

After All the Drama, Openly Gay Michael Sam May Not Make NFL

Defensive end Michael Sam's dream of becoming the first openly gay player in the National Football League (NFL) was put on hold on Saturday when he failed to make the St. Louis Rams' 53-man roster for the 2014 regular season.

The 24-year-old, a standout with the University of Missouri who had announced he is gay in February, was one of 22 players cut in final roster moves by the Rams to reach the limit before the NFL's 4 p.m. EST deadline on Saturday.

"I want to thank the entire Rams organization and the city of St. Louis for giving me this tremendous opportunity and allowing me to show I can play at this level," Sam tweeted after the Rams' decision.

"I look forward to continuing to build on the progress I made here toward a long and successful career. The most worthwhile things in life rarely come easy, this is a lesson I've always known. The journey continues."

Rams coach Jeff Fisher, who spoke to Sam by phone before the final roster moves were announced, said it had simply been "a football decision" to cut the defensive end.

"The decision is no different than any other decision that we make," Fisher told reporters. "It was a football decision back in May to draft Mike, and once again it's been all about football."

"I will tell you this, I was pulling for Mike, I really was. I don't say that very often. Mike came in here and did everything we asked him to do (in preseason)."

“He got a chance to play a lot of snaps, he had the second-most snaps on the defensive line to Ethan Westbrooks and was productive. But as we said on the front end of this, this was going to be a tough road.”

Sam, who became the first openly gay player to be selected in an NFL draft when taken in the seventh round by the Rams in May, was watching the Missouri Tigers play South Dakota State in Columbia, Missouri when the last roster moves were made.

Now on waivers, he can be claimed by any team but could rejoin the Rams as part of a 10-player practice squad if he clears waivers.

Should he make another team, Sam would become the second openly gay player in one of North America’s four major professional team sports following basketball’s Jason Collins, who joined the NBA’s Brooklyn Nets last season.

Asked Sam’s reaction on being told he was cut, Fisher replied: “He said, ‘Yes, sir, and I understand. Thanks for the opportunity.’ And I said, ‘Mike, I am looking forward to visiting with you tomorrow because I am too.’”

“Our intention is to get together tomorrow so that I can tell him the same thing I told everybody else that I let go, the reasons for that and then what their worlds look like moving forward.”

Sam, the co-defensive player of the year in the Southeastern Conference, had been vying with the undrafted Westbrooks during the preseason for the last of nine defensive-line spots with the Rams.

Westbrooks, who made the roster on Saturday after displaying greater energy and big-play potential than his rival, ended up with 12 tackles and two sacks in four preseason games while Sam had 11 tackles and a team-leading three sacks.

"I believe (Sam) can play in this league, yes, as can some of the other guys on this team that had good preseasons," Fisher said after his team ended the preseason with a 14-13 loss to the Dolphins in Miami on Thursday.

St. Louis went into the preseason training camp with eight defensive linemen already inked in on the roster: Robert Quinn, Chris Long, Michael Brockers, Kendall Langford, William Hayes, Eugene Sims, Alex Carrington and first-round pick Aaron Donald.

"Those four defensive ends that we have on the roster are good," Fisher said. "They play a lot and they are very productive as well as (making) the tackles. That's a strength of our football team and again it was a football decision."

Despite Sam's success at Missouri, talent evaluators had said he might struggle in the NFL over concerns he might be too small to play regularly on the defensive line and not athletic enough to play in space as a linebacker.

"As I told our team yesterday after we had made most of the moves, unfortunately we let go some really good team mates, some close friends," Fisher said during his news conference on Saturday.

"Some may be coming back, you may see them on Sunday on practice squads, some of them you may never see again. These are two very difficult days for us."

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