

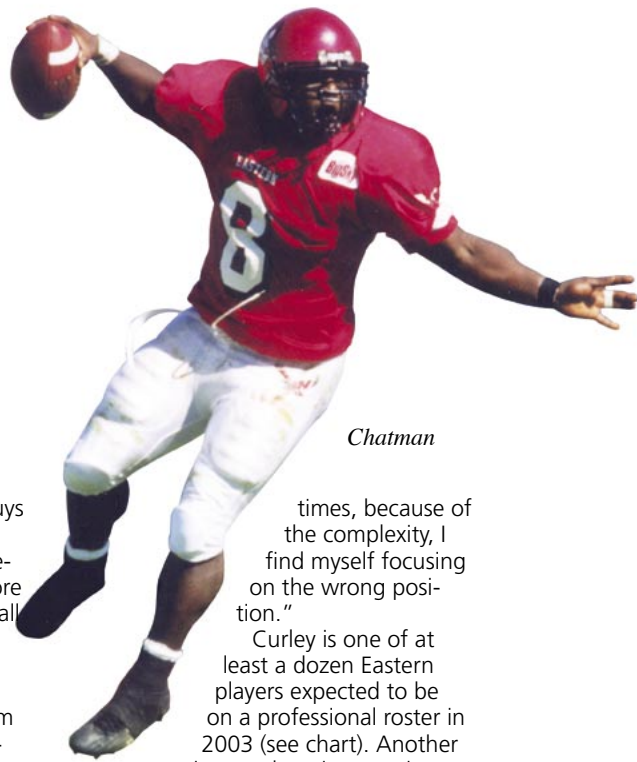


# NFL

## Tradition

### Continues at Eastern

by Paul Seebeck



Chatman

"You get confused if you think about it too hard," says Eastern Athletics Hall of Fame member Ed Simmons, who was recently named one of the 70-greatest Washington Redskins of all-time. "I can't figure out my success, or Eastern's. But I know I wouldn't let anybody destroy my dream. I just shut 'em all up, by showing them I was a legitimate player even though I was from a smaller school."

"The last thing I ever thought I'd be was a college football player," adds Jeff Mickel, who played alongside Simmons on Eastern's offensive line, then lined up against him in the National Football League (NFL) in the late 1980s. "I was more of a basketball player. But I went from 190 pounds to 250 in my first year at Eastern when I red-shirted. The coaches knew that guys from 18-20 who might not be Pac 10 players now, would mature a lot, so that's who they went after."

Simmons and Mickel were the first to make it to the NFL after Eastern became a Division I-AA football member in 1984. They best embody what Eastern football was about then, and what it has become. Despite immediate success on the field — the Eagles advanced to the second round of the I-AA playoffs in 1985 — the program suffered a near fatal blow in 1986.

"I was a senior that year," says Simmons. "I knew I had a chance to make it to the NFL, even though we didn't make it into the Big Sky Conference."

"It was a strange time," says Mickel, who was in his sophomore season. "There was a 24-hour period where we thought the program was going to get dropped."

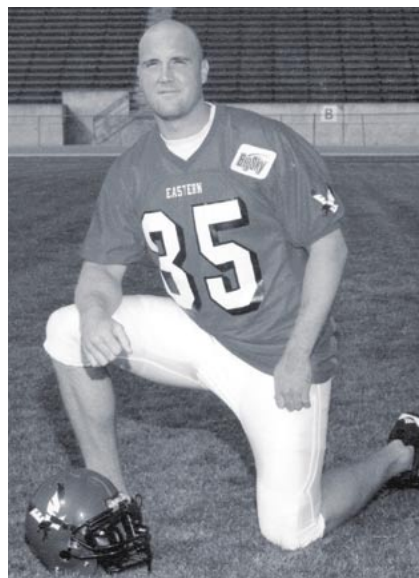
"That's why when I go back there

now, I'm amazed," Simmons says. "Guys have shorts with 'EWU Football' on them! If I were invited back to do a pre-game speech, I'd tell them they are more big time than what they believe. The ball game has changed."

A year later, in 1987, Eastern was accepted into the Big Sky Conference. Gradually, it became a winning program known for its ability to produce professional caliber talent.

"I think a lot of it has to do with the coaching staff," says Eastern's most recent NFL draftee, Dan Curley. "They are very supportive of the players and keep your name out there."

Despite playing in only 28 games at Eastern, because of injuries, Curley was drafted in the fifth round this year by the St. Louis Rams. He missed the first part



Curley

of Rams camp due to a torn calf muscle, but is expected to be one of three tight ends on St. Louis' roster in 2003.

"I've still got some studying to do," says Curley. "The play book is the size of the yellow pages. They insert new plays and subtleties every day. There are two different tight ends and a fullback not much different than a tight end. At

times, because of the complexity, I find myself focusing on the wrong position."

Curley is one of at least a dozen Eastern players expected to be on a professional roster in 2003 (see chart). Another is record-setting running back Jesse Chatman, who is in his second year at San Diego. Despite being undrafted, the 5-foot-8, 215-pound Chatman led all NFL rushers in the pre-season last year with 234 yards on 46 carries.

As a backup to pro bowler LaDainian Tomlinson, Chatman probably won't get many carries in the regular season, so he'll settle for making a contribution on special teams. In one of the all-time great football quotes this year, Chatman told the *San Diego Union Tribune*, "special teams ain't no lollygag deal. That's how I assume I made the team last year, because I took my special teams seriously."

