

TAYLOR TUIASOSOPO

Speaks His Truth

“You see somebody at the grocery store, treat them the way you want to be treated. It’s the golden rule we’re all taught when we’re three years old.”

BY PAUL BURNS

Taylor Tuiasosopo wanted his days as a Montana State football player to be meaningful on and off the field, as well as in and out of the classroom. As the senior embarks on his final season as a Bobcat, it’s safe to say he’s accomplished his quest.

DOING THE RIGHT THING

Tuiasosopo wants to be heard. To be honest, to not hear someone as big as him means you just aren’t listening. But he has important things to say, and the topic is not always about football. Yes, he can talk about football, but there’s so much more to this complex young man than sports.

In 2020, with then-coach Jeff Choate’s blessing, Tuiasosopo and a handful of Montana State athletes marched through the

streets of Bozeman along with a few thousand others who, like him, believe that Black lives do matter. This was shortly after the senseless killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Speaking clearly through a mask, he told ABC Fox Montana that “a lot of people get offended by the phrase of Black lives matter. They feel a sense of entitlement, Well, do ours not matter?” he said at the time.

“We’re not saying that nobody else matters, but just look on the news. When you see the racial injustice that’s been going on, what’s the common factor between all those people that’ve been victimized?”

He left his question hanging but, like most others, Tuiasosopo knows the answer. He acknowledges that many of his teammates have been treated poorly due to the color of their skin and, as a representative of Bobcat athletes, he has taken it upon himself to engage the mostly white Bozeman

community with the goal of raising awareness of what people of color are experiencing. “If we really want to see change, this has to be consistent day-in and day-out,” he insists. “We need to see change happen every day.”

The march down Main Street in Bozeman wasn’t the first time Tuiasosopo shared his views on some of the issues that seem to be

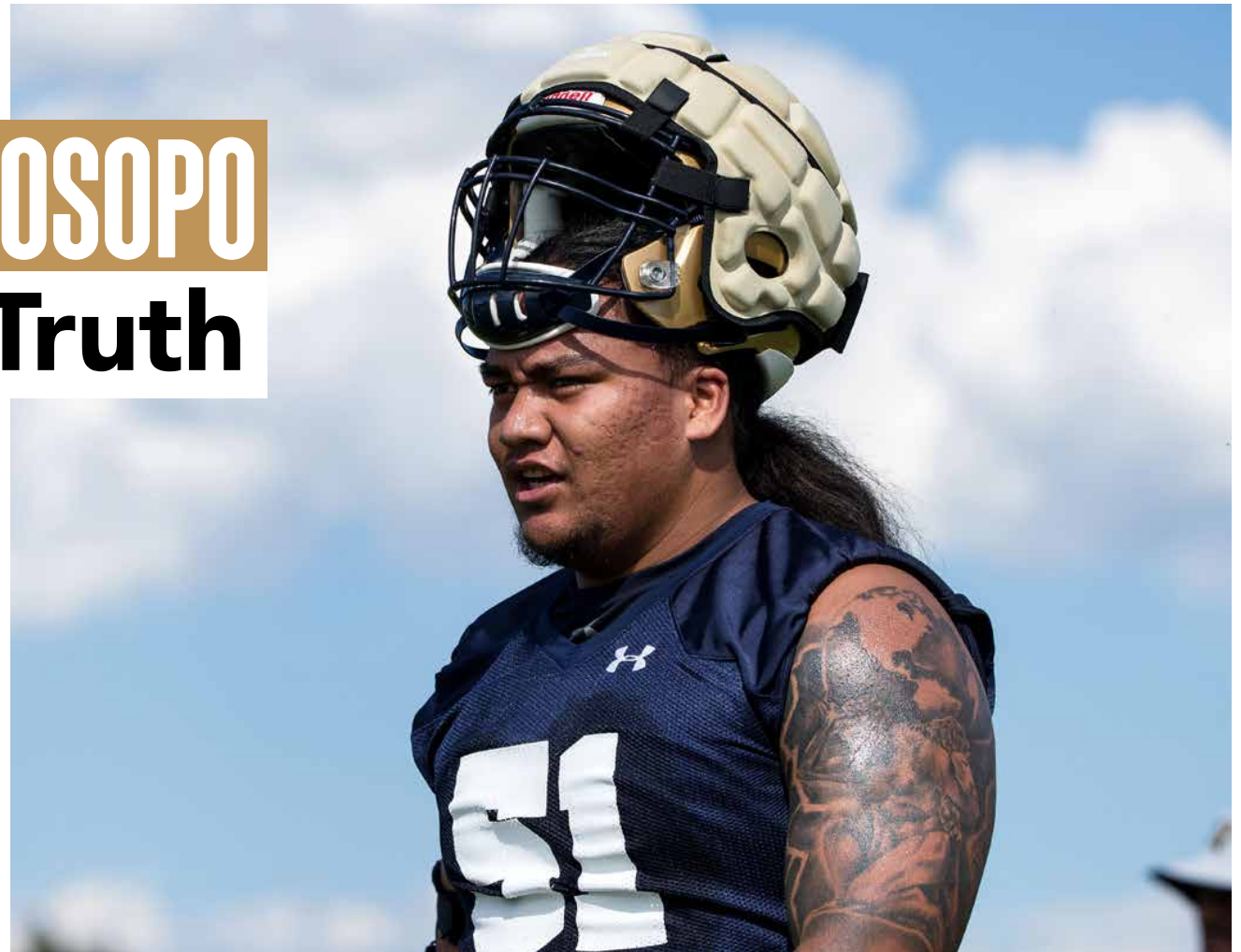
constantly plaguing this country. Long before George Floyd and others became household names for the wrong reasons, the big man took a knee outside the Bobcat locker room during the national anthem prior to a 2017 game against Weber State. Typically, players remain inside and out of sight during the anthem, but Tuiasosopo and then teammate Edward Vander ventured onto

