

sports

The rise of James Prater Jr. to defensive stardom

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For James Prater Jr., football has seemingly always been a huge part of his life. He has felt a connection to the game ever since he was a child. It was during his childhood, however, where that connection would be cemented forever in an ironic twist of fate.

Like many other people, Prater had a childhood fear growing up. While most people's fears relate to the dark or monsters, his fear was just a touch different.

Prater was afraid of the very ground that he plays on every weekend. Prater was terrified of grass.

"Before I started playing football, I was afraid of grass when I was younger," Prater said. "My parents used to try and sit me in the grass and I would cry and scream and hold my legs up away from it."

Take one look at the hulking 6-foot, 244-pound defensive end, and you would never begin to imagine that he would have had such a fear as a child.

This fear, however, would soon turn into fate as Prater eventually found his way to a football field because of it.

"One day when I was about five years old, I just decided to run through our grass," Prater said. "It was crazy. The very next week my dad took me to football practice and I started playing football. It just felt right and where I was meant to be."

Ever since that one moment in his life, football became Prater's world. He would watch football whenever he could, trying to be just like the professional players he saw on television.

"I was always watching football and always wanted to be in that position to make plays and be famous and cool," Prater said. "It was like any little kid who loves a sport or is doing well in the sport that wanted that dream. I've always wanted to be the best football player on the field."

While Prater grew up enjoying playing at the elementary and middle school level, it couldn't compare to when he made the jump to high school, he said.

Prater played linebacker during his time at Columbus St. Francis DeSales, a private Catholic high school near his hometown of Columbus.

The transition into the more serious football environment took some time to adjust to but only strengthened his love for the game, he said.

"It was definitely a different experience but that's where my love for football grew so big," Prater said. "It was so intense and serious. Our football tradition at DeSales was amazing. Football was everything for the school. It was just a cool experience."

There was one particular game during his time at DeSales that stuck out in his mind, helping to push him towards playing at the collegiate level, he said.

"We were facing Chillicothe and they had a lot of good players," Prater said. "They were supposed to beat us but we won, and I had a really good game. It let me bring out a lot of grit and toughness in myself and helped me establish that I'm still a good football player."

It was this game that had next lead Prater to the Ashland Eagles.

The feeling of being able to play the best competition just like in high school is what pushed Prater towards playing for AU, he said.

"Coming here was great because we are the top D2 football team in Ohio so it's not missing a beat playing the best competition," Prater said. "It's just amazing what we do here. I love the competitive nature."

He had already established a relationship with the coaches of the football team and felt welcome at AU, he said.

"Ashland was showing me the most love," Prater said. "The communication that the coaches gave me during recruiting was great. They would call or text me every week and helped develop our relationship. It was just a good fit."

Even though Prater was a walk on for Ashland, his time at AU would not be all smooth sailing. He struggled his freshman year transitioning to college and trying to adapt from being a linebacker to playing as a defensive tackle.

"My freshman year, I was kind of depressed; especially after the fall semester with no football," Prater said. "It was a trying time because I would get super down on myself. I wanted to lose a lot of weight and was super caught up in life with school work. I couldn't really do things with my friends because I was always so busy. I talked with my parents and a counselor and that helped a lot."

Besides those outlets for help, Prater also had another person who he could talk to about his personal struggles. That person was interior defensive line coach John Saccomen.

"He really took me under his wing," Prater said. "That was something I needed; especially my freshman year. He just talked to me about life a lot of times before and really cared. It's something I definitely appreciate."

Besides helping with off the field struggles, Saccomen also helped Prater on the field with developing his footwork and hands, he said.

"Coach loves his footwork," Prater said. "He prides himself in being a technician with footwork. A lot of my footwork and how I use my hands come from my freshman and sophomore year because of him."

Prater only played in four late-season games his freshman year before becoming a regular member of the defensive line rotation during his sophomore season.

It was at this point that he felt like he began building trust with his teammates, and that he saw teammates rely on him to make plays even as a backup, he said.

"I saw a lot of my teammates start to rely on me," Prater said. "I was a backup, but I was a backup that was going to play. I wanted that responsibility, but it also put a lot of trust between me and my teammates. My teammates wanted me, and they wanted me to be there. They were pushing me as well as me pushing them. It just felt good to be able to be a part of something great."

