

Griffin overcomes obstacles to shine at Air Force



Air Force Academy senior, and Louisburg High School graduate, Garrett Griffin is all smiles now and for good reason. Griffin and the Falcons are 8-3 on the season and will soon play for the Mountain West Conference title. Griffin faced a lot of obstacles during his time at the Academy on and off the field, but he is now ready to use those to his advantage.

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. – On a warm Saturday afternoon, Garrett Griffin was introduced to the Falcon Stadium crowd as he ran through a tunnel of teammates to celebrate senior day at the Air Force Academy.

The nerves were eating him up inside.

Garrett and the Falcons were about ready to go up against a Utah State team on Nov. 14 that had beaten them his previous two years. A win would put Air Force on top of the Mountain Division of the Mountain West Conference.

Needless to say those nerves have always been there for Garrett, whether it was senior day, the first day of practice, the first moment he stepped on campus for basic training or his first collegiate football game.

Life in the Air Force isn't for everyone. Adjusting to

military life, along with the tough curriculum and being a Division I football player, is demanding.



Garrett Griffin (80) runs through a tunnel of players as he was honored before Air Force's final home game on Nov. 14.

There were thoughts of taking the easier route. Thoughts of going to school closer to home, being with friends and family and living the "normal life." They were all tempting at one time or another.

Easy isn't in Garrett's vocabulary.

It is that perseverance that has now put Garrett in a position to play on one of the best teams in the Mountain West and in a bowl game, on pace to graduate from one of the top colleges in the country and possibly have a chance to get on a National

Football League roster next year.

“It hasn’t sunk in yet,” Garrett said. “The academy is kind of bittersweet your senior year because you want it to go by quick so you are done with school, but at the same time it is the end of your football career. It won’t really set in until after the bowl game when it is your last time strapping it up. Right now I am just trying to enjoy it and not really thinking too far ahead.”

That Saturday against Utah State was the time for Garrett to live in the now and think back on his journey – one filled with ups, downs and everything in-between.

HUMBLE BEGINNING

At Louisburg High School, Garrett was the total package when it came to athletics and academics.

He was a two-time all-state football player for the Wildcats, helped them to their first state championship in 2010 and became an unstoppable force in the backfield as he topped the 2,000 yard mark his senior season at running back in 2011.

In track, he was the state champion in the javelin in 2011 and also helped the Wildcats to a state title just months after winning one in football. He won numerous regional titles and also qualified for state in the 110-meter high hurdles.

He won three regional championships his senior year, but was unable to attend the state meet after he suffered a ruptured appendix.

Garrett was also a fixture on the Wildcat basketball team as he was named as an all-Frontier League selection in three of his four years.

Academically, he was just as dominant as he held a 4.0 grade

point average throughout his four years of high school and was a member of the National Honor Society.

It would be enough to make any high school coach gush over that type of player – unless that coach was his father. Former Louisburg head coach Gary Griffin didn't want to give his son too big of a head as he racked up several postseason honors throughout his high school career.

“He was humble and I think people appreciated that,” Gary said. “He never acted like he was good and he loved interacting with little kids. He hated being the center of attention. He always wanted to be known as someone who was a team player who never put themselves first.

“That is one of the prouder things of his high school career for me. Every coach that went up against him would mention what a good kid he was and that is pretty cool. It is important that kids are humble.”

It would have been easy to get a little cocky as he had programs like Kansas State and Air Force recruiting him, along with several Division II schools. It was a difficult choice when it came down to make his decision, but he eventually chose Air Force.

It had been several years since Louisburg had a football player go to a Division I program out of high school and the community quickly became Falcon followers.

High school life for Garrett couldn't have gone much smoother.

It was his college life that he would test him – sometimes to the limits.

MILITARY LIFE

Garrett entered the Air Force as a two-sport athlete as he was

offered spots on both the football and track and field teams.

In some colleges, they would treat their athletes like kings, but at Air Force, and any other military institution, it is a different story. They are treated like normal cadets and go through a rigorous schedule.

As soon as he arrived at his new home, which is nestled next to the Rocky Mountains, Garrett traded in his street clothes for a military uniform. Then came basic cadet training, which is a six-week program that tested him in every facet possible – emotionally, physically and mentally.

The time was also tough on his parents who didn't get a chance to talk their son much. If In fact, he could not have visitors or receive phone calls for five weeks.

"They basically had them on lock down," Gary said.

It became a little more open as he was able to call on the weekends following basic training, but contact was still limited and so were his trips home. He got a chance to come home for two weeks over Christmas and then a week during the spring.

He also had the opportunity to come home during the summer, but he spent his first two summers at the academy doing academic work.

"One of the things that makes me the most mad is I talk to other moms who have kids who come home from college and they can't wait for them to go back," Garrett's mother, Lori, said. "I would give anything for my kid to come home and call me whenever he wanted to."

The first two years were especially stressful for Garrett as he quickly found out academia at the Air Force is nothing like high school. He started seeing grades next to his name he wasn't used to seeing –letters further down the line in the

alphabet.

