

A Day to REMEMBER

For Buccaneers second-round pick Sabby Piscitelli, draft day was one of the most intense experiences in his life, but by day's end the stars would line up for the former standout safety from Oregon State.

When Sabatino Carmine Piscitelli opened his eyes on the morning of Saturday, April 28th, he started the day much like he would any other, acknowledging the presence of God in his life with a quick prayer.

But as grounded as the son of Diane and Sabatino Sr. is, the humble young man couldn't help but feel the weight of the day descend immediately upon him. Lying in his bed back home in Boca Raton, "Sabby" – as he's called by his family and friends – knew only one thing: At that moment, he had to get out of the house.

It wasn't anything going on around the Piscitelli household, although it would very soon be abuzz with all sorts of activity. Rather, the desire for a temporary leave of absence had more to do with all that was going on inside the mind of this excited but distracted 23-year-old.

By day's end the former standout safety from Oregon State would fulfill his life-long dream of becoming a professional athlete, having been selected by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the second round of the 2007 NFL Draft. In doing so, Piscitelli would place himself among an elite group of individuals. How elite? Of the 9,000 players that make it to the college level, only about 300 end up in the pool from which teams make their draft picks each year. Piscitelli would be one of them. Even better, he'd even wind up playing for the very team he rooted for while growing up in Florida.

But in those early-morning moments, Piscitelli had no way of knowing how the day

would unfold. And a young man who had always relied on discipline, regimen and, most importantly, self-confidence begin to feel something of a foreign concept: uncertainty.

Where would he play? Who would he call "coach?" Who would his teammates be? Did he show enough in college and at the combine to go early in the draft? Would a team see his true potential and angle to beat other teams to him, or would he somehow get overlooked and have to endure a precipitous fall?

Now a few months past draft weekend and well into his integration with the Buccaneers, Piscitelli can easily recall his emotions at the start of that Saturday.

"Honestly, I wasn't nervous; I was more anxious," he said. "I felt like I got the short end of the stick a little, entering college. Though I would never change it for the world, I felt like I got cheated a little because I had to go away from Boca [Raton] to Oregon State just to show myself. So on draft day, I was hoping I didn't get overlooked again like I did going into college. That passed through my mind. In the back of my head I was a little anxious in the sense that I had worked my whole life for this, and I hoped I didn't get overlooked."

And there in his cluttered mind, such an occurrence wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. As he said, it had already happened once, largely due to a late start in football – Piscitelli didn't join his high school football team until his junior year.

As a prep freshman, Piscitelli tried out for the football team and made the junior varsity squad, but the combination of hurricanes and a few teams from other schools choosing to drop out of competition ended the season rather prematurely, after only two games had been played. The following year Piscitelli opted not to play football while recovering from a baseball injury. His baseball career was going well, but he felt empty. He wasn't playing the sport to which he had always been drawn. As a junior, Piscitelli decided he owed it to himself to give football another shot, and some good-natured encouragement from a close friend didn't hurt.

"I'd always loved football, and one of my boys who actually plays at Oregon State now – Yvenson Bernard, one of my best friends – said to just come out," Piscitelli recalled. "He said, 'You're athletic, you're fast.' I wasn't big then; I was small and skinny, but I went out, and they put me at free safety and a little bit at receiver. I remember my very first game. There was kind of a trick play, and they ran a post down the middle of the field. I remember I dove and picked it off, and ever since then I was a safety."

Though he splashed onto the scene, Piscitelli's first season on the field was largely spent learning the game, and that cost him. Junior years are when high school football players turn the heads of scouts from big-time colleges and prompt those scouts to closely watch their senior seasons. Piscitelli, however, was

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playing catch up. The result was a highly successful senior season for the Boca Raton safety that most scouts missed out on because Piscitelli was off their radars. Even though he finished the year with 62 tackles, seven interceptions, 10 sacks and three fumble recoveries, Piscitelli, the District 10, Class 5A Division Defensive Player of the Year, would not be heavily recruited.

Fast forward to draft-day morning, through what proved to be an outstanding career at OSU. Rather than dwell on the past, Piscitelli rounded up the friends who had flown into town to offer support and the group headed out to breakfast. With the start of the draft just a few hours away, this would be the last diversion for Piscitelli. For the better part of four months, he had done his best to employ self-imposed avoidance techniques – steering clear of myriad draft magazines, television specials and any other form of football-related media that professed to “know” his strengths and weaknesses. It wasn’t always an easy task.

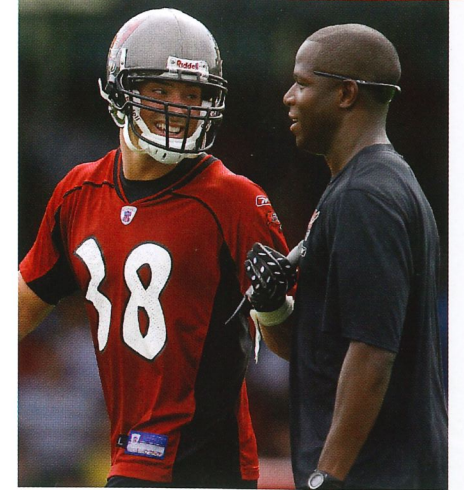
“I just didn’t want to get caught up in the Internet; I didn’t want to get caught up in the Web sites,” Piscitelli said. “And I’d wake up every morning, and my dad would be on the computer, reading this stuff. My house would keep NFL Network on all day. I mean, I would come back from working out, and both TVs in my house would be on the NFL Network. My dad would try to tell me stuff he had heard, and I would be like, ‘Dad, I don’t want to hear any of it.’”

