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Their dream? To play pro football

DCD grad tackles odds with Dallas

By Marty Budner
staff writer

Rodney Gilbert is a 21-year-old athlete who is one semester shy of gaining a business degree from Wittenberg (Ohio) College.

He played four years of basketball at the tiny Division III school in southwestern Ohio. He never played college football. In fact, his last organized gridiron action was 1977 — his junior year at Detroit Country Day High School.

So, how in the name of National Football League Commissioner Pete Rozelle did he wind up at the Dallas Cowboys free-agent/rookie training camp currently in progress at Thousand Oaks, Calif.?

"I guess I just have a natural athletic ability to play football," said Gilbert last week from his Conejo Dormitory at California Lutheran College.

Gilbert was among 105 rookies and free agents who checked into the Cowboys' camp a week ago Sunday. He is hoping to land a spot as a defensive back.

"The biggest adjustment for me is learning how to run backwards," said Gilbert, who was instrumental in helping DCD qualify for the quarterfinals of the 1977 Michigan High School Athletic Association's state Class C playoffs.

"IN BASKETBALL, you don't have to run backwards that much. Here, you have to run backwards as good as you do forwards, and you have to be able to make the cuts.

"There are two things you have to be able to do. First, you have to have the ability to cover receivers tight and break when they break. And, secondly, you have to play tough and aggressive.

"I seem to be improving every day. All the coaches are making positive comments right now," he said. "I want it bad enough and I think my chances are great — that's the way you have to think."

Gilbert was a three-sport athlete at Country Day, where he played football and basketball and ran track. He played football his sophomore and junior years, but couldn't play as a senior because of injuries.

Joe D'Angelo, the current DCD football coach who began his career at the Birmingham prep school in 1977 when Gilbert was a sophomore, never anticipated Gilbert's unexpected jump to professional football.

"I knew that football was there for him, but it wasn't his main sport — basketball was," said D'Angelo. "He always had the ability and he's a good overall athlete, but it still came as a surprise to me that he even got into (football) again."

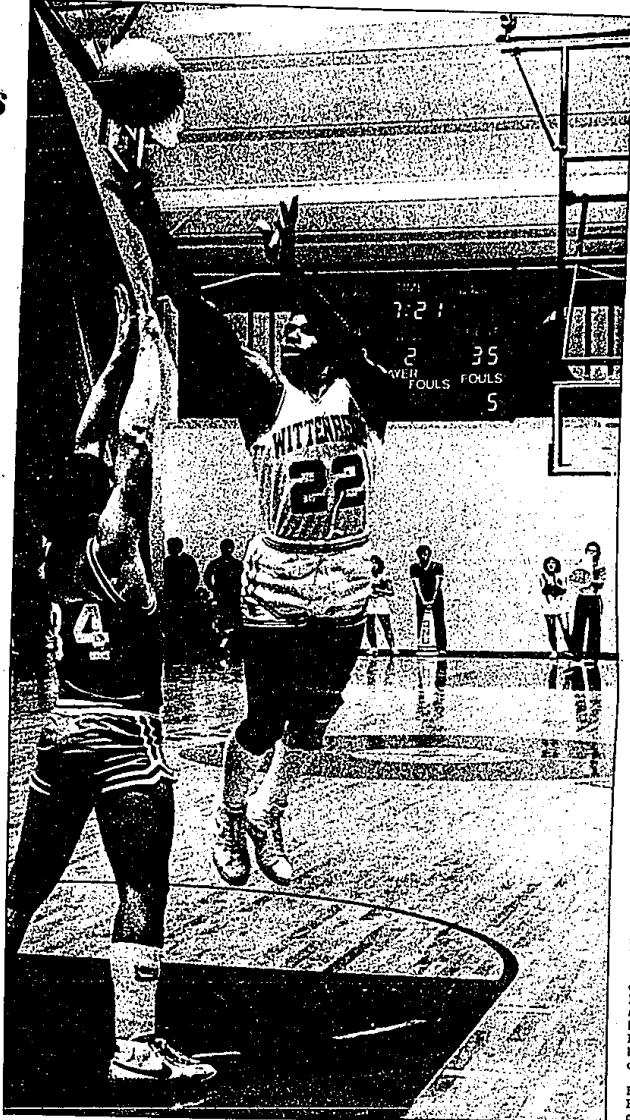
KURT KEENER, DCD's present basketball coach, graduated from Wittenberg College and was instrumental in Gilbert's decision to attend the Ohio school. They have mutual respect for each other. Gilbert said Keener is like a brother to him, and Keener said Gilbert is one of the finest athletes he's ever coached.

