

LHS grads suit up for Division I programs



Four Louisburg High School graduates will find themselves on the sidelines as they take part in the highest level collegiate football has to offer. Mesa Ribordy, Kade Larson, Luke Hupp and Konnor Cook are all on Division I rosters as they compete for time on the field for their respective schools.

Below are small bios and the school they will play for this season.



Mesa Ribordy, redshirt freshman, University of Kansas

Mesa Ribordy could see a lot of playing time this season for the Kansas Jayhawks after redshirting last season. Ribordy is listed as a backup guard and center on the most recent depth chart and has bulked up since moving to Lawrence. He now stands at 6 feet, 4 inches and weighs 290 pounds.

Ribordy, who wears No. 69, could see the field as early as this Saturday when the Jayhawks host Rhode Island at 6 p.m. Ribordy is a 2015 graduate of Louisburg High School and spent of his time at the tight end spot at high school before

finding a home on the offensive line with the Jayhawks.

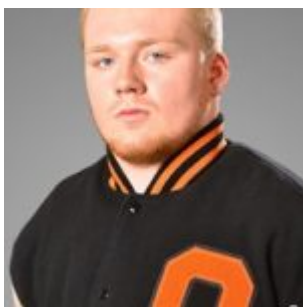


Kade Larson, sophomore, University of Tennessee-Martin

Kade Larson had to battle a little adversity before joining the Tennessee-Martin football team, but Larson seems to be finding a nice home with the Skyhawks. Larson, who stands at 6-3 and weighs 275 pounds, plays on the offensive line and saw some playing time as a freshman.

In 2014, Larson started out with the Skyhawks, but suffered an arm-injury during fall workouts and had to redshirt. In 2015, Larson played in five games and later earned a spot on the OVC Commissioner's Honor Roll.

Larson, who wears No. 98, is a 2013 Louisburg High School graduate and started out his collegiate career playing baseball for Coffeyville Community College before deciding on football. While in high school, Larson was an all-Frontier League player on both the offensive and defensive lines and was all-state defensive lineman as a senior. Larson and the Skyhawks opened their season with a 28-7 loss to Cincinnati on Thursday.



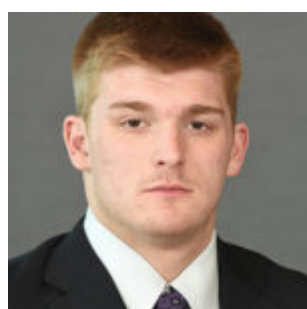
Luke Hupp, sophomore, Oklahoma State University

Luke Hupp worked his way up the to Division I ranks last year when he earned a walk-on spot with the Oklahoma State football

team. Hupp redshirted last season after spending a little time at Fort Scott Community College in 2014.

Hupp, who is listed at 5-10 and 255 pounds, plays the Cowboy Back position for Oklahoma State and could also see some time on special teams. Hupp wears No. 40 for the Cowboys.

Hupp is 2014 Louisburg High School graduate and played fullback and linebacker for a majority of his time with the Wildcats. Hupp and the Cowboys opener their season at 2:30 p.m. on Saturday against Southeastern Louisiana.



Konnor Cook, junior, Kansas State University

Konnor Cook is in his first year with the Kansas State football program after taking a break from football. Cook earned a walk-on spot with the Wildcats this past spring and will play fullback.

Cook, who measures at 6-0 and 241 pounds, will wear No. 48 for the Wildcats this season. He played six games for Coffeyville Community College in 2013 as a freshman.

He graduated from Louisburg High School in 2013 and earned all-state honors as a defensive tackle. Cook and Kansas State opens their season at 8 p.m. tonight against Stanford.

Wildcats ready for redemption after playoff defeat



Louisburg senior running back Jake Hill (left) tries to get away from fellow senior Owen Staver during the Wildcats' scrimmage last Friday at Wildcat Stadium. The Wildcats open their season Friday when they travel to Wyandotte.

The sting of last season's first round playoff loss continues to hang around the Louisburg High School football team.

The Wildcats players felt it over the summer and all the way through the first couple weeks of practice. They welcome it, however, as they are using it as motivation for what the Wildcats hope is a special season.

