

CHANCELLOR GRAD POISED TO BECOME AREA'S HIGHEST PICK

Gross-Matos goes from 'Bambi' to NFL scouts' dear

BY TAFT COGHILL JR.
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When Penn State defensive coaches Brent Pry and Sean Spencer arrived at Chancellor High School in the spring of 2015, they wanted an up-close view of sophomore defensive end Yetur Gross-Matos.

The Nittany Lions' coaching staff was in the process of reestablishing the program as a Big Ten and national power and was in search of talent that could help them reach that level.

Pry and Spencer knew right away Gross-Matos had potential. On Thursday, he could become the first player from the Fredericksburg area to be selected in the first round of the NFL draft.

"He had this frame, this body, that was just beautiful," Pry said of a high school Gross-Matos. "He had all the makings of a big-time looking kid. He was just kind of like a baby deer. We kind of joked around that he was like Bambi."

Gross-Matos continued to thrive at Chancellor and received more than 30 scholarship offers from major college programs. He orally committed to the Nittany Lions as a junior the following spring. Still, Pry and Penn State's coaches continued to sweat until he signed a national letter of intent in February 2017.

TUNE IN

NFL DRAFT

Tonight-Saturday (ABC, ESPN, NFL Network)

"I remember the messages and the tweets where he would get another big offer and at the time we'd kind of hold our breath because we were still kind of getting it going," said Pry, the team's defensive coordinator since 2016. "We'd reach out to [his father, Rob Matos] or Yetur and they'd be like, 'Coach, I appreciate the offer from Alabama or Clemson or whoever it was, but I've got my new home.' And we always breathed easy because the family was outstanding throughout the recruiting process."

TURNING HEADS EARLY

It didn't take long for Penn State's players and coaches to realize Gross-Matos was for real.

The summer before his first fall camp, he trained with former defensive lineman Garrett Sickels and others in voluntary workouts. The group immediately reported back to Spencer, who was the Nittany Lions' defensive line coach from 2014-19 and now holds the same position for the NFL's New York Giants.

"They just said, 'Coach, you're going to have a special one on your hands here,'" Spencer recalled. "It was exciting to hear those guys say that."

The Nittany Lions didn't redshirt Gross-Matos. He played sparingly as a true

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freshman because coaches knew he'd be in line for a bigger role sooner rather than later.

He finished with 17 tackles and 1 ½ sacks in his initial college season. Spencer said he was playing mostly off of instincts and motor.

"He was 'See ball, get ball,'" Spencer said. "He had no idea what he was doing or why he was doing it. I think what he did was he improved his mental game by studying film and watching film and just becoming a student of the game."

Spencer said Gross-Matos became a meticulous note-taker. If he didn't have an answer to a question, he'd write it down and come back the following day with the solution.

Gross-Matos took advantage of injuries on the team's defensive line his sophomore season and earned a starting position. He never looked back.

"He just became Yetur Gross-Matos after that," Spencer said.

Pry said Gross-Matos' change of direction skills (6-foot-5, 266 pounds) for his size is uncommon. He noted Gross-Matos could play inside in "combat mode" and get "down and dirty" or he could just launch off the edge and create havoc.

"We'd let him fire off a couple of snaps and then we'd twist him and turn him and fire off and twist him," Pry said. "It just kept those offensive tackles and tight ends off balance. He was a lot to handle out there on the edge."

In his final two seasons, Gross-Matos racked up a combined 94 tackles, 17 ½ sacks and 37 tackles for loss. He was a first-team all-Big Ten selection his junior season and declared for the draft.

Pry and Spencer said he left a legacy at Penn State. Pry said his "infectious smile," kindness to teammates and desire to do well for the greater good of the team will be missed.

"He has the most incredible practice habits," Pry said. "The way he worked in practice was a constant example that we used for the rest of the defense and the rest of the team. Sometimes we had to slow his big butt down in the walkthrough because we didn't need him going 110 miles an hour."

ALANDING SPOT

The majority of online projections and television analysts foresee Gross-Matos as a late first-round pick. He's been projected as high as 18th overall to the Miami Dolphins and as low as the early second round.

Gross-Matos said he's been in touch with multiple franchises.

"I have spoken to quite a few teams," Gross-Matos said. "However, I couldn't tell you what is going to happen on draft night. I've never paid attention to mock drafts."

Tony Pauline, an NFL Draft analyst at profootballnetwork.com, slates Gross-Matos as a late first-rounder. He has Gross-Matos rated as the No. 2 edge rusher in the draft behind Ohio State star Chase Young.

