

First NFL touchdown was years in the making for Griffin



New Orleans Saints tight end, and Louisburg High School graduate, Garrett Griffin was all smiles after catching his first NFL touchdown on Jan. 20 in the NFC Championship game.

NEW ORLEANS – Garrett Griffin put his hand on the Superdome turf waiting for the snap, knowing this could be his moment.

New Orleans quarterback Drew Brees took the snap and rolled to the right, and Griffin from his tight end position, did the same. For some, it was a play that happened in slow motion.

Griffin's friends and family watched the No. 45 make his way across the endzone as two Los Angeles Rams defenders collided with each other. Griffin made a cut and sprinted to the right, and as he got close the sideline, he turned and looked toward Brees.

Brees fired the ball to where only Griffin could get it. As it came spiraling his way, Griffin had only one thought in mind.

"Oh crap," Griffin said to himself.

To put this in some context, Griffin, a 2012 Louisburg High School graduate, spent much of the last three years on the New Orleans Saints practice squad. He got the call up and was on the 53-man roster a year ago late in the season, but a foot injury ended his season prematurely.

During the 2018 regular season, Griffin found himself on the practice squad again. Then following the regular season, he made the move to the active roster for the NFL Playoffs and the Saints' game against the Philadelphia Eagles on Jan. 13.

Griffin was the team's No. 3 tight end in the Saints' win over the Eagles and provided some key blocks on their way to the NFC Championship game the following week.

Blocking was mostly what Griffin was planning on doing in the championship game against the Rams, but fate had other ideas.

The team's No. 1 tight end, Ben Watson, was unable to play due to an appendix issue and Josh Hill, the back-up, suffered a concussion early on in the game. That left Griffin and Dan Arnold as the team's only tight ends for much of the contest.

As the Saints drove down to the Rams' 5-yard line in the first quarter, the play was called into huddle and Griffin realized his time might be coming on what was one of the biggest stages in the NFL.

"We ran that play in practice against our scout team and we were able to score on it so we knew it was going to be an option," Griffin said. "I think about 2-3 plays

before one of our other tight ends (Josh Hill) went out with an injury and he was supposed to get most of the plays. So we were all kind of scrambling on the sidelines to see what plays were going to what other tight ends.”

With 1 minute and 36 seconds left in the first quarter, it was Griffin’s time to shine.

Brees took the snap, rolled right, and found Griffin who went on his knees to scoop up the 5-yard touchdown pass.

The touchdown was his first in the NFL and was just his second career catch.

What a time for your first catch of the year.

5-yard TD grab for Garrett Griffin! #HomeInTheDome #NFLPlayoffs

📷: #LARvsNO on FOX pic.twitter.com/mJFZ2Hgd6e

– NFL (@NFL) January 20, 2019

“They ended up calling the play we worked on in practice and I got my opportunity,” Griffin said. “I figured someone else was going to get it, but the play kept going and I was getting closer to the sideline so I looked over and he (Brees) found me.”

Although most players would find a creative way to celebrate their first NFL touchdown, Griffin was more interested in one thing – keeping the ball.

“Honestly, a lot of people were making fun of me after it happened because I didn’t really celebrate or anything,” he said. “We have a rule on the team where you can only keep a ball if it is your first touchdown or milestone or something like that. I had a teammate earlier this year that got his first touchdown, he spiked it and then he never got his ball back.

“I knew that I didn’t want to lose it, so I just tried to find some guys to celebrate with. It was a pretty cool moment and something I will always remember.”

It was a moment that left a few fans in tears, most notably, his parents, Gary and Lori Griffin who were at the game. Gary, who coached Garrett in high school, had a clear view of the touchdown as he sat about 20 rows behind the endzone in which he caught the pass.

“It was surreal,” Gary said. “It was directly in front of us. I looked up at the sky and the first thing I thought was, ‘Did that really just happen?’ I looked over and those two guys were getting kind of emotional and I was getting pretty emotional. I just couldn’t believe it.”

