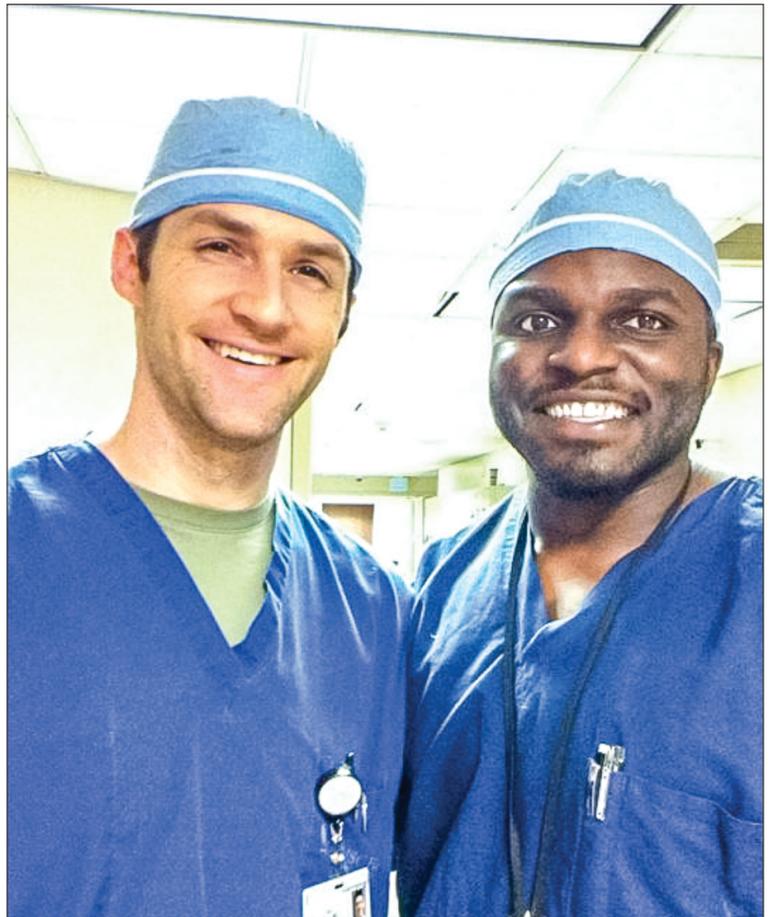
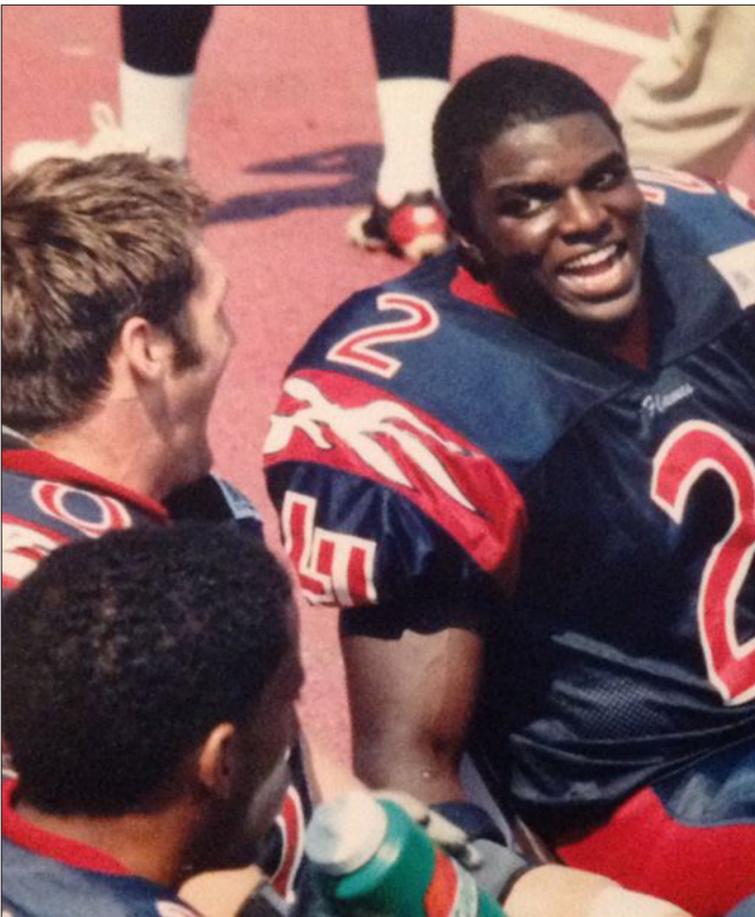


SPORTS

September 15, 2020

B1

back in the 'Burg

PHOTOS PROVIDED

FRIENDSHIP - Jay Cline (left) and Samkon Gado (right) became close friends in their years playing for Liberty football – and remain friends today.

