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Richie Grant's Journey Is 1 to Salute

By Marc Daniels
UCF Forum columnist
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He came to UCF rated as the 357th best wide receiver in the country. He left as a champion, a college graduate, and the Knights' highest selection of the 2021 NFL Draft.



"When I'm done playing at UCF, everyone will remember my name," Richie Grant '20 (center, #27) once told UCF broadcaster Marc Daniels. (Photo courtesy of Leland Dutcher, UCF Athletics)

The first time I met Richie Grant '20 was after recording an interview with former UCF football coach Scott Frost in 2016. Grant was standing outside the football facility on campus with two teammates. He recognized me and asked if I knew who he was.

I said, "Of course, you are Richie Grant."

He responded, "You read my backpack that has my name on it."

Grant was right. I did read the backpack and Grant knew it, as well. But his next comment I still remember today.

"When I'm done playing at UCF, everyone will remember my name," said Grant. I told him that I will hold him to that.

Richie Grant's journey is one to salute. Recruited out of Choctawhatchee High School in Fort Walton Beach, Grant was a two-star prospect who drew little attention from major football programs. He was listed as the 357th best wide receiver in the country. At 6-feet and 165 pounds, Grant was offered a scholarship to play defensive back, and he jumped at the chance to come to Orlando.

Coming off a winless season in 2016, UCF needed a fresh start and Grant arrived willing to do anything to get on the field. But the undersized freshman sat out that season and used the time to listen and learn and get better on the field and in the classroom, where he made the conference all-academic team.

Grant learned from the likes of Shaquill '16 and Shaquem '16 Griffin, who told Grant that players get what they earn. In 2017, Richie Grant earned playing time. He made big plays on special teams and played in all 13 games as a defensive back. In the Peach Bowl win over Auburn to secure an unbeaten season, Grant recorded five tackles.

In 2018, Grant started in all 13 games and led the team in tackles, interceptions and forced fumbles. He was an all-conference selection and drew national attention for being one of the best players at his position in the country.

Grant only knew the feeling of victory for his first two seasons at UCF. He was 25-0 to start his career before UCF lost in the 2019 Fiesta Bowl to LSU.

By the time 2018 ended, Grant had become a leader on the defensive side. He was more vocal and became the older player teaching younger players what the "UCF Way" was about.

In 2019 and 2020 Grant got better and better. NFL scouts took notice and it was obvious that he was going to get a chance to play pro football. After earning more conference and national recognition in 2019, Grant's final season would be challenging in many ways.

The summer of 2020 brought a worldwide pandemic as well as a national discussion on racial and social injustices. Grant was one of several UCF players who openly addressed the need for change and encouraged teammates to speak up and use their platform to be heard.

But Grant had a decision to make himself about the 2020 season. With so many uncertainties about COVID, players across the country were deciding whether to opt out or play. Several UCF players decided to sit out. Grant chose to play.

The season saw Grant take on a greater role as a leader on the field. Injuries and opt-outs left the UCF's secondary with only Grant as someone with starting experience. Working with coaches and teaching freshmen how to play major college football was now part of Grant's role at UCF.

While the defense struggled at times, Grant's play did not. But still wanting to show NFL scouts his skill set, Grant asked coaches if he could return to special teams. Although he played and excelled on special teams during his freshman season in 2017, Grant wanted NFL teams to see him in 2020 running down on kickoffs making tackles. Why? That is who he is.

Grant earned his degree in sport and exercise science with a minor in medical sociology in 2020. But football was the focus for the now 200-pound draft prospect. He shined at the Senior Bowl, a showcase of college talent, where every NFL team saw Grant perform.

At UCF's Pro Day, Grant solidified his resume with an impressive performance. It set the stage for the NFL Draft. Talent evaluators thought Grant could be a second-round pick. They were right.

On April 30, the Atlanta Falcons selected Grant in the second round of the NFL Draft with the 40th overall selection. He was one of five UCF players chosen in the draft. His contract will be four years and worth more than \$7 million.

Grant went from the 357th-ranked wide receiver coming out of high school to one of the top players taken in the NFL Draft. And he was right. When his playing days ended at UCF, every Knight fan knew his name.

There will be more players with hidden talent coming to UCF. One day I will come out of Coach Gus Malzahn's office and someone else may be wearing a backpack. I may not know his name at the time.

But give him a few years and he will have a story to tell just like Richie Grant.

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