

Longhorn defensive back took long road to UT and success

By JIM VERTUNO
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AUSTIN — Aaron Ross had to feel like he was in the Twilight Zone.

He was 20 years old and back in high school. Sitting among 15- and 16-year-olds in sophomore English, he listened to the same discussions about composition, literature and poetry he had already heard years before.

And yet, he was happy.

Pass this class — again — and his long and winding road to becoming a Texas Longhorn would finally end. An administrative goof and a missing half credit of high school English had held up his college football career for two years.

"I did a lot of waiting," said Ross, now a 24-year-old senior starting cornerback for No. 5 Texas. "And praying."

He looks back on those days with a laugh now. None of it seemed very funny four years ago.

Ross didn't know it, but his long detour began when he moved from San Antonio to Tyler after his sophomore year of high school.

Although he didn't start playing football until he was 15, two years in Tyler had turned him into a top recruit. He was part of the 2001 Longhorn recruiting class considered among the best in the country.

He graduated in the spring and by late summer he was ready for preseason practice.

Then the NCAA stepped in. There was a problem.

Although he had been accepted by the university, his high school transcript didn't show he had taken English II, a core requirement for the NCAA.

He wasn't eligible to play because that measly half credit didn't make the paperwork when he changed schools.

There were tears when coach Mack Brown broke the news. Texas filed a waiver with the NCAA but was denied. Ross went home to Tyler.

He thought about enrolling at Blinn Junior College, but spending two years in exile at a college football outpost didn't appeal to him.

So he waited. He worked out. He got a job as a file clerk in a doctor's office as officials tried to drum up a record of his sophomore class.

Ross thought the problem was fixed and signed again with Texas in 2002 as part of another standout class that included Vince Young.

But the same thing happened. The NCAA still didn't have the missing class.

"Everybody was apologizing," Ross said. "But it wasn't changing anything."

A Texas assistant coach suggested he retake the missing class. That meant going back to high school.

When he left high school the first time in 2001, he was a senior football stud. Now he was a 20-year-old 10th grader. Teenage angst and girl problems were supposed to be long gone, not surrounding him.

"It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be," he said. "People did tease me about coming back out for the football team."

He passed — again — with an "A" — again — and signed with Texas — again — in 2003.

"I was part of three recruiting classes," Ross said with a laugh.

He's played a key role on defense and special teams ever since, and he plans to graduate next summer with a degree in education.

Teammate Michael Griffin got the early attention as the leader of the secondary this season, but it's been the steady Ross who has been the most consistent. He has a team-high four interceptions, two in the fourth quarter against Oklahoma.

He typically draws the toughest coverage assignments. That meant matching up with Ohio State's Ted Ginn Jr., who beat him for a touchdown in the Buckeyes' 24-7 win, a play featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated.

Ross shrugs it off. A year earlier, he helped shut down Ginn in a Texas win.

Even after Ohio State won, Buckeyes quarterback Troy Smith called Ross a "great cornerback, probably the best in the Big 12."

Ross lived up to that with his game against Oklahoma. The two interceptions and a fumble return for a touchdown clinched a 28-10 win. Brown started lobbying for Ross to be an all-American.

"If he's not the best defensive back playing in the country," said UT defensive co-coordinator Duane Akina, "I don't know who is."

As a punt returner, Ross has three career touchdowns.

Ross says life is good with that two-year detour well behind him, a wait that taught him patience and persistence. At 24, he takes good-natured ribbing from his teammates that he's the "old man" of the team.

His girlfriend, Sanya Richards, is the former UT track star who holds the American women's record in the 400 meters and won an Olympic relay gold medal in 2004.

Richards got to Texas a year before Ross and met him his freshman year.

"Then I found out he was older than me," she said. "I didn't understand how that could be."

She was attracted to him in part because he always seemed so happy. Even when she dinged up his car in a fender bender, he didn't get mad.

"There's not a single thing to be unhappy about," said Ross, who somewhere in all that extra English education learned how to write his girlfriend a couple of poems.

The two get a lot of ribbing now about who's faster.

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Ross said he could take her in the 100 or 200 meters. The 400, her specialty, would be different.

"She'd murder me," Ross said.

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