Nutmeg Legend Has Distinguished Yale Career

By Tommy Hine

He graduated from Ansonia as the most prolific running back in Connecticut high school history.

So, when Alex Thomas arrived in New Haven as a college freshman four years ago, he brought those wonderful high school memories to Yale.

But it wasn’t the state career rushing record of 8,279 yards at Ansonia that Thomas remembers most. Nor was it the 114 touchdowns he scored, another state career record, or the 747 points, yet another Connecticut career mark.

No, the memory Thomas cherishes most wasn’t even a rushing accomplishment. It was the pass he threw for Ansonia High. It was the only pass of his high school career, and it scored an Ansonia touchdown.

“Playing against Seymour my senior year, I was able to throw the ball on a toss pass for a touchdown which helped seal the game, because it was pretty close at the time,” Thomas said. “They had been shutting down our running attack.

“That was my only touchdown pass in high school. It was the only time I ever threw the ball. The funny thing is that I had zero receiving touchdowns in high school, but I had one pass completion for a touchdown.”

The way Thomas ran the ball in high school, he didn’t have to pass. In addition to the Connecticut career records he set for rushing yardage, touchdowns and total points, he set single-season state records with 3,596 rushing yards and 47 touchdowns, and Thomas also set a state one-game rushing record of 518 yards on 44 carries for seven touchdowns.

Picking Yale as his college of choice wasn’t a difficult decision for Laura and Dwayne Thomas's son. “It was pretty much an easy choice for me to pick Yale with the education I could get,” said Thomas, selected Connecticut’s State Player of the Year in 2007. “Football is one thing, but you can only play football for so long. After that, what are you going to do? That was pretty much my thought process.

“Thinking about the possibility of coming to a place like Yale didn’t even strike me until probably my sophomore year. Ever since I realized that there was an opportunity to actually come here, there was just no looking back for me. I’m sure if I had not declared myself an Ivy League candidate so early, I probably would have had an opportunity to play college football elsewhere. I have no regrets.”
Nicknamed Train because of his tattoo taken from a Bible scripture that refers to training both physically and spiritually, Thomas continued his assault on the record book after he arrived at Yale. In the loss at Penn two weeks ago, he had a career-high 204 rushing yards -- the most since Mike McLeod ran for 276 yards against Lehigh four years ago. It was only the fifth time in the history of Yale football that a running back rushed for more than 200 yards in a game, and it was also the first time anyone had done it against Penn since 1997. Thomas’ 204 rushing yards against the Quakers was the most by an Ivy League back through the first six weeks of the season, and he accomplished the feat playing a little more than three quarters before he was removed from the game after suffering an injury in the fourth quarter.

The injury kept Thomas out of the game at Columbia last Saturday, but he expects to be fully recovered for Yale’s last three games of the season, including today.

“I’m walking on it much better,” said Thomas, who wore a brace last week but did not need crutches. “I don’t really remember what happened. I landed funny I think, and I even stayed in the game for a few more plays. With just rest and some rehab, it should be fine.”

At the time he was injured two weeks ago, Thomas was Yale’s active career rushing leader with 1,594 yards, including seven 100-yard games. Unlike his high school days at Ansonia, Thomas is also Yale’s active career receiving leader among running backs with 49 pass receptions. His 47-yard run at Cornell last season was the longest run by a Yale back last fall, and his 74-yard run against Dartmouth was the longest in the Ivy League through the first six weeks of this season.

Voted the strongest player on the team, pound-for-pound, in a vote of teammates, Thomas really likes this team at Yale.

“I think we’re the most talented team we’ve put together since I’ve been here,” said Thomas, a second-team All-Ivy selection last year. “Obviously, a few games haven’t gone our way, but that’s the nature of the game. You never know what’s going to happen on the field of play. If you play up to your potential, anything can happen.

“I really like the enthusiasm we have. Everyone just loves playing. Everyone loves being there and going through the grind together. That makes the whole process much easier. The talented guys you are around and the guys that you’re constantly competing against just makes you better. It’s the best team I’ve played on at Yale.”

Thomas said the best of times during his four years of Yale football were the games he played when the Bulldogs trailed late and came back to win.

“Games like my sophomore year playing at Columbia,” said Thomas, remembering the game when Yale trailed the Lions by 12 points with six minutes to play before the Bulldogs rallied to score the go-ahead touchdown with 58 seconds left.
“And definitely the game last year against Georgetown when we scored in the last second of
the game as time expired,” Thomas said. “Those close games - - pulling them out at the end - - -
those are the games I remember most.”

Then, unfortunately, there are the bitter memories of Harvard losses the last three years. “The
Harvard losses - - - definitely - - - especially playing better than them for most of the game and
then letting it slip away at the end,” Thomas said.

In his senior year at Ansonia, Thomas was one of many Yale recruits who sat in the stands
that shocking fall day in 2007 when a victory over Harvard would give the Bulldogs a perfect
10-0 record and the Ivy League title. Instead, Harvard handed Yale a crushing 37-6 loss.

“It was the second Yale game of the year I went to,” Thomas said. “It wasn’t the same team
that I saw earlier in the season. I didn’t know what to think. I was just shocked. Obviously,
beating Harvard is one of my goals this year. It would mean the world to me, and it would mean
a lot to everyone on campus. That’s the one time of year when everyone is excited. Nearly
everyone goes to the Yale-Harvard game, either to tailgate or to actually watch the game. That’s
the week when everybody is excited about football and actually pays attention to what’s going
on. Everyone talks about it.

“Last year’s graduating team was the second Yale team in history to go four years without
being Harvard. I don’t want to be another one of those classes.”

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No. 1 is a Hit By TOMMY HINE

It is probably a stretch to say Drew Baldwin was born to play football.

But it can be said that Baldwin knew football was his game even before he was in grade
school.

“I played organized football in my first-grade year when I was only six or seven years old,”
he said. “I played organized football again in my sixth-grade year. I always knew I was going to
play football before I ever got to high school.”

And on the days when Baldwin wasn’t playing organized football as a kid, football was
always his game when he was just at play in the neighborhood.

“My buddies and I would throw the ball around at home,” said Baldwin, from Alexandria,
Va. “Growing up, everybody in the neighborhood would be throwing and catching the ball every
day, just playing football games whenever we could.
"I always knew I wanted to play football when I got to high school. I didn’t really know I was going to choose to play football over playing basketball."

But Baldwin did. He was a three-year letterman at Thomas Edison High School as a defensive back and wide receiver. He had four pass interceptions and scored six touchdowns as a two-way player his senior year and was a two-time first-team all-district and all-region selection, besides being named the Washington Redskins’ Scholastic Star of the Week.

“I had a great time playing offense in high school,” Baldwin said. “It was a lot of fun playing both offense and defense. I never really wanted to choose one over the other in high school.

“Coming into college, I decided it was a better fit for me to play on the defensive side of the ball. Playing corner is a heck of a lot of fun, especially our kind of defense and the way we play. It’s just a lot of one-on-one match-ups, and that makes it a lot of fun. It was my decision. Yale coaches asked me which one I wanted to play, and I thought about it awhile before I came up to camp. That’s when I let them know I wanted to play defense.”

It was a wise choice. Baldwin played in all 10 varsity games his freshman year as a reserve cornerback and special teams player and won the Charles Loftus Award as Yale’s most valuable freshman. His sophomore year, Baldwin was fifth on the team with 39 total tackles, 31 of them solos. He had seven solo tackles against Harvard that season and six against Lehigh and was tied for the team lead with four pass breakups. Last season, Baldwin made 25 tackles, including six solos, broke up five passes and was Honorable Mention All-Ivy at cornerback.

“To be a good cornerback, it’s all about reacting,” said Baldwin, who had nine solo tackles two weeks ago in the win over Cornell. “You have to be able to react to what you see in front of you. And just as important is the way you react to plays that have already happened. You have to be able to forget what just happened a play ago and know in your mind that you’re going to win the next play.

“In your game preparation, it’s not so much watching just one receiver. In your film study, you watch the whole offense, all their offensive schemes. You want to pick up tendencies and the route combinations. But even after watching film, a team can switch things around and do something different on Saturday. You have to get a feel for those sorts of things during the game.”

Hitting is Baldwin’s specialty. Simply put, he loves to hit people.

“Hitting is definitely something I love,” Baldwin said. “It’s part of playing the cornerback position. I loving being able to cover somebody down the field, but if the ball is in front of me, I want to be able to come up and make the tackle. That’s a key to our defense, to have some great tacklers in the secondary. That’s the way our secondary guys play.

“Offense, defense, special teams… we have the ability to just be dominant when we’re really playing on all cylinders. It’s a different culture, and you can feel the change. It’s become more
competitive. It’s getting tougher and tougher to play because there are more guys coming in who are also competitive, trying to take your spot.”

Edward and Auretha Baldwin have gotten used to watching their son play hard-nosed football. “Both of my parents actually try to come up to all the games, which is great,” Baldwin said. “I have a wonderful support system. My grandmother (Charlotte Fleming) is going to try to get up to all my games this year, too, because she hasn’t been able to the last couple years.”

She hasn’t missed a game this season.

Off the field, the Baldwins can be just as proud of what Drew Baldwin has accomplished away from football. For all four years of college, he has been an active member of the Yale Black Men’s Union, the last two years as the Community Outreach Co-Chair.

