

From Utah State to the Commanders, Bobby Wagner has always been a leader

By BEN STANDIG

Ashebur, Va. — Bobby Wagner's rookie lazing with the Seattle Seahawks was inevitable.

"I had a lot of characters in my bubble," the former Seahawks linebacker said. "The first couple of weeks, they just made fun of everything they could make."

Seahawks are subjected to jocular torment from older or more veteran teammates, a time-honored tradition in professional sports. Perhaps extra digs went the 2012 second-round pick's way. His middle linebacker duties included verbally relaying the play call to chatty defensive backs Richard Sherman, Kam Chancellor and Earl Thomas.

"(They) didn't even know what I was saying," Wagner said in 2020. "They just said I had no neck."

Along with joking at his neckless appearance — "and heeps," Wagner added at the Washington Commanders' organized team activities last month — Seahawks general manager John Schneider remembers a Tennessee Mutant Ninja Turtles backdrop creating endless fodder. Whether those chatty characters bothered listening, Wagner had a specific goal in that first campaign.

"You make sure you don't want your voice to crack," Wagner said. Looking back at those initial steps in Wagner's now-projected Hall of Fame career, what stands out most to Schneider is that the player he selected 47th overall out of Utah State was always a boss.

"I don't remember him not being a leader," the longtime executive said.

The middle-linebacker position lends itself to taking control by verbally relaying every defensive play to teammates. Ken Norton Jr., Wagner's position coach in Seattle and a Super Bowl-winning linebacker, frequently reminded his young apprentice about the leadership requirement. Conversations with linebacker legends Ray Lewis and Mike Singletary hammered home the point.

The Commanders signed the still-progressive, yet-aged Wagner in June 24 on a year-long, \$13.5 million contract. Coming off a 13-season and seven years removed from its last campaign with a winning record, Washington kicked off a full-blown organizational reset. Among its decisions was signing the 10-time All-Pro to help establish a winning approach by sharing the lessons learned throughout his career.



Former Utah State linebacker Bobby Wagner, shown during a Seattle Seahawks minicamp on June 6, 2023, in Renton, Wash., is now with the Washington Commanders and preparing for his 13th NFL season.

"This is a rare competitor," Washington coach Dan Quinn said. Quinn served as Seattle's defensive coordinator for the 2013 Super Bowl champions under head coach Pete Carroll. He schemed for a unit put together by Schneider that included the runner-up for Defensive Rookie of the Year the season before.

"Steady. Bobby wasn't like a yeller, a screamer, but super confident," Schneider said during a recent phone conversation with The Athletic. "Not outspoken. He's never changed his approach or attitude. He's going to be the same person every day. Steady as a rock."

Washington's situation requires that element. The defense may open the season with eight new starters. Quarterback Jayden Daniels, the No. 2 overall selection in April's NFL draft, represents the long-term hope along with other members of the 2024 class. His willingness to work impressed Wagner. Still, rookies often endure significant ups and downs. Some talented holdovers remain, but talent alone won't get the Commanders into the contender class.

Establishing the required work ethic and an intense spirit is why Washington signed veterans Zach Ertz and Austin Ekeler for the offense and the savvy linebacker with a Super Bowl pedigree in

free agency. "It's a huge (impact) he can make," Quinn said of Wagner. "He's as skilled a ballplayer as you're going to find because of the details he puts into (his work)."

Last month, during Washington's second week of organized team activities, Wagner explained how he cemented his leadership in Seattle by displaying confidence. Then people feel like they know you're in charge."

Schneider's stated example of Wagner's belief wasn't one of his nine Pro Bowl seasons or exploring teammates for more after a 30-13 Week 1 home loss to the Los Angeles Rams last season — Seattle responded by winning its next three games. Instead, their interactions in contract negotiations. Wagner, a business entrepreneur who co-founded Fuse Venture Partners in 2020, is among the few players who handle their financial handling without an agent.

"The confidence to represent himself in a room with two people (on the other side of the negotiation) takes a lot of self-efficacy," Schneider said. "That just shows what kind of person that is."

