

Alfred University's Clark pursues his NFL dream

2/29/12



ALFRED, NY - Less than three years ago, Nick Clark was certain that his football playing days would end after his senior season at Alfred University. The Saxons' standout linebacker - who had earned Empire 8 all-conference recognition as a freshman and sophomore at AU - had begun making plans to take a graduate assistant's coaching position after wrapping up his career at Alfred. That began to change the summer of 2010, before Clark's junior year at AU, when a representative of the NFL's Arizona Cardinals asked AU head coach Dave Murray for some game film on Clark. Once resigned to the prospect his football career would end in college, Clark instead began to think about the possibility he could realize his dream of playing in the NFL. That dream has led him from the youth league and high school playing fields in Canisteo, NY, where Clark grew up, to Alfred University's Merrill Field, to Carrollton, TX, a Dallas suburb where Clark has been training since early January in advance of an NFL scouting combine he'll attend in early March in Akron, OH. The combine is held to give pro scouts a look at prospective players prior to the NFL Draft. The BSN Combine is for players from smaller colleges - Division I-AA, II, III and NAIA - and will be held March 9-11 at the University of Akron. BSN (Beyond Sports Network) is an on-line resource providing information on players and promoting them to pro scouts. The combine is run much the way as the NFL Combine held in Indianapolis for players from large Division I programs. Players are tested for strength (weight lift repetitions), speed and agility, and vertical and broad jump. The BSN Combine, like the NFL combine, is invitation only; Clark is one of about 200 players invited to participate in the BSN Combine. Did Clark ever think when he walked onto the AU campus in 2008 that he'd be where he is today, pursuing a career in the NFL? "Absolutely not," he said during a break from a recent workout. "Up until my junior year at AU, I was all set to take a GA spot at East Central (University in Ada, OK). Then coach told me the Cardinals had asked for some game film, and everything changed." Clark came to Alfred prior to the 2008 season, after a year at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, where he was on a wrestling scholarship. A two-time state wrestling champ as well as a football standout at Canisteo-Greenwood Central High School, Clark wanted to be closer to home and return to playing football. He chose to play at Alfred University, where his mother, Theresa Gunn, is a member of the faculty in the College of Business. Clark, who graduated from AU in December with a bachelor's degree in environmental studies, finished his AU career last fall, earning Empire 8 all-conference First Team honors for a third straight season and repeating as conference Defensive Player of the Year. After a season in which he broke the AU career record for tackles, Clark was named an American Football Coaches Association Division III All-American. Over the last two seasons since the Cardinals first came calling, Clark has managed to catch the eyes of scouts from nearly 20 NFL teams, most of which sent representatives to the AU campus last fall to watch him play, review game films, and interview Clark and his coaches. Knowing that NFL teams were impressed with his ability - the Cardinals, New York Jets and St. Louis Rams have shown the most interest - Clark made the decision to go to Carrollton, where he has been working out with seven other NFL hopefuls at Integrated Athletic Development (IAD), a facility that specializes in training elite athletes. Clark has been dedicated to staying in prime football shape since arriving in Alfred. After his freshman season, he began spending summers at a ranch in Colgate, OK, owned by friend Brian Freeland. Brian Freeland, a Canisteo native, is the brother of Clark's high school coach, Jamie Freeland, who this year served as an assistant on Murray's coaching staff. "We work out down there, fix fences, work the cattle," Clark said. "It's hard work, but it's a lot of fun." At IAD, Clark has been under the instruction

of a professional trainer who supervises the players' workout regimen. Kevin Smith, a former NFL defensive back who played for the Dallas Cowboys Super Bowl teams of the 1990s, is on staff as well, helping players develop their footwork. Clark said his group works out six days a week, for a total of about 15 hours. He has been in Carrollton since early January, staying in an apartment he's rented there. "I'm training with some of the best athletes in the country," Clark said of his time at IAD. "It's a competition, so it's fun. At the same time, it's hard work." After the BSN Combine in March, he'll return to Carrollton and continue training until the April 26-28 NFL Draft, which he'll watch on television with family and friends in Canisteo. Even if Clark isn't taken in one of the draft's seven rounds, he could be picked up by a pro team as an undrafted free agent, a route many players have taken to the NFL. He has signed with an Arkansas-based agent, Chris Turnage, whose clients often work out at the IAD facility. AU head coach Dave Murray said scouts from different NFL teams have projected Clark as either an inside or outside linebacker, a fullback, or a special teams player. Clark played outside linebacker his four seasons at AU, amassing a school-record 377 career tackles, and served as the team's short-yardage back each of the last three, rushing for 26 touchdowns. Murray said it wouldn't surprise him in the least if Clark found himself on an NFL roster next fall. "Nick is a very driven individual, with a phenomenal work ethic," Murray commented, noting that Clark has set high goals for himself, then worked hard to achieve them. "When he came in before his sophomore season, he said he wanted to be an All-American. He's accomplished that. The next year, he said he'd like to play beyond college, and how he's doing everything to accomplish that goal." Murray has coached one NFL player during his 22-year head coaching career: R-Kal Trulock, a defensive end who played for Murray at Cortland and who went on to play several years in the NFL as a pass rush specialist. He said Clark is the more talented player. Murray said Clark has the size - he's 6-2, 245 pounds - and speed - he is running the 40-yard dash in the 4.5-second range - that NFL teams look for. He predicts Clark will continue to impress scouts when he performs at the BSN Combine. "Based on his numbers, I'd guess he will test out well. I think his numbers, and the game film, will open the eyes of a lot of people," Murray said. "I would not be surprised at all to see him catch on with someone and be playing in the NFL some day."