

16 of 21 DOCUMENTS

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Mining the islands' football gems

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BY STEPHEN F. HOLDER

Times Staff Writer

When Bucs tight end Alex Smith conducted his first football camp in the Bahamas last year, he went in with no expectations.

"We were trying to expose them to a little football," Smith said, noting the utter lack of football infrastructure in his father's native country.

"They really don't have any football background. We had guys showing up in jeans and sandals, in some cases."

Smith didn't find much football knowledge. But he and his father, Edwin, a defensive end for the Broncos from 1973-75, did uncover plenty of football potential.

It was at that moment the Smiths' efforts to merely introduce football to the islands morphed into a mission.

They returned to Nassau on July 14 for a second camp and were stunned by the increased intensity. Now, their goal of identifying Bahamian youths with enough upside to play in the United States seems more realistic.

"This year," Alex Smith said, "we saw a big difference. It was like they really came ready to work, and we pushed them. There is definitely a lot of talent down there."

The idea is to find players with athletic ability and give them the option to enroll in U.S. high schools to play football while getting an education. The ultimate objective, the Smiths say, is to position them to attend college through football.

For many kids in the Bahamas, financial challenges make college unlikely.

But it is a goal others have found worthy. The Smiths were joined in Nassau by quarterback **Bruce Gradkowski** and defensive lineman Julian Jenkins of the Bucs, Chargers linebacker Shaun Phillips, Broncos running back Mike Bell and former Bucs quarterback Doug Williams.

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Ravens receiver Devard Darling, who is of Bahamian descent and has an annual camp in Freeport, also attended.

Though the NFL is followed intently in the Bahamas - life comes to a standstill on Super Bowl Sunday - there are no organized youth leagues. Basketball, track and, to a lesser extent, soccer rule. The lone football offering is the primitive six-team Commonwealth American Football League.

"Right now, we're getting them involved too late," said Lawrence Hepburn, a member of the league's steering committee. "You can't teach them the fundamentals at 19."

So Hepburn is joining the Smiths, trying to generate financial support from the business community to sponsor candidates while looking in nooks and crannies for the next big thing.

Hepburn, literally, found one recently when he stumbled upon a 300-pound teen fishing with his father on the island of Abaco.

One success story is 6-foot-9, 380-pound Ian "Big Bahama" Symonette, a redshirt freshman at Miami who also was recruited by Texas, LSU and Oklahoma after only two years of high school football in Texas.

The Bahamas have produced renowned athletes. The "Golden Girls," as the locals call them, won gold in the 4x100-meter relay at the 2000 Olympics. Mychal Thompson was the top pick of the 1978 NBA draft. And there have been numerous Bahamian-Americans who have achieved success in the United States.

Other NFL standouts with Bahamian ties include the Jets' D'Brickashaw Ferguson, Jaguars' Fred Taylor and Ravens' Samari Rolle.

The Smiths believe there could be others like them on the islands.

"They don't have a lot of knowledge. You have to teach them how to get in a stance and all the basic things," Alex Smith said. "But once someone has the ability, all it takes is a little coaching."

If they can find those who possess that ability, maybe a gem will be uncovered. Or maybe a young player simply gets a ticket to college and earns an economics degree from Stanford, like Alex Smith.

His father, the NFL's first Bahamian player, sees himself in many of the Bahamian kids. Edwin Smith was picked up by upstart Colorado College after three years in the United States because, "I could walk, talk and chew gum at the same time. But once I got there, I really started to excel.

"The precedent is there. A lot of the parents (in the Bahamas) don't have the financial means to send their kids to college. Hopefully, we can step in and bridge the gap."

Stephen F. Holder can be reached at (813) 226- 3377 or
sholder@sptimes.com

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