

MCFL player projected to be selected in NFL Draft

Rags-to-Riches Story Continues for Kings Comets's Mardy Gilyard

When the NFL Draft kicks off Thursday night, MCFL fans, players, and coaches will have more than the usual interest in which players their favorite teams add. That's because one of their own, University of Cincinnati All-American receiver and former Kings Comets defensive back Mardy Gilyard is projected to be drafted Friday, in the second or third round of the NFL draft.

Gilyard played the first three games of the 2007 season with the Comets before returning to UC as part of a rags-to-riches story that saw him go from living out of his car to this weekend's draft.

After a season as a defensive back in 2005, his freshman year at UC, Gilyard's career was nearly derailed.

"I was ruled academically ineligible and I had to withdraw from school," Gilyard said. "I was pre-enrolled in school in some classes. When I

got my scholarship taken, since I was pre-enrolled I got stuck with the bill."

Over the next year, Gilyard worked as many as four jobs at a time while living out of his car, all in an effort to pay back his bill and return to the Bearcats. It was during this time that his friendship with Farrah Rogers, who he had met through the UC football program, among other players brought him to the Comets.

"At first I wasn't allowed around the team and I just knew a couple guys who played for the Comets," Gilyard said. "I came to a few practices and I worked out and before I knew it, Carlos (Chambers, the Comets head coach at the time) asked if I wanted to play."

Chambers, who now coaches the Midwest Panthers of the Heartland Football League, knew Gilyard's time with the Comets would be limited, but also knew how important it was for him to get back on the field.

"He was in dire straits and football was his outlet," Chambers said.

Gilyard worked out with the Comets throughout their off-season mini-camp, and immediately made his impact for the team in their first game that season against the Monroe County Sting, June 23. The first time he touched the ball, Gilyard ran back a punt 67 yards for the Comets only touchdown in a 26-6 loss. Gilyard finished the game with a team-record 143 yards on three punt returns, two kick returns for 55 yards, and an interception.

A mention of Gilyard's performance in a brief summary about the game in the Cincinnati Enquirer brought up a new set of obstacles, however.

Daryl Moore, a receiver for the Comets and the team's president at the time, got an e-mail from the UC athletic department the week after that game.

"I had to fill out some paperwork for UC," Moore said. "There was a whole questionnaire to try to show I didn't pay him. Did he get paid to play, get any incentives, how did we travel. It was mostly about money."

Gilyard was close to being reinstated in school, but remained with the team despite the wishes of the UC coaching staff.

"They had an idea of what kind of athlete I was, but after that return for a touchdown, they said 'what are you doing?'," Gilyard said. "I walk a thin line, but I know the rules."

Since no one on the Comets is paid to play or given any other incentives, Gilyard was within NCAA regulations in staying with the team for two more games.

A 53-yard interception return in his second game set up the Comets only touchdown in a 7-6 win at the Fort Wayne Flyers the next week.

Gilyard, the future All-American receiver, finally got his wish to play offense in his final game with the Comets, July 7 at the Columbus Fire, although he caught just one pass for three yards and was tackled for a loss on his only rushing attempt.

"When he came to us, he said he played defensive back," Chambers said. "We did not have a clue

what kind of potential he had as a receiver, but we had a need in our secondary. We kept our best athletes on defense.”

“I’m kicking myself every day,” Chambers later added.

Gilyard says Chambers still helped him develop as a player, particularly by letting him help run the defense along with Dontai Fikes while he was with the team.

“We made most of the calls,” Gilyard said. “That was a blessing, having guys listen to what you have to say. They were like, ‘What do you want to run? What coverage should we be in?’”

“I was a leader before that coming in, but it was knowing I could be a leader of men.”

Gilyard returned to UC after the Columbus Fire game and made an impact with the Bearcats just as quickly as he had with the Comets, making highlights around the country with his blocked punt against Oregon State in a nationally televised Thursday night game Sept. 6.

“It was exciting to see someone you’ve been coaching and you see him on ESPN,” said Chambers. “It was kind of like watching a family member be successful. It was a proud moment and a proud moment to be a Comet.”

The success that followed for Gilyard, leading the Bearcats to back-to-back Big East championships, was no surprise to those who were with him in his days with the Comets.

“You could see what his work ethic was like that with the Comets,” said Moore. “Carlos had two-a-days and he always worked hard and stayed after practice. He just has a real strong work ethic. I thought he had talent and I told him he should go back to school.”

“I’m not surprised at all,” said Chambers. “You could see if he went back to school something special was going to happen. If he got back to UC, he was going to be a star.”

And this weekend, Gilyard appears set to not only be the first Comet to be drafted into the NFL, but proof of the power of perseverance, according to Chambers.

“We played a major part in his life and he played a major part in our life,” Chambers said. “He showed if you can keep pushing and never give up, you can be successful in life if you don’t quit and you believe.”