

Boivin: ASU, Todd Graham changing perception of JC players



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Highlights of Damarious Randall, Jaelen Strong, Jamil Douglas and Marcus Hardison. azcentral sports

ASU proves that football teams no longer need to defend themselves about recruiting junior-college players.



(Photo: Matt York/AP)

It didn't take long for Jaelen Strong to decide the uniform number he would wear with the Houston Texans.

Eleven.

"To remind me that 10 receivers were taken before me in the draft," the wide receiver wrote on Instagram. "So much hunger in my heart."

Few have an appetite to prove naysayers wrong like a junior-college player. Arizona State coach Todd Graham has recruited 28 since he landed in Tempe – three were selected in the 2015 NFL draft – and he's helping

change their perception.

He and his staff even made Cincinnati rethink their philosophy of not drafting jucos. The Bengals took defensive lineman Marcus Hardison, who started out at Dodge City Community College in Kansas, in the fourth round.

"Talking to him when he came here (on a visit), we looked at tape together and he knew their whole defense," Cincinnati defensive line coach Jay Hayes said. "He was very, very sharp. I could just put the tape on, and he looked at it and was telling me what everyone was doing."



<https://instagram.com/p/2ND7tZG3fc/>

Instagram | [@jaelenstrong21](https://instagram.com/jaelenstrong21) (<https://instagram.com/jaelenstrong21>)

Number 11 to remind me that 10 receivers were taken before me in the Draft. So much hunger in my heart. Thanks Houston! #HTOWN #ASUForever

Three of the four Sun Devils drafted last week started out at a junior college: Hardison, safety Damarious Randall (first round) and wide receiver Strong (third).

The fourth, guard Jamil Douglas, played all four seasons in Tempe.

"We probably have the best reputation in the country for developing JC players," Graham said.

ASU players in 2015 NFL draft: [Randall in first round \(/story/sports/nfl/2015/04/30/asu-safety-damarious-randall-selected-30th-by-the-packers/26653499/\)](#) | [Strong in third \(/story/sports/nfl/2015/05/01/asu-receiver-jaelen-strong-selected-by-houston-in-the-third-round/26652143/\)](#) | [Douglas in fourth \(/story/sports/nfl/2015/05/02/asu-guard-jamil-douglas-selected-by-miami-in-the-nfl-drafts-fourth-round/26653961/\)](#) | [Hardison in fourth \(/story/sports/nfl/2015/05/02/asu-dl-marcus-hardison-selected-by-the-bengals-in-the-fourth-round/26723839/\)](#)

That's four drafted JC players in two years – running back Marion Grice is the other -- something that will give Graham a boost in the recruiting process.

Nothing captures the attention of a young football player more than the letters N...F...L.

The Sun Devils have long had a reputation of embracing the junior-college transfer. After the 1997 Rose Bowl, three of ASU's eight draft picks had gone that route but it was during a time when schools felt they had to defend the decision.

The stigma is changing and Graham is embracing it full force, taking nine, 10, six and three in his four recruiting classes, respectively. They must, he insists, be of the same character mold of all players he recruits at ASU.

In the non-athletic world, many accomplished students are spending their first two years at junior colleges because of high tuition at four-year universities.

Related: [Arizona State finishes off a strong NFL draft \(/story/sports/college/asu/2015/05/02/arizona-state-finishes-off-a-strong-nfl-draft/26794703/\)](http://story/sports/college/asu/2015/05/02/arizona-state-finishes-off-a-strong-nfl-draft/26794703/)

The reasons athletes take that path vary.

Some are athletic late-bloomers. They started the sport late or took longer than their peers to hit their football stride.



Nov 28, 2014: Arizona State Sun Devils defensive back Damarious Randall (3) reacts prior to the game against the Arizona Wildcats during the 88th annual territorial cup at Arizona Stadium. (Photo: Mark J. Rebilas/USA TODAY Sports)

Some are physically behind, often due to age. The month of one's birth, and subsequent placement in school, makes a huge difference as documented in Malcolm Gladwell's popular book, "Outliers."

Others have challenges academically and are unable to gain admission to universities. It doesn't mean they can't turn it around, and junior colleges often ease the academic transition.

Randall said ASU, too, had the pieces in place to help the adjustment. That's a nod to Jean Boyd, senior associate athletic director for Student Athlete Development, who played for the Sun Devils, and, by the way, was a JC transfer.

The three drafted ASU players who went the community college route had different reasons.

More: [Former ASU QB Taylor Kelly to attend Cardinals rookie minicamp \(/story/sports/nfl/cardinals/2015/05/04/former-asu-qb-taylor-kelly-to-attend-cardinals-rookie-minicamp/26896155/\)](http://story/sports/nfl/cardinals/2015/05/04/former-asu-qb-taylor-kelly-to-attend-cardinals-rookie-minicamp/26896155/)

Randall had two brothers drafted by Major League Baseball and thought he would go the same path. But after a stint playing the sport at Butler Community College in Kansas, he suffered a shoulder injury.

That prompted him to transfer to Mesa Community College and switch to football, where his play caught the attention of ASU.

"He was raw," Graham said, "but really a gifted, talented guy."

Although he played free safety in Tempe, the Green Bay Packers envision him as a cornerback, the spot he played at Mesa. He's comfortable one-on-one with receivers because of the Sun Devils' blitz-happy defense.

His background, from playing center field in baseball to multiple positions on defense, attracted the Packers, who were looking for a hybrid corner/safety and thought Randall looked well-prepared to make the transition to the NFL.



Nov 8, 2014: Arizona State Sun Devils defensive lineman Marcus Hardison (1) against the Notre Dame Fighting Irish at Sun Devil Stadium. Arizona State defeated Notre Dame 55-31. (Photo: Mark J. Rebilas/USA TODAY Sports)

"We think he's a very versatile player," general manager Ted Thompson said. "We took a good football player, in my opinion, and took him at a place very reasonable."

Strong's journey was different. He wasn't eligible for Division I out of Philadelphia's West Catholic High and went to Pierce College in Los Angeles, where he took a year off from football and reinvented himself.

He was highly coveted and, after committing to ASU, had to take 11 classes during the spring and summer to avoid losing a season of Division I eligibility.

Strong did the work and landed with the Houston Texans. He is motivated by his drop to the third round – many analysts predicted late first – the type of fuel that is common with many junior-college players.

"Kids are very hungry when coming from the junior-college ranks," Graham said. "And they feel a sense of urgency."

Related: [Pac-12 players selected in the 2015 NFL draft \(/story/sports/nfl/2015/05/01/pac-12-players-selected-2015-nfl-draft/26677481/\)](/story/sports/nfl/2015/05/01/pac-12-players-selected-2015-nfl-draft/26677481/)

Hardison, who at Florida's Charlotte High School was a 6-foot-4, 260-pound backup quarterback, didn't play significant time on the defensive line until his senior year.

He found his spot but decided to fine-tune his skills at Dodge City CC. He excelled and two years later ended up at ASU. He proved a late bloomer there, too, with 10 sacks, 53 tackles, two interceptions and three forced fumbles as a senior.

Those were numbers that caught the attention of the Bengals despite Hardison's mediocre junior season.

"Whatever happened in that first year, he learned the defense and was able to do it the next year because it equated to 10 sacks," Hayes said.

ASU has demonstrated it can develop junior-college players. And it has no intention of stopping.

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Photos: First-round NFL draft picks from ASU