

CULTURE

Aspiring dentist from Danville first aims for football career in Canada

A school program got Malik Clements interested in a dental career. But now the former Danville star eyes a second season in the Canadian Football League.



by **Judy Owen**
May 23, 2022



WINNIPEG, Manitoba – Malik Clements came off the football field after almost four hours of practicing on an unseasonably cold, windy and rainy Canadian spring day and he was smiling.

And what a smile it was – toothpaste commercial-caliber the linebacker didn't get by accident. More about his affinity for perfect pearly whites later.

The native of Danville is at training camp for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, the back-to-back Grey Cup champions of the Canadian Football League.

“From the outside looking in, you see it and you want to be part of a winning culture,” Clements said last Friday after Day 2 of camp. “You could tell that they have a tight-knit group. They had a lot of guys come back.”

Clements, 25, was signed by the Blue Bombers on March 4, two weeks after being released by the CFL's Edmonton Elks following an injury-marred 2021 rookie season.

He played just seven games after tweaking a hamstring, then strained a pectoral muscle. He recorded seven defensive tackles and two on special teams.

The Elks went 3-11 in a season shortened to 14 games from the regular 18 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The team then cleaned house, hiring a new dual head coach and general manager who overhauled the roster.

Undaunted by his release, Clements acted as his own agent and sent film to the Bombers. It was enough to give the 6-foot, 228-pound hopeful a chance to crack the championship squad (11-3 in 2021) that's based in the prairie province of Manitoba, north of North Dakota and Minnesota.

Having a Plan B and embracing hard work are traits Clements learned growing up in Danville.

His mother, Shara, was a single parent to Malik and his two brothers and sister while working at the Goodyear tire manufacturing plant.

"She worked hard so we never needed for anything," he said. "We always had a roof over our heads and food on the table."

She then married Wesley Hall, who blended his three sons into the family. The couple also had a daughter together, so eight kids filled the home.

"I'm family-oriented. There's never a dull moment in the house with all those kids running around," Clements said, with another bright smile.

He did most of his running on the football field, excelling as a wide receiver and safety at George Washington High School. It was there he also discovered a career option off the field.

It started with advice from his Danville dentist, Dr. David Childress, and orthodontist, Dr. Bryan Spurrier.

"They used to joke around with me all the time saying, 'You know, you shouldn't play football, you should be a dentist, be an orthodontist,' because I guess football is hard on the body," Clements recalled.

His high school offered a certified dental assistant program, so Clements signed up.

"I absolutely fell in love with it," he said. "Giving people smiles on their face after they take their braces off, it brought so much joy to me. It was like another passion and I fell in love with it.

"I always thought, 'You know, if football didn't work out or football worked out, once football ends I could go the dentistry route.' That's still my plan."

In high school, he immediately caught the attention of college scouts. He was rated the No. 46th prospect in Virginia and No. 124th safety in the 2015 class by ESPN.com



Malik Clements. Photo by Judy Owen.



Map by Robert Lunsford.

He drew some interest from the University of Virginia and coveted Virginia Tech, although neither made an offer. After committing to the University of Cincinnati, he turned down an offer from Liberty University.

Two factors played into his decision to go to Cincinnati.

The Bearcats' defensive end coach was Robert Prunty, who hails from Chatham near Danville.

"We were really close and I kind of felt comfortable going to school where he was at because I already knew him," Clements said.

He also wanted to spread his wings outside his home state.

While he initially played safety for the Bearcats, he transitioned to linebacker in his senior year. After graduating, he prepared for Pro Day in Denver but didn't get drafted by the National Football League and only had a rookie tryout with the Detroit Lions.

He admitted that not reaching his dream of playing in the NFL – and earning "life-changing money" to help his family – sent him into a "depressed state" for two to three months, time he spent at home in Danville.

He eventually started training again and went to camp at the Spring League in Atlanta in early 2019.

A few months later, he turned his sights back to dentistry. He got a job at the dental school at the University of Chapel Hill at North Carolina, commuting an hour back and forth from Danville.

In December 2019, his football dream was reignited. He caught the eye of a scout for the Elks, who saw him at one of the CFL club's tryouts. He signed for the 2020 season and later moved to Cleveland to train, living with his girlfriend he'd met at university.

Just like most people around the world, his plans got turned upside down because of the pandemic and the CFL canceled its 2020 season.

Clements remained in Cleveland, working at Amazon and a dental office while training. He finally hit the field with the Elks last August when the CFL began its shortened season.

It was an eye-opening experience for someone who had watched just one CFL game on TV, the 2018 Grey Cup. His friend Kevin Brown from the Bearcats was playing for the Ottawa Redblacks, who lost the title match to the Calgary Stampeders.

