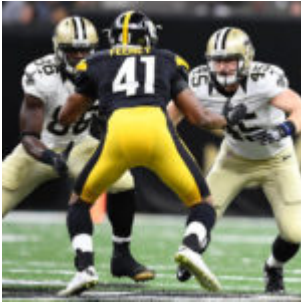


Griffin ready to take step forward with Saints



New Orleans Saints tight end, and Louisburg High School alum, Garrett Griffin (45) is ready to take what he learned off the practice squad last season and make the Saints roster this year.

As college football players around the country wait to hopefully hear their name called during this weekend's NFL Draft, Garrett Griffin remembers what that whole experience was like.

A year ago, Griffin wasn't sure if football was even going to be in his future. He was about to graduate from the Air Force Academy and he garnered interest from a few NFL teams.

They liked what they saw out of the 6-foot-4 inch tight end in his pro day, but Griffin was prepared to leave football behind and turn all his focus to the military life.

"After my pro day, I knew I might get an opportunity but I wasn't sure when it was going to come," Griffin said. "You usually have to serve two years in the Air Force first, so I knew some teams weren't sure how that was going affect me."

That doubt left Griffin undrafted, but once the Air Force delayed his service commitment, he was allowed to pursue his dream of playing professional football. That dream became a

reality when Griffin signed a free agent contract with the New Orleans Saints last year.

Although he didn't earn a spot with the Saints out of training camp, New Orleans signed him to the practice squad where he spent all of the 2016 season – learning and soaking up what it takes to play in the NFL.

The Louisburg High School alum worked out at tight end, played a little fullback and also did some long snapping and special teams work. Griffin wanted to make sure he did everything he could to give him the best chance at staying with the Saints.

“During (training) camp last year, the coaches told me they kind of view me as a project and hopefully I can help the team in the future,” Griffin said. “I knew I wasn't ready to play (this past) year because I wasn't ready to do some of the things they were going to ask me to do. They told me I could be playing a lot of positions, whether it is a receiving tight end or fullback. It is also valuable that I can long snap. Just being able to do a lot things can only help me.”

Griffin's first year in the NFL was a blur as he didn't have much time to let it all sink in. He graduated from the Air Force Academy, then quickly moved on to work out with the Saints.

He had to get bigger, faster and stronger in just a few weeks time as training camp was just around the corner. Griffin had a good training camp, but he suffered a hamstring injury that cost him a couple weeks of workouts during the preseason.

“I put on a lot of weight, but I wasn't necessarily where I should have been,” Griffin said. “I was in good shape, and I was strong, but I put on weight so fast because that is what I needed to do and I don't think my body was ready to handle it. I think that is why I messed my hamstring up during camp.”

Those lack of snaps left Griffin on the wrong side of the

training camp cuts, but he never left the Saints as he was signed to the practice squad just days later. It was there where he stayed for the entire 2016 season.

On the scout team, Griffin faced off against members of the Saints starting defense on a daily basis.

"I got to go against Cam Jordan (defensive end) every day and I think that made me better," Griffin said. "He is a Pro Bowler and to go up against him helped me out a lot just to get ready for what I can expect."

Griffin also had some veterans take him under his wing as his locker is right next to veteran fullback John Kuhn, who was a longtime Green Bay Packer before signing with the Saints last season.

"I am not sure any one thing stood out, but it was just really cool to become friends with some really good dudes that I didn't think I would ever meet," Griffin said. "(Kuhn) is a legend in Green Bay. He is starting to become a legend in New Orleans just because he is a really good dude. He started his career in kind of the same situation as me. He went to a smaller school, but he was on the practice squad for the (Pittsburgh) Steelers and he has just helped me out throughout the year. He is just a really good guy to talk to and we come from similar upbringings.

"Our locker room is great and I get along with everyone. I think everyone gets along and I don't think it is like that everywhere. Any time you need something, the veterans are there for you and that is coolest part about last year is just to see how close everyone was."

That closeness to the other players was important as the season started to become a grind. As a member of the practice squad, he was in the same meetings as the Saints starters and practiced with the team six days a week.

