



Everything Michigan

## Singular focus: Unrelenting will helps WMU's Braska overcome adversity, earn scholarship

By Graham Couch | Kalamazoo Gazette

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Tyler Tjomsland / Kalamazoo Gazette

**WMU senior defensive end Justin Braska battles freshman Chris Blair at practice Tuesday. Braska is third on the Broncos with 27 tackles this season, including 4.5 for loss.**

**KALAMAZOO** — Like for all of his Western Michigan University teammates, this is a big week for Justin Braska.

A "last shot" at Central Michigan for his senior class, as he put it.

"I'm letting them know, this has got to be our best week of everything," Braska said of his message to the rest of the Broncos, especially those on the defensive line.

The thing is, whatever happens this Saturday at Waldo Stadium, Braska has already given years of his best of everything.

At least that's how those around him tell it.

That's why he is where he is — having started 13 games as a Division I football player, including all six games this season, where he's WMU's third-leading tackler from his defensive end position.

It may not be the resume of an All-American or even on par with some of the others who arrived as part of Bill Cubit's first recruiting class in 2005.

### Central Michigan at WMU

- **When:** 3:30 p.m. Saturday.
- **Where:** Waldo Stadium.
- **Records:** CMU 5-1 (3-0)

But Braska's goal was fairly simplistic and perhaps more focused than most: To earn a Division I college football scholarship.

That was his intent when he sat in a Lansing hospital room, telling a doctor that he'd wait until after his senior season at DeWitt High School to have surgery on a torn knee ligament.

He didn't waiver from such ambition when a coach at Saginaw Valley State questioned his commitment to the game, as he limped around campus.

Or when many other coaches walked away from a kid who played all the way to the state championship game with a brace holding together his right knee.

"I still remember him sitting in the hospital his senior year with a torn ACL and the doctor saying, 'When do you want to have the surgery?'" Braska's brother-in-law, Craig Dennis, recalled. "He said, 'After the season. I can just put a brace on it.' I thought, 'Wow.'"

Former WMU linebackers coach Chuck Bullough thought the same thing when he sat down on the Friday after Thanksgiving in 2004 and caught Braska's DeWitt Panthers on TV playing at the Silverdome.

Bullough, as Dennis remembers it, said, "If I had the opportunity and was coaching in college, I'd like to coach a player like that."

Two weeks later, Bullough received the call to be the Broncos' linebackers coach and, he told Dennis, his first call was to the Braska clan.

A few weeks later, on his official visit to WMU, Braska received his only scholarship offer.

"We knew he wasn't going to be able to play early," Cubit said, citing the ACL tear that caused Braska to redshirt in '05. "But his (high school) coach really believed in him. And Chuck Bullough recruited him. And when Chuck says you're a tough kid, you're a tough kid."

And when Cubit extended the offer, sitting in a conference room at the Radisson Plaza Hotel in Kalamazoo ...

"I was like, 'I definitely want to come here. Let's do this,'" Braska said. "... It wasn't even a question."

What hasn't been explained yet is why a scholarship was so important and why Braska's brother-in-law is such a prominent source in this story.

Walking on, as so many programs wanted Braska to do, wasn't an option.

There wasn't the money — or parents, for that matter — to fund such an idea.

But there was the love and support of his oldest sister, Sheila Dennis, and Craig, her husband, and the values instilled by his mother, Mary, before she passed away from melanoma when Braska was 9.

"The way he figured it, it was the only way he could make it to college," said Sheila, who, at age 26 and still months from her wedding, took custody of four of her seven siblings in April of 2000.

"She went from no kids to four," Braska said, laughing.

Four boys, three already teen-agers, including 13-year-old Justin.

"My husband's a saint," Sheila said. "He didn't back away."

"He had to grow up quickly," Craig said of Braska. "That's what it was. Same with my wife's family. A lot of them had to grow up quickly.

"I truly believe, even though she's not here anymore, that his mom oversaw all of this." Whether divine intervention or the drive she left him, Braska is a different kind of kid.

MAC); WMU 3-3 (2-1).

• **Tickets:** \$27, \$21 and \$18 (\$15 youth end zone); 888-4-WMU-TIX.

• **TV:** Fox Sports Net-PLUS.

• **Radio:** WZUU-FM 92.5.

Quiet, oblivious to distraction. Nothing gets in the way of football or school, where he's already earned his degree in accounting.

"He never had a lot of close friends, but I don't think he's the type that really needs them," Sheila said. "He has goals and does what he needs to fulfill them."

After all he's been through, halfway through his final season of college football, Central Michigan doesn't seem like such a tall hurdle.

"You can tell the appreciation he has," Cubit said. "And the sister and the brother-in-law, how appreciative they were. And he's been a great kid for us. Doesn't ever complain, goes out there, he works, he plays hard, goes to the best of his ability."

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