


# Meet Deon Yelder, the Southern High 'go-getter' who wen from WKU walk-on to Super Bowl TE

**Hayes Gardner, Louisville Courier Journal** Published 8:09 a.m. ET Feb. 1, 2020

There was no fanfare when a tall, thin basketball player named Deon Yelder came out for the Southern High football team as a junior in the fall of 20 There were no hubbub when his Trojans went 1-10 his senior year, nor was there any pageantry when he quietly walked on at Western Kentucky an then — for four seasons — accumulated zero offensive statistics.

But on Sunday, there will be a touch of attention on Yelder when the Kansas City Chiefs tight end takes the field in the Super Bowl in front of an estim 100 million viewers.

Out of high school, Yelder received no Division I offers. Even after a breakout senior season at WKU, he was not selected in the 2018 NFL draft. But Sunday — in what will assuredly be the most watched American television event of 2020 — he'll suit up for the AFC Champions in a game full of grandeur.

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"Right now, I'm getting chills just talking about it," Southern assistant coach Tim Blythe said on Friday. "It makes you proud, and I told him that today, said, 'I'm so proud of you.'"

Yelder was a standout basketball player for the Trojans when he went out for the football team. He was initially placed at quarterback before being m to wide receiver, as well as safety. With big frame and athleticism, he excelled.

"He had hands like Spider-Man," recalled assistant Koby Clark, who has served as Yelder's "coach/mentor/uncle" since his high school days.

Yelder got the attention of WKU's then-offensive coordinator, Jeff Brohm, who offered him a chance to walk on with the Hilltoppers. Yelder's first year redshirted. His second, he didn't see the field. His third, he played a few games on special teams. His fourth, he blocked a crucial PAT, but had no receptions.

So, in the spring of 2017, he still had no scholarship; he was even working shifts at a local grocery store (https://sports.yahoo.com/meet-nfl-tight-end-prospect-whose-dream-nearly-crushed-didnt-ride-164028503.html).

Then came his fifth year.

**More Topper football:** WKU's Tyson Helton named Conference USA Coach of the Year (https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/football/2019/12/11/wku-football-tyson-helton-named-conference-usa-coach-year/4403270002/)

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He racked up 52 catches for 688 yards, and led the team with 7 receiving touchdowns, while also adding a rushing score and a couple of 2-point conversions. He finished third and fourth, respectively, in the nation for yards and touchdowns among tight ends.

Suddenly, he was a pro prospect.

He went undrafted in the 2018 NFL draft, but was quickly signed by the New Orleans Saints with a $90,000 bonus. After being cut, he signed with th Chiefs, and he made his first NFL catch earlier this season. He's Kansas City's third-string tight end, earning a salary of $570,000, and on Sunday, is likely to become the first Southern High graduate to play in the Super Bowl since the famed Phil Simms, who was named Super Bowl MVP in 1987.

To understand how Yelder went from Southern to the Super Bowl, one must understand Yelder. His former coaches tell it best.

"His drive," Blythe explained. "If you were to tell him that he wasn't going to be able to do it, he would do it just to spite you."

Like when he began playing both ways during his prep football days — not only did he embrace his role in the secondary, he stayed late after practic become the best at it.

Said Clark: "He always had a drive. Deon has always been a strong, strong, strong-headed kid."

Shedrick Jones, the Southern head basketball coach, recalls a player who, even when outnumbered, would still always come up with offensive rebou

Or, when told he couldn't guard an opponent's point guard in the backcourt, would make it a point to lock the speedy player up.

**Read this:** Super Bowl hooky may be common on Monday. Here's what to expect from Louisville's workers (https://www.courier-journal.com/story/money/companies/2020/01/31/super-bowl-hooky-monday-after-game-may-impact-louisville/4614025002/)

"He's kind of hard-headed. In a good way," Jones said.

When Southern would get behind by 20 points in the fourth quarter, Jones remembers Yelder leading comebacks.

"As long as I've known him, Deon has never been a person that thought he couldn't do something. He's always been a go-getter," Jones said.

At WKU, go-getting meant changing his body. He morphed from a lanky receiver to a strong tight end. He's now listed at 6-foot-4, 255 pounds.

"I guess it's just a need to succeed for himself," Blythe said.

As he's progressed on his football journey, Yelder has dealt with tragedy, including the death of a few family members while he was in college.

Then, tragically, one of his best friends from high school, Carlos Catalan, was killed in a Louisville shooting in January 2019.

Catalan played football and basketball with Yelder, and the two were incredibly close. Yelder's Twitter bio includes the hashtag, #LongLiveLos, which also tweeted following a Chiefs' playoff win this year.

Clark keeps in close touch with Yelder, and he said the loss of such a close friend hurt Yelder. Catalan was killed just three days after Yelder won his ever playoff game with the Chiefs and a few days before the AFC Championship game.

"He was upset," Clark said. "You know how you go through life and you always have somebody that you can depend on? That was his brother that h can depend on."

Said Jones: "It was tough on him."

Catlan's death was an unequivocal tragedy, and one that Yelder has had to live with in the year since.



**Former Southern standout Deon Yelder (right) will play in the Super Bowl on Sunday. He posed with friends Deandre Means (left) and the late Carlos Catalan (middle) during their high school days.** *(Photo: Photo courtesy of Koby Clark)*

Yelder stays in close contact with his former coaches; he speaks with Clark all the time and sees Jones whe he's back in Louisville. Jones said that his sons admire Yelder, and the now-NFL player comes over often en that Jones's wife knows to prepare a big meal for the tight end.

"I'm like a proud dad," Jones said. "He deserves it. He works his butt off."

Yelder is likely to become the third Hilltopper to appear in the Super Bowl, following Rod Smart in 2004 and Higbee last year, and there will certainly be a surprising amount of Chiefs' support in both Bowling Green an Louisville.

"There are a lot of Chiefs fans at Southern High School," Blythe said.

**Read this:** Angel McCoughtry's presence felt everywhere in her return with USA national team (https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/louisville/2020/01/31/louisville-basketball-team-angel-mccoughtrys-returns-team-usa/2854155001/)

Yelder has seen limited action this season but did catch three passes for 50 yards during the regular season added an 11-yard grab in the AFC title game.

His former coaches make sure to tune into his games, and Blythe can't help but point out the former Trojan on the field: "I tell all my friends, 'Hey the Deon.'"

He'll have a chance to brag on him once again during Sunday's spectacle as the tall, thin basketball player, who received no Division I offers and we undrafted, takes the field as a bulky NFL player with over 100 million watching.

*Hayes Gardner can be reached at hgardner@gannett.com (mailto:hgardner@gannett.com); _(mailto:CTeagueRob@gannett.com)Twitter: @HayesGardner (http://twitter.com/hayesgardner); Support strong local journalism by subscribing today: courier-journal.com/subscribe (https://offers.courier-journal.com/specialoffer/).*

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