

Hubbard's journey: How one Edmonton high school football player became a top U.S. college prospect

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Hubbard's Journey

How one Edmonton high school football player became a top U.S. college prospect

By Zach Mueller



Most defenders playing against Chuba Hubbard just saw No. 30 receding into the distance. (Courtesy Chuba Hubbard)

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HUBA HUBBARD sits in the second row of his first-block class, listening to the teacher drone on about acceleration. It's just another day in Physics 20.

Then he feels his phone vibrate.

He pulls it from his pocket and hides it under the desk – the way kids used to do with love notes. It's a text from Mike Bobo, head coach of the Colorado State University football team.

Hubbard's hand shoots into the air, and he asks to go to the bathroom. The teacher obliges.

He hurries toward the cafeteria. A few students hustle past him in the hall. When he reaches the lunch area, there's no one in sight. He takes a seat at a table near the railing and dials Bobo – a decision that will change his life.

That was Feb. 17, when Hubbard received his first NCAA offer from the Colorado State Rams in the Bev Facey Community High School cafeteria. Three months and 23 offers later, he verbally committed to the Oklahoma State Cowboys for track and football.

He knew from the start that it wouldn't be an easy road as a Canadian athlete – only one other Edmonton-area player has earned a U.S. Division 1 football scholarship in the last decade.

But he learned early that it was possible with hard work and determination.

Hubbard was born in Edmonton in 1999, the youngest of four children. His father left when he was three, but he says he never lacked any support at home.

"My mom and stepdad have always been there for me. They've always encouraged me to follow my dreams, so I've never felt a void."

He admits that his mother, Candace, took it easy on him growing up, but his two brothers dished out some tough love when he needed it.

"They got me ready for the real world," he says. "I wasn't allowed to cry over the little things."

When they weren't around to look out for him, he says, his sister kept him out of trouble.

"She would always threaten to tell my mom if I was thinking about doing something stupid – and it always worked."

His brothers played basketball, but Hubbard chose the track over the hardwood.

When he was six, he attended Meadowlark Christian School, where he met his close friend Simon Timmer, whose mother was the track and field coach. It wasn't long before Hubbard started competing.

"Simon was a runner so I wanted to run, too," Hubbard says. "When I figured out I was fast, I never looked back."

Hubbard was a natural on the track, but he quickly realized that no one ever gave you first place. In 2009, he took a trip to Hershey, Pa., to race in the North American finals. When he showed up at the track, he was met by a group of athletes who looked the part.

"All these kids were in spandex and spikes, and I was there in these raggedy Pumas and basketball shorts," he recalls. "They were all down in their three-point stance and I was just standing up."

Hubbard finished the 100-metre race in third place, with a time of 13.94 seconds. He says the loss was devastating, but he used it as motivation to train harder.

"I just remember crying to my mom, saying that I wish I had won. But I also told her I would be back for the gold."

He kept his word.

In 2013, Hubbard went back to the event in Hershey and placed first in the 100-metres, clocking in at 11.62 seconds and beating the silver medalist by half a second – an eternity on the track.

"That was a big accomplishment for me," he says. "I just bawled my eyes out because I worked so hard for it."

TWO YEARS LATER, Hubbard flew to Cali, Colombia, to compete in the 2015 IAAF World Junior Championships against the top sprinters in his age group. He finished in fifth place, missing the podium by a fraction of a second.

“It was a big moment for me – placing fifth in the world,” he says. “That loss in the 2009 finals really drove me to compete at a world championship level.”

He says he dreams of one day making the Olympics, and he carries that drive onto the gridiron.



Hubbard's mom (Candace) and stepdad (Lester) have cheered him on from peewee football to his senior season with the Falcons. (Zach Mueller)

In 2008, Hubbard and his family moved to Sherwood Park, where he discovered his passion for football. The father of his friend Nolan Benson was a coach of the Strathcona SabreCats peewee football team.

“Nolan’s dad was always telling me to come play football,” Hubbard recalls. “So one day I decided to give it a try, and I guess it worked out pretty well.”

