

Ex-Chippewa Valley, CMU star Sean Murphy-Bunting makes name for himself on Buccaneers' run

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The Detroit News

Tampa Bay Buccaneers cornerback Sean Murphy-Bunting will take center stage at the Super Bowl at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa on Sunday evening while trying to slow down Patrick Mahomes, Tyreek Hill and the defending champion Kansas City Chiefs.

Murphy-Bunting played his high school ball at Clinton Township Chippewa Valley, then played at Central Michigan before impressing coaches and general managers at the NFL combine to become a second-round pick of the Buccaneers in the 2019 NFL Draft.



Sure, all the talk heading into Sunday's game is on Tom Brady and how he left New England for Tampa Bay and quickly led the Bucs to the playoffs for the first time since 2007, joining the playoff dance as a wild-card team and advancing to host the Super Bowl.

"It's extremely exciting, just getting another opportunity to play football again," Murphy-Bunting told The Detroit News on Saturday. "It's been a really long season, and getting that opportunity to play with my brothers again, it means everything to me. Obviously, being at the home stadium is the ultimate; you can't ask for anything more than that, especially when it's for a championship of this caliber."

Murphy-Bunting has played a major role in getting the Buccaneers to the Super Bowl. He became the first player to notch interceptions in each of his first three playoff games in the same season.

All three of Murphy-Bunting's picks were tempo-setters, interceptions in the first half of games leading to touchdowns, with two of them coming against future Hall of Famers.

First, Murphy-Bunting intercepted a pass by Washington's Taylor Heinicke in the first quarter at the Tampa Bay 42, leading to a Brady touchdown pass to Antonio Brown for a 9-0 lead in an eventual 31-23 wild-card win.

Then, Murphy-Bunting picked off a Drew Brees pass early in the second quarter and returned it 36 yards to the Saints' 3 to set up a Brady touchdown pass to Mike Evans for a 10-6 lead in a 30-20 divisional playoff win.

Murphy-Bunting intercepted an Aaron Rodgers pass near midfield late in the first half of the NFC Championship game at Lambeau Field, setting up Brady's 39-yard touchdown pass to Scotty Miller for a 21-10 lead over the Packers with a second left before halftime in an eventual 31-26 victory.

"Getting those interceptions put our offense in better position to score points," Murphy-Bunting said, "but at the end of the day our defense playing as one unit has made it a lot easier for a lot of us to make different plays. Everybody is doing their job, and being in the right position has allowed our defense to create sacks, to get more turnovers.

"I credit all my success during the playoffs to my peers and my other brothers that are playing next to me, because without them doing their job, it's not possible that I get those (interceptions)."

'Late bloomer' at Chippewa Valley

Chippewa Valley coach Scott Merchant is thrilled for Murphy-Bunting, knowing it had been a long road for him to reach Division 1 football at CMU, let alone the NFL and Super Bowl.

“I’m super excited for him and his family because Sean didn’t have a prototypical journey to get to where he is today,” Merchant said. “He’s had to go through way more than most people who have the opportunity that he’s about to have. He was a late bloomer in high school. He played JV football as a sophomore because he was 5-9 and 140 pounds. He was small. He was always talented, but size-wise he hadn’t hit his spurt yet and came back his junior year and we almost didn’t know who he was since he had grown so much. He was a completely different kid.

“He had a really good junior year, and his senior year he had a phenomenal season. He still wasn’t fully developed, like strength-wise. He was kind of a long, lean guy who was unbelievably athletic, just body control, his jumping ability. He had some of the best hands I had ever seen.”

Murphy-Bunting's first love growing up was baseball, then basketball. He played travel baseball for the D-Town Tigers based out of Detroit with his father, Maurice Bunting, as one of his coaches. He played in tournaments in Mount Clemens, Sterling Heights and national tournaments in Florida starting as a 9-year-old, playing second base before moving to center field in high school.

“My dad played college baseball at Central State in Ohio, and I played travel baseball growing up,” Murphy-Bunting said. “I loved baseball, that was my favorite sport; my second favorite sport growing up was basketball. I didn’t fall in love with football until my junior year of high school.

“My junior year, I was like 6-foot and I could jump out of the gym. I was so athletic and naturally gifted because I played three different sports, there was just a different type of explosiveness in me. They had me at wide receiver. I didn’t play defense at all my



junior year. I really didn't have any interest in playing defense if I didn't have to. I played defense later on.

“I think you have to be mentally tough in order to play the position (cornerback) because you're always going to have ups and downs, everything is not going to go the way you want. At times guys are going to get catches on you, but you have to know how to react and bounce back and be able to let it go and continue to play. It was just my competitive nature and it's just a natural position for me. I've always been a good defender, whether it was in football, basketball or baseball.”

Murphy-Bunting put himself on the radar in a 48-35 regional final loss to Detroit Cass Tech his senior year when he had 120 receiving yards and two touchdowns.