It won't be easy as Louisburg faces a tough schedule, including a rough gauntlet through the Frontier League. Still, they aren't backing down from the challenge.

"We have very high expectations for this season," co-head coach Jeff Lohse said. "As always, the Frontier League will be an extremely tough, physical league. We are going to continue to work hard every day and take it game by game."

Louisburg has the experience to handle what its nine-game schedule holds as it returns seven starters on offense and eight on defense from a team that finished 7-2 in the regular season last year.

Offensively, senior Grant Harding takes over the quarterback spot after serving as the backup last season and did see time as a starter his sophomore campaign.

Senior Thomas San Agustin, a second-team all-Frontier League player a season ago, is also one of the team's starting running backs. Fellow seniors Korbin Hankinson, Jake Hill, Nick Hull, along with junior Will Ridley and sophomore Austin Moore will also see a fair share of snaps in the backfield at times this year.

Wide receivers Desmond Doles, Christian Tosterud, Connor Green and Jackson Ewalt will give Harding options to throw to, while Ben Hupp and Dalton Ribordy will help on the offensive line at the tight end position.

The Wildcat offense will be led by co-head coach Gary Griffin.

"I think our experience should be the strength of the team," Griffin said. "Grant has played quite a bit of quarterback, especially as a sophomore, but he has played a lot for three years at other positions. We have five running backs with starting experience and probably the only positions with inexperience is at wide receiver and tight end, but we have some talented kids there as well."



The Louisburg football team huddles together before last week's scrimmage

The most talented part of the offense could be the Wildcat offensive line as they return three all-league players from a year ago. Senior Dustyn Rizzo earned second-team honors, while fellow senior T.J. Dover and Mason Koechner were honorable mentions.

Junior Garrett Lowry returns after starting last season, while Dalton Frazier, Matthew Rison and Kiefer Tucker are all battling to take the center spot.

"We have four starters back on the offensive line and they have a great understanding of what we are trying to do," Griffin said. "We are going to rely on them. They are a big, strong and tough group that is pretty athletic, so there is a lot of stuff we ought to be able to do."

Rizzo will also help anchor the Wildcat defense as he is a returning first-team all-league player on the defensive line. He led the Wildcat defensive line with 49 tackles, including

eight for a loss. He also had five sacks, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery.

Koechner and Dover, who were honorable mentions all-league on defense as well last season, will join Rizzo on the line.

Moore, San Agustin and Hull are the team's starting linebackers, while Harding, Hankinson and Hill will man the secondary. A spot on the defensive line and at cornerback are still up for grabs heading into this week's opener.

"Our defense has the potential to be really good this year," Lohse said, who will run the defense. "We return eight starters from last season and many other guys who have gotten a lot of reps. Our team speed and experience are going to be huge factors for us this year. We have the luxury of having a lot of quality backups at many positions to help with our depth."

Experience will be key for the Wildcats as they return 16 seniors this year and it has already shown their leadership on and off the field.

"Practices have been going extremely well," Lohse said. "The seniors have been doing a great job of leading and this was evident from day one in the weight room this summer."

The Wildcats will hit the field for the first time this season when they travel to Wyandotte High School at 7 p.m. Friday. Louisburg will host Piper for its home opener on Sept. 9.

Littrell resigns as head

football coach



Louisburg High School's Kyle Littrell stepped down as head football coach Thursday and his letter of resignation was accepted by the USD 416 Board of Education during a special meeting later that night.

A week before the start of the 2016 season, Louisburg High School head football coach Kyle Littrell has resigned from his post.

During a special meeting of the USD 416 Board of Education on Thursday evening, Littrell turned in his resignation to the board and it was accepted by a 6-1 vote. He also resigned from his assistant track and field position. The board met in executive session for nearly an hour before taking a vote.

Board members Jerry Flanagan, Bruce Caldwell, John Payton, Jacob Vickrey, Lanny Smith and Dr. Sally Lundblad all voted to accept his resignation, while Rob Vohs cast the "no" vote.

During the roll call vote, Dr. Lundblad stated she wished (Littrell) was not submitting a letter of resignation as head football coach, according to the board minutes.