the turf in the northeast corner of Bobcat Stadium and lowered themselves silently and peacefully onto a single knee, doing so again with Choate’s approval. With a brother in the Marines, Tuiasosopo made it clear that he wasn’t disrespecting the flag or the military. He just wanted to raise awareness about racism, society’s inequalities and police brutality. “What we’re protesting

really is, there’s a lot of stuff in the news and innocent people (are) dying and a lot of people have gotten away with it,” Tuiasosopo told the Bozeman Chronicle. “We’re a broken country.”

IT’S NOT JUST FOOTBALL

Don’t let it be said that Taylor Tuiasosopo is all business. With his engaging smile and his free-flowing black hair, he can’t help





but be noticed. Which includes the classroom, where his hard work paid off this past spring when he walked across the stage of the Brick Breeden Fieldhouse to collect his diploma. The honor student now has a degree in business marketing with a minor in entrepreneurship, which is why he came to MSU in the first place. In fact, he had promised his parents he wouldn't leave MSU without that piece of paper. Unfortunately, his father didn't live to see that day, having died last October of a stroke at the age of 50. "He was my first trainer and my first coach, biggest fan and biggest critic," Tuiasosopo says. "He was always hard on me and really instilled the idea of what hard work can get you." Like a diploma. Tuiasosopo came to MSU from Lancaster, California with his eye on first getting an education, then an opportunity to play football. "A lot of times people confuse the idea of their kid going to play Division I football and they're so big on the NFL and the football part of it, but the main thing he made me promise was I had to graduate. I finally fulfilled that promise."

With a degree in hand, there was no over-compelling reason to play this season, other than that he's passionate about learning and he loves the game. So, he's taking graduate-level business classes. What happens when the current season ends this fall

remains unknown. He's looking at the southern California music scene, where he hopes to gain exposure for his own style of R&B hip-hop rap, "but with more storytelling and trying to convey a message" — something he's never been shy to do, no matter how uncomfortable that message may be to others. On the other hand, "I can see myself sticking around here. It's a lot easier to get hired around here than going into the big pool of Los Angeles. Of course, the kid in me wants to go back home, but the adult side says I can't afford it, it's too expensive."

