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Cards' McCareins stays prepared

Kent Somers

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If he's to make the Cardinals roster as an undrafted rookie, cornerback Jay McCareins must prove he can cover some ground. Off the field, he's been doing just that since signing with the team in April.

There was a three-day minicamp the weekend after the draft, then it was back to Princeton for the end of classes. Last week, he took four finals in three days in order to return to Valley for the final week of rookie camp. Normally, those exams are spread over a 13-day period, but McCareins had missed one week of rookie camp, so he condensed his exams.

"You do what you have to do," he said. "I had to get back."
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His travels aren't over. On June 6, he'll be back in New Jersey at Princeton to accept his degree in economics. While most of his classmates celebrate that night, McCareins will be on a flight to Phoenix to participate in the few remaining days of voluntary workouts.

"I couldn't miss a chance to graduate from the best school in the world," he said.

Coming out of high school in Naperville, Ill., McCareins didn't realistically think he would play in the NFL, although his older brother,

Justin, was in the league as a receiver with Tennessee.

Jay McCareins was only about 5 feet 10 and 150 pounds then. At quarterback, he used his speed and quickness to lead Naperville North High to the state semifinals. Schools such as Stanford and Vanderbilt, impressed by his academic accomplishments - which included a score of 31 on the ACT - wanted him to walk on. But several Ivy League schools offered a better chance to play. And with his lack of size, McCareins figured he had better make plans that didn't include a professional athletic career.

"I had to think realistically that football might not be my whole life," he said.

Then a funny thing happened. He grew. By the time he was a senior, he was 5-11 and 190 pounds. A cornerback, he had eight interceptions last year and scored four touchdowns despite not gaining a yard on offense.

He returned two interceptions, a missed field goal and a kickoff for scores for the Tigers.

He wasn't drafted, but several teams, including Detroit, Pittsburgh, Carolina, New England and Chicago, tried to sign him immediately afterward. But he chose Arizona because the Cardinals, who are thin at cornerback, offered the best chance to make a roster. Plus, "They were the ones who were calling me the most," he said.

So now, Alicia and John McCareins have two sons in the NFL, which is ironic because academics took priority over athletics with their three children, all boys.

Alicia McCareins had three majors in college and went on to earn a doctorate in psychology and a law degree. She now owns an education consulting business. John has an MBA from DePaul and is a partner in an investment firm.

When the boys were growing up, John said it was understood that homework must be done before a football was thrown or a basketball bounced.



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Rookie free-agent cornerback Jay McCareins, a Princeton graduate, turned down offers from a number of other NFL clubs to sign with Arizona, citing the Cardinals' need at his position and their persistence.

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"We didn't hit them with rulers too much," he said, "but there were a lot of trips to museums, and they all played the piano early on. We just exposed them to it."

Whatever they did, it worked. The oldest son, John, graduated from Northwestern and did his graduate work at Dartmouth. Justin, now with the Jets, is entering his sixth year in the NFL.

Jay McCareins' time at Princeton wasn't without difficulty. He was suspended for the 2003 season after school officials determined he didn't properly cite a source for a short passage in a paper for a religion class.

"The school is pretty clear-stated in regards to academics being No. 1," McCareins said. "So any mistake you make, careless or not - in which case mine was careless - you have to pay the penalty."

So McCareins sat out the year. He moved to Nashville to be near his brother and took an internship at a trust company, paying for his own apartment.

He and his parents discussed transferring to another school, but McCareins never seriously considered leaving Princeton for good.

"I had a chance to come back, be bigger, stronger, a little more mature and be a leader," he said, "which I eventually was."

At Princeton, McCareins helped rebuild a program. The Tigers won seven games last season, their most since 1995, and McCareins was a Division I-AA All-American.

"He's a real smart player, extremely competitive," said Cardinals coach Dennis Green.

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