In a related action, the board voted to appoint LHS assistants Gary Griffin and Jeff Lohse as co-head coaches for the remainder of the year. LHS physical education teacher Zac Livingston was also named as an assistant coach for the rest of the season. The motion was passed 7-0.

Earlier in the week, reports surfaced that Littrell was arrested in July on a domestic battery charge. He posted bond and appeared in Miami County District Court on Thursday afternoon where he accepted a diversionary agreement and the case was closed.

Littrell was entering his fourth season as the Wildcat head coach. He led Louisburg to a 7-3 record a season ago and earned a spot in the state playoffs.

He was at the fall sports community pep rally Thursday evening before the board meeting and introduced his team before the crowd and talked about how excited he was for the season. A couple hours later, he resigned.

USD 416 superintendent Dr. Brian Biermann declined to comment on the situation. Littrell could not be reached for comment at this time.

The team will have its fall scrimmage at 6 p.m. tonight. The Wildcats open their season next Friday at Wyandotte and will have their home opener on Sept. 9 against Piper.

Numbers are up for LHS fall sports



After making the playoffs a season ago, the Louisburg High

School football watched its number rise by a small number as they try to improve off of its 7-3 season in 2015. The Wildcats hold a scrimmage at 8 a.m., on Saturday.

A week into the fall sports season, all of the Louisburg High School sports teams have seen their participation numbers rise from last year – albeit by a small number.

It would make sense as all four programs made strides in the 2015-16 campaign. The football team returned to the playoffs after a 3-win season the year before and volleyball placed third at the state tournament.

Boys soccer won its first regional title in five years despite a rough beginning. Meanwhile, cross country qualified a runner for the state meet for the first time in several years and the girls team made program history when it won its first ever meet.

Needless to say, last year's results have left several excited for what is to come in all sports.



Sophie McMullen is one of three returning varsity players from

**last season's third
place finish at state
for the LHS volleyball
team.**

Louisburg's football team won seven games last season, which was four more than the year before despite a first-round exit in the playoffs. The Wildcats saw their numbers rise from 58 to 63 this season and are ready to make an improvement on the field as well.

They are going through 2-a-days now and will finish a grueling week with an 8 a.m. scrimmage Saturday.

"The first couple days have gone real well, however we are a little limited in what we can do and expect without full pads," football coach Kyle Littrell said. "We have a great group of kids who have committed themselves to our grueling summer program and the seniors have really taken the leadership role and ran with it."

Volleyball spent the first three days of practice going through tryouts, but head coach Jessica Compliment saw numbers rise from 28 to 36 this season, which means a few more cuts than last year, but Louisburg has to replace five varsity players from a year ago.

The Lady Cats might have the shortest amount of time to get ready of all the sports as they open their season with the preseason Frontier League tournament on Aug. 27 in Baldwin.

"The first few days of practice have centered around testing and conditioning," Compliment said. "We started practice with the team on Thursday. I know the players are ready to get the season going, which is good because we have a quick turnaround with a tournament in a week."



Louisburg's (from left) Jon Paul Totta, Kyle Allen and Jacob Arnett take part in a drill during a soccer practice Wednesday.

First-year boys soccer coach Kyle Conley inherits a Wildcat program that won the regional tournament and advanced to the state quarterfinals. The numbers for the Wildcats program were up by just two from last year, but Conley has liked what he has seen out of his group thus far.

"The kids are focused and determined," Conley said. "I am very pleased with their attitudes and work ethic. They seem eager to learn from each session. I love how the kids are believing in the program and my philosophy.

"It is really good to finally get started and get things going. I am excited to see what this team will become. I do understand that our league is incredibly talented, but our mind set it going to be we have something to prove."

As for cross country, head coach John Reece has seen a large number return for the season, especially on the girls. The Wildcats have 36 runners out this season – with 24 of those competing on the girls team. Louisburg had 31 total runners out a year ago.



Louisburg cross country runners Kaitlyn Gaza (left) and Lilly Mick finish up a practice run Wednesday.

Junior Wyatt Reece returns to help the boys after qualifying for the state meet as a sophomore.

“Practices have started great, especially since it is not 110 degrees in the shade,” coach Reece said. “Those who ran through the summer are ahead of the game. We hope to do some great things this year with almost all of my varsity girls returning.”