“He showed why he was one of the best receivers around,” said Merchant of Murphy-Bunting's performance against Cass Tech. “He has sticky hands where he'll get anything that's around him.”

Division 1 the goal

Murphy-Bunting's goal was to play Division 1 football, but there were no offers coming his way, just from Division 1-AA North Dakota and Division II schools, including Ferris State.

Then, Murphy-Bunting received a gray-shirt offer from Central Michigan head coach Dan Enos, but that offer was off the table when Enos departed to become offensive coordinator at Arkansas.

“Coaches are offering kids in eighth grade, not rewarding kids for having great senior years like Sean had,” Merchant said. “I remember he was just getting that 1-AA offer from North Dakota and the Division II offers, then Dan Enos offered him a gray shirt, they were out of scholarships for his graduating class, but could go to Central in January where his scholarship would be counted for that next class, but then three to five days later Dan left for Arkansas and everything was off the table.

“It was then January and (National) Signing Day. Sean decided not to sign, and I freaked out. His goal was to play Division 1 and he wasn't signing anywhere else. Well, I'll never forget I was in Grand Rapids, watching my daughter in a soccer tournament that March and I get a call from Sean's mother and she says, ‘Guess where we are. We're at Central Michigan and we're searching for Coach (John) Bonamego.’”

Kim Murphy, Sean's mother, did find Bonamego, who took over CMU's head job to replace Enos, and he offered him the gray shirt.

“Sean worked out in the fall, Merchant said, “then went up to Central in January, learned the system and tore it up, started at nickelback that fall, then started at cornerback his sophomore year and was first-team All-MAC as a junior. Then (he) left after his junior year, you know bet on himself and just blows up at the combine.

“Really, this is like a Lifetime movie, the journey he took was incredible. It’s great to see good people who have worked for everything they’ve got to have this type of success. I’m thrilled for him and his family. His mother is his biggest fan and he wanted to honor his mother after he got drafted by adding her name.”

He played as Sean Bunting through high school and college, then played as Sean Murphy-Bunting in the NFL.



Murphy-Bunting has worked hard for everything he has, especially when he left CMU after that junior year and put on 20 pounds from December to February while preparing for the NFL combine.

“The combine was a fun experience for me because I had never gone through anything like that so having all those tests were cool for me,” Murphy-Bunting said. “I put on like 20 pounds, went into the Combine at 196 and still ran a 4.41, my vertical jump was high, and I benched 14 reps (of 225), so I had a good combine.

“A problem of mine had always been gaining weight, so when I did that it kind of solidified that I was really capable of doing a lot of different things in my mind.”

A Super challenge

Murphy-Bunting feels ready to take on the challenge of facing the defending Super Bowl champs.

“This is surreal, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Murphy-Bunting said. “Really, this is what I’ve worked for my whole life, to get to the point that I’m at right now, to get to the Super Bowl and play for that big championship and that big ring, so I’m excited and ready to take on that challenge.”

So, what makes Mahomes, Hill and the rest of the Chiefs special?

“They are just electric, they can make big plays in any given situation, so we have to keep those guys in front of us and we have to play our technique and play our ball,” he said.

The Chiefs defeated Tampa Bay 27-24 on Nov. 29, with Mahomes throwing for 462 yards and three touchdowns, with Hill grabbing 13 passes for 269 yards, including TD grabs of 75, 44 and 20 to put the Buccaneers at 7-5. They have won seven straight since that loss.

The Bucs, of course, have Brady, the former Michigan quarterback playing in his 10th Super Bowl.

"He's an outstanding pro," Murphy-Bunting said, "and he does every single thing every day the right way and he's very consistent in what he does, very technical in attention to detail."

Murphy-Bunting will have plenty of fans on hand at Raymond James Stadium, which will have 22,000 spectators.

Sean’s mother plans to be at the Super Bowl, along with Sean’s girlfriend, and three brothers: Gregory, 27; Martice, a 19-year-old receiver at Saginaw Valley; and Carlton, a freshman at Chippewa Valley.

“I’m going, just ecstatic, extremely excited to see Sean play,” Kim Murphy said. “I remember back when he was in high school, when he said ‘I’m not Division II material, I’m not signing with a Division II team,’ I remember telling him back then to never settle for anything less than what you’re cable of having.

"I remember when he got drafted, he said 'We did this. We did it. I love my father to death and he's been a big part of my success as well, but I want you to see your hard work every game.' It's been an honor to see that, great to see my name on his jersey."

Said Murphy-Bunting: "She's been that rock for me my entire life. She's taken me to every sporting event, baseball practice, basketball practice, football practice,

she's never missed a game. She's always been that best friend figure that I can always go to whenever you need to talk to about anything and she always gives good advice. She's always going to be by my side and she just means the world to me."

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