Those two guys sitting next to Gary were Garrett’s former high school teammates and long-time friends, David Embers and Ross Dvorak.

Both made the trip to watch Garrett play in his first NFC Championship and he didn't disappoint them.

"Our hometown buddy playing in an NFC championship game was enough for us to get there," Dvorak said. "Then having him catch a touchdown, and it literally being right in front of our seats, was just surreal. The atmosphere made it all the better. I'd imagine Griff doesn't shed tears too often, but it was an emotional minute for all of us for sure.

"It's been a lot of fun to watch him over the years and that moment was kind of a culmination of his journey. Small-town Kansas kid, small school in college, plenty of injuries along the way and for him to have a significant impact in a game of that magnitude, was just super special. So happy for Lori and Gary."

It has been a long road for Garrett to get to this moment.

He helped Louisburg High School to its first football state championship in 2010 and then went on to the Air Force Academy to play football after not getting much Division I interest out of high school.

Garrett then worked his way up the Air Force depth chart, but suffered an injury his senior year and was forced to miss half of that season after having strong sophomore and junior campaigns.

He went undrafted and later signed with the Saints as a free agent. Garrett eventually worked his way up the roster on the practice squad before getting the call last year and then for the playoffs this season.

“Most of the people close to Garrett know how hard he has worked to put himself in a position to always be ready,” Embers said. “Obviously the planets aligned a little bit with the injuries and the play call, but Garrett has always been prepared for the next step and he capitalized in the biggest moment.

“It gives you some nostalgia when you watch his games at Air Force and then even back in high school. It was pretty special to see in person and I know he was fired up too, even if his touchdown celebration was underwhelming.”

Not only was it the first touchdown of Griffin’s career, but it was also the first touchdown of the game and it gave the Saints a 13-0 lead at the time. It also left a lot Saints fans wondering who exactly No. 45 was.

“You end up kind of standing there in disbelief, looking around like ‘did that really just happen?’” Embers said. “Saints fans all around us were just going bananas and fans in front of us were pulling out their phones and looking up Garrett’s bio on ESPN not knowing his dad was right behind them.”



Garrett Griffin had a chance to celebrate his milestone with some long-time friends. Pictured (from left) is Griffin, his girlfriend Sonya Murphy, Lindsay Dvorak, Ross Dvorak and David Embers.

As a dad, Gary was filled with pride when his son caught his first NFL touchdown and then went on to catch another 7-yard pass later in the game. It was an emotional moment because of everything his son has gone through.

“It has been surreal throughout the whole thing and just following him along the way,” Gary said. “The whole Saints thing was an accident. One year the military lets their graduates go play professionally and he just so happens to fall in that window and he was able to try and play in the NFL. He was lucky.

“Then the Saints snagged him and put him on the practice squad. Then he gets that foot injury last year and I honestly thought he might be done there. He wasn’t fully healthy until right before training camp and he had a great camp. He has just stayed really positive throughout the whole process, even when he got put back on the practice squad.

He just had great attitude this entire time and it paid off.”

There were certainly plenty of people who knew Garrett Griffin’s name in Louisburg and throughout Kansas as people took to social media to congratulate their hometown boy.

“I think I had over 100 text messages from people congratulating me on the touchdown and I didn’t even go on social media for several days after it was over because I knew there would be a lot of negative stuff on there after we lost,” Garrett said. “Overall, I heard from probably close to 200 people from Louisburg, from the Air Force, along with high school and college coaches calling me. It was kind of a surreal experience to be honest. It was amazing.”

Just seconds after the touchdown, Lori’s phone starting exploding with messages congratulating her on her son’s accomplishment.

“I just couldn’t believe it,” Lori said. “That was my child out there that just caught a touchdown in the NFL. I knew he was going to do something when Josh went out with a concussion. He was the only one left to do it and it was just amazing. My phone was just going crazy. I had more than 100 messages and some from people that I didn’t even know that followed him.

