

# WILSON FOOTBALL CATCHING UP WITH

## *RODNEY HILL (SENIOR FALL: 2008)*

January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Rodney Hill is a Class of 2009 graduate of Wilson High School, playing on the varsity football team during the Fall of 2006, 2007, and 2008. Rodney was selected to the 2008 All-State First Team at DT & also chosen to participate in the PSFCA East/West All-Star Game following his senior season, which saw his Bulldogs win Section 1 of the Lancaster-Lebanon League and win the District 3 AAAA Championship in dominating fashion, before ultimately falling in three overtimes in the PIAA-AAAA Western Final. A two-time All-Berks First Team pick at defensive tackle, Rodney was named the Wilson Coaches Defensive MVP (along with linebacker Colton Weaker) and was selected as a team captain following his senior campaign. During his scholastic career at Wilson, Rodney accumulated 18 sacks (2<sup>nd</sup> in program history), 30 tackles for loss (4<sup>th</sup> in program history), and 117 tackles. In addition to football, he was also a member of the school's track & field team.



*Rodney Hill (#71) as a member of the Wilson Bulldogs.*

**Joe Mays, *The Bulldog Hour* [JM]:** Thanks for discussing your post-high school career with me today. It is important to the community that watched your student-athlete endeavors stay updated with your life outside of Wilson. You made a significant impact on the Wilson Football program and I look forward to sharing your responses with the alumni and fans.

**Rodney Hill, Strength & Conditioning Coach for the Buffalo Bills [RH]:** It's a pleasure to connect with you and I appreciate you wanting to do this with me. It is very humbling knowing that my HS alma mater is still keeping up with me and that there are people out there that think I had a significant impact on the football program.

**JM:** Immediately after graduating from Wilson you attended Howard University and were a member of the Bison football team, starting three seasons at defensive tackle. Tell us about your Howard football career and your favorite moments at the University.

**RH:** When I got to Howard, we weren't very good; we won 3 total games in my first two years there. We had a new coaching staff come in and instill discipline, work ethic, and most importantly, confidence in us that we could compete with any team in the conference. My senior year we finished 7-4 and second in the conference, good for the best record in over 10 years. I would say my fondest moment is knowing that we were picked to finish last in the conference that year and we came out shocked many people. That, and the friendships that I built over those 4 years. Some of my old college teammates are some of my best friends to this day.



*Rodney Hill played collegiately at Howard University in Washington, DC, where he was a 3-year starter for the Bison.*

**JM:** When did you develop an affinity for sports performance and athletic training & conditioning and who served as guides or mentors while in high school or college?

**RH:** I would say that in high school I noticed that I was naturally strong, and I enjoyed lifting weights and training. Coach Bill Haas made training easy for me to understand and I was able to take that into college. My first year at Howard the strength and conditioning program wasn't very structured, so I was able to take the knowledge that was accumulated throughout high school and apply it my freshman year to continue to make strength/performance gains. Then my junior and senior year, our college strength coach, Nick Latham, had a very significant impact on me as well. Being able to see how he trained not only all of the sports, but the way he trained himself, made me want to do things the way he did them. I thought "I can get paid to train athletes and work out all the time myself? That is awesome"

**JM:** You graduated with your Bachelor of Science degree in Human Performance in the spring of 2013 and your next destination was close to home, joining the football coaching staff at Kutztown University. How did you become the assistant defensive line coach at KU? Had you considered a coaching career before then? How did your time at Kutztown prepare you for a career in professional sports training & conditioning?

**RH:** I actually graduated and wanted to go to physical therapy school at first but needed a couple classes to meet the prerequisite requirements. I enrolled at Kutztown and emailed the head football coach to see if I could help them out in the weight room. He said that they did not have a strength coach but I was more than welcome to join the staff as an assistant DL coach and help the OL coach in the weight room. Kutztown was an introduction into what coaching is, it let me know that I could do more on less sleep than I ever imagined. It has also allowed me to see



*Rodney Hill's first coaching experience was with Kutztown University.*

things from the coach's perspective and not just the strength coach's perspective.

**JM:** In the spring of 2014 you moved on to Penn State to work under the tutelage of Dwight Galt and his staff in State College as an intern. What was it like making the leap to NCAA Division I athletics? Tell us about your time with the Nittany Lion strength & conditioning program.