When the players went to the team hotel following workouts on Saturdays, Griffin stayed behind to watch the games on television, only to do it all over again the next week.

“It is good being on the scout team because you are preparing like you are going to play, but you aren’t really and it is a good learning experience,” he said. “We traveled to two games. The home games, we have walkthrough and practice till like 2 on Saturday and the rest of the time we just try and relax.

“We went to an LSU game once and we try to go out and see New Orleans. I just wanted to take advantage of the fact that we have some free time and all the older guys told us to enjoy it because once you start playing every week, it is football non-stop.”

Although he wasn’t on the active roster, Griffin would still get recognized around New Orleans from fans and get asked for the occasional autograph.

“I don’t see myself any different than when I was in high school,” Griffin said. “Sometimes it is a little awkward because they think I am famous and I know that I am not. It is really cool though because everyone appreciates the fact that the fan base is great, and it is such a cool, historic city and it is great to be a part of that.

“After (Hurricane) Katrina, the Saints were what helped bring the city together. The fans know everyone. They know the practice squad guys and a lot of the people that work behind the scenes. They even know who our chef is in our cafeteria. They just worship Saints football.”

Probably the most popular Saint is Drew Brees. The all-pro and Super Bowl MVP quarterback is looked up to by many in the Saints locker room and Griffin is one of them.

“I have had some interactions with him and he is a great guy,” Griffin said. “There was a time where he broke a record and

they were talking about it on ESPN. I was talking to him at lunch and he was embarrassed that it was even on TV. He is a really humble guy and he could care less about his stats. It is cliché to say that, but he is a great dude and he earns everything he gets.

“Quarterbacks have to prepare so much more than everyone. They are pretty much coaches. It is cool to see how hard he works and you realize why he is so good. When you walk in the door, he has already been there for two hours watching film. He has his routine and it is the exact same thing every day. He is a perfectionist. He is obviously talented, but watching how hard he works, he sets a great example for everyone else.”

By the time the Brees era is over in New Orleans, Griffin hopes to become a target for the future hall of fame quarterback. He is behind veteran tight end Coby Fleener and a couple others on the roster, but Griffin is ready to do what it takes to move from the practice squad and on to the big stage.

Griffin is currently in New Orleans working out with the team as he prepares for minicamp, and then eventually another training camp later this summer.

“I think the ultimate goal for me is not only to make a team, but to contribute,” Griffin said. “The thing about the NFL is that when you are on a roster, you are going to play quite a bit because there aren’t many spots. Once you make a roster though, it is all business. It is a ruthless business and they can cut you any time they want. I just want to stay on the team, contribute and help win some games and maybe make the playoffs.”

Following the conclusion of the 2016 season, Griffin returned home to Louisburg to spend time with his parents Gary and Lori Griffin, his sister Gentry and other family and friends – people he didn’t get to see much the last four years due to

his service in the Air Force Academy and then spending the last seven months with the Saints.

"This is actually the first time that I have had off since I started playing sports in high school," Griffin said. "I just wanted to let everything heal, let my legs get back under me and just get my body right."

"I was able to see some friends from high school and I got a chance to just hang out at home, which was fine with me. My dad likes that I am home because he says my mom cooks a lot more when I am around. It was great to actually spend some time with both my parents and hopefully I didn't annoy them too much."

It was a much-needed getaway for Griffin as he had an opportunity to refocus and prepare himself for what he plans to be an eventful 2017 season with the Saints. He wants a chance at making the active roster and help New Orleans take the next step following a 7-9 season a year ago.

Still, Griffin knows his roster spot can be taken at any time and he could be left without a football home.

"It is a great way to make a living and it is a lot of people's dream to play in the NFL, but I don't think people realize just how stressful that it is," Griffin said. "You walk in on Tuesday, which is our off day, but everyone still comes in to work out. That is when they work out free agents and every week it seems like they are working out 20 people. Anyone can take your job at any time. Especially in camp, you are on edge 24-7."

"Coach (Sean) Payton always says that we are all on a train right now, but everyone gets off at some point. For some people it is sooner than others, so just try and enjoy it while you are on it. It is not long for most people."

For Griffin, he hopes that train doesn't pull into the station

any time soon.