“I put this school’s difficulty up against anyone in the world,” Garrett said. “I have struggled academically quite a bit which was something I never thought I would do. I was a pretty good student in high school, but my first two years here, especially, were really hard.”

In his freshman year, Garrett was enrolled in 18 hours of classes, which after football, left him zero free time. With courses like calculus, chemistry and physics on his list, along with all his football duties, the pressure to do well started to mount.

The Air Force experience wasn’t what Garrett had thought it would be. He started to wonder if this was for him.

“Everyone knows the character he has, we just took for granted that he can handle anything,” Gary said. “He has never not been able to handle anything in his life, but the Academy is tough. I couldn’t have done it as his age.

“His buddies were texting him on a Saturday night and they were out partying and he was in his room writing a paper and I think that frustrated him a little bit. I told him you are going to do stuff that they are never going to get to do.”

The temptation of attending of an “easier” school and hanging out with his friends and family weighed heavily on Garrett at times, especially when school work continued to be a bear.

But when those ideas creeped into his head, he would remember all those people in Louisburg who looked at him with pride as he headed off to college.

“At one point he was thinking that it wasn’t for him,” Lori said. “But at the same time he would say that he didn’t want to let the whole town of Louisburg down. He didn’t want to let us down. I just told him that he needs to do what is best for

him.”

In the end, Garrett stuck it out and now he’s starting to see the fruits of his labor – especially on the football field.

LIFE ON THE GRIDIRON

As overwhelming as the Air Force can be to a normal first-year cadet, throw in the life of a college football player and one can imagine the stress it brings.

Garrett wasn’t worried when he started. He imagined using his freshman year to get acclimated and use it as a learning experience.

Instead, he impressed the Falcon coaches enough and made the traveling squad. He suited up in 12 games, and was mainly on special teams and slowly worked his way into more playing time.

His sophomore season, his role on the team grew even more as he was one of team’s top tight ends. That year he had 13 catches for 163 yards and a touchdown

Those numbers more than doubled in his junior campaign as he finished with 16 receptions for 307 yards and four touchdowns in a run-first option offense that isn’t known for throwing the ball much.

Garrett became an easy target however thanks to his 6-foot, 4-inch and 240-pound frame on a Falcon team that finished with a 10-3 record and defeated Western Michigan 38-24 in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl to end their season.



Garrett Griffin looks for a block while quarterback Karson Roberts runs outside on Nov. 14 at Falcon Stadium.

The Falcons did all this after finishing the previous season with a 2-10 record. Air Force also relied on Griffin for his blocking as he is a main cog in the offense to help seal off the end of the line.

Life on the football field was good, but even with all the touchdowns and bright moments, life in the Academy was still difficult and his parents knew it. Even his tough love father became a little concerned.

“My relationship with Garrett is to be a tough kid and you can get through anything,” Gary said. “I knew he was depressed and stressed. He was getting bad grades on tests and you know he was stressed. I worry about his mental state sometimes, so I

text him every day. I always start out texting him and asking him about practice and I can tell right away whether he has had a good day or not.”

Still, with all the ups and downs, Garrett realizes this experience has only made him stronger and he is better off for it.

“Military wise it is a tradition to beat you down so they can build you back up,” Garrett said. “They have definitely done a good job of beating me down and now they are starting to build me back. I really appreciate the opportunities that this place opened and it is starting to pay off and I am glad I came here.”

Following his junior campaign, Garrett knew he was going to have an opportunity for a big senior season. The Falcons returned several playmakers on offense and they had a chance to build on their 10-win season from a year ago.

Then came one more test – and it didn’t come in the classroom.

SENIOR SEASON

The season opener came quickly as the Falcons took the field on Sept. 5 against Morgan State. Air Force picked up right where it left off as it rolled to a 63-7 victory.

Unfortunately for Garrett, he had to watch the rout from the sidelines.

During pregame warmups, a player was thrown into the side of Garrett’s knee and he immediately knew it wasn’t good.

“I heard it pop,” Garrett said. “Right when that happened I thought my season was done. It is weird trying to get ready for your first game of your senior year and then find yourself in the training room thinking that your season and career

might be over.”

The official diagnosis was an MCL sprain and Garrett was going to be out of action for six weeks. During that time, the Falcons went 3-3 before he could get back on the field fully healthy.

He played some in Air Force’s loss to Colorado State on Oct. 17, but watching from the sidelines was hard to handle for Garrett who had to deal with his first long-term injury.

“Once you have played a lot, and then you find yourself watching from the sidelines, you know you can’t do anything and it is hard,” Garrett said. “We had a couple weeks where we struggled against teams like Navy and it is tough. Our quarterback from last year tore his ACL and he really helped me to get through it. I had another buddy who had the same injury I did and he got back faster than I did. Having that support system and knowing I could come back was a huge thing.”

Garrett was finally healthy on Oct. 24 when Air Force traveled to Fresno State, and since then, he and the rest of his Falcon team have taken flight.



Garrett Griffin lets out a scream following Air Force's victory over Utah State on Nov. 14.

The Falcons have won five straight games, including a 35-28 win over Utah State and a 37-30 victory over Boise State. Griffin caught two touchdown passes in Air Force's win over Army to become bowl eligible and then had his best game of the season last Saturday against Boise.