**RH:** My time at Penn State was awesome; it was my first experience with big time football. I initially applied to intern for Coach Craig Fitzgerald (Head Strength and Conditioning Coach for the New York Giants) but he ended up leaving before I could get there to be the Head Strength and Conditioning Coach for the Houston Texans. Coach Fitzgerald is still a mentor of mine and I would not be where I am without him today. Coach Galt and his staff treated me well, but I also worked as hard as I could and put my everything I had into everything that they asked me to do. I remember the White Out against Ohio State that year, it was the second loudest venue that I have ever been at. I literally could not hear myself think. I am extremely thankful to Coach Franklin, Coach Galt, and everyone that was a part of that staff in 2014 for helping to provide me with such a positive experience and the passion/drive to pursue this as a full-time career.

**JM:** You shifted locations in early 2015 by not only becoming an assistant strength & conditioning coach at Mercer University but doing so in a learning capacity as well. What encouraged you to pursue a Master of Education degree in Higher Educational Leadership and how has that discipline helped you in your career so far?

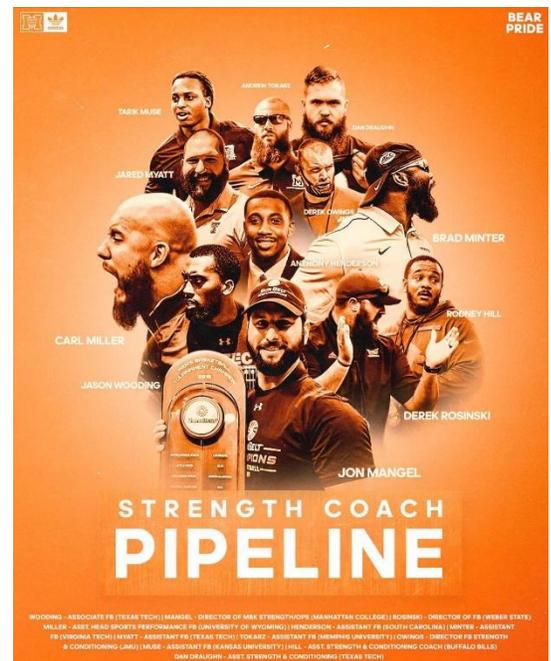


Rodney Hill served as a graduate assistant at Mercer.

**RH:** The role I was in at Mercer was a graduate assistant strength coach, so enrolling in school and getting my masters was part of the deal. That is often how it goes in coaching, you work for free, and then you earn a graduate assistant position with a staff; you coach all day and go to school at night. The program that almost every GA in the athletic department was enrolled in was the M. Ed program so it was nice to build connections with a bunch of young, up and coming coaches. The main thing I learned from that masters program is leadership and what it means to be an effective leader. That can carry over from athletics and coaching, into retail, and corporate America. That was an experience I will always be thankful for and I appreciate Coach Jon Mangel for taking a chance on me even though he had never met me.

**JM:** Just before receiving your M. Ed. you returned to your Howard roots by becoming the Director of Strength and Conditioning for the Bison in the spring of 2016. Was this a position that you applied for or did the university seek you out? This was your first big opportunity in the strength & conditioning discipline in the coaching world, after earning valuable experience as student, intern, and graduate assistant. What was your main focus as Director of Strength and Conditioning at Howard for the next year?

**RH:** My college strength and conditioning coach, Nick Latham, was looking to move into an admin role within the athletic department and reached out to me and asked if I would be interested in coming back to Howard and running the weight room. I was very thankful that he thought of me to be his successor and had the faith in me to come back and do a



Mercer recognized their ability to develop strength coaches recently on social media and included Rodney in their accomplishments.

good job, even at 24 years old. The main focus at Howard was making connections with the athletes, coaches, and everyone else in the athletic department in order to get buy in for what I was trying to accomplish in the weight room. I wanted to make sure that I not only developed the athletes, but myself and the interns that I had as well and make sure that everyone I came across was impacted positively through our interactions. This is a pivotal point in someone's life, that 18-22 year old range, so I wanted to make sure that I could help instill some traits that would be useful for the rest of their lives.

**JM:** What was your first reaction when landing your next job as Seasonal Strength & Conditioning Coach with the New York Giants – your first job in the NFL? How did this opportunity present itself to you – was it a spur of the moment application or had you made a connection with NFL coaches?

**RH:** When I first learned that I was going to be fortunate enough to work for the New York Giants, it was obviously very exciting. I knew that I was going to have to learn another system at another level of football. At first I was in awe because these are people that I've seen on TV since they were in college, but it doesn't take long to get over that. Coach Fitzgerald knew Coach Aaron Wellman and was able to get me an interview for the position, and I was fortunate enough to be selected to come in and work for the off season and in season programs. I am thankful for Coach Wellman taking a shot on me, helping me learn and develop, and helping me take that next step as a coach.



