

N.B. football player chasing NCAA dreams

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Riverview's Taylor Burns is soft-spoken and polite off the football field, but the 6-foot-4, 290-pounder brings a dogged approach to his job as an offensive lineman.

He was a defensive player for much of his minor football career until he was moved to offence two years ago.

Now, he's an offensive lineman - with a mean streak.

"I bring a defensive mentality to it," the 17-year-old said.

"No one is going to touch my quarterback, no one is going to touch my running back, and if they do, they're going to pay for it."

That attitude is serving him well.

Burns is in his first year studying and playing football at Episcopal High School, a private boarding school in Alexandria, Virginia.

The school is known for producing NCAA Division I football players, including sending eight players to top United States college programs this season. School alumni include Arizona Republican senator John McCain, NFL running back Tim Hightower and former Los Angeles Dodgers general manager Paul DePodesta.

Burns suited up for the Riverview High Royals for the previous two seasons in his Grade 10 and 11 years after moving to Riverview in 2015 from British Columbia. Last year, he started receiving calls from prep school and college coaches in the U.S. who liked his size and potential.

Burns settled on enrolling at Episcopal, a school located on 135 acres about 13 kilometres from Washington, D.C.

He's a key member - he can play the tackle and centre positions on the offensive line - on the football team, which competes in the Interstate Athletic Conference, made up of six Washington-area schools.

The team sports a 3-2 overall record and has four games remaining on its schedule this season.

Scouts from NCAA Division I teams are in the stands each week.

"I want to prove to them that I'm



Riverview football player Taylor Burns, right, with stepmother Jennifer Burns.

PHOTO: SUBMITTED

the best option that they have," said Burns, who played as an underdog on both the New Brunswick under-18 and under-17 football teams.

The football challenge - both in practice and the opposition - is top-notch.

"Day in, day out I'm lining up against Division I calibre defensive linemen. On our defensive line, we have the No. 1 lacrosse player in the U.S. who also plays football and is extremely talented, we have another Canadian who plays nose guard and he's a SEC (Southeastern Conference) calibre defensive lineman and we have another defensive lineman who has multiple Division I offers," said Burns, who has attended football camps across the U.S.

"I'm working against the best players that I can play against, and working hard against the best competition is only going to bring your game up."

Each day, Burns rises at 7 a.m. and heads to class for 8 a.m. in full dress attire - shirt, tie and dress pants. He's in class for much of the day, before hitting the field for football practice at 3:20 p.m. Practice goes until 6 p.m. and a mandatory two-hour study hall follows each night, before he calls it a day.

He's enjoying life at the school, which sends students to Washington for field trips each week.

Burns said it was a difficult decision to leave Riverview and his high school, but knew heading to the U.S. was best for his football future.

"I felt like it had a good balance of academics and athletics in terms of getting me prepared to go off to university in both football and school," he said.

The son of former Canadian Football

League defensive lineman Darin Burns of Riverview, he's been dreaming of landing a U.S. college football scholarship since he got his start in the sport at the age of nine.

It became more of a reality last year when he began receiving interest from NCAA schools.

Burns reclassified as a Grade 11 student at Episcopal this year and will play his Grade 12 year next season. He's among the top ranked NCAA Canadian prospects in the Class of 2019.

"It's exciting and at the same time it's really stressful knowing that every day you have to bring your game up and continue to get better," he said, "but it's like that in the real world, too."

Burns has already visited Syracuse University and Cornell University, and expects to visit many more schools over the next year.

His first season at Episcopal hasn't been without adversity. Not long after the first game, doctors found a cyst on his spleen that had ruptured. A seven-hour surgery to remove the spleen followed and he lost one litre of blood.

He played in a game 13 days later.

Riverview High Royals head coach Guy Messervier realized early on he had a special player in Burns. He was a starter in Grade 10 and a team captain in Grade 11.

"He was bigger than the average kid and his physique was impressive," said Messervier, who accompanied Burns on his visit to Syracuse University.

"He's very strong. He'll watch his opponent on tape and he does a lot of the work that needs to be done. With his size, he can put that all together, and he's very determined. He had a goal of playing at the next level and he knew what he had to do to give him a chance to get there."

Darin Burns played seven CFL seasons with Hamilton, Montreal and Ottawa.

"I actually enjoy the game a lot more watching my son play than me playing. I get such a high watching him do the things he's doing," he said.

"He's a heck of a lot better than I was at his age - he's a lot bigger, a lot stronger, a lot quicker."