"That was like the only game I watched in the CFL, so I didn't know much," Clements admitted. "I'd never been to Canada. Once I signed, I was kind of curious and interested in being able to go to a new country and pick up a whole new game of football."

He also had to educate his family on the rules and nuances of the fast-paced game compared to the NFL. The CFL features three downs, 12 players on the field instead of 11, a longer and wider field, and receivers who can be in motion before the ball is snapped.

"I would tell Virginia players that the CFL is a great league to continue your passion of playing football," he said. "It's this falsified agenda that the CFL isn't competitive, but that's not the case."

His parents got a TV package showing CFL games and were also able to see him play a couple of games in person. He hopes they'll be able to watch him suit up for the Blue Bombers after the start of camp took a brief twist.

He arrived in Winnipeg on May 14, the day before main training camp was to start. However, the collective bargaining agreement between the CFL and its players' association expired that night with no new deal. Players went on strike the following day for the second time in league history. (The first was in 1974.)

Clements is staying in a dormitory and used the extra time to study the playbook. Veteran players also ran informal practices. A new contract was tentatively reached May 18 and camp began the next day.

The Bombers were supposed to play their first of two pre-season games on the road against the Saskatchewan Roughriders on May 23, but that game was postponed until May 31.

The team's first exhibition game is now its May 27 home tilt against Clements' former Edmonton team. Just under 100 players are participating in Winnipeg's camp, and cuts to 75 must be done by 10:59 p.m. CT on May 28.

Clements is one of nine linebackers in camp, including veterans from last season's top defense. He wants to be part of the team as it aims to extend its 2019 and 2021 championship run into a three-peat at the 109th Grey Cup in Regina, Saskatchewan, in late November.

"Like I was telling all the coaches, I'm here to be the biggest help as possible, whether that's special teams, defense, wherever," he said. "I just want to win games. That's the ultimate goal."

Blue Bombers head coach Mike O'Shea, a former CFL all-star linebacker and the league's 2021 Coach of the Year, was asked for his impression of Clements.

"When we put on the [Edmonton] film, he just was a guy who showed up on film all the time," O'Shea said. "So, that kind of style of play is something we liked.

"Now how it fits here ... I just thought he probably deserved another chance."

Malik Clements at training camp. Photo by Robert Ong, Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

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CULTURE

Danville's Malik Clements to play in Canadian Football League championship game

The former George Washington High School star is now a starting linebacker for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, who play for the Grey Cup on Sunday.



by **Judy Owen**

November 16, 2022



Malik Clements. Photo by Robert Ong.

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Malik Clements will soon be playing in the biggest football game of his career – almost two thousand miles from his roots in Danville.

The Winnipeg Blue Bombers linebacker is competing in the 109th Grey Cup game, the national championship of the Canadian Football League, against the Toronto Argonauts on Nov. 20.

The game is at Mosaic Stadium in Regina in the province of Saskatchewan, which is next door to the Blue Bombers' home in Manitoba.

There could be history in the making for the Bombers, who are seeking their third straight Grey Cup title – a feat that would be a first for the franchise.

“I’ve been to some bowl games with [the University of] Cincinnati, but the highest championship game in college is the national championship, so I’ve never been to the dance,” Clements said Monday.

“I’m super excited. I wish I could play tomorrow.”



Game highlights from the West Finals that sent the Winnipeg Blue Bombers (in blue) to the championship game. Clements is involved in tackles in plays that begins at the 8:30 mark and the 10:30 mark. He also figures in the final play that begins at 10:54. Clements is number 0.

The Bombers advanced to the Grey Cup following a 28-20 victory at home Sunday against the B.C. Lions in the CFL West Division final.

There was a scary moment for Clements on the last play of the game. He got smacked to the turf by Lions offensive lineman Sukh Chungh, who was called for a blind side block.

“Yesterday I was a bit dazed, but today I feel way better,” he said. “Kind of still upset about the whole situation, but I’m OK now.

“I’m 100 percent. I’ll still be able to play, which is all I was worried about.”

Clements called his parents, Shara and Wesley Hall in Danville, and girlfriend Alisia Barclay after the game for some celebratory conversation. He’s trying to arrange for the trio to watch the Grey Cup in person in the open-air stadium.

They better bring parkas, mittens and tuques, the Canadian name for a knit hat.

The forecast for Sunday’s 5 p.m. CT kickoff (ESPN) is a high of around 26 degrees F with a low of 12.

Malik Clements (0) in action against the British Columbia Lions. Photo courtesy of Robert Ong.

The West final in Winnipeg at IG Field was played in 21 degrees F temps with a light snow falling on the players and 30,319 fans, who delivered loud cheers and jeers that disrupted the Lions' play calling.

Clements thoroughly enjoyed it.

"I was always the type of person who didn't like the cold, but yesterday I was amped up to play," he said. "It was my first time playing in the snow.