*The UCF Football Twitter account announces Rodney Hill joining the Knights staff on Christmas Eve 2017.*

**JM:** You left the New York Giants following the 2017 football season and moved to the southeastern U.S. where you became the Assistant Director of Sports Performance at the University of Central Florida (UCF). What was your role there? Were you focused solely on football or were you working with all their student-athletes?

**RH:** At UCF I worked with football and was in charge of implementing the daily nutrition protocols for the football team. This was something I had never done before and something that I wasn't really familiar with. Having Coach Kurt Schmidt there to guide me through that was really important. I was involved in everything strength and conditioning, but I was also at most of the meals monitoring what the players were eating, making shakes, ordering supplements and fueling station necessities, giving nutritional talks to the players post-lift, creating eating schedules for players who needed to gain weight, creating workouts for players that needed to lose weight, washing, cutting, de-vining, and bagging fruit and making sandwiches for gameday fuel. This allowed me to add a skillset to

my resume that I probably would not have gotten otherwise. Thanks to Coach Schmidt for helping me learn and grow as a coach and take another big step in my career.

**JM:** You were part of their football run of dominance during the late 2010s, specifically in 2018 under first year Head Coach Josh Heupel, the Heisman Trophy runner-up in 2000. What was it like being an important cog in a program coming off a 13-0 season in 2017, which included an upset of #7 Auburn in the Peach Bowl?

**RH:** It's always a great experience being a part of a winning team and program; when you are apart of a winning team, you get to see the inner workings of what makes them so successful. Those are invaluable lessons because you never know



*Wilson graduate Rodney Hill poses in the UCF locker room after the Knights won the AAC Championship in 2018.*

where you will be, and you may have to help reset the culture within that organization. Having those experiences to fall back on is a huge help.

**JM:** The 2018 season was nearly perfect for the UCF Knights football team - going 12-1 overall - with an undefeated run through the regular season, culminating with an AAC Championship Game victory over Memphis. On New Years Day 2019 the Knights played against #11 LSU in the Fiesta Bowl in Glendale, AZ. Were you a member of the traveling squad for that game? If so, what was it like to be a part of a major bowl game like the Fiesta Bowl?

**RH:** I was fortunate enough to travel that week for the Fiesta Bowl and watch it from the sidelines; it was a fantastic experience. Any time you are a group of 5 school (Power 6 as the UCF faithful like to call it) and get to play in a New Years 6 Bowl game, it is a testament to the success the team has had. That was a special group of players and a special locker room; I have never seen a team that loved each other as much as that 2018 UCF football team. Every player on that team was best friends with everyone else on the team, from the freshman DB to the 5<sup>th</sup> year senior OL. That is what made that team so special along with the leadership. On every successful team, the players run the team and are the most influential on one another, not the coaches.

**JM:** You jumped back into the world of professional football in the spring of 2019 by joining the Detroit Lions as an Assistant Strength & Performance Coach. What was it like to be a part of Matt Patricia's staff and a team featuring the likes of NFL stars such as QB Matthew Stafford, WR Kenny Golladay, OT Taylor Decker, DE Trey Flowers, and CB Darius Slay?

**RH:** Being with the Lions was a good experience and allowed me to become a full-time NFL strength and conditioning assistant. Coach Patricia was and is a brilliant football mind with a wealth of knowledge about the game. He was able to break down the game into concepts that I never would have thought of and I am thankful for him and Coach Harold Nash for hiring me and allowing me to be a part of their staff. The team had some great players on the roster and although things did not go exactly as planned that year, I will always be thankful for the opportunity to be a part of it and grateful for the opportunity to build relationships with every single person that worked in the building.



*Rodney Hill returned to coach in the NFL with the Detroit Lions in 2019.*

**JM:** Following your time with the Lions during the 2019 season you moved on to the Buffalo Bills in April 2020. What spurred you to join the Bills as a Strength & Conditioning Coach, where we find you now?

**RH:** I was fired from the Lions following the 2019 season and was fortunate enough to land in Buffalo for another seasonal position in the weight room. Coach Eric Ciano was the 2019 NFL Strength Coach of the Year so being able to work for and learn from him was a tremendous opportunity that I could not pass up. Now that I am here, I feel like the Buffalo Bills have one of the best performance staffs in the country and it is no wonder that they are able to be a healthy

team year in and year out. This has been a phenomenal opportunity not only because of the success that the team is having, but because I get to learn from so many great minds inside the building. They are all willing to share their ideas and thought processes with me; you don't get that everywhere you work so I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to be here in Buffalo.