“As Co-Chair, you create lesson plans for the mentoring program we have at Hillhouse High School in New Haven,” Baldwin said. “We create lesson plans. I’m not able to get over there much this first semester because of football, but on Fridays we go over and just be there for the kids. We go over the lesson plans with them and try to make a connection with the kids and give them a beacon of hope.”

Former Yale defensive back Casey Gerald ’09, who once wore the No. 1 uniform Baldwin now wears, first got Baldwin interested in the Yale Black Men’s Union four years ago.

“He pretty much told me I was going to be a part it,” Baldwin laughed. “I really had no choice. It’s a program and an organization that brings people together. Everyone knows that is the one place to go to and have a good time and learn from other people’s experiences.”

Because of his work with the Men’s Union, Baldwin’s teammates voted him the most improved player in community outreach this year. Linebacker Jordan Haynes, the Yale captain this season, works closely with Baldwin on the lesson-plan project that helps promote personal growth for the Hillhouse students.

“It helps them to see guys come in from Yale University who look just like them,” Baldwin said. “We want them to know success is not something that is so far out of reach it can never happen to them.”

It’s Not All Black and White, Except For The Movies
By Joel Oblizalo ‘12

Don’t call movies made in the ‘80s “old.” Colin Kruger might politely correct you.
Kruger, a senior offensive lineman, knows good movies were being made long before *Star Wars* and *Back to the Future*. And he should: as a kid, movie nights with his father included *Citizen Kane* after *The Lion King*.

“My dad was always a huge fan of old black and white movies,” Kruger says. “Now I’m a big movie buff.”

When asked what his favorite flicks are, he readily responds, “An old Cary Grant film called *His Girl Friday*. *(The film, an adaptation of the comedic play *The Front Page*, came out in 1940.) “I love old movies.” However his love of black and white doesn’t keep him from appreciating newer films, like Kevin Spacey’s classic performance as Keyser Söze in 1995’s *The Usual Suspects*. He’s a true movie lover, not a film snob.

It doesn't take long to get the sense that Kruger isn't the kind of guy who looks down on before giving it a fair chance. He's unassuming, and refreshingly grounded; shrewd enough to see other's perspectives, humble enough to respect them.

“In high school, I was in the International Baccalaureate program,” he says. “Our classes were literally above the rest of the school.”

The higher achieving students often took a bit of a snide attitude towards the teens that weren’t enrolled in the IB program, but not Kruger. “I was playing football with guys that a lot of the IB kids looked down on,” he explains. “In the end, it was football, and my coach who really pushed me to go to a good school, that got me into Yale.” He remarks on how some of his classmates were disappointed with where they ended up after graduation, while Kruger was thrilled with where football had helped take him.

Unfortunately, getting there was only half the battle. To play Division 1 football at Yale, he would have to work his way up—or, more accurately, work his way down.

“Coming in at about 315 pounds, [OL Coach Mike] Preston said I was too fat,” Kruger recalls. “I was not a thought in his mind until I lost weight.”

It wasn’t an easy battle. Progress was slow freshman year, and injuries during his sophomore campaign set him back even further. He couldn’t keep his weight low, and Preston was adamant about dropping the pounds before Kruger could move up to the varsity squad. Then, there was a breakthrough.

“My sophomore spring, everything changed. A strict diet of chicken breast and salad helped me come into preseason at around 270. I felt much quicker and more fit.” Preston was impressed; Kruger started every game last year at left guard.

“My Yale football experience has really been a journey of 40 pounds,” Kruger chuckles. “I had to lose to get to the top.”

Kruger’s humble, hardworking approach and respect for things that came before him are also what enables him to do well in the classroom. Majoring in History, one of the most rigorous disciplines at Yale, he’s particularly interested in Latin America, especially during the mid-20th century. The interest in the region may have started when on a whim he decided to try a class on Brazilian history.

“I knew nothing about Brazil,” he says, “I just thought of it as another South American country. And in some ways, it is, with similar problems as others, but in the end I realized it’s really a fascinating place.”

While studying, football, and old movies take up most of his time, the Jacksonville native always catches his beloved Jaguars’ games. “It’s tough being a Jaguars fan, because there aren’t many of us.” He shakes his head. “Even in Jacksonville, it’s hard to find them.”
So when Tom Williams, a Jaguars defensive assistant, became the new Yale head coach, Kruger was admittedly excited.

“I wanted to ask him about it and tell him what a fan I was of the team, especially since there are so few other fans to talk to here,” Kruger says, “but I didn’t want him to think I was just sucking up.”

Now, Kruger doesn’t have to think about sucking up. With a starting spot earned after a solid junior season, the senior will do his best to protect quarterback Patrick Witt and create lanes for Yale’s running weapons. But though his blocks may be mean, a conversation with Kruger reveals his genuinely nice, unassuming nature.

“I’m trying to break the stereotype,” Kruger says. “We’re not all oafish.”

A Rare Bulldog  
By TOMMY HINE

Geoff Dunham has almost made it look easy.

When he was only a freshman, he played in all 10 games that season on Yale’s special teams.

He has been a starter at free safety every game since.

Rare is the Yale player who appears in all 40 varsity games of his collegiate career and is a starter for 30 of those games.

Dunham is one of the few who has that chance.

“I had a lot of help, especially when I was younger, from a lot of the older guys,” Dunham said. “As a freshman, I had Larry Abare and Paul Rice back there and Adam Money last year. I played next to and behind a bunch of playmakers. They definitely made it a lot easier on me. Now, I try to be like that with the younger guys and help them out like the others helped me. “

Dunham wasn’t just filling a hole left vacant by the great Yale defensive free safeties that preceded him. From the start, he proved he could play, right from the very first solo tackle of his college career in a 2008 17-14 loss at Cornell.
When just a sophomore, Dunham finished the 2009 season third on the team with 54 total tackles, including 40 solos. He also was tied for the team-high with four pass breakups, one recovered fumble and, against Princeton, he had a career game with 13 tackles, including nine solos.

“I pride myself on consistency,” Dunham said. “I try to be in the right place and make sure I’m doing all the right things. If I’m doing everything the coaches ask me to do on a certain play, I’m going to be in the right position to make a play and then be able to make that play. I don’t try to do anything too crazy.”

Last season, Dunham started every game at free safety for the second straight year and just like in 2009, he finished third on the team with 47 overall tackles, 31 of them solos. Dunham was credited with six solo stops in Yale’s 21-7 win at Cornell, he was second among Bulldogs’ defenders with two interceptions, and he returned a fumble 57 yards for a touchdown against Princeton, one of only two Yale defensive scores all year.

Still, Dunham is one of the quietest men out there, even while directing Yale’s defensive secondary.

“Off the field, I’m more of a lead-by-example kind of guy,” he said. “On the field, as a free safety, I have to make all the coverage calls. I have to make sure everyone’s lined up correctly, so I have to be vocal on the field. I’m not a rah-rah guy like the Abare brothers, but I get excited when we make plays. There are a lot of congratulatory hand-slaps out there.”

For the last three years, there have been a lot of congratulatory hand-slaps in the stands as well. Dunham’s parents, William and Beth, have attended many Yale games, even though they live in Dallas. This season, their son’s last at Yale, they plan on going to every one of his 10 games.

“My parents have been super supportive over the years,” he said. They’ve been great.”

Dunham thinks his parents will like the Yale team they’ll see this season.

“Defensively, we’re very aggressive,” he said. “I like that. We have a lot of weapons on both sides of the ball and a lot of playmakers. You can really count on everyone out there doing his job, and we expect exciting plays out of our defense.
“I feel like it’s going to be an exciting year. We have a lot of returning players and a lot of younger guys who will be pretty exciting to watch. We have all the talent. We just need to go out there and take care of business. I love this team. I’m super excited about this season. I can’t wait to get into it.”

Off the field, Dunham’s life is just as exciting.

For three of the past four summers, he has been an intern in cancer research, two years at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas and most recently, at the Scripps Research Institute in Jupiter, FL.

“I was synthesizing or making small, protein-like molecules that would inhibit tumor growth,” Dunham said.

In layman’s terms, Dunham then tried his best to explain the research he conducted in his chosen field.

“The molecules I was making were intended to disrupt some of the signaling processes tumors use in order to grow larger,” he said. “When tumors are very small, they need nutrients to grow, so they send out chemical signals to nearby blood vessels to promote the branching out of vessels toward the tumor. The molecules I was synthesizing work to block the interaction between the chemical signals and the receptors on the blood vessel.

“The research I did didn’t involve animals, but mainly focused on the chemistry side of things - - - and generally dealt with tumor processes in general, not really focusing specifically.”

This past summer, Dunham worked out with his Yale teammates in the off-season in New Haven, but he was never far from the classroom and his chosen field of studies. While training for this season, he still found time to take a class in organic chemistry at Yale.

Cancer research is the field Dunham wants to pursue after his college days are over, unless there first is an opportunity to extend his football career.

“Oh yeah, definitely,” he said. “I love this game. I’d jump at the opportunity to continue playing it. Football has been great for me. It’s given me tremendous opportunities in my life. If I could continue to play football, I will.
“Barring any opportunities to play football after college, I want to go to grad school for perhaps bio-chemistry or something related to that field and hopefully, end up doing some type of cancer research. I want to be a research doctor. I definitely want to stay on the research side of things.

“I can’t really say anything about a timetable for a cure just because the disease is so complex, and I’m just not sure.”

But he, like the world around him, can hope.

