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## More than a Quarterback

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## More than a Quarterback

By Marc Daniels  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, December 30, 2020

McKenzie Milton came to UCF as a skinny kid from a small town in Hawaii. He leaves as maybe the most impactful athlete ever to represent the black and gold.



McKenzie Milton often spent time and took photos with Knight fans. (Photo by Eric DeSalvo '09, UCF Athletics)

It is 4,747 miles from Orlando to Kapolei, Hawaii. It is a nine-hour flight. And yet someone who was raised so far from UCF has left a lasting impact on a campus and community.

When McKenzie Milton was being recruited, not many schools were knocking on the door of a 5-foot-10-inch, 160-pound quarterback. Even though he was breaking almost every high school passing record in Hawaii, many recruiters had concerns about Milton's size and throwing skills. The records he was breaking once belonged to former University of Alabama quarterback Tua Tagovailoa. All of those records Milton was breaking would eventually be broken by current UCF quarterback and his best friend, Dillon Gabriel.

Former UCF head coach Scott Frost saw something in Milton. He was named MVP of a summer passing camp at the University of Oregon — where Frost served as offensive coordinator before coming to UCF — and he wondered if the Ducks should take a closer look.

Frost never got to make that pitch to Oregon. Instead, he became the head coach at UCF and convinced Milton to travel all the way from his Hawaii home to a new home in Orlando.

We know the rest of the story — a story filled with incredible football memories. Highlights of a player who dazzled us time after time. A player who brought a nation of fans together to cheer on their team Saturdays in the fall. Milton and his teammates took UCF to the national stage with undefeated regular and appearances in major bowl games.

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His success on the field made the national media pay attention and what they saw was a talented player with talented teammates. They saw a packed stadium with an atmosphere as good as any campus in the country and they learned more about a university and everything it offers.

But Milton always knew he was more than just a great quarterback on a team that captured the nation's attention. As someone who has had the privilege to broadcast every play of his UCF career, some of the best moments I can share are that of Milton off the field.

For example, on a rainy Saturday in October of the 2018 season, UCF had rallied from a 16-point deficit to beat Memphis on the road, 31-30, and extend its winning streak to 19. He scored the game winning touchdown by flipping into the end zone on a running play. With a shoulder hurting and an ankle sprained from the fall and multiple hits throughout the game, a battered and bruised Milton exited the UCF locker room from the Liberty Bowl in Memphis.

His post-game media duties were done and with a boxed-meal in hand, he could have easily found his bus and sat for a moment to absorb the day. But he saw Knight fans who traveled from Orlando, Philadelphia, Texas and Chicago. They cheered him and thanked him. But Milton didn't just smile and keep moving. He stopped. He smiled and hugged them back. He posed for pictures. He signed autographs and he thanked them.

He knew that staying just a little longer after a game to interact with fans meant much to Knight Nation. So time and time again he stayed. Why? Because that's just who McKenzie Milton is and always will be.

When he suffered his horrific injury in November 2018, he began a new journey. His road to recovery saw fans connect in a different way, a more spiritual impact than clapping and yelling from the stands. Each update on progress brought hope, and hope brought anticipation. Could he return from an injury so severe to reach a point that he might play again?

That answer is yet to be known, but if he does play again it will be in a different uniform. Milton says he considers current UCF quarterback Dillon Gabriel as his younger brother. After all, Gabriel took that 4,747 mile journey, as well. He is on pace to shatter not only Milton's passing records but every other passing record in the UCF history book.

Milton decided the torch has been passed. He felt he could not put Gabriel in the position to step aside or even share the spotlight.

So he chose a new place to play one more season — and has committed to FSU. He wants one more chance to run out of a tunnel and one more chance to lead a team. He wants one more chance to be, well...to be his old self again.

There are questions he — like everyone — ponders. Can he be what he once was? Can he take a hit from an opposing player? But the burning desire to find out takes Milton away from his second home.

UCF will always be a home for McKenzie Milton. He came to Orlando as the skinny kid from a town in Hawaii. He leaves as maybe the most impactful athlete ever to represent the black and gold. His impact on not just the football program but the school will last forever. No matter where he goes and no matter what happens, once a Knight...always a Knight.

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