

SPORTS

## Danville's Malik Clements uses Canadian football career to promote mental health

*The former George Washington High School star, who now plays for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, hopes to start a mental health outreach program in his hometown.*

by **Judy Owen**

December 20, 2023



Malik Clements. Photo by Cameron Barlett. Courtesy of Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

Malik Clements had really wanted to show residents in his Danville hometown a historic football trophy this winter.

His wish was denied, but he's still planning a special visit to the Virginia city.

The linebacker and his Winnipeg Blue Bombers didn't get to hoist the Grey Cup after falling 28-24 to the Montreal Alouettes in the 110<sup>th</sup> Canadian Football League championship game on Nov. 19 in Hamilton, Ontario.

"It was definitely gut-blowing," Clements said after cleaning out his Winnipeg locker and driving home to Columbus, Ohio.

"I was lost for words. At the end I literally sat on the bench for like 10, 15 minutes just trying to take it all in — like, wow, we really lost again. It was definitely heart-breaking."

Winnipeg was upset 24-23 by the Toronto Argonauts in last year's Grey Cup game.

Clements was playing his third CFL season, and second with the Blue Bombers, in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He began his pro career in 2021 with the Edmonton Elks, one of nine teams in the league.

The Blue Bombers captured the national championship in 2019 and 2021. There was no 2020 season because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While Clements still won't get a turn to celebrate with the silver cup in his hometown, he wants to bring some long-lasting positive vibes to residents.

The 27-year-old is putting together a plan to start an outreach program in Danville that focuses on mental health.

It's a desire that's grown since the University of Cincinnati psychology grad began offering therapeutic services as a case manager at a Cleveland nursing home last winter.

He was also a guest speaker at the Family Mental Wellness Festival last July in Winnipeg, an event put on by Inspire Community Outreach Inc. The nonprofit social services agency provides family-centered education and programming for children and youth aged 3-29 who are living with neurological differences or mental-health challenges.

"My next step will be to have some type of community event in Danville to kind of introduce what I plan to do and give basic info on mental health," Clements said, adding that it'll be in the new year but no date has been set.

Programming might later involve holding yoga sessions, reiki classes, music therapy or activities that provide coping mechanisms to show the importance of doing things to improve mental health.

His long-term goal is creating a nonprofit organization. Its outreach could incorporate services by professionals such as therapists and psychiatrists. He's also open to teaming up with an existing clinic if that would speed up the process.

"It's really to provide therapeutic services and be a light to people in the Danville community," Clements said.

"I want to make sure I'm giving back. That's the city I'm from and the love is going to be there. That's where my family is from and most of my friends are still there. It kind of molded me into the person I am today."



Winnipeg Blue Bombers linebacker Malik Clements was a guest speaker at the Family Mental Wellness Festival put on by Inspire Community Outreach in Winnipeg on July 8. Photo by Jolene Oszrian/Inspire Community Outreach.

### 'Incredible man'

Clements said he was searching to get involved with the Winnipeg community and came across Inspire's website ([www.inspirecommunityoutreach.ca](http://www.inspirecommunityoutreach.ca)) during the 2022 season. He loved the work it was doing and contacted founder and chief executive officer Angela Taylor.

It was a call that definitely surprised her because he was a professional football player, plus the organization she founded in 2013 isn't a big, well-known agency.

"I booked a conversation with him and I just remember he had such a good energy. He's such a kind man," Taylor said.

Clements planned to attend some of Inspire's events during his first season with the Blue Bombers, but his schedule got busy and it didn't work out.

When Clements returned to Winnipeg for the 2023 season, Taylor reached out to him. They got together at her office with some of her colleagues. He offered to support the wellness festival at a city park, which was a free event that featured booths and gave out treats and small prizes to kids.

He made a donation for “passports” that families could buy for \$10 as part of a registration that came with a new hardcover book or other special gift. He also sponsored some kids who were offered the passports for free, Taylor said.

Clements also agreed to be a guest speaker and talked to participants about his football journey, physical activity and mental health.

He was a hit.

“He’s really an incredible man,” Taylor said. “He’s an incredible athlete, but as person he’s just heartfelt and kind and very community-minded. That really spoke volumes.

“He talked about how everybody can struggle and sometimes we feel like we can’t say it or maybe we shouldn’t, but it’s really normal and there are all kinds of things we can do for ourselves.

“He talked about physical activity and sports. He was very engaged, very physically connected with the youth. It was interactive. He hopped down off the stage and he was goofing around with the kids. They were all laughing and having a great time.”

She’s aware of Clements’ plan to start an outreach program in Danville. She offered to share her experiences with him and the resources on Inspire’s website. She gave him advice such as starting small with programming that’s preferably in partnership at an existing location.

“And use what you know,” she said. “Use the people that you know, use the resources that you know to make it easier on yourself. Then you apply for little bits of funding.”

Inspire also focuses on helping parents and primary caregivers, as well as professionals who support those families such as teachers, healthcare workers, childcare workers and therapists.

“I think that he has a lot of passion and he would do a beautiful job supporting community,” Taylor said.

“I do hope that he moves forward with that because I think there’s a lot of need for supporting community. You can build magic with and for community. The idea of ‘with’ is really important, and I know that he believes that as well.

“So nothing about us without us — making sure that the youth, the families are part of the solution, part of the planning. And evidence-based. What we do at Inspire, everything is research, it’s listening to community members. That’s how we put everything together.”



Malik Clements, left, and Adam Bighill celebrate after a play against the British Columbia Lions. Courtesy of Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

## Community roots

Clements definitely feels connected to Danville, which he often visits. He wants it to be a positive place to live.

