

TOMMIE HARRIS JR. comes full circle



Harris proclaims his faith on and off the field.

BY ERIC TIANSAY

For Chicago Bears defensive tackle Tommie Harris Jr., growing up as a preacher's kid was not easy. The expectations were high and the strict rules left him reeling.

"I thought, *What are they keeping me from?*" Harris remembers.

In a misguided effort to find out what he was missing, Harris became involved with a gang and eventually got kicked out of school. The upside to his relatively brief foray into the gangster lifestyle was learning quickly such activities did not bring him any measure of satisfaction.

"I was 16 and I knew about God," he recalls, "but I didn't have a personal relationship with Him."

One Sunday during the 11th grade, Harris decided to go to church. Something unexpected happened.

"I went forward for an altar call, and I had a spirit of peace come over me," says Harris. "I had tried everything. I gave Christ a shot, and I've never turned back."

In April 2004 Harris was the 14th overall pick during the NFL draft.

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When he was introduced to the Chicago media, he told reporters he believed “divine intervention” brought him to the Bears, as he invoked his faith in God regularly when discussing his mental approach to the game.

“Anything I put my mind to, I can do because of God,” Harris said then. “Hopefully, you won’t just see Tommie, but you’ll see God in me.”

Harris’ father, Tommie Sr., says what you see is what you get with his son.

“The Lord has enabled him to be humble in the ‘not for long league,’” says Tommie Sr., 51, using the phrase of some to describe the NFL. “For someone so young, Tommie has acquired discipline. He’s focused on the Lord and life. And he understands the business part of the game and what it takes to play in the NFL.”



Harris sacks Matt Hasselback of the Seabawks in an October 2006 win.

Harris, who stands 6 feet 3 inches tall and weighs 295 pounds, is a force to be reckoned with on the field. He is a two-time Pro Bowler who ranks third with 165 tackles and fourth with 11.5 sacks among Bears defensive linemen over the previous three seasons according to his Web site.

“His size ... coupled with his uncanny athletic ability made him the perfect fit” for coach Lovie Smith’s defense, reported *The Chicago Sun-Times* after Harris was chosen as the Bears’ first-round draft pick.

Indeed.

Harris left Oklahoma University after his junior season when he won the prestigious Lombardi Award as the nation’s top interior lineman. A three-year starter with the Sooners, Harris was a two-time Associated Press All-American first-team selection.

At Oklahoma he made news on the field, as well as off the field concerning his faith. Harris, who became a star as a freshman with 17 tackles

for losses and two sacks, twice turned down *Playboy’s* offer to be photographed as part of its preseason All-America team due to respect for his four sisters and his displeasure with the magazine’s portrayal of women.

Harris’ mother, Janie, says her son has a passion for God.

“He seeks to be

faithful to the Lord,” she says. “He believes in being in Bible study and having fellowship [with other believers]. ... He’s in step with the Lord.”

Janie says she and her husband are not concerned for Tommie regarding the trappings and pitfalls of playing in the NFL because their son seeks to apply God’s Word to his life.

“I believe that Tommie is strong enough to shun foolishness,” says Janie, who talks to Harris several times a week during the football season. “Like in college, Tommie selects the right people to be with.”

Harris attends a team Bible study made up of several Bears players.

“We work on Sundays, so Wednesdays are my church [days],” says Harris. “I look forward to that every week. It helps me out a lot. It recharges my faith.”

Harris says he finds strength from the Bible, especially Psalm 138:8: “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O Lord, endures forever — do not abandon the works of your hands” (NIV).

Sounds like the once-wayward preacher’s kid has come full circle. **tpe**

ERIC TIANSAY frequently writes for *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel* Super Bowl Outreach Edition.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

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