Hubbard didn’t become a U.S. football recruit overnight. In fact, his mom admits she didn’t even want him to play.

“I wanted him to focus on track – something where the other kids couldn’t touch him,” she says. “But we always let Chuba make his own decisions. He fell in love with football, too, so that was that.”

Hubbard struggled in his first season as a running back, but the next year he helped lead the SabreCats to the 2011 provincial championship against the Calgary Cowboys. He scored twice, but it wasn’t enough; they lost a shootout 78-60.

He says he remembers the game like it was yesterday.

“It just sucked to work so hard and make it so far only to come up short in the end. But losses like that stick with me and push me to work harder.”

Hubbard carried that attitude into his next two seasons, with the Sherwood Park Rams. In 2013, he scored 38 touchdowns in nine games and earned team MVP honours. The Rams made it to the provincial championship, but fell 25-16 to the Calgary Cowboys.

The next summer, Hubbard had to decide where he wanted to go to high school. He says he narrowed his choices to Salisbury and Bev Facey – two bitter football rivals.

“It was almost like a game of tug-of-war. I had friends at both schools, pulling me in opposite directions.”

Curtis Martin, head coach of the Bev Facey Falcons senior football team, says Hubbard was a heavily recruited kid, but the Falcons decided to let the cards fall where they may.

“It’s just not our program’s philosophy to chase guys like that, in terms of waiting outside their school or things of that nature.”

After weighing the options with his family, Hubbard decided on Facey. As a freshman on the senior team, he ran for 1,337 yards and added 15 rushing scores. The Falcons reached the Tier 1 provincial final, but lost 44-21 to Calgary’s Notre Dame Pride.

Despite the individual stats, Hubbard says he felt like he hadn’t lived up to his potential. When the season came to an end, he considered quitting football to focus on track.

“It’s tough when people have these crazy expectations,” he says. “If I don’t meet them, it makes me question my abilities sometimes.

“But I think those moments have shaped my character. When you’re about to break but keep pushing, that’s what makes people who they are.”

DURING THAT off-season, Hubbard played in the U-15 International Bowl in Arlington, Texas. The Canadian team wasn’t given much of a chance heading into their matchup with the Americans, but Hubbard scored three touchdowns and was named MVP in a 45-0 win.

In the following months, his highlight tape began circulating on social media, and U.S. prep schools started reaching out to him. He admits he thought about leaving Facey for a better shot at getting noticed, but he couldn’t imagine life without his family and friends.

“I took some time to look at the bigger picture and realized that, if I’m that good, they’ll notice me here,” he says. “This team is my life. These are my brothers. I’d do anything for these guys. I’d take a bullet for them.”

The decision to stay worked out in his favour.

In the 2015 season, Hubbard rewrote the Facey record book, finishing the year with 3,213 rushing yards and 40 touchdowns.

Martin attributes much of Hubbard's on-field success to his work ethic in the gym.

"As a freshman, Chuba wasn't built for the grind of being a feature back, especially at a more physical level," he says. "But in Grade 11, he came into camp in better football shape, and the rest is history."

In February of the next year, after Hubbard made that phone call to Bobo, the offers started rolling in.

In the space of 72 hours, he got seven Division 1 scholarship offers, which included such big-time schools as Oklahoma State, Tennessee, Oklahoma and Texas A&M.

"I remember waking up one morning and the Tennessee coach was asking me to call him," Hubbard says. "I went from being an unknown kid in Sherwood Park to an SEC recruit just like that.

"It was crazy."

And the craziness didn't stop there.

Hubbard says the initial recruiting was done on Twitter but, as the process intensified, he started getting letters, phone calls and visits. It was a new experience for everyone, so Hubbard and his parents deferred everything back to Martin.

"They wouldn't respond to coaches unless the coaches talked to me first," Martin says. "They used me as the enemy at the gate so to speak."

Martin is an English teacher at Facey, and he says the Americans didn't understand the Canadian structure of high school football. They just assumed he was a full-time coach with no other commitments.