Best Dressed Bulldog by Ron Vaccaro ’04

Ingalls Rink, Friday, October 29, 2010. As the clock hits 7 p.m. and the puck is dropped on the Yale men’s hockey team’s season opener against Brown, Evan Ellis ’12 is beginning his year as the voice of Yale hockey on Yale All-Access, the professional-quality videostreaming operation run entirely by students. Not two hours ago, Ellis, an offensive lineman, was on the field at Yale Bowl for the team’s final practice prior to playing Columbia the next day. Now, he’s swapped the sweats for shirt, sweatervest and tie – Yale blue, of course – and the helmet for a broadcast headset. He won’t be settled into his press box perch for long, though. Offensive line and team meetings loom at 8:30. Ellis calls a period and a half, then races from Ingalls over to Ray Tompkins House. After more running than an offensive lineman should ever do, Ellis arrives in the o-line meeting room at 8:25. Five minutes to spare. He’s greeted with a chuckle from offensive line coach Mike Preston, whose never seen one of his players so well-dressed for a Friday night meeting.

The next day, Ellis was in uniform for Yale’s 31-28 win over Columbia at the Bowl, and in his customary broadcast outfit that night – he got to call the entire game this time – as Yale’s hockey team defeated Dartmouth by a football-esque 7-3 margin. The weekend captures the essence of Ellis at Yale – a devoted member of the football team who has spent just as much time pursuing broadcasting. And when he’s been seemingly forced to choose between his two passions, he’s often found a way to give both endeavors his all.

Ellis’ love for both football and broadcasting can be traced to his beloved hometown – Elizabethton, TN, a mountain town of 13,000 nestled in the northeastern most corner of the state.

“It’s a football town,” Ellis says. “Think Friday Night Lights. It’s a one main street town that pretty much shuts down when there’s football going on. Saturdays, Tennessee football is king.
You go to church on Sunday. Then by Monday, Tennessee football is dominating the discussions again.”

Ellis has lived there in a house on the old family farm since he was nine months old. He attended his first Volunteer game at five years old, but it was a year earlier he was first exposed to sports broadcasting.

“I remember the exact place I was in the car with my dad in Elizabethton,” Ellis recalled. “All of a sudden I heard this voice on the radio, and it was John Ward (the legendary voice of Tennessee football from 1965-99) and since that time, my goal has been to be the voice of the Tennessee Volunteers. I’m still in awe of that man to this day.”

While his ultimate goal remains the same, the path from Elizabethton to Yale was not exactly a natural one. Once in high school, Ellis and his dad, Sam, sent football tapes to about 35 schools, and Penn was the first school to respond with a letter expressing interest. Penn was the only Ivy school Ellis had sent a tape to at that time because he watched when ESPN’s College Gameday visited Franklin Field for a game. When Penn wrote back, and Ellis explored the Ivy League further, he proceeded to send tapes to Harvard, Princeton and Yale.

Yale’s was the first Ivy League camp Ellis attended. As fate had it, just a week prior to Yale’s camp, he’d attended camp at Appalachian State, and remembers to this day the wisdom the coach there had for his campers.

“Coach Moore told us all to make sure when we picked a school that we picked one that was right for us for the next 40 years, not just the next four. That next Thursday, I went to Yale, and it was clear that I’d found that place,” Ellis said.

Once on Yale’s campus, Ellis didn’t waste time making an impact. On the field, he’s been a consistent, steadfast member of the team, working as hard as anyone, day in, day out. His commitment to broadcasting has grown each year as well. As a sophomore, he worked as a member of WYBC’s sports staff, but last year left to spearhead the official Yale Hockey video broadcasts.

“We have about 20 student employees for Yale All-Access, and none work harder at their job than Evan,” said Sam Dorward ’13, the managing producer of the group. “I’ll get a text from Evan at three in the morning after the game breaking down the minute details of the broadcast.”

Ellis’ success as a hockey broadcaster is remarkable given he had never seen the sport played in person until his freshman year in New Haven, when he was hosting a football recruit and decided to check out a game. Yet his passion and excitement and devotion to the craft come through on the air as if he’d been calling games forever. He spent the past two summers working at the University of Tennessee in the video department, logging tape, doing whatever was necessary to learn more about the field.
“Evan gets more excited when the Bulldogs score than anyone else in the rink,” Dorward said. “I often have to tell other announcers to bring more energy to the broadcasts. With Evan, that’s never a concern.”

Last winter, when Harvard came to Ingalls, Ellis was in his familiar perch in the broadcast booth, but there was nothing ordinary about the man who was inches to his right. U.S. Senator John Kerry was in attendance, and sat in the press box, literally rubbing elbows with the Yale broadcaster in Ingalls’ cramped quarters.

“When the game was over, he said ‘good job kid, keep it up’ and I was blown away,” Ellis said. “Here I am a 20-year-old kid and a U.S. Senator is commenting on something I did.”

Thanks to his relentless pursuit of excellence in the craft, Ellis is likely to be commenting on sports for many years to come.

Return Man by Chelsea Janes ’12

There are few positions in sports like that of the punt returner. For a few agonizing seconds in every game, all eyes are on him as he awaits the arrival of a ball he must catch, 11 charging defenders he must dodge, and the responsibility of a field position he must establish. In addition to speed, finesse and vision, the punt returner must also possess an uncommonly fearless focus and a little bit of magic: that spark with which he evades certain tackles, eludes hungry defenders and blocks out the dangers headed his way.

In 139 seasons of Yale football, few players have filled that role as well as Gio Christodoulou. A 5-foot-10, 190-pound combination of courageous creativity, fiery focus, and that little bit of magic, Christodoulou has been the Bulldogs’ one-man field position machine throughout his years at Yale.

“I just try to be fearless out there,” Christodoulou said. “I want to contribute anyway I can and help the team. If I can make a big play, that helps, and that’s the goal.”

Christodoulou showed that fearlessness and a nose for the dramatic from the very start, making an impact as a freshman on a Yale football player’s biggest stage: The Game. In the biggest game of his young career Christodoulou exploded, running back a 47-yard kickoff return and breaking off an 87-yard punt return for a TD – the second-longest in school history – in a performance that earned him Ivy League Special Teams Player of the Week honors, the Charles Loftus Award as the Bulldogs’ top freshman and a place in the heart of Yale football fans for years to come.
Five years later, Christodoulou has juked his way into the Yale record books, sitting just 82 yards from the school’s career punt return record (currently with 707). He also holds the second-highest single season punt return yardage (285 in 2008). He has also established himself as a major part of the Bulldogs’ receiving corps with 46 career catches for 630 yards and one touchdown.

As Christodoulou’s knack for finding the right path has served him well on the field, he has also employed it to comparable success off it. The political science major is the head of the Yale Black Men’s Union’s mentoring program, a program he says helps him give back to those who steered him throughout his life.

“We give the kids advice, become friends with them, and mostly just try to guide them down the right track,” Christodoulou said. “I had a lot of people in my life guide me, and I’m trying to do the same for them.”

One of the most instrumental figures in Christodoulou’s journey, he says, was former Yale player Chris Denny-Brown, who was a fifth-year senior when Gio was a freshman. Having done it all (playing QB, HB, WR and CB) in high school at Belen Jesuit Prep in Miami, Fla., Christodoulou needed to narrow his focus to his new role as a Bulldog. He credits Chris Denny-Brown ’07 with showing him the ropes and teaching him the basics of punt returning, as other Yale leaders – the likes of Bobby Abare ’09, Paul Rice ’10, Travis Henry ’10 and John Sheffield ’10 among others – taught him the best way to translate that focus and finesse on the Class of 54 Field into similar success off it.

Certainly, his run through the Yale record books and contributions to the community indicate he has used both lessons well for four years, but after an injury sidelined him for much of 2009 and opened the door for him to play one more season in 2011, Christodoulou jumped at the chance to – fittingly – return.

The reason? Besides a love for the game and his team, Christodoulou says he has yet to accomplish his goals for his Yale career. For a player whose role is often so solitary and so singularly important, that unfinished business is decidedly team-oriented.

“The main reason I came back was to beat Harvard and win an Ivy League Championship,” Christodoulou said. “That’s why we play. We play to win, and that’s why go through what we go through. Early mornings, hard practices – that’s why you do it. I will always remember playing Harvard – as a Yale football player, that’s your big moment. That’s what you’re judged on.”

Christodoulou’s legend began against the Crimson, and he hopes to cap it off in the same way. But much like his punt returns, Christodoulou’s career will not just be defined by how it starts or where it finishes, but also by the brilliance in between.

There is no doubt Christodoulou came back with his fearless focus set on running his team to an Ivy League Championship. If he does, it will be a fitting end for the fifth-year senior, one last magical return.
Taking the Plunge
by Miyuki Hino ’12

Dawson Halliday ’12 has never been scared to try something new. As a kid, he played tennis, football, basketball and baseball. He tried his hand at defensive end, then running back, then quarterback. In coming to Yale, he swapped the southern comfort of Knoxville, Tenn., for the cold winters of the Northeast. True to his style, he made one more leap after his freshman year: he switched from quarterback to cornerback, a position utterly foreign to him.

“I realized after my freshman year we’d have a coaching change, and I just wanted to find a way to contribute,” Halliday said. “I’m glad I did it, it’s been a great transition and it’s helped me have an impact on the team.”