His mother, Shara, was a single parent, raising him and his two brothers and sister while working at the Goodyear tire manufacturing plant. She later married Wesley Hall, who blended his three sons into the family. The couple also had a daughter together, so eight kids filled their home.

"Danville is a very small city and there's not much to do in general," Clements said. "A lot of their younger generation fall victim to the streets just because there's not much to do there.

"I want to create different avenues and different ways to kind of escape problems at home or the streets or whatever the case may be."

Clements points to experiences in his football journey as the catalyst for his passion about mental wellness.

He excelled as a wide receiver and safety at George Washington High School in Danville and also became interested in dentistry after getting braces.

He took the school's program for becoming a certified dental assistant, with thoughts of one day getting into orthodontics.

When he got a scholarship to play for Cincinnati, he planned to major in biology. However, juggling football and schoolwork was a heavy load and his academic advisor suggested he switch majors.

He graduated in December 2018 with a Bachelor of Science as a psychology major, but also took the prerequisites for dental school.

"Looking back at it, I feel like it was a great choice because I've grown to become a mental-health advocate as well," Clements said.

Dentistry is something he's still interested in after football, although he knows it would require a lot more school and can't predict what his life situation may be down the road.

"Football is my first love and it's hard to get rid of that first love."

His first love wasn't initially kind to him.

Clements had transitioned to linebacker in his senior year at Cincinnati and prepared for Pro Day in Denver. He didn't get drafted by the National Football League and only had a rookie tryout with the Detroit Lions.

"In my eyes, I was going to make it," he said. "Once it got to a point where it was like that may not be the case and I might have to start the next journey, I couldn't really sit and, I guess, come to an agreement with that.

"I was still training, but I was still in a slump because there was a possibility that football might be over. When I got in a slump, I was sort of like in a depressed state."



Malik Clements' girlfriend, Alisia Barclay, takes a selfie with his mom and step-dad, Shara and Wesley Hall, and Winnipeg Blue Bombers mascots Buzz and Boomer at the 110th Grey Cup in Hamilton, Ontario, on Nov. 19. Courtesy of Malik Clements



## Overcoming stigma

One day, he listened to a podcast by mental-health leader and author Jason Wilson. He then bought his book, "Battle Cry: Waging and Winning the War Within." The book focuses on how men struggle to express and master their emotions.

It sparked Clements to become a mental-health advocate.

"Obviously, I'm not the only person who goes through things," he said. "At the time, in my head it was more so that negative stigma.

"It's not as bad now, but the negative stigma of men should hold their emotions in and if they are expressing it, then you're considered soft or whatever the case may be.

"I wanted to kind of spread light on mental health because I know personally a lot of friends who still think like that, and I try to get them out of that way of thinking."

Clements 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, opportunity knocked on his door. Or rather, rang his phone.

Clements got a call from a scout for the Edmonton Elks, who had seen him at one of the CFL club's tryouts. He signed for the 2020 season and later moved to Cleveland to train, living with longtime girlfriend Alisia Barclay.

After the CFL canceled its 2020 season, he stayed in Cleveland and worked jobs at Amazon and a dental office.

When the CFL resumed play in 2021, Clements spent his rookie season with the Elks but only played seven games because of injuries. The team finished 3-11 in a season shortened to 14 games from the usual 18 because of the pandemic.

The CFL has three downs and 12 players from each team on the field instead of 11 used in the NFL, as well as a wider and longer field.

Clements was released in February 2022 after Edmonton brought in a new dual head coach and general manager who basically cleaned house.

Things quickly improved, though, when the Blue Bombers signed him to a two-year contract the following month.

Winnipeg 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.

After the Bombers lost by one point to Toronto in the Grey Cup, Clements got a job that began turning the wheels faster for his mental-health outreach goal.



Brian Cole (41), Kyrie Wilson (19), Malik Clements (33) and Les Maruo (00). Photo by Cameron Bartlett. Courtesy of Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

## Nurturing job

He had planned to work in a dental office last off-season, but saw an opening for a therapeutic case manager. He was initially supposed to work at a school, but got switched to a nursing home.

“It was trying to teach them coping skills and being an ear at the same time and a helpful hand whenever it was needed,” he said.

He really clicked with one resident.

The woman enjoyed music, and Clements would bring his laptop to their visits.

“She was always fascinated with computers and YouTube. She was just fascinated that I was able to reach any song, any genre,” he said with a chuckle.

“I would throw on some music and call it like music therapy. We would just talk, and I’d maybe teach her some breathing techniques.

“She would tell me songs that she had her first dance to or songs that she played at her wedding and stuff like that. It brought up good memories and got her into an uplifted spirit.”

Clements and his girlfriend moved to Columbus before he returned to Winnipeg for training camp in May.

His season began as a starting linebacker, but the 6-foot, 216-pounder missed six games in the middle of the schedule because of a hip injury.

The Bombers ended the regular season with a 14-4 record. Clements played 12 games, finishing with 23 defensive tackles, six special-teams tackles, three quarterback sacks and one forced fumble.

The team won the West Division final against the B.C. Lions, earning the right to play in the Grey Cup against the Montreal Alouettes, who upset Toronto in the East final.

Clements’ girlfriend, mom and step-dad attended the game in Hamilton, their first trip to the league championship. They enjoyed the experience, other than the outcome.

The Bombers held a 17-7 halftime lead over the Alouettes, buoyed by a late second-quarter goal-line stand by Winnipeg’s defense.



Malik Clements (33 in white) stars in this goal-line stand that prevented a Montreal touchdown. In the final play, Clements emerges from the pile with the football.