“It was weird. They would just show up at the school unannounced, and I’d be getting pulled out of class so I could meet with these coaches.”

Hubbard distinctly remembers one of those visits from an Oregon Ducks coach.

“He came in wearing this full suit, looking like a pimp. He had this big ring on with a bunch of diamonds. I just couldn’t believe it was all happening.”

Martin estimates that around 500 hours were spent outside of the regular work day just dealing with the recruitment process. He says Hubbard was receiving as many as 40 pieces of mail from universities every day.

“My recommendation to Chuba was to fill up his hot tub with the letters. Drain it out, dry it, and just start dumping them in because he has garbage bags full of them at home.”

In one instance, the University of California had every player in the football program write Hubbard a personalized letter – 101 pieces of mail.

“I think it came fast and furious for the Hubbards,” Martin says. “And they did a phenomenal job of dealing with it. But I’m not sure, even if they had a personal assistant and all the time and money in the world, that they could cope with it seamlessly.”

Candace admits the process has been overwhelming at times, but she says she would do it all over again if it meant the same results.

“Sometimes I look at my husband and wonder how we managed to stay sane – and how we’re still doing it. It’s been stressful, but it’s been worth it.”

On May 8, Hubbard justified all the time and effort when he verbally committed to Oklahoma State as a dual athlete. The Cowboys were going after five running backs with two scholarships, and Hubbard didn’t want to miss out on the opportunity.

He credits Marcus Arroyo, the running back coach at Oklahoma State, as a deciding factor.

“You can tell who you want to spend the next four years with,” he says. “You can tell if they’re really into you or if you’re just another piece to the program.”

“Coach Arroyo came to the school and showed so much interest in me. He’d walk in and just yell, ‘CHUBA!’ and then give me a big hug.”

Candace also built a relationship with Arroyo and says she feels comfortable sending her son off to Oklahoma State.

“We know he’s not just going to a football factory. They care about him and he’s going to get a good education, too.”

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UBBARD WILL be joining fellow Canadian athletes Amen Ogbongbemiga and Shane Richards on the Oklahoma State football roster. While he’s there, he says, he plans to get a degree in business or sports management.

He also hopes to write an autobiography one day.

“Some people think the guys in the NFL were special kids when they were younger,” he says. “But I was raised up normal. I just want people to know that hard work is the key to everything and it beats talent at the end of the day.”

With his level of success as a Canadian athlete, Hubbard has been thrust into the spotlight. There’s always a reporter trying to get an interview or a parent asking for an autograph, but he says he’s learning how to manage it all.

“At first, it was like, ‘Wow! I’m in the newspaper!’ but now I just can’t let that stuff get to my head. I’m not God or anything.”



Coach Martin has watched Hubbard grow as a person and a player over their three years together at Bev Facey. (Zach Mueller)

As Hubbard gears up for the next level, Martin says he will be able to do whatever he wants, as long as he can cope with being away from home.

“Oklahoma is very similar to Edmonton, but it’s still Oklahoma. It’s still a plane ride away. It’s still Smalltown, U.S.A. He’s still going to be a young black man in the South.”

“There are a million things that will pop up his way that he’s going to have to deal with, but he has all the tools to be successful.”

With National Signing Day looming on Feb. 1, Hubbard and his parents have a flight booked to visit Oklahoma State at the end of January.

But Hubbard says he isn’t thinking about that right now. In the middle of a playoff run with the Falcons, he’s focused on bringing home that elusive provincial championship.

As Martin sits at his desk and reflects on the last three years, he says he’s most proud of Hubbard’s resiliency.

“It would be so easy to be that Boobie Miles, where it’s all about him and not the team. It would be so easy for him to say that he’s already ordered his shot and check out.

“But for Chuba, it’s all about the opportunity to win a championship here and now. The journey means everything to him.”

When the time comes, Hubbard says he’ll be ready to leave his mark south of the border.

“You know, Barry Sanders went to Oklahoma State and set a high bar, but I want to be the best athlete to ever go through there.

“I’m just hoping to put on for my city.”