Griffin finished with three catches for 107 yards, including a 51-yard touchdown reception and the Falcons clinched the Mountain Division title and will play San Diego State for the Mountain West Championship on Dec. 5, despite dealing with several injuries on the team.

"It seems like someone has gone down every week and we have just battled through it and that has been our thing," Garrett

said. "We just try to get better each week and Utah St. was a huge win for us. They have beat us pretty good the last couple of years and it is a big time win."

NATIVE SON

Garrett has been a part of several big wins during his time at Air Force and Louisburg has been right there with him.

According to the Griffin family, several members of the Louisburg community have made the 9-plus hour drive to Colorado Springs to attend every one of Garrett's home games the last two years. Whether it is former coaches, teachers or friends, there have been familiar faces there each time.

"I am really grateful for that," Garrett said. "It just shows how great the people of Louisburg are to their athletes and their community. It really puts it in perspective for me that some guys here will only have one or two people come down to watch them and it seems like every week I am trying to get 20 tickets, which is awesome. It just shows the support system that I have personally and how good the people of Louisburg are."

Following each home game, family will make their way down onto the field for a quick visit, and the following for Garrett is obvious.

"Even other Air Force families will comment, 'Oh there is Garrett and his entourage,'" Lori said.



Garrett poses for a picture with his parents, Gary and Lori Griffin, during the Falcons' senior day presentation.

It is that support system that has kept Garrett going through some difficult times. Gary, who teaches at LHS, said Garrett is still a popular topic at the school.

"He is gone so much, that he mentioned to me that they probably don't remember who he is anymore," Gary said. "That is certainly not the case. I can't go anywhere without someone asking me about Garrett. All the teachers on Monday morning after a game are talking about Garrett. The seniors this year were in eighth-grade Garrett's senior year and a lot of those kids are asking me how he did.

"He really appreciates it too. He always asks how many tickets that he needs to get for a game. It is pretty neat. We have a

lot of people go to games up there.”

Lori, who is the school nurse at Rockville Elementary, said Garrett even has fans of the small variety. Lori mentions she has students who wander into her office to look at the photo montage she has of her son.

“I ask them if they know who that is and they say, ‘That is Garrett Griffin.’” Lori said. “Then I tell them I am his mom and they are like ‘No, you aren’t.’ And I am like ‘Yes I am.’

“It is crazy. It is not even just the people that come to watch him play every home game, but just people I run into at the store – people I had no idea even watched sports. He has a lot of fans.”

SENIOR DAY

Air Force’s matchup with Utah State on Nov. 14 was not just another game for Garrett, it was something a lot bigger.

Garrett ran out of the Falcon Stadium tunnel for his final regular season game full of nerves. Those nerves brought back memories of his first collegiate game, his first day on the Air Force campus and many of the other obstacles he has had to face the last three years.

He had another challenge to face as he was set to go up against Utah State’s Kyler Fackrell. The Utah State linebacker is considered an NFL prospect and it would be Garrett’s biggest test of the season.

It was all he could think about.

“I was pretty nervous,” Garrett said. “This was a big time game and I was going up against their outside linebacker, who is probably going to be a second or third round draft pick. He is a stud and I was pretty nervous about going against him.”

As he made his way out of the tunnel for the final time, he looked around on the field for the two people who have always been there for him – his parents.

“I didn’t really know what to say to them,” Garrett said. “I am not really good in those moments, and neither is my dad, obviously. I saw them and it just calmed me down. It put things in perspective that I don’t have many times left to strap it up so I just need to go out and enjoy it. It was a pretty awesome moment.”



Gary Griffin gives his son, Garrett, a quick pat on the stomach before his game against Utah State.

It was an emotional moment for both Gary and Lori as well.

Both have spent the last four years either traveling to

Colorado Springs for games, or most of his away contests.

"It was bittersweet," Gary said. "It was bitter because he has been playing since the fifth grade and now it is coming close to the end. I have only missed a few of his college games when he was a freshman, but a big part of our lives has been watching him play football.

"The sweet part is I know how hard it is in that place and he is just about done. He can see the light at the end of the tunnel. He knows what job he is going to have and he is excited to move on to the next phase of his life. It brought a tear to my eye to be honest with you."

For Lori, she couldn't be more proud of her son and what he has accomplished already despite all the tribulations he has had to face.

"It is amazing to see how far he has gotten," Lori said. "I knew he loved football, but who would have thought he would be where he is and has the opportunity that he has. He has worked so hard.

"People will come up to him sometimes and thank him for his service and he gets embarrassed because he says he hasn't done anything, but he has. He has given up a lot. His other college friends can go out and party whenever they want and he has to be in his room every night by 11. They are his...and it is a different life."

It is a life, however, that Garrett would never give up.

"It has been hard, but I have a lot of opportunities now that I would have never had if I didn't come here," Garrett said. "Overall, it has been a great experience and I am glad that I came here. I just want to enjoy everything I can before it is over."

For a photo gallery of Garrett's senior day game make sure to click here. Then click the download icon underneath the photo to get your free digital copy.