Undrafted underclassmen have a hard road to make it in the NFL

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Xavier Grimble has second-guessed himself a few times over the past two years. Had he exhibited a little more patience, he might have some security in a profession that has little. Had he listened to the NFL draft advisory board and not some influential people in his inner circle, he might have a nice signing bonus in the bank and almost certainly have NFL draft pick next to his name.

Instead, Grimble is a cautionary tale of an underclassman who gambled with his NFL future and lost. Two years after leaving college early, Grimble has an uphill climb to make his dream of becoming a pro football player come true.

Grimble left Southern California after his junior season to declare for the 2014 NFL draft. All 32 teams passed on him — seven times. He is now with the Steelers, his fourth team in 24 months, and it’s just about make-or-break time.

“Of course I’ve had second thoughts,” said Grimble, a tight end and one of a handful of veterans who were eligible to participate in rookie minicamp this past weekend. “Looking back on it, I played half of my last season hurt. There was no rush for me to come out.
When you get here there is a lot to learn. I could have gained a little bit more that fourth year, probably could have put up better stats and better film, just from being healthy alone I would have been better. But everyone has a different story, a different path.”

Grimble’s path included a stint with the New York Giants, his original team that signed him immediately after the draft in 2014. He was cut at the end of training camp. The past two seasons he has spent time on the practice squads of the San Francisco 49ers, New England Patriots and, last season, the Steelers.

But practice-squad eligibility expires after two, sometimes three years, depending on a team’s roster composition, and Grimble is going to have to crack a 53-man roster soon if he wants to remain in the NFL.

More than 100 underclassmen left school early and declared for the NFL draft this year. Twenty-eight percent of them didn’t hear their names called. The lucky ones signed as undrafted free agents and might have a chance to make a practice squad in the fall. But many of them will wash out of pro football before they knew what hit them.

Talented college players make the same mistake every year. On average, more than one-quarter of the underclassmen who declare for the draft don’t get selected.

Grimble is one of the fortunate ones to land on his feet. He made $112,000 as a member of the Steelers’ practice squad last season, but that sum still pales in comparison to the $435,000 first-year players made as members of a 53-man NFL roster.

“It was a family thing,” Grimble said of his decision to turn pro at 21. “I had an agent. We figured, ‘Why not come out early, and at least I’ll have an extra year on the back end.’ We thought I was good enough, had good enough tape, had a good enough name that I’d probably get drafted. I made a full-speed decision. I went undrafted, but I’m still here, still working, still have an opportunity. So I’m grateful.”

Grimble (6 feet 5, 260 pounds) might have finally caught a break. The Steelers lost two tight ends off their roster since the end of the 2015 season. Heath Miller retired and Will Johnson signed as a free agent with the Giants. The Steelers signed former San Diego Chargers tight end Ladarius Green to replace Miller as the starter, but there might be room for Grimble, or another tight end, if he plays well in the preseason.

Grimble is a talented receiver who averaged 10.9 yards per reception and scored five touchdowns as a sophomore for the Trojans. But, like many young tight ends entering the NFL from college, he has had to work on his blocking. That was the message Steelers coaches gave him in his exit meeting after the season, and he has been working feverishly the past few months to make himself a more versatile player with a well-rounded NFL skill set.

“If you can’t block, you can’t play here,” Grimble said. “I’m just trying to be a more consistent player.”
Behind Green, the Steelers have veteran Matt Spaeth, who is 32 and entering the final year of his contract, and Jesse James, who is entering his second season. The Steelers also signed undrafted free agents David Reeves and Jay Rome for added competition this summer.

Grimble tries not to focus on his roster competition or the fact that his time in the NFL might be running short. All he’s doing is looking forward to an opportunity to show Steelers coaches that he’s capable of earning a spot on the roster.

“I really try not to pay attention to that stuff,” Grimble said. “All of that is out of my control anyway. Things I can control are my effort and my passion and what I do with my opportunity when I get it. I just keep showing up every day. The opportunity will come. I just have to be ready for it.”
1 Based on the article, with which of the following beliefs about this past year's NFL draft would Xavier Grimble MOST likely agree?

(A) Many underclassmen do not realize how difficult it is for undrafted players to make even a practice team.

(B) An undrafted player’s only chance at making an NFL team is being invited to rookie minicamp and impressing the coaches.

(C) If underclassmen had better agents, they would have a better chance at being chosen in the NFL draft.

(D) Being undrafted is not the end of the world if you are talented; you can still make a practice team.

2 How does the author develop the idea that Grimble is fortunate to make an NFL practice team?

(A) By explaining the Steelers’ need for a tight end for next season

(B) By emphasizing how many practice teams that he has made and has been cut from

(C) By sharing how much money he made as a member of the Steelers’ practice squad

(D) By discussing all of the hard work he has put into training and conditioning

3 Read the following sentence.

But many of them will wash out of pro football before they knew what hit them.

What is the connotation of the phrase “wash out” in the sentence above? Which line from the article supports your answer?

(A) It has a positive connotation; The lucky ones signed as undrafted free agents and might have a chance to make a practice squad in the fall.

(B) It has a positive connotation; On average, more than one-quarter of the underclassmen who declare for the draft do not get selected.

(C) It has a negative connotation; The lucky ones signed as undrafted free agents might have a chance to make a practice squad in the fall.

(D) It has a negative connotation; On average, more than one-quarter of the underclassmen who declare for the draft do not get selected.
Read the sentence below.

Two years after leaving college early, Grimble has an uphill climb to make his dream of becoming a pro football player come true.

Which phrase below creates an optimistic tone by replacing the phrase “an uphill climb”?

(A) a lot of work ahead of him
(B) a fighting chance
(C) a 50-50 chance
(D) some hope