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"You got to prove it, that you belong in the NFL."

FOYESADE OLUOKUN '18

Bulldogs in the NFL say Yale guided them to – and through – the league

FOOTBALL

BY LUCY BENJAMIN
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

When Foyesade Oluokun '18 entered the National Football League, he said, his Yale degree did not carry the same weight in a football locker room that it did elsewhere.

Oluokun is now one of several former Bulldogs playing professional football. Alongside players such as Ben Mann '25 and Jackson Hawes '24, his path from New Haven to the NFL is emblematic of a group of Yale alumni competing at football's highest level.

"You come to the NFL and everybody's looking down," Oluokun said in a phone interview. "It's kind of a knock, like, 'Oh, you play in the Ivy League though. They suck at football up there.' Because they don't, but that's just the perception of it."

For the Bulldogs who have made the jump to professional football, being recruited by Yale brought them to an environment markedly different from those experienced by most players at major football programs.

Oluokun, who was selected in the sixth round of the 2018 NFL Draft by the Atlanta Falcons and now plays linebacker for the Jacksonville Jaguars, said one of the most important skills Yale gave him was adaptability.

"I think just being adaptable and learning on the fly," Oluokun said.

He said Yale taught him how to be successful in new situations, both in the classroom and on the field.

While Oluokun is suiting up with the Jaguars for his fifth season, long snapper Mann is entering his rookie season with the New York Giants after signing as a free agent in April, following a transfer season at Boston College.



LIZA KAUFMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

While Yale may not be a traditional football powerhouse, several former Bulldogs have made it from the Ivy League to National Football League rosters. They say they carry valuable pieces of their Yale education with them.

Former Yale kicker and punter Nick Conforti '26, who played alongside Mann at Yale in the special teams unit, said he and his teammates recognized Mann's professional potential well before he reached the league.

"We used to talk about him all the time, like, 'There's no way this guy doesn't make it to the NFL,'" Conforti said in a phone interview.

He described Mann as both physically gifted and dependable.

"You knew that no matter what, he's going to go out there, he's going to get his job done."

Conforti said that for a long snapper, simply earning an NFL roster spot is particularly difficult.

"There's only 32 spots in the league," Conforti said. "For Ben, he's one of 32."

On the offensive side of the ball, Hawes, a tight end with the Buffalo Bills, charted a more recent Yale-to-NFL path after being drafted in the 2025 NFL Draft.

Now in his second season, Hawes said he has one goal for the season: "Win the Super Bowl, of course, and have a ton of fun doing it."

Former Bulldogs differ from many of their teammates who come from Power Four schools where football is the priority, since Yale players often refrain from making their sport their entire identity.

Conforti said that distinction becomes especially apparent once practice is over.

At Yale, "when you leave the athletic facilities, you really got to focus on the other parts of your life," he said.

While at a larger football program, being an athlete might feel closer to being a full-time professional, demanding academics and other parts of campus life at Yale force players to divide their attention.

Conforti said this compartmentalization was beneficial — if "football isn't going well, my whole life isn't going into the ground," he said.

Yale football broadcaster Jim Cain praised Bulldogs' composure outside the locker room.

"There's a poise about these players," Cain said in a phone interview. "There's a certain confidence that they breed and just the way they carry themselves."

He described the Yale undergraduate football program as creating not simply a well-rounded athlete, but a "well-rounded person."

Cain also pushed back against the idea that Yale recruits academically accomplished students who merely happen to be good at football, asserting that the Bulldogs have strong talent across the roster.

"These are some of the best football players in the country that also value their education," Cain said.

While many players arrive in New Haven looking to pursue both academics and athletics at the highest level, some of the players themselves say some of their strongest memories of Yale have little to do with either academics or athletics.

Hawes said what he remembers most is simply being around his teammates.

"I wouldn't even say it has anything to do with the football itself, but just hanging out with the fellas," Hawes said. "Going out on the weekends with the guys, celebrating big games, hanging out in the locker room and just kind of joking with each other and just having a good time. I feel like that's the part that I miss the most."

Oluokun similarly pointed to the relationships he formed in New Haven. Years after leaving Yale, he said, he still makes an effort to stay connected with his former teammates.

"Those are my real friends," Oluokun said. "They know me for me."

Oluokun said players from major football programs sometimes assumed that competing in the Ivy League meant he had never faced serious talent.

"You got to prove it, that you belong in the NFL," he said.

Hawes said he encountered a more lighthearted stereotype.

"A lot of guys, when I first got out here, would make nerdy jokes about Yale," he said.

Yet both players also described elements of Yale that they now see as useful at the professional level.

Hawes said Yale gave him the ability to communicate with people from very different backgrounds. Growing up in Utah, he said he was largely surrounded by similar people. Yale exposed him to professors and classmates from around the world.

"Yale is crazy diverse," he said, adding that the NFL was similar. "You got people from all over the country coming together for a common goal."

