

ASU's Brooks jacked up for NAU game

The former Flagstaff High star should see time in ASU's opener against NAU.

By DANIEL BERK
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Craig Holland had to do a serious double-take the first time he saw James Brooks.

Holland, then the head football coach for the Flagstaff High Eagles, was making sure all of his players were getting the right equipment for the first day of football practice, when he stumbled across a young man he had never seen before. "I remember we were outfitting freshmen and it was their turn because (junior varsity) and varsity had already gone. I saw him and I thought he was a coach," Holland said. "I went up and asked him if he was a football player and he said, 'Oh no, I'm a basketball player.'"

That soon changed.

Then FHS basketball coach Mike Moran talked to Brooks about playing both sports, and just two days later, Brooks was out at football practice.

Six years later, it seems like Moran was on to something.

Brooks, the 2006 Daily Sun defensive football player of the year, excelled at defensive end and wide receiver for the Eagles and eventually accepted a scholarship from Arizona State. The 6-foot-4, 270-pound defensive end figured making the adjustment to college ball wouldn't be all that hard.

After a couple of practices last season as a true freshman, Brooks quickly changed his mind.

"I thought since I played both sides of the ball in high school, I could definitely play one side of the ball in college," Brooks said. "I quickly found out that's not how it works. I had to get in the weight room from day one and just work on getting faster and stronger."

After redshirting last season and focusing on his overall conditioning, Brooks is poised to make his college debut on Saturday against NAU.

The redshirt freshman is currently listed on the second team as a defensive end and should see some significant game action this season, backing up senior Luis Vasquez, a 2007 honorable mention All-Pac 10 pick.

"It's exciting that we're playing against my former hometown team, but it's game one of my college career, so regardless of who's on the other side, I'm going to be ready to go," Brooks said. "Hopefully, it's the first game of many in this uniform."

Brooks, who returned to Flagstaff in the summer for two weeks to spend time with his family, suffered an ankle injury in ASU's fall scrimmage 10 days ago at Camp Tontozona, but expects to be 100 percent for Saturday's opener.

"I didn't want to miss any practices, because I'm still trying to prove myself, but the trainers didn't really give me a choice," said Brooks, who returned to practice on Monday. "I haven't played in a game since high school, so it's going to take something a lot worse than an ankle injury to keep me out of the game."

Of course, when he takes the field on Saturday, everything about the game of football will be different than the last time he played.

The last time he suited up for a game, it was for FHS. Brooks had six catches for 77 yards against Apache Junction in a 15-12 Class 4A, Division II state tournament first round loss.

Fast forward about 22 months and although he'll be sporting ASU colors, a big part of his heart is still with Holland -- who is an assistant coach at Avondale Agua Fria -- and the Eagles and the feeling couldn't be more mutual.

"We went and saw the Cal game (last year) and I know he was redshirting, but to actually see him go through the tunnel and run through the gauntlet...that gave me chills," Holland said. "A lot of people, coaches, didn't believe he could make it. They didn't think he would make it grade-wise and be able to hang at a big university."

"He's always had talent, but to work, not only on his athletic skills, but also to work on the academic part, is really great."

Brooks credits his academic success to ASU defensive line coach Grady Stretz. Stretz was the main coach who recruited Brooks along with former Sun Devil coach Dirk Koetter.

When Koetter was fired by ASU, Stretz was the only assistant coach who was retained by current head coach Dennis Erickson, which played a big part in Brooks still deciding to head down to Tempe after the coaching change.

"He's just a great coach and he's always riding me, making me better," said Brooks, who also considered Utah and Oregon State in the recruiting process. "The entire staff is great, but I love working with him. He was a huge part in me deciding to go to ASU."

Brooks said when he was a junior at FHS he met briefly with former NAU offensive line coach Frank Pollack. Even though the Lumberjack coaching staff knew they didn't have much of a chance with Brooks, the former FHS star said Pollack gave him plenty of advice about the recruiting process and what to look for when he went on official visits to different schools.

Although he ultimately chose the FBS route, he said he's always been grateful to the NAU coaches for their honesty.