



TY OKADA

BOBCATS' RELIABLE SAFETY

"He's The Kind Of Guy Who's Earned Everything He's Got."

- TOM WHITE, FORMER BOBCAT WR

BY PAUL BURNS

There's an old football saying that a safety on defense is equivalent to a quarterback on offense. Both positions are usually the play callers and both positions have the vantage point of scanning the whole field. Quarterbacks

are supposed to know what the defense is up to and safeties are keeping watch on the offense.

It makes sense, therefore, that a former quarterback should make a good safety since that player has the mindset of viewing the whole field, and the better he was as a quarterback, the better

a safety he'll become. By his own admittance, Ty Okada wasn't anything special as a quarterback in high school. Undersized at 5-foot-10 and 165 pounds, Okada confesses he had some flaws when he was a two-way starter for East Ridge High in Woodbury, MN. "I wasn't much of a pocket passer," he says of his quarterbacking

days. "My best friend played tight end, and if he wasn't open, I just took off (running)." No second read, no time in the backfield waiting for his pal to get open, just go. "I didn't read defenses."

And yet, he's now Montana State's starting safety after playing mostly the nickel position for his first two years. Wasn't there anything he learned from playing quarterback that makes him a better defender? "Nope," he says. Being smart, athletic and driven to succeed allowed him to make the transition. He picked the brains of his coaches. He spent hours watching film. As a redshirt freshman in 2018 he talked to the seniors who kept him off the field due to their knowledge and experience. "I knew I had the mentality, I knew I had the work ethic (to be successful)," he says. Yet, in the back of his mind it was never a sure thing. "Coming to fruition like this is something I could never have even dreamt of. It's been phenomenal. It's been more than I could ever ask for."

He says his coming-out party occurred that same year, after injuries to some key players thrust him into the starting lineup for the first time in MSU's playoff game against Incarnate Word. Being on the field early instead of during late-game mop-up time allowed him to get in a rhythm and as the game progressed he became more comfortable. A week later the Bobcats' season ended with a loss at North Dakota State. Expectations were high for 2019, but an early season knee injury at Texas Tech initially kept Okada on the sidelines. When the playoffs came around again at the end of that season he was back among the starters, but by now he was at his current position of safety. It was a case of being excellent at reading offenses, and "just being that guy on the defense who's going to tackle anyone and

everyone in the open field."

By then Okada, who's been referred to as Old Reliable on what could be a thin crop of defenders, had been rewarded with a scholarship after first coming to MSU as a walk-on. He was a pretty unsung player back at East Ridge High, even though he was on the field for just about every play as a quarterback and as do-everything defender. "When you come here as a walk-on you have to prove yourself even more than the scholarship kid because that's who (the coaches) invested in," he says. "Being put on scholarship is an incredible feeling. It means the coaches saw the work you put in and that they believe in you as a player and as a person."

Former Bobcat great, wide receiver Tom White had a front-row seat watching Okada improve. White, who works in Bozeman as a financial planner, likes to hire MSU College of Business students as interns. Despite having been a student-athlete himself, he hadn't brought on an athlete in over 10 years, but when Okada's name appeared on the list of potential interns, White allowed him to spend the summer of 2020 learning the ins and outs of the financial world. Okada impressed White in the boardroom, leaving White no doubt how Okada would perform in the classroom. "He's got a lot to be proud of; he earned a scholarship," says White, who starred for the Bobcats on the 1984 championship team.

Most football players spend five years at MSU before graduating; four years on the football field after a redshirt season. Okada graduated this past May with honors after a redshirt season and just two years of playing, thanks to Covid-19 erasing all of the 2020 season. With two years of eligibility remaining, he now has his eyes on a Masters in Family Financial

Planning, which would put him on track following the 2022 season to complete the exams necessary to become a certified financial planner like his mentor, White. "If he can get all that accomplished while here at school, that's a terrific thing. I don't have any doubt if Ty wanted to pursue this profession he would do very well," White says. "He's sincere, a hard worker, very polite. He's the kind of guy who's earned everything he's got."

"As a goal-oriented person, I would love to help other people reach their goals," Okada says. "Especially in the financial world, where I can help change the trajectory of their life as well as their family's life." In addition to having completed his degree in business, Okada also earned a minor in Spanish. He's not sure what he'll do with his fluency in the language, but "I think it's important to know



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how to speak a second language. It's a great tool to have."

His path may one day lead back to Minnesota, where his parents and brother live. After all, Minnesota has lakes and fishing, while the Bozeman area has rivers and fishing. Fishing is a lot easier out there, he says. "Out here it actually takes some skill. In Minnesota, you can drop a lure anywhere and catch a bass. I like to actually catch fish, so I prefer back there. Here the fish are normally smarter than me." Besides the fishing, friends have cabins on lakes, and there's water skiing. But for him, most of that takes place in Wisconsin. "It's funny, your 'Land of 10,000 Lakes' is actually 11,000-something, and I normally go to a lake in Wisconsin. I don't even go to a Minnesota lake."

Wherever he ends up following his athletic and academic days at MSU, he'll always try his best to relate to others what it's like to play in

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Bobcat Stadium on a Saturday afternoon in the fall. Because he wasn't courted too hard by MSU, he never had an official visit to Bozeman to see the Bobcats in action before actually arriving here.

One day during fall camp of 2017, when he was still new to Bobcat football, he saw a photograph on the wall of a coach's office that showed the overflowing crowd at the annual Gold Rush game. He asked if it is always that way for that game. The answer: It's like that for every home game.

"It's always rocking in Bobcat Stadium," Okada says. "On kickoff you can feel it—you can physically feel the ground shaking and you're like, Oh man, this is no joke. This is prime time. This is exciting stuff."

Even if he makes millionaires out of his clients as a financial planner, he knows he'll never replicate the thrill of playing football. "It's exhilarating. After my career is over, that's something I'm going to miss: the time with my teammates and my brothers in the locker room. I can see why people who love football love to get into coaching, because you can't get that anywhere else."



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