

Going the Extra Yard: Senior follows former NFL player and father's footsteps, plans to continue football career in college

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The 2003 Wild Card game — Green Bay Packers vs. Seattle Seahawks.

As the clock ticks down to overtime, the two teams are tied at the nail-biting score of 27-27.

Referees and captains meet in the middle of the field to prepare the coin-toss to decide which team receives the first opportunity to take the win.

Heads or tails.

The coin flips off the referee's fingers, soaring into the air and hovering for a breathless moment. The Seahawks call heads just before the coin lands on the turf...heads up.

"We'll take the ball, and we're going to score," former Seahawks quarterback Matt Hasselback said confidently into the referee's microphone.

After a short struggle that takes both teams to three-and-out, Seattle manages to drive the ball up to their own 45-yard-line.

The teams line up, weight resting on the tips of their fingers and await the snap.

Hasselback takes the ball with practiced ease and makes the pass to left side. The ball spirals through the air while the clock hits 4:25, but it never quite makes it to its proposed destination.

In a flash, current Kansas City Chiefs Assistant Secondary coach, Alshinard Harris Sr., intercepts the throw and runs the ball back 52 yards for the game-winning touch down.

Hasselback called his pass leading to a score — he just guessed in favor of the wrong team.

Harris Sr.'s interception is still talked about today and is one play no Packer fan will soon forget.

FOLLOWING IN HIS DAD'S FOOTSTEPS:

Earlier in his career, Harris Sr. was drafted to the National Football League (NFL) in 1997 as a sixth-round, 169 draft pick. After being waived by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, he made his NFL debut as a starting cornerback for the Philadelphia Eagles in 1998.

Harris Sr. played in the NFL for 14 sea-

sons as a cornerback for the Eagles, Packers, Miami Dolphins and St. Louis Rams.

He was selected to compete in the Pro Bowl for the 2007 and 2008 seasons with his career as a Packer.

Although he was waived from the roster due to an injury, the Packers gave Harris Sr. a ring from the Super Bowl XLV victory against the Pittsburgh Steelers, on Feb. 6, 2010.

Despite his dad's successes, Blue Valley senior Alshinard Harris Jr. said he does not feel any pressure to be as good.

"I only see my dad as my dad," he said. "He has worked very hard for all he has accomplished and earned. I have goals of my own I want to accomplish, and no one can get that done except me. I just try to work hard and be the best me I can be each and every day, and there's no pressure involved in that. What he did professionally doesn't define him to me."

Harris Jr. said he and his father are best friends on and off the field.

"My junior football season, he actually coached me, and that's an experience I'd never forget," he said. "He was there to give me advice through the good and the bad, which was meaningful to me. Off the field, he's just really fun to be around and always keeps me and my brothers laughing."

Prior to attending BV, Harris Jr. attended Saint Thomas Aquinas High School in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

Head football coach and Assistant Athletic Director STA, Rocco Casullo, said Harris Jr. and Harris Sr. are very similar in athletic ability.

"Him and his dad are just true competitors," he said. "I was fortunate to have Al Sr. help out with the coaching staff. He's a technique guy and he's very knowledgeable in the game of football. They are both hard working and dedicated people. [Harris Sr.] played in the NFL for many years, so I think that's the same chip on his shoulder that Al Jr. plays with."

Harris Jr. began his football career 12 years ago, by the guidance of his father.

He said his decision to be a cornerback stemmed from his dad playing the same position.

"As a little kid, I always looked up to my dad," he said. "I grew up watching my father

play, and once I started playing, I loved it. I've been playing ever since. Seeing him play, and me wanting to be like him, naturally caused me to want to play the position."

Casullo said Harris Jr. was respected not only on the field, but in the classroom as well.

"The younger kids would look up to him with how he handled himself with teachers, other seniors, administration — just everybody," he said. "Saying 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' is a huge compliment to his parents because they did a heck of a job raising him. It wasn't a surprise that he would receive the most votes to be a team captain."

Harris Jr. said he attributes his athletic success to mentoring from his father.

"He's taught me everything I know," he said. "He's taught me the techniques of the position and what I need to do to become a good player. He's also taught me how to balance school and sports, which is very important, because with no grades, I can't play. Watching my dad play was very exciting for me. It often felt like I was playing because he is a part of me."

A TOUGH TRANSITION:

In the middle of his senior high school football season in Florida, Harris Jr. tore his hamstring.

In order to fully heal, he said he is seeing a physical therapist three days a week.

"Throughout my season, I was doing everything in my power to battle back from my injury so I could finish the season out with my team," he said. "Then I got an MRI, and it was worse than we thought. If I would have come back to play, I would risk totally tearing my hamstring, and my father and I both felt that was too risky. So, we decided I would come to Kansas earlier than expected so I can prepare myself for college and get the best treatment as possible."