Seattle's offseason strategy included re-signing the 2023 second-team All-Pro selection. Wagner, deemed by Quinn as the "very best tackler that I've had the chance to coach," led the league in

tackles (183) for a third time.

Linebackers "hung out for a while" in 2023 free agency. Schneider recalled, but went off the board earlier this cycle than the Seahawks' front office anticipated. That Wagner maintained personal relationships with Quinn and Norton, hired as the Commanders' linebackers coach this year, made a reunion appear plausible. Reports of Wagner's one-year, \$6.5 million contract with Washington surfaced on March 13. Having replaced Carroll as head coach with ex-Baltimore Ravens defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald, Seattle pivoted to sign Tyrod Taylor and Jerome Baker.

"It made sense because (Bobby) knows Dan's system," Schneider said, "and we're starting a whole new system here. I think it's really cool that Dan and Bobby are together. I respect both of those guys so much."

Therefore, those leadership traits honed over a storied career brought the lifelong West Coast coach to the nation's capital. Wagner's primary hiccup involved adjusting to late-night start times for NFL playoff games when morning practices warrant waking up by 6:45 a.m.

"Luckily, the Lakers are not playing," the Los Angeles native cracked. "So, I'm cool, but I want to watch (Dallas Mavericks star)

Kyrie (Irving) play."

Wagner's new teammates acknowledge the benefits and intrigue of being around the seasoned pro. Asked which teammates they were most excited to play with, the rookies cited Wagner above all. Defensive tackle Daron Payne said he studied Wagner's routine, "similar to how, in his 2018 rookie season, he tracked established edge rusher Ryan Kerrigan."

"Man, he just brings a winning presence, a winning culture, the way he works every day," defensive tackle Jonathan Allen said. "When you see a guy like that, in Year 13, first-ballot Hall of Famer, work as hard as he does, there's really no excuse for anybody else."

No teammate will have more of a front-row seat to Wagner than linebacker Frankie Luva, Washington's highest-paid free-agent signing. The pair project as every-down linebackers, assuming Wagner's defensive instincts make up for a decline in pass coverage.

"The dude is like a treasure box," Luva exclaimed. "You never know what you're going to get out of him. But he's just real at the end of the day. He's always there, trying to help the young guys, myself and the team."

Players also grasp that the grizzled linebacker is watching them intensely. Wagner called out right guard Sam Cosmi's plan to pull out of a three-point stance before the snap.

"I'm like, 'What the heck?' ... I was trying to disguise that," said Cosmi. Wagner shared that Cosmi's tell was leaning in his stance. "Those are things that I'm noticing and enjoying," Cosmi said of having Wagner around in practice and the building.

Wagner sees paying it forward as a prominent part of his career arc.

"I think you just share your scars," Wagner said. "You can learn from (others') experience. People that can get at that knowledge and that get insight. Things that I did in my rookie year and my second year and third year. Try to have you avoid some of those mistakes. I think that's probably the biggest thing."

Perhaps this season is Wagner's first and last in Washington. Maybe he heads full time into the business world, or the Commanders seek a younger player to quarterback the defense. But if his presence this year helps Quinn and the organization spread their winning message, Wagner's impact will be felt in these parts for seasons to come.

QB Murray on his sixth season: "The sky's the limit"

By DOUG HALLER

Temp, Ariz. — After the ninth workout of organized team activities, Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kyler Murray on Wednesday was asked a simple question: After everything that you've experienced, the contract situation, the ACL injury, the recent loss, are you happy entering your sixth season?

Murray responded with a brief summary of his pro career.

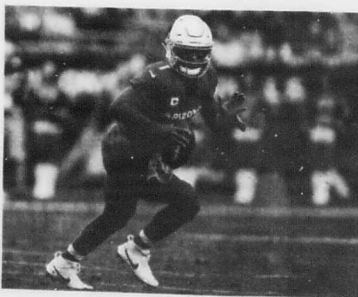
"Being a rookie, just trying to get better every game," (Murray wins AP Offensive Rookie of the Year) "After everything that you've experienced, the contract situation, the ACL injury, the recent loss, are you happy entering your sixth season?"

