

Patrick Williams ready to lead University School

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August 29, 2009

Two years ago, while jumping from school to school in the Orlando area and watching his mother battle cancer, there was no way that Patrick Williams could ever have imagined that he would end up in Davie, attending a prestigious school and being considered as one of the best football players in the nation.

As he begins his junior year at University School, there is Williams -- all 6-1, 245-pounds of him, finally watching his own hard work and desire to achieve a better life -- pay off, in a major way.

After attending Dr. Phillips, Jones and Oak Ridge, Williams felt that he was on a treadmill to nowhere. His mother, Rhonda Drakeford, was diagnosed with Leukemia at the age of 37, and while it would have been easy for him to get dragged down, Williams wanted more out of life.

As he read about other programs across the state, Williams came across Roger Harriott's budding team at University School, where the student-athletes received plenty of attention from the coaching staff, and the success rate of placing students into college was 100 percent.

"It was a dream, something that I felt it would take a miracle to achieve," Williams said. "But I wanted a better life for myself, and my mother wanted me in an environment where I would at least have a chance to succeed."

As Williams and his mother filled out the paperwork to attend University School, there was a sense that this was just one of those dreams that many would attempt, only to be faced with disappointment.

"I have always been a confident kid," Williams said. "People would tell me I can't do something, and I have always tried to prove them wrong."

LIFE-CHANGING

What happened in the following months was indeed a miracle. Williams was accepted into the school, his mother's cancer was in remission and both were on the way to south Florida to have that better life.

While he receives financial assistance to attend the school, his grades have been impressive, and his play on the football field is everything the coaches thought it would be.

"It was like winning the lottery," said Harriott, who has developed one of the most successful stories in Florida the past four years with the Suns. "He had the opportunity to get a quality education in an environment that has long produced doctors, lawyers and top business and financial professionals, and we received a player who will be one of the best juniors in Florida."

In addition, he had the chance to make his mother proud, and after all she has gone through, it is something that Williams believes is the most important thing he has ever done.

"It's not often that you can actually live a dream," Williams said. "Two years ago, there was no way anyone could have predicted this. Now, I have the opportunity to not only receive a top-notch education, but also play football in an environment that has brought together so many different kinds of people."

University School is the most unique situation around. From the day Harriott and the program started, this has been a winning situation -- all the way around.

TURNING PROGRAM AROUND

For starting defensive tackle Brandon Reaney-Graham, who has attended the school for 12 years, it's people like Williams who has turned the entire school around. Before Harriott and his staff brought football to this school, the

excitement level was reserved for a basketball game or maybe a lacrosse match. Now, football has turned up the volume for the entire student body.

“People walk around the halls and talk about upcoming games or star players on the team,” said Reaney-Graham, who is looking at Ivy League schools next year. “I have played here all four years the program has been around, and have watched the change in the entire student body.”

For every Reaney-Graham in this senior class, there are marquee players who fully intend to have football in their immediate future. Players such as highly recruited defensive end David Perry and defensive tackle Max Beaulieu, and receiver Joey Scaglione, lineman Daniel Conboy, linebacker Brice Hawkes, running back Taylor James and Dillard transfer Dwellie Striggles, who has been a standout since his youth football days.

“This experience has been a total life changer,” said Striggles, a wide receiver that has several schools looking at him. “The education, the campus life and the overall experience has been great.”

While the senior class is loaded with talent, the train won't stop after this season. Building on an 11-1 record from last year and a much tougher schedule this season, the Suns are loaded for the future as well.

A LOT OF TALENT

Juniors Devon Gaulden (defensive back), Douglas Cook (quarterback), Sebastian Amadee (athlete), Justin Cooper (linebacker), Ben Feldman (defensive back), Will Hall (running back), Nick Kutscher (receiver), running back Greg Rabb, linebacker Alex Lowery and receiver Gerry West will all be recruited over the next year along with Williams.

“I came here for a number of reasons,” Gaulden said. “Education is obviously the top priority, but I also wanted to play basketball and give football another try. When I was at Flanagan, the sport wasn't as fun as I had hoped, but so far, I have no complaints here.”

Gaulden is already projected as one of the top Class of 2011 prospects.

Even though he doesn't want to look past the juniors and seniors, it's tough for Harriott to watch sophomores such as Steven Blattner (linebacker), 6-5, 320-pound offensive lineman Abraham Garcia, defensive end Daniel Perry, receiver Leo Alba, running back Robert Johnson and linebacker Johnny Gonnell and not get excited.

“These kids are so super talented,” Harriott said. “I credit much to raw ability, but also to a coaching staff that has been right there every step of the way.”

Talk to him about Class of 2013 receiver Jordan Cunningham, and Harriott starts to rattle off what this 6-2, 180-pound ninth grader will be in two or three years.

In the past, University School had some athletes who would compete and were overmatched when the playoffs rolled around, but even in a year that has schools such as Pahokee and North Broward Prep in the district, there is reason to believe that there may not be many teams with the quality and quantity the Suns bring to the table in 2009.