

Former rivals now teammates at UW-SP

By Ross Pattermann

Two weeks ago the Colby Hornets and Abbotsford Falcons were on a collision course to meet in a highly anticipated football game between two undefeated, top ten teams.

Unfortunately, it was not to be, with the Falcons forced to cancel the game due to health protocols. But while Colby and Abbotsford were unable to battle it out for supremacy in the Marawood, several members from both schools did find themselves on a football field. Only not as rivals, but rather as teammates.

Abbotsford's Joe Aguilera, Chase Sperl and Blake Draper, along with Colby's Connor Jeske and Gavino Lopez, are all student-athletes for the UW - Stevens Point football program.

They got to experience a college game day atmosphere for the first time in nearly two years at Goerke Park on Saturday, Sept. 18, and while they did not get the win, being able to play the game after a year-long hiatus was the real victory.

"This is so awesome," said Abbotsford's Blake Draper, a linebacker with the Pointers. "All you really think about for that past COVID year is getting back out here. You spend all that time prepping to do that, and it's quite the feeling to actually be out here."

Abby grad Chase Sperl had never experienced a college game until this season, and while he's rehabbing from injury this year, he took joy in seeing his friends and teammates on the field.

"It's awesome. I love to see it," Sperl said after the Pointer's game with UW - Stout. "Watching some of my closest friends go on to the next level with me and play here at Point is just a dream come true."

Sperl's next dream is to get back out on the field, and to be able to make an impact on the offensive line, just as he did with Abbotsford when he wore the black and red of a Falcon.

"I'm so excited to get healthy and get onto the field again. Hopefully soon I can get some things going again."

One player who does know what it's like to play college ball is Colby High's

Connor Jeske. A Class of 2020 graduate, Jeske played in several games this spring with the Ripon Red Hawks.

"It really prepared me for practices and fall camp, and then just the speed of the game," Jeske says. "But it's not like Ripon, it's going to take time to see the field, but you just gotta keep working."

As much as he loved his time at Ripon, he found himself wanting to be closer to home, and in a place where he could vie for starting time almost immediately.

"It's been interesting, that's for sure. It's good to be a little closer to home, and playing football with some people I know from the area," Connor remarked.

When asked how it feels to play with guys from Abbotsford, Jeske shrugs and says they all have the same goal in mind.

"It's different," Jeske says. "But in a few years, with Draper, I'm looking forward to playing with him, and then I'm looking forward to playing with my old high school teammate Gavino."

He's also happy to see familiar faces from Colby in the crowd cheering he and his teammates on.

"It means a lot that I can continue to play football at the next stage and have my hometown behind me," Jeske says. "It's great to see people from Colby continuing to support me. It means a lot."

For Lopez, Sperl, Jeske and Draper, the time away from the game they love was hard, but they put that spare year to good use, spending time learning the playbook, which is far more complicated than any high school offense or defense.

"The playbook is very, very different from our little town of Abbotsford," Draper says. "It's super complex; you can't just go out there and read and react anymore. You gotta know a lot and actually study it. It's like another class."

Not only did the year away from the field allow him to get better acquainted with the playbook, but Draper spent the time getting his body in excellent shape.

"A lot of last year was a lot of workouts and lot of trying to manage my diet. I knew if I let it go I'd come back out of shape, so I wanted to show people I'm committed to the team and the game."

No one undersands the game, or had to



FIGHTING FOR EVERY INCH - Joe Aguilera helps out in pass protection, blocking a UW - Stout defender during the Pointers first home game since 2019. The Pointers have multiple players from Abbotsford and Colby looking to find their place on the field this season. *STAFF PHOTOS/ROSS PATTERMANN*

deal with the year long absence, in quite the same way as Abby's Joe Aguilera.

Aguilera was one of those rare freshman players who found himself getting game reps in 2019. He admitted the speed and physicality of the game, even at the NCAA D-3 level, surprised him. But when COVID-19 hit, it not only meant that Aguilera would not be playing games, but he also would not be doing in-person instruction.

"Last year the school got shut down, including football and all the sports, so I didn't attend in-person classes the last whole year."

Aguilera missed out on football, a game he loves, but the time away from the physical and hard-hitting college game allowed Aguilera to recuperate and get bigger and better.

"The break off, I used it to get my body right," Aguilera said. "I just grinded it in the weight room, and worked on speed and agility stuff. So I got my body healthy to be prepared for this coming season."

Armed with the knowledge of what the college game looks and feels like, Aguilera says he's ready to be back.

"I feel like I'm probably in the best shape of my life, finally healthy and just feel a lot stronger and faster. So I'm excited to see what I can do this year now that we actually get to have a season."

One goal all players have is to see more student-athletes from Colby and Abby in Stevens Point.

"I hope it encourages them to chase their dreams, and that anything is possible no matter how small the school you go to is," Sperl said.



ONE PROUD MAMA - Derek and Andrew Jeske pose with their older brother Connor and their mother Kara after Connor's game against UW - Stout. Jeske played with Ripon this spring, but is happy to be closer to home, playing for UW - Stevens Point, with high school teammate Gavino Lopez.





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