The change certainly turned out positively for both Halliday and the Bulldogs, but it wasn’t always a smooth ride. Though position changes are frequent in college football, players rarely venture from offense to defense. Defensive back coach Rick Flanders certainly had his doubts and suggested wide receiver as a more realistic choice. However, Halliday was confident he would be able to learn the new role. Ultimately, Coach Flanders agreed to give him a shot.

At cornerback, Halliday has been able to take advantage of his experience at quarterback. His quick, shifty feet and understanding of the game have eased the transition greatly.

“A lot of times, I can feel what’s coming and know what the quarterback is thinking in certain situations, and that might have given me a little bit of an edge,” comments the Trumbull College resident.

Classmate and safety Geoff Dunham ’12 agrees. “His knowledge of how quarterbacks read coverages has definitely helped him as a defensive back.”

Those intangible qualities stem from Halliday’s long-time obsession with football and Friday night lights. Growing up watching Peyton Manning at the University of Tennessee, Halliday knew that football was the sport for him. He begged his parents to let him play and finally got permission in fourth grade.

“The first time I hit somebody, I looked at my dad like ‘Am I allowed to do that?’ He said ‘Good job,’ and I knew I loved it,” laughs Halliday.

After switching to quarterback in middle school, he enjoyed a prolific career at Bearden High School. A four-year starter, he earned all-region recognition twice and was named all-state as a senior. In a town where football was everything, Halliday became a local hero. Games regularly drew crowds of 10,000 fans. As star quarterback, his picture was painted in the hallway at school. He threw for more than 2,000 yards as senior captain and led his team to the state semifinals.

On top of his football success, Halliday started on the baseball team for four years. He captured the squad his senior year and garnered several scholarship offers for college baseball. Still, there was something about football that drew him in. And unsurprisingly, a number of colleges came knocking on his door.

Local schools such as Austin Peay and Middle Tennessee State reached out to Halliday first. He never really set out for an Ivy League education, but it was an opportunity he could not pass up. He considered Harvard among others, but felt that Yale had demonstrated the most commitment to him. He decided to make the trip north and arrived in New Haven in the fall of 2008.
“It’s a big shock once you get here. You leave your family at home and you leave everything you’ve ever known,” says Halliday with an unmistakable Southern accent. “Everyone’s not about football up here [in New England], there are a lot of other sports. People care, it’s just not the center of attention.”

In addition to that Southern accent, Halliday brought with him a strong religious faith. He has expressed that foundation through Athletes in Action, a Christian organization on campus. Whether he is leading the freshman Bible study or relaxing at a club social night, Halliday finds time three or four nights each week to devote to AIA.

“That’s just who I am,” he says.

On and off the field, Halliday’s sincere care for those around him is visible for all to see. As many of his teammates and friends can attest to, he seems to have a perpetual smile on his face. His positive attitude is infectious.

“I love to encourage others, to build other people up and make them feel like they can run through walls. I hope I’ve done that for the people around me,” he adds.

Coach Flanders speaks highly of Halliday’s contributions, calling him “a joy to be around every day.” According to Dunham, he is “the ultimate teammate. He does everything the right way and sets a great example for the younger guys on the team.” Fellow defensive back Drew Baldwin ’12 describes him as “the type of person you want to have around you.”

Halliday has certainly been thankful to be around Baldwin, who has served as his mentor during his position change.

“When I first got out there, I was struggling, treading water and just playing as hard as I could even though I was making mistakes. I always ask Drew, ‘What should I have done here?’ He really helped me learn the position.”

Baldwin has nothing but praise for the former quarterback.

“Sometimes I forget he wasn’t a defensive back during our freshman year,” Baldwin says. “Since making the switch, he has had more opportunities to show off his athleticism, physicality, and playmaking abilities.”

Coach Flanders adds that the key to Halliday’s success at cornerback has been his work ethic and competitive spirit.

Now in the home stretch of his final season, Halliday has been reflecting on the team camaraderie that has formed the foundation of the Bulldogs’ success. Through years of punishing offseason lifts and conditioning workouts, he and his teammates have learned to lean on each other when the going gets tough.

“I care so much about the people to my left and right that I want to play the best I can so I don’t let them down…you make a new family here. We’re so close and so tight—that’s been really beneficial all season and will continue to benefit us.”

The Middle of It All        by Chelsea Janes ’12

For Yale captain Jordan Haynes, the few seconds before the ball is snapped are short-lived and stressful. First comes a quick glance to the sidelines for the play call. Then an even quicker read of the offensive formation. Combine those into a split-second decision on defensive alignment, followed by a signal to the defense, repositioning of the safeties, and checks on the linemen. Then the symbolic
installation of his mouthpiece, a move which both seals his play call and marks his transition from on-field director to physical anchor of the Bulldog defense.

Sometimes, those seconds are too few. Such was the case for what may be the biggest play of Haynes’ career so far – a fumble recovery for a touchdown in Yale’s riveting 40-35 last-second victory over Georgetown in 2010.

“(That game) was so fast paced - I was putting in my mouth piece before I realized the ball had been snapped,” Haynes said of his only career score. “Sometimes you just have to play the play.”

That ability to both direct and react has served him well as both a player and leader throughout his Yale career. The 6-foot-1, 237-pound Haynes earned a varsity letter as a freshman, playing in eight games on special teams, and emerged as a central part of the Yale defense as a sophomore, playing in every game and recording 28 tackles and two sacks.

As a junior, Haynes exploded. He shared the Ted Blair Award for team MVP for a season in which he started every game and led the team in solo (59) and overall (102) tackles. He earned first-team All-Ivy and first-team All-New England recognition, in addition to Yale football’s Norman S. Hall Memorial Trophy for outstanding service to the program.

But as impressive as his contributions after the snap are, it is the work Haynes does in those crucial seconds before it that make the difference for the Yale defense.

“Jordan does a great job of handling the situation,” senior linemen Jake Stoller said. “He has the unique ability of making the other players on the field do things right…he demands a lot from the other 10 players on the field which brings everyone’s game to another level.”

The ability to lead Haynes shows before the snap, combined with his success after it, led teammates to elect him the 134th Yale football captain. That role, defensive coordinator Ikaika Malloe said, forced the reserved Haynes to emerge as a more vocal presence.

“He was really a quiet person – you could barely get a word out of him when he first got here,” Malloe said. “He grew quite a bit in terms of learning how to be a vocal leader, along with being a leader of action.”

“I was nervous at the beginning, but talking to guys like (former captains) Paul Rice, Tom McCarthy, Bobby Abare, they gave me good advice to just be myself. You don’t get elected captain for who they expect you to be, but for the person you’ve been,” Haynes said. “From the beginning I’ve been really excited that my teammates have confidence in me.”

That Haynes has emerged as one of the Bulldogs’ brightest should be no surprise given his highly-decorated high school career. The Folsom, Calif., native was valedictorian at Jesuit High School, where he was named a National Merit Scholar and the 2008 National Football Foundation’s High School Scholar-Athlete for the West Region. This year, Haynes has already earned Capital One Academic All-District honors.

“He was probably the most sure-fire candidate for captain that I’ve seen in my four seasons here,” senior lineman Matt Battaglia said. “To have a guy who is so well-respected by his teammates both as a player and as a human being is something we almost take for granted.”

And for all the chaos Haynes must reign in before the snap, he has found a few seconds here and there to appreciate his time in the heart of the Bulldog defense.

“When I’ve been out there this year and looked to my left and looked to my right I see my best friends are out there,” Haynes said. “There’s something special about when you’re in a team sport like that…they’ve sweat with you, bled with you, done all this crazy stuff with you in the offseason…Down the line I think that’s what I’ll consider the most memorable part of this experience.”
Yale senior linebacker Matt Battaglia didn’t play football before high school. In fact, he didn’t play football his freshmen year of high school, either. Or his sophomore year. Or his junior year…

The former Northwest Catholic (Simsbury, Conn.) basketball standout decided to begin playing football the day before Northwest’s training camp opened his senior year. A buzzer-beater, of sorts, from the then high school basketball star with his eyes on collegiate ball. Then 6-foot-3 and 200 pounds, Battaglia was a versatile – if inexperienced – weapon, playing fullback and wide receiver on offense while tallying the third-most tackles on the team as a linebacker in his first season of competitive football.

With football now on his radar, Battaglia decided to take a post-graduate year at the Salisbury School to hone his gridiron skills. He posted the second-highest sack total on the state’s No. 1 defense while gaining crucial muscle weight – and interest from Ivy League coaching staffs. The chance for an Ivy League education and division I athletics, Battaglia said, swayed him from basketball, and the personal interest shown by his recruiter, Larry Ciotti, brought “Batta,” as he’s known to teammates, to New Haven.

Former Yale coach Jack Siedlecki was taking a chance by bringing in a player who had only two years of football experience, but it was apparent from the start that that chance would pay off. Though short on experience and the knowledge of the game his teammates had been developing since Pop Warner, Battaglia learned quickly. As a freshmen, he gained a foundation from coach John Walsh, and then from Doug Semones, current defensive ends coach. After a season at outside linebacker as a sophomore, the coaching staff moved Battaglia to defensive end where, Semones said, “he really blossomed.” And while development of his position and sport-specific skills was important, Semones says the most important part of the two-sport star’s emergence was the growth of a football mentality.

