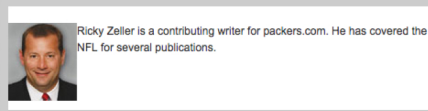


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Ricky Zeller is a contributing writer for packers.com. He has covered the NFL for several publications.

Sherrod driven by ambition, discipline

Ricky Zeller
Posted Apr. 30, 2011

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There's an undeniable fear that runs through Derek Sherrod... It has driven his development as a player and a student, a relentless voice echoing in his mind that might make him a better player in the NFL than even the Packers' coaching staff thinks he can be.

The voice in the back of his helmet belongs to his mother back home in Columbus, Miss., Harriet Sherrod. Though low-pitched, it has kept him on the straight-and-narrow, forces him to finish every play and helped him grow into an All-America at Mississippi State.

"She's a tough woman, for real," Sherrod said with a chuckle. "I've never met a woman quite like my mom. She's something special."

His mother was proud of his selection by the Packers at 32nd overall, a reward after years of her youngest son's hard work. Harriet also had a message, delivered loud and clear while the celebration on Thursday night was still fresh.

"Derek has to go there and earn his respect," she said. "I want people to be proud of the team for having picked him and have no regrets. He's going to work for it. If he acts a different way outside this house than he does inside it, I will know about it and be there in a heartbeat."

"I've always told him to work to be the best, and that's the kind of person who's coming up there. I've always told him, 'Sign your name to your job.' He's going to make the people up there proud. I guarantee that. We're proud people. We're mighty grateful for the opportunity as a family. We don't take him going to Green Bay lightly, and neither does he."

That's just a sampling of what has kept Sherrod on the move over his 22 years.

His father, Louis, spent 21 years in the U.S. Navy as an air traffic controller - moving from Rhode Island to California to Mississippi - before retiring and joining the highways as a long-distance truck driver. Harriet was a telephone operator at Columbus Air Force Base before retiring. Military discipline ran deep in the Sherrod household, and it took hold.

Louis was the closer in the bullpen if there was ever any trouble in the house. Once Harriet spoke, he rarely had to get out of his chair. Everyone knew the rules.

Education was also at a premium. Derek's brother, Dezmond, was a tight end for the Bulldogs and the brothers played together before Dezmond graduated with an MBA. He spent time on the practice squads of the Steelers and the Texans and is now with the Las Vegas Locomotives of the United Football League. Their older brother and sister, Louis Jr. and Erica, are both working on Master's degrees since leaving the military with a combined three tours of duty in Iraq.

It took Sherrod just 3½ years to navigate through his undergraduate studies at Mississippi State, graduating with a 3.5 grade point average in business with a focus on risk management, insurance and financial planning. He is working on his MBA, and Harriet will keep tabs on him finishing that up between NFL seasons.

In 2009, Sherrod quickly ended speculation on whether he'd return for his senior year or declare for the NFL draft. He earned All-SEC honors as a junior and was a promising prospect, but Sherrod became one of the country's best blockers in 2010. He was a first-team All-America and a finalist for the William V. Campbell Trophy, which is known as the "Academic Heisman."

MSU finished 7-4 and then stomped Michigan, 52-14, in the Gator Bowl. Sherrod finished with a grade of 90 percent or better for his blocking assignments in every contest from his coaches.

"Derek spent more time preparing than anyone, working on his technique, always trying to get better," said Mississippi State Coach Dan Mullen. "He had such a pro attitude. Everyone wants to play on Saturday. If you don't want to play in the games then there's something wrong. But on Thursdays, in practice in just helmets, no one worked like he did. In those terms, he's the best I've ever seen."

Sherrod played on the biggest stage in the Southeastern Conference. He faced Alabama's Marcell Dareus and Auburn's Nick Fairley in 2010, the two top defensive linemen selected in this year's draft. Mississippi State took on a

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handful of defensive No. 1 picks annually, typically in big games against high-ranked opponents.

"The talent he has played against week in and week out is ridiculous, but nothing could faze him," said Mullen. "Derek has calmness about him when he plays, even in front of 100,000 people. He's not a rah-rah guy, and I've never heard him raise his voice or seen him frustrated. He just knocks people down and goes back to the huddle. I've seen Derek drive someone 15 yards downfield and not say anything."

Louis and Harriett were in charge of the Mississippi State Parent's Club, so they made every contest. While watching him grow into one of the conference's top performers and start 34 of 46 games over the last four years, Louis took particular pride in his son being unflappable in pressure-filled situations.

"I think that's what I admire about him most," his father said. "Derek is a nice young man, but on the field he handles himself like a professional. He's all business and he looks confident."

It has been a quick transformation, as Sherrod got a late start in football. By the time Derek showed an interest in the sport, Dezmond was the best player at Caledonia High School in Columbus, a K-12 school that wasn't a traditional powerhouse in an area dedicated to prep football. Though a 20-minute commute, Harriett selected the school based on its reputation for sending kids to college.

Sherrod walked into the football office at Caledonia in eighth grade and said he also wanted to play tight end, just like Dezmond. He hadn't laced up cleats since a one-day experiment with Pop Warner as a youngster proved to be a waste of the \$200 in equipment that Harriet had just purchased. Sherrod wasn't a tight end for long.

"Derek kept getting bigger and bigger and I told him we'd have to move him to the offensive line," said Jason Foster, one of Sherrod's coaches at Caledonia. "He said he wanted to be better than his brother, anyhow. There was a friendly competition going."

Along with Harriet's prodding, credit Dezmond with making Sherrod into the player he is today.

"We're only four years apart, and I always wanted to follow in his footsteps," Sherrod said. "We were very competitive in everything, and he was always giving a lot of advice. Dezmond accomplished a lot in school and sports and I was always trying to one up him."

At Caledonia, Sherrod was known for his manners, good grades and as a gentleman on the field. He returned a week ago to visit with former teachers and mingle with the elementary school students. However, Foster also said the streak that defines all offensive linemen was evident in high school after kickoff.

"In his last playoff game, a guy at Cleveland Eastside High School busted his lip, and that was the meanest I'd seen him," Foster said. "The guy didn't get the best of him the rest of the night."

On Thursday, family and friends huddled for the NFL Draft. Sherrod's parents, both Mississippi natives, were thrilled with their son heading to Green Bay from Columbus, a town of around 26,000. Louis traveled throughout the Midwest as a truck driver and made a point to stop by Lambeau Field in the mid-1990s.

"When they announced Derek was picked by the Green Bay Packers, I knew that it was a blessing," his father said. "You're talking about the No. 1 organization in the NFL, the most historical club in the profession. I watched them all last season. He'll be inspired by the players he gets to go against, people like **Clay Matthews I** and **B.J. Rajil**. It couldn't be better."

Allow Mullen the final word. He took the reins in Starkville in 2009 after serving as the offensive coordinator for four years under Urban Meyer at Florida, and he saw some of the country's best offensive linemen with the Gators. Few were as talented as Sherrod.

"Derek has done everything the right way, he was raised the right way and he has followed that lead," Mullen said. "Being a good person has always been important to him."

"I'd be shocked if he doesn't play in the NFL for a long time. Let's put it this way. He's the best tackle I've ever coached. Maurkice Pouncey is the best center I've ever been around. Chris Kemoatu is the best guard I've ever been around. Derek is the best tackle. I might lose some friends saying that."

For more feature stories on the 2011 draft class, [click here](#).

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