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# Southern Football's Rise Can Be Seen in Rock Hill, S.C.

A city of 70,000 produces an outsize share of top players, and an outsize share of dreams for the area's youth.

By MARC TRACY NOV. 10, 2016

ROCK HILL, S.C. — Every Monday, the local newspaper reports how the graduates of this city's three high schools who now play college football fared over the previous weekend.

This week, it noted that Northwestern High's Mason Rudolph, Oklahoma State's quarterback and a potential first-round N.F.L. draft pick, threw five touchdown passes in a win over Kansas State. It reported that the former South Pointe High star Cory Neely led Marshall in tackles, with 11, in a loss to Old Dominion. And it reported a down game for Rock Hill High's Deshaun McFadden, who was without a catch for North Carolina A&T for the first time this season, though the Aggies remained undefeated with a win over South Carolina State.

Beyond sating the demands of readers in the place that calls itself Football City, U.S.A., the weekly roundup reminds the current players at Northwestern, South Pointe and Rock Hill of what is possible. Some of the athletes they grew up watching and reading about, these young players know, have gone on to play beyond college.

"Everyone wants to be the next Jadeveon Clowney, Stephon — I can go through the whole list of people from Rock Hill who went to the N.F.L.," said Eli Adams, a junior defensive end at South Pointe, referring to Clowney, the league's No. 1 pick in 2014, and Buffalo Bills cornerback Stephon Gilmore.

“Everyone’s working to grab their dreams,” Adams added, “cause in this town, everyone knows you can.”

San Pedro de Macorís, in the Dominican Republic, is famous for producing Major League Baseball players, just as New York City once set the bar for high school basketball talent. Over the past couple of decades, Rock Hill has been a little like that for football. Northwestern High’s Derek Ross was a cornerback for Ohio State, and then for several N.F.L. teams. Rock Hill High’s Chris Hope played safety at Florida State before a long Pro Bowl career that included a victory in Super Bowl XL with the Pittsburgh Steelers. The former Bearcat Tim Jones starred in the early 1990s at linebacker at Clemson, and now works back at Rock Hill High. The former Notre Dame all-American defensive back Jeff Burris, who played at Northwestern High, returned to South Bend as a coach this season.

That Rock Hill is now nationally renowned as an incubator of football talent is partly a consequence of arbitrary fortune: From 2012 to 2014, it happened to produce consecutive first-round N.F.L. picks in Gilmore, Minnesota Vikings receiver Cordarrelle Patterson and Clowney.

Despite a name that conjures images of a dusty, one-stoplight town that has no business mass-producing football stars, Rock Hill is actually a growing city of 70,000 — one of the largest in South Carolina — about 20 miles south of Charlotte, N.C., and right off the interstate highway that links that city with South Carolina’s capital, Columbia.

And its track record of professional-quality football has helped produce a virtuous cycle of talented players.

“The continuing success we’ve been able to have means the expectations are there, the standards are there,” said Doug Echols, Rock Hill’s mayor since 1998, whose first job in town, in the 1970s, was as Northwestern’s football coach. “That spills over into quality coaching, kids’ interest, district support, community support.”

But Rock Hill also reflects the shift in high school football’s national center of gravity to the South over the past several decades. Over five recent national

recruiting classes, according to SB Nation, the greatest number of top recruits were produced not only by extremely populous and sunny states like Florida, Texas and California — the three leaders, in that order — but also by the Southern football factories Georgia (fourth), Louisiana (sixth), Alabama (seventh), Virginia (eighth), North Carolina (ninth) and Tennessee (tenth).

The N.F.L. draft numbers are even more stark: Seven of the 10 states with the most picks per million people were in the South. South Carolina was No. 1.

For Tom Lemming, a recruiting expert who has published Prep Football Magazine for nearly four decades, the ideal community for high school football “has got to be a town that doesn’t have a professional team, one that has a tradition for high school football, builds the kids up with youth leagues and youth programs — which towns in the South do much more than in the North.”

In the South, Lemming added, “they grow up not wanting to be a racecar driver, a baseball player, a basketball player — but a football player.”

And while the N.F.L. draft disperses talent without much regard for geography, college recruiting is different. Players are more likely to choose a college program near where they grew up, particularly home-state teams that they have rooted for and that their families can easily travel to for games.

Who is best on Friday night, then, influences who is best on Saturday. The dominance of Southern high school football is no doubt a factor in Southeastern Conference teams’ winning eight of the last 10 national championships, as well as Florida State’s title three seasons ago out of the Atlantic Coast Conference and the title game appearance last season by Clemson, which is a couple of hours’ drive from Rock Hill.

