

# Undrafted rookie Keiser had 2 sacks in his 2nd NFL game

By Associated Press, Published: November 22

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Thomas Keiser left Stanford a year early certain he'd get drafted.

But when no team called his name during the NFL draft this past April, Keiser quickly realized he'd have to take the hard road and put in extra work to achieve his lifelong dream of playing in the league.

And he's done just that.

The rookie defensive end was one of the few bright spots for the Panthers on Sunday, recording a pair of sacks in the team's 49-35 loss to the Detroit Lions in just his second game. Although coaches acknowledge Keiser isn't the most physically gifted lineman on the team, they say he makes up for it in other areas and his NFL future is bright.

"You love a story like that," said Panthers defensive coordinator Sean McDermott. "He's a guy who has worked his butt off to become a good football player. He's not the household name that we all know, but he continues to work hard and play with great effort. There are a lot of people out there more talented than he is, but he wants it. And that's what I love about him."

Keiser showed that desire right from the start.

The Panthers contacted him immediately after the lockout ended in July and brought him in as an undrafted free agent.

There were no guarantees he'd make it. Keiser was buried on the depth chart at the time. However, he worked hard enough to stand out and graded out higher than any defensive lineman on the team during the preseason, according to coach Ron Rivera said.

Keiser made the initial 53-man roster, but was released a day later when the Panthers claimed a handful of players off waivers.

"That was frustrating," Keiser said.

But he returned to the practice squad with a renewed vigor, eager to prove to coaches that he belonged. When practice would end, Keiser would subtly slip off to an adjacent field and run 100-yard gassers on his own.

Coaches took notice.

"He would run sprints and he worked tirelessly to make himself a better football player," McDermott said. "I would be talking to him throughout the season saying, 'Hey, stay ready. Stay ready.' And he would tell me, 'Coach, yes sir, I'm going to be ready.'"

Keiser was ready when the Panthers re-signed him to the 53-man roster two weeks ago.

He saw limited action against Tennessee, but erupted onto the scene Sunday with five tackles and two sacks on Matthew Stafford while seeing spot duty behind starting defensive ends Charles Johnson and Greg Hardy.

"I firmly believed I was going to have an opportunity at some point during the season," Keiser said. "When that opportunity came I wanted to be able to make the best of it and the number one factor for me was physical conditioning and being able to line up and give your best effort. If you can't do that you're going to look like an average to below-average player. I felt that was the one thing I could control about this whole process."

Keiser had a productive career at Stanford and helped the Cardinal to an Orange Bowl victory last year. He announced his intention to turn pro prior to Jim Harbaugh taking the job with the San Francisco 49ers.

But a string of unfortunate events might have led to Keiser going undrafted.

He wasn't invited to the Scouting Combine, preventing him from a golden opportunity to impress NFL coaches and scouts. Then, at his pro day workout at Stanford, he pulled a hamstring on his first 40 and couldn't finish.

"I felt like I was off the radar after that," Keiser said.

Despite the obstacles he's had to overcome, Keiser doesn't regret his decision to turn pro even though he might have benefited from another year of college football.

He said he plans to return to Stanford in the spring to complete his degree in Science Technology in Society with a minor in Arabic. But for right now his focus is where it's always been — on becoming a better NFL player.

"I felt like I was ready to play in the NFL coming out last year," Keiser said. "Ever since I began playing football in the fifth grade, that's been my goal. I had four good years at Stanford, three of them playing. I finished on a high note with the Orange Bowl win and that felt like I was making the right step."