

Boles battles beast on his back

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By JOHN HEUSER

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DETROIT - The corner of Linwood and Elmhurst on the city's near west side has gone quiet in the late morning, save for the humming of cars that occasionally drive past on the rain-dampened pavement, and the impatient barking of a narcotics dog in the rear seat of a parked Wayne County sheriff's cruiser.

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A handful of law enforcement officers have gathered outside the sprawling, Tudor-styled building, constructed in 1939 as a rabbinical school. Since 1972, it has been called Elmhurst Home and used as a residential treatment center. About 100 recovering addicts live there at a time, getting clean and trying to collect, bit-by-bit, the pieces of their lives, often smashed and scattered beyond anything recognizable.

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Hour-upon-hour of Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings lay souls bare, like fresh fish for sale, split end-to-end and iced down in the market. There's a 6 a.m. wakeup, then a military style roll call. Daily tasks get assigned, like cleaning communal bathrooms, the chore handled by the man waiting to cross the four lanes of Linwood.

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Progress in the battle is tracked in thick work books, filled in by residents rehearsing the concept that drug addiction won't release its death grip until they change their thinking. The man in the torn, hooded gray sweatshirt and the dark-blue mesh shorts knows how impossible that can be.

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"Someone's in some trouble," he says, casting a quick glance over his shoulder at the officers before stepping off the curb.

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Within 15 seconds, the one-time star football player, the tailback considered by Bo Schembechler as perhaps the finest he ever coached at the University of Michigan, is standing at the windowless entry of a plain, low-slung building. He's there for an interview, arranged after speaking with a reporter who had left a phone number with the man's probation officer.

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The man presses a button next to the locked door. "Who is it?" asks a woman's voice from within Elmhurst Home's administrative offices.

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Then he says the name, once cheered lustily by football fans, now twisted in knots by years of drugs, homelessness and incarceration.

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"Tony Boles."

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There's a click, the lock releases and he walks inside.

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'Truly a gift'

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Gray flecks accent Boles' close-cropped hair and beard. Two top teeth are missing to form a gap near the front of his mouth. He says, however, that a recent physical showed him to be in good overall health, except for the right knee, which he rubs absent-mindedly.

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It's being consumed by arthritis. Bone fragments, floating loose beneath the skin, need to be removed. The best thing would be a knee replacement, but at 38, Boles is too young for that operation, he was told.

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Hardware from surgery to repair the joint that was shredded back in 1989 - when he was a junior at Michigan - still holds things together. Motrin is the only drug he's taking now, Boles says, a necessity to dull the ache that never goes away.

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At 6 feet, 2 inches tall, Boles weighs about 190 pounds, 10 or so less than when he played. He works out in the weight room at Elmhurst Home, but really can't run any more. The last of Tony Boles' football skills have vanished, except on film and in the memories of those who recall his sublime athletic ability.

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At Michigan, when players met during the off-season, they'd run 40-yard dashes, timed electronically. Boles took his turn, stunning teammates who made him sprint again to see if the equipment was functioning properly.

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"Nobody ran what he ran," says Phil Webb, a former Michigan player who's now a police officer in Birmingham. "He was sub 4.3 (seconds). He was truly a gift, speedwise."

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In closed-door meetings, coaches raved about Boles' potential. His position coach, Tirrel Burton, now retired and living in Ann Arbor, compared Boles to Dallas Cowboys great Tony Dorsett, who mixed evasiveness and acceleration in matchless fashion.

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"He could have been the best," Burton says of Boles. "And he had great hands. He would have been a great wide receiver."

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Former Michigan defensive back Thom Darden, who served as Boles' professional agent, says the tailback was considered talented enough by NFL scouts to be a potential No. 1 overall draft pick.

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Though indifferent toward conditioning and the classroom (Boles once served a six-week suspension from football at Michigan for poor academic performance), Boles was a marvel on the field. In 1988, his sophomore year, Boles gained 1,408 yards rushing, which ranks as the eighth-best performance in 126 seasons of Michigan football.

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A pinched nerve cut into his carries in 1989, but heading into the Nov. 18 Minnesota game at the Metrodome, Boles had still rushed for 822 yards, was averaging a Big Ten-best 6.3 yards per carry and had 216 yards receiving.

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Michigan was 8-1 to that point, and would trounce the Golden Gophers 49-15. The injury, which happened when Boles was tackled on his only rushing attempt, drew little mention in the next day's Ann Arbor News.

