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### OPINIONS

#### PERRY LEFKO

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## Learning the Hardaway

June 7, 2011

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### He's making money for Canadian talent and creating headaches for GMs. So who is Johnathon Hardaway?

What's the big fuss about Matt O'Donnell anyway?

The Saskatchewan Roughriders have a poll on their website asking fans which one of five players they are most looking forward to seeing in training camp, and O'Donnell is currently second in the voting.

But O'Donnell isn't even in training camp.

The Riders selected O'Donnell, a 6-foot-10, 340-pound offensive tackle out of Queen's University in the second round, 15th overall, in this year's Canadian draft.

Aside from his size, which clearly has him standing head and shoulders above the crowd even in the behemoth world of professional football, there really is nothing particularly amazing about O'Donnell – to this point anyway.

He is a prospect, which is to say he may be any kind of player.

Normally a player drafted in the second round would apprentice in his first year, the likelihood of playing in a game slim, much less starting. Particularly with someone of his size, O'Donnell might require added time dealing with older, more experienced players, who give up size and weight but counter with savvy, skill and speed. As a tackle, there is little room for error in a one-on-one situation.

All that said, when – and if – O'Donnell surfaces with the Riders, it will be news – big news, for various reasons because of his absenteeism.

In one of the stranger stories to have surfaced in some time with a Canadian football player, it was revealed that he attended a workout last week with the Boston Celtics, who apparently were impressed by his results at the CFL combine.

The fact O'Donnell last played basketball in high school – and apparently at the intramural level – would make this the ultimate story, the Rudy of the National Basketball Association.

But let's not get too ahead of ourselves.

If the Celtics or any other team doesn't sign him – and we'll go on a limb and say it won't happen – he is also looking at the National Football League, notwithstanding there is the possibility it may not have a schedule this year or possibly a protracted one because of a work stoppage between the league and the players.

Apparently there is one team that has shown "serious consideration" in O'Donnell, according to a story in the Kingston Whig-Standard.

So, O'Donnell has put his CFL plans on hold.

If he decides to waste a year of his life and his football career chasing impossible or illogical dreams, what's the big deal? He could report to the Riders, sign a contract and the whole situation will be blown over quite quickly and become nothing more than a footnote in a team media guide or on Wikipedia.

He wouldn't be the first Canadian-born player to chase the American dream.

The lure of the big paycheques and lifestyle of the NFL is the reason why some Canadian players are drawn to it. The list of top Canadian prospects that have chased this dream is long.

Why O'Donnell has chosen this somewhat bizarre route and time to put his CFL plans on hold can be traced to his agent, Washington-based attorney Johnathon Hardaway, who has quickly become an individual drawing attention from Canadian players seeking to leverage their talents south of the border.

Hardaway turned Cory Greenwood's results at the 2010 CFL combine into a free agent deal with the Kansas City Chiefs.

Hardaway turned Cory Greenwood's results at the 2010 CFL combine into a free agent deal with the Kansas City Chiefs.

His small stable of clients includes Henoc Muambe, drafted first overall out of St. Francis Xavier by the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, and Cory Greenwood, selected third overall by the Toronto Argonauts last year out of Concordia.

Hardaway turned Greenwood's results at the 2010 CFL combine into a free agent deal with the Kansas City Chiefs. Greenwood, a middle linebacker, did enough to crack the Chiefs' roster in his first year as a special teams player and recorded 11 tackles.

That immediately gave Hardaway a license – credibility if you will – among young, Canadian players seeking to achieve the dream of playing in the NFL.

So far, he has managed to infuriate CFL teams with his negotiating tactics, but at the end of the day he's doing what he has to do for his clients. He engaged in tough negotiations with the Bombers before a deal for Muamba was finally secured only days before the team opened its training camp for rookies.

Whatever was being said privately and publicly by CFL teams, and at least one player agent criticizing his bargaining tactics, didn't seem to chafe Hardaway.

He doesn't do interviews.

There isn't much known about him. One agent said Hardaway worked for a legal firm that represented NBA players, hence his ability to tap into the Celtics to arrange a workout for O'Donnell.

Right now, O'Donnell is following the lead of Hardaway.

By this time next year or maybe even in September when there should be a clearer picture of the NFL season, the Canadian Football League will be well underway, and if O'Donnell hasn't signed a deal with the Roughriders by then, he will have sacrificed some of his career. But he'll be able to talk about the time he once auditioned for an NBA team. Not too many Canadian players – certainly football players – can boast of that.

At some point, he will have to decide what to do. When NFL teams finally are able to sign free-agent players, there will be a deep pool from which to choose. By that point, O'Donnell will just be another body available for hire.

And when he finally signs with the Roughriders, of if they decide to trade his rights at some points, all will be forgotten.

As one veteran CFL personnel guru told me: "He's a Canadian. He's going to go somewhere (in the CFL). It's just a matter of time."

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### Perry Lefko

Married to Jane and with two children (Ben and Shayna).

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