



FOOTBALL

Achieving an American dream: Azzaam Kapadia's journey from the UVa football recruiting office to the NFL

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His parents encouraged him to chase a uniquely American dream, and that's not lost on Azzaam Kapadia.

The son of Indian immigrants, and the first in his family to be born in the United States, Kapadia graduated from Virginia in May and is embarking on his first full-time gig in pro football.

He'll start as a scouting assistant with the Seattle Seahawks this week.

"I'm so lucky to have parents so open-minded to let me do what I want to do," said Kapadia, who worked as a student in the Cavaliers' football recruiting office for the past three years. "Most Indian parents are not like that."

Kapadia's parents advised him, "Don't worry about the money, but whatever you do, love what you do."

Kapadia grew up in Richmond, and said his father Altaf, an owner of convenience stores — including a few in Charlottesville — instilled a strong work ethic in him. His older sister Shannon, "is like a second mother," to him, but it was Kapadia's mom, Rozina, who signed him up to participate in youth athletics, helping him discover his passion.

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And, Kapadia's former boss at UVa, Hoos director of recruiting Justin Speros, said that trait was immediately recognizable in Kapadia upon their first meeting in January of last year following Speros' move from South Florida to join coach Tony Elliott's staff.

“It was clear [Kapadia] was eager and really just excited to be involved and had a passion for football and scouting,” Speros said.

Said Kapadia: “My mom made me try all sports when I was young, and in Indian culture you don’t really see that because there’s more hesitation and a want for you to focus more on school and things like that, so I’ve always told my mom, ‘Thank you for doing that for me.’ And so, I tried every sport when I was younger and I fell in love with football.”

He played in middle school and then as offensive lineman at Henrico High School. At that time, too, he began plotting his path toward a job in the NFL.

Volunteering with Washington

Kapadia described himself as the kid who would assemble his own mock drafts during the offseason and anxiously wait for the NFL Draft annually.

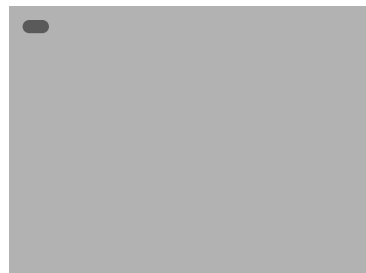
“I always made sure to tell my mom, ‘Cancel everything because I’m not doing anything except for sitting in front of the TV for those 72 hours,’” he said with a laugh. “That was my favorite weekend and that’s what I loved, so in high school I started to realize, ‘That’s what I wanted to do.’”

Between his sophomore and junior years at Henrico, Kapadia put his love for the game to test and got a first taste of exactly what it might require of him to work in the NFL. He volunteered with the Washington then-Redskins at their training camp in Richmond, learning the logistics behind a three-week stay in the Commonwealth’s capital city for the franchise.

“I’ve always been a curious person and I’m shy in a lot of things,” Kapadia said, “but when it comes to football, I’m not shy at all. So, whenever I’d get the opportunity to talk with the [operations] people and scouting people then, I started picking their brains.

“I was like, ‘What do you all do? What’s it look like day-to-day?’ And they’d say, ‘It’s a lot of stuff you don’t want to do,’ but that’s what it is in any role you start out in. They told me you have to do training camp stuff and all the dirty work, but then they’d talk about helping out with free agency visits, the draft board and how they’d sit in the draft room and that’s when it caught my attention that it’s something I’d like to do. So, it really was then, I figured out a scouting assistant is the name of the role I’m trying to get right out of college.”

From a foot in the door to a trusted voice



Azzaam Kapadia has worked in the Virginia football recruiting office for the past three

years. The recent UVa graduate is set to begin a new job in the Seattle Seahawks' scouting department.

Courtesy of Azzaam Kapadia

There were plenty of steps for Kapadia since, though, including what might've been the most difficult task of all — getting a foot in the door with the Hoos.

Kapadia said upon his arrival on Grounds as a freshman, he reached out to everyone and anyone who might have an opportunity with the Cavaliers' football program. One email after another went unanswered or was met with the same response.

“We don't need any help,” Kapadia said of the line he read a few dozen times.

So, it wasn't until his sophomore year in early 2020 that a message on Twitter was actually returned and a chance was presented. Former UVa senior scout Jordan Arcement, now the director of player development for LSU, had a need in his office and granted Kapadia an interview. Arcement and ex-Cavaliers director of player personnel Justin Anderson, who is now in the same job at BYU, ran the back-and-forth with Kapadia.



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And according to Kapadia, the highlight occurred when he had to evaluate former Cavaliers wide receiver Dontayvion Wicks' high school film, and let Arcement and Anderson know what he thought. Kapadia said he didn't know then it was Wicks' tape, but thought Wicks was talented and aced the interview because his evaluation matched that of Arcement's and Anderson's.

