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Drew Anderson's long and winding road to the NFL

By Jon Kingdon



Drew Anderson in 2013 Photos Gint Federas

The Arizona Cardinals concluded the 2019 season Dec. 29 with a loss to the Los Angeles Rams, finishing their season with a 5-10-1 record. Earlier in the week, with little fanfare, the Cardinals activated Drew Anderson, a 2014 graduate of Miramonte High School from their practice squad, much to the satisfaction of those in Lamorinda who have followed his meandering career these past six years.

Perseverance is an understatement in describing the route Anderson took to the NFL, but it was a goal he had from a young age: "As a kid, growing up and playing football, it was a dream for me to play in the NFL. With such a winding road and a different path than most guys take to the NFL, there were a lot of times when I thought that this might not be for me. I just kept plugging away and continued to get better."

The "Anderson Trail" took him from Miramonte, to San Diego State to Diablo Valley College to the University of Buffalo to Murray State University and finally to the Arizona Cardinals, though his home base still remains in Orinda: "Orinda and the whole Lamorinda area was a super supportive community. I always had people reaching out to me, wishing me good luck. It was awesome and even now when I come back, a bunch a people are there willing to help me and train with me."

Anderson played football, basketball, baseball and even one year of lacrosse at Miramonte but it was not until he was a senior that he blossomed on the football field. After playing freshman and JV football his first two years, a fractured scapula in the first game of his junior season severely limited his playing time. However,

everything came together for Anderson as a senior throwing for 4,074 yards with 47 TD's and only 10 interceptions, leading Miramonte to the North Coast Section championship over Clayton Valley and being named first team all-state.

"Coach (Jack) Schram was great and did an awesome job in giving the players a lot of freedom, especially me," said Anderson. "I was able to change the plays at the line of scrimmage which not a lot of high school QB's get to do and we all loved playing for him and he played a big part in my development."

Schram was equally taken aback when Anderson was not heavily recruited: "Drew had all the qualities you wanted in a quarterback - he's intelligent, he has good arm strength and is real leader. I do not know why it had taken so long for him to be recognized."

Anderson did not get any offers to play at a Division I school so he walked on at San Diego State, which turned into a situation he had not hoped for: "I stayed there for one year. After spring ball, I saw the writing on the wall. At that point, I felt that going to Diablo Valley College would be the best thing for me because I had a lot of developing to do and at Diablo Valley I was able to get a lot better to where I could play at a Division I school. Getting all the reps in practice and starting all the games was something that I definitely needed. At that point, I was more of a thrower than a passer. I was pretty raw and learned a lot in how to play the position."

Anderson worked closely with DVC head coach Mike Darr, assistant coach Doug Longero (now the head coach at Los Lomas) and Will Hewlett. Darr knew Anderson from his play at Miramonte: "Drew had the arm to make all of the throws. In high school, he was able to just sling the ball and get away with it. Once he came here, in our spread offense, he had to read defenses, check things at the line, make pre- and post-snap reads and manipulate safeties and underneath coverages. It was just a higher caliber of football and he was more responsible for things in the passing game."

While attending DVC, Anderson was living at home and working in retail when the University of Buffalo offered him a football scholarship: "I never thought that I would end up in western New York but in the end, it was great for me. I saw it as an opportunity and I was ready for a new challenge. (Head coach) Lance Leipold and Jim Zebrowski, my QB coach, were very important in my journey."

Though playing behind Tyree Jackson, the starting quarterback at Buffalo, Anderson patiently waited for his chance to get on the field. It came in his second year at Buffalo when Jackson went down with an injury, said Anderson: "It was a long time in the making for me and having been in the offense for a long time, I was always prepared to play and to be ready for that moment and knew that once I got that opportunity, I would be ready."

Ready was an understatement. Against Western Michigan, Anderson threw for 597 yards and seven touchdowns in a 71-68 overtime loss. After taking eight classes in the spring to graduate with his degree in psychology, However, in his next game, Anderson tore his pectoral muscle which required surgery and signaled the end of his career at Buffalo. After taking eight classes in the spring to graduate with his degree in psychology, Anderson had another year of eligibility and used it to transfer to Murray State University (Kentucky).

It was another Bay Area connection that led him to Murray State, said Anderson: "Brian Hamilton was an assistant coach there and had been the head coach at Concord High School. He knew the coaches at DVC and with their recommendations, it provided me with a great opportunity to go there and earn the starting spot. When I look back at myself as a redshirt freshman and then as a senior at Murray State, I could see that I was a totally different player." In 11 games at Murray State, Anderson went on to complete 60% of his passes and threw for 20 touchdowns.

That's when the NFL became a realistic goal for Anderson: "It was a gradual thing for me but, to be honest, there were a lot of times when I had those doubts and did not think that playing professional football would ever happen, but I continued to work and improve and by the end of my college career, I started to see that maybe this is something that I could do."

After his pro day at Murray State and workouts at the San Francisco 49ers and Oakland Raiders facilities, it was time for the draft. Anderson was a free agent, and with the help of his agent Greg Linton he was able to choose among a number of teams that were interested in his services. The Cardinals had a new head coach in Kliff Kingsbury and a 5'10" quarterback they drafted with the overall first pick named Kyler Murray.

"That's one of the awesome things about Coach Kingsbury," said the 6'4" Anderson. "He knows how to play to different guy's strengths. It's a super friendly quarterback system and he makes it work for whichever quarterback is in there. As with anything, by the last preseason game, I was feeling a lot more comfortable. Going against starters in practice and seeing that speed, the game did slow down for me. The game is faster but the players around me with the Cardinals are also much better and it forces you to raise your level. The more I played, the more comfortable I got."

Anderson played in 3 of the 4 preseason games for the Cardinals going 18 for 32 for 104 yards with 2 touchdowns and 1 interception. Playing against the Raiders in preseason was a particular highlight for Anderson, going 6 for 9 for 59 yards and one touchdown pass: "At the Raider game, I had a lot of family and friends come out for that game and it was special for me. The Raiders were the team that I grew up rooting for and playing against them with family and friends there was definitely a special moment for sure."

Having learned so many different schemes and terminologies from high school to the NFL, in the end, proved to be beneficial to Anderson: "Offenses may be different but you're still trying to accomplish the same things so I do think that playing in a number of different systems for a bunch of different coaches helped me in a holistic sense of understanding football. It obviously wasn't the route that I would have chosen out of high school but in learning offensive football, it's definitely been beneficial to me."

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[back](#)

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