Clements was in on the plays that halted Montreal’s offense, forcing a turnover on downs with eight seconds remaining until the break.

But the underdogs from Quebec clawed their way back in the second half, clinching an upset in a late drive.

Alouettes quarterback Cody Fajardo connected with receiver Tyson Philpot for a 19-yard touchdown grab in the end zone with 13 seconds left in the fourth quarter.

Clements has put the loss in perspective.

"After a while, it's life. You can't win them all," he said. "For me, I always look at it as a lesson rather than a loss. I always like to say, 'An L is a lesson, not a loss' because you learn from it.

"Looking back at it and after watching the film and doing a deep dive of the game, I learned from it. I'm able to better myself and get equipped for next year, so if I get to that stage again I can do whatever I can to make sure it has a different outcome."

Clements was one of [22 CFL players this past season with Virginia ties](#), either being born or attending college or university in the state.

His teammates included starting defensive tackle Ricky Walker (Newport News, Virginia Tech). Defensive end TyJuan Garbutt (Fredericksburg, Virginia Tech) joined Winnipeg's practice roster in the summer and got into the final regular-season game.

Alouettes starting running back William Stanback (Hempstead, New York, Virginia Union) was playing in his fifth season with Montreal. He rushed nine times for 68 yards and one touchdown to claim his first Grey Cup victory.



William Stanback, No. 31, who attended Virginia Union University, celebrates with the Grey Cup during a parade in Montreal following his team's win. Photo courtesy of Montreal Alouettes.



William Stanback, No. 31, who attended Virginia Union University, celebrates during a parade courtesy of Montreal Alouettes.

Winnipeg has 36 players who are pending free agents in February, including Clements. He'd like to re-sign after feeling more comfortable on the field, and especially in the locker room.

"I want to be back in that type of culture," he said. "That culture is different in Winnipeg, it's like a family."

His off-season plans including training, possibly a job in case management in Columbus and trying to move his Danville outreach program forward with partners and supporters that include family members.

"You have to have tough skin to grow up in Danville, and a tough mental [approach]," Clements said.

"Not many people, especially in sports, get to the professional level. So I feel like whenever I go home, a lot of the younger generation kind of gravitate towards me anyway, just based on like, 'Wow, you ended up really making it out. You weren't just another statistic.'

"I feel like God blessed me with a talent, so it was only right to pay it forward and give back."



A highlight reel of Clements' 2023 season with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. He's No. 33 for the team in blue.

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SPORTS

# Former Roanoke football star now starting in the Canadian Football League

*Darrius Bratton, who went to William Fleming High School and the University of Virginia, is one of 20 CFL players this year with Virginia ties.*



by **Judy Owen**  
July 13, 2023



Darrius Bratton at an Edmonton Elks practice. Courtesy of the Elks.

Darrius Bratton is enjoying some new experiences this year – with a Canadian twist.

Born and raised in Roanoke, the rookie defensive back is adapting on and off the field after earning a starting role with the Edmonton Elks of the nine-team Canadian Football League.

Bratton is one of 20 current CFL players who were born in Virginia or played their college ball in the state. As of mid-July, 18 were either on a 45-man active roster or injured list, while two remained hopeful on practice rosters.

It's taken some time for the 25-year-old cornerback to get used to the league's three downs, bigger field and different rules.



Darius Bratton. Courtesy of the Edmonton Elks.

home losses at Commonwealth Stadium dating back to October 2019. The squad's next opportunity to end that dubious streak is July 13 when it hosts the Hamilton Tiger-Cats (1-3).

"I think it's just coming in and doing everything to script and being precise with our work and just going and taking it day by day," said Bratton, who had 13 defensive tackles, two pass knockdowns and one tackle for a loss in five games.

"I think that's how we change the narrative of this whole losing aspect."

"I knew of the CFL, but I didn't know how different the rules were and the point system and stuff," Bratton said in a recent Zoom call.

"I messed up a couple of the rules at first, but at the end of the day it's still football and it's still throwing and catching like in the States. It's fun. I actually enjoy the game."

What hasn't been enjoyable for the six-foot, 200-pound newcomer is his team's results.

The Elks have opened the 18-game regular season with a 0-5 record and are riding a CFL-record 19 consecutive



Darius Bratton (No. 24, in the white jersey) in action against the British Columbia Lions. Courtesy of the Elks.

Off the field, the William Fleming High School and University of Virginia product is having more pleasurable experiences. He's trying new food such as ketchup-flavored potato chips and Canada's famous Tim Hortons coffee brand.

Teammates have become friends, and he likes meeting fans in the Alberta province's capital city, which is home to 1.41 million people (as of the 2021 census).

"I know I'm not back in Virginia around the mountains in Roanoke, so it's a little bit more flat," Bratton said. "It's just a different culture, but I love to travel and I love to experience new things.

"It's very diverse and people are very nice here. That's one thing that me and my teammates that's not from here say, that people are really nice in Canada."





Edmonton is the northernmost city in the Canadian Football League. Courtesy of Atlas of Canada.

Located north of Montana, Alberta has the Rocky Mountains in the southwestern part of the province near the largest city of Calgary (1.48 million, 2021 census). The Calgary Stampeders are Edmonton’s biggest CFL rival.

Edmonton is near the middle of the province with more of a prairie landscape. It has the nickname of “Canada’s Festival City” for its dozens of year-round events and features the West Edmonton Mall, North America’s largest shopping and entertainment complex.





The Edmonton skyline. Courtesy of Alice Hunter.

That's quite the change from Roanoke, where Bratton and his immediate and extended family have deep roots.

His dad, Tim, is a tire technician and mom LaRhonda works at a veterans' hospital. He has two older siblings, brother Marcus and sister Jerika.