Prater's meteoric rise would build to a climax his junior year when he switched positions yet again, this time from defensive tackle to defensive end.

It was during this switch where he had one of the most dominant seasons as a defensive lineman in Ashland history.

Over the 2017 season, Prater set a

new school record with 23 1/2 tackles for loss while also tying the program mark for single-game sacks with 3 1/2. He would end up finishing the season with 63 tackles, 10 sacks, an interception, a fumble recovery and a forced fumble.

Prater was also named to the second-team Division II Conference Commissioners Association (D2CCA) All-Super Region 4 and the All-Great Lakes Intercollegiate Athletic Conference first team during that time.

"It sounds cliché, but I just put in the work and listened to my coaches," Prater said. "I had a lot more space to work and could use my abilities more."

He currently comes into the 2018 season with a list of various accomplishments. He is fourth on the all-time tackles-for-loss list in Ashland history and was also named the 'Street & Smith' preseason NCAA Division II All-American and Lindy's first-team preseason All-Division II team.

The game is his niche in life, he said.

"Football is my life," Prater said. "It keeps me going and drives me. It's my niche. I'm a football player. That's why I'm here. I feel like God has put a lot of passion in me for the game."

Prater still watches football whenever he can and tries to pattern his game after Chicago Bears defensive end Khalil Mack, he said.

"I really like Khalil Mack because he's not the tallest guy like me," Prater said. "He's short, stout, and strong and a lot of moves I do aspire from him. He also likes to compete and dominate the game and that's something I love to do as well."

Ashland Eagles head coach Lee Owens said that Prater stands out from other defensive players.

"The great defensive players are wired a little differently," Owens said. "You can see that with James."

He is an extremely unique player, he said.

"He's a unique type of athlete on a defensive line," Owens said. "He's not long but he's so explosive and powerful and quick that he just creates issues for offenses. He's got that unique blend of power and speed and has got a whole lot of tools in his tool box. It makes him a pretty good player for us."

Eagles defensive coordinator Tim Rose agrees that Prater is such a dynamic player, he said.

"He's a dynamic player for us," Rose said. "He's fast, explosive, and strong and has got pretty good instinct for us to make plays. He's just a guy that we count on a lot."

Prater is inspired by his parents each day and credits a lot of his success to them, he said.

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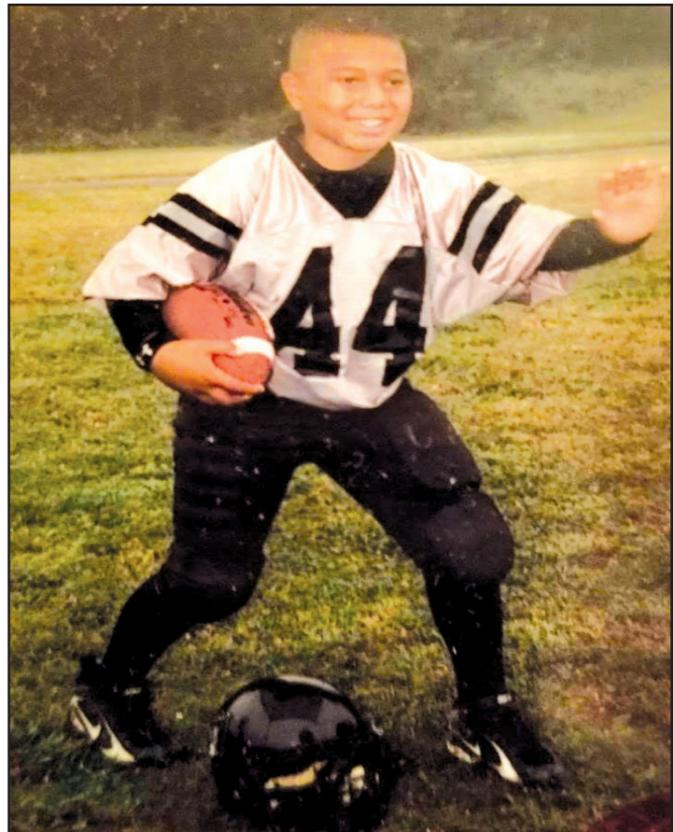


PHOTO SUBMITTED BY JAMES PRATER JR.

James Prater Jr. playing little league football in 2006.