Look for full previews on each team next week at Louisburg Sports Zone.

Vance enjoys time at Shrine Bowl



Anders Vance, a 2016 Louisburg High School graduate, signs an autograph for a couple fans on July 30 following the Kansas Shrine Bowl at Emporia State University. Vance and the East squad won going away, 48-27.

The Kansas Shrine Bowl brought a lot of unforgettable memories for Anders Vance, but the one he will remember the most didn't happen on the football field.

Vance spent a week at Emporia State University preparing for the annual all-star football game as a member of the East team. The 2016 Louisburg High School graduate developed a lot of friendships along the way as he was the starting center that helped the East to a 48-27 win over the West squad on July 30.

As much fun as that was, he will never forget what happened two days before.

Vance and the rest of the Shrine Bowl players met with patients from the Shriners Hospital for Children (SHC) out of St. Louis. Not only did he get to meet them, but Vance also took part in several stations that helped him understand what it was like to live the life of a patient.

"Those kids are just amazing," Vance said. "That is what stuck out to me is just how tough these kids are. They are tough as nails and pretty inspirational. We took part in different stations, including one that had us try and tie our shoe with just one hand. I don't know how they do what they do."



Vance's Louisburg teammates (from left) Austin Moore, Mason Koechner and Grant Harding made the trip down to Emporia to watch Vance play in the Shrine Bowl.

The purpose for the Kansas Shrine Bowl is to raise money every year for Shriners Hospitals across the United States. The Shrine Bowl generates close to \$70,000 each year for the hospitals.

SHC is a healthcare system of 22 hospitals dedicated to improving the lives of children by providing pediatric specialty care, innovative research and outstanding teaching programs for medical professionals. Children up to the age of 18 are eligible for care and receive all services in a family-centered environment, regardless of the patients' ability to pay.

Vance reported to Emporia State a week before the game to take part in practice with his East teammates. It wasn't a vacation for any of the players as they practiced every morning, had film in the afternoon and another practice in the evening.

Then came the game as Vance was the starting center and helped the East to a quick lead as it scored 19 straight points in the game's first seven minutes. Vance, who is headed to Pittsburg State to play football this fall, teamed up with

fellow Pitt State signee in Rossville quarterback Tucker Horak.

"It was good to be back at center again and I thought we played pretty well, especially early," Vance said. "It was nice to get the win too because a lot of the West players were pretty cocky all week. To be able to score all those points early was really nice."

The West actually scored 20 unanswered points itself and took a 20-19 lead before the East answered with a touchdown right before halftime.

"The coaches really challenged us at halftime," Vance said. "They told us the only thing we were missing was effort and I think everyone of us came out ready to go in the second half."

The East certainly did that as it outscored the West 22-7 in the second half to earn its second straight Shrine Bowl win and three out of the last four.

The entire week was something Vance will cherish for a long time to come.

"To be honest, it was a pretty awesome experience," he said. "Whether it was meeting the kids, or getting to know new people or bonding with my new teammates. I really loved all of it."

With the completion of the game, Vance's high school career has officially come to an end and will report to Pittsburg State this week to begin his collegiate journey with the Gorillas.

Vance has actually been in Pittsburg since late May and has been participating in offseason workouts with his new teammates.

"I am really looking forward to playing at Pitt State," Vance said. "I have been working hard this summer and staying down

in Pittsburg and coming home on weekends. It is just a great opportunity for me and I can't wait to see what happens."

Cook happy to give back to hometown



Former Kansas State wide receiver and quarterback Kody Cook works with a camper in a footwork drill during the Kansas Gridiron Greats Football Camp on Saturday at Louisburg High School. Cook, an LHS graduate, came back to his hometown to run the camp along with former K-State players Tramaine Thompson, Morgan Burns and Chris Harper.

Area youth gathered on the Louisburg High School practice football field Saturday to learn the sport from a few former Kansas State football players who have played in some pretty big games.

One of those players competed in a few large games in Louisburg history as well.

LHS and Kansas State graduate Kody Cook returned home as the Kansas Gridiron Greats Football Camp made a stop in Louisburg. Former K-State football players Tramaine Thompson, Morgan Burns and Chris Harper joined Cook to help teach the young

players how to compete on the football field, and in life.