It is that kind of mentality that increasingly defines an Eastern Washington University football player. "It gives you a sense of Eagle pride," says Mickel, "to see Chatman at San Diego and Curley at St. Louis with a great chance to make it at the next level. One of our strengths has always been the belief that it's us against the world."

Mickel admits that he gets frustrated at times with the lack of publicity for Eastern's football program because "it's top notch." But he's encouraged by the growing numbers of Eagles who have made it to the next level, which draws attention to the program. Since 1984, 41 Eastern football players have signed free agent contracts or been drafted by the NFL or Canadian Football League teams.

"After 20 years of competing at that level, it starts to build slowly," says Mickel. "A lot of the guys I played with are now high school coaches around the state, who aren't afraid to speak highly of Eastern."

"There's such an excellent group of people coaching at Eastern," adds Curley, "and so many coaches at the high school



*Jeff Mickel in Los Angeles Rams Uniform (L) and Ed Simmons in Washington Redskins uniform (R) pose together at Los Angeles Coliseum in 1989, after facing each other on the offensive line in an NFL preseason game.*

level have been influenced by our program.”

Just like Eastern envisioned when it became an NCAA 1-AA football member in 1984.

“We didn’t take anybody’s evaluation but our own,” says Larry Hattermer, who was Eastern’s offensive coordinator when the University became a Division 1-AA football member. “You’ve got to give former head coach Dick Zornes credit. We made offensive linemen a high priority, which we became known for. We recruited the tall athletic kid, who might be more interested in other sports and had been passed over by other schools.”

Eastern’s most recent draft choice is an example of this kind of recruiting philosophy that hasn’t changed much over the past 20 years.

“They do a good job at projecting what someone might do,” says Curley. “I was more interested in basketball than football.”

Simmons, who was Eastern’s first 1-AA football player to be drafted by the NFL, also remembers how good Eastern coaches were at seeing raw talent. “I remember when Larry (Hattermer) came to watch me play basketball,” he says. “I fouled out. I was too aggressive. I was trying to impress him with my hustle.”

Eventually the hustle paid off for both Eastern and Simmons, who became the first Division 1-AA player from Eastern to make it in the NFL. He helped pave the way for other Eagles with NFL dreams. “I think, more or less, I put confidence in the guys who were in the EWU program,” says Simmons. “They say ‘if you can make it, I can make it.’ And I can tell them about the time I had my second Super Bowl championship celebration on the lawn of the White House. We were out there with the first President Bush, with a big old barbecue going on. He had horse shoes set up, and nobody wanted to play. Guys were like, ‘horse shoes, what’s that? That’s what old people do.’ So I had a small quick game with the president, and he whipped my tail good.”

It’s that kind of story, stories shared between guys who have forged a common bond over the years, that now help cement Eastern’s tradition. There is a growing sense of excellence and consistency — thanks to those who made it — that creates Eagle pride in the process.

“When I think about Eastern,” says Curley, “I think of all of people pulling for me, both those in the past and those in the present who want me to do well. I want them to know that I’m

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## EAGLES IN THE PROS

(Year listed is the final year each individual played at EWU. The line that follows is the original team they were drafted by or signed a free agent contract with.)

**Dan Curley** - Tight End – ‘02. Drafted in 5th round by **St. Louis Rams**

**Josh Blankenship** - Quarterback – ‘02. Free Agent Contract with **Miami Dolphins** ~~~ Waived in June 2003

**Jesse Chatman** - Running Back – ‘01. Free Agent Contract with **San Diego Chargers**

**Lamont Brightful** - Wide Receiver>Returns – ‘01. Drafted in 6th round by **Baltimore Ravens**

**David Sherrod** - Offensive Line – ‘01. Free Agent Contract with **Chicago Bears** ~~~ Waived by Miami Dolphins March 2003

**Chris Polinder** - Offensive Line – ‘01. Free Agent contract with **Detroit Fury** (Arena Football League). Now with **Colorado Crush** (AFL)

**Anthony Griffin** – Linebacker – ‘01. Free agent contract with **Chicago Rush** (AFL) ~~~ No longer on roster

**Dario Romero** - Defensive Line – ‘00. Free Agent contract with **Edmonton** (CFL). Now with the **Miami Dolphins**

**Luke Fritz** - Offensive Line – ‘00. Free Agent contract with **Carolina Panthers**. Now with the **Montreal Alouettes** (CFL)

**Bashir Levingston** - Return Specialist - ‘98. Free Agent contract with **NY Giants**. Now with the **Toronto Argonauts** (CFL) as a cornerback

**Tom Ackerman** - Offensive Guard – ‘95. Drafted in 5th round by New Orleans . 8th season in NFL, now with **Tennessee**

## NOTABLE FORMER EASTERN PROS

**Jeff Ogden** - Wide Receiver – ‘97 Free Agent contract with Dallas. Played five seasons in NFL with **Dallas, Miami** and **Baltimore**

**Jackie Kellogg** - Defensive Back – ‘93. Free Agent contract with **San Francisco 49ers**. Played in four different pro leagues in his decade-long career: Released by **San Francisco** prior to start of ‘95 season. Six seasons with **Calgary Stampeders**, one with the **Edmonton Eskimos** both of the CFL. Two seasons with the **Frankfurt Galaxy** of the World League. One season with **Memphis** of the ill-fated XFL

**Kurt Schulz** - Defensive Back – ‘91 Drafted in seventh round by **Buffalo**. Played ten seasons in the NFL, including his final two in **Detroit**