

# English's Melvin Booker reverses field, finds path to success

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Photo by Angela Rowlings

When Melvin Booker is busting out of the backfield for Boston English High School, he has many choices before him.

He can take a deep breath and plow straight ahead, carrying half of the opposition's defensive line with him. Or he can go to his right. Or to his left.

To Melvin Booker, that's one of the beauties of playing football: With a little help from your friends, you have choices, options.

It didn't used to be this way. It was just four years ago - though, to him, it seems a lifetime ago - that Melvin Booker graduated from a string of petty thefts to a crime that was serious enough that, when he finally landed in the custody of the Department of Youth Services, his own mother told him, "Don't call me from jail asking me to come see you, because I'm not. And if I do see you, it will be because I want to, not because you want me to."

The crime for which Booker was charged was horrifying: armed robbery.

## Troubled past

"It was just some random guy minding his own business," Booker said, recalling that day four years ago. "We robbed him, thought we were going to come out big, but we ended up coming out with, like, 5 dollars and 16 cents.

"I had a shotgun," he said.

A shotgun? Sawed-off?

"Yeah."

Booker and his accomplice didn't get very far. They were arrested in front of Randolph High School, and soon Booker was in the custody of the DYS. That's when his mother, Anissa Booker, made with the tough love.

Straighten yourself out, she said, or spend the rest of your life in prison.

"I was labeled a bad kid," Booker said. "Nobody wanted to talk with me. I had a couple of friends here and there, but that was about it.

"I was illiterate when I was younger. I barely went to elementary school. I got into a lot of mischief. I went to jail."

As Booker spoke these words, he was sitting in the front row of a set of wooden bleachers at the West Roxbury High School football field on a gray, chilly late Friday afternoon. Boston English had just suffered a 28-16 loss to West Roxbury, though Booker made things interesting late in the game by busting loose for a 65-yard run and then scoring a touchdown.

Now, as Booker sat there talking about his past, a West Roxbury High fan approached the bleachers and said, "Hey, that was one hell of a run you had there."

"Thanks, man," said Booker.

"That was really nice," said the guy. "Some really strong running. Awesome."

"Thanks," Booker said again, smiling.

He started to talk again about the bad old days, about the fights, the mayhem, about not being able to read.

Now a member of the victorious West Roxbury High football team came up to Booker, extended a hand, and said, "Man, good game."

"Thanks," Booker said.

And it made me think: Some guys can't run away from their past, but at this moment, seated in the front row of those bleachers, still wearing his Boston English football uniform, Melvin Booker found it difficult to run to his past.

He wanted to talk about all the bad stuff, as if by doing so he could remind himself where he's been. But no: Too many people wanted to shake his hand and talk about today.

#### **'A feel-good story'**

Seems everyone is rooting for Melvin Booker. One DYS official familiar with Booker's case said that sometimes kids really find the capacity to take inventory of their lives and turn things around.

Keith Parker, the longtime football coach at Boston English who will coach his final game tomorrow morning when the Bulldogs take on Boston Latin at Harvard Stadium, said, "Melvin has done everything we've asked him to do, on and off the field. He listened the day he got here two years ago, and he's still listening. And not just in football. There's a light bulb in his head, and it's on. He made the honor roll last year. He's got a bright future."

Bill Stewart Jr., the referee who worked the Boston English-West Roxbury game and whose father, the late Bill Stewart Sr., was athletic director at English for 35 years, said, "The greatest inventor of all time is the guy who invented the eraser. Because it allows you to start over again. Now I don't know Melvin Booker, but I know about him. And from everything I hear, he's really worked hard to straighten himself out."

Stewart isn't just throwing words around. A scholarship is given at Boston English in memory of his father, and, as Stewart puts it, "We don't just give it to the straight-A student. It goes to a kid who works hard, who is goal-oriented, who believes in sacrifice, dedication. If George Washington didn't have these kind of guys in his boat he never would have made it across the Delaware and we'd all be drinking tea at 5 in the afternoon."

Though this year's scholarship hasn't been awarded yet, "Melvin Booker would be a good candidate," Stewart said.

And Keith Ford, the associate football coach at Boston English and the man who will succeed Parker next season, said, "When we were trying to get the players to show up for weight training, it was Melvin who was calling them. He's a mentor to a lot of the players. They believe in him. This is a feel-good story."

To be fair, it is a feel-good story in the making. It's not over yet. To be sure, it's a feel-good story so far: How, during the more than two years Booker spent in the state's juvenile justice system, he honed his reading skills and, when he got out, enrolled as a junior at Boston English.

So far, so good . . .

But though his high school football career will come to an end tomorrow morning at Harvard Stadium, he still has to complete his senior year at Boston English. He needs to explore the possibility of playing college football, perhaps at a local Division 3 school. He needs to keep hitting the books. And, especially, he needs to steer clear of the kind of life that landed him in custody in the first place.

### **Scary reminder**

It's not going to be easy. He knows that. As recently as three weeks ago, as if to serve as a reminder of the importance of making the right choices, Booker received a visit from his past. Let's have him pick up the story from here:

"To be completely honest, and I've not really talked to anybody about this, I've only told my football players and whatever, but I was walking down my street and I saw this kid I used to chill with," he said. "He's like a real gangster, whatever. He's like 23 now. He was saying, 'Hey, what's going on,' playing it real safe, and real cool. I was walking away, saying bye, and he says, 'Yo, come here real quick.'

"And I looked real nice, had on nice clothes, had my cell phone, it was a nice day," Booker said. "And he was, like, 'Yo, give me that,' and he looked at my shoes and he looked at my phone. And I said, 'Give you what?' And he said, 'Your wallet. Your phone.' And I said, 'Are you playin'?' And he said, 'Gimme your (expletive.)' And he pulled out a gun on me.

"I was thinking about running. I could have easily ran. But I don't think I'm that fast. So I gave him my wallet. And he was walking off, and I said, 'I just hope that doesn't happen to you.' And he says, 'What the (expletive) does that mean? What are you trying to say? You tryin' to say you coming back?' I said, 'No. I swear to God I won't do anything. But I pray to God that doesn't happen to you. I pray to God that doesn't happen to you.' "

This is one thing Melvin Booker has learned: "If you rob somebody, there's two things that are going to happen," he said. "They might come back and kill you if they're mad enough, or you might go to jail. If you do the good thing, you have a job, you support yourself, you support your family one day when you grow older. And you have fun. There's so many options when you do the good thing. When you do the bad thing, there's only two. One of them is death at a young age and the other is jail."

Melvin Booker already has done the jail.

Now, he chooses to live.

And now, he has everyone from his own coaches to West Roxbury football fans who like what they are seeing.

Feel-good story?

This is just the beginning of the story.

Melvin Booker, and Melvin Booker alone, will decide how it ends.

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