“I think the last thing to get him over the top was he had to become more physical.” Semones said. When he started playing, he was more finesse and he wasn’t as violent as we wanted him to be… he hadn’t developed that because of basketball. Basketball’s more finesse because if you’re that physical in basketball, you’re going to get fouls called on you… He’s become a violent guy, he likes collisions, he can maul a tight end. Because of his size and his strength, when you add the temperament and the physicality to it…he’s tough to block.”

“One of the first things he (Semones) told me was to do it 100 miles per hour whether I made a mistake or the right play. If I make a mistake it’s fine, as long as I go at full speed,” Battaglia said. “He told me to think less and react more, but at the very least make sure at all times you’re going 100 percent.”

The shift to a football attitude was certainly a crucial part of Battaglia’s rapid rise from basketball player to Yale defensive star. But no one can learn a whole new sport as quickly as Battaglia did without a special personality, something Semones says has been a big part of his defensive end’s growth.
“He’s a smart player. He sees things. He studies film, and he sees things,” Semones said. “He always has a perspective or an insight on the opponent and stuff, so I think that’s helped him, also. He’s definitely the leader of the defensive end group…he stepped forward with his personality to be a leader, and he’s one of those guys we depend on.”

He has certainly not disappointed so far this season. Through six games, Battaglia is one of the Bulldogs’ top-10 tacklers, having recorded 11 tackles and a sack. But his role has grown not only on the field, but off. Once the tutored, the quick-study Battaglia is now the tutor, taking younger defensive linemen under his wing and showing them the ropes as only grizzled veterans can. Part of what he will be passing down is the Yale football tradition – a tradition that, for someone who just started following Connecticut football as a senior in high school, Battaglia is very aware of.

“It’s an honor to be a part of the team where, basically, the modern sport of football originated,” Battaglia said. “It started here with Walter Camp and to say you’re a descendant of him – it’s something players at other schools can’t say that they’ve been a part of. It means a lot to me, and it’s very special to be a part of that lineage.”

Such enthusiasm for Yale football begs the question: does Battaglia think he made the right decision choosing his crash-course in football over his first love, basketball?

“Absolutely,” Battaglia said. “Coming here and playing football is the best decision I’ve ever made. By far.”

By TOMMY HINE

Rare is the football player who does not experience what Wes Moyer did his first year at Yale.

He had to put his press clippings in the closet and check his ego at the door.

“In high school, you’re playing freshman ball, and you’re one of the best players on the team,” Moyer said. “You go up to JV ball, and you’re still one of the best players on the team. Then, you get up to varsity in high school, and you’re one of the best players on the team able to play at the next level.

“But it’s a real big adjustment coming to college. You’re not THE guy any more. You’re not the guy everyone looks at. I was excited as a freshman. I didn’t think I’d start, but I thought I’d get some playing time. The first year was a crazy learning experience, and there was definitely an adjustment to make. You’ve never really faced that before. The other guys are a lot bigger and faster and stronger. They have more experience. You’re playing with grown men, and you’re just
Like most freshmen, Moyer survived the first-year disappointment and the reality check but then, as a sophomore, his patience was tested even more, certainly far more than most.

“I tore my wrist up,” said Moyer, still waiting back then to see his first live varsity action at linebacker. “I dislocated my wrist and was out for the year on the first padded practice of the season. I was done for the year from Day One.

“That was even more of an adjustment, a real learning experience about how you can put so much time into working out and getting better and being dedicated to something and then, have it all taken away on one play. It was tough to be around football and not be able to play. It was painful being out there just watching, but it helped motivate me. It was an eye-opening experience, a definite learning experience. It motivated me for two years but still, not being THE guy and being the backup instead was a new experience. All three of my first years were unique in their own way.”

After the reality check as a freshman and the injury as a sophomore, Moyer then was forced to make yet another adjustment as Jesse Reising’s back-up last year. “It was a chance to learn and see what he did and try to help the team any way I could,” said Moyer, who played in every game and saw time on special teams as well.

Then, with 9:53 left in the fourth quarter of the Harvard game, Moyer had to adjust again when Reising was hurt in a hard collision and was carried off the field on a stretcher.

“When Jesse got hurt, it was a grounding experience, a shift in mind-set,” Moyer said. “I’ve heard of injuries when someone gets really injured, but I’d never seen one. When that happened, I thought I had to really dedicate myself to working out as much as I can. It motivated me a lot.

“Over the summer, I thought about the battle in front of me and all the opportunities I had. It really motivated me to put everything into my workouts. That’s been one of the biggest things, to feel strong enough to take on a lineman coming up instead of just getting out of the way . . . to beat him with quickness and to stand in there . . . to deliver a blow and get off a block and make a tackle. I feel now like I have more of a grown-man’s strength, developing into my better years, nearing my peak, maturing, understanding the defense more, being thrust into a leadership position.”

There was no surprise, then, when the Bulldogs opened their season last Saturday against Georgetown that Moyer was the No. 1 linebacker on Yale’s depth chart. He had come full-circle since he arrived in New Haven as a wide-eyed freshman. He had evolved as a player.

“Somehow, being in a starting position has taken the pressure off,” Moyer said. “I don’t know if that makes sense, but now that I’m playing well and know that I’m going to be a starter on a Saturday, I can just relax and go out there and play more.”

In the off-season, Moyer tried something new last year. He worked in a stem cell lab in
Sacramento. It had nothing to do with his psychology studies or the field of endeavor he’ll probably pursue after college, but he did it, and he’s glad he did.

“It was a definite learning experience,” he said. “I never really had much of a science background. I had taken a lot of science classes but never really anything hands-on. I worked in a vivarium, so I would take care of animals that were injected with diseases that were bred with diseases like ALS and Parkinson’s. I would inject them with stem cells trying to find a cure. It was real cool to see the beginning stages of medical research being put into action, something that could develop into helping people with these diseases in the future.

“After college, my plans are still up in the air. I wanted to do this last summer to see if I really enjoyed it and if I could see myself working in a lab studying diseases. I don’t know if that’s the direction I’ll go in the future. I feel like I want to do something more along the lines of psychology.”

Not only did a summer in California give Moyer a chance to spend time with his father, Steve, in Alameda. It offered him the opportunity to re-unite with his mother, Nan Joyce, who moved to Michigan when he was in eighth grade.

“I hadn’t really seen her as much as I would have liked since then,” Moyer said. “She was living and working now at UC -Davis where the lab was, and she made the suggestion that I work there last summer.”

Moyer worked out regularly at the Crunch Gym nearby, and it’s safe to say that no one there had longer hair and a chin beard quite like his.

“There were a high number of people there who were real strong and were just trying to be stronger,” Moyer said. “It wasn’t like I was working out in a health club. There were people there doing hand-cleans, power lifts, squats, dead lifts. It was a great atmosphere to work in.

“I still have long hair, oh yeah. My beard got a little bit longer. I can only grow hair in one spot on my face, just my chin and underneath my chin. So, I decided to make use of that area and just let it go. I’ve got the sleeve-thing going, a cutoff sleeve I just put it on my head. My hair comes out the back of my helmet, but the sleeve keeps it out of my eyes, which is what I was looking for.”

To complete the California image, Moyer is the lead singer in an all-Yale band called Salivating Eyes. They have performed in residential colleges and bars around the city since his freshman year. His roommate, CJ Uy, does all the instrumentals, and Moyer writes the lyrics and then sings the songs.

“It’s fun,” he said. “It provides a good counterpoint, an alternative to football. I’m a California guy at heart.”

The only thing missing from Moyer’s resume is a surfboard. He has never owned one.
“Actually, I’ve never been surfing,” he said. “People never believe me. I get asked that all the time. I want to go. I wanted to go this summer, but none of my friends did. I’m going to get out there and shred the gnar sometime real soon.”

The Consummate Yale Man
By Ron Vaccaro ’04
The August sun has barely begun its ascent over the Pacific when Patrick Witt laces up his sneakers and exits his hotel room. It’s 6 a.m., and in less than three hours, the summer associate for the Boston Consulting Group will be leading a meeting with senior executives from a leading tech software firm. For now, though, it’s time for Yale’s prolific quarterback to run sprints in the parking lot. You could call his whole day a sprint, for after workouts and 13 hours at work, he’ll return to his San Diego hotel room to write personal statements for the various postgraduate scholarships he is pursuing. It’s well after midnight when the lights finally go out, with less than six hours until it all begins again.
The day is both taxing and typical for Witt, a 6-4, 230-pound senior passer whose football success – the preseason All-American should break all of Yale’s major passing records this autumn – may only be surpassed by his academic accomplishments – he has earned a 3.91 GPA and is a strong candidate for several postgraduate awards. He looks just as comfortable consistently delivering NFL-caliber throws as he does leading a classroom discussion, but don’t let this Georgian’s gentility deceive you – nothing about Patrick Witt’s journey has been easy.
Witt’s athletic challenges began in his yard in suburban Atlanta in his pre-high school days. His older brother Jeff, a 2009 Harvard graduate who was a quarterback for the Crimson, would often have friends over to play basketball, and Patrick would end up playing with them despite being smaller. Two and a half years age difference is a lot more significant at 12 than at 22, after all.
“Jeff’s friends would pick on me, taking advantage of me being younger and smaller, and I had to work that much harder,” Witt said. “It frustrated me so much. I wanted so badly to compete at their level, and I couldn’t.”

