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Cecil Shorts' hunger to succeed is rewarded with NFL draft selection by Jacksonville: Terry Pluto

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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- You're Cecil Shorts, and you were determined to prove them wrong.

There would be a day like Saturday, a day when an NFL team would call out your name. You didn't know it would be Jacksonville. You had no idea it would be in the fourth round, the highest a Division III player has ever been selected in the current form of the NFL draft.

Or that you'd be the only Division III player selected this year. Or that this was only the 11th time in the last 15 years that a Division III player has been picked.

Yes, you were a star at powerhouse Mount Union. You broke most of the receiving records set by Pierre Garcon -- who has caught 114 passes over the last two years for the Indianapolis Colts.

You did everything you could to position yourself to beat the odds. But most pro scouts are suspicious of small-school stars -- even those who played for Larry Kehres, the man who has won 10 national titles at Mount.

Can Cecil Shorts really play? That question goes back to when you were a star at Collinwood High. When several mid-major Division I schools seemed interested. When you were coached by your father, Cecil Shorts II.

Your dad had dealt with recruiters before. He was certain that at least one would actually offer a scholarship.

"But they all backed off," he said. "I still can't figure out why."

The fact is that major-college recruiters love players from Ted Ginn's incredible program at Glenville. But for everyone else in the Senate, it's a struggle to prove you belong at college football's highest level.

Yes, you did all the right things in high school. Good grades. Strong character. Solid family. Star quarterback.

But when signing day came, there was nothing for you to sign.

Almost angry



Mount Union photo

"Cecil proves that you can come from any high school and go to any college and accomplish a lot if you have the talent, the character and the work ethic," says Mount Union football coach Larry Kehres. Mount Union had an assistant coach named Jason Candle, who was in charge of recruiting the Cleveland area. He believed Mount Union was right for you, especially after being rejected by the larger schools.

Candle told Larry Kehres. The head coach loved your highlight tape, loved talking to you and your dad. He also believed you could be a quarterback at Mount, a position you wanted to play.

When talking about how you ended up at Mount, Kehres tells how Candle convinced him to attend a Senate track meet and watched you win event after event, everything from the 800 to the hurdles. Is that why you went to Mount? Of course not. But the two football coaches at the track meet sent this message, "The best Division III football program wants you."

You had some offers from Division II schools, which could give you some financial aid for football. There's no aid for financial aid for athletics at Division III. You qualified for some scholarships thanks to your grade-point average and other issues.

But as your father said, "We had to bite the financial bullet if we went to Mount."

Unlike nearly everyone else in this NFL draft, you enter the league owing thousands of dollars in student loans.

Now, you say, "It was worth it."

Now, you say, "Coach Kehres is a great man."

Now, you say, "Mount may be the reason I'm in the NFL."

Now, you thank assistant coaches Zac Bruney, Vince Kehres and Jason Candle.

But when you walked on to the campus in Alliance, you said, there was "a chip on my shoulder."

Your father said, "Cecil was almost angry. He wanted to prove a lot of people wrong."

Nearly a quarterback

As a freshman, you quarterbacked Mount's junior varsity team.

"Cecil would have been outstanding as a quarterback for us," said Bruney, a former Mount QB who was your position coach.

But three games into your freshman season, you suffered a high ankle sprain. No more football. It seemed everything was conspiring against you from the moment those big-college coaches turned their backs. For a moment, you considered transferring. But to where? And why?

These coaches believed in you, and you liked the small-school setting. So this became your redshirt season.

Besides, your mother, Priscilla kept saying, "You are in school to get a degree. It's not all about football."

So you stayed. The next season, you began to play more wide receiver. Mount had a quarterback named Greg Micheli, who would become the Division III Player of the Year. The team was winning a national title,

There was Garcon, who was attracting NFL scouts. In 2007, you were a backup to Micheli, completing 16 of 24 passes. But the coaches were working you as a receiver, setting you up to replace Garcon.

Kehres now says, "I have to be the only Division III coach in history with two NFL receivers on same team and not win a title."

That was in 2007, Garcon's final season. It was your first as a receiver, and you caught only 12 passes. As for Kehres, those 10 national titles along with only 23 losses in 25 years shows he has a clue what to do with talent.

When you saw Garcon drafted in the sixth round by the Colts in 2008, you realized the door was opening. Maybe it was just a crack, but there was a sliver of light -- the NFL can find you.

A success story

In the next three seasons, you dominated Division III football, scoring touchdowns in every manner -- receiving, rushing, kickoff returns, punt returns. Kehres was tempted to return you to quarterback after Micheli graduated. But those same scouts who watched Garcon were coming back to see another Purple Raider receiver.

In the 2009 playoffs, Mount's starting quarterback was injured. Kehres turned to you -- and you delivered with three rushing touchdowns as the team advanced to the Division III title game. Quarterback coach Bruney says you "would have been an outstanding quarterback" for Mount. Kehres praises your passing skills, adding "The only reason I didn't move Cecil full time to quarterback is because he had a pro future as a receiver." Kehres and Bruney told scouts, "Cecil is the most popular guy on the team. He's just a good person, not stuck on himself. He'd do anything on our team to help us win."

They praised you for running track, for taking part on life on campus.

"Lots of people say that about their players," said Kehres. "Every word is true with Cecil."

For a while, you thought New England would draft you. The Patriots sent more coaches and spent more time with you than any other team. The Browns had some interest. So did Jacksonville.

Your goal was to be drafted higher than Garcon. Not to disparage him, but to bring more attention to Mount and Division III. Your father is telling everyone how you're the highest draft pick in Division III history.

On to the NFL

Early this week, you sat in Kehres' office and promised to finish your degree. You need one more semester after dropping out in January to train for the NFL combine. Garcon did the same thing -- and came back over the next two years to graduate.

The coaches challenged you to do the same. Your mother and father demand the same. You say you won't let them down.

Jacksonville coach Jack Del Rio has said you will immediately compete for a spot in the receiving rotation, possibly in the slot. Kehres said NFL coaches liked that you can play inside or outside as a receiver.

Now 6-foot and 202 pounds, you "no longer are the skinny kid who showed up here five years ago," said Kehres. You needed the five years at Mount to mature physically and learn a new position.

Jacksonville General Manager Gene Smith had an easy answer for those who asked why he'd pick a Division III product so high: "We scout the player, not the school."

But you say the school -- Mount's football tradition and tremendous coaching -- along with Garcon's success is among the reasons you were picked in the fourth round.

Kehres simply says, "Cecil proves that you can come from any high school and go to any college and accomplish a lot if you have the talent, the character and the work ethic. And Cecil is a polite young man, too."

That should make you feel just as good as anything said on draft day.