

# Miramonte and UCLA alum Drew Bennett reflects on time in NFL

... continued from Page C1

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."

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