There’s an age old debate about whether adversity builds character or reveals it. In Witt’s case, the answer may well be: both.
“At that time, Patrick was physically way behind us, but he was always competing. He would never not play,” Jeff said. “He always hung in there with us. I think that’s partly where he developed his ‘fire in the belly’ competitiveness.”
Then one day, when Patrick was in high school and Jeff and his friends were home on a college break, the gang reassembled for another pickup hoops game. Only this time, the younger Witt was no longer the whipping boy.
“I had started to grow into my body, started to mature, and all of a sudden I was beating Jeff and his friends, consistently,” Witt said. “I knew then something had changed.”
Witt’s athletic prowess earned him much more than long sought bragging rights in those backyard hoops competitions. He received 25 football scholarship offers prior to his senior year, and ultimately found himself graduating from high school early to enroll at the University of
Nebraska in the spring of 2007. He’d always dreamed of playing big time college football, and by the winter of 2009, he had more than fulfilled it – with a Gator Bowl ring to show for it. Entering his redshirt sophomore season, Witt was poised to become the starting quarterback for the Cornhuskers, the big man on campus at the former Big 12 school.

But something bigger than football was missing. As his brother Jeff’s graduation from Harvard loomed closer, Patrick realized that there was more to life than four years in college, and that there was more to those four years than just football. Make no mistake, Witt excelled in the classroom at Nebraska. He achieved a 4.0 in five semesters and carried such a heavy course load that he was only five classes away from graduating in three years. But he wasn’t satisfied at the rate he was growing academically relative to the rate of his Ivy League brother.

“Coming out of high school, it was difficult to make the decision not to go to the Ivy League,” Witt said. “But it is hard as a 17-year-old kid to turn down the red carpet treatment you get as a football player at a school like Nebraska. It was a great experience to play in front of 90,000 people. But I began to realize how quickly college goes by. When Jeff was getting ready to graduate, I started to develop a more long range focus.”

That’s easy to say now, two and a half years removed from the decision, but at times that winter, it was gut-wrenching. Per NCAA regulations, he would have to ask for a release from his scholarship, a Rubicon-crossing act, before knowing if he was accepted at another school. “When the news came that I was accepted into Yale, it was a huge relief,” Witt said. “There was so much uncertainty with the transfer. I was so happy that I went out and tried to buy as much Yale stuff as I could right off the bat. Today I consider myself a Yale Bulldog through and through. This is my school and I’ll be proud to say I went to Yale for the rest of my life.”

In return, he’s given Yale many reasons to look upon him with pride. While some consider getting in to be the hardest part about Yale, for Witt, more challenges were ahead.

When Witt arrived in New Haven in 2009, he entered a football team with a new head coach and a popular incumbent quarterback. Despite participating in only the few weeks of fall camp, he won the starting job, becoming the first transfer student to start his first game at Yale since before World War II, when transfers were common. While his mornings, afternoons and evenings were spent winning the starting job, Witt’s work day did not end when he returned to his dorm room late at night. He stayed up into the wee hours to write stories that were published in two school newspapers, and became a staff reporter for the Yale Daily News. He also joined the Intercultural Affairs Council and Athletes in Action and excelled while adapting to a new classroom environment. Witt was all-in.

“He was hungry for the full Ivy League experience,” observed Penny Laurans, the master of Jonathan Edwards College and one of the most respected officials at the University. “He wanted to talk about courses and professors and find the ones that challenged as well as engaged him. It can’t be easy to walk onto a team that has been together for several years. It can’t be easy to be a transfer student and find your way academically in an initially confusing environment where you are choosing between literally hundreds of courses. But Patrick was not looking for the easy way. I remember when I pointed him towards Don Kagan’s class on Ancient Greek history. It’s a marvelous class but I pointed out that it was known to be very demanding and he would be taking it in season, along with Intermediate/Advanced French and several other demanding courses. Patrick never missed a beat: there was no way he was going to miss that course! He got an A, one of his many As.”
Witt has a voracious appetite for all things Yale, a point underscored to Laurans when she advertised some Sprague Hall chamber music concert tickets to the college. Witt was the first to respond. But no matter how full his plate, Witt has always made time to serve whatever community he’s been in– be it prison ministry and speaking at local schools in Nebraska or volunteering in homeless shelters in New Haven. Even while working full time in Los Angeles this summer, Witt helped to build houses for Habitat for Humanity.

“When you are in a position of leadership, and are a visible person, you lead through serving. That’s always been very important to me,” Witt said. “It’s something I attribute to the way I was raised, true to Christian values, and the faith that I have.”

Two weeks ago, when being interviewed for this story, Witt was asked how he’d want to be remembered once he leaves Yale at the end of this semester.

“I’d want people to say ‘He was the complete package. Think what you want of his performance, but he gave it his best. And he was an excellent student, the definition of a Yale man,’” Witt said.

Yale, it turns out, already has said that.

Unbeknownst to him, just a day after answering that speculative question, he was named the recipient of the Francis Gordon Brown Prize, awarded to the student in the Junior Class in Yale College who most closely approaches the standards of intellectual ability, high manhood, capacity for leadership, and service to the University set by Francis Gordon Brown, who captained Yale Football’s “Team of the Century” in 1900. The distinguished list of former recipients of the award includes former U.S. President George H.W. Bush.

Witt will officially graduate in December, but he “walked” with the Class of 2011 in May. The process of going through commencement ceremonies with plenty of unfinished business on campus – a football season and a senior essay to name just two – gave Witt added perspective.

“I realized how much I love this place and how hard it will be to leave here,” Witt said. “There were times in the past year when I thought I was ready to graduate, and in many ways I am, but it won’t be easy. I really have laid down roots here. I’ve savored every moment.”

When asked about his favorite moments at Yale, Witt doesn’t mention the thrilling comeback he led the football team to at Columbia in 2009, or even the last second touchdown he scored against Georgetown last year. In fact, he mentions no single event.

“Every day that I walk to class, I take time to look at the buildings, to study the small things,” Witt said. “Sometimes I’ll sit on a bench in the middle of Cross Campus or Old Campus and just take it in. That’s all I really need to see. The school has so much tradition – it outdates the founding of this country and that hits home with me big time.”

As for those roots he has laid down, they are certain to nourish healthy, productive branches in all facets of Witt’s life. Next year at this time, he has a realistic chance of studying abroad on a postgraduate scholarship, being on an NFL roster, or working for BCG as a consultant – he received a full-time offer from them following the summer. While the short term might be unclear thanks to his multi-faceted success, one of Witt’s long term goals is no less ambitious than anything else he’s undertaken.

“Down the road, I’d definitely like to serve my country and get into politics,” Witt said.

He already has one endorsement. Asked what she envisioned Witt doing 10 years from now, Laurans’ response was simple:

“I hope I am invited to the inauguration.”
A Man on a Mission
By Josh Satok

It's probably fair to say that every member of the football team came to Yale on a mission, a mission to play their hardest, win games, and take home the Ivy League Championship. Austin Pulsipher, a senior defensive end from Temecula, Calif., had a mission and then some. He was on a real Mormon mission to Taiwan.

Pulsipher’s route to Yale was typical enough. He was born in Utah, moved to Dallas and the family settled in California when he was 12. In high school, he played both linebacker and tight end before coming to Yale in the fall of 2006. Pulsipher experienced instant success when he arrived at Yale: his freshman year, Yale not only won the Ivy League Championship but also defeated Harvard.

Rather than come back for his sophomore year to defend the Ivy League title, Pulsipher made a decision that few football players or college students ever would. He left school for two years in order to go to Taiwan as a missionary for his church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (more commonly known as the Mormons).

When Pulsipher chose to take on the challenge of being a missionary, he had no clue where in the world his mission would take him. His church has missionaries in over 350 locations across the world, and people are assigned more or less randomly to different missions. Like in most Mormom circles, going on a mission is a tradition in Pulsipher’s family: his grandpa went to Kentucky, his father to North Dakota, one brother is currently in Guatemala, and another brother is about to leave for Chile.

It turned out that Austin’s path would lead him across the world to Taiwan. As it happens, his uncle had also gone to Taiwan on his mission as a young man. Jon Huntsman, one of the candidates in the Republican primary and former ambassador to China, had also been on the same mission Austin was assigned to. Some may have been weary of going to a country where they didn’t speak the language, but Pulsipher is glad that he was able to immerse himself in a new language.

“I’m so grateful, I learned Chinese, came back and took Chinese classes for native speakers- I was the only white kid in the class,” he says. He attended the Missionary Training Center on the outskirts of the BYU campus- where his brother plays football- for 12 weeks, preparing for the mission. He felt he was conversational in Chinese, until he stepped on the plane and couldn’t even speak with the stewardess and realized that real life might be a little different from the classroom.

Pulsipher’s life in Taiwan certainly was different than his life at Yale. Instead of practices, lifts, games, and classes, his days, from when he woke up at 6:30 every morning to when he wrote in his diary and went to bed at 10 each night, revolved around spreading his church’s message to those around him.
“The main focus of the mission is to find people, set up appointments with people, and introduce them to our church with the hopes of them joining our church,” he says. He went door to door and through parks talking to people, and also organized other activities like getting 300 people to clean up a local cemetery and leading a six-week drug rehabilitation at something that he describes as between a drug hospital and jail.

Pulsipher was totally emerged in his world for those two years. When a member of the church goes on a mission, they’re expected to devote themselves totally to the task at hand. They’re only allowed to email once a week, and call home twice a year. Despite all the challenges, Pulsipher wouldn’t change his experience for the world. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done but the most rewarding,” he said.