"Year 3, OK, let's ride" (Murray takes Arizona to the playoffs for the first time in six years) "Obviously that's a down year. To be the No. 1 overall draft pick, obviously the circumstances that you go into, I think we got better every year. But Year 4 was kind of a painful one, obviously getting hurt." (Murray tears ACL)

"Year 5, new regime, sitting there learning and everything, just trying to be there to support the guys." (Murray misses nine games recovering from surgery)

"So I think going into Year 6 ... am I excited? Hell yeah, I'm excited."

"Range. For a team coming off a 4-13 season, there's noticeable optimism in the Valley of the Sun. Some of these stems from the popular belief that next season will always be better. But it's also impossible to ignore Murray's comfort



Quarterback Kyler Murray, who has had an up-and-down career with the Arizona Cardinals, is optimistic heading into his sixth season.

level and confidence. That obviously has to do with his health, but his relationship with head coach Jonathan Gannon should not go overlooked.

Important to note: Gannon doesn't care about external optimism, especially at this time of year. Asked Wednesday about it, he started shutting his head before a reporter could even finish the question. The Cardinals understand the standard, he said. No one's high-fiving, celebrating culture changes inside the team offices. Winning is all that matters.

Come September, that starts with Murray. The 26-year-old has had an

uneven five years. It's easy to forget that not long ago Murray was trending toward stardom. For the first half of 2021, when Arizona started 10-2, he was in the MVP discussion. But in 2022, Kliff Kingsbury's final season, Murray regressed. Then he tore up his knee. After the Cardinals parted ways with Kingsbury and GM Steve Keim, it was reasonable to wonder how Murray fit in the organization's future. That's no longer the case. Since his arrival, Gannon has praised the quarterback's work habits and desire.

Asked on a recent radio show to describe his relationship with Murray, Gannon initially joked

that the quarterback was his best friend. More seriously, he added: "From a competitive standpoint, we got that same feeling. Hey, this is what I need from you. This is what you need from me. Let's deliver."

Murray on Wednesday recalled the afternoon he met Gannon. It was after the head coach's introductory news conference. The former defensive coordinator of the Philadelphia Eagles, Gannon was coming off a Super Bowl loss. Murray had been in the building rehabbing his knee. The two talked for about three minutes. The conversation itself wasn't important, it was the vibe, Murray said. The connection. The two just clicked.

"I think (with all relationships), you go to know yourself and then you go to know the other person," Gannon said. "Then you go, 'I think after we kind of learned about each other a little bit, then that kind of took off.'"

Gannon is a frequent texter, and this once got Murray into trouble. The head coach has a 24-hour rule. That is, when he texts someone, he expects a response within 24 hours. Over time, he noticed that Murray texted back immediately if it was about something that piqued his curiosity. If not, the return text tended to take a while.

"Yeah, he got on me one time because I forgot to text him back, but, no, I was not aware of that rule," Murray said.

Gannon's texts can be about anything. "Anything that he sees (or) I see, but it doesn't even have to be football," Murray said. "And that's

where he goes to the next level. You got a guy that you would legit run through a wall for. I think he's just got that aura about him. He actually cares about the players, and he holds everybody accountable. It's not fake. He doesn't treat me any different than he would a rookie."

During OTA's last year, Murray had to work with a strength coach off to the side. He learned the offense and attended meetings, but it wasn't the same. Even when he started playing in November, he caught himself thinking instead of reacting. This spring has been different. Offensive coordinator Drew Petzing tweaked timing patterns to better suit Murray's quickness. And Murray has built chemistry with wide receivers, including star rookie Marvin Harrison Jr.

The comfort level and confidence reminds Murray of how he felt in 2018, the year he won the Heisman Trophy during his junior season at Oklahoma. Yes, he knows college is different, but it just has a similar "feel," he said. With more depth on the offensive line and a strong running back in James Conner, he expects the Cardinals to have one of the league's top offenses.

"I just feel really locked into where we're doing," Murray said. "For me, confidence (is) understanding where to go with the ball no matter what they're doing because I've been in the system a year. When you feel like that, man, the sky's the limit. I've played the quarterback my whole life, but when you're at that point, and I really can't explain it to y'all, but it's a good feeling ... Yeah, I'm excited."