It was Marcus, 33, who became Darius's biggest mentor. He attended the University of Virginia's College at Wise and played defensive back and kick returner. That was followed by a pro career in France, Finland, Austria and Germany. He's still in Germany working and coaching.

Bratton didn't follow in his brother's cleats right away. He played football, basketball and baseball, but baseball was his first love. He was also a natural talent on the diamond.

"Me and my family thought I was going to go to college to play baseball," said Bratton, who played pitcher [he could pitch with both arms], catcher and first base, but mainly center field.

"I was pursuing that, but when I got into high school I knew that my chances of getting a scholarship and being on my way to the next level where I wanted to be at a D-1 school, to get a scholarship in football was the way.

"So I just committed myself, and my brother was there to help me along and guide me because he'd been through the process and he was a really good football player as well."

After baseball practices, his brother and friends helped him with his gridiron skills.

“Having them is a blessing to show me the way of working hard and also growing a love for football.”



Darius Bratton at an Elks practice. Courtesy of the Elks.

Bratton played wide receiver, defensive back and returned kicks at William Fleming, but decided defense was the side of the ball he preferred.

“I just like to go and hit people instead of people hitting me,” he explained with a smile.

Unfortunately, he was hit with a big challenge in his 2015 senior year at William Fleming.

Bratton tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee three games into the schedule and was done for the season. He recovered and attended Fork Union Military Academy in 2016 as a prep year. He earned a three-star recruit rating by ESPN.com and committed to Virginia.

He appeared in nine of 13 games in his freshman year with the Cavaliers and started five games in 2018.

His 2019 season ended with a bad case of déjà vu.

Bratton tore the same ACL during a pre-season practice. Once more, he worked his way back onto the field with the support of his family and his faith.

He also worked hard in the classroom.

Bratton has a degree in American studies and got a master's in social foundations, which he explained is a degree in education that can lead to being a counselor or principal. He also received the 2022-23 Ed Armstrong Endowed Football Scholarship.

“I love to mentor kids and see them reach their next level, but I'm focused on football right now and see where that takes me.”

In five seasons with the Cavaliers, he played 52 games and registered 77 total tackles, one tackle for a loss, a half credit for a quarterback sack and 14 passes defended.

Then came a moment in the spotlight earlier this year. In front of 30-plus scouts at Virginia's NFL pro day in March, Bratton recorded 38.5 inches in the vertical jump, a broad jump of 11 feet three inches and a speedy 40-yard dash in 4.43 seconds.

The performances earned him shoutouts on social media and an online brief in Sports Illustrated, but not a selection in April's NFL Draft. However, he did get an invite to the New Orleans Saints' rookie minicamp in May.

“I felt it was a great experience to really show where I'm at right now with other competition,” Bratton said of the camp. “I feel like I'm right there, right along with the same competition that's in the NFL. The coaches really liked me, but it just comes down with numbers in the NFL and that's how the game goes.”

It was prior to that camp that he connected with the CFL – or rather, it connected with him.

Elks head coach and general manager Chris Jones, who saw Bratton's pro day stats and game film, called him and invited him to Edmonton's training camp, but Bratton told him he planned to go to the Saints' camp.

When nothing came out of the minicamp, Bratton called Jones back and the invite was still open, so he flew to Edmonton for his first trip to Canada.





Darius Bratton (No. 24) in a game earlier in the summer against the British Columbia Lions. Courtesy of the Elks.

His parents have been watching his games on TV and plan to see him play in person. His dad did call him early on because he was confused about the scoring system – in particular, the league’s unique “rouge” or single point.

The rouge is a single point a CFL team can score on a field-goal attempt, punt or kickoff. If a kicker misses a field goal and the ball goes out of bounds, or if it’s not touched or run or punted out of the end zone, the kicking team scores a point. The same scenario applies on a punt or kickoff.

One of Bratton’s teammates recently experienced a costly refresher of the rule.

The Elks were on the road playing the Saskatchewan Roughriders on July 6 when the Roughriders tied the game 11-11 with 66 seconds to go in the fourth quarter. Saskatchewan kicked off and the ball went over the head of Edmonton rookie American returner C.J. Sims and bounced into the end zone. Rather than rush back to get the ball and run it out, Sims trotted to it and took a knee like in U.S. college and NFL games to end the play. Unlike those leagues, though, Saskatchewan scored a rouge and went up 12-11.

Edmonton got possession and started marching down the field to attempt a go-ahead score, but Elks quarterback Taylor Cornelius threw an interception. The clock ran down and the Elks walked off the field with their fifth straight loss.



The CFL also allows receivers to move toward the line of scrimmage before the ball is snapped, which is called the “waggle.” Bratton said that’s been the biggest adjustment for him, but staying disciplined and sticking to his fundamentals and technique has helped.

While he’s enjoying the new brand of football, he still wants to crack the NFL.

“That’s still the end goal, but I’m just going to focus on the season right now and try to be the best I can be for the team right now in Edmonton,” Bratton said.

“I’m just trying to make the best of where I am now, and I feel extremely blessed to be here in the CFL. I’m just grateful for the opportunity.”



The Edmonton Elks play in Commonwealth Stadium, the largest open-air stadium in Canada. It seats 56,302. Courtesy of Tewarianuj.

SPORTS

# Virginia Tech's Cam Phillips leads a parade of state football players making a career in the Canadian Football League

*This year 20 players with Virginia connections are playing north of the border. Virginia Tech and the University of Virginia each have more players there than power schools such as Alabama.*



by **Judy Owen**

July 26, 2023



Cam Phillips, who starred at Virginia Tech, shows off the championship ring he won with the Toronto Argonauts. Courtesy of the team.

