

Masina ready to hit the gridiron

Bengals' senior hopes for breakout season

By Kyle Goon
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Uaea Masina had a natural feel for the game since he first joined the Brighton football team, coach Ryan Bullett acknowledged. He probably could have played as a freshman.

That is if he wasn't so darned skinny.

"He was a pretty gangly kid, and we didn't want him to get hurt out there," Bullett recalled. "Even as a sophomore, he didn't have a lot of strength. But you could tell by then he knew everything we were doing, and he knew his responsibilities."

The body soon caught up with the keen football mind, and now the 6-foot-4, 210-pound Masina has become one of the top outside linebacker prospects in the state.

The square-jawed rising senior has speed and smoothness in the open field, with ball skills he's developed from playing as much safety as linebacker. But Masina's game is hardly all finesse. When he played soccer and basketball growing up, he was the kid other parents had to be concerned about.

"They always told me not to be so rough out there," he says. "I was always the biggest

one growing up. That's why I love football: No one gets on you for being too physical."

Masina made plenty of rounds this June, hopping from camp to camp as he considered offers from Utah, BYU, Colorado, San Diego State, Hawaii and Southern Utah. Coaches like his run-stuffing ability, and they love his pass defense.

The last one to realize his defensive prowess might have been Masina himself. He also played running back for the Bengals last season, racking up 511 yards. Bullett says he thinks Masina thought of himself as an offensive player.

Bullett's eyes told him something different.

"He liked playing tailback and all the glory that came with that, but I told coaches this kid is a defensive player," he says. "The switch flipped last year. He started thinking that too."

Masina's parents have gone to great lengths to allow their sons to play sports and support them. Masina says he's never lacked for love from the sidelines, and his parents taught him his most important quality: humility.

Bullett noticed that his then-sophomore linebacker had an uncommon sense of accountability. He was the first to apologize for a broken play, and never had a problem with criticism. Masina didn't mind having his mistakes laid out in front of him as long as he

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learned what he did wrong and how to change it.

His older teammates grew to respect him for his eagerness to learn. His coaches were surprised by how quickly he seemed to grow into a leadership role.

"If we had junior captains, his teammates probably would've picked him," Bullett says. "When he got his first scholarship offer, he called to thank me. Kids don't do that anymore."

Masina is hoping to choose a school before the fall — he wants to concentrate on his high school squad this year.

After a number of freak injuries and ailments — a broken hand, a torn ACL, a broken foot, meningitis — plagued the offensive and defensive line last year, Brighton finished as the No. 4 seed in its region. With Masina leading a charged-up defense, the Bengals could be headed for bigger things.

"We expect a lot from our team this year," Masina says. "Like every other team, we want to end up with the championship."