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Schembechler, coaching his final season, said immediately after the game that he thought Boles would be fine. He wasn't. The last meaningful carry of Boles' life went for 17 yards. He dropped out of classes in the winter term ("I didn't want to be crutching around campus," he says.) Eventually, he quit rehabbing his knee. Tony Boles was gone.

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Drafted by Cowboys

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In 1990, Darden invited Boles to Cleveland, putting him up in a hotel, giving him a car, working him out with trainers. Darden bet \$25,000 or so on the kid with the gimpy knee who was obviously missing something.

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"I could tell there was a hole in his soul," Darden says. "He was a guy who was not totally happy in his own skin."

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Boles would push himself hard for a couple of days, then skip a workout.

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"I was losing desire," he says. "I had lost confidence in myself."

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Nonetheless, the Dallas Cowboys used an 11th-round draft pick in 1991 on Boles, who never made the active roster.

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With his signing bonus, which Boles says was about \$15,000, he rented a limousine and bounced bar to bar around the Dallas area. Boles and a man he met that night got high on cocaine. Boles says he then "dropped dirty" for the Cowboys in a drug test, and he was cut.

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Born in southern Georgia, and raised in metro Detroit, Boles remembers himself as a child, watching for guests to set down near-empty glasses at his parents' parties. When no one was looking, he'd tip the glass back, finishing the drink. He says he smoked marijuana for the first time in high school and tested positive for the drug once at Michigan.

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His stepfather reminded him frequently that he'd never amount to anything, Boles says, a message that resonates in his head today.

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After Dallas, Boles played nearly a full season of football with the San Antonio Riders of the World League of American Football, the predecessor of NFL Europe. But he missed the season's last two games while he was locked up; jailed because he was duped, Boles says, into picking up a stranger who asked to stop at a flower shop, then robbed the place. Boles' jobs after that were many and meaningless to him, lasting no more than a month or two. He was a construction laborer, did roofing, worked in grocery stores.

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"The little money I had, I invested in selling drugs," he says.

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Boles was living in Florida then, near Fort Lauderdale. It wasn't long before he became strung out on his own product, crack cocaine. "It's been all downhill from that point," Boles says.

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Asked how many times he's been arrested, Boles lets out an audible, "whoooo," as he begins to count.

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"I would say 10 times É plus," Boles says, slowing down his speech. "Yes, I've been arrested quite a few times."

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Mostly drug busts, plus some thefts. All to support his habit. Boles was first homeless in Broward County, Fla., when he lived in a place he knew as Tent City. He has also been homeless in Inkster, Detroit, Ann Arbor and Akron, Ohio.

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Boles landed in Ohio after hooking up with a truck driver in Inkster, a place Boles says he had grown tired of. He was promised a ride to New Jersey, where the trucker was headed.

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They stopped in Akron so Boles could use the restroom, and when he came out, he was alone. Boles called the local sheriff, who took him to a homeless mission.

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"I was doing pretty well there," he says. "Then I got right back involved with drugs again."

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This time, Boles sold narcotics to undercover police, and was sent to Ohio's Grafton Correctional Institution, where he served about six months. Boles estimates that, all told, he has spent eight to 10 years behind bars, either in jail or prison.

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"I would never, ever wish that on anyone. To get involved with drugs, any type of drugs, or to go to penitentiary," he says. "Penitentiary is not a place for no one. It absolutely scared me."

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With old teammates

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Tony Boles was dead, killed in Romulus in a drug bust gone wrong. At least that was the rumor circulating around the Michigan football family.

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Eventually the story was heard by Webb, who couldn't believe the unassuming, supremely talented player from Westland John Glenn High School was, in fact, gone.

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"Not this guy," says Webb, who hosted Boles during his recruiting visit and became Boles' mentor at Michigan. "He was like Superman. He was a god for a little while."

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In 2003, through contacts in the Westland Police Department, Webb found out Boles had been recently arrested, that he was alive.

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"Don't go try to find this guy," an officer warned. "He's going to break your heart."

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Against that advice, Webb checked Boles' old addresses. The search took Webb, and another former Michigan player, quarterback Michael Taylor, to Michigan Avenue in Inkster. The crime-ridden, dilapidated stretch of asphalt also was an area frequented by Boles.

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Webb and Taylor stopped at a liquor store and asked the owner if he knew of Boles.

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Boles, as it turns out, had recently left, walking around the corner.

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"I was getting high, and this big truck pulled up," Boles says. "These two big guys get out, two of my buddies that I had played ball with."

