

Chicago Bears Rookie Seeks to Represent Christ in NFL

Tommie Harris Jr. is a Pentecostal preacher's kid who wants God to get 'all the glory' during his football career

Tommie Harris Jr. is a rookie defensive tackle with the Chicago Bears, but he is not a neophyte when it comes to recognizing the spiritual challenges of playing in the NFL, with its barrage of temptations.

"The Bible says we wrestle not against flesh and blood," Harris told Charisma a few weeks before the season started in September. "It's all about the spirit man. A man who can't control his spirit is like a city without walls. That man has no protection. I plan on looking to God to help me control my spirit in the NFL."

If he needs any reminders, Harris can look at a cross tattoo on his left arm and another tattoo on his shoulder that says: "For God I live and for God I die." Harris, who got his tattoos when he was 17, can also look at his No. 91 jersey number, which will remind him of Psalm 91.

"I want to dwell in the shelter of the most high and keep my eyes always on God," said Harris, who credits his parents for their Christian influence.

Harris' father, Tommie Sr., is a retired career Army man and Pentecostal minister. His mother, Janie, is a former missionary and special education teacher.

Tommie Sr. said his son calls himself MAGOH—"Man After God's Own Heart."

"My wife and I are not concerned with the trappings and pitfalls of life in the NFL because he's well versed about the issues of life, and he tries to apply God's Word," he told Charisma. Tommie Sr., 51, is a former Church of God in Christ pastor who is currently a music minister at a Spirit-filled Methodist church in Texas.

Harris has also made an impression on former Green Bay Packer and ordained minister Reggie White. The NFL's all-time sack leader when he retired in 2000, White believes Harris has the right priorities.

"Most of the time, I just talk to Tommie on how to get stronger," White told a Chicago newspaper. "He didn't want me to show him anything about football. He just said I just want to know the truth and life and get closer to the Father. I haven't heard a lot of young men as concerned with that as he was."

Harris, who turned 21 five days after being picked 14th overall during the NFL draft in April, left Oklahoma University after his junior season when he won the prestigious Lombardi Award as the nation's top interior lineman.

A three-year starter who was a two-time Associated Press All-American first-team selection, Harris made news off the field at Oklahoma because of his twice rejected Playboy's offer to be photographed as part of its preseason All-America team out of respect for his four sisters and his dislike for the magazine's portrayal of women.

In addition, before Oklahoma's game against Louisiana State University in last season's Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, Harris passed on the party atmosphere of Bourbon Street.

Oklahoma Sooners coach Bob Stoops called Harris "one of the spiritual leaders on our team."

"He participated in a number of Christian activities and often spoke publicly about his faith," Stoops, who expects Harris to be "an exceptional professional player," told Charisma. "His faith provides him a great base."

Harris, who stands 6 feet, 2-1/2 inches tall and weighs 289 pounds, became the first Bears rookie to start an opening game since 2000 after impressing coaches with his speed and athleticism in training camp and the preseason.

Harris, who is involved with a team Bible study made up of several Bears players, said he wants to live a lifestyle in the NFL that aligns with the Bible.

"The way I live may be the only Bible that someone reads," explained Harris, who has two cousins in the NFL, Detroit Lions guard Stockar McDougle and his brother, Philadelphia Eagles defensive end Jerome McDougle.

Harris said he desires to stay spiritually focused as a professional football player. "During training camp, I heard it said that man doesn't stumble over mountains; he stumbles over rocks," recalled Harris, who sees himself preaching someday. "It's the little things that keep us from Christ. ... My prayer is that God may get all the glory for me playing in the NFL and that God would continue to grow me in Christ."

Eric Tiansay