If Cam Phillips ever feels disappointed about his path to professional football, he can pull out a special piece of jewelry to remind himself that his career is already successful.

The finger bling is the former Virginia Tech star's 308-diamond and blue sapphire Grey Cup ring, which the wide receiver earned after his Toronto Argonauts won the Canadian Football League's 109<sup>th</sup> championship game last November.

Toronto prevailed 24-23 over the heavily favored Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

Phillips led all pass catchers in the game with a career-high 96 yards on four receptions and hoisted the Grey Cup trophy in only his second CFL season.

“I’m a firm believer in everything happens the way it’s supposed to,” Phillips said in a phone call after a recent practice and autograph session with Argonauts fans.

“Everything is as it should be. To finally do that and get there and play the way I played and to win, I was just full of joy and kind of really on a high for about two to three months after that.”

Phillips is one of 20 current CFL players with a Virginia connection — either born in the state or played their college or university ball there — who are on an active roster, practice roster or injured list.

*Full list below.*

“I think that’s a good representation up here,” he said. “That’s a good number, and who knows how many other Virginia guys were in [training] camps, because they cut down basically 50% of the roster. There’s still a lot of talent coming from there.”

All nine CFL teams have at least one of those 20 players.

The Ottawa Redblacks lead the way with four players. The Argonauts and B.C. Lions have three each, followed by the Blue Bombers, Calgary Stampeders, Edmonton Elks and Hamilton Tiger-Cats with two on their squads. The Montreal Alouettes and Saskatchewan Roughriders each have one.





Lucky Whitehead of the B.C. Lions, who was born in Manassas, taking selfies with fans. He's considered a fan favorite in the league — or "favourite," as Canadians would spell it. Photo courtesy of the B.C. Lions.

## Historical presence

Virginia schools have been well-represented in the three-down league for decades.

According to all-time statistics provided by Steve Daniel, CFL senior director, football and team analytics, there have been 35 Virginia Tech players in the CFL since 1936, including current active rosters as of mid-July. The University of Virginia accounts for 28, the University of Richmond has had 23 and Hampton University has had 21.

The U.S. school with the highest number during that span is a three-way tie at 80 between Nebraska, Michigan State and Ohio State.

Other football hotbeds are close to that total. The University of Southern California and University of California, Los Angeles, were at 78 players each. Powerhouse programs such as Alabama (60), Louisiana State (55), Clemson (50) and Georgia (50) have also produced players for the northern league.

When it comes to this season's 45-player CFL active rosters, Virginia Tech and Virginia are holding their own. As of mid-July, the Hokies and Cavaliers each have four players. UCLA has five, Georgia and the University of Texas three each, Ohio State two, Clemson and Louisiana one each and Alabama and USC both have zero.

It should be noted that the CFL — which has 12 players from each team on the field, unlike 11 in the NFL — has a unique roster ratio.

An active roster includes a minimum of 21 “national” players, who are usually Canadians. However, one of those players can be designated a “nationalized American” if he’s spent at least five years in the league or three with his current team. There are a maximum of 19 Americans and a minimum of one global player from outside Canada and the U.S. The maximum three quarterbacks don’t have a designation but are usually Americans. The 45<sup>th</sup> player is either an extra global or national player.

Some simple math shows schools in Virginia produce an admirable number on those game-day rosters.

Using the maximum of 19 Americans plus three quarterbacks, the nine teams could have 198 players from south of the border on their active rosters. Virginia schools had 13 players on those rosters as of July 21, accounting for almost 7%.



William Stanback, who went from Virginia Union to the Montreal Alouettes, cheers on his team. Photo courtesy of the Montreal Alouettes.

## Roads leading north

The 20 players with ties to Virginia have taken different paths to the CFL, which pays a minimum salary of C\$70,000 this season, or about \$53,200 U.S. (Teams have a C\$5.45-million salary cap.) The highest-paid player this year is Blue



Bombers quarterback Zach Collaros. The reigning two-time CFL most outstanding player from Ohio (University of Cincinnati) will reportedly earn \$600,000 in Canadian dollars, or \$456,000 U.S.

Canadian athletes who attend schools in the United States can be selected in the CFL Draft. American players are often discovered by CFL scouts who cover the States, or agents send clients' film to clubs. Players also submit their football resumes and highlight tapes to teams, while some pay \$100 U.S. to attend yearly tryouts most CFL teams hold in various American locations. The tryouts are listed by teams on the CFL website.

Redblacks director of pro personnel Brendan Taman, a former general manager with the Saskatchewan and Winnipeg clubs, said the four Virginia-connected players with Ottawa were picked up in different ways.

One of the team's scouts (staff are responsible for different U.S. regions and two live in the States) watched defensive lineman Bryce Carter in some James Madison games. Taman saw his video and talked to Carter's agent before last season. He liked Carter's pass-rushing abilities, even though "he wasn't the prototypical NFL guy" because of his smaller 6-foot-1, 252-pound frame.

"He's a good, solid player for us. He's well-suited for the Canadian game," Taman said.

The other three Redblacks include receiver/returner DeVonte Dedmon (William and Mary), who's on the six-game injured list after suffering a season-ending shoulder injury. He was recommended to the team by his college receivers coach, former CFL player and assistant coach Winston October.

Veteran offensive linemen Jacob Ruby (Richmond) and Hunter Steward (Liberty) arrived in Ottawa through free agency after starting their CFL careers with other teams. Both were born in Canada and selected in CFL drafts.