Roommates reunite

How a college friendship brought NFL RB-turned ENT doctor Samkon Gado back to Lynchburg

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As Samkon Gado suited up Nov. 13, 2005, to take the field for the Green Bay Packers in his first NFL start, he knew Jay Cline, his best friend and college roommate, was watching from the stands.

They felt like they were living an absurd dream. Both pre-med students and football players at Liberty, the duo bonded over four years of brutal schedules, constantly juggling medical coursework with their football practice.

Now Gado was playing with Brett Favre, barely a month after being cut from the Kansas City Chiefs roster before ever playing a game. Three touchdowns later, his NFL career was off and running – a six-season career that would take him all over America, from Green Bay to Houston and everywhere in between.

“It didn’t seem like it was really happening,” Gado said in a video call.

That November night changed his life

forever. But fifteen years later, he is back in Lynchburg, reunited with Cline not by football but by the love for medicine they both share. All along, Gado has known what his goal is: one day serving his homeland of Nigeria through medicine.

Gado’s journey didn’t always point toward medicine, much less the NFL, however. Born in Nigeria, he moved to South Carolina at age 9 because his father wanted to attend seminary.

In his new surroundings, Gado soon wanted to play football, but his parents wanted him to play soccer, Gado’s father said in a Liberty Game On video. Eventually, however, his parents relented – and Gado’s football career began.

As his skills increased as a running back and he started thinking about college, he made the decision to attend Liberty University and play football. Before long, he would cross paths with Cline for the first time.

“The first time I had the opportunity to meet him was during a summer practice session before school started,” Gado said. “We

were part of a small group of players on the football team who had the same perspective, with very similar interests with regard to school and our walk with the Lord.”

Cline and Gado quickly realized that their dreams lay along the same lines. Both football players and pre-med students passionate about their studies, both soft-spoken, studious men, they quickly ignited a fast friendship – a friendship full of humorous college moments.

Gado often visited Cline’s home in Danville, Virginia, during breaks.

“His mom would make my favorite casserole and I’d sleep in his bed downstairs, and we would just get doted on for two days,” Gado said. “She’d send us back with these piles of food, and of course it’d be gone three days later.”

But even as they enjoyed fun memories, the relentless pace of life as a college football player meant that maintaining high grades in pre-med honors coursework was a constant juggling act – a challenge that Gado would become increasingly acquainted with as the years rolled by.

“Those were busy days. Lots of early mornings and lots of late nights – I think playing any sport during college definitely changes your college experience,” Cline said in a Zoom interview.

Though he worked hard, Gado never believed he could make it to the NFL. So, when he graduated and Flames Coach Ken Karcher helped him get an opportunity to

“I wanted the game to end as quickly as possible so that I wouldn’t mess it up – and I was so glad when the game was over.”

– Samkon Gado

sign with the Kansas City Chiefs in the summer of 2005, he jumped at the chance.

The Chiefs cut him before he ever played, however, and before long the Packers signed him – thanks to the slate of injuries that would eventually give him his opportunity to start that fateful November evening in 2005.

It was a moment he will never forget. “I wanted the game to end as quickly as possible so that I wouldn’t mess it up – and I was so glad when the game was over,” Gado said.

See **ROOMMATES** B4

Running into the season



ISAAC APON | LIBERTY FOOTBALL

GAME READY – While having worked hard in practice and scrimmages, the Flames lack the game experience that WKU salvaged last week against Louisville.

Preview of Flames football season opener against Western Kentucky

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After six months of uncertainty – including two Power 5 league cancellations, multiple schedule adjustments, numerous health and safety protocols and the most bizarre spring and summer in sports history, Liberty football is back.

The Flames are preparing for Saturday’s 2020 season opener against a formidable opponent in Western Kentucky. Led by second-year Head Coach Tyson Helton, the Hilltoppers are coming off of a 9-4 record last year and possess one of the most talented rosters LU will face this fall.

“We have a great challenge ahead of us against a team that is expected to compete for a conference championship in (the) Conference USA,” Liberty Flames Head Coach Hugh Freeze said during a press conference Monday. “(WKU features) 26 returning seniors and 50 (total) uppersclassmen). So, it’s a very mature team that won 9 games last year and certainly are going to be a great test for us to open the season.”

Freeze also announced Monday that Auburn transfer Malik Willis would get the start against Western Kentucky, noting that the quarterback competition is still ongoing. Grad transfer Chris Ferguson will prepare

as the team’s backup for the first game.

“We feel very good about (Willis) and Chris (Ferguson), and even (Johnathan Bennett),” Freeze said. “We just felt like Malik will maybe give us a little extra something when plays don’t quite go the way we want with his legs. So, he is going to get the start Saturday.”

Hilltoppers’ quarterback Tyrrell “Piggy T” Pigrome is a graduate transfer from Maryland, where he played four years, starting only seven games due to injuries. At 5-foot-10-inches and 210 pounds, Pigrome provides a dual threat under center for WKU.

