

MORNING SUN

Staley drafted in first round

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Joe Staley made Central Michigan University history Saturday. The senior offensive tackle out of Rockford became the first ever Chippewa to be drafted in the first round of the NFL Draft, going 28th to the San Francisco 49ers.

The 49ers actually traded up to get Staley, who was listed by many as a top 20 prospect, but fell back in an unpredictable draft.

San Francisco traded a 2007 fourth round pick and a 2008 first round pick to New England in order to move into the 28th spot to take Staley.

"Basically all I've been hearing is the lower half of the first round," Staley told the 49ers official website, sf49ers.com. "I had a couple of teams that were really interested, especially the (New York) Giants and (Kansas City) Chiefs. When it passed them, I was thinking probably the (Baltimore) Ravens, but I'm glad the 49ers traded up and picked me. I didn't really know they were interested, so it was a total surprise too."

In San Francisco, Staley joins a team that finished 7-9 in 2006. The 49ers improved from 4-12 in 2005 and 2-14 and 2004.

Saturday's draft completes a memorable college career for Staley, who began his career at CMU as a tight end, only to make the switch to offensive tackle after Brian Kelly came in as head coach.

"Joe always put the team first," Staley's offensive line coach and current Cincinnati assistant coach Jeff Quinn said. "When we came and put the spread offense in, he was excited because he thought he would get the chance to be bigger part of the offense as a tight end. We approached him and told him that team needed him at right tackle. That wasn't what he wanted to hear, but he knew it was best for the team and he made the change, and he embraced the change."

Staley's transition to the offensive line was made easier thanks to the assistance of teammate, and fellow Rockford alum, Adam Kieft, who played offensive tackle for the Chippewas, and was drafted in 2005 by the Cincinnati Bengals in the fifth round.

"It was tough for Joe early on, but having Adam was a big help," Quinn said. "Adam really told Joe to accept and embrace the change and Adam really mentored Joe. Joe looked up to Adam being from Rockford and all and Adam really took Joe along."

In the spring of 2004, Staley got his first taste of the offensive line, and it didn't take him long to enjoy the experience.

"During spring practice, we had the second team go in and Joe moved in to the offensive line. After a few plays I asked Joe how it was going and he grabbed me and said 'coach, I love it,'" Quinn said. "I knew then that Joe had a great future at offensive line ahead of him."

Quinn among many others were able to watch Saturday's draft and smile to see Staley taken in the opening round.

"It is a proud day for a lot of Central Michigan fans," CMU football coach Butch Jones said. "Joe is a guy that I helped recruit and stayed in touch with and he is a guy that really helped the young guys on the team and let them know what to expect when I arrived. I am excited for him and what the future brings."

By making CMU history, Staley will now always be linked as one of the most successful Chippewa football alumni.

"Joe is not only a great football player, but a great person and a great ambassador for Central Michigan University," Jones said. "We are all going to be excited to watch him succeed at the next level."

An increase in the interest level of the 49ers will certainly follow Joe from Mt. Pleasant now and follow from former coaches and teammates.

"It will be enjoyable for me to watch Joe on Sunday's and know that I helped get him to that point," Quinn added. "I just wish I could get a piece of that fat paycheck he is going to get."

Along with Staley's success, Central Michigan will get an increase in national attention, which helps the football program.

"You can't put a price on that," Jones said of the national exposure. "People are going to see CMU on that screen and they will see what kind of program we have and will continue to have."