

Players move on after Hofstra dumps football

By ZINA KUMOK Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK(AP)—Former Hofstra co-captain Luke Bonus lives in a house just a short walk from the stadium where he played college football.

“I’m reminded by it 50 times a day, and that’s not an exaggeration,” the former linebacker says.

Sometimes when he looks at the place, he recalls exact conversations from those days. “I feel like I can hear coaches talking,” he says. “It’s a weird thing.”

It’s also bittersweet, or sometimes, just plain bitter.

The reason: Hofstra administrators cut football last December. The school cited financial reasons and a lack of fan interest but the move shocked the school’s 84 players.

“You plan out the next four to five years of your life, and you have it ripped away from you,” defensive back Keith Ferrara said. “It felt like someone had died in my family.”

Now, with another season about to start, the players have moved on. Some have graduated, others are staying at Hofstra without football, and some have transferred - at least six have moved up to FBS programs. Whatever they chose, they share a lingering anger about the way they got the news and the disruption it caused.

The school, meanwhile, maintains it tried to make the transition as easy as possible. Vice President for University Relations Melissa Connolly said the announcement’s timing was “purposeful” and designed so the players could make a well thought-out decision with the season behind them.

“Our focus was always on them,” she said.

Hofstra is not a place with a glorious football tradition, not a USC, Oklahoma or Notre Dame. But the private FCS school with 12,000 students in Hempstead, on Long Island, produced its share of pro players over the decades (football started at the school in 1937).

More than 20 of its alumni have gone on to the NFL. Marques Colston got a Super Bowl ring last season with the [New Orleans Saints](#) while Willie Colon earned two with the [Pittsburgh Steelers](#) from their most recent titles. The [New York Jets](#) used to hold preseason practice at Hofstra, and alum Wayne Chrebet was a fan favorite when he played for them.

The Pride even moved up from Division III to what was then Division I-AA in 1994.

“Historically you wouldn’t think that Hofstra would drop its program,” wide receiver Derek Benson said.

Even though fellow Colonial Athletic Association school Northeastern also dropped its program in 2009, the players say there were no rumors about Hofstra getting rid of football.

“There wasn’t even a whispering that would happen to us,” said Bonus, who graduated last spring.

Now, looking back, he can see some signs that the football players didn’t have the support of the administration.

Football posters with the 2009 schedule weren’t made. The team was told to empty its locker rooms at the end of the season, something it hadn’t been asked to do in previous years.

Then in December, two weeks before finals, the players were notified of an emergency meeting. The notice came while some were in the middle of class. Some went to the meeting, some skipped and some say they didn’t receive the notice.

At most, the players thought head coach Dave Cohen was getting fired after a 5-6 season. (Cohen, now a defensive coordinator and linebacker coach for Western Michigan, declined comment).

Former guard Armand Poole couldn’t go to the meeting because he was on crutches. Still recovering from surgery, he was just starting a six to nine-month rehab program.

“It was like a double shock for me because I couldn’t do anything at the time,” he said.

Poole, then a junior, spent the spring semester at Hofstra and considered his options. Now at Stony Brook, along with four other former Hofstra players, Poole said he did not consider staying at Hofstra for his last year. If any players chose to remain at Hofstra, the university said they would honor their scholarships.

“I always knew I would continue playing football somewhere,” he said. “It was just a matter of where.”

More than 10 of its then-current players were transfers. They had already uprooted their lives once for Hofstra, and now, to continue their playing careers, they would have to do so again.

Coaches from other schools began filing in, eager to see which of Hofstra’s players could fit into their programs. Cohen and his staff contacted other coaches, pitching their players as possible prospects.

“They really just were in their office more than they were in the season,” wide receiver Anthony Nelson said.

“They knew they didn’t have a job at Hofstra, but they still” fulfilled their commitment to the team.

Most players were able to find schools before the spring semester started.

Now they have new schools, coaches, teammates and uniforms. A new season awaits. They've made friends, adjusted to new teams and maneuvered their way on campus.

"You're almost like a freshman again," said wide receiver Aaron Weaver, now at Syracuse.

Still, they miss the good times they had with their teammates at Hofstra, and can't forget how it all ended.

"The decision made at Hofstra by the staff was one I'll never forget," said Said Gaida, a linebacker now at Albany. "It kind of scarred me for life."