“I was like that because you get mixed feelings. You hear something good. Some guy will say he’s definitely a this-rounder. And then somebody else will say something entirely different. Everybody has a different opinion, and there’s good stuff and bad stuff. It’s just one of those things where if I did get caught up in all of that, I would have driven myself crazy. Even in the times I did catch myself reading it, I would be angry for a couple of hours.”

But now there was no escaping it, so Piscitelli returned home from breakfast and steeled his nerves for the events to come – a process that required him to tame his inner competitor.

“I had looked at all the safeties in the draft,” he said. “And even though there were some great safeties in this draft, I didn’t feel like they were better than me. Numbers speak for themselves – my stats, my interceptions, my pass break-ups, my 40-times, my size, my speed. Still, I knew that some of these guys were going to go in front of me, and I was just hoping that it wouldn’t happen to the point where I was upset. I didn’t

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want to drop too far in my eyes and in my standards. That’s what I was afraid of.”

By the time Commissioner Roger Goodell walked onto the podium in Radio City Music Hall to kick off the 2007 NFL Draft, Piscitelli’s home was a flurry of activity. Family and friends had come together for a draft day party in his honor, and even though the mood was a festive one, Piscitelli’s nervous energy was evident as he paced back and forth. His disposition signaled a need to be left alone, and his supporters tried their best to oblige him.

And so Piscitelli waited... and waited... and waited – all the while grinding his teeth



each time a safety was selected. Ultimately, he would see five come off the board before him.

Six hours and eight minutes later, the longest first round in the history of the NFL Draft concluded, and with the second round beginning, the tension in the house began to swell. Ever since the moment Piscitelli realized he had a legitimate shot at playing professional football, his goal had been to be selected within the first two rounds of the draft. If he was to live up to his extremely high expectations, he knew the 12th hour was rapidly approaching.

"The second round started, and that's when I really started to get nervous and pace around the house," he said. "I had my phone in my hand the whole time for six hours. I looked at it every five seconds. The day went on, and I don't think I ate anything all day. Now it's about 5:30 and the second round is still going on. My agent is at work, trying to do things. No one is talking to me. There are 45 people in the house, and no one dares to talk to me."

With about 10 selections left in the second round, the sun began to set outside of the Piscitelli home. The ticker running across the bottom of Piscitelli's television flashed the teams yet to pick, and looking at them, an intriguing thought crossed Piscitelli's mind.

Sitting at number 32 was the Tampa Bay Buccaneers – the team Piscitelli had long rooted for and a team that many analysts had speculated would look at the safety position some time in the draft. The Bucs, who would use their early second-round pick to address another need position with guard Arron Sears, had that pick thanks to a midseason trade of defensive tackle Anthony McFarland to the eventual NFL champs, Indianapolis. Might Piscitelli's destiny be to suit up for the Bucs and follow in the footsteps of his idol, former Bucs safety John Lynch? Might that happen with the very last pick of the last round he secretly found acceptable? Piscitelli forced the thought out of his mind before it could take root...and just hoped for the best.

"About that time, I started to hear all sorts of things about teams trading up and down and possibly taking me," Piscitelli said. "How true and accurate it was, I don't know. There were lots of rumors, and at that point I was just praying for the best opportunity for me to go somewhere and play."

Then it happened. The cell phone that Piscitelli had feverishly clutched for the entire day finally rang.

"Right when Green Bay was on the clock, I think my agent knew where I was going," Piscitelli said. "I was standing next to him, and we were strategizing something. All of a sudden my phone rang, and I saw [area code] 813. I knew it obviously couldn't be my agent. I knew who it was. It was Coach [Jon] Gruden. I picked up the phone and walked out the back."

"I remember one of the first things I said to Coach Gruden was, 'Coach Gruden, you just drafted the hardest-working player in the draft.'"

As excited as Piscitelli was, he wasn't ready to exhale until he heard his name on the television. Everyone in his house remained on the edge of their seats, waiting for the official word.

"The funny thing is when you're talking to them, it still hasn't been announced yet, so you know things can happen," Piscitelli explained. "I'm talking to Coach Gruden and Coach Raheem [Morris] and Bruce Allen. Then they gave me some reporters, and told me they would call me back when my name was called. And the whole process just went so fast. And the house is ready to start celebrating because they saw me on the phone, and they're ready to start clapping. I put the phone down, and then the draft came back from a commercial. And I saw the guy walk to the podium and then he said my name."

"All I remember is my house erupting. It was crazy – all sorts of screaming. Everyone went crazy. The first person I hugged was my mom. I remember just saying, 'I did it.' She started to cry a little, and she just kept hugging me."

Not only had his dream been realized, but the stars had aligned for Piscitelli. He indeed

would play for his favorite team.

"You know, I still hear my dad's scream when they called," said Piscitelli. "He was the first one to scream. He was the first one to say, 'Alright Sabby!' That was the only thing I heard, really. It's funny because as loud as he was, I kind of only heard it as a buzz in my ear in the middle of a blur."

It wasn't until a day later when the magnitude of all that had transpired finally hit Piscitelli. And when it did, it leveled him much the same way he will be looking to level opposing receivers who enter his territory – with an enormous ferocity. Sitting in the company of his mother and father and with the draft officially over, Piscitelli finally allowed himself to watch a little of the coverage. When he did, he saw something that he said immediately framed his accomplishment. It was a list of names, names of several players who didn't get drafted, players who he played with and against, players who he respected.

"When I saw some of the players who didn't get drafted who I played against, it hit me," he said. "They were good. It was the biggest privilege to get drafted, especially in the first two rounds. It was the first time I sat back and sort of patted myself on the back. What separated the guys who didn't get drafted from me? It could be the smallest thing. That was the moment I really realized I got drafted by the NFL. I was in awe."

With a lump in his throat, Piscitelli turned to his mother and father and uttered a final, honest thought on the weekend: "Wow, I can't believe I just did that!"



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