When Harris Jr. moved to Kansas, Smith said the whole football program was sad to see him leave.

"We didn't want him to go, and we didn't want to lose him," Smith said. "Even though he was unable to play, his leadership and qualities on the field have been greatly missed. He was nothing less than an extremely intelligent kid and an extremely polite kid. We had a lot of fun talking about

life, and I just find him to be a great athlete and definitely one of the top kids I’ve been around in 42 years.”

Harris Jr. lived with his grandparents and biological mother in Florida, while the rest of his family resided in Kansas.

He said his transition from Florida to Kansas has been very smooth.

“My guidance counselor and all of my teachers have been very welcoming and understanding, so that’s taken a lot of the stress off me and my family,” Harris Jr. said. “I’m very appreciative of that.”

Casullo said Harris Jr. had a huge contribution to the STA football program.

“He had the most votes to be a captain at St. Thomas this year for the 2013 season,” he said. “He’s a three-year player, and he’s one of those kids that would work with everybody. He loved to help the new kids that would come in and he was a leader and all the guys looked up to him. If I had a problem with something, I could go to Al and he would address it. He’s just an all around great kid.”

After 34 years as STA’s head football coach, Smith said he spent his last year coaching when Harris Jr. was a freshman. Under Smith’s coaching, STA won the State championship in 1992, 1997, 1999, 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2012. They won the National championship in 2008 and 2010.

“Al Jr. — that’s what we called him — came across to me as a young guy who just gets it,” he said. “When he got hurt this year, he was unable to play, and that was a huge loss for our team. He’s a great player, obviously. He’s going to South Carolina, which is one of the top programs in the South. As far as his demeanor, his ability to diffuse situations, his ability to read a team and his positive attitude, [he] is just outstanding.”

FOCUSING ON THE FUTURE:

STA Athletic Director George F. Smith

said he believes Harris Jr. will be very successful in his academic and athletic endeavors.

“Number one, I know he will be a great student — he’s not going to have a problem with that,” Smith said. “I hope he progresses in football, and I’m sure he will. I think if all those things happen, and I’m more than confident they will, then he has a chance to play in the big leagues and get out of [the University of] South Carolina with a degree. He will be a huge success.”

Harris Jr. said he has worked hard throughout high school to achieve his goal of receiving a Division-I scholarship to play football.

"In February, that goal will be accomplished," he said. "Until then, I have to take care of my responsibilities in the classroom, so another goal I have is to make all As and Bs in my classes. My ultimate goal is to play in the NFL, but that's no easy task. I'm going to have to work very hard and stay focused."

Harris Jr. said he made his decision to attend the South Carolina through praying, discussing it with his father and researching.

"I've been trying to create good eating habits and making sure I put the right things into my body, improving my flexibility and dedicating myself to the weight room," he said. "I study the game by watching NFL and college games and just trying to learn from some of my favorite players like [Arizona Cardinals cornerback] Patrick Peterson and [Tampa Bay Buccaneers cornerback] Darrelle Revis."

Harris Jr. was a three-year varsity football player at STA.

“We have a lot of good athletes that come through St. Thomas, and he was one of them,” Casullo said. “He played a lot his sophomore year and had a tremendous junior year. Unfortunately, he got injured his senior year, and that’s what hurt us. There’s

no receiver in Kansas City that would be able to do anything on Al Harris. No offense to the players, but it’s not possible. When Al got hurt, we had to change the defense, and the young guys did a great job, but they’re no Al Harris.”

STA currently has six of their formwer players competing in the NFL.

Smith said Harris Jr. has a strong chance at being drafted to the NFL in the future.

“This year, in the past NFL season, we had the second most students, and the year before we had the most students, out of any high school in the country to go to the NFL,” he said. “We’ve had a history of very, very good football players. I think he definitely has a chance at the NFL. He’s going to the right place to put him in a position for the draft. I think his playing ability is strong, and he’s going to get bigger. He’s a class act, also.”

Casullo said Harris Jr. gives tremendous effort in everything he does.

“His dedication in the classroom just parallels what he does on the field,” he said. “Our program is recognized nationally, so our kids put a lot of time and effort in their work ethic. He’s one of those kids where if we have 6:00 morning workouts in the offseason, he’d be there by 5:30 ready to go. Our program is like a college program and he’s one of those guys that’s definitely looking to get better.”

Smith said meeting Harris Jr. has left a positive impact on his life.

“I have been very blessed, not only to have great football players, but to be around a bunch of great kids,” he said. “I think [Harris Jr. is] a very, very good football player, but his deal is that he’s a human being. He’s not going to be controversial, and he’s not going to run his mouth. He’s going to listen to the coaches and do what he’s told. On the field, you can’t find a better leader. Off the field, you can’t find a better person.”