"I came to Country Day fresh out of college (1978) and Rodney was a senior," he said. "We became close and I think the age thing — he was 17 or 18 at the time and I was 21 — had a lot to do with it."

"Rodney is a tremendous athlete, and he is far and away the most intense athlete I've ever coached at Country Day. But, as for football, I never had an inkling that he'd get into that."

"I think he realizes he's a long shot, but if there is ever anyone who could make it, that would be Rodney. Any time someone said that he couldn't do something, that's sort of spurred him on even more."

"He has the desire," said Keener. "And, with the Cowboys, he might even get that little extra look because they've been known to gamble a little bit."



DCD grad Rodney Gilbert played four years of basketball at Wittenberg College.

He is now trying out for the Dallas Cowboys professional football team.

noted Maurer. "It didn't take a whole lot for anyone that's involved in the game to see on the basketball court the same kind of skills that you'd like to see in a defensive back or a wide receiver."

GILBERT SPENT the past three weeks in Dallas lifting weights and exercising to gear up for the California camp. He eagerly anticipated camp since the initial shock of reacquainting himself to football — especially with a nationally-renowned team like the Cowboys —

"The 'awesome' part was over for me when I had the opportunity to sign with Dallas," said Gilbert. "That nervous feeling sort of left me once I got to Dallas. Then I knew I had to come down and just get to work."

Gilbert realizes it's a long shot if he's smashing bodies on the football field this fall alongside such stars as Ed "Too Tall" Jones, Tony Dorsett and Harvey Martin.

"I know everybody can't make it. . . and if I don't I'll try again next year — but I won't wait too long just to play football," said Gilbert. "I've worked hard for everything all my life, and I know I'll have to earn this position."

Gilbert credited the atmosphere surrounding Country Day as the basis for his realistic outlook on life.

"If I didn't have the opportunity to go to school at DCD and Wittenberg, it would be worse for me if I didn't make the team," said Gilbert, who noted that such DCD personnel as Keener, George Brown (former track coach), Gene Rally (former athletic di-

rector) and Bill Homik (trainer) were big inspirations to him.

"Going to those schools prepared me for life after athletics. They prepared me to cope with things when they didn't work out. DCD was a tremendous learning and growing experience for me."

When I came to DCD from the city, I learned discipline, how to compete and how to control myself with people," he said. "The experience made me a well-rounded person."

KEENER SAID Gilbert is the fourth player from Country Day to attend an NFL training camp. The other three were Mike Paige, who graduated from Harvard and tried out for the Cowboys in the mid-70s; David Marrett, who graduated from Wittenberg and tried out for both Buffalo and the Lions in the mid-70s; and Jim Hinesly, who graduated from Michigan State University and attended a Seattle Seahawks camp.

All three were cut and never made the big time. "They all had their chances to make it, but they just didn't have the right amount of ability," said Keener. "But, they are all successful in their fields today. And, we (Country Day School) have to take some pride in that."

"But, I wouldn't be surprised about Rodney because he has the size and speed. If I had to compare (Rodney) to anyone, I could compare him to Vince Bean (a Southfield graduate who is now playing for the University of Michigan).

"Rodney fits in Bean's mold," said Keener. "And, if Bean can play professional football, Rodney certainly can."

The Dallas Cowboys' veterans arrive at training camp on July 21. Rodney Gilbert is hoping to report to that same camp.

Rollercoaster takes Rudzinski to NFL

By Chris McCosky
staff writer

Just when Joe Rudzinski was ready to give up the game of football, just when the game had thoroughly disappointed and frustrated him, he got the phone call every college player dreams of.

Rudzinski, a native of Farmington and a 1979 Catholic Central graduate, completed four years of football at Notre Dame last fall. The four years could accurately be described as a rollercoaster ride for Rudzinski.

The 6-foot-3, 218-pound linebacker was a highly-touted prospect from Catholic Central in 1979. In his senior year at CC, Rudzinski was a Catholic Prep All-American and was named to All-State, All-Metro and All-Division teams.

His talents were actively pursued by the University of Michigan, Michigan State, Wisconsin and Notre Dame. The rollercoaster was, at that point, ascending.

"I CHOSE NOTRE Dame for a couple reasons," the muscular, curly-haired Rudzinski said. "They didn't beg me to come they just kind of said, 'Well, if you want to come, come, if not, that's fine too.' I liked what I saw when I visited there. It's a first-class operation. I was in awe, almost. I remember when they were showing me around they took me into the tunnel that leads to the field. That really took me. You could feel the magic of the place."

