

HILL COUNTRY NEWS

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Spencer Drango goes from Cedar Park to the NFL

The first offensive play for the Cleveland Browns Sunday in Houston was met with an announcement from the referee: "Number 66 is eligible."

Spencer Drango's journey to the NFL began in Cedar Park more than a decade ago. And it almost never happened at all.

"I have a lot of memories in Cedar Park," Drango said. "From getting there as a freshman for the first two-a-days and not really knowing what's going on all the way to my senior year playing against Lake Travis at DKR. It was a fun ride. I had a lot of fun times and good memories and made lifelong friends. It's a part of me."

The offensive lineman took his first snap at Canyon Ridge Middle school and spent three years on varsity with the Timberwolves. He spent five seasons at Baylor and was a fifth-round draft pick of the Browns in 2016.

His final year at Cedar Park, in 2010, he was named first-team all-state and was the Offensive Lineman of the Year in District 25-4A after not allowing a sack all season. The Timberwolves went 13-0 before falling to Lake Travis 21-20 in the quarterfinals at Darell K. Memorial Stadium.

Everybody he came in contact with in high school felt special. Every Friday morning during the season, the varsity and junior varsity offensive lines and coaches would go to IHOP for a breakfast to get gameday started right.

"I've coached 21 years and had a bunch of guys," former Cedar Park head coach Chris Ross said. "He's probably the best overall football player I've ever coached. His ability to impact others and make plays, when you put the two together, it's really special."

Drango would have been playing with bigger kids in Pop Warner, so he waited until middle school to start his football career.

His first practice as a seventh grader, he had no idea what to do but remembered hearing he was part of a 'line' group. So when the different positions split up, he ran over with the linebackers. His coach looked at him and laughed.

Canyon Ridge Middle School opened the year before Drango started attending there. He didn't like football the first year. He said the team wasn't very good and it felt like Cedar Park Middle was kind of like the older brother.

So he decided to quit football and focus on basketball, a sport he had been playing for much longer.

"The football coaches and basketball coaches sat me down and said to try it for one more year," Drango recalled. "And if I didn't like it I could move on. From then on it was history."

He spent his first season at Cedar Park on the freshman team but had his schedule changed the second half of his freshman year in high school so he could join the varsity squad during spring football.

Beau Smith, now an assistant football coach with the Rouse, was a tight end for the Timberwolves and grew up playing football and basketball with Drango. While the two communicated well on the football field, it was the basketball court where things really got physical.

"We were the only two big guys," Smith said. "Practice especially it was me against him and we were throwing elbows and going up for rebounds and someone we would walk away with bloody noses."

The offensive line at Cedar Park was stacked when Drango was there and he can name every player and what school they went to from the group.

Matt Wofford went to Rice, Jarrett Hudson went to Air Force, Tyler Chauvin went to Texas A&M-Kingsville, Felix Romero went to Texas State, Kody Grelle went to Montana State, and Smith attended Sam Houston State.

"I was lucky enough get a scholarship at Sam Houston State and if it wasn't for Spencer, I wouldn't have had it," Smith said. "He was always the guy where good enough wasn't good enough and there was always something better. The thing with him that was so unique was that he was a technician. Every play was picture perfect."

Spencer's decision to attend Baylor was not easy. Growing up a Texas fan, he was offered a spot with the Longhorns not long before signing day. But with the help of his coaches, separated the fan from the player and decided he wanted to build something instead of jump on with the tradition.

Drango was an immediate starter at Baylor, and he was a two-time All-America selection in 2014 and 2015. He was named Big 12 Co-Offensive Lineman of the Year in 2014 and Big 12 Offensive Lineman of the Year in 2015.

Having played one season at right tackle at Cedar Park, Drango was shifted to left tackle, where he remained throughout his time at Baylor. But, he was pegged as a guard by most NFL scouts and was told midway through last season that he'd be starting at guard against the Bengals All-Pro pass rusher Geno Atkins.

Obviously, Drango had some concerns, because even at the professional level, there's still room for development.

Despite Cleveland having had limited success in recent years, the opportunity for Drango is a good one — he has one of the best teachers in the NFL in Joe Thomas, easily one of the best

offensive linemen to ever play the game. Thomas surpassed 10,000 consecutive snaps played this season and has been a Pro Bowl Selection for 10 straight years.

"He's one of the role models and people to aspire to because his stats speak for itself," Drango said. "But he's so open to teaching people because he wants the team to succeed. I'm more versatile now. I've picked up techniques from not just Joe but other experienced guys."

Drango excelled at just about everything he did at Cedar Park. He was one of the top basketball players on a team that went to the state tournament. He was a captain on the football team and the leader on and off the field.

"I'm proud of him," Ross said. "Not just with the player is but that man that he's become. As they leave your program you really don't know how well you've done with them. When you see a guy like Spencer and the success he's had, it reflects not only on him but the community of Cedar Park and the program there as well."

His parents, aunt and uncle, family friends, his girlfriend, and friends from college went to watch him take the field for the Browns in Houston, the closest he's played to Waco or Cedar Park since he was drafted.

Drango said he wouldn't be where he is without everybody that's helped him. From the middle school coaches that told him to give football another chance to the group at Baylor that helped him flourish into a professional player.

He knows he's fortunate to be in the position he is and he's nothing but thankful.

"It's been a blessed journey," Drango said. "All the time and effort that people have put into me, I know I couldn't have done it without them. I've been blessed to have them to help me get from where I was at Cedar Park to where I am now."