

BADGERS FOOTBALL

Significant influence

Class of 2020 fuels offensive line

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Wisconsin State Journal

“The Great Wall of Wisconsin” has started to take shape on the Badgers’ offensive line after some years of rearranging. A graphic floated around social media in the summer of 2019 that featured five University of Wisconsin commits for its 2020 class under that nickname. Four of them currently sit within the Badgers’ two-deep this week as the program works to solidify that group. Three — Tanor Bortolini, Jack Nelson and Trey Wedig — have started and held prominent positions in that group this season.

“It’s pretty nice to see that some guys that you came in here with, you saw everyone down at the bottom of the barrel, and now you’ve seen yourself and a couple other guys that you’re close with make it to the top,” Wedig said. The foundation for a couple of those Badgers started setting early. Bortolini and Nelson are roommates, and the two traveled with the team as true freshmen two years ago.

Nelson received the first game action in a blowout win at Michigan, and Bortolini entered a baptism by fire situation when Kayden Lyles and Cormac Sampson suffered injuries during the 2020 campaign. That left Bortolini needing to fill in at center at home against Indiana and start on the road at Iowa.

“I remember early on, it’s just like, ‘Oh, this is awesome. We get to get these nice meals at the hotel and then not worry about getting in there, of course,’” Nelson said. “And then all of a sudden, two guys go down and ‘Bort’s’ up. It was nerve racking for me. I was like, ‘Oh my God.’

“It was a lot of fun, and I’m thankful to have gotten to go through that with Tanor because we’re really close. And he’s super smart, and we’re always playing off each other, and he’s always helping me with stuff. It’s pretty awesome.”

The graphic depicted Nelson at left tackle, Wedig at right and Bortolini at center, but the pieces to that wall have moved around on the line during their time at UW. Ben Barten, one of those five signees, actually moved across the line of scrimmage to play defensive end in 2021. Dylan Barrett is listed as the No. 2 center behind Joe Tippmann.

Bortolini and Nelson have worked next to each other at multiple positions during games over the past two seasons. Nelson, a former five-star recruit according to 247Sports, started all 13 contests at right guard last season, but Bortolini recorded starts at left guard, right tackle and as an extra lineman.

Nelson bumped out to left tackle this season, a significant change both in transitioning from the interior to the edge while also flipping to the other side of the line.

“Going from guard to tackle, your sets are a lot different. The kind of body types you’re facing are drastically different, and he’s done a good job at it,” Bortolini said. “It’s just something I don’t think was as easy as you thought it might be, flipping stances and going to the outside, but I think he’s done a really good job at it, really embraced that role.

“I think he’s one of the best tackles in the nation now.”

Bortolini, who worked back from a partially torn meniscus and cartilage tear behind the kneecap suffered during fall camp, again has seen starts at left and right guard this season. UW also utilized him as an extra lineman and at right guard two weeks ago against Purdue.

“He’s really taken huge steps physically,” Nelson said. “Mentally, he’s the smartest guy I know. ... Football wise, school wise, that guy is a bona fide genius.

“He’s just taking steps all around. It’s great to see, especially in the leadership category, too.”

Experiencing their recruiting journeys at the same time and building chemistry has helped them work next to each other despite lining up at multiple positions.

PACKERS



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Packers wide receiver Samori Toure catches a second-half touchdown pass against Bills safety Damar Hamlin on Oct. 30 in Orchard Park, N.Y.

‘Captain Casual’

For Touré, practice improvement (and Buffalo TD) set stage for more

JASON WILDE
For the Herald

GREEN BAY — Samori Touré has not arrived. He knows that.

Two receptions for 41 yards — even if one was a 37-yard touchdown in last week’s loss at Buffalo, on which Touré did exactly the kind of improvisational find-some-open-space maneuvering that his quarterback craves on off-schedule plays — are not enough to say that.

They’re not enough to get the Green Bay Packers’ offensive coaches to publicly compliment him, not enough for the four-time NFL MVP to fully trust him and not enough for the head coach to anoint him as the answer to the team’s inconsistent play at wide receiver.

But what Touré has done in his first two regular-season NFL games — and more importantly, with his work in practice — is earn a new nickname. Because the one that quarterback Aaron Rodgers derisively bestowed upon him this summer is no longer deserved.