Pauline said Gross-Matos' stock is high in part because pass rushers are at a premium.

"He makes a lot of plays up the field and behind the line of scrimmage, which is a hot commodity on Sundays," Pauline said.

Still, added Pauline, there are questions.

He noted that because of a hamstring issue, Gross-Matos didn't run

the 40-yard dash at the NFL combine in February. He could've rectified that at Penn State's pro day last month, but it was canceled because of COVID-19 concerns.

"I am pretty confident it has not hurt my stock at all," Gross-Matos said of not being able to run the 40 for scouts.

Gross-Matos bench-pressed 225 pounds 20 times at the combine and performed well in agility drills. Pauline said it remains to be seen how Gross-Matos will hold up against the run at the NFL level.

"He's got to do a little bit better with his hands consistently, strike and just dominate blocks a little bit better than he does," Spencer said. "But it's not a glaring fault of his. It's just something that if we were going into next year and I was coaching him again, that's one thing I would say his game needed to go another step."

Pauline said Gross-Matos' NFL usage will depend on where he's drafted because some teams may want to use him as an outside linebacker in a 3-4 scheme.

Gross-Matos said he didn't do that much in college, but Spencer said with his background as a high school basketball player and ability to move in space, it wouldn't be an issue for him.

"He's an ascending talent," Spencer said. "Sky's the limit with this guy. He's not tapped out by any means."

BIG DAY ARRIVES

Gross-Matos was one of 58 players selected to be interviewed by ESPN after his name is called. On Wednesday, the NFL sent Gross-Matos a plethora of items from league sponsors including snacks and hats from all 32 NFL teams.

They family is ordering a celebratory cake as well as catering from McCoy's Smoked BBQ. But the league is also sending a large delivery from Pizza Hut and a cooler of Bud Light.

"Which is interesting because we don't drink," Rob Matos said.

It's not what the family envisioned for his draft party. But because of social distancing guidelines, fewer than 10 people will be at their Spotylvania County home.

"If you don't have an appropriate setup they will not broadcast you," Matos said. "They don't want to give the impression they're disregarding what's going on in society."

The family received tripods, microphones and two of the newest iPhones complete with the necessary applications for live streaming. It all has to be returned Monday.

One live camera will be set up in the main area where the family is watching the draft and will be on at all times.

Matos will be in contact with a liaison to inform him when the broadcast will be focused on them.

After Gross-Matos is picked, he has interviews lined up with NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and a host of media outlets.

Matos said he and his wife, Sakinah, will likely be restless leading up to the moment their son's name is called.

"We're all extremely excited," Matos said. "We've been waiting for this day so long it almost seems like the days are going slower ... I think we're all holding back a bit. But when the time comes, there's going to be a great deal of emotion."

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FredNats' newest niche is A-OK

FREDERICKSBURG RECEIVES INVITE TO BE WASHINGTON'S LOW-A MINORS AFFILIATE

BY JOEY LOMONACO

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Washington Nationals extended invitations to four minor-league teams on Wednesday, and Fredericksburg is positioned to become the organization's Low-A affiliate.

"We are thrilled to be continuing an incredible and deep relationship with the Washington Nationals that began with their arrival in D.C. back in 2005," FredNats Chairman and Owner Art Silber said in statement.

"We've enjoyed watching the Nats' future stars – like Juan Soto, Trea Turner, Ryan Zimmerman, and Stephen Strasburg – grow up and develop in front of our fans. The continuation of our long relationship will allow fans throughout the greater Fredericksburg region to enjoy seeing the next stars of the Nationals play in front of their eyes in our new ballpark opening in 2021 in Fredericksburg."

With Wednesday's announcements, Washington's minor-league structure looks like this: Rochester (AAA), Harrisburg, Pa., (AA) Wilmington, Del., (High-A) and Fredericksburg. Wilmington joins the Nationals organization following a lengthy affiliate relationship with Kansas City Royals.

Washington also parted ways with Hagerstown (previously Low-A) and Fresno, its AAA affiliate for the past two seasons.

While the FredNats are technically moving down a rung on the Nationals' ladder, a contraction of the overall minor league system ensures that plenty of high-level prospects will start their climb to the Bigs in Fredericksburg. Short-season and rookie ball affiliated leagues are disappearing in 2021 as part of a new agreement with Major League Baseball.

"In complete honesty, I think the caliber of play is going to dramatically increase," FredNats general manager Nick Hall told The Free Lance-Star. "We can look at High-A, Low-A, all that kind of stuff. But when it comes down to it, the affiliated system went down from six teams to four. The best talent from six leagues is now combined into four."

