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Against all odds

Some players continue to pursue their NFL dreams despite the recurring pain and disappointment of being cut

By Jim Trotter
 September 4, 2006

Wide receiver Aaron Boone tied for the Southeastern Conference lead in touchdown receptions as a senior at Kentucky, but his phone never rang during the NFL draft. Disappointed, he signed with Dallas but was released in the first round of cuts. He signed with Chicago the following year but failed to get past the second wave of cuts. He signed with Carolina the next summer but, again, was released before the regular season.

Three teams, three rejections, one obvious conclusion for Boone: Keep after it.

Wideout Grant Mattos signed with the Chargers after going undrafted out of USC in 2003. He bounced between the practice squad and the active roster as a rookie but was released the following summer during training camp. When no team called, he sat out the season and signed with Denver the following January. His goal was to earn their respect during offseason workouts, and he succeeded by not missing a workout and rarely dropping a pass.

But on the first day of training camp he got the call that every player dreads. He was being released so the Broncos could sign one of their rookies. Detroit picked him up soon after, but almost as quickly it released him to sign someone else.



JIM BAIRD / Union-Tribune
 Grant Mattos, who signed with the Chargers after going undrafted out of USC in 2003, has been rejected by four NFL teams.

Three teams, three rejections, one unmistakable conclusion for Mattos: Keep after it.

“Don't get me wrong, there are definitely times when you're by yourself and everyone else is playing and you start thinking to yourself: Is this something I still really want to do?” said Mattos early in training camp before being released by a fourth team, the Tennessee Titans. “It's a dream and you want to keep it alive and going, but when stuff starts stacking up and you're not on a roster, you've got bills to pay. The lifestyle's not the same anymore and you've got to get side jobs; but at the same time you've got to maintain your shape so you look the part if a workout does come along.

“In my mind it's always been, good things will happen to good people. That's my attitude about trying to make a team. You work hard, you do what's asked and you never let that doubt come into your mind. You never think, 'Ah, I don't think this can happen.' Because once I start thinking like that, I should hang

it up, you know?”

Mattos made the comments last month, between practices with the Tennessee Titans. He survived their first round of cuts, but was released Saturday when each of the league's 32 teams had to reduce its roster to a maximum of 53.

Mattos knows the odds of him getting another shot are remote, at best. He used personal connections to get a tryout with the Titans and knows that teams generally have little need for someone who will have been out of the league for three years by the time training camp rolls around again in 2007.

But that doesn't make his story – or those of every other underdog pursuing his dream – any less compelling. Just check the box office receipts for “Invincible” for proof.

The Mattoses and Boones of the football world are the players you rarely hear about but for whom you always pull. They're the long shots, the guys with pocket protectors trying to win a date with the homecoming queen, the players whose names usually are limited to the tiny print on the back pages of every sports section. As in: “TITANS (NFL) – Released WR Grant Mattos.”

And yet the Mattoses and Boones make for some of the best stories because their love of the game is so pure, their passion and perseverance so plentiful. They're so driven to make it that they allow the game to determine what they eat, when they sleep, where they live, even who and when they date.

“I didn't want to get serious with anyone because I could be gone to a new city tomorrow, for all I knew,” Boone said. “I've put a lot of things on hold, hoping and wishing.”

Kyle Smith, son of Chargers General Manager A.J. Smith, is another wide receiver who lacks all the measurables, but is loaded with intangibles. At 6 feet, 170 pounds, he doesn't have great speed or size, but he does have a passion for the game. At the same time, he's more realistic than some others.

After his senior season at Youngstown State, he sat down with his father and discussed his future. It was decided he would give himself two years to make an NFL roster, then, if that failed, turn his attention to Canada or the Arena League.

He signed with Minnesota as an undrafted rookie this year, but was waived several days before training camp. He recently had a workout with Seattle, but nothing came of it. Now he has targeted January and the end of the regular season, because that's when offseason rosters expand and clubs begin adding players for NFL Europe purposes.

“Minnesota was a good experience, just to make it that far,” Smith said. “Guys were dropping left and right while we were there – there were probably six guys that were cut just during my time. But the experience was great, even though it was kind of crazy, just living day by day.”

“I would talk to my dad at night, and he'd be like, 'Well, another day down. You're still a Minnesota Viking.' I was brought up in the game and understood all that, but some of the guys had trouble living in a hotel for six weeks straight, not seeing anybody and being away from home.”

Chas Gessner knows the routine. After being signed in 2003 as an undrafted rookie wideout from Brown, he spent time with the Patriots but failed to see the field or the active roster. He moved to the Jets, but was waived in the final round of cuts. He was in camp with the Bucs and made it to the final round of cuts before being released Saturday.

“What I've learned to do is hope for the best and expect the worst,” Gessner told Buccaneers.com early in camp. “That's how I approach it. I'm hoping to make it this time – that's what I want to do, that's my goal, I'm not going to set my goals any lower than that. But at the same time, I've got to understand the situation. And I understand that there are only certain things I can control.”

No one knows that better than Boone, who has been rejected more than an unstamped letter. He has been cut not only by three NFL teams, but also an NFL Europe club and an Arena Football League squad. His road has been so bumpy that he even spent time on an NFL Europe practice squad, which he never knew existed until he was signed to it.

His perseverance eventually landed him a spot on an NFL Europe roster, where in 2004 he was one of the Berlin Thunder's leading receivers. In 2005, he led the league in receptions and tied for second for touchdown catches by a receiver, earning an invitation to the Carolina Panthers' NFL camp that summer.

“I thought I'd finally got there, working my way up from the bottom,” said Boone, a native of Provo, Utah. “I made it all the way to the final cut, but was one of the last two players released. After that, a lot of NFL doors just seemed like they were closing quick. I could never figure it out.

“I watched the guys that I used to beat in the SEC and NFL Europe starting for NFL teams ... and I didn't get it. LSU, I had five touchdowns against them in two years, and here's their entire secondary in the NFL. I'm thinking to myself, 'I can beat this guy. Is this ever going to happen?'”

For most players, getting cut by an Arena team would be a neon sign that it's time to call it quits. Not for Boone. He believed in his heart he could succeed if given the chance, and he got it this past AFL season when, after being traded from Philadelphia to Kansas City, he twice scored a team-record five touchdowns in a game and was voted to the All-Rookie team.

His new hope is that another strong season will produce another invitation to an NFL camp, although by that time he'll be 29. Until then, you can still find him running and lifting and training and dieting.

“I come from a large family – I'm one of 10 kids – and I want to get married and I want to have kids,” Boone said. “But not yet, because it's hard dragging around your family while pursuing your dream.

“I know I can make a lot of money in the business world – (he earned his degree in business management and has a minor in Spanish and international business) – because I'm very motivated and I'm a hard worker. But not yet.”

Boone thought about it and continued.

“I look at it like this: I'm going to work my entire life, but I'm only going to have one opportunity to play football,” he said. “My window is open for only a short time in the grand scheme of things. So, this is it for me.

“I'm still healthy, I'm still happy, and I still have that desire. That's the biggest thing. When someone loses that desire, it's time to hang it up. But I still love waking up in the morning at 7:30 and training. And I can push myself. I still see myself reaching that goal. I don't know if anyone else does, but I see it happening. ... I'm still training today like I'll be playing tomorrow. That's just the way it's been.”