"I've played in games where there was snow already on the ground. The simple fact it was snowing and I was playing, it was pretty amazing. With my adrenaline going, I didn't feel the cold at all."

Clements had four defensive tackles and helped star defensive end Willie Jefferson force a fumble that was recovered by Winnipeg tackle Jake Thomas.

The [@Wpg_BlueBombers](#) defence does it AGAIN! 🍷 [#GCPlayoffs](#)
pic.twitter.com/5QX0ehpx71

— CFL (@CFL) [November 13, 2022](#)

Clements – number 0 — helps cause a fumble on this play.

He hopes to contribute as much, or more, in the championship match against Toronto, which won the East Division final against the Montreal Alouettes.

“A little bit more physicality. Just come in with the same mindset each and every game to play fast, physical and clean. The Blue Bomber way.”

It hasn't taken long for Clements to immerse himself in the three-down CFL game, despite enduring some injuries.

The 26-year-old played for the Edmonton Elks in his rookie 2021 season. He got into only seven of 14 games, a schedule reduced from the usual 18 games because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He had tweaked a hamstring and then strained a pectoral muscle, finishing with 11 defensive tackles and two on special teams.

He was released by the 3-11 Elks in February after the club brought in a new dual head coach and general manager. Edmonton was the last CFL club to go on a Grey Cup run, a league-record five consecutive titles from 1978-82.

Winnipeg signed him on March 4 and he was thrilled to join the two-time defending champions, who claimed the titles in 2019 and 2021. The 2020 season was cancelled because of the pandemic.

“Man, it's been a grateful experience coming in with a great group of guys and coaches that treat you like family since Day 1,” Clements said. “It's kind of like surreal, just the way that things played out.”

“At first it was more so just trying to make the team, then the opportunity to get a couple of snaps once the season started, and then kind of into a starting role. It happened because of injuries, which was unfortunate, but the coaches put their trust in me to help me learn a new system and just try to get me as comfortable as possible.”

One thing Clements did to become more comfortable is change the No. 54 he wore at training camp to a single digit, which he's always preferred. He was No. 4 at Cincinnati.

The only single number left with Winnipeg was 0 so he took it, although he now says he should have stuck with 54. His roommate, fellow linebacker Les Maruo, is 00.

Although Clements cracked the roster, his season didn't get off to a smooth start.

The six-foot, 224-pounder suffered a knee injury early in the campaign – the first of two setbacks.

“It's crazy because, like knock on some wood, but last year was my first time really being injured and actually missing time,” he said. “For it to come again, because I'm heavy on what I eat and how I train and stuff like that, it kind of hit me hard. It was like, ‘Oh, here we go again.’”

Map by Robert Lunsford.

The second injury was to a hamstring that kept him off the field for a five-game stretch late in the season.

“This one didn't really hit me as hard because I had to really understand that I can only control what I can control. In this game of football, injuries come and go, unfortunately. My main thing was getting back healthy and just fit in where I fit in.”

Where he fit in was retaining a starting role on a defense that has been tops in the CFL for the past few years.

“The attributes that he brings, his athleticism, his speed, just the willingness to be aggressive out there, it fits right inside of what we want to do defensively,” Bombers defensive coordinator Richie Hall said when asked to describe Clements' contribution.

“There’s a lot of attributes that he brings to the table that makes us a better defensive team.”

Clements also enjoyed his teammates’ company away from the field. A group of them headed to one of Manitoba’s many lakes to fish and he caught seven walleye.

He got to know Winnipeg a bit, too, but admits not having a car hampered his tours.

“Uber kind of adds up so I try to save as much money as possible,” he said with a smile. “I got to go out a bit with the guys. I love the city, I love the people.”

The Bombers posted a franchise-best 15 wins in the regular season (15-3). Clements played 12 games, registering 31 defensive tackles, four special-teams tackles, one quarterback sack, one pass knockdown and one tackle for a loss.

The CFL has 12 players from each team on the field instead of 11 like in the National Football League, as well as a wider and longer field.

“It’s like a college atmosphere. The crowd is nonstop, loud,” he said. “And even if you do go out in the city or the Bombers store, if somebody notices us, they come up and speak. It’s just friendly, nice people.”

He’s not sure what he’ll do after the final whistle blows in the Grey Cup, but he will return to Danville.

Clements has been on a path toward a career in dentistry, with the goal of becoming an orthodontist. He may continue that, but first has something else up his sleeve.

“I’m thinking about starting... well, I don’t really want to say it because it’s a surprise back at home,” he said with a grin.

“I have some things cooking up for community work back in my hometown in Danville, Virginia, but I haven’t decided as far as a job what I’m gonna do.”

See our [previous story on Malik Clements](#) before the season started.

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