Oluokun recalled a conversation with his strength coach after an NFL scout had asked the coach if Oluokun loved football. His coach had said that Oluokun had chosen to dedicate time to the sport despite not having "all the resources the big schools have."

"In order to get to that level, there was no doubt that I had a love for the game," he said.

He said he would give a similar message to current Yale players hoping to follow him to the NFL.

"You want to believe that you're good. But you're not competing against the Ivy, you're not competing against your teammates, you're competing against the dude at Alabama who thinks you don't even play football," Oluokun said. "You're not going to be the top of the top being the same as everybody else."

He said that younger Yale players hoping to play professionally could not satisfy themselves with doing the same work as everyone around them.

"If you want more," he said, "become more."

Oluokun will travel with the Jaguars to face the Cincinnati Bengals on Sunday, while Mann and the Giants play the Arizona Cardinals at home. Hawes will next take the field with the Buffalo Bills against the New England Patriots at the newly opened Highmark Stadium.

All three games will take place at 1 p.m. on Sunday.

Contact
LUCY BENJAMIN *at*
lucy.benjamin@yale.edu.

In Ithaca, Team 153 suffers first loss of the season

FOOTBALL

BY BRODY GILKISON
STAFF REPORTER

The No. 17 Yale Bulldogs (1–1, 0–1 Ivy) fell 38-25 to the Cornell Big Red (1–1, 1–0 Ivy) on Saturday in their second game of the season.

The Ithaca matchup marked the first time Cornell and Yale have played each other since last September, when Yale prevailed 41-24. But on Saturday, in the first half of a game that marked both teams' conference opener, Cornell smothered the Yale offense, holding the unit to just three points. While the Bulldogs mustered a valiant comeback effort, it was too little too late.

"We made too many mistakes and allowed Cornell to control the game," head coach Kevin Cahill said following the game. "They are a very good football team, and when you give them extra opportunities, they will take advantage of them."

Though Dante Reno '28 just last week opened his second season as Yale's starting quarterback with an impressive 454-yard, 5-touchdown showing, Charlie Hewitt '29 opened the game on Saturday — marking the sophomore quarterback's first-ever collegiate start.

The Associated Press reported that Reno sustained an injury to his left elbow during the Holy Cross game last weekend. The yardage total from that game placed Reno second all-time on Yale's single-game passing yards leaderboard.

On Saturday, Team 153 got off to a slow start offensively, putting up just three points in the first half. Still, Hewitt remained aggressive the entire half and continued to improve as the game progressed.

After the Bulldogs found themselves down 28-3 halfway into the third quarter due to several defensive breakdowns, Hewitt finally settled in and managed to lead Yale down the field for their first touchdown of the game, connecting with four different targets along the way before hitting tight end Graham Smith '26 for the score. A successful two-point conversion made the score 28-11.

Then, the Bulldog defense started to show some signs of life and forced a punt to give Yale the ball back.

Again, Hewitt connected with a diverse group of targets as he marched the Bulldogs back down the field. Running back Hugo Djeumeni Kemeni '29 punched it from a yard out to cut Cornell's lead to just 10.

With just over 13 minutes remaining, the Bulldogs had gotten themselves back in the game but needed their star-studded defense to force a Cornell punt.

Unfortunately for Yale, Big Red quarterback Garrett Bass-Sulpizio led his squad down the field with a methodical seven-minute drive to set up an easy field goal and extend their lead to 13.

While not putting the game totally out of reach, the clock was not on the Bulldogs' side. They still needed to find the end zone twice more in six minutes, a tall task for a young quarterback.

The pressure was on Yale, and the Bulldogs were unable to respond, turning the ball over on downs in just four plays. Three minutes later, Cornell was back in the end zone, seemingly putting the game out of reach for the Elis, as the score was now 38-18 with only three minutes to go.

Hewitt retook the field with his offense, and while victory now seemed unattainable, he had another chance to build confidence in his new role. The Bulldogs were able to put together an efficient 75-yard drive in under two minutes to add another seven points to the Yale score. But as the final seconds ticked off the clock, the scoreboard read 38-25.



LIZA KAUFMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

With a new signal-caller at the helm, the Bulldogs were unable to overcome early setbacks and fell 38-25 to the Cornell Big Red in a Saturday game.

"We learned a lot more about ourselves today," Cahill said. "We will clean up our mistakes and move on to next week. A lot to learn from and a lot to grow from. Really proud of the fight that Charlie played with today. He made some big plays to bring us back into the game. There is a lot for him to grow from after his performance."

Yale will be back in action on Saturday when the Bulldogs host Merrimack in their first home game of the season.

Contact
BRODY GILKISON *at*
brody.gilkison@yale.edu.

Stat of the Day

THE NO. 17 YALE BULLDOGS (1–1, 0–1 IVY) FELL 38-25 TO THE CORNELL BIG RED (1–1, 1–0 IVY) IN THEIR SECOND GAME OF THE SEASON.