Gilmore, for example, was coaxed to South Carolina in part by state pride, according to his mother, Linda, who can be found selling popcorn and soda at the South Pointe concessions booth on Friday nights while another son, Steven, takes the field for the Stallions. Steve Spurrier, the Gamecocks’ coach during Gilmore’s recruitment, took six assistants to the Gilmores’ home in Rock Hill. They ate apple

pie. Spurrier told Gilmore, “We need for you to stay in state, come here, and change our program.”

Two years later, Spurrier returned to South Pointe and persuaded Clowney to stay in state.

## Inspired by Pros

In Northwestern High’s purple-and-gold weight room one Thursday morning several weeks ago, music by Wiz Khalifa and Young Dolph blasted out of speakers as the team followed a lifting protocol projected onto the wall. The ratio of players to coaches seemed like that at a top college program.

On the wall of a narrow hallway off the weight room are listed all the Northwestern graduates who have gone on to the N.F.L., including in recent years the Vikings’ Patterson, who is also a punt and kick returner; Houston Texans cornerback Johnathan Joseph; and Baltimore Ravens tight end Benjamin Watson.

“It motivates me to keep pushing,” said Logan Rudolph, a tight end who has committed to Clemson. Rudolph also has motivation closer to home: He is the younger brother of Mason Rudolph, the Oklahoma State quarterback.

High school football’s ability to catapult heroes to wider prominence has been an important part of Southern life for nearly a century, said Andy Doyle, a historian of sports and the South at Winthrop University in Rock Hill. Success in the sport brought validation and led to another Southern archetype: the local boy made good, through football.

“‘This boy from Gunnersville, this boy from Andalusia, this boy from Opp, Alabama’ — wherever,” said Doyle, imagining what Southern townspeople told themselves over the decades. “‘He’s playing at the university. I’m now attached to the university. I’m a fan.’ This feeds on itself.”

By the 1970s and ’80s, this mind-set pervaded parts of South Carolina. But it was the nearby towns like Spartanburg, Gaffney and Union that were football hubs.

“Rock Hill hadn’t beaten Spartanburg in, like, 19 years,” said Jim Ringer, who took over the Rock Hill High football team in the early 1980s and coached it for 22 seasons.

“It wasn’t real good when I first went there,” Ringer added, “but we were able to get the district to buy in and invest in the programs.”

Ringer and Jimmy Wallace, the coach of Northwestern at the time, lobbied the school district for money. They held clinics together. They emphasized academics and tutoring, making their school district enviable.

Youth football programs soon cropped up. The city runs teams for young children, while the Y.M.C.A. administers the pre-middle school squads.

Northwestern’s first championship came in 1989. For a time, Rock Hill High was also excellent, but when South Pointe High was created about a decade ago to deal with the school district’s rising population, it supplanted Rock Hill High as the city’s second football contender. Last year, Northwestern and South Pointe won state championships in their divisions, which are determined by school enrollment. They are in the hunt again this season, which was delayed two weeks because of Hurricane Matthew.

“Friday night is the most important night in the week” in the South, Lemming said. “It’s not like that in the North anymore.”

## Following Footsteps

Clowney is the biggest star Rock Hill has produced. But Rock Hill was recognized for its talent as early as 1990, when Burris, a star running back, went to Notre Dame and later to the N.F.L., where, as a cornerback, he was a first-round pick who lasted 10 seasons.

Burris now works on the Notre Dame coaching staff. His brother, Pat, who played for Arkansas, is an assistant coach at South Pointe. Their cousins are the Adamses: Daniel Adams was the fullback to Burris’s tailback when Northwestern

won that first title, and Daniel's son, Eli, is now a star on South Pointe's defensive line.

Eli Adams's two offers so far are from East Carolina and South Carolina. It would not be surprising if he followed the path taken by Clowney — a role model for Rock Hill's next generation — down the interstate to Columbia and the Gamecocks.

Like many people in Rock Hill, Adams has a Clowney story.

"I was a little kid," he said. "I went up to him — I had a football game — and he was standing out there. I was like, 'One day, I'm going to be better than you.'"

"I don't think he'd remember that," Adams said, "but I actually said that to him."

***Correction: November 10, 2016***

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misidentified the Rock Hill high school that Jeff Burris attended. It was Northwestern High, not Rock Hill High.

***Correction: November 11, 2016***

An earlier version of this article misidentified Eli Adams's grade. He is a junior, not a senior.

***Correction: November 11, 2016***

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of a caption with this article misidentified the location of one of two colleges extending a recruiting offer to Eli Adams. He received offers from a college in South Carolina and another in North Carolina, not two offers from schools in South Carolina.