“It was a good time,” Cook said. “It was the first time I have been able to come back in a long time and being on the field really brought back a lot of memories. I got to talk to the high school kids about what is getting ready to happen this season and try to help them out in any way I can. Plus, seeing the little kids laugh and smile a lot – it was just a good time and it was great to give back.”

Athletes from kindergarten all the way up through high school had a chance to learn from the four K-State players. Each player conducted position specific drills such as passing and catching and also defensive drills.



Tramaine Thompson holds the bag as he teaches a camper how to run through contact.

Cook then had a chance to talk to the athletes and tell them his story of perseverance. His story of quarterbacking Louisburg to a state title in high school, not getting many big college offers and eventually landing in junior college.

It was during his time at Hutchinson Community College where he saw time as a wide receiver just so he could get on the field. Then during his final game at Hutch in the Salt City

Bowl, Cook was asked to come in and quarterback the Blue Dragons without taking any snaps at the position all season.

Cook came in and played like a veteran as he recorded six touchdowns in three quarters on his way to being named the game's MVP and K-State took notice. He earned a spot as a walk-on the next season and eventually made his way onto scholarship as one of the team's wide receivers.



Morgan Burns works with an older group of players on a defensive drill.

It was a bit of déjà vu for him during his senior season at K-State as he saw several snaps at quarterback for the Wildcats due to an injury and Cook eventually became just the third player in Big 12 history with 100 yards passing, rushing and receiving in the same season.

The story is one Cook loves to tell. Not to gloat on his own accomplishments, but to give kids hope that their dreams can come true.

"I just told them to push through adversity and to never give up in life," Cook said. "Just because you are from a small town doesn't mean you can't do something that you put your mind to. Everything is earned through hard work and dedication. I know it sounds cliché, but that is what it boils down to at the end of the day. I know there are plenty of guys

in the NFL right now that outwork people instead of necessarily being more talented.”

Following the completion of the camp, Cook also met with some members of the LHS football team and gave them some advice on how to prepare for the upcoming season and enjoy the ride.

“Hopefully these high school kids just cherish these moments,” Cook said. “I have played at K-State and done things in front of thousands of people, but every memory I have had of football, my favorite ones are playing here and under the Friday night lights.

“Winning a state championship with all those guys that you grew up with is just special. It is not to say those K-State memories don’t mean a lot, because they do, but the high school ones are the ones that stick with you.”

Saturday was the final day in what was a busy week for Cook. Along with Thompson, Harper and Burns, he conducted camps for six straight days that included stops in Wichita, Newton, Osborne, Topeka and Garden City.

“It has been a lot of fun,” Cook said. “It has been pretty crazy but it has been good to stop at different places and see how people do things. I just enjoy getting a chance to talk to the kids and let them know they can achieve whatever their dream is if they work hard for it.



LHS grad Kody Cook talks to

a group of current Wildcat football players and gives them some advice on their upcoming season.

Cook is looking to heed his own advice as he is still looking to accomplish his ultimate dream, which is to play in the NFL. Despite not getting invited to a team's minicamp, he is still working out in hopes of one day getting a shot to do what he loves.

Till then, Cook is hoping to earn a graduate assistant job with the K-State football program and possibly tryout for the Canadian Football League in March.

"One of the things I want to do is coach, so hopefully I can get that opportunity," Cook said. "At the same time, I still want to prove that I am good enough to play and maybe something works out up in the Canadian league. I am just going to work as hard as I can and see where that takes me."

Wildcat football finishes off busy month



Louisburg's Mason Koechner wraps up a Blue Valley Northwest defender during the Wildcats' scrimmage on June 29 in Louisburg. The Wildcats scrimmaged Blue Valley Southwest the

week before and just finished up a busy month of June.

It scrimmaged with Class 5A and 6A programs, traveled to Paola every Monday in June for 7-on-7 workouts and also held its team camp.

Add in the fact players hit the weight room several days a week and it was a busy month of June for the Louisburg High School football team. The Wildcats have put in a lot of work as they prepare for the 2016 season and try for a Frontier League title and a spot in the playoffs.

The Wildcats have taken the right steps to get there, and although Louisburg coach Kyle Littrell has liked what he has seen on the field, he is looking for even more from his team in the month of July.

