

# Concussions force a rising star out of football



[Hamilton Spectator](#)

By [Scott Radley](#)

The hit by the McMaster blitzer was devastating. Hard enough that nearly two seasons and hundreds of collisions later, Marauder players and coaches who were on the field that Saturday afternoon still vividly remember that particular train wreck.

As does the Western quarterback on the receiving end of it.

"I was out on that play," Will Finch says.

That moment his lights briefly went out isn't the sole reason the 21-year-old Burlington native is foregoing his fifth year of eligibility and retiring despite still being among the best players in Canadian university football. But it's a starting point to explain his decision.

For years now, Finch has been a star. He's big — 6-foot-3 and 215 pounds — has a rocket launcher for an arm that led him to numerous passing records, two Ontario MVP awards and dreams of a pro career, and he'd been groomed for this role since he was six or seven with his football coach father.

He's also tough. Perhaps too tough. Rather than slide to avoid a hit, he'd usually drop his shoulder and take on a tackler to gain an extra yard or two. If he could sacrifice his body to help his team, he'd do it every time.

When he woke up a second or two after being hit on that October afternoon against McMaster, he got to his feet and continued as if nothing unusual had happened. His coach, Greg Marshall, recalls being told it was his pivot's shoulder that had been banged on the play. Nothing about his head.

"Four plays later Will came over and said he was fine," Marshall says. "I can go back in."

Finch says it wasn't until his adrenaline stopped pumping an hour or so after the game that he really started feeling the effects of the hit.

He sat out the next week. Then after getting medical clearance to play against Windsor, a fluky knee to the helmet left him temporarily unable to feel his hands. Might've been a concussion. Might've been an injury to his neck muscles. Either way, at that moment his junior season was done.

For days he lay alone in a quiet, dark room with no visual stimulation and his eyes closed. He nearly quit football right then. Yet he still loved the game and figured once he was back to normal he could adjust his style to avoid the big blows.

So when he returned this season, he slid way more than ever before. Got rid of the ball more quickly to reduce the chances of getting destroyed, too.

"I learned the hard way," Finch says. "I smartened up, but I think I smartened up too late."

See, no plan in football is foolproof. During the Ontario semi-final against Laurier a few months ago, he took a hard hit. Suddenly he was woozy. He went to the trainers' room to go through the concussion protocol and hopefully have someone tell him he was just fine.

But he already knew what was coming.

"I think there were four or five diagnosed (concussions)," he says of his career. "But I know for a fact I have some undiagnosed ones, too."

The first came way back in minor football. He remembers being hit out of bounds and banging his head on the yard-marker pole. He saw stars. Worse, he remembers losing his peripheral vision for a while. Yet he didn't mention it to anyone and ran back to the huddle to prepare for the next play.

"I just thought it was part of the game," he says.

This whole back story came to a head not long ago while he was sitting on the couch watching a documentary about football and concussions with his sister who's a nurse. He couldn't avoid the message the film was sending him.

As the minutes rolled by, they discussed what they were seeing. No, he wouldn't be letting anyone down if he retired, she told him. No, it wouldn't be a sign of weakness. No, it wouldn't make him a quitter.

After some chats with his family, medical staff and Marshall, he'd made up his mind. He's about to graduate. He wants to be a firefighter. It's time to move along.

He didn't waver from his decision even when it was announced the other day that this year's Vanier Cup would be played at Tim Hortons Field. He could have a chance to win his first ring in his own backyard.

Tempting as it might've been, Finch wasn't swayed. Nor will he be.

"A Vanier Cup is great," he says. "But your brain is greater."

[sradley@thespec.com](mailto:sradley@thespec.com)