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Webb embraced Boles and didn't let go. He set the homeless man up in a motel, got him a job at a car wash. As the 100th Michigan-Ohio State game approached, Webb asked Boles if he'd like to return to Ann Arbor to attend a reunion of former Michigan football players.

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Boles accepted and was received warmly by his old teammates, some who gave him business cards and offers of help. When hundreds of former players created a tunnel in Michigan Stadium to guide the 2003 Wolverines across the field, Boles was there. With no letter jacket of his own, Boles wore one loaned to him by Webb.

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During the game, a Wolverines victory, Boles contentedly watched from a sideline position near the north end zone. It was the first Michigan game Boles had seen in person since leaving school.

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"He was like in heaven again," Webb says. "It was a turning point, I thought."

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While waiting to receive a copy of his birth certificate and other identification needed to help get his life back on track, Boles stayed nights in Ann Arbor's homeless shelter on Huron Street. Webb went off to Michigan's Rose Bowl game, feeling encouraged about his friend. The next thing Webb knew, Boles had again been arrested.

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One mid-January day in 2004, Boles and a new acquaintance were driving and drinking. Broke, they began plotting a way to get money.

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"I was drinking and drinking and drinking," Boles says. "I got false courage."

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Boles and his partner targeted an older couple walking along State Street, less than a mile north of Schembechler Hall, Michigan's football building. Boles jumped from the car and

ripped the purse from the woman, who was knocked to the ground and dragged into the street. As the vehicle drove away, she managed to get the license plate number.

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Within days, Boles was arrested when police pulled the car over in Inkster. He confessed to the crime, eventually pleaded guilty to unarmed robbery and was sentenced, briefly staying at a state prison in Jackson before being transferred to Carson City (Mich.) Correctional Facility. Between jail, prison, then boot camp, Boles served nearly a year for the purse snatching, which he says was the only violent crime he has committed.

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"I say again today, I apologize (to the couple)," Boles says. "I'm sorry. I know I probably scarred them for life. If they don't forgive me, that's OK."

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Peeling the façade

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Released from boot camp in January 2005, Boles plunged into his old habits. Within three months, he had violated parole, was getting high and was again homeless, this time in Detroit's seedy Cass Corridor.

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He spent most of his time in Cass Park, recollected by Boles as "Jurassic Park," and as the place where police picked him up four months ago in a drug sweep.

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After spending several weeks in another treatment program, Boles arrived at Elmhurst Home in February. He had no wallet. No identification. None of the contact information handed to him by ex-teammates.

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Boles' only clothing was what he wore; a coat, a sweatshirt, jeans and shoes. And a deeply imbedded mask he hid behind, a disguise that cloaked years of guilt and embarrassment.

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"It was a terrible feeling," he says. "I was covering everything up, all the pain and shame I had from my lifetime."

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Harold Lockett, Boles' counselor, began peeling the facade off as soon as Boles arrived. When Lockett met Boles he said: "You're Tony Boles. You played for the University of Michigan."

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When Lockett introduced Boles to the other residents, he told them of Boles' history, his homelessness, his athletic career.

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"He put me out there," Boles says. "At first, the defenses came up. I didn't want no one to know that. I wanted to go in, get what I needed and get up out of there."

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Yet, after 20 hours of meetings each week for the last two and a half months, Boles says firmly that he's in recovery. He's tapped into deep emotions, crying at church and in conversations.

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Boles, who has been in rehabilitation twice before, says he's better prepared to make the change permanent this time. He was planning to meet with his mother (his stepfather died in 1994) and his 21-year-old daughter this weekend, neither of whom he has seen in more than a year. Webb also intends to visit Boles soon.

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"We're all praying for him. We all know about the monster, the beast on your back," Webb says. "It's taken some of the best of people and turned them into the worst of people."

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When Boles leaves Elmhurst Home later this month, he'll move into transitional housing in Detroit, living with other recovering addicts for up to a year. Although Boles will have to pay rent there, it's still unclear what he'll do for work.

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An education major at Michigan, Boles would like to finish his degree at some point. He has connected with a minister who said he may be able to help Boles become a substitute teacher. Boles also is talking about retelling his story in schools, cautioning young people about how any life - no matter its promise - can be forever altered.

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The last time Boles spoke with his daughter, she couldn't resist talking about what might have been. NFL riches. Stardom. The easy life.

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There are no fantasies like that left for Boles.

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He pictures a future for himself that sounds simple, but so far has proven agonizingly elusive.

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"I see myself helping others, and sober," Boles says quietly. "I don't have to be rich, I don't have to be poor. Just content and at peace with myself."

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