

Sports

PAGE 17 THE STAR-LEDGER, AFFILIATED WITH NJ.COM

“I wouldn’t trade my football story for anything in the world.”

— Hillside’s Barris Grant, who overcame a serious spinal injury as a player and later found his calling as a coach



Hillside head coach Barris Grant, an Irvington High alum, leads the Comets to today’s state title game. George McNish, For NJ Advance Media

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL HILLSIDE

BORN TO LEAD

How near-tragedy sparked the coaching career of an ex-Irvington star who plays for a title today

Jeremy Schneider For The Star-Ledger

Football has been Barris Grant’s life since he was a kid playing Pop Warner in Irvington.

“When I was in school and we were doing math equations, I was writing down X’s and O’s,” he joked.

There were moments along the way when stardom seemed within Grant’s grasp. He was an All-American and two-time All-State linebacker at Irvington High School. From there, he became an All-American and conference Defensive Player of the Year at Dodge City Community College in Kansas.

He used that as a gateway to the SEC, where he spent most of his first season at Mississippi State as a backup.

Grant made the most of his snaps as a second-stringer and earned a start against Clemson in the 1999 Peach Bowl, responding with the best game of his college career — seven tackles, two sacks, five quarterback hurries and defensive MVP honors.

That performance was supposed to be a preview of things to come — maybe even a sign that a professional career was in Grant’s future.

It turned out to be his finale.

A few months later, after earning a starting linebacker position at Mississippi State, Grant was taking part in a tackling drill on Sept. 5, 2000, when he delivered a hit that left him paralyzed for several minutes.

“I hit a guy,” Grant said. “And then my body went numb. It was like choking and then being able to take a deep breath, like getting that breath of life back,” Grant said. “It was only

Central Jersey, Group 2

1-Point Pleasant Boro (11-0) vs. 7-Hillside (8-3)
Today, 10 a.m. at Rutgers University, Piscataway

INSIDE

Westfield celebrates its third straight North 2, Group 5 title, a 20-7 victory over Bridgewater-Raritan Thursday that stretched the Blue Devils’ winning streak to 37 straight games. **Page 21**

for a couple minutes, but that’s a different life. ... It’s real.”

In that short span of complete immobility, his mind raced years into the future.

“Words really can’t describe those thoughts,” Grant said. “You think about everything. In such a short period of time, you think about playing with your kids that you don’t have yet. You think about not being able to play. You also think, ‘Why can’t I get up?’”

Grant did get up, a few minutes later, but the impact was still life-changing. Soon after he had spinal surgery, and team doctors determined in March 2001 that his condition was dire. He had spinal stenosis, the same condition that afflicted Peyton Manning late in his career.

Grant would never play football again. He felt like a player without a team. Football was Grant’s life from when he was a 10-year-old playing Pop Warner to when he was 21 and suffered the career-ending injury. **SEE GRANT, 19**

BIG TEN CHAMPIONSHIP OHIO STATE VS. WISCONSIN, 8 P.M., FOX

South Jersey star Taylor key to Badgers’ title hopes

Ryan Dunleavy For The Star-Ledger

There is no telling how many of the eighth-graders in Jonathan Taylor’s class fulfilled the dream laid out in an assignment to describe where you see yourself after high school.

At least one did.

Taylor wrote about playing football for the University of Wisconsin, where two of South Jersey’s greatest running backs — Ron Dayne and Corey Clement — both blossomed into stars.

“He spoke it into existence,” said Montrey Wright, who was the substitute teacher in the class when Taylor handed in his essay. “It was like a movie.”

Taylor arrived from Salem High School at Wisconsin over the summer and began No. 4 on the running back depth chart. He was at the top by the end of training camp — projected starter Bradrick Shaw got injured — and the climb never stopped en route to a runaway Big Ten-best 1,806 rushing yards (616 more than anybody else).

The First-Team All-Big Ten selection and Big Ten Freshman of the Year can solidify his place as a Heisman Trophy finalist with a big performance today against favored Ohio State in the Big Ten Championship Game as Wisconsin (12-0) looks to punch its ticket to the College Football Playoff. **SEE TAYLOR, 22**



Wisconsin’s Jonathan Taylor, a New Jersey native, left, is the Big Ten Freshman of the Year. Morry Gash, Associated Press

MLB

Boone to be next Yankees manager

Ex-third baseman who hit iconic homer in ’03 outlasted a group of six candidates

Randy Miller For The Star-Ledger

Aaron Boone hit one of the most dramatic home runs in Yankees history during his one and only season with the club, a Game 7 American League Championship Series blast in the 11th inning that sent them to the 2003 World Series.

Boone seemed destined to be forever known for that walk-off homer at the old Yankee Stadium that kept the Boston Red Sox’s curse alive for one more year ... that and his pickup basketball injury that off-season that led to the Yankees trading for Alex Rodriguez.

Not anymore.

Nearly 15 years later, Boone is giving up his analyst job for ESPN’s “Sunday Night Baseball” to return to the Yankees as the new manager of a young and talented club that fell one victory shy of making the World Series this year, multiple media outlets reported Friday night.

More than a month after Joe Girardi was informed he wouldn’t be returning as manager for an 11th season, Boone emerged as the winner of a long and exhausting managerial hunt that included six candidates.

It’s believed that Boone, 44, beat out Hensley Meulens, another former Yankees player who recently was promoted by the San Francisco Giants from hitting coach to bench coach under manager Bruce Bochy.

Boone is taking over the Yankees with no managerial or coaching experience at any level, but he’s known for being a very bright guy and having tremendous communication skills.

“I feel like I am the guy who can help these guys go into another level as players,” Boone said in a teleconference following his Nov. 17 interview at Yankee Stadium.

Boone was a third-generation player whose father (Bob), grandfather (Ray) and older brother (Bret) also played in the majors. Bob Boone also managed for six **SEE YANKEES, 19**



Aaron Boone is reportedly set to be the 35th manager in Yankees history. Boone played 54 games for the Bombers in 2003.

GIANTS

McAdoo: ‘No regrets’ about handling of Eli

Dan Duggan For The Star-Ledger

Coach Ben McAdoo said on Friday that he has no problems with the way the team sent Eli Manning to the bench and made backup quarterback Geno Smith the starter for Sunday’s game against the Oakland Raiders.

“I was honest, I was upfront with Eli and I don’t have any regrets with the way it was handled,” McAdoo said.

McAdoo said the plan presented to Manning was for the quarterback to make his 211th consecutive start on Sunday and then be replaced by Smith at the start of the second half. Giants co-owner John Mara indicated that he was not on board with such a defined exit strategy.

“I didn’t necessarily think it had to be at the half,” Mara said. “I think if he’s playing well in the first half, we’re winning the game, it looks like we’ve got a chance, the **SEE GIANTS, 19**