Each CFL team also has a negotiation list of up to 45 American players, which gives clubs those players' exclusive rights. Names go on and off the lists all the time. Dedmon and Carter were on Ottawa's negotiation list, Taman said.

American-based scout Josh Washburn "hits Virginia pretty hard" but scouting usually isn't aimed at specific states, Taman said.



Bryce Carter. Courtesy of the Ottawa Redblacks



“We’ll try to go to most of the [American] schools that have Canadians playing at them ... or if we have a quarterback on the neg list. We try to strategize where we go,” he said, adding the Redblacks don’t hold free-agent tryouts in the States because other scouting methods are valuable and more cost-efficient.



Toronto Argonauts wide receiver Cam Phillips (#89) makes a catch as Winnipeg Blue Bombers defensive back Jamal Parker (#45) defends during the 109th Grey Cup at Mosaic Stadium on Nov. 20 in Regina, Saskatchewan. Photo by Kevin Sousa/CFL.

## Shot of reality

Cam Phillips took a winding road to the CFL after a record-setting career at Virginia Tech (2014-17).

He holds the school record for most receiving yards in a career (3,027) and is the all-time leader in receptions with 236 career catches. He recorded the most receptions in a game after hauling in 14 catches for 189 yards in a 64-17 victory over East Carolina in 2017. He was also the most valuable player in the 2016 Belk Bowl and was named to the Atlantic Coast Conference first-team in 2017.

“I wasn’t a big Virginia Tech fan growing up, but I loved it there,” said Phillips, who was born in North Carolina but grew up in Maryland. “I met some of my best friends there, like lifelong friends. I have a lot of good memories.”

After recovering from sports hernia surgery in December 2017, Phillips wasn’t selected in the NFL Draft. However, his dream of reaching the big league was rekindled a few weeks later when the Buffalo Bills signed him in May 2018 as an

undrafted free agent.

The next chapter of his career was a roster roller-coaster ride.

The 6-foot, 202-pound rookie had stints on and off the practice squad. He got into two August preseason contests and an October regular-season game, when he caught one pass for nine yards. More releases and signings followed, with his final release in August 2019.

“I enjoyed my time in Buffalo,” Phillips said. “I learned a lot there because that was the first stop of my professional career. Getting released was a little unexpected for me.

“I’d never been cut. I’d always been one of the better players, if not the best player, on my team from little league to college. That was just a shock for me, kind of the first time in my young adult life out of school and I have to man up and figure things out. Really uncharted waters.”

Then came an opportunity to shine.

Phillips was drafted by the XFL Houston Roughnecks. He led the league in receiving yards with 455 yards from 31 catches in five games, including nine touchdowns. Play was canceled by the COVID-19 pandemic and then the league suspended operations in April 2020.

He attended the Carolina Panthers’ training camp that summer but was released.

It was his ties with Roughnecks head coach June Jones that introduced Phillips to the CFL.

The longtime NCAA and NFL coach had been a head coach with the Tiger-Cats (2017-18) and played quarterback for the Argonauts in 1982.

“Coach June showed us film from Hamilton because some of the plays we ran were some of the plays he showed us. There were a couple guys that followed him [to Houston] that had CFL experience also.”

Phillips signed with the Tiger-Cats in June 2021 but was cut the following month in training camp.

It didn’t take long for another club to show interest.

“We were having the meetings in the extra rooms in the hotel in Hamilton,” Phillips recalled of receiving the news of his release. “As soon as I get back to [my] room, my agent called me and was like, ‘Toronto is on the way to come pick you up. Pack your bags.’”

Phillips spent most of the 2021 pandemic-shortened 14-game CFL season on Toronto's practice roster but got into the last game of the season in November. There are normally 18 regular-season games.

He also started last year on the Argonauts' practice squad until injuries vaulted him into the lineup. He played 12 regular-season games, recording 38 receptions for 515 yards and three touchdowns. Toronto beat Montreal in the East Division final, propelling Phillips into the Grey Cup against Winnipeg.

"Everything happened as it was supposed to happen to make me the person I am today, to be in Toronto, which is a place that I love, and I love the team," Phillips said. "I would say it made me better, even as plot twisty or just unexpected or ironic as it may be. I'm grateful for getting cut [by Buffalo] and dealing with those things."

This season, Toronto is the CFL's only unbeaten team (5-0) through July 21.



Malik Clements (left, who grew up in Danville and went to Cincinnati) and Ricky Walker (who grew up in Hampton and went to Virginia Tech) now play for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. Photo courtesy of the team.

## Following in family footsteps

Of the 20 players with Virginia ties, five are former Hokies.

Blue Bombers defensive lineman Ricky Walker is one of them.



Born in Newport News and raised in Hampton, Walker was a finalist for the Bill Dudley Award for top collegiate player in the state in his 2018 senior year at Virginia Tech.

Like Phillips, the 6-foot-2, 287-pound tackle wasn't drafted by an NFL club.

"That was tough," Walker said. "But I've still got opportunities to fulfill my dream and that's all you can ask for. The Dallas Cowboys gave me that opportunity. I'm grateful from there."

Walker signed as a free agent with the Cowboys in 2019 and got into a preseason game but was part of the team's final cuts.

He also competed in the XFL with the Tampa Bay Vipers during the ill-fated 2020 season, and was with the Cleveland Browns for a few weeks that summer.

After posing for a photo with fellow Bombers linebacker Malik Clements following a practice (Clements was born in Danville), Walker explained that Winnipeg had reached out to his agent in 2021.

"At the time, it was pretty much looking like the only offer," Walker said. "I was like, 'Let's do it.' You still get a chance to play football."