Michigan State was a close second. Rudzinski's older brother, Paul, was a standout for the Spartans and went on to play four years with the Green Bay Packers.

"I didn't choose State because my brother had gone there. I didn't want to follow in his footsteps, so to speak. I didn't want everyone calling me 'Little Rud,'" he said.

He saw limited action as a freshman, but in his sophomore year Rudzinski earned a starting job with Dan Devine's Irish.

"My goal as a sophomore was just to play. I ended up starting. I really learned a lot that year," he said.

THE ROLLERCOASTER hit its crest in Rudzinski's sophomore year. He started all 12 games for the Irish and was the team's third-leading tackler. He was lauded throughout South Bend for his aggressive style of play, his sticking tackles and his ability to defend against the pass.

The highlight of his sophomore year, Rudzinski said, was beating MSU at East Lansing. "I had always dreamed of running out of that tunnel like I had seen my brother do for four years. My family was there and I knew a lot of the guys. . . that was really neat," he said.

Things changed in a hurry for Rudzinski. The summer between his sophomore and junior year, Jerry Faust replaced Devine as head coach. The effects of that change were not immediately visible.

Rudzinski began his junior year as a starting linebacker. On Oct. 30, 1981, half way through a game against Michigan, Rudzinski injured his shoulder. He finished the game, but during practice the next week the pain became unbearable.

"I DIDN'T EVEN know I was hurt. What happened was, I did some damage to my rotator cuff," he said.

The injury kept him out of the lineup for three games. He was replaced by Rick Naylor, who was coached in high school by Faust.

Rudzinski returned to the lineup in time for the game against traditional rival USC. He played the finest football game of his career that day in front of a national television audience. He made 10 solo tackles and frustrated USC's offense most of the day.

"That was a fun game," Rudzinski said.

Unfortunately, it was the last bit of fun he would experience for a while. He and Naylor soon began sharing the strong-side linebacker spot. The question of Rudzinski's shoulder kept coming up. The coaches felt it was nagging him. The rollercoaster was descending.

"IT WAS A combination of things. There was a coaching change, there

were questions about my shoulder and other nagging injuries. But, I always felt I could play," he said.

Rudzinski isn't the type of athlete who will bad-mouth a school or a coach once he has departed the scene. But, he's honest.

"Rick Naylor is a fine athlete. I wouldn't take anything away from him. I don't know if I got a bad deal, or what. It's hard to say. I'm a competitive person so, yes, I'd say that I was better and I deserved to play. But, it wasn't my decision to make," Rudzinski said.

After starting as a sophomore and junior, Rudzinski saw shared-time duty with Naylor. It cost him a chance at being drafted into the pros.

"I DON'T KNOW HOW high I would have gone, but I think if I played more I would've been drafted," he said. As it happened, the draft passed him by.

So, after a highly successful high school career, and what started off as being an equally successful college career, Rudzinski left Notre Dame figuring his football days were over. The rollercoaster hit bottom.

"I was getting out of football completely. I told people that I was through, that I was tired of it all. I've been playing since I was eight," he said.

He was all set to enter into a different line of work. He thought about sales, he interviewed with the FBI. His degree was in public relations. He thought about going into journalism. He even thought about coaching little league football.

Then the phone rang.

First, the Kansas City Chiefs called. Then Green Bay. Then Houston. He chose Green Bay and signed a three-year free-agent contract complete with up front bonus money for signing. He was going to take a shot at pro football.

"I've taken the attitude that football is just a game. I'm not going to get real hung up on it. I am really nervous about it. I mean, it's a step up, a chance to play with the big boys. I would love to make it. It would help me out financially, and to know you played a year in the NFL would be great," Rudzinski said.

CAN HE MAKE it in the NFL? His ex-coach thinks so.

"He's got a shot. He's got a good shot," said Faust. "I was always impressed with Joe. He was one fine football player. He played with reckless abandon all the time and he's very intelligent. A lot depends on the Packers' depth at linebacker. It's always a question of numbers in the pros."

The Packers did not draft any linebackers. Rudzinski said there were two ways of looking at that. "It's either that they don't need anybody at linebacker, or, it's a good opportunity for me."

It won't be the end of the world if he doesn't make it. He'll be content in the knowledge that he had an opportunity that very few people get — he got to try out for a professional football team.

"I know that if I didn't try, I'd always wonder how I might have done. I look at it like, hey, I have nothing to lose and an awful lot to gain," Rudzinski said.



Farmington's Joe Rudzinski will get his shot with the Green Bay Packers.