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Miramonte and UCLA alum Drew Bennett reflects on time in NFL

By Jon Kingdon



Drew Bennett scores a touchdown against the Raiders.

There is no greater annual sporting event that captures the attention of the country than Super Bowl Sunday. In the buildup to the game, there is as much analysis done as there is for a presidential election.

For Drew Bennett, following his graduation from Miramonte and UCLA, the term long shot would not have been misapplied prior to his eight-year career as a wide receiver for six years with the Tennessee Titans and two years with the St. Louis Rams that could clearly be called successful, having caught 307 passes and 28 touchdowns.

Bennett was a multi-sport athlete at Miramonte prior to the beginning of year-round club sport teams. "Back then you would play one sport after the other," Bennett said. "There would be about a week break between the football, basketball and baseball seasons and over the summer, you played all the sports."

It was more than sports for Bennett growing up in Orinda. "There is something very unique about Lamorinda that promotes lifetime connections," Bennett said. "People are always surprised at how many friends I keep in contact with that go back as far as elementary school."

As a quarterback his senior year, Bennett was a first-team All-League and second-team All-Bay Area honors, averaged 17 points/game in basketball and batted .430, earning first-team All-League honors in baseball.

"I remained close to my basketball coach Tom Blackwood until he passed away and I still talk with my football coach Floyd Burnsed (now at Acalanes) on a regular basis," Bennett said. "Both were pillars of the Miramonte sports world for decades."

Burnsed still remembers Bennett's play in the 1995 NCS playoffs: "We played Vintage High School in Napa stadium and late in the game, Drew made a great pass down the field and on the 10-yard line, he ran a bootleg play for a touchdown to win the game. I believe he may have been the best athlete that ever came out of Miramonte."

Yet Bennett was more than just an athlete to Burnsed. "As a person, Drew was a great kid," Burnsed said. "He was very well liked and a hard worker that did whatever it took to be successful. He had all the good things that you wanted in a player and a young man."

Bennett was heavily recruited by Princeton (his mother Barbara's first choice), but on his recruiting trip it was 9 degrees and Bennett didn't get along with his host. His next visit was to UCLA where it was 77 degrees and sunny. He then told his mother, "I'm sorry, Mom. I'm not going to Princeton."

As a walk-on at UCLA in 1996, Bennett soon learned that he was no longer playing for Miramonte but things soon broke his way. "When I got to UCLA, I was the seventh quarterback on the depth chart," Bennett said. "We then had QB's quit, fail physicals and transfer and I became the 3rd string, dressing for all of the games, and was the backup QB to Cade McNown after another player's injury."

After being awarded his scholarship in 1997, UCLA utilized Bennett's athleticism as a quarterback and a receiver and he was the starting quarterback for three of the first four games in 1999. "I was not playing as well as I had been and was then demoted and then moved to wide receiver my senior year," Bennett said.

After graduating with a degree in political science, Bennett was anticipating going to law school. "My dad, Richard, is an attorney and when I was asked my career choice at UCLA, I suggested that I would be an attorney so they directed me to political science," Bennett said.

With such limited playing time, Bennett finished his college career having completed 56 out of 102 passes for 773 yards with 7 touchdowns, 4 interceptions and 8 receptions for 167 yards, numbers that did not bring

NFL teams running in his direction. "At my pro day, when I was asked for my medical records by the NFL teams, I told them I didn't have any because I didn't play very much so there was no damage yet," Bennett said.

After an excellent workout that day, the 6'5" Bennett was signed to a free agent contract with the Tennessee Titans, a team that was on the cusp of being a top team in the NFL.

At Tennessee, Bennett was once again starting at the bottom, actually below the bottom. "When I walked into the receivers meeting room, there was an X and Z (WR positions) on the board with six names under each and there was a line underneath those names and my name was underneath that line in the middle.

When I asked Coach (Steve) Walters why I was below that line, he said that they were considering bringing in another defensive back for this camp and if we do, we're going to cut you."

Instead of flying to Nashville, Bennett had driven straight to Tennessee and used that to plead his case to Walters. "I said, Coach, I just drove here from Los Angeles, can you at least let me get a pair of shorts and let me get sweaty once and not have to tuck my tail between my legs and have to drive back home?" Bennett asked. "I was given the number 19 when receivers had to wear numbers in the '80s and my first thought was 'This isn't good.'"

