



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT...

Sheldon Rankins-Defensive Tackle, New Orleans Saints Eastside High School Class of 2012



Many young boys dream of playing professional sports one day but few see that dream become reality. Not so for Newton County native Sheldon Rankins. The defensive tackle for the New Orleans Saints pursued his dream, put in the hard work necessary, and ultimately made it to the National Football League (NFL).

“There were others things, but playing in the NFL was always my dream and everything I ever wanted,” said Rankins, who was drafted by the Saints in the first round of the 2016 NFL draft. He

said the draft, “was the culmination of a lot of hard work from a young age and doing the right things both on and off the field to put me in this position.”

According to Rankins, his education and the support he received from his hometown school system also helped pave the way for his future success. A student at Oak Hill Elementary and Indian Creek Middle, Rankins was just as successful in the classroom as he was on the athletic field in high school. He earned all A’s and B’s and graduated with a 3.5 grade point average (GPA) from Eastside High School in 2012. He was a two-time second team All-State player in football and so successful during his high school playing career that the Eastside Eagles retired his jersey number. And Rankins didn’t limit himself to one sport. In addition to football, he also threw the shotput in track and played basketball for the Eastside Eagles—all while maintaining his high GPA.

When asked his favorite teacher along the way, he did not hesitate—Coach Michael Poor.

“My senior year he was my math teacher,” Rankins explained. “He made learning real easy, broke it down for me and was just a good teacher. He was able to relate to the kids real well and teach them individually as well.”

Rankins also had high praise for the Eastside High School athletic department for helping prepare him for success at the collegiate level.

“They got me ready for the rigors of the next level,” he said. “In addition to helping me improve my skill, they helped in hard work, development of character and overcoming adversity.”

And that would pay huge dividends when he got to the NFL.

After graduation, with his sights still firmly set on a career in the NFL, Rankins enrolled in the University of Louisville because, “it was the best fit for me both athletically and academically.”

Rankins excelled both on the field and off at Louisville. In 46 games, he finished his college career with 133 tackles (72 solo), 31.5 tackles for loss, 18 sacks, two interceptions, two forced fumbles, and two fumble recoveries. As a result, he was selected to the All-ACC team in both his junior and senior year of college. And just like in high school, he soared academically as well. Not only did he earn a bachelor’s degree in exercise science and kinesiology but he also was selected as a member of the Athletic Director’s Honor Roll at Louisville.

His dominating play on the field earned him a first round selection and twelfth overall pick by the New Orleans Saints in the 2016 NFL draft. The Saints had high expectations for Rankins and he had high expectations for himself, too. And then, during training camp, adversity struck. Rankins suffered a broken fibula during practice and had to be carted off the field. The injury required surgery with several weeks of recovery. As a result, he missed the first half of his rookie season.

Using the lessons he learned from his high school teachers and coaches about character development and overcoming adversity, Rankins worked hard, came back from the injury and salvaged the second half of his rookie season. He played nine games and finished with 20 tackles, four sacks, and a forced fumble.

“I think I did some good things after fighting back from missing half the season with a leg injury,” said Rankins. “It was something to build upon.”

He said his goal for the future is, “to develop into a leader both on and off the field for my team.”

Although he’s back in New Orleans for training camp now, when he’s not at work, Rankins still calls Covington home.

“Generally, if I’m not in New Orleans or training somewhere, I’m in Covington, especially since my mom still teaches there,” he said. His mother, Cheryl, teaches at Indian Creek Middle School.



Although he is a star defensive tackle with a multimillion dollar contract in the NFL, during his downtime, Rankins said he enjoys simply watching movies at home on Netflix.

His hometown is important to him and Rankins reminisces about his defining moments of growing up in Newton County.

“Probably the whole experience of high school football, growing up in Covington, high school football is a big thing,” he said. “Watching it growing up and then being able to go out there on Friday nights to be able to make as many plays as I did was big.”

Even though he plays football on Sundays now in front of a much bigger audience, Sheldon Rankins hasn’t forgotten the lessons learned and the education he received in the Newton County School System.

“I had teachers that cared not only about my education but my development and well-being as a man,” said Rankins. “The things they taught me served me well in college and at the professional level now as well.”

So if you tune in to a New Orleans Saints game, look for #98 Sheldon Rankins. He’s not just a professional football player who worked hard to achieve his dream of playing in the NFL, he’s also a proud alumnus of Eastside High School, Class of 2012!

***All Photos Courtesy of the New Orleans Saints.*

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