“I heard from people from everywhere, whether it was Gary’s

and my hometown of Frankfort, Louisburg or people watching in New Orleans. Even one lady I worked with 20 years ago instant messaged me and didn't realize that was my son. It was crazy. Now everyone wants jerseys, shirts and autographs. The kids I work with at Blue Valley want him to come to our school and it is pretty cool."

The Saints did go on to lose to the Rams in overtime after a controversial no-call on a pass interference play late in regulation that would have all but sealed a trip for New Orleans to play in the Super Bowl. Instead, there was no flag on the play and the Rams won on a 57-yard field goal in overtime.

It was the second year in a row the Saints had suffered heartbreak in the postseason after losing to the Minnesota Vikings last season in the divisional round of the playoffs on the 'Miracle in Minneapolis.' The Vikings defeated the Saints on a touchdown on the final play of the game.

"I think what made the loss even tougher was last season when we ended up losing to Minnesota the way we did on the last play," Garrett said. "We have a passionate fan base in New Orleans and they are taking the loss pretty hard. We were so close to making it to the Super Bowl and were just kind of a play away, kind of like the Chiefs against the Patriots. Both games were pretty intense.

"As far as the call goes, you just never want to leave the game in the hands of the referees. We

had some chances to do things a little better and we could have made more plays. It is going to take a while to get over, that is for sure. Hopefully, maybe after the Super Bowl is over then maybe we can start to put it behind us.”

Following the game, Garrett met up with his family and friends in what was a weird moment for everyone. Although they were disappointed with the outcome, they were all still thrilled for what Garrett had accomplished just a couple hours earlier.

“A lot of people were pretty upset after losing the game and how we lost it, so that was hard,” Garrett said. “But at the same time, everyone who was there to watch me was really proud. It was great to have both my parents there, my girlfriend and then Ross and David as well. For them to be able to see me catch the touchdown in person was really awesome and it really means a lot.

“I even heard my dad cried a little bit, which he might not want out there, but I know he is proud of me. I think he is getting a little soft in his old age.”

Just like his parents, there are plenty of people out there cheering for Garrett, including the town of Louisburg that has adopted the Saints as their new favorite team.

“I don’t think Garrett has any clue that this whole town is now Saints fans,” Gary said. “He doesn’t realize yet just how many people still follow him and care about how he does. People tell me all the time about how much they are rooting for him and want to see him do well.

“Even people he doesn’t know are rooting for him. I teach in Adrian (Mo.) now and some of the students there have Griffin jerseys on and they don’t even know him. They just know me and want to see him do well. It is the same with Lori in Blue Valley. There are a lot Garrett fans out there and we couldn’t be more proud.”

Although he just finished his third year in the NFL, his parents believe there are bigger things to come with their son.

“I am proud of him no matter what he does and I tell him that before every game,” Lori said. “Even if he doesn’t do something right, I am so proud of him. I don’t think that he gets that he is living every kid’s dream of playing in the NFL. I was thrilled that he could show other people what he could do.”

The news kept getting better for Garrett as the Saints signed him to a three-year minimum contract when he was called up to the practice squad. It is similar to the rookie deal he signed, which guarantees him a spot in training camp.

Garrett was in his final year of his contract with the Saints before the extension and could have become a free agent. Instead, the Saints showed faith in him with the multi-year deal.

Depending on what happens in the draft and free agency, he will have the opportunity to move up

on the depth
chart next season and he is excited about the opportunity.

“In my eyes, it is my position to
lose,” Garrett said. “Next year will be my fourth year with
the team, and I
feel like with a couple of guys retiring that I will have a
good opportunity to
make the team. You never know what guys the team will bring in
through the
draft or free agency, but I feel like I know the system and
that will help me.
I just have to keep working hard and do whatever I can to put
myself in a good
position.”