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October 3, 2009

At Holy Cross, a Quarterback Proves He Is Hard to Ignore

By [PETE THAMEL](#)

WORCESTER, Mass. — Steve Specht likes to joke that each [N.F.L.](#) questionnaire that arrives at St. Xavier High School in Cincinnati is a reminder of an embarrassing yet alluring legacy.

One of Specht's former players, quarterback Dominic Randolph, has become the biggest star at the College of Holy Cross since Gordie Lockbaum's sensational [two-way play made him a Heisman Trophy candidate in 1987](#).

N.F.L. teams are interested in Randolph and are reaching out to Specht. The twist in this underdog story is that Randolph started just two games in high school because he played behind Rob Schoenhof, a cannon-armed quarterback who was considered the country's sixth-best college prospect.

While Schoenhof's career fizzled after he signed with [Ohio State](#) and then transferred to Delaware, Randolph scrapped his way onto the Holy Cross roster.

"This is hopefully going to be one of those stories where Dom goes on and becomes one of the small-college guys who does well in the N.F.L.," Specht said. "And everyone is going to wonder who the idiot was in high school that didn't start him at quarterback."

Specht laughed. "I'm going to be part of history, God willing, if that happens," he said.

Randolph, now a senior, has helped bring an identity to a Holy Cross football program that struggled after its last class of scholarship players graduated in 1992. The Crusaders had 10 losing seasons in 11 years until Coach Tom Gilmore arrived in 2004. The Crusaders are 3-0 heading into their game at Northeastern on Saturday and looking for the college's first Football Bowl Championship Subdivision playoff appearance since 1983. The on-field centerpiece of the revival is Randolph, who is as productive as his back story is unlikely.

“He could be playing at any Division I college in the country,” Gilmore said. “He can play at the next level, without a doubt. He has all the tools.”

Randolph ended up at Holy Cross only because he was attending a Harvard football camp and decided to come down the road to attend one at Holy Cross. He spoke to Gilmore without realizing he was the team’s coach.

“It was running late and I didn’t have many options,” Randolph said about his unromantic match with the college. “This was the biggest program that I could play at and it gave me the best academic opportunity, too.”

He has ascended from fifth string as a freshman to a starter that nearly every N.F.L team has come through Worcester to scout. Some, like the [Indianapolis Colts](#), have popped in twice.

Everything changed for Randolph through a marriage of good fortune and desperation. Heading into his sophomore year, Holy Cross had just one fullback and one tight end, so they switched to a no-huddle spread, lifting wrinkles from Urban Meyer’s Utah teams. Randolph, who is 6 feet 3 inches and 225 pounds, calls the offense a “quarterback’s dream.” He won the job and soon began a dominating stretch in which he won two Patriot League Offensive Player of the Year awards.

“I struggle to call Dom an overachiever,” Gilmore said. “He really had some talent that wasn’t exposed. Actually, he had a lot of talent that wasn’t exposed.”

Randolph’s life as a high school backup has shaped him. If coaches are coming in at 7 a.m. to watch film, he will ask if they can come in at 6:15 so he can watch more.

Even if Randolph never saw the field at Holy Cross, his on-campus legacy would be secure. The root of that is an 11-year old boy named Franky, who has been Randolph’s “little brother” in the local [Big Brothers Big Sisters program](#) for the past three years.

Randolph picks up Franky on Monday, his football off day, and will either take him to eat or bring him to campus to do homework. They have a game-day ritual known as “dabs,” fist-knocking when Randolph leaves the field to talk on the phone to coaches in the booth.

“He’s not only Franky’s big brother, but he’s his good friend,” said Jody Rodriguez, Franky’s mother. “They love spending time and sharing stories with one another. He’s like part of the family.”

Randolph and his former teammate Daryl Brown also intertwined the Crusader football

program with the local Big Brother program.

Melanie Perreault, the vice president for programs with [Big Brothers Big Sisters of America in Central Massachusetts](#), said the waiting list for big brothers was typically more than two years. But thanks to Brown's and Randolph's recruitment of more than 50 of their teammates, there is no longer any waiting. For their service, Brown and Randolph were awarded the organization's highest honor, which is known as the Deranian Fellowship Award.

"He's the kind of person you want representing your school," said the Holy Cross president, the Rev. Michael C. McFarland. "He's a good person who is a first-rate football player."

No task is too small; Randolph has enticed local companies to participate in Big Brothers, and he has stuffed a pillow atop his belly and dressed as Santa Claus for a children's Christmas party. When Perreault e-mailed him a thank you note, Randolph wrote back, "Santa says, 'You're welcome.' "

Lockbaum, who is a partner in an insurance company in Worcester called Sullivan Group, loves seeing the difference that Randolph has made at Holy Cross. The program used to compete regionally with the likes of Syracuse, Rutgers and [Boston College](#), but it has had some uneven years since the final scholarship class cycled through in 1992.

Athletic Director Dick Regan called the move a "painful transition," and said the university still loses more than \$1 million a year playing football. But under Gilmore the Crusaders have found an identity as a strong Patriot League team, thanks in part to football-direct fund-raising efforts, which have boosted the recruiting budget by 60 percent.

Lockbaum remains an ardent supporter, even though his attendance has waned because he typically spends his Saturdays watching [his son Gordie, a sophomore cornerback at Amherst College](#). The elder Lockbaum said the Worcester community had rallied around the revived program.

"If they make the playoffs, I'll be making a road trip," he said. "I'll guarantee you that."

As Randolph's improbable story has unfolded, only one person could say that he saw it coming. That would be Randolph's father, Charlie, who sat by himself in the stands at St. Xavier games and steamed at his son's lack of playing time at quarterback. "I was the classic high school helicopter dad," he said without prompting. "I was obnoxious. I was so convinced that he could play for any college in the country."

It turns out that Charlie Randolph was right — something Specht is reminded of every time a piece of mail with an N.F.L. logo shows up at St. Xavier.

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