Walker knew a bit about the CFL through former Virginia Tech teammate Woody Baron, a current defensive lineman with the B.C. Lions who started in the CFL with Montreal in 2018.

In his first two seasons, Walker played 19 games as a backup or in a rotation. He was the reserve player and game-day scratch for Winnipeg's 2021 Grey Cup victory over Hamilton, but did suit up in last season's championship loss to Toronto.

This year, he clinched a starting job after the player he backed up signed with another CFL team.

"It's a good league," said Walker, a married father of sons aged 4 and 2. "Good people. I like it. It's a little change-up. The three downs is different, the field is bigger, but at the end of the day you still put your helmet and your pants on the same way. It's pretty cool."

His family, most in Pittsburgh, are tuned in to his CFL games, which isn't too surprising as his football pedigree runs deep.

His uncle, Adam Walker, played running back and won the 1995 Super Bowl with the San Francisco 49ers. Older brother Rijo was a defensive back for Virginia and younger brother Rmondo a DB who played for Army at West Point.

Blue Bombers head coach Mike O'Shea has been impressed with Walker's patience and work ethic.

“He’s quick. He’s got a low center of gravity,” the reigning two-time CFL coach of the year said. “He can show power, he can show some speed moves. He can vary up his pass rush, he’s stout against the run — all the things you want.”

The coach was also seeing progress from Clements before the starter suffered a hip injury in a July 15 contest that put him on the six-game injured list.

“He’s shown exactly what you need out of a linebacker on any given play,” O’Shea said prior to Clements’ injury. “If the play needs sideline-to-sideline pursuit, then he shows it. If it needs physical straight-on mauling a guy in front of you, he shows that, too.”

Clements was excited for his second season with Winnipeg. He played for Edmonton in 2021 but was released after the Elks overhauled their coaching staff. He took initiative and sent film to the Bombers, leading to a contract and then playing time because of injured teammates.

He even entered this season with a new jersey number, changing from 0 to 33. The reason was an unselfish gesture for a teammate.

Fellow Blue Bombers linebacker Les Maruo, a global player born in Japan (University of Texas-San Antonio), had worn 00 last season. The team was made aware this year it couldn’t have a 0 and 00. Clements let Maruo keep 00 after learning it had special meaning for his teammate.

“Double zero means Les Maruo [in his culture],” Clements explained last month. “It’s more meaningful to him, so zero didn’t really have significance to me so I let him keep double zero.”

The Danville native said he’s into numerology and what numbers mean. He discovered the available 33 refers to a “master teacher and influencer in a sense.” It fit because Clements, who was a psychology major at Cincinnati, did some mental health seminars while living in Cleveland in the offseason.

“So I kind of look at it as that. I can rock out with 33,” he said with a smile.

Clements was well aware that 33 was the number worn by former Winnipeg star running back Andrew Harris, a future hall of famer who signed with the Toronto Argonauts as a free agent prior to last season.

“I did think about that, but I looked at it as I’m not on offense because that would be a lot more weight on my shoulders if I was on offense,” he said, laughing. “But hopefully I can make a name for 33 on the defensive side for myself.”

He said he and Walker feel a kinship of sorts because of their Virginia connection, and both are proud that 20 CFLers have links to the state.

“You’re going against all the states in the U.S. and then the places here in Canada. I mean it’s impressive,” Clements said. “Then you’ve got some global spots on teams so there’s not a lot of open spots on a CFL roster.”

Walker agreed 20 is a solid number.

“That says a lot, lets you know the kind of talent that we have in Virginia,” he said. “It’s good to know that our state is getting recognized because it’s really a good state full of talent.

“We have plenty of legends, from the big names like Michael Vick to Allen Iverson and Bruce Smith, guys like that.”

And maybe, just maybe, some of this season’s 20 will leave their mark in the northern league. One of them already has.



DeVonte Dedmon (17) in action for the Ottawa Redblacks. PHOTO: André Ringuette/Freestyle Photography. Courtesy of the Ottawa Redblacks.

Dedmon was a bright light for the Ottawa Redblacks in 2021, when he set a new CFL record for the fastest player to score five career return touchdowns. He did it in 15 games over the 2019 and 2021 seasons (the 2020 season was canceled because of the pandemic).



The speedy specialist had one punt and one kickoff return for TDs in 2019, followed by two punt-return TDs and a kickoff-return TD in 2021. The old record was 18 games by Henry (Gizmo) Williams.

Dedmon's feat, coupled with his league-leading 737 yards off punt returns and 1,223 yards from returning kickoffs in 11 games, led to him being named the CFL's 2021 most outstanding special teams player.

Phillips could be the next one to turn heads.

He said he's feeling more confident about his abilities and knowledge of how the three-down game works.

"I'm a high-quality player, but I'm also a believer of just being where your feet are," said Phillips, noting his NFL dream is on pause.

"I'm here, I have teammates and coaches that believe in me. You need to make plays for them so I want to be there for those guys, however long that is."

*See also:*

[\*Former Roanoke football star Darius Bratton now starting in the Canadian Football League.\*](#)

[\*Danville's Malik Clements to play in Canadian Football League championship game.\*](#)

[\*Aspiring dentist from Danville first aims for football career in Canada.\*](#)

## Virginia players in the Canadian Football League

Northern lights are shining on Virginia football players this year.

Twenty players who were either born in Virginia or went to college/university in the state are with the Canadian Football League's nine teams. Some have already turned heads and claimed league awards and championships in their three-down careers.

Here's a look at the talented 20.



Woody Baron, a former Virginia Tech player, is now with the B.C. Lions. Photo courtesy of the B.C. Lions.