“I nicknamed him ‘Captain Casual’ in training camp, as a way to maybe encourage him to start practicing with a little different type of tempo, practicing like a pro,” Rodgers explained as the Packers prepped for Sunday’s game against the Detroit Lions at Ford Field. “I don’t think he really appreciated that nickname. I mean, who would?”

But because Touré has responded to Rodgers’ challenge by improving his practice habits and because Touré has started to show why general manager Brian Gutekunst kept the rookie seventh-round pick from Nebraska on the 53-man roster



Up Next
Green Bay (3-5) at Detroit (1-6)
When: Sunday, noon
TV: FOX

coming out of training camp based more on potential than production, Touré is no longer the healthy game-day scratch he was for the first six games.

And, in the process, Touré has also altered Rodgers’ view of him — significantly.

“It’s gone from a nickname that was legitimate, to more of a joke now because his practice habits have really picked up and I’ve been impressed with him,” Rodgers continued. “I had a conversation with him about how I thought it needed to be a sure thing that he was suiting up by midseason and playing meaningful minutes for us. I felt like his ability level was that, but I said, ‘You’ve got to start practicing better. You’ve got to show it to us in practice.’

“I really feel like the last three weeks he’s had really nice practices. Going on the ‘look’ team with ‘J’ (backup quarterback Jordan Love) and making a lot of plays, and then when he gets opportunities with the first team, not having a drop-off in production or approach. I give him a lot of credit for that.”

Touré also got his opportunity out of necessity, with Randall Cobb (ankle), Christian Watson (hamstring, concussion) and Allen Lazard (shoulder) all missing time in recent weeks, forcing Touré onto the field.

Now, with Lazard expected back against the Lions and Watson trending that way, it’s hard

to see Touré being inactive in Detroit — even if offensive coordinator Adam Stenavich is withholding public praise, mostly on principle.

“With a rookie, I never really want to compliment him too much. You can always get burned with those guys,” Stenavich said Thursday afternoon. “But I was encouraged by (the Buffalo game). I was encouraged by that (touchdown) play. I’ve been encouraged by his practice habits for the last month or so.

“You can definitely see him learning how to become a professional. Does he have a long way to go? Absolutely. But I’m definitely encouraged by him and his performance the last few weeks, for sure.”

Added coach Matt LaFleur: “I was super proud of him on that (touchdown). It went off schedule and it showed some of his instinctiveness, but I still think with all these young guys there’s a lot of details that we still need to improve upon.

“I think he’s done a nice job maturing and understand just what the expectations are and the standards that have been brought from that room in the past. I think those veteran receivers have been hard on him ... but I think we’ve all seen him progress.”

With the Packers failing to acquire any pass-catching weapons at Tuesday’s trade deadline, any upgrades will have to come from improvement from within. That makes it absolutely vital Touré continues his upward trajectory.

Asked about Rodgers’ “Captain Casual” nickname Thursday, Touré didn’t hide from the

not-so-flattering genesis of it.

“They felt like I wasn’t giving the effort or the finish that I should — and I agree with that,” Touré said of Rodgers and LaFleur. “You’re supposed to burst for 15 (yards) every time you catch the ball and there were a few times I didn’t do that and LaFleur would always say, ‘You look real casual out there. You’re never going be able to reach your potential if you’re not really finishing. Stop being casual. Be more intentional with everything.’

“I wasn’t like mad, but I was just like, ‘Dang, that’s not what you want to be known for.’ You don’t want one of the greatest quarterbacks thinking you’re casual, so I’m like, ‘Alright, if that’s what they think of me, I got to change something.’

“You don’t want to be known as that guy who’s casual, so I guess my practice habits just started to gradually get better.”

And for his part, Touré seems to grasp the gravity of the situation. While the touchdown meant a lot to him — he has the ball in his locker — he made it clear such a play must be only the beginning for him.

“That’s the whole reason why I’m here. I want to be on the field, I want to help the team, I want to make plays,” Touré said. “So it’s all about how you deal with it, work toward that next step, prepare like you’re going to play and just work for your opportunity.

“I’m just trying to get in anywhere I fit in. Just like I was before, whether I have a big role, small role, I’m just going to prepare like I do every single week and just try to maximize my opportunities.”