He started life in Carson, California, part of the Los Angeles metro area. With a median family income of \$65,000 it's not Beverly Hills, so when his mother was given a chance to work with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, the Tuiasosopos moved to Lancaster, where his father opened a church and the whole family put out the welcome mat. It was a hardscrabble upbringing. On top of five siblings, the Tuiasosopos housed four other youngsters, as well as a constant stream of people who needed shelter for a night, a week, a month or sometimes longer. "My parents have always kept an open house to people who wanted to try to find a better life situation," says Tui.

There was always plenty of love and food to go around, but sometimes not much else. "We didn't get the wants; it was more like if we needed something. There was a lot of heads to try to take care of for my mom." Like so many of his Polynesian relatives in the area, football was his way out. It's been estimated that as many as 20 relatives have played college football, including his dad, who was an offensive lineman at USC in the early 1990s. "For us, scholarships were and still are the only way we would be able to go to college. I knew I wanted



to play collegiate football and I knew football was the best way for me to get to college and get a better situation. For a lot of people, we're that crazy athletic family that's all go-go on sports. From an outside view it looks like all we're focused on is sports, sports, sports, but from an internal view we understand this is our way to better our lives. Football is more like a step than a dream."

As a senior at Lancaster's Paraclete High, his only other scholarship offer was from the University of San Diego, but MSU won him over when he came for a visit back in 2016. "The moment I got here, the second I got off the airplane until the second I got back on the airplane to go home, I felt I was part of a family here." And it was an escape to the unknown. "I wanted to get to somewhere that was very different from where I was so I could grow as much as I could. I just wanted to get comfortable being uncomfortable." After fasting and praying, he agreed to become part of Choate's inaugural group of players. All the while, he's blossomed into a spokesperson for MSU's people of color. "You see somebody at the grocery store, treat them the way you want to be treated. It's the golden rule we're all taught when we're three years old."

IT IS JUST FOOTBALL

Ah yes, the grocery store. When you pack 315 pounds on your 6-foot-4 frame, you're well known at the grocery store. Tui, which is what he's called by his teammates, arrived here from Paraclete, a private Catholic school in Lancaster, tipping the scales at around 350 pounds. "I came in here pretty heavy," he says. "I felt like I was moving good, but it's one of those things you don't really know until you lose the weight. Now that I'm down to this weight, I feel like this is where



my best performance is. This is the weight I'd like to stay at."

As good as he's been in the classroom, he's created an impressive resumé in football too, earning All-Big Sky honors in 2019. He was named to the All-Big Sky's 2020 preseason team, a team that never got a chance to play due to Covid-19, and expectations are high for the 2021 season. Just where he'll line up seems to be in flux, with new coach Brent Vigen saying Tuiasosopo could be a center or a guard. It doesn't matter much to Tui. "Being able to play all the positions is probably one of my greatest strengths. I don't think there's a specific preference. I just play where I get put."

The current crop of Bobcats has never tasted defeat against the Grizzlies, having won the last four encounters, all under Choate. Tui loves that fact so much that among the many tattoos running up his massive left forearm are the letters FTG in big, bold print that can't be missed. Always the



spokesperson, Tui has taken it upon himself to educate the new head coach on the state's premier sporting event, the Brawl of the Wild. "I've never lost to them. We're doing a great job of letting coach Vigen know how big the Great Divide Trophy and the whole rivalry are." That's Taylor Tuiasosopo. Always speaking the truth.