He was hired, and began with the Cavaliers immediately — albeit remotely in Richmond because the COVID-19 pandemic happened a few weeks later.

“Jordan trusted me, and I was the first one on Bronco's [Mendenhall] staff to be a student in the scouting department,” Kapadia said.

Each scouting department person during Mendenhall's tenure was assigned a state to scour and Kapadia's responsibilities were Louisiana and Alabama, and he said he was able to evaluate film and write reports — sometimes as many as 15 to 20 a day — on prospects to give to Arcement or Anderson. But Arcement left that spring and the recruiting staff's full-timers were starting to deplete, so Kapadia took on more during COVID and up until Mendenhall resigned in late 2021.

At that time and through the first few weeks following Elliott's hiring, all of the folks in recruiting at UVa who trusted Kapadia were gone or their jobs were in limbo.

But Kapadia stayed busy, and met Elliott by chance early in his tenure.

"Late December or early January, I was in the office and Coach Elliott walked in," Kapadia said. "He was like, 'Hey man, what's your name?' It was just me and Coach Elliott in the office. It was winter break and Christmas had passed, but I think I made a great first impression. I wasn't expecting Coach Elliott to be there, because he hadn't hired his staff yet, and I was watching film and he saw me there and I told him what I do, and he was like, 'Well. We can definitely use your help. We're going to need the update on what's going on with the recruiting side.'"

Kapadia and Speros connected almost instantly once Elliott hired Speros, and Kapadia said he tried to assist as best he could with the transition between staffs and the rush to finish the recruiting class of 2022.

"He was the only student worker we had in the building, right?" Speros said. "He was one of the first guys I met when I touched down that first week, and he explained to me their scouting process from the previous staff and I laid out to him what Coach Elliott's vision was and just what our new process was going to be and he was super excited from the get-go.

"He watched a ton of players as we were trying to complete that first class," Speros continued, "and piece together that 2022 class. He worked tirelessly, was watching guys, sending me guys and I told him what we were looking for with that first class and he went to work and really earned trust not only from me but from everyone in the building."

A bright future

Speros said Kapadia embraced the way Elliott wanted to run things, and that meant dividing scouting responsibilities by position instead of by state and helping Speros grow the number of students in the scouting department.



Azzaam Kapadia graduated from Virginia in May has taken a job as a scouting assistant with the Seattle Seahawks.

Courtesy of Azzaam Kapadia

At South Florida, Speros had anywhere from eight to 12 student assistants in scouting, he said, and at Clemson, the Tigers had a scouting staff of 20-plus.

"I was thinking, 'OK, it's an ACC program, there's probably seven or eight kids back there,'" Speros said about what he thought it'd be like at UVa, "but [Kapadia] was the only one. He was

the only guy, and really if you talk to a bunch of people in my role throughout the country, they'll tell you how critical the role of students are with day-to-day tasks. So, he had to shoulder a lot because he was literally the only one."

Kapadia said he was happy to do so and his responsibilities grew to that of a graduate assistant or full-time scout — his positional evaluations were for wide receivers and defensive backs — just in an undergraduate student capacity.

With all his dedication and some networking, he was able to land an internship with Indianapolis Colts in the summer of 2022 and then one last summer with Athletes First, one of the premier player agencies in the NFL that represents top players like Aaron Donald and Aaron Rodgers. There, he assisted on Athletes First's football side, helping general manager Matt Lindsey evaluate potential prospects for the agency to sign in the next NFL Draft class.

"My job was watching a ton of film," Kapadia said, "and if there was someone not on the big board, I'd say we should look at him and Matt trusted my evaluations."

Kapadia said his extensive opportunities at UVa and his internship with Athletes First played a big part in allowing him to gain his job with the Seahawks.

He will have a hand in free agency and player evaluation with Seattle and be in the draft room when the 2024 NFL Draft rolls around.

Speros said those at UVa are rooting for Kapadia to do well, and that, "he'll be missed for sure."

Kapadia did not leave Speros empty-handed, though, considering he ultimately recruited enough students to grow UVa's number to about 17 currently assisting in the Cavaliers' scouting department. Kapadia said while serving as the president of UVa's Sports Business Society last year, he put the word out and convinced his classmates to lend the Hoos a hand.

The Cavaliers aren't the only ones who are proud, either. Kapadia said his mom and dad won't stop telling their family and friends about the NFL career their son is beginning.

"They've already booked their Week 1 tickets for Seattle," he said.

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By Greg Madia

UVa Beat Writer

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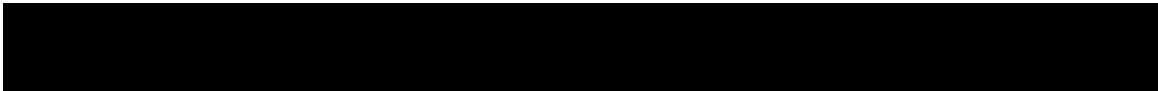
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