Notebook

From B1

co-conference champions in action at the state volleyball tournament with McDonell and Bloomer.

The Blackhawks and Macks shared the league title with Stanley-Boyd during the regular season before making runs to state in their respective divisions. The Western Cloverbelt also joined the Classic Eight (Oconomowoc and Kettle Moraine) and the Greater Metro (Wauwatosa East and Divine Savior Holy Angels) as the only conferences with more than one representative at state with the other two conferences advancing in Division 1.

Bloomer marks the fourth different Western Cloverbelt school to make the state volleyball tournament since 2020. Fall Creek and Osseo-Fairchild advanced to the Division 3 state semifinals along with McDonell making the Division 4 state championship game that season before the Macks returned last year to win the Division 4 title.

The Blackhawks were in their final season with the Heart O’North Conference during their first trip to state in 2019. This year’s Heart O’North champion St. Croix Falls qualified in the Division 3 field.

Three time

Thursday night marked a unique milestone for Chi-Hi’s Paige Steinmetz.

The Chi-Hi junior opposite hitter had a team-high 19 kills and 19 digs in their quarterfinal loss to Burlington. It marked the third different prep sports season Steinmetz competed as a part of a team at state.

As a freshman, Steinmetz scored six goals and assisted on seven others with the Chippewa Falls/Menomonie girls hockey team as the Sabers won the state championship in a 3-2 overtime win over the University School of Milwaukee on Feb. 2, 2021. Later that year patrolled the outfield and earned second team All-Big Rivers Conference honors in helping the Chi-Hi softball team reach the Division 1 state semifinals.

Steinmetz was announced as the Big Rivers Conference’s Player of the Year for this fall prior to the state tournament.

Three-year run

Chi-Hi has put together a special stretch in the past three years, breaking through to state for the first time this year.

The Cardinals have a cumulative 89-9 record from 2020-22. Chi-Hi posted an 11-3 mark in a COVID-altered 2020 season before posting a 37-3 mark with a

trip to the Division 1 sectional finals. Chi-Hi has only lost to three teams during that span and seven of the nine losses have come to River Falls, the team they beat in last Saturday’s sectional championship game.

Best of the best

Not surprisingly many of the teams at the state tournament feature players that will be continuing to play volleyball in college.

Chi-Hi senior outside hitter Sami Perlberg will be playing in the WIAC at UW-Oshkosh. Appleton Xavier 6-foot-3 junior middle hitter Olivia Neumann will be playing up the road in Green Bay with the Phoenix where she will be will be teammates with Justman.

But perhaps no other team in the field is as flush with college-bound talent as Oconomowoc which features three players in senior outside hitter Cordelia Kearns (Florida Tech) and junior middle blocker Anna Bjork (Notre Dame) and setter Lilly Wagner (Maryland). Appleton North has players heading to the next level with senior outside hitter Karissa Fortune (Drake) and senior middle hitter Olivia Lasee (Lehigh). Kettle Moraine junior outside/right hitter Grace Grocholski is heading to West Virginia to play basketball while senior libero Kyleigh Cogh-

lan goes to the University of North Carolina Pembroke for volleyball.

In Division 2 Sauk Prairie senior middle hitter Maggie Hartwig is taking her basketball talents to the University of Evansville while Wisconsin Lutheran senior libero Kati Goba will play at UW-Milwaukee and senior teammate Hannah Trotter is heading to Alaska-Anchorage.

Howards Grove senior outside hitter Saige Damrow has been committed to play at the University of Wisconsin since she was in eighth grade and is ranked as the second-best libero in the country according to Prep Volleyball. Tigers teammate Jacqueline Yancy will play at Michigan Tech and Randolph senior setter Jorey Buwalda is heading to UW-Milwaukee to play basketball.

Monticello senior outside/middle hitter Ellie Gustafson is heading to St. Thomas for volleyball.

Familiar voices

The Bloomer High School choir group Mezzo Fortes sang the national anthem prior to Friday’s Division 2 state semifinal against Appleton Xavier.

Familiar face

Graduated McDonell senior Lauryn Deetz was one of seven players to be featured on the official state tournament program cover.