

## Episode #30

# An Injury Ended His NFL Career: So He Became An Opera Singer

<b>Who</b>	<b>Audio Segment</b>
Ta'u Papu'a	<p>You know, all my years of playing football, I really never got injured or anything. And so I thought to myself, "What do I do now?" And I just looked up and I...you know, I was in my room and I looked out of my window and just looked up to the heavens and said, "What am I supposed to do? What is my calling here in life? What is my true calling?"</p> <p>And this little voice came in to my head and said, "Step left, move forward, move to New York and go and sing."</p>
INTRO MUSIC FROM TA'U	
Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. I'm your host, Andy Levine. And I'm delighted to share our first episode of 2019. And it's a great one.</p> <p>We're listening to Ta'u Pupu'a, a man who now makes a living as a professional opera singer. But before his path to the opera stage, Ta'u performed on an NFL football field. He was recruited by legendary football coach Bill Belichick to join the Cleveland Browns as a defensive lineman.</p> <p>In his second season, a nasty injury ended his NFL career. Despite almost no formal musical training, he decided to follow a new dream to become an opera singer.</p> <p>So in the spirit of the opera world, we're going to tell Ta'u's story in four short acts.</p>
FADE MUSIC	
Andy	Act I: Coming To America
Andy	So I kind of want to start at the beginning. Go back to your arrival in the U.S. at the age of five.
Ta'u	<p>Well, I was born in the Kingdom of Tonga. I am the youngest out of nine children. The reason why my parents packed us nine kids and moved us to America is because America is the country of dream, you know, the land of opportunity. And so I always joke around that in the Kingdom of Tonga, you can only climb a coconut tree so high.</p> <p>We first moved to Hawaii and I was five years old and my dad did not speak English nor my mother. And so my dad worked about five jobs because he didn't want my mom to work. He wanted my mom to stay at home and watch us kids. And so...</p>
Andy	That's a lot to watch.

Ta'u	<p>Oh my gosh. There's a lot of diapers to change.</p> <p>Yeah. So my dad worked many jobs from construction to dishwasher at a restaurant to, you know, you name it. He did it. And so we didn't see our father until Sunday when it was time to go to church. Then we moved to Salt Lake City, Utah. And the reason why we moved to Salt Lake City, Utah is because my mom's side of family, they're LDS or Mormons.</p>
Andy	<p>So Ta'u is growing up in Utah. And at the age of ten, he is big kid who is often mistaken for 15 or older. And a man in the neighborhood came to Ta'u's parents and said "I want to teach your son how to play football."</p> <p>And that brings us to Act II which we'll call "Football and Coach Bill Belichick.</p>
Ta'u	<p>Well, it all started again with this football. So when you're the first generation here in America, you grew up very humbled. And let's just say humble because when it came to important things, we weren't poor when it came to love and a lot of stuff. But materialistic thing, yeah, we were poor but we grew up, we were loved, and we were always fed, and we were always cleaned. But I knew that the only way for me to get into college was through some kind of scholarship and I knew that sports usually pays the most.</p> <p>But I'm gonna be really serious here because when I was in college, I was really good but my grades were really bad. And I just wasn't good in school. And so I would get letters from Notre Dame and Stanford and all these big colleges but I couldn't accept their scholarship because of my grades. That was really, really tough.</p>
Andy	<p>Ta'u spent the next two years playing at a junior college. And then he went on to Weber State, not exactly a football powerhouse but a bigger stage.</p>
Ta'u	<p>And so I was at Weber State University. I had so many sacks and yards for lost tackles and all this. And not a lot of NFL teams look at small school except for certain coaches and who believed that there are great talent in small ponds. And so when I was at Weber, they had these NFL tryouts, and it was at the University of Utah. So they packed me and two other of my teammates in a van and we drove 45 minutes to the University of Utah where we had this tryout.</p> <p>And so when we got there, we had to do all these drills. And remember, there were about maybe four or five NFL coaches and Bill Belichick was there. And so we did some drills and where I would go against some of the University of Utah guys and I would beat them all the time. And so here I am coming from a small school beating someone in this big college. And so he would just keep an eye on me.</p>
Andy	<p>And he's the head coach of the Browns at this point?</p>