## **B.C. LIONS**

### **Woody Baron, defensive lineman**

Birthplace/age: Chicago (29)

School: Virginia Tech

CFL seasons: 5 (Montreal 2018, 2019, 2021; B.C. 2022)

### **Lucky Whitehead, receiver/returner**

Birthplace/age: Manassas (31)

School: Florida Atlantic

CFL seasons: 4 (Winnipeg 2019; B.C. 2021, 2022)

Awards: 2021 West Division and CFL all-star; won 2019 Grey Cup



Taquan Mizzell, formerly of the University of Virginia, in action for the B.C. Lions against Toronto earlier this season. Photo courtesy of the B.C. Lions.

### **Taquan Mizzell, running back**

Birthplace/age: Virginia Beach (29)

School: Virginia

CFL seasons: 1

### **CALGARY STAMPEDERS**

### **Tae Daley, defensive back**

Birthplace/age: Miami (24)

School: Virginia Tech



CFL seasons: 1

**Mike Moore, defensive lineman**

Birthplace/age: Hyattsville, Maryland (29)

School: Virginia

CFL seasons: 7 (Ottawa 2016; Edmonton 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021; Montreal 2022)

Awards: 2019 West Division all-star; won 2016 Grey Cup



Darius Bratton, who grew up in Roanoke and went to Virginia, at an Edmonton Elks practice. Photo courtesy of the Elks.

**EDMONTON ELKS**

**Darrius Bratton, defensive back**

Birthplace/age: Roanoke (25)

School: Virginia

CFL seasons: 1

**Elliott Brown, defensive lineman**

Birthplace/age: Odenton, Maryland (25)

School: Virginia

CFL seasons: 1

**HAMILTON TIGER-CATS**

**Malik Carney, defensive end**

Birthplace/age: Alexandria (27)

School: North Carolina

CFL seasons: 3 (Hamilton 2021, 2022)

**Jarrold Hewitt, defensive lineman**

Birthplace/age: Venice, Florida (25)

School: Virginia Tech

CFL seasons: 1



William Stanback of the Montreal Alouettes may be the biggest star in the CFL with Virginia ties. Photo courtesy of Montreal Alouettes.

## **MONTREAL ALOUETTES**

### **William Stanback, running back**

Birthplace/age: Hempstead, New York (29)

School: Virginia Union

CFL seasons: 5 (Montreal 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022)

Awards: 2021 CFL rushing leader; 2021 East Division most outstanding player; 2021 East Division and CFL all-star; 2019 East Division and CFL all-star

## **OTTAWA ROUGHRIDERS**

### **Bryce Carter, defensive lineman**

Birthplace/age: Steelton, Pennsylvania (25)



School: James Madison

CFL seasons: 2 (Ottawa 2022)



DeVonte Dedmon was named Most Outstanding Special Teams Player in the CFL for 2021. Courtesy of CFL.

**DeVonte Dedmon, receiver/returner**

Birthplace/age: Williamsburg (27)

School: William & Mary

CFL seasons: 4 (Ottawa 2019, 2021, 2022)

Awards: 2021 CFL most outstanding special teams player; 2021 East Division and CFL all-star

Records: 2021, set CFL record as the fastest player to score five career return touchdowns (15 games)

**Jacob Ruby, offensive lineman**

Birthplace/age: London, Ontario (30)

School: Richmond

CFL seasons: 8 (Montreal 2015, 2016; Edmonton 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021; Ottawa 2022)

Awards: 2022 East Division all-star





Hunter Steward of the Ottawa Redblacks stands for the national anthem. PHOTO: André Ringuette/Freestyle Photography. Courtesy of Ottawa Redblacks.

**Hunter Steward, offensive lineman**

Birthplace/age: Calgary, Alberta (31)

School: Liberty

CFL seasons: 9 (B.C. 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021; Ottawa 2022)



Frankie Hickson of the Saskatchewan Roughriders. Courtesy of the Roughriders.

**SASKATCHEWAN ROUGHRIDERS**

**Frankie Hickson, running back**

Birthplace/age: Lynchburg (26)

School: Liberty

CFL seasons: 2 (Saskatchewan 2022)

## **TORONTO ARGONAUTS**

### **DaShaun Amos, defensive back**

Birthplace/age: Midlothian (28)

School: East Carolina

CFL seasons: 5 (Calgary 2018, 2019, 2021; Toronto 2022)

Awards: won 2022 Grey Cup; 2019 West Division all-star; won 2018 Grey Cup

### **Dejon Brissett, receiver**

Birthplace/age: Mississauga, Ontario (27)

School: Virginia

CFL seasons: 3 (Toronto 2021, 2022)

Awards: won 2022 Grey Cup





Toronto Argonauts wide receiver Cam Phillips hauls in a pass against the Winnipeg Blue Bombers during the 109th Grey Cup at Mosaic Stadium on Nov. 20 in Regina, Saskatchewan. Photo by Kevin Sousa/CFL.

### **Cam Phillips, receiver**

Birthplace/age: Charlotte, North Carolina (27)

School: Virginia Tech

CFL seasons: 3 (Toronto 2021, 2022)

Awards: won 2022 Grey Cup



Malik Clements of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers at a practice last year. (He changed jersey numbers this year.) Photo by Robert Ong.

## **WINNIPEG BLUE BOMBERS**

### **Malik Clements, linebacker**

Birthplace/age: Danville (26)

School: Cincinnati

CFL seasons: 3 (Edmonton 2021; Winnipeg 2022)

### **Ricky Walker, defensive lineman**

Birthplace/age: Newport News (27)

School: Virginia Tech

CFL seasons: 3 (Winnipeg 2021, 2022)