

A LONG, WINDING ROAD TO GREY CUP TITLE

LINEBACKER TRIUMPHS WITH BLUE BOMBERS AFTER HONING SKILLS IN ITALY

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As a receiver, Tanner Gaskill-Cadwallader's job was clear: run your route, stick to your predetermined path.

But a change in position was perhaps the least drastic detour on the Georgetown native's road to achieving his dream of playing professional football. It led him across an ocean and back and just as he was on the verge of achieving what he had been working toward, everything was put on hold by a pandemic.

Still a longshot at best, Gaskill-Cadwallader's determination was rewarded with a spot on the Winnipeg Blue Bombers roster last spring. And on a cold day in December, just a 45-minute drive from where he grew up playing Halton Hills Minor Football, the 24-year-old lifted the Grey Cup above his head after a dramatic overtime victory.

"As a football fan, those are the greatest games," Gaskill-Cadwallader said. "I've learned to appreciate the game so much, so not having football for so long, I was just excited to go into the building every day and have the chance to play."

Two years earlier, Gaskill-

Cadwallader couldn't have been further from playing in the Canadian Football League, at least geographically.

After graduating from Wilfrid Laurier University in 2019, he had another year of playing eligibility remaining. But rather than returning to take courses just to play football, he decided to look for opportunities in Europe.

He landed with the Bologna Warriors in the Italian Football League, where the more experienced import players took on a coach-like role.

"All my teammates were very passionate about football," he said. "They appreciated what I brought to the table and I was able to show them different things I learned over the years."

Returning to Canada, Gaskill-Cadwallader still had hopes of playing in the CFL, but realized he probably wasn't on anyone's radar.

He signed on to play junior football with the London Beefeaters, where he earned all-star honours as a linebacker and helped the team win the league championship.

That caught the attention of the Blue Bombers, who drafted him in the seventh round of the 2020 draft. But four months later, the CFL cancelled the season. By the time he reported to Blue Bombers camp last spring, another round of picks from the 2021 draft had doubled his competition for a job.

"As the last pick of the sev-



Winnipeg Blue Bombers photo

Tanner Gaskill-Cadwallader celebrates the Winnipeg Blue Bombers' Grey Cup victory in Hamilton.

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enth round, you're not guaranteed anything," Gaskill-Cadwallader said. "I knew I'd have to work my butt off so I kept training through COVID with the goal to make the team."

After a solid rookie season, Gaskill-Cadwallader continued to reward the Bombers in the playoffs. He forced a fumble in the fourth quarter of Winnipeg's

21-17 win over Saskatchewan in the West final and then recorded a season-high three tackles in the 33-25 overtime win over Hamilton in the Grey Cup.

Gaskill-Cadwallader thought back to when he was in Grade 9 at Christ the King and Elliott Montag, a member of McMaster's national championship

team, brought the Vanier Cup to the school.

"Seeing that, it just seemed so unreal," he said.

But it would provide inspiration for him to pursue the game to the highest level. If that meant switching from quarterback in high school to receiver when he joined the Western Mustangs, or to defence as a linebacker when he transferred to Laurier the following year, that's what he did.

"I've never shied away from learning anything football related," he said. "That's where I was needed and if that gave me an opportunity to get on the field, I was going to take the opportunity and make the most of it."

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