2021 MSU BOBCAT FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME	LOCATION	TV STATION	CONFERENCE	PROMOTION
04 Sept	University of Wyoming	2:00 p.m. MST	Laramie, WY		FBS Non-Conference	
11 SEPT	DRAKE UNIVERSITY	6:00 p.m. MST	BOZEMAN, MT		FCS Non-Conference	GOLD RUSH
18 SEPT	SAN DIEGO U	1:00 p.m. MST	BOZEMAN, MT		FCS Non-Conference	Military Appreciation
25 Sept *	Portland State U	3:00 p.m. MS	Portland, OR		Big Sky	
02 OCT *	NORTHERN COLORADO	1:00 p.m. MST	BOZEMAN, MT		BIG SKY	Stripe the Stadium
09 Oct	CAL POLY	2:00 p.m. MST	BOZEMAN, MT	ROOT Sports	BIG SKY	HOMECOMING
15 Oct *	Weber State	8:00 p.m. MST	Ogden, UT	ESPNU	Big Sky	
23 Oct *	IDAHO STATE U	1:00 p.m. MST	BOZEMAN, MT		BIG SKY	
BYE		BYE		BYE		
06 Nov *	Eastern Washington	2:00 p.m. MST	Cheney, WA		Big Sky	
10 Nov *	U OF IDAHO	1:00 p.m. MST	BOZEMAN, MT		BIG SKY	Sr. Day/Ag Appreciation
17 Nov *	University of Montana	12:00 noon MST	Missoula, MT	ROOT Sports	Big Sky	



We know Golf!

- * Best in Gallatin Valley for Indoor Golf
- * 35+ years experience PGA PRO
- * Comprehensive Lesson Programs
- * Simulator Time
- * Custom Club Fitting
- * Complete Golf Club Repair

"Swing Hard, Just In Case You Hit It" Patrick Stoltz PGA Pro




96 Laura Louise Lane S-14 Bozeman, MT 59718 (406) 924-6085









American Made Sofas, Sectionals, and Chairs in all shapes & sizes at very affordable prices!



WE HAVE FURNITURE FOR SMALLER SPACES TOO!

Corner of 7th & Durston * M-F 10-6 Sat 10-5 * 587-1199 * www.rikkisfurniture.com



SQUIRE HOUSE

BAR | EATERY

STEAK, CHOPS, SEAFOOD, PASTA

(406) 577-2773 • SQUIREHOUSEBOZEMAN.COM • 25 E. MENDENAL ST. BOZEMAN



We can fix all your tech!

\$5.00 off
a device repair

Some conditions apply. See store for details.

Visit our new Bozeman location:

867 S 29th Ave
Bozeman, MT 59718
(406) 219-3322

Free diagnostics • Veteran Owned

ubreakifix
BY asurion



Simply. Feel. Better.

- Increase mobility
- Improve posture
- Reduce stress



Highly trained Flexologists work one-on-one with you to meet your goals. Call us today.



23 S. Willson Ave., Bozeman, MT | 406.624.6010 | bozeman@stretchlab.com

Facials
Body Waxing
Lash Extensions
Manicures
Pedicures
Massage Therapy
Foot Zone Balance
full service...

PURE Bliss
SALON & SPA

"Come join our family"

Bonnie Berdahl, Lic'd Esthetician
406.599.7368

Kim Stewart, Lic'd Nail Technician/artist
512.820.9314

Madison Johnson, Lic'd Esthetician
406.581.8342

Heather Kern, Lic'd Massage Therapist & Esthetician
406.581.0871

Pure Bliss Salon & Spa 102 Eagle Fjord Road Unit F Bozeman, MT 59718

Olivelle
THE ART OF FLAVOR

Game UP YOUR FOOD
WITH AWARD WINNING INGREDIENTS

LOCALLY OWNED, PRODUCED & LOVED SINCE 2006 • 2855 N. 19TH AVE SUITE K, BOZEMAN MT 59718 • WWW.OLIVELLE.COM

best little big store

heeb's
Fresh Market

PHARMACY

406-586-5484
www.heebsgrocery.com/western-drug-bozeman

406-587-3145
200 Highland Blv. Bozeman, MT 59715

Celebrating
90 Years
1929-2019

**RENT HERE...
BUY HERE...**

www.tractorandequipment.com

• 406-585-5800
• 2770 North 19th Ave.
• Bozeman, MT

T & E **CAT** Rental STORE

SUMMIT
MOTORSPORTS

“Bozeman’s Premier Dealer For Year Round Fun”

- PARTS
- SALES
- SERVICE
- RENTALS

25 Homestake Dr. Bozeman, MT 59718 406-586-7147

www.summitmotorsports.net