Ta'u	Yes. And then we did all these different drills and, I mean, I remember Bill coming up to me and just smiling and saying, "What's your name?" And so he took a lot of my information down and everything and he was really, really happy. There were other coaches that came up to me but I didn't think anything of it and went back to school-and...
Andy	Two weeks later Ta'u Papu'a was selected by Bill Belichick and the Cleveland Browns in the fifth round of the NFL draft. And a few months later, Ta'u is off to the NFL.
Ta'u	I arrive and thought to myself the first day of practice. I'm like, "Well, welcome to the NFL. Everyone is big and everyone's fast." When you come from a small school, you're big and you're fast and there's no other person besides you. And so when you get there, you have...I remember going in practice, I was going against this guy we call Zeus. Zeus was about 365 pounds, 370 pounds and he was about 6'8", 6', yeah, 7', 6'8". And that's why they call him Zeus. He was big. He was a big guy and he's the biggest person I've ever played against.
Andy	But Bill Belichick really saw something in you and he said, "This guy has potential."
Ta'u	And you know what's so great about Bill Belichick is that if he believes in you and if you're one of his draft people and he believes in you, he would take you under his wings. I mean, Tom Brady went, what, seventh round and Bill believed in him and kept him and nurtured him and, you know? And I believe that that's what makes a great coach.
Andy	So Ta'u is in the NFL. His first season is with the Cleveland Browns. And the next year, the Browns owner Art Modell moved the team to Baltimore so he is now a Baltimore Raven. And he has more money than he ever dreamed of (which he is sharing with his family). But like a good opera, tragedy often strikes when things are going really well.  Which brings us to Act III: The Injury and The Little Voice.
Ta'u	So when I was at Baltimore and I got injured with the Ravens and I thought to myself, "My gosh. I don't know what else to do now, you know."
Andy	Talk about that. So you shattered your foot arch or?
Ta'u	Yeah. I broke the arch of my foot.
Andy	In a preseason game or?
Ta'u	No. By Zeus.
Andy	Well he does weight 380 pounds or whatever.
Ta'u	It was...oh gosh.

Andy	Did he just come down hard on it.
Ta'u	Yeah. He stepped on it and I got...what happened was he was a play and I was being triple teamed. And so Zeus was in the middle and then I had a guy on my right and a guy in my left and they're both 270 pounds. But Zeus came down on my arch of my foot and...
Andy	Did you immediately know something is wrong here?
Ta'u	I didn't know what happened. All I knew was that something happened that was really, really bad.
Andy	Ta'u tried to rehab the injury first with the Ravens and then with other NFL Teams. But it was taking a long time to heal and his first just wasn't in football anymore.
Ta'u	<p>You know, all my years of playing football, I really never got injured or anything. And so I thought to myself, "What do I do now?" And so I left and went back to Utah. And then I had another time when I went to Philadelphia to the Eagles and I was in their camp and things just wasn't going right. And I remember thinking, "All right. Well, this is number two trying to get back." And then the third time was I was at a football camp and I woke up the next day and my teammates were there to pick me up so we go to practice. And I just looked up and I...you know, I was in my room and I looked out of my window and just looked up to the heavens and said, "What am I supposed to do? What is my calling here in life? What is my true calling?"</p> <p>And this little voice came in to my head and said, "Step left, move forward, move to New York and go and sing." And I thought, "Wow, I never thought of it but okay."</p>
Andy	So here's the final act of our story. Act IV which we'll call "Goodbye Football...Hello Julliard."
Andy	So Ta'u moves to New York City. But frankly he is pretty miserable. The NFL paycheck has ended and he really is lost in this new city.
Ta'u	And so I moved to New York and I remember thinking, "What do I do now? Who do I talk to?" And I remember just living life for two months and bored out of my mind, didn't know a soul, depressed. And I thought, "I don't know what to do. I mean, how do I socialize with people?" And one day, I was walking along Broadway in 66th, 65th, 64th Street and I saw the Metropolitan Opera House and I saw Juilliard and I thought, "I need to do something." And so there was a restaurant there called O'Neill's restaurant.
Andy	And so what was Ta'u's first job after football, he worked as a host at O'Neills. And he started to meet opera singers and Julliard students who would come into the restaurant.

