

Sports



GRIDIRON ACTION
GET THE LATEST ON
THE NFL'S PREMIER
MATCHUP BETWEEN THE
PACKERS AND VIKINGS.
Go to sacbee.com/xtrasports.



XAVIER MASCAREÑAS xmascarenas@sacbee.com

Phillip Bell, only a sophomore and already a varsity football standout wide receiver, practices with Christian Brothers High School teammates Thursday at the school in Sacramento.

How Christian Brothers' Phillip Bell became a top recruit

BY CHRIS BIDERMAN
cbiderman@sacbee.com

Sometimes you arrive to a football field and just know.

When going to watch a practice at Christian Brothers, it wouldn't take a Bill Belichickian background in the sport to see someone who stands out. An athlete that glides around the field while others plod, someone whose teenage frame isn't overwhelmed by the size of their pads, a combination of size and speed that reminds us of players we watch on Sundays.

That player for the Falcons is Phillip Bell, a sophomore receiver who doesn't look much like his teammates. He looks like a player ready-made for the college level, and perhaps the level after that, with the appropriate hard work and ability to make plays.

Bell was the only freshman in 2021 to earn The Bee's All-Metro honors. He had 1,002 yards and 12 touchdowns de-



XAVIER MASCAREÑAS xmascarenas@sacbee.com

Christian Brothers High School varsity football head coach Larry Morla watches over practice while sophomore Phillip Bell, a standout wide receiver who is already gaining national interest from colleges, stands behind him Thursday at the school in Sacramento.

spite being at least two years younger than the majority of his opponents. The 6-foot-1, 180-pound dynamo already has 15 scholarship offers from some of

the best college programs in the country — including reigning national champion Georgia, Michigan, Auburn, Texas A&M and nearby UC Berkeley —

likely with more on the way.

It might be reactionary, or even hyperbolic, to mention an NFL future for someone like Bell. But in the context of getting scholarship offers from elite programs after just one year of high school (he had two Division I offers after eighth grade), and the fact Christian Brothers has churned out NFL players such as cornerbacks Ahkello Witherspoon and Asa Jackson, and tight end Asante Cleveland, there's precedent to lift the ceiling on whatever Bell can accomplish.

"If that ball's in the air, he's the one coming down with it, no doubt about it," Christian Brothers head coach Larry Morla said. "Even though he was a freshman, he was almost physically better than any competition he went against. So he has the whole package."

Despite his coach's praise, Bell said getting better at coming down with contested catches over defenders remains a

SEE BELL, 5B

BELL

priority. That ability is a source of Bell's confidence.

"Just making sure nobody can mess with me, where I'm going to get the ball 100% no matter what. It's not 50-50, it's 100-0," said Bell, talking like the receivers he idolizes, Odell Beckham Jr. and Jamar Chase.

TAKING OVER AS A LEADER

It's not often a sophomore is picked by a head coach to lead a varsity football team. But that's Bell's responsibility heading into the new season that kicks off Friday against Elk Grove. Morla tasked Bell with taking over a leadership void vacated by a strong class of outgoing seniors that helped the team reach the second round of the Division III playoffs last fall.

"Now I'm planning for him to be the man and carry this team," Morla said. "Obviously, he's getting a lot of recognition from colleges, but if he wants to get to that high level of college, he needs to be the best player in the area, best in the state, best in the nation, if you want to be that man and get to your dream college."

The approach from Bell's perspective is simple. He's taking lessons learned from those graduated seniors like Jake Elorduy, D.J. Crowther and Jackson Burlison.

"I approach it just like I'm one of the seniors from last year," Bell said. "I gotta lead the team, gotta take everybody under my wing, gotta take some guys up with me — Isaiah Jordan, Ezekiel Castex (two other sophomores) — we got to lead the team."

Therein lies an obvious question.

How could a sophomore, no matter how talented or productive, earn

that type of unquestioned responsibility? Captaincy and leadership are often defined by experience and seniority. A college underclassman is rarely considered a leader without having the pelts on the wall. Forget about a rookie becoming a captain on an NFL team. Even second-year players rarely get that distinction.

That type of leadership is earned. And Bell has done it despite being an underclassman playing on varsity for just one season.

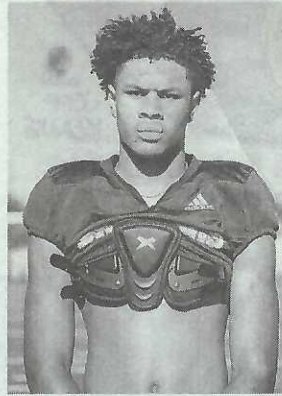
It started when he decided to go to Christian Brothers the summer after finishing eighth grade. Knowing he was good enough to play varsity, Bell found contact information for Elorduy, the senior quarterback, to meet at a local park where they began practicing routes and catching passes before the start of the season.

"I didn't tell him to do that, he did that on his own," Bell's mother, Samantha Barnes said.

ADVERSITY AWAY FROM THE FIELD

Barnes has been a Type-1 diabetic since she was 14. Bell would often help get her blood sugar up in the middle of the night with fruit snacks or apple juice to prevent his mother from slipping into a coma during her worst episodes.

There were times when Bell, who's 15, had to drive his mother to the hospital because she dealt



MASCAREÑAS xmscareñas@sacbee.com XAVIER

Phillip Bell, a sophomore and standout wide receiver for Christian Brothers High School varsity football team, is photographed during practice Thursday at the school in Sacramento.

with complications that require injections into her eyes every three months to prevent blindness.

"Phil has always learned with my medical condition, my chronic illness, that he has to be strong. He's always been the man of the house," said Barnes, who recently got engaged.

When she came down with COVID-19 during the height of the pandemic, she thought she might never see her son again.

"It was really scary," Bell said. "Because I love my mom and I couldn't lose her."

Barnes went to the emergency room because she had a series of heart attacks. She had heart surgery and came down with pneumonia while in the hospital. Her stay lasted three months.

"He's had to grow at lot faster than these other teenagers because of my

illness," Barnes said. "And I think that's another reason why he's so mature."

Like any mother, Barnes beams when she talks about her son. She's quick to point out it's not just his physical talent that's gotten him on the brink of playing at one of the top college programs in the country. It's the fact that he wakes up before sunrise, seven days a week, to train before school and later after football practice.

Bell's mom serves as his inspiration for the work he puts in.

"He's up at 5:30 in the morning doing ladder drills," Barnes said. "He's running the stairs, he's going to the gym. He's working while everyone else is asleep. And that's what I'm so proud of. When he was younger I would always tell him, 'Somebody's always out there working harder than you.'"

Bell first started playing sports at age 4 when he took on soccer back when he lived in San Francisco. (He moved to the Sacramento area at 9.) He averaged six to eight goals per game back then before taking on basketball, and "he scored his whole team's points," Barnes said.

Perhaps it shouldn't be a surprise, then, that Bell is just a second-year high schooler playing beyond his years. He's always been accelerated in life and in sports. That's how a sophomore receiver becomes the leader of the football program — and someone the top college programs are already clamoring for.