“I like how our summer is going so far and what we have accomplished, however I think we have not reached our expectations in our conditioning portion of our workouts,” Littrell said. “Workouts get tougher in July and it’s going to be interesting to see who responds. We still have a lot of work to do.”

In in the final two weeks of June, Blue Valley Southwest and Blue Valley Northwest ventured to Louisburg to compete in a controlled scrimmage at the Wildcats’ practice field. Louisburg had a chance to see where it stood against bigger programs and it held its own.



Louisburg running back Thomas San Agustin spins away from a Blue Valley Northwest defender on June 29.

Littrell especially liked what he saw from his group against Blue Valley Northwest as he had more players in attendance.

“I thought the scrimmage with Northwest was the better scrimmage, probably because our whole offensive line was there and we were able to start the gelling process with that group,” he said.

Louisburg also participated in several 7-on-7 workouts throughout the month of June, and while those are geared to improving a team’s offense, Littrell thought those workouts really helped the Wildcat defense.

He is still looking to see improvement from his offense before the team hits the field for the first day of practice on Aug. 15.

“I thought we got better defensively at 7-on-7,” Littrell said. “We did some nice things offensively, but we have a ways to go throwing the ball and the only way to get better at that is by grabbing guys and throwing and catching on your own.”

The Wildcats appear to be one of the favorites in the Frontier

League this season as they return several starters on both sides of the ball. Senior lineman Dustyn Rizzo, who was an all-league first team player on defense, returns to lead the Wildcat line.

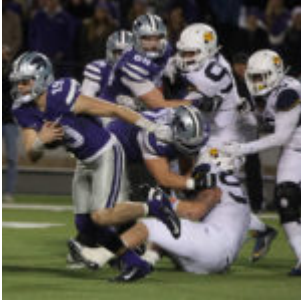
Fellow seniors Mason Koechner and T.J. Dover, who earned honorable mention, will also help anchor the line of scrimmage with junior Garrett Lowry.

Senior running backs Thomas San Agustin (second team offense last year) and Korbin Hankinson hope to take advantage of the experienced offensive line, while senior Grant Harding will step in to the quarterback spot after serving as the team's backup last season.

Despite having a number of spots already filled, there are still plenty of positions to be had and Littrell is looking forward to seeing how it shakes out.

"We are having some really nice battles and it is fun to watch these kids compete for something that they love and care about," he said. "We have battles right now at center, tight end, wide receiver, linebacker and defensive tackle. It will be fun to watch and evaluate these kids as we go along. Every year when we put on the pads, the separation usually takes place."

K-State's Cook to host football camp in Louisburg



Kody Cook served several different roles for the Kansas State football team last season, including a few games at quarterback. Cook, a Louisburg High School graduate, will join former K-State players Tramaine Thompson, Chris Harper and Morgan Burns and will host the Kansas Gridiron Greats Youth Football Camp on July 16 at the LHS football practice field.

Kody Cook spent most of his high school years on the Louisburg High School football practice field.

Cook used that opportunity to get better as a player and person. Then in his final year of high school all that hard work paid off as he led the Wildcats to their first state football championship in 2010.

That success catapulted him to the junior college ranks and he eventually earned a scholarship to play for Kansas State and legendary head coach Bill Snyder.

Six years later, Cook is returning to that same practice field where it all started.

Cook, along with former Kansas State players Chris Harper, Tramaine Thompson and Morgan Burns, will be in Louisburg on July 16 to conduct the Kansas Gridiron Greats Youth Football Camp.

"I really excited to get back home," Cook said. "I have been so busy that I haven't had a lot of time to make it back, but I am looking forward to giving back to the community that helped me out so much and working with the kids and not just

teach them about football, but about life as well.”

The camp, which will be held on the LHS practice field, will be held in two sessions. The cost for one session is \$50 or it is \$80 to attend both sessions. The first session will run from 9 a.m. to noon and the second session will go from 1 to 4 p.m.

All four former Wildcats will be on hand to teach young athletes from kindergarten all the way up through 12th grade to work on fundamentals on both sides of the ball. Those interested in the camp can visit www.kansasgridirongreats.com to download a registration form.