Ta'u	<p>These kids will come in from Juilliard and I would talk to them, "Hey, who's your voice teacher? Where do people go and sing?" So I asked a lot of questions.</p> <p>And that is when I saw Placido Domingo will come in, all these great singers from the Met will come in. And so I started to do my homework. I wanted to know what they ate. I wanted...you know, what gives them phlegm, what do they not eat? And if they were to drink alcohol, what kind of alcohol because alcohol dries out your throat, your chords.</p>
Andy	<p>So Ta'u is working at O'Neills. And he is networking in New York City and working with a vocal coach. But his real opportunity came when he meets Dame Kiri Te Kanawa – a fellow Polynesian who had made it big as an international opera star.</p>
Ta'u	<p>I went to the Metropolitan Opera to see Il tritico. It's three operas, short operas. And when I got to the Met, I saw a big poster, a flier that said, "Dame Kiri Te Kanawa will be signing autographs in the Metropolitan Opera bookstore." And I said, "That's great." So I go in and I watched the first part of the opera and then I come out and by the time I came out, there was already a line that literally ran, if you've ever been in the Met store, it comes out of the store and it goes down the escalator and it wraps around downstairs and it goes by the parking lot.</p> <p>So all these people are waiting to get an autograph from Kiri. But I remember that moment before I moved to New York, my dad said to me, "When you get to New York, go and look up Kiri Te Kanawa and tell Kiri to help you because you're Polynesian." She's Polynesian and you're Polynesian and so she should help you. And I'm like, "Dad, you can't just go up to a mega star and say, 'Hey..."</p>
Andy	<p>We're both Polynesian.</p>
Ta'u	<p>We're both Polynesian. Why don't you help me?" That doesn't work. And so I wait in line and it took about an hour to get to her and when I got up to her table, she looked up and said, "Oh, what are you doing here?" And I said, "I'm a singer. I'm a tenor." And she goes, "You are?" She goes, "Where do you study?" And I said, "Nowhere. Privately." And she goes, "So you have a teacher?" And I said, "Yes." She goes, "How's it going?" And I, you know, to be honest with you, it wasn't really going. I mean, it was going but...and I said, "Uh." And she goes, "It's hard." And I said, "It is."</p> <p>And she just looked at me and said, "Can I help you?" Out of the blue she goes, "Can I help you?" And that didn't register...</p>
Andy	<p>And this is after a hundred people have gone through, got a book signed or whatever.</p>

Ta'u	Right. And I looked at her and it didn't register and she goes, "I'd like to help you. Can I help you?" And I shook my head. I said, "Yes." And she said...you know, she called one of her bodyguards or whatever. She goes, "Give this guy my number," and she said, "Make sure you call me tonight."
Andy	Kiri met with Ta'u the next day. And she said I have a concert at Carnegie Hall next year. And when I come back, I want to hear you sing.
Ta'u (35:21)	<p>So I met her seven months later and she said, "Meet me at Juilliard." And so I thought, "Okay, well, all right." So I met her at Juilliard and walked into a room and the head of the vocal department, Brian Zeger was there and a pianist. And they said, "Okay, now sing for us." And I said, "All right." So I sing for them and after I was done, Kiri turned around. So Brian said, "There's a diamond in there. It needs to be polished but there's a diamond."</p> <p>And Brian said, "Well, I can't just give him a scholarship. He has to go through all the auditions and everything and the auditions are in about a month and a half." And Kiri looked at me and said, "Can you do the audition? And I said, "Sure." And Kiri said to Brian, he goes, "He's gonna do the audition and he's gonna be great."</p>
Andy	For the next six weeks, Ta'u "studied his butt off." And he came back for the audition – along with 110 other applicants who were competing four slots to study at Juilliard.
Ta'u	It's like this is like a football tryout. So they went from that a hundred and whatever people to 50. Then we had to do another tryout. They went from that 50 down to 10 and I made that 10. And then we had a interview. We had two interviews, coachings on Italian and whatever and then I got a phone call and said, "Congratulations. You're one of four that we took."
Andy	Now you were, I would imagine, quite a bit older than most of the other students there. Am I correct enough?
Ta'u	You're correct. I literally, Andy, I really felt like I was playing catch-up. These colleagues of mine, when they were learning their solfege, you know, Do-Re-Mi and all that stuff, I was learning plays how to kill the quarterback and how to make tackles. And so it was like it's just a whole different world. And so when I got in, I didn't really know how to read notes. I didn't really sing in French and Italian or Russian. And so when I was thrown into this, shall we say, lion den of Juilliard, I had to play catch up really fast. The only thing I had was this God-given talent that I've been blessed with and the voice.
Andy	Is there a similarity between playing on an NFL team and being in an opera company?