See **RUNNING** B2

Making adjustments

Club sports teams adapt to ever-changing COVID-19 restrictions

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Like Liberty's NCAA sports programs, the 40 men's and women's Club Sports teams on campus are encountering a plethora of challenges as they face the upcoming season.

Some of those adjustments include mask-wearing requirements (both indoor and outdoor sports), staying six feet apart from teammates in locker rooms, and having a lower number of athletes in weight rooms during workout sessions. Additionally, if any team reaches a 20% positive testing rate, all activities will be suspended.

Men's Division I hockey Associate Head Coach Jeff Boettger helps lead a task force in charge of communicating with LU's Office of Legal Affairs, the Health and Wellness Department and the Athletic Training department to figure out the best methods of combating the difficulties ahead.

"We've all been in constant contact, trying to get information out to players so they know

what to expect," Boettger said.

The first hurdle the hockey team overcame was postponing tryouts until Sept. 7-11. The team delayed tryouts because several members are international students, including sophomore goalie Cedric LeSieur, a native of Montreal, Quebec. Upon arrival, Liberty required every international student to enter a precautionary two-week self-isolation period. Once that time was completed, tryouts could resume.

The prevailing expectation is that conference games will resume in the spring, but the fall season is still in limbo. Boettger and Head Coach Kirk Handy are anxious to play this season and build off of last year's historic success.

"We are very confident in having a season," Boettger said. "We have a strong core that has the mentality to do well. We could easily finish in the top five nationally."

Liberty's men's ultimate frisbee team is another program whose promising season was interrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak. While the team is hungry to replicate last

year's success, practices will look different for the foreseeable future.

Before they are cleared to practice, players get their temperatures recorded and fill out a questionnaire.

Ultimate Head Coach Kevin Habermas believes the program has plenty of upside to build on from last year and that these temporary limitations will not affect that growth.

"We had a ton of people at tryouts last fall, and it was really exciting to see the program grow," Habermas said. "You've just got to take what you get and kind of move through it."

Even though the COVID-19 outbreak may put some seasons on hold or slow their pace down, the pandemic will not prevent athletes from getting injured. For the Athletic Training Department, the safety precautions will add stress to the already high-pressure job of constantly rehabilitating athletes.

Athletes will only be able to meet with trainers by appointment, so walk-ins are no longer an option. All staff must wash their hands while treating patients and frequently clean any surface they touch.

Although the challenge at hand seems daunting, Assistant Athletic Director for Sports Medicine Angie Witt believes that her team of six trainers has what it takes to successfully treat athletes.

"We will be doing the best we can to build each other up, and we will use this chance to influence others for Christ in the way we act," Witt said.

Ultimately, the ability for club sports teams to play in the upcoming season will depend



NATHAN SPENCER | LIBERTY PHOTOGRAPHY
VARIETY – In addition to 18 NCAA programs, Liberty offers 40 club sports teams, including disc golf.



JOEL ISIMEME | LIBERTY PHOTOGRAPHY

SCREECHING HALT – Quinn Ryan (above) and the Liberty men's hockey team had their historic 2019-20 season cut short due to COVID-19 cancellations.

on how well the students and coaches follow the health guidelines.

"We have to trust the athletes to be responsible," Witt said. "Their seasons depend on their decisions."

“We have to trust the athletes to be responsible. Their seasons depend on their decisions.”

While so much remains unknown, Boettger believes club sports is in the best possible position to have a 2020-21 season.

"The collaboration between all the different departments has been exceptional," Boettger said. "Things are changing quickly, but it has been a blessing to see all of us work together to get teams ready for a new year."

– Angie Witt, Sports Medicine Asst. Athletic Director, Club Sports

SIMMONS is a sports reporter.

ROOMMATES continued from B1

Gado would go on to win two NFC Rookie of the Week awards and score seven touchdowns that season, according to ESPN – quickly gaining a reputation among Packers fans in a year often marked by failure for the Packers (a 4-12 disaster).

Looking back now, one memory in particular stands out for Gado as one of the highlights of his career: a double-date with then-fellow rookie, now-NFL legend Aaron Rodgers.

"There was a girl that he was interested in from his hometown in college, and she brought a friend with her," Gado said. "So, we went on a date, it wasn't really that remarkable when it was happening. ... We went out, had a nice steak dinner ... And that was that. It only really became something significant when Aaron became Aaron and then it was like, 'Yes, I have that story. I was his wingman.'"

After that famous season, however, Gado moved between teams with varying degrees of success, always knowing that his ultimate goal was expanding his medical knowledge – not NFL success.

