



## Duty calls: Army says Cadets can turn pro now

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Roger Staubach entered the U.S. Naval Academy in the 1960s with an eye on a military career.

Along the way, Staubach became one of college football's greatest quarterbacks, winning the Heisman Trophy in 1963. But the NFL did not find him attractive – not with a five-year commitment to the Navy looming upon graduation.

So the Cowboys selected Staubach in the 10th round of the 1964 draft in the unlikely event that he would one day pursue a professional football career.

But a recently implemented rule at the U.S. Military Academy could change the way cadets are selected in April's NFL draft. And two cadets from Texas, including punter Owen Tolson of Richardson's Canyon Creek Christian Academy, could get drafted this year.

Service academy players, even the legends, rarely have NFL careers.

Felix "Doc" Blanchard (1945) and Pete Dawkins (1958) won Heisman trophies and never played in the NFL.

After fulfilling his military commitment, including a stint in Vietnam, Staubach reported to training camp in 1969 with the Cowboys as a 27-year-old rookie. He would quarterback Dallas to four Super Bowls in the 1970s and earn himself a bust in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

How much glossier would Staubach's football legacy have been had he spent those five prime years of his professional life – ages 23 to 27 – on the football field instead of in the military? That was the tradeoff for one of the best educations a college scholarship could buy.

"When I went there, I knew what the deal was," Staubach said. "When I left high school, I wasn't thinking I was going to play pro football. But today if you're thinking that way, it would be nice to have an option like Army has. If Army has it, Navy should be able to compete with it as well."

### Service option

Army is offering its top athletes a side door to professional sports. West Point has implemented an alternative service option program that allows cadets to turn pro – and play – right away.

Cadets accepted into the program "will owe two years of active service in the Army, during which time they will be allowed to play their sport in the player-development systems of their respective organizations and be assigned to recruiting stations. If they remain in professional sports following those two years, they will be provided the option of buying out the remaining three years of their active-duty commitment in exchange for six years of reserve time."

The Air Force Academy and Naval Academy do not offer such a program. Both academies require two years of active service upon graduation before presenting the option of swapping the final three years of active time for six years in the



JON MALINOWSKI / Special to DMN

Army safety Caleb Campbell (left) and punter Owen Tolson pose in their cadet uniforms at the United States Military Academy's Michie Stadium.

reserves.

"It's a complicated issue," Staubach said. "But I think it's good for the service academies if you have athletes that can compete at a higher level – and can still give back to the service – that they can find a compromise that allows them to play professional athletics. It's worth the effort to look at it and try to figure it out."

Six cadets have already applied for admission to Army's program since its inception in 2005: four in baseball, one in hockey and one in football. Center Pete Bier went to training camp with the Green Bay Packers last summer but was released.

Three more football players hope to apply for the program in 2008: Tolson, safety Caleb Campbell and fullback Mike Viti. Campbell is from Perryton in the Panhandle's northeast corner. Tolson is from Lucas in Collin County.

In February, Campbell and Tolson became the first players from any service academy invited to the NFL scouting combine since 2000 when the Air Force sent wide receiver Matt Farmer.

### The other draft

The last cadet invited to the combine was tight end Ron Leshinski in 1997. That also was the last year Army had a player drafted into the NFL – quarterback Ronnie McAda in the seventh and final round.

But the Packers had to wait on McAda, a Mesquite product, back then.

Campbell spent much of his nightly interview time that weekend in Indianapolis at the NFL combine explaining his situation to potential employers.

"Some teams wanted to know if I'd be able to play for sure," Campbell said. "They wanted to know if I'd have to go to Iraq if I got called up. 'Do we invest all kinds of money in a player just to let him go?'"

"Now all the teams have the understanding I can play football. My duty right now is to play football."

Tolson, who became an All-TAPPS kicker at Canyon Creek before enrolling at West Point, considers this fork in his professional life a choice of two attractive options. For that, he is grateful to the Army.

"The academics at West Point can't be touched," said Tolson, whose father is a commander in the U.S. Navy. "I'll be set up for success no matter what I do in the private sector. Playing in the NFL obviously would be living the little kid's dream.

"But I'll have a job right out of college, with or without the NFL, as an officer in the Army. I'll have five years of on-the-job experience unless I get into the private sector and decide to get out of the Army right away."

Tolson finished seventh in the NCAA in punting last season, averaging 44.9 yards per kick. His 7,220 career punting yards rank second in school history. Last season, he doubled as Army's placekicker, booting eight of 15 field goals, including a game-winning 25-yarder against Tulane in overtime. As a senior in high school, Tolson nailed a 53-yard field goal.

Campbell was a four-year starter at strong safety, finishing his career with 307 career tackles and six interceptions. He was a team co-captain in 2007, when he finished second on the team with 97 tackles.

Viti, from Berwick, Pa., was a three-year starter and a co-captain in 2007. He caught 30 career passes and rushed 91 times for 321 yards and three touchdowns.

Army posted a 13-34 record in the four years Campbell, Tollson and Viti spent on campus. At least they helped point the program in the right direction. Army was 5-41 in the four years before their arrival. The Cadets have not managed a winning season since 1996.

Campbell thinks the alternative service option program can help bring Army football back.

"If we want to compete at this level and continue carrying on the Army football tradition that has been such a winning program in the past," Campbell said, "I think this is a great opportunity to get all-star kids into the academy, because they'll know they still have a chance to play football after they leave the academy.

"The amount of kids who actually leave the academy to play a professional sport is very small in relation to the number of kids who are going to go to protect our nation. So we're actually benefiting the Army, just in another way."Draft watch

The U.S. Military Academy has had only one player drafted by the NFL since 1970 – quarterback Ronnie McAda in 1997. But the immediate availability of safety Caleb Campbell and punter Owen Tolson increases the chances of Army having another draft pick in 2008.

Tolson is the long shot. In the last 10 years, there have been an average of two punters drafted each year. But Tolson was one of five punters invited to the NFL scouting combine. If drafted, Tolson figures to go late, in the sixth or seventh round.

Campbell also projects as a second-day draft pick, but a thin safety board could push him up into the fifth or sixth round. The NFL likes his size (6-2, 229 pounds), and he has adequate speed (4.61 in the 40).