Accordingly, the 2021 MLB draft will be 20 rounds, half its pre-pandemic length.

"On average, we're going to be getting guys out here that were drafted in the first few rounds, and that's huge," Hall said.

Potential affiliates will receive MLB teams' formal proposals by Dec. 18 and have 30 days to respond. The new agreements will have a fixed term of 10 years.

Required facilities upgrades or other financial considerations will prove a dealbreaker for some teams, meaning that replacements will need to be brought into the fold before leagues can be set.

Hall said he expects the FredNats will know their league assignment by the new year.

"We're excited to review all of the details," he said.

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Sermons on the mound: Nationals' aces pitch advice

PHOTOS BY JEFF ROBERSON / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Washington Nationals pitcher Wil Crowe catches a pop up during a Feb. 14 spring training workout. Crowe is one of the beneficiaries of veteran teammate Stephen Strasburg's tutelage on the mound.

STRASBURG, SCHERZER TUTOR TEAMMATES

BY HOWARD FENDRICH
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla.—Stephen Strasburg chatted by his locker early in spring training with Wil Crowe—just a World Series MVP and a non-roster invitee for the Washington Nationals plopping themselves on a pair of folding chairs to talk shop during camp's ample idle time.

Strasburg discussed “little pointers and some cues” about throwing out of the stretch, Crowe said, before an unexpected offer arrived.

“He said to meet him outside the next morning at 8, on the mound,” said Crowe, a 2017 second-round draft pick from the University of South Carolina who split 2019 between Double-A Harrisburg and Triple-A Fresno. “It was just me and him; no coaches, no staff. He watched me do my movements and try to take what he does and blend it into what I do.”

Fans know what Strasburg

and three-time Cy Young Award winner Max Scherzer can do when they're on a mound for the Nationals, whose exhibition schedule resumes Thursday against St. Louis after Wednesday's day off. Their bona fides

make that obvious. Less so is what that pair, Patrick Corbin and Anibal Sánchez—the starters who form what Washington manager Dave Martinez jokingly calls the “Four Amigos”—do

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behind the scenes to teach less-experienced pitchers in the organization.

“It’s just a part of being a good teammate and caring about the guy next to you. As you get older, all the players around you seem to get younger and younger. You just kind of have to make yourself available. It’s important for the young guys to want to speak up and ask questions, because once they realize that we’re very approachable—I think we all are—they’ll see you can learn from anybody,” said Strasburg, who is 31 as he enters the first season under a \$245 million, seven-year contract.

“I can learn something from a Wil Crowe, purely because his path to this point could be completely different from what I had to go through. You can get helpful feedback from anybody in this clubhouse,” Strasburg said. “That doesn’t necessarily mean they should listen to everything we have to

tell them—or that we can’t listen to things they’ve picked up along the way.”

Martinez and his pitching coach, Paul Menhart, refer to Strasburg, et al., as assistant coaches.

Scherzer, 35, described the process as giving others “crumbs at a time,” because “when you figure it out yourself, it’s a lot more powerful than when somebody else tells you how to do it.”

They give tips on arm slot or grips, say, between-start routines or pitch sequencing.

Just like they got such advice, years ago.

Separately, Strasburg and Scherzer both mentioned Dan Haren as someone who guided them when he was their teammate—Strasburg in Washington, Scherzer in Arizona.

“They’re giving back to the next generation. When Max goes into our minor league facility when their spring training starts, which he’s done the last three years, and teaches them ‘Pitching 101’ and what he does and how he prepares and that type of

thing, that’s invaluable,” Nationals GM Mike Rizzo said. “He’s up at 6 in the morning to come down here and talk to 50 minor league pitchers that are trying to take his job. ... If you’re a pitcher with any kind of sense at all, why wouldn’t you just try to mirror what these great pitchers do? If just one thing wears off from Stras or Max or Patrick or Sánchez, you’ve gained a lot.”

Austin Voth, competing to be Washington’s No. 5 starter, said Scherzer is “always trying to get me to pitch from the ball of my foot,” for example. Voth said Strasburg showed him how he holds the baseball for a changeup.

Another righty trying to earn that final rotation spot, Joe Ross, said Strasburg gave insight into how he finishes his curveball. Ross spoke to Sánchez about his butterfly changeup. Scherzer, Ross said, explained “the mentality of kind of attacking hitters and setting up pitches and things like that, when you can miss and where you can miss.”