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FOOTBALL

WKU's next George Fant? Hilltopper hooper Carson Williams an NFL hopeful

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Carson Williams left the field dejected the last time he played football. His team had been defeated in the second round of the playoffs, he still remembers, in a game in Louisville. The loss ended their season, and he recalls teammates crying and being disappointed himself.

“It’s funny to talk about because eighth-grade football seems like, I guess, unimportant, but I was definitely upset because that meant everything at the time,” Williams, now an NFL hopeful, said of the last time that he put on a football helmet. “I just remember thinking, ‘Well, I start basketball on Monday.’”

He returned to playing basketball that Monday, and never stopped. To focus on hoops, he gave up football, and went on to have a tremendous career, winning Kentucky Mr. Basketball in 2016 and scoring 2,967 career varsity points at Owen County. He then played for Northern Kentucky and Western Kentucky, starting 117 career games over five years.

Williams hoped to play in the NCAA Tournament this season, but as WKU fell in overtime of the Conference USA championship to North Texas on March 13, effectively ending their chances of making the tournament, he knew what his next move was.

The Owenton, Ky., native would not join his teammates in the NIT, though. Instead, the 6-foot-5, 240-pound athlete would immediately begin preparing for WKU football’s pro day, attempting to showcase himself to NFL scouts as a prospect.

In a congruent path as former Hilltopper hooper and now-NFL lineman George Fant, Williams hopes to land a career as a professional football player. His first step in that direction will be working out Thursday in front of scouts, alongside WKU football players.

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The last time Williams played football was the fall of 2011, in that middle school playoff loss to the Christian Academy of Louisville. Back then, he primarily played running back — but also some quarterback, and tight end, and receiver, and also defensive end and middle linebacker, he recalled.

He's similarly open to playing any position at the NFL level, but is primarily training to be a tight end, the position most naturally suited to his big, athletic body type.

Williams is a burly, physical basketball player, and over the past nine years, he's often been likened to an NFL tight end.

"I don't know how many times I heard an analyst say that this year," Williams said.

Before high school, Williams wanted to focus on either football or basketball, and said it was a "flip of the coin." He could've just as easily picked football. But he chose basketball, much to the delight of the Owen County basketball program, which went 55-10 over his final two years, but to the chagrin of the football program.

Williams recalls the football coach, Adam Fowler, wanting him to come out on the gridiron.

"Coach Fowler was drooling over him," Owen County athletic director TJ Wesselman said with a laugh.

Wesselman remembers refereeing Williams when he played in a second-grade basketball league, and he's long been impressed with Williams' work ethic and rare athletic ability. Wesselman became the football coach when Williams was a high school senior, and the idea of Williams wearing pads crossed his mind.

“Was I tempted? Oh my gosh, yes, he could’ve been a gamechanger on both sides of the ball,” Wesselman said. “But I didn’t wanna pressure him.”

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The athletic director supported Williams’ basketball aspirations, and as an assistant basketball coach, was well aware of Williams’ hardwood ability. Williams broke all sorts of weight lifting records in high school, and Wesselman said that Williams was so strong, officials missed foul calls against him more than any athlete he’s seen.

“Because he would get hit, and if another kid got hit the same way, it would knock him to the ground,” Wesselman said. “But if Carson got hit, he would still finish through contact and dunk on people ... He was so able to overpower people.”

He was such a force on the court that Wesselman, even back then, would josh with him about an NFL career and becoming his agent.

“Carson, you’re gonna go to college, you’re gonna play basketball and then after your basketball career is over in college, you’re gonna get drafted like Antonio Gates and play in the NFL,” Wesselman recalls saying.

It was just a joke, until it wasn’t. Early in Williams' college career, the idea of trying to pivot to pro football was in the back of his mind. Last year, when he was at home at the pandemic's outset, he had time to think more about the prospect of pro football, and he lifted more aggressively than usual.

“Numbers went way up,” Williams said, noting he added 15 pounds of muscle and that his bench max improved from 315 to 350.

He caught some passes from his brother, Sawyer, a former college basketball player, in the fall and briefly toyed with the idea of trying to play football for WKU, but decided to focus on basketball.

Perhaps the biggest motivator for Williams to pursue the uncommon idea of a pro football career is the precedent: many successful NFL players, like great tight ends Gates and Jimmy Graham, were college basketball players.

WKU has its own success story, too. Basketball player Fant decided to pursue the NFL and signed as an undrafted free agent with the Seattle Seahawks in 2016. He became a contributor and signed a \$30 million contract in March 2020.

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A month before signing that contract, Fant was back home in Bowling Green when he and Williams, who were just acquaintances, wound up having a conversation in the weight room.

“He said, ‘You gonna do this football thing, or what?’ and that was really weird to me,” Williams said, “because that was something that at the time I had been thinking heavily about, wondering whether to pursue it or not, but I hadn’t told anyone about it.”

That pushed Williams even more to football, and he knew if WKU did not make the NCAA Tournament, he’d immediately pursue football.

Williams said his basketball coach, Rick Stansbury, and his teammates were supportive of his decision to pursue football rather than play with the team in the NIT, and Williams sat alone on his couch as he watched the Hilltoppers advance to the tournament’s quarterfinals. It made for a bit of an out-of-body experience.

“It sounds weird, but I was looking for myself out there for a second,” he said.

Williams said that if football doesn’t work, perhaps he’d seek overseas basketball opportunities. But since mid-March, he’s been on a crash course with D1 Training in Bowling Green, preparing for football drills — like the 40-yard dash and vertical jump — in an effort to impress NFL scouts and hope to be signed as an undrafted free agent.

It’s a tall task. Williams has not donned football pads since playing running back for his middle school team, and he’s not even sure what size helmet he would wear — “Probably pretty big,” he guessed — but he’s hopeful he can carve out a career in the sport he hasn’t played in nearly a decade.

Wesselman said that he's never seen an athlete as driven as Williams and that he expects the former basketball player and potential football player to surprise some pro teams.

"If he makes this transition to the NFL and there's something he's not good at, it won't be long until he's good at it," Wesselman said.

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