



NICK GAMMETT / GAZETTE

Highland defensive end Dan Miller (85) used to play quarterback. Now, he tries to sack them.

Major role reversal

Albert Grindle
The Gazette

The football version of an emergency situation sent Highland's Dan Miller on a meandering path to success.

Already a hard-throwing pitcher who had interest of dabbling at quarterback as a freshman, the defensive end was forced into the spotlight when two QBs went down with injuries. The next thing Miller knew, he was running the mesh on power reads and inside zone options while leading the Hor-

Miller

Playing quarterback as freshman opened Miller's eyes to big picture

nets' ninth-grade team to a 7-1 record despite superstar running back Casey Myser being on the varsity.

Three years and two foot surgeries later, Miller is no longer at quarterback — though a return wouldn't be ruled out if Grady Gibb went down — but has become one of Medina County's top breakthroughs as the top-seeded Hornets (10-0) gear up for a Division II, Region 6 quarterfinal tonight against No. 8 Brecksville (7-4) at North Gateway Tire Field.

The 6-foot-11, 215-pound senior is a

full-time starter at defensive end and also helps as the No. 2 tight end and No. 6 offensive lineman. The All-Gazette pitcher even sported two jersey numbers against Avon Lake, all in the name of doing whatever is necessary for Highland to emerge on top.

"It was different, because obviously going into the season I thought I'd be strictly defense and didn't have to worry about any of the offense," he said before practice Thursday. "Then I realized I had to step up and play my role."

"It was hard for me to learn all

of the plays because at quarterback you're supposed to learn what everyone else has to do, but the guys around me, they put their trust in me and I put my trust in them that I knew what I was supposed to do. They made life a lot easier for me as a quarterback."

The articulate Miller believes that one season at quarterback — he also saw spot time on the junior varsity, where Highland often rotates QBs — allowed him to see the game in a different light. At the high school level and beyond, a quarterback is trained to learn team concepts and not just his individual assignment, leading to a big-picture understanding.

See MILLER, B3

MILLER

From B1

When Miller attacks an offensive lineman, he uses length, speed and play recognition to slither into the backfield out of a two-point stance. He also knows an option likely is coming if he's unblocked, so he'll instinctively squeeze the line of scrimmage while keeping his shoulders square to maximize the chances that the quarterback will make an indecisive read.

The combination of brains and brawn — the latter plays far bigger than his frame — has led to 26 tackles (10½ for loss, 2½ sacks) and three fumble recoveries that include a 2-yard return for a touchdown against Revere. While those numbers seem tame, Highland's first string has played the equivalent to 24 quarters due to blowouts.

"He's an extremely smart football player, works hard and is a great kid," 11th-year coach Mike Gibbons said. "His knowledge of every single situation, he can pick up little things that maybe even as coaches you don't see. He's like, 'Well, I saw the tackle leaning this way, and I

reacted to the play because of that.' I think all of those little nuances make him who he is."

Miller never had a lot of experience on offense growing up, so playing QB helped him catch up quickly. He hasn't seen much action as the No. 2 tight end because Highland has not used its two-tight end sets much, but Gibbons has an established history of using the formations the Hornets call King and Queen when the weather gets cold.

Miller only has one reception, a 32-yarder against Copley in which Miller knew he was open a corner route and flashed his left hand just 6 yards downfield so Gibb could see him. Miller's best offensive memories, however, have been at left tackle.

Returning starter Josh Messina missed the opener at McDowell (Pa.) with an illness, so Miller wore No. 76 and helped the Hornets racked up a school-record 672 yards total offense. Messina returned the next week against Avon Lake, but left guard Wyatt Sitz got dinged in the second quarter, Highland called timeout, bumped Messina to his 2024 position of left guard and Miller, now wearing No. 85,

knew what he had to do.

"It all came back to me playing quarterback freshman year," said Miller, who's also the long snapper. "The offense is the same, so it's a lot easier for me to think about it in a quarterback's stance vs. an offensive lineman stance. It's who I have to block, what the O-line should look like and what the movement should be."

"In Week 1, obviously I wore No. 76. In Week 2, we brought an extra ineligible jersey for me just in case that situation happened. It did, and the defense had just gotten off the field. We're going to watch film on the last drive so we could clear up any mishaps that we had, and then all of a sudden I just hear my O-line coach (Kenny Fritz) yell for me, 'Miller, we've got to change your jersey!' All I do is put my hands up, so they ripped my jersey off me, put the new one on and I thought, 'Well, I've got to go on the field.' It was a sudden change, but we got it done pretty quick. It was a cool experience, because you never see that happen."

Despite owning a mid-80s fastball and coming off a junior season in which he went 6-0 with a 0.96 ERA, Miller is leaning

toward not pitching in college so he can focus on a business degree.

Not having that distraction has Miller dialed in. The Hornets have won nine games by an average of 42.5 points — the 10th victory was a forfeit by Barberton — and Miller exemplifying the next-man-up mentality has been a larger-than-expected reason as to why.

"It's a surreal experience, because I remember when I was younger coming to all of the Friday night games and realizing these guys, it could be their last game," he said. "Coming out on the field, I know I have to give everything for this team. They've given everything to me."

"Going out on the field with my guys, we're all buddies. We hoot and holler. When someone makes a big play, we're all amped for each other. No one is selfish on the team. Everyone is proud of the moments they make, and that's really cool to go out on Friday night and play with your guys. I remember playing flag football with them in third grade, and I've played with them ever since."

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