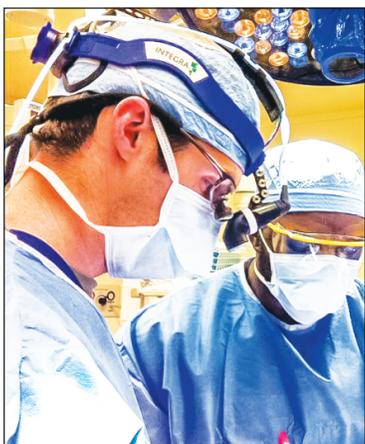


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PARTNERS – After crossing paths both in college and medical school, Gado and Cline now work together at Blue Ridge ENT in Lynchburg, Virginia.

"Because of the way that I entered (the league), I never felt that I was given the assurance to know that (football) was something I could plan on the next year," Gado said. "I never signed a big contract; I never was drafted. ... I was always afraid that I was just one decision away from going to medical school."

“The question we’ve asked ourselves is why does the Lord keep bringing us back together. Is it to keep making us better and sharpen us for different things, or is it for something together?”

– Samkon Gado

Simultaneously, however, Gado knew he wanted to return to Nigeria as a doctor one day – and he was preparing for that very thing, even as Cline went through medical school. In an NFL.com interview with Adam Scheffer in 2007, Gado discussed missing offseason practice so he could study for the MCAT to apply to medical school. According to ESPN and PackersNews.com, he even spent time working at nursing homes and other medical facilities to sharpen his skills during most off-seasons – and when the end of his career finally rolled around in 2010, he knew it was time to make the step and apply.

That decision saw Cline and Gado reconnect, five years after graduation separated them. Gado chose to attend the Medical University of South Carolina to continue his studies – the same school Cline was in his residency at as an ENT specialist.

Both married by that point, Gado and Cline had kept up with each other throughout Gado's NFL career, with Gado often visiting Cline or vice versa when they had spare time.

"It was fun for me – it was exciting to vicariously continue my football career through Sam. I had hung up my cleats, and part of me was thankful to be done," Cline said. "But ... it was really exciting to visit and go to games. He'd give me tours of the locker room, so that was fun."

After making the jump from constant NFL

action to nonstop studying, Gado graduated from medical school and applied for a residency at Saint Louis University – an opportunity he attained as he followed in his friend's footsteps to study otolaryngology (ENT).

All along, Gado had planned to move back to Nigeria to begin his work in his homeland after finishing his residency, but when the 2020 coronavirus pandemic hit in his last of five years at SLU, he knew his family would need a break.

After finishing his residency this summer, the opportunity opened up at Cline's ENT practice in Lynchburg to reconnect with his lifelong friend – and he realized Lynchburg could be that break.

"We've changed our approach a little bit," Gado said. "Residency happened, a wife and three kids – with another one on the way – happened, and I think we just needed a time of recovery. So that was what led us to come to Lynchburg. The job really seemed to be a good step – the right step in my learning."

As he continues developing a plan to help Nigeria through his organization, The Jonah Inheritance, aiming to build surgical infrastructure in the country while involving local doctors, he is enjoying his time reconnecting with Cline, 20 years after they first met.

"Our goal really is to start finding doctors who are indigenous and supporting them," Gado said. "And one of the ways we want to do that is to build clinics for them, create an infrastructure ... and hopefully down the road we'll be able to open up a surgery center. And so Lynchburg seemed to be the perfect place to start developing the skills to do that."

Though life brushing shoulders with Aaron Rodgers and blasting through defenses seem a world away, football and medicine have come together to provide Gado with a one-of-a-kind resume, and he's grateful for every opportunity he's had. He has no idea where medicine may take him next – but somehow, Cline will probably be involved.

"The question we've asked ourselves is why does the Lord keep bringing us back together," Gado said. "Is it to keep making us better and sharpen us for different things, or is it for something together?"

NEKRASOV is the sports editor.



PHOTO PROVIDED

DRIVEN – Gado studied for his MCAT while playing in the NFL. He retired from football in 2010 to attend medical school.

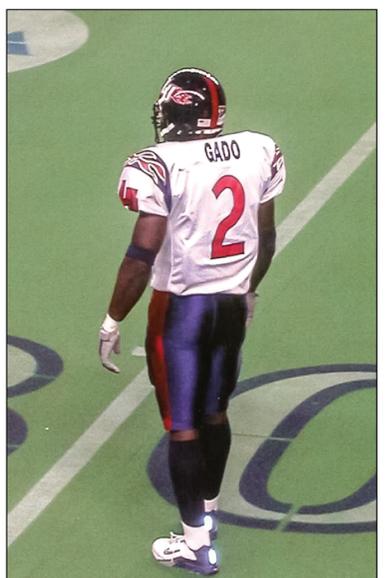


PHOTO PROVIDED

OPPORTUNITY – Despite being only the third-string RB at Liberty, Gado signed with the Packers and played for six NFL seasons.