

Boone set to battle against the odds — again

By: Steve Reed
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SPARTANBURG, S.C. — Aaron Boone knows the odds of making the Carolina Panthers roster are stacked against him.

But hey, that's nothing new to Boone.

It seems Boone has been battling stiff odds ever since he chose to postpone playing college football to go on a two-year Mormon mission to Peru at age 19.

Boone ranks no higher than eighth on the Panthers depth chart at receiver, behind starters Steve Smith and Keary Colbert, and reserves Rod Gardner, Ricky Proehl, Drew Carter, Karl Hankton and J.R. Tolver. Since the Panthers normally only keep five receivers on the 53-man roster, it's fairly obvious Boone has plenty of ground to make up.

But he's clearly giving it a shot, having put forth a strong effort in training camp so far.

"There's a lot of talent here at the wide receiver position," said Boone. "My mindset is like every other place I have been. I've always had to start from the bottom and work my way up. Coach (John) Fox always preaches it's not where you start it's where you finish."

But to get to know Boone and truly understand his inexhaustible desire to make an NFL roster, you must go back to the start.

He was an all-state quarterback at Millard Fillmore (Utah) High after leading his team to an 8-2 record and a Class AA state championship as a senior. He had a handful of scholarship offers from some smaller colleges, but Boone, who was born into a Mormon family, had always wanted to go on a mission.

So, at age 19, he decided to put off his football career on hold and spend the next two years of his life in Peru. There, he helped victims of the El Nino disaster rebuild their homes and provided other services to the country's poor.

When he returned home he was 20 pounds lighter and his body hunched over, stricken with parasites.

Needless to say, there were no longer any scholarships on the table.

He ended up at Snow Junior College in Utah, where he was moved to receiver two days before the start of the regular season. It turned out to be a blessing as Boone earned All-America status with 81 receptions for 1,505 yards and 19 touchdowns. Boone transferred to Kentucky and by his senior year led the SEC with 41 receptions for 706 yards and 10 touchdowns.

It seemed Boone might have a shot at the NFL.

But a few weeks before the NFL Scouting Combines he pulled a quadriceps muscle in his leg and was unable to workout. All 32 NFL teams bypassed him in the draft.

Since then, you might say Boone has been on another mission - a mission to beat the odds and make a 53-man roster.

Boone caught on as a free agent with the Dallas Cowboys in 2003, but injured his shoulder the third week of training camp sidelining him for the season. After being released, he latched on to the Chicago Bears and was allocated to NFL Europe. After a

productive season overseas playing for the Berlin Thunder, he came back to attend the Bears camp, but wound up in the hospital with a torn muscle in his abdomen and a bruised kidney.

Again, he was released.

"That's the way my career has been so far – ups and downs," Boone said.

He worked out for the Panthers last year and was signed to a free agent contract this spring and again allocated to NFL Europe. This time he made the most of his opportunity leading the league with 43 receptions for 582 yards and five touchdowns in 10 games. He had eight receptions for 83 yards for Berlin in World Bowl XIII.

Now Boone is battling for a roster spot here with the Panthers.

But despite the long odds, Boone keeps pushing on.

"It seems like the longer I can stick around I will get a chance to prove myself," he said.

So far, so good.

In Carolina's first preseason game he showed great field awareness in hauling in a 26-yard touchdown reception from Stefan LeFors on a broken play. When LeFors scrambled out of the pocket, Boone broke off his route and followed the quarterback across the field before making a sliding grab in the end zone.

"It seems like that is when I make a lot of plays when the route breaks off and everything is chaos," Boone said. "You just have to get open and be an athlete. I thought I was going to come out of the end zone to get it. That was fun. That is what you play for."

In all likelihood the Panthers will release Boone in late August and think about re-signing him to the practice squad if he clears waivers. That would give him a year to learn Carolina's offense and continue to develop his skills.

Boone doesn't wonder about what might have been had he gone to college instead of Peru, saying that was something he needed to do to become a better person.

"Honestly, it was the best two years of my life," Boone said. "It was two years where I didn't have to worry about girls or work or school. I was able to be with the Lord. And it was two years of service."

Now 27, Boone isn't about to give up on his NFL dream anytime soon. He's come too far.

"Right now, I just have to survive," Boone said. "All of the other places I've been started at the bottom. I've always been written off. I just have to fight through. I think I will get my break sooner or later."

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