He came back to Yale for the 2009 season, out of shape but ready to get back into the swing of football. “Two years in Taiwan eating rice and chicken just doesn’t keep the weight on you very much,” he says. Yet he quickly got back into playing condition, made a change from linebacker to defensive end in a new system, and last year played in every game, including starting the Cornell game.

This summer, Pulsipher embarked on a journey of a different type that is also very unique for a Yalie: he got married. He met his wife, Laura, his freshman year through church (her older brother was a law student), and proposed over spring break last year. Pulsipher says that it definitely is different being a married man on a college campus. “We’ll go to different things with other couples we know, we’re not going out to parties at DKE,” he says.

Getting married obviously didn’t keep him busy enough; Pulsipher also found the time last summer to intern at Deutsche Bank in the investment division for industrials. His interest in business and finance actually stems from his mission; at one point, he broke his foot playing basketball, and “instead of sending me home because I was kind of useless,” Pulsipher worked in the back office of the mission, doing all of their finances. He has already gotten an offer and will be working for Deutsche Bank in New York next year.

He is a football player, a Mormon missionary, a future investment banker and a married man. Austin Pulsipher is not your typical young man, not your typical Yale student, and not your typical football player.

This year, Pulsipher may no longer be on a mission in Taiwan, but he’s on a mission here at Yale, a mission to bring home a championship. That mission starts today.

Value in Depth    By TOMMY HINE

Nick Schneider didn’t have to look at Yale’s depth chart this morning. He knows he won’t start today’s game against Dartmouth. He has never started a varsity game at Yale, and he knows he probably never will.
That doesn’t mean his desire, heart and love for the game is any less intense than a player who has been a starter his whole college career.

“Obviously, as a competitor - - - and everyone on our team is a competitor - - - you want to be the No. 1 guy,” said Schneider, a senior linebacker from Cincinnati. “But you know, the way my career has gone, I’ve learned a lot about myself and a lot about being a good teammate. I’m definitely where I am right now because I play on special teams, and I back up the captain [Jordan Haynes]. So, it’s easy to get frustrated, and I’ve been in those places before, but I also realize now that I am a very valuable asset to the team and what I bring to it. I take pride in my job, and I think everybody on the team takes pride, whether they’re the No. 1 guy or the scout guy or whatever they are. You’re just out there to help this team win.”

“I’ve been lucky enough to be playing for a staff that recognizes guys who, even though they aren’t starters, have something to bring to the squad and to do some good things out there. I appreciate that.”

A broken left leg kept Schneider on the sidelines for his whole sophomore year but in the three years he has played, he has not only grown as a man. He has seen a Yale team grow up around him.

“I really like the way our senior class has come together to lead the team,” Schneider said. “In the past, I feel like there have been more divisions than there are this year. I feel like everyone understands now what we’re trying to accomplish. Everyone believes that we can do what we’re trying to do.

“There’s a lot of leadership, not only from the captain, Jordan Haynes, but from just about every senior out there. We’ve all seen quite a bit happen in this program, and they’ve been around the block. We have great underclassmen talent, too, so it’s a lot of fun to be around this team. There are a lot of fun guys. I think we’ve really found our niche as a team.”

It wasn’t achieved without some bumps and bruises. Not only did Schneider break his left leg in camp two years ago but in the second week of camp this fall, he tore the meniscus in his right knee.

“I’ve had my share of injuries in my career here,” said Schneider, who has put off knee surgery until after the season. “My right leg was formerly my good one, but now, I’ve injured that one, too. That’s the way it goes in football.

“Still, it’s going well, and I’m playing through that right now. It took me a few weeks to figure out what I could and couldn’t do on my knee. I’m feeling pretty good right now. I’ve gotten to the point where I feel comfortable enough that I’m not thinking about my knee when I’m trying to make my reads and make plays. It’s the type of injury that’s really not about stability. It’s a pain tolerance thing.”

Schneider arrived at Yale with some lofty credentials from the St. Xavier High School he attended in football-crazy Ohio. “To give you an idea, the freshman team at my high school
usually has about 115 guys on it,” Schneider said. “That number will kind of dwindle but when you have juniors and seniors together on the varsity squad, there are still over 100 guys, so there’s really no need for two-way players.”

So, Schneider played only linebacker at St. Xavier, the one position he has known in his football life. Two-time state champions, his high school team went 56-2 in Schneider’s four years there. “We were 15-0 my sophomore and senior years,” he said. “In my senior year, we had some No. 1 national rankings. It was a blast. We actually played on ESPN my senior year against DeMatha from Maryland. It was one of those nationally televised high school deals that was really a lot of fun.”

Rare is the college game Schneider plays now when he doesn’t recognize a familiar face on the opposite side of the line of scrimmage.

“I was lucky to go to a real outstanding high school, both athletically and academically,” he said. “My class alone sent one player to Yale, two to Penn, two to Columbia, one to Cornell and two to Georgetown. I’ve played against a former teammate in games with Georgetown, Cornell, Penn and Columbia, and there is also a guy at Lehigh from the class below me. It’s almost a rarity when I’m not playing against someone who I played with in high school. We not only have a lot of guys in the Ivy League but we also sent quite a few guys to Division I schools.”

Few, though, can match the off-field accomplishments Schneider has seen in his four years in New Haven. He has made Larry and Tammy Schneider very proud parents back in Cincinnati.

As a freshman, Schneider was one of seven friends at Saybrook College who founded ReadySetLaunch - - - a non-profit consulting organization that provides one-on-one college tutoring for underprivileged students.

“These are high school students who wouldn’t normally achieve or be able to pay for these one-on-one type counseling situations,” said Schneider who, as director of external relations, managed relationships with potential donors in the community. “In the second semester of my first year, we were able to win $50,000 in the Chase Community Giving Challenge. Every non-profit organization in the country was eligible to enter, and there were thousands that did enter. We were able to garner enough support through friends and family and students on campus to initiate our effort. We helped 12 or 13 high school students the first year, and it’s been on an upward trajectory ever since.

“We have applications come in from kids all over the country, and it’s really cool to hear their stories. The counseling, tutoring and mentoring covers the entire spectrum, from essay writing and college searches to the application process and financial assistance. It’s really rewarding to help these people.”
Children can get stuck with stereotypes, like being shy. Some are socially maladjusted or prone to extreme competitiveness. Yale defensive tackle Jake Stoller doesn’t know anything about social awkwardness, but he could tell you a bit about being competitive.

At University High School just outside Cleveland (he’s “not a fan” of Lebron), he played forward for the basketball team, caught for the baseball team, and even beat out Yale RB Mordecai Cargill for a spot on the 4x100 relay team. Division I college football (mostly) satisfies his craving for competition now, although as a political science major looking to go into finance, he’s got healthy competition in the classroom and in the job market.

“I’m real competitive,” says Stoller with a smile. “I get it from my dad.”

Legend has it, a backyard game of one-on-one basketball to 11 between Stoller and his father was tied at 10 when the younger Stoller went down with a bad ankle injury. Dad picked up the ball and went in for the game-winning layup.

“I had to go to the hospital and ended up in a boot, but hey, it was tied at ten, and he wasn’t going to lose,” Stoller chuckles.

Stoller’s fire for competition definitely lends itself to football. A captain and all-state selection in high school, his work ethic has made him a force for the Bulldogs.

“He trains as hard as anyone I’ve ever seen,” says Captain Jordan Haynes. “There aren't many guys around that have the same combination of speed and strength that he does.”

Stoller is serious about training because he’s serious about winning. That is also why, as competitive as he is, he is fine with sharing — as in, splitting playing time. In DL Coach Duane Brooks’ system, lines are subbed in out frequently and everyone gets to play. Somewhat ironically, that lack of competition is one of his favorite things about Yale football.

“I love it,” Stoller says. “When I need some wind, I know the next guy coming in is going to do the job just as well.”

During Stoller’s freshman year, he was one of nine players in the rotation. Instead of competing for time, the defense bonded into a tight-knit group who were all rooting for each other. Stoller wouldn’t have it any other way.

He says that he’s a “people person” casually, like some people say their age when explaining something (“I’m 21; I’m not looking to settle down”) or like something you’d hear after the phrase “at the end of the day.” That’s because despite being a 6-foot 4-inch, 290 pound nightmare for runners and passers alike; despite being extremely competitive; despite being an
only child without siblings to learn social skills with, at the end of the day, Jake Stoller is a people person. And from his perspective, that’s the essential thing to know about him.

“I’m competitive, but when it comes to my teammates and my friends, it’s different,” he says. “On the team, I try to be vocal, and positive. [Then] my free time is all about my buddies,” Stoller says. Stoller and his buddies do a lot together. They go to New York City and explore. They perform culinary experiments in the kitchen (he can make a pretty decent conventional chicken parmesan). They relax with the occasional round of golf (he usually cracks triple digits). And for many of his friends, they lift weights together, practice together, and play football together. On the field, off the field, he is a people person.

“He's the kind of friend that would have your back no matter what,” says Haynes, who has roomed with Stoller the past two years. “I respect and look up to Jake in a lot of ways, and I'm lucky to have had him as a friend.” You get the sense that Stoller is the type of guy of who lives for that brand of compliment. Relationships are what he values most, so he isn’t stingy about investing in them. The returns, for him, are priceless.

