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Narkaj turns his life — and game — around

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David Grossman

When Samuel Narkaj moved to Canada four years ago with his family, it was a sporting culture shock.

Narkaj, then 14, had thrived on the glitz and glamour of playing football in front of large crowds in a big stadium on the outskirts of Detroit — a place he called home after moving from Albania at age 5.

When Narkaj again moved, this time to Toronto, he felt a bit out of place.

“Football is a religion down there, far different than up here,” said the 18-year old, now in his graduating year at Silverthorn Collegiate, and widely regarded as one of the top teen football players in the Greater Toronto Area. “It was a strange feeling and a huge change. Up here, I had no friends, no family and played on a grass field with garbage. It took time to adjust and I got so fed up that I almost packed in football.”

He almost packed in school as well, until he finally found a mentor, Silverthorn gym teacher and football coach Rich Panas. Narkaj credits Panas for changing his approach to life, school and sports, and helping him deal with frustrations.

“I missed school, failed some classes, had a bad attitude — things just weren’t going well,” recalled Narkaj. “(Panas) noticed during football practice and put aside lots of time to help me. He made it fun and I am doing well because of him.”

At 6-foot-1 and 240 pounds, Narkaj rarely leaves the football field.

On offence, he’s the Spartans’ top running back; he’s also a double-threat, playing as a linebacker on defence.

“He’s the definition of an athlete — talented, physical and gets the job done,” said Panas, whose team kicks off its season Sept. 30 against Richview Collegiate.

Just as Narkaj credits his mentor with changing his outlook, Panas credits Narkaj for his determination.

“A few years ago, I saw a negative attitude from him about rules and everything. He was someone falling through the cracks, but he was also determined to do well and worked hard.”

A former defensive MVP in grade 9 and Silverthorn’s senior male athlete of the year last year, Narkaj has high hopes for success this season, with an eye to the future.

“I just want to be an impact player and do well enough to attract university coaches,” said Narkaj, adding that several Ontario university coaches have spoken with him about how he could fit in to their plans.

And if that doesn’t work out, he’s always got wrestling — Narkaj won the provincial juvenile gold medal in the 115 kilo class earlier this year, and placed sixth at the national championships.

Six to watch

Five of the top high school football players in the Greater Toronto Area for 2010

Will Finch

Nelson Lords (Burlington)

A 6-foot-3, 200-pound quarterback, Finch is one of the best at his position in the GTA and a highly successful product of the Burlington Stampede house league program. He threw for 300 yards and two touchdowns in a 40-15 pre-season win over London’s Mother Teresa and scored a TD in a 17-16 win over Corpus Christi.

Braeden Harris

Markham Marauders (Markham)



From left top Greg Morris (Donald Wilson Gators), Samuel Narkaj (Silverthorn Spartans), Braeden Harris (Markham Marauders); bottom row, Daniel Horta (St Marcellinus Spirit), Will Finch (Nelson Lords), Eddie Meredith (St Andrew's Saints).

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A two-time football defensive MVP, the 18-year old Harris was a key factor on last year's Metro Bowl championship team and is also a tailback for the York Region school. He capped the year as the institution's top male athlete. A bull at 205 pounds, he's also one of the Marauders top rugby players.

Daniel Horta

St. Marcellinus Spirit (Mississauga)

At 270 pounds, stick him anywhere on the offensive line on the defending Peel Region Tier One championship team and he would not look out of place. He was one of the top players for the Mississauga Warriors of the Ontario Varsity Football League this past summer and during the off-season competed in the shot put.

Eddie Meredith

St. Andrew's Saints (Aurora)

Once played hockey, but traded his skates for a football uniform. A Toronto Star all-star last year, not many are better than 6-foot-6 Meredith at offensive tackle, making him one of the top recruits by NCAA teams in the GTA. He had a sack and five tackles in a 24-7 league opening win over Villanova.

Greg Morris

Donald Wilson Gators (Whitby)

He plays basketball, runs track, but football just might be his best sport. Chosen senior athlete of the year at his school, the 5-foot-10, 195-pounder is a running back and corner linebacker with the defending Durham Region senior football champs. They lost a pre-season game 35-25 to Hoover High from Canton, Ohio.

Samuel Narkaj

Silverthorn Spartans (Toronto)

A provincial juvenile wrestling gold medalist in 115 kilos, Narkaj was born in Albania, then moved to Detroit where he learned to play football at the age of nine. He rarely leaves the field, doubling as a linebacker and running back.