

Falkirk defender Ciaran McKenna details the rape accusation he refused to let ruin his life

Former Celtic youth left for the States but his American dream was to turn sour.

BY GORDON WADDELL

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(Image: Jamie Williamson)

Ciaran McKenna left for America at 17 with a head full of dreams and ambitions.

A quarter of a million pound education at Duke University, producer of presidents, Nobel Prize winners and business billionaires, plus a football scholarship that would keep a professional career on his horizon.

Now he's back in Scotland with a degree and his aspirations intact.

The only question, when you consider the ordeal he went through, is how?

How does a teenager find the resilience, the depth of character, to fend off the nightmare of a false rape accusation and take on an \$8billion institution, ranked as one of the best 20 universities in the world – and win?

How does a kid, nearly 4000 miles from home, who is told his education and football future are in ruins, resist the urge to cut and run back to his distraught parents who are desperate for him to get on the first flight out?

The answer, he shrugs, is simply that he refused to let a lie ruin him. Refused to accept the prospect of a life spent regretting not fighting for himself.

And here he is. A professional footballer. Not only living to tell the tale but wise beyond his years for it.

As composed, polite and eloquent a 20-year-old as you'll ever meet, the knowledge he had right on his side and his determination to prove it – with the help of one of the most venerable law professors in America – has brought him home.

He's chastened but stronger, still angry but more resolute than ever to have the life he planned for himself when he refused a full-time contract at Celtic to explore the wider world.



McKenna in action for Falkirk (Image: SNS Group)

Now cutting his first-team teeth at Falkirk on a short-term deal to get experience, the 6ft 4in defender exudes self-belief on and off the park. He's an absolute specimen of an athlete from one of the biggest and best sports programmes in the States.

He's grateful for a chance to show what he can do but is acutely aware of how different it could all have been.

A fateful Valentine's night hook-up in 2016 ended in an accusation without credibility or evidence, brought by a girl who had thanked him and asked for his number afterwards.

The allegation was seen for what it ultimately was and thrown out as a criminal case in an instant as being completely without foundation.

What followed, though, would have destroyed lesser men. His own university ostracised him through their fear of a culture that assumed guilt rather than innocence. He was tried, cleared, tried again, found guilty – of what, no one ever knew – then forced to take on and beat a system stacked against him.

"The accusation was first made when I was 17," said McKenna, relaxed despite the anguish of the subject. "We didn't settle it all until last August so it was the best part of a two-and-a-half-year ordeal.

"At the beginning I was naive, I couldn't get my head around it.

"It didn't feel real – I almost put it to the back of my mind. It was ridiculous and I never saw it going anywhere.

"But when it did, very quickly, James Coleman, a professor who works at the Duke Law School, helped me.

"He's nationally recognised, had an incredible career dealing with death penalty cases and miscarriages of justice before he got into academia.

"He recognised instantly I was getting screwed and agreed to help.

"Bizarrely the panel of students and professors didn't believe the accusation yet still suspended me for two years!

"It's very political, the culture, so it was almost done 'just in case' there was a backlash to my innocence.

"We appealed it, won, but they went totally against their policy and had a new hearing with new people. I had to go through it again, I was suspended again for two years, we appealed, lost that one – it was Christmas by then –and I was told I had to leave.

"Professor Coleman put me in touch with lawyers who sued Duke on my behalf and eventually we won an injunction that allowed me to stay in school until the lawsuit was over."

It's exhausting even listening to the tale of his nightmare unfolding, far less living it.

It's not the first case Duke have fought and lost – three students from their lacrosse team won a \$16m settlement in a bungled 2006 rape case they vowed would never be repeated, yet they ended up back at the table opposite McKenna and on the losing side again.

The size of the settlement remains undisclosed although McKenna made a substantial donation to Duke's Wrongful Convictions Clinic by way of thanks.

The kid from Uddingston said: "The judge ruled there was no need for a trial – it was so completely black and white. The university settled out of court for negligence and reputational damage.

"There was a bit of relief, certainly a lot of anger – I still had a life in front of me, I didn't want my future ruined.

"It would have broken me more to walk away though. I owed it to myself to keep going. My parents never doubted me but were saying 'Look son, just come home and put it behind you'.

"That would have felt like admitting defeat. I'd regret not fighting it down the line. And the vindication of a full exoneration at the end was worth it."

Despite having lived a lifetime's worth of distress in under three years, Ciaran didn't waste his time.

His degree in Political Science is in the bank along with a football education that he still insists was a benefit.

Son of former pro Adrian, he said: "I'd been at Celtic from nine years old and was from a huge Celtic family.



(Image: Daily Record)

"The contract offer came when I was 16, in fourth year. But I got seven 'A's in my exams and was worried about putting all my eggs in one basket, depending on football.

“Celtic encouraged me and the assumption was always that I’d sign a year later once I’d done my Highers.

“But I could see how many boys were signing the same deal then just kicking around for years nowhere near the first team. I didn’t want to be one of them.”

When the scholarship offer came through that would take him to Durham in North Carolina, he didn’t hesitate to accept.

McKenna said: “The soccer programme benefits from the ridiculous amounts of money that basketball and American football bring in. They have the biggest gym you’ll ever see and you work with all the players from all the sports.

“Duke hospital is one of the best research hospitals in America so when I got a knee injury, you get the best surgeons.

“You get treated like a professional – and the tuition is \$280,000, all of which I got paid.

“I’d probably have developed more as a footballer staying in Scotland – but the physical side, the athleticism, they pour resources into that and I definitely got fitter, stronger and faster.

“I never once stopped wanting to be a pro. Now I’m 20, I don’t have any more time to waste to establish myself.”

He’s following a path well travelled at Falkirk.



(Image: Jamie Williamson)

Davie Weir pitched up at Brockville in 1994, the only club who'd even give him a trial after his scholarship in Indiana with Evansville, and his career panned out not too badly.

Signed with the Bairns until the end of the season, despite interest from the Premiership, McKenna intends to make the most of the opportunity.

He said: "I want to get to the highest level I can and I'm capable of reaching that level.

"This is a good place for me just now. It was important to come back and play 'real' football.

"Ultimately you need to play games and the Championship is a great place to start. Hopefully I can get as many games under my belt as I can and take it from here."

<https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/falkirk-defender-ciaran-mckenna-details-13896709>