**Justin Raffauf, *The Bulldog Hour* [JR]:** What would you say is the biggest difference between working for a college program vs an NFL team?

**RH:** The two biggest differences between college and the NFL from a training standpoint are the schedule, and biological and training age. In college you get close to 20 weeks in the offseason where it is just strength and conditioning, in the NFL it is less than half of that. The guys in the NFL are professionals so you trust them to work hard when they are away from the facility, but it would still be nice to have them around and train them yourself. That also means that the biggest training block that you have is in season so it's imperative to still try and make performance gains in season as well. When an athlete arrives on campus in college, they are usually 17-18 years old, they are still relatively young and need a lot of development. When they arrive in the NFL, they are generally more physically developed because they have had 3-4 years of intense training in college. Sometimes (not because of training, just from playing the game) athletes develop new injuries as well so it is important to work around those as well.

**JM:** You have held a number of incredible jobs at a variety of institutions at every level of the strength coaching field. So far, what is your fondest memory from your career in Sports Performance?

**RH:** It's hard to pick just one memory throughout this journey, but I would say that the best part about this job is being able to share it with others. Being able to get family and friends tickets to games and sideline passes for pregame is great. People get to see these athletes up close that they have only seen on TV before and sometimes they get to interact with them. Although I work with them and see them every day, I have to remember sometimes that I am blessed to be able to do what I do because to other people it is the coolest job in the world. Seeing these athletes in person is something that they will get to talk about for the rest of their lives. So being able to share this experience with others is extremely gratifying.



**JM:** What has been the best friendship or connection you have made so far after graduating from Wilson nearly 12 years ago? Outside of family and childhood friends, who has helped you most along the way?

**RH:** My fiancé, Kimberly Mazzapica; without her I would not be where I am today. I have taken some jobs where I didn't make a lot of money and she supported me through all of that. I am super appreciative of her and I

*As of January 2021, Rodney is a Seasonal Strength & Conditioning Coach with the Buffalo Bills, who play Chad Henne (WHS Class of 2004) and the Kansas City Chiefs in the AFC Championship Game on Sunday, January 24th.*

hope to be able to give back to her what she has given to me.

**JR:** If you could go back in time and deliver yourself a message while you were still in high school, what would you say?

**RH:** I would say “Study harder and get good grades, attention to detail is important in everything that you do, make sure you learn what a healthy and balanced nutritional diet is, strength isn’t everything, make sure you know how to move properly and bend, and don’t ever feel like you need to change who you are, your values, and beliefs for anyone.”

**JM:** What are your career goals? Where will Rodney Hill be and what will he be doing in January 2026?

**RH:** Hopefully having some longevity with one program and on a path to being a head strength and conditioning coach for a premier football program if I am not one already. I would also like to have a family and raise kids and hopefully get a PhD.

**JM:** Do you want to recognize anyone else for helping you along the way?

**RH:** First and foremost I would like to thank my parents because they have been my support system and believed in me and supported my dreams even when I had to work for free. I mentioned my fiancé above, along with every strength and conditioning coach along the way that helped mentor me and gave me advice. My guy Ian Jones that I met when I was at Penn State, Brian Johnson who is the Head Strength and conditioning coach at the University of California at Berkeley, Barry Gant at Penn State University, Jordan Smallwood, Markus Paul (Rest in Peace), Erica Goldstein, Molly Tye, Chelsea Holmes, Moe Pearson, Jessica Larmony, Neil Maskill, and I would like to thank Coach Fitz (Craig Fitzgerald) again because he has helped me out time and time again when he didn’t need to or have to.

**JM:** What would be your message to current student-athletes at Wilson or for those interested in pursuing a career in Sports Performance?

**RH:** Don’t be afraid to work for free. Try out a summer internship while you are in college and see if it is what you want to do. Start at the school you are at, and then branch out and go to other schools as well. This business is all about who you know and the more people you can make a good impression on, the more people you will have to speak on your behalf when it is time to search for a job and employers are calling references. Continue to read, learn, apply the information, and ask questions to your peers and mentors. Getting these certifications will only teach you 10% of what you need to know; the other 90% will be learned through practical experience. Make sure you build relationships with everyone you encounter, not just the coaches, the people working in the cafeteria, the janitors, those working on the business/admin side, because you never want to seem like you are too big time for anyone.

**JM:** Thank you so much, Rodney, for taking the time to answer questions from us here at *The Bulldog Hour*. Congratulations on an amazing career path full of meaningful & impactful experiences. The Wilson community wishes you nothing but the best. We hope we can talk with you again soon. Best of luck to your Buffalo Bills in the AFC Championship game and beyond!