Ta'u (43:14)	There is, yeah. Our breathing, like when we would breathe...well, when I was playing football, I would not breathe from my chest up because I know I won't get enough oxygen. That I will make sure that my breath will go lower and that's with singing too. And also with, you know, in football, you have to be graceful. You have to be, you know, like some of my teammates were taking some ballet lessons to be graceful and to have a lot of finesse in your playing, it can't just be always be power, power, power. You have to have finesse. Especially for us guys for my position, when we play against Zeus, we have to be able to swim pass him or glide by them so we can make the sack.
Andy	Ta'u graduated three years later at the age of 35. He was the first Polynesian to earn a degree from Julliard. And over the past five years, he's had a very successful career singing throughout the United States and around the world.
Andy	When we talked before, you started off saying you realized how blessed you are. So you've done something, you've done two things that a lot of people dream about doing: playing on a football field in the NFL, singing in major roles in the opera. As you look back at those two very different careers, are you happier on an opera stage or on a football field as you think back at those two stages of your life?
Ta'u	They go hand in hand and I'm happy with both. I'm happy with what I've done. I'm very blessed and very fortunate that I was able, along my journey, to help people that needed help. I am very blessed and fortunate to even now, give advice to younger singers that are coming up to have them fulfill their dreams. I am blessed to be here to tell my story. I'm blessed for a lot of different reasons that I am able to communicate through the power of singing.
Andy	So I don't know that I've come across anyone as dramatic as NFL to opera. What advice would you give to someone about making this kind of dramatic change?
Ta'u	<p>My advice that I would give to whoever wants to make a dramatic change from is to, first, you have to love yourself and you have to know yourself. You have to know the passion that's within you. If something speaks loud but of something good, not something bad but something good, you should follow your dreams. No matter if it's such...no matter if it's other people think, "Wow, really? You're gonna go from here to there?" Your journey is your journey. It's not their journey. It's your journey. Let their fear be their fear. It's not your fear. But you gotta believe, you gotta just keep on believing.</p> <p>As long as it brings good into this world, if it brings something that is productive to yourself and to others, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to try it.</p>

Andy	What does the future hold for Ta'u Pupu'a?
Ta'u	What does the future hold for me? Hopefully that I continue on singing. My goal is to sing in big opera houses and small opera houses. For me, it doesn't matter just as long as I keep singing. But wouldn't it be great if they invite me to sing at a Super Bowl, the national anthem? Wouldn't that be awesome?
Andy	That would be awesome. Back on the field.
Ta'u	Back on the field.
	Switch to Second Act Stories Music and fade
Andy	<p>So that is a wrap on today's story in four acts. There are couple of things that really struck me about Ta'u's story:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) <b>As one door closes, another one opens.</b> When an injury ended his football career, it would have been easy to wallow in self-pity. Ta'u didn't do that. He set a new goal and pursued it regardless of how unlikely success appeared. He stayed positive and five years later, he was on a full scholarship to Julliard and on his way.</li> <li>2) <b>A second act can involve a completely different career.</b> It's hard to imagine someone making the leap from an NFL football field to the opera stage. But Ta'u did it. And so there's no reason to close the door on your dreams. As Ta'u put it, "you just gotta keep believing."</li> <li>3) <b>The impact of two completely different people on Ta'u's path.</b> Legendary coach Bill Belichick discovered his football talents at an obscure tryout at the University of Utah. And he brought him into the NFL. A decade later, opera superstar Kiri Te Kanawa, met Ta'u at a book signing and sensed there was greatness within him. And she helped him enter The Julliard School, the most prestigious performing arts conservatory in the United States.</li> </ol> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Some people might call that luck. I'd disagree. I believe, most successful people make their own luck.</p> <p>I hope you've enjoyed today's episode and the musical interludes which Ta'u provided. We hope you'll keep listening. There are more second act stories just around the corner.</p>