“Haynes, [WR Bryan] Farris, guys like them, the friendships I’ve made... that’s really what I’ll take away from Yale,” Stoller says with earnest conviction.

Not surprisingly, Stoller is also quite close with his family. His parents, who both have degrees from Yale, come in to have dinner with him the night before home games.

“They’re fans of the pizza here,” he says. In the summer, Stoller and his father usually take a week’s vacation to go fishing together in Canada or Alaska. He loves to fish, and appreciates the opportunity it provides him to spend time with his dad.

With his parents’ background at Yale and a history at his high school of turning out Bulldogs, it would seem like the immediate choice for Stoller. But in the end, it was the people of course that got him to commit.

“Coach Brooks was a big reason why I came to Yale,” he says. “You knew what you were getting with him.”

He also cites former Yale captain Paul Rice ’10, who also went to Stoller’s high school, as playing a big part in his decision. Now, with Stoller’s vocal style of leadership and willingness and enthusiasm to befriend his teammates, you can expect to hear younger players saying similar things about him.

That’s because at the end of the day, Jake Stoller is a people person.
For Jesse Reising ’11, one tackle changed everything. After his sophomore year, the linebacker completed the first half of the Marine Corps Officer Candidates' School. He was on track to become a second lieutenant following graduation in May. When he suffered torn nerves during The Game last fall, he lost more than the feeling in his arm—he lost his dream of defending his country as a Marine on the front lines of battle. In a remarkable show of determination and persistence, Reising has discovered his own ways to protect the American Dream.

“After my injury, my body changed but my beliefs and my spirit did not,” says Reising. “Especially after losing the Marine Corps, I felt there was more I should be doing to give back to my country.”

To that end, he and classmate Nick Rugoff came up with the idea for Operation Opportunity.

Launching in early 2012, Operation Opportunity is just one expression of Reising’s desire to serve. Operation Opportunity is a nonprofit organization that provides assistance with the college admissions and assimilation process to returning veterans and the children of fallen service members. One branch, the Gold Star Scholar Project, guides students who have lost a parent in combat through the college admissions process. The Warrior-Scholar Project helps veterans acclimate to life outside the military and reintegrate into the college classroom environment.

Reising and Rugoff envision Operation Opportunity as a comprehensive education assistance program including tuition assistance, peer networking, and college essay advice. Primarily funded through donations, students and graduates of top universities can volunteer their time as mentors in the Ivy Corps. Ivy Corps members are matched up with veterans or children of veterans and will work with them via instant messaging, video conferencing, and in person.

Reising chose this project with the hope that “those who have made great sacrifices on behalf of their fellow citizens have the greatest possible opportunity to pursue their dreams.” He has teamed up with several other Yale graduates to get the organization up and running. However, Reising did not give up on his ultimate dream of representing America on the front lines.
Due to physical limitations, the opportunities for Reising to work in a war zone were severely limited. He had torn several major nerves in his arm and underwent a series of surgeries to regain feeling in his biceps and forearm. Nerve grafts were taken from his calf and hand, then redirected in his arm. He now has feeling in his arm, but still cannot raise his arm at the shoulder or bend it at the elbow.

“With regards to the pain, it feels like a highly corrosive acid is flowing through the veins in my arm and hand,” admits the Decatur, Ill. native. “But it is a bittersweet feeling, because it is still better than not feeling anything.”

Ultimately, Reising leapt at the chance to oversee construction of military bases in Afghanistan. Though it may not be what he originally imagined, he will still be able to contribute to American military efforts. Concerned about safety with his arm, the US government denied his medical clearance four times. Reising persisted, applying and reapplying for medical waivers.

His efforts paid off. Nearly one year after that tackle, he is finally Afghanistan-bound.

By TOMMY HINE

Christmas time can be party time in the Fernandez home in Honolulu.

Gabriel flies to Hawaii on his Christmas break at Yale. His older brother, Frank, who splits time between working in finance and playing football in Japan, flies home for the holiday. Their younger sisters, Jade and Cana, fly in for Christmas week.

Christmas time is a reunion for a family scattered far and wide but the last couple years, Gabriel hasn’t been in a real fun-loving mood - - - not after being on the losing side of Yale-Harvard games two straight years - - - and not when the big brother sitting across the table was an all-Ivy League center when playing for the Crimson.
“It’s gotten ridiculous,” Gabriel Fernandez said. “We haven’t beaten Harvard in five years and in nine of the last 10 years. It’s embarrassing.

“Even my brother’s friends who I’ve come to know and like ask me, ‘When are you guys ever going to beat us?’ They’re kind of joking, but the message is there. It gets to you. You want to do something about it, and the only way is to beat them. It couldn’t happen at a better time than my senior year.”

There once was a time four years ago when Fernandez sat on the other side of the field at a Yale-Harvard game after his brother played his last game for the men from Cambridge.

“I went to that one Yale-Harvard game with my brother,” Fernandez said. “I believe I was at the game when the Harvard fan held up a sign that said, ‘Yale Sucks.’ I believe I was part of that group of people sitting up there in Cambridge.”

Fernandez’s life has changed in many ways since he watched his first Yale-Harvard game three years ago. He was a freshman at UCLA then, a walk-on at offensive guard who didn’t play a down because he red-shirted that first season. One year later, he arrived in New Haven.

“My father had talked to some coaches up there like (Yale assistant coaches) Doug Semones and Ikaika Malloe and (head coach) Tom Williams,” Fernandez said. “My parents (Frank and Janis) started talking about it, and we realized this was a good opportunity for me. My parents liked the idea of me playing at a school where there were some Hawaii coaches.”

Now in his third season as Yale’s head coach, Williams coached at Hawaii for three years (’96-’98), including one year as defensive coordinator. Semones, the Bulldogs’ defensive ends coach, spent the same three years at Hawaii, coaching the defensive line, special teams and tight ends. Malloe, Yale’s defensive coordinator, spent the 2008 season as an assistant coach at Hawaii.

“That’s one of the reasons I ended up here at Yale,” said Fernandez, who will be making his 27th consecutive start on the Bulldogs’ offensive line today.

Not even Fernandez’s brother, the former Crimson center and all-Ivy pick in 2006, had any reservations about his younger brother playing for Harvard’s bitter rival in New Haven.

“My brother was glad either way, as long as I ended up at an Ivy League school,” Fernandez said. “My parents wanted me to go to a place where there were some Hawaii coaches, and my brother was happy that I could get an Ivy League education. So, to him, it wasn’t a very big issue.”

With Fernandez and Colin Kruger anchoring Yale’s offensive line as senior guards, the Bulldogs’ running game has improved almost every week with the exception of the loss to Brown two weeks ago.
“We had a few mental breakdowns that day,” Fernandez said. “Whenever you start a drive on first down and have a mental breakdown in one area and end up with a bad block, it’s hard to regain the momentum and gain a first down. It just kills a series. That’s what happened on multiple series, and that is what caused a momentum loss overall.”

Still, Yale’s offensive line has come a long way in three seasons.

Three years ago, running back Mike McLeod, Yale’s all-time leader in nearly every rushing category, averaged only 3.4 yards per carry. The following year, Alex Thomas gained only 286 yards all season, the fewest for Yale’s leading rusher since they started keeping records more than 60 years ago. Then, came the sudden turn around. Last year, Yale’s offense averaged 367 yards per game. This season, Thomas and Mordecai Cargill rushed for more than 200 yards in consecutive games, the first time in Ivy League history that a team had two different 200-yard rushers in back-to-back weeks.

“I feel like the offensive line is more of a solid unit,” Fernandez said. “We’ve had our injuries, but a few of the younger guys have been able to step up. We’re getting to that point where we’ve built a cohesive unit, trying to perfect our blocking schemes. On film, you’ll see we’re one or two blocks away from making a huge run a lot of the time. We’re getting to the point where we’re consistently making good blocks across the board.

“That’s the kind of thing that’s been helping us. (Offensive line coach) Coach Mike Preston has done a great job in building us as individuals and then bonding us together to become one pretty strong unit. He’s done a really good job of teaching us, spending extra time on film to go over all the small details. Then, once we get into a game, we’ve been able to execute well across the board to get more of those big runs.”

Because of his red-shirt year at UCLA, Fernandez has a fifth year of eligibility he could use next season at Yale, if he chooses.

“I still don’t know what I’ll do,” he said. “I’m still thinking about it, and talking to the coaches and my parents. I would like to continue spring semester and then if I decide to stay, try to petition for another semester. In that case, it would cost my parents a little bit more money, so we have to talk about that. I’m thinking about it, and I still have some time to decide.”

If this is indeed his last year and final game at Yale, Fernandez might start a career next year in civil and environmental engineering, or he could follow in his older brother’s footsteps and enter the field of finance. “I’m looking at the Asia-Pacific region to do some finance work in Japan, China, Korea or Hawaii,” said Fernandez, who had an interview in Boston the morning before last week’s game and then took a train to Princeton.

But before Fernandez makes that career decision, he has a game to play against Harvard today in the Yale Bowl.
“Both my parents have always come here for the Harvard game,” Fernandez said. “A bunch of my friends, family and even my teachers are coming to watch me. Most people on campus who I’ve talked to only have interest in this one game.

“A win over Harvard would honestly complete my senior year. It would be incredible, just amazing. To see the fans rushing onto the field, there’s no feeling like it, especially on this big a stage. A win would mean everything to me, especially since it could be my last game.”