

Griffin thankful for opportunity with Saints



Garrett Griffin (left) is all smiles as he chats with fellow Louisburg High School graduate Jason Spradling as he watches the Louisburg High School scrimmage last Wednesday. Griffin is currently trying to make the New Orleans Saints roster.

In early June, Garrett Griffin received his diploma from the Air Force Academy and shook hands with the President of the United States.

That event alone is enough to top most people's list of accomplishments. Four days later, Griffin fulfilled a life-long dream.

Following his graduation from the Air Force, Griffin was signed by the New Orleans Saints and his dream of playing professional football became a reality. It was a whirlwind of emotions for the Louisburg native in what was a short period of time.

"To be honest, those moments haven't really hit me yet," Griffin said. "There is just so much going on, whether it was with graduation or signing with Saints, to really sit back and think about what just happened. Once I graduated, I hopped on a plane to New Orleans, signed my contract and then went out to practice. It is crazy to think about how fast everything happens, but it is going well so far."

Signing with the Saints was no surprise to Griffin. New Orleans offered Griffin a contract in May, but he was unable to sign until after graduation.

Griffin, who played tight end at the Air Force Academy, was invited to participate in rookie minicamps with the Kansas City Chiefs and Saints. He attended the Chiefs minicamp first and got a good idea of what the coaches were looking for.

He left Kansas City without a contract and then traveled to New Orleans the following weekend for its rookie minicamp. The Saints had scouted Griffin since his pro day and were impressed by what they saw and offered him a contract before he left town.

"When they told me they were going to offer me a contract, it was a childhood dream come true for me," Griffin said. "Going to Kansas City for their camp was a good experience for me because playing in the NFL is a lot different than at Air Force, so it helped me catch up on what I needed to know.

"But going to New Orleans, I could just tell it was a better fit for me. They know me as a player and have followed me since the draft process began. The team is just one big family and they take care of each other. It has been a great experience so far."

After Griffin signed his free agent contract, he immediately hit the practice field to take part in the team's four-day OTA offseason workout and then followed that up with a three-day mandatory minicamp on June 14-16.

Griffin got a lot of work in at the tight end spot during that time and had several eye-opening experiences, but none were much bigger than when he caught passes thrown by All-Pro quarterback, and Super Bowl MVP, Drew Brees.

"That was pretty cool," Griffin said. "When you are doing drills, you just line up and do what you are supposed to and

don't think about it too much. But after I caught my first pass from him, time kind of slowed down and I realized what had just happened. It was awesome."



Photo taken by Michael C. Herbert / New Orleans Saints

Garrett Griffin goes through a drill during the Saints offseason workouts in June.

The Saints signed Griffin as a tight end/long snapper, but he has his work cut for him in making the roster as there are several veterans currently ahead of him, including Coby Fleener, who spent the last four seasons with the Indianapolis Colts. Fleener signed with the Saints in the offseason and is the favorite to be the team's starter.

"He and the rest of the vets have been really great at helping me and making sure I am in the right spots," Griffin said of Fleener. "They like to give the rookies a hard time, and that happens no matter where you go, but they have been good about it."

"The Saints are just a great organization and they have a

great fan base. There is a family atmosphere around the whole team and the city just embraces them. In some ways it is kind of what Louisburg is like. They really love football and they love their team. It is great to be a part of."

Griffin's immediate future will begin to take shape later this month when he travels to West Virginia with the rest of the Saints for the team's training camp that begins July 27.

That also includes a trip to Foxborough, Mass., where the Saints will take part in two joint practices with the New England Patriots before the two team's square off in the exhibition opener on Aug. 8.

"I think that will be pretty cool, just getting a chance to go up there and practice against the Patriots," Griffin said. "Then to have a chance to watch one of the best tight ends in football in Rob Gronkowski and see how he prepares, it will be a great learning experience for me."

Although most of his time is dedicated to the tight end spot, Griffin is also spending some time working as a long-snapper, a position he held the backup role on at Air Force. When it comes time to make cuts as training camp winds down, being able to play two different roles could be a positive for Griffin.

"Tight end is my main focus, and if I am going to make it in the NFL then that is what I have to spend most of my time on," Griffin said. "But if I can work on my long snapping a little, and it comes down to me and another tight end, then the team might decide to go with the player that can play two spots, and that can only help me. I am just trying to do everything I can right now and I am working hard."

As excited as Griffin would be to make the Saints roster, he knows there is another obstacle in his way. Currently, he is on a 60-day leave from the Air Force before he is set to begin his two-year military obligation.

That obligation would prevent Griffin from playing in the NFL until that two years is complete. Still, there has been precedence that the Air Force could allow Griffin to play and complete his military requirements in the reserves.

Most recently, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus gave Naval Academy grad Keenan Reynolds permission to play with the Baltimore Ravens. Reynolds was drafted in the sixth round by the Ravens in the NFL Draft.

"I don't want to say, the rules have gotten a little bit more relaxed. That's not the right term but, if a player like (Griffin) has an opportunity they're going to work with him where maybe 20 years ago it may have been a little bit different," Saints head coach Sean Payton said during a press conference last month. "I know in his case, he won't miss anything. We like him as a young prospect and because of graduation he was one of the guys that got here a little late but that was really more of the graduation rules. Fortunately for us he will be involved with everything we do."

Until training camp arrives, however, Griffin is currently back in Louisburg where he is enjoying some time off. Last week, Garrett made his way back to where it all started for him – the Louisburg High School practice field – where he took in the Wildcats' scrimmage with his father Gary, who is an assistant coach.

"It was great to be back out there again," Garrett said. "I watch every game on film, but it was great to be able to see them in person and see what this team is going to be like. It was fun to be able to be with those coaches again and kind of stand back and learn a little bit from there. I wouldn't mind being a coach one day so there are always things that you can learn, no matter how much football you play."

Still, he is focused on making his dream come true.

"I don't want to think a lot about it because I don't know

exactly what is going to happen yet, but I can only do what I can control and that is to work hard and be prepared," he said. "If for some reason the NFL doesn't work out, I have a great Plan B with the Air Force and I know a lot of guys don't have that. At the same time, I don't want to have any regrets. So, we will see how it goes. Whatever happens is fine with me."