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From haymaker to playmaker

By Matt Herb

SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH
08/22/2007



Rolla wide receiver Ashton Gronewold.
(University of Missouri-Rolla)

is a fringe benefit. It's a really good way to become a blue-chip football player. Just ask Gronewold. The centerpiece of Missouri-Rolla's high-powered passing offense, he's a farm-grown All-American, a Say Hay Kid.

"Bailing hay definitely works the whole body," he said. "It builds endurance because you're doing it all day. Being out in the heat every day teaches you to put up with it. There are some long days. Some days are over 15 hours."

Apparently, it's been time well spent. The 5-foot-10, 190-pound wide receiver was named the Great Lakes Football Conference offensive player of the year as a junior after breaking or tying 12 school records, including the season standards for receptions (78), receiving yards (1,120) and all-purpose yards (1,788). This year, he has been named a preseason All-American by Lindy's and Street & Smith's, and he has aroused the interest of NFL scouts with his eye-opening numbers and 4.47-second 40-yard speed.

Gronewold's success shouldn't come as much of a surprise given his penchant for tough, physical labor. But it is unexpected in one respect: He was a running back at Carthage High School, where he played in the Wing-T, an offense not known as a springboard to college pass-catching stardom. "I don't know how many balls I caught, but you could probably count them on your hands and toes," Gronewold said.

So why was he recruited as a wide receiver?

"Well, he was just a great all-around athlete," Miners coach Kirby Cannon said. "We had great tape of him running the football, catching punts, returning kicks. We were making a commitment to (a pass-oriented) offense, and we were looking for guys who could fit into that type of offense. We felt he was going to be able to do that."

Cannon knew he was getting a player with a drive to excel. Gronewold scored 45 touchdowns as a senior at Carthage, the second-highest total in Illinois prep history. Moreover, he was a diligent student. He finished as valedictorian of his class of 74 students and chose mechanical engineering as his major at Missouri-Rolla. (He has since switched to engineering management.)

Gronewold started to make an impression on teammates and coaches at his first preseason camp. He didn't know the terminology, but he quickly proved he could handle the slants, outs and crossing patterns he was called on to run.

"I got thrown in there and made a few plays," Gronewold said. "I saw some reactions on some guys' faces. They were like, 'That was a decent play.' So I think I caught on pretty quick."

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Missouri-Rolla Miners

Coach: Kirby Cannon, 9th season, 20-57

Last season: 6-5, 2-2 in Great Lakes Football Conference

Top players: WR Ashton Gronewold (78 rec., 1,120 yards, 17 TD), WR Mike Greaving (50 rec., 789 yards, 5 TD), OT James Smith (6-4, 275), QB Brad Guidry (1,471 yards, 16 TD at Blinn JC), OLB Justin Butler (73 tackles), FS Brian Jordan (61 tackles, 3 int.), K Tim Valencia (8-11 FG)

Bottom line: Even with a new quarterback under center and a new coordinator calling the shots, the offense will be tough to stop. Of more concern is the defense, which improved throughout the 2006 season and allowed only one of the last five opponents to surpass 14 points.

Countdown to kickoff

Today: Missouri-Rolla

Thursday: Northwest Missouri

Friday: Washington University, high schools special section

Saturday: Lindenwood, McKendree

Sunday: Special section (colleges, NFL)

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Forgoing a redshirt, Gronewold ended up catching 38 passes for 499 yards his freshman season. He nearly doubled his totals the next season, finishing with 75 catches for 1,080 yards. Then came his junior year, in which he topped all his previous numbers even though he was well known to opposing defenses.

Is there room for further improvement? The Miners will find out this season. They face Truman State on Sept. 1, the first game in what they hope will be a Division II playoff season.

Gronewold said first-year offensive coordinator Josh Richards has tweaked Missouri-Rolla's offense as part of a larger effort to improve on last season's 6-5 finish. He said the Miners probably will run the ball more than they did in previous years. "That will increase the efficiency of the pass game," he said. "It's going to be a big plus."

Gronewold hasn't set personal goals for his final college season.

What would be the point? If he has proven anything, it's that the future can't be predicted.

All he knows is that he'll be back in that broiling summer sun before too long. After he gets his engineering degree, he wants to find a job in agriculture, maybe with John Deere or Caterpillar. It only makes sense. "I can't see myself getting an internship and sitting in an office," he said.

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