And yet, with luck and circumstances, Bennett made the team as their seventh wide receiver. "My roommate at training camp was Chris Sanders, the team's fourth string quarterback, and he had less of a chance to make the team than I did," Bennett said. "We became friends and he told me, 'If we ever get into a game together, I don't care what happens, I'm going to throw you every ball.' Chris was true to his word and threw me every single ball and I caught about eight passes in the game."

In the NFL, there's an expression, "The more you can do," which can be a key in making the team. Prior to a preseason game, a drafted rookie receiver, Eddie Berlin, said he would not return punts in that game. "The special teams coach then asked me if I could return punts and even though I had never returned a punt in my life, I told him of course, and I was the second team punt returner for that game and after that, I was moved ahead of Berlin on the depth charts," Bennett said.

On cutdown day, the team was required to let the league and the players know who was being released. Bennett had not been cut at that point and called his mother who said how sorry she was that he had been cut, saying how she had seen his name on the cut list on the Titans website.

Once again, fate was on Bennett's side. Floyd Reese, the team's general manager explained to Drew how they almost cut him. "Prior to my being cut, Floyd took a call from the Washington Redskins who said they were going to sign me if the Titans were going to cut me," Bennett said. "Floyd then changed his mind and the Titans kept me on the active roster."

Coach Sanders once again did not build up Bennett's confidence. "He told me that I shouldn't buy a car because I would probably be the first player they would cut if they needed a roster spot," Bennett said.

In Bennett's first three seasons with the Titans, he caught 24, 33 and 32 passes and then had a breakout year in 2004 catching 80 passes for 1,247 yards and 15 touchdowns though the team's record was 5-11. "We had several injuries that year and the team wasn't very good," Bennett said. "We were always trailing and I really clicked with our new quarterback, Billy Volek, and he was passing to me a dozen times a game so it was really fun despite our record."

After six seasons with the Titans, Bennett signed a free agent contract with the St. Louis Rams and in his two years there, the team had a combined 5 and 27 record, contributing to Bennett's decision to retire.

"It was life changing to get my second contract with the Rams but it was not the way that I had wanted to finish my career," Bennett said "At that point, I had lost some of my love for football by that experience, and along with some knee injuries, I decided it was time to move on and see what was next in my life."

Still, when the playoffs begin each year, Bennett does not look away. "When I watch the playoff games each year, it's the only time I ever miss football," Bennett said. "When we prepared to play those games, there was something so special in the locker room, in the buses, on the flights and in the crowd for playoff football knowing there was a chance to play in the Super Bowl."

Playing in the AFC championship game in Oakland against the Raiders was all the more special for Bennett. "I purchased 67 tickets for friends and family for that game and that didn't count my parents who were sitting in a box," Bennett said. "I just remember how intense and exciting everything was."

It was a close game with Oakland ahead 27-24 before the Raiders scored two late touchdowns to win the game 41-24.

"I caught three passes that day and beat Charles Woodson for a touchdown which is something I will always remember and to have all of my family and friends at the game was really awesome," Bennett said.

Since retiring in February 2009, Bennett and his wife, Heather, moved to New York City for a year as he commuted three days a week to Bristol, Conn., to do a morning show on ESPN2. "It was the first time in my

life that I had no meetings to get to, no weight or strength to maintain, and I was able to just relax and do some TV work and explore New York City," Bennett said.

After Heather got pregnant, the Bennetts moved back to the Bay Area. "I coached

at Miramonte for four years under Coach Jack Schram and I really enjoyed that. We had some good teams and won a Division II NCS playoff title," Bennett said. "I was then offered a job with a financial firm, Union Bank of Switzerland, that I was already a client of, eight years ago and I'm still with them."

Football is still a family game for the Bennetts. "Our two daughters (Dylan and Blaine) are now 10 and 7 and both are athletes. Our oldest daughter is playing on an all-girls flag football team in an all-boys league and their record is 2-2 and we're looking forward to the high schools beginning flag football teams for girls."



Drew Bennett after beating Charles Woodson for a touchdown. Photos provided

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[back](#)

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