Cook quarterbacked Kansas State for part of his senior season in 2015 along with seeing time as a starting wide receiver. He became just the third player in Big 12 history with 100 yards passing, rushing and receiving in the same season. Cook was also named to the All-Big 12 second team this past season.

Burns finished his Wildcat career as was on the top kick returners in Kansas State history and finished the season as a first team All-American and broke numerous school and Big 12 records.

Thompson was a big target at wide receiver for Kansas State as he helped the Wildcats to a Big 12 championship in 2012. He is eighth in school history in all-purpose yards and was also an All-Big 12 player.

Harper transferred from the University of Oregon to Kansas State in 2010 and led the Wildcats in receptions in his final two years with the program to earn All-Big 12 second team honors.

The camp tour begins Monday in Wichita, followed by stops in Maize, Newton, Garden City, Osborne, Topeka and ends with Louisburg.

As for the camp itself, it will feature specific position training for quarterbacks, running backs receivers, tight ends and linemen along with some defensive work. Mixed in with all the football lingo, Cook is looking forward to working with the campers on more than just their game.

“We are definitely going to help them with the fundamentals, but I just want to let them know how there is more to life than just football,” Cook said. “Education is so important because football is going to end for everyone sometime, whether it is high school, college or in the pros. I just want to help mentor the young kids and tell them things I wish someone would have told me when I was their age.

“All these guys coming with me are good people and kids are going to learn a lot from them. I hope to see a lot of people out there.”

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."

Vance competes for Kansas in all-star game



Anders Vance (52) jumps out of his stance as he prepares to block a Missouri defender Thursday during the Greater Kansas City Football Coaches Association Kansas vs. Missouri All-Star Game at Blue Springs (Mo.) High School.

BLUE SPRINGS, Mo. – Anders Vance traded in his purple and white jersey of Louisburg for one of the red and white variety.

No, it wasn't a Pittsburg State one – at least not yet anyway.

Vance donned the Kansas all-star uniform for the Greater Kansas City Football Coaches Association Kansas vs. Missouri All-Star game on Thursday at Blue Springs (Mo.) High School. He wore his usual No. 52 as Vance took the field with Team Kansas in hopes of snapping a Missouri winning streak.

Kansas nearly stopped Missouri's winning ways, but came up

short in a 28-24 loss. Vance still enjoyed his team practicing and playing with his new teammates.

“I really had a good time,” Vance said. “I had a chance to see a lot of great players from around the metro and I got to meet some cool coaches. It was a lot of fun and I got to learn some new stuff.”

The game featured some of the best players from the Kansas City area and Vance saw a lot time on the offensive line. He played several snaps at right guard, while also seeing time on special teams for punts and extra points.



Anders Vance listens to the Kansas coaches during a timeout Thursday.

Kansas took a 15-14 lead at halftime and held a 24-21 advantage in the fourth quarter before Missouri scored a touchdown with five minutes left in the contest to all but seal the win for the sixth consecutive time.

“It’s always disappointing to lose, but it is a different feeling because you are wanting to beat another state instead of a school and there isn’t that family aspect there so it is a lot different,” Vance said.

“They moved me to guard the day before the game,” said Vance,

who usually plays center. “It was a little different for me, but I think I did alright.”

Vance spent the last two weeks before the game practicing with his Kansas teammates in the evenings at Mill Valley High School and had a chance to work with some different coaches.

He also saw several familiar faces as he teamed up with four other Frontier League players. Paola’s Nate Staats and Alex Wilson, along with Baldwin’s Jake and Joel Katzer, also participated in the game

The contest was a culmination of what was a great high school season for Vance. He earned a lot of recognition in the offseason as he was selected to the Class 4A all-state first team by the Kansas Football Coaches Association, Topeka Capital-Journal and Wichita Eagle. He was also an honorable mention selection to the all-metro team by the Kansas City Star.

Vance, who has signed to play football at Pittsburg State this fall, has one more high school game left to play. He will represent the East quad in the Kansas Shrine Bowl on July 30 at Emporia State University.



Louisburg High School

graduate Anders Vance
takes on a Missouri
lineman Thursday in
Blue Springs.

"I am excited for that one," he said. "It is going to be fun
and a little more intense I think."