

Sacrificing riches for country

Tillman bolts NFL for Army

By Greg Boeck
USA TODAY

PHOENIX — The NFL general manager who drafted him thought so highly of him he tried to get him to marry one of his daughters.

His linebacker coach in college, a man in his 60s, admires him so much he calls him "my hero."

One of his high school coaches, Dan Lloyd, "can't think of anybody I'd rather be in a foxhole with."

That's where life is headed for Pat Tillman — by choice.

Last Friday, Tillman, 25, met with a U.S. Army recruiter, walked through his final physical and took the military oath. So instead of reporting to the Arizona Cardinals training camp next month with a three-year, \$3.6 million deal, Tillman will head for basic training starting July 8 at Fort Benning, Ga., for a three-year hitch that will pay at most \$51,948 (\$1,443 a month).

The safety-turned-soldier traded his football pants for fatigues — word is he already has a crewcut — to pursue a stint with the elite U.S. Army Rangers, who bring the war to the enemy where they least expect it: behind enemy lines.

Sundays will be different from now on. And not just for Tillman.

"I said to one guy, 'Look out, bin Laden,' because he's the type of guy who can get him," says Frank Bauer, Tillman's agent.

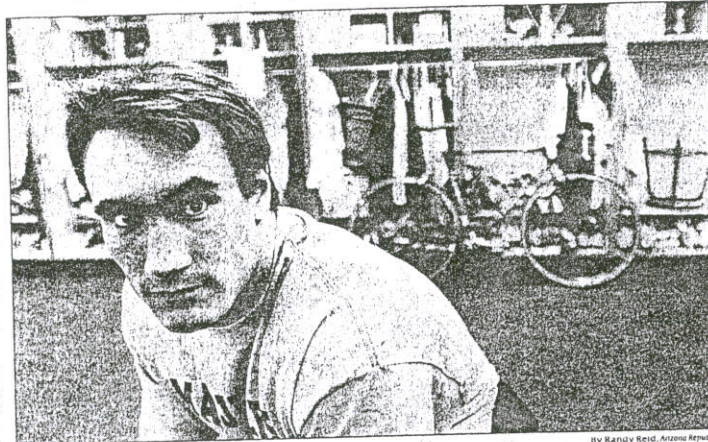
The decision by one of the best special-teams players in the NFL to turn his back on a handsome payday he worked four years to earn and pursue the Army's special team has ignited a buzz in and out of football. Word of Tillman had even reached Fort Benning.

"I heard something about that," says Elsie Jackson, an Army public affairs specialist. "Is he married?"

Told he married his high school sweetheart, Marie, on May 4 in his hometown of San Jose, Calif., Jackson said, "I bet she's real happy about his career."

Mystery move

Only Tillman knows why he put his NFL career on hold, and he's not talking. He enlisted in Denver three weeks ago to avoid publicity, but word leaked out and he was flooded with interview requests. But Tillman declined them all.



By Kately Reid, Arizona Republic

Career change: Pat Tillman, one of the NFL's top special-teams players, enlisted in the Army after four years with the Arizona Cardinals. He plans to serve with the elite U.S. Army Rangers.

"Forget that," he told Bauer. "I'm not doing any of that."

Some think the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 inspired him. "He was definitely touched by it, emotionally stricken," says Bob Ferguson, the Cardinals GM who selected Tillman in the seventh round of the 1998 draft.

Others think it was brother-inspired. The Tillmans are a close family. Pat and Kevin, one of his two younger brothers, enlisted together. Kevin followed his brother to Arizona State to play baseball.

Still others believe it's simply his pursuit of yet another adventure, another challenge. This is the same guy who trained one summer rock climbing and got ready for the NFL season by running in a triathlon.

"He's Forrest Gump with smarts," says Oakland Raiders lineman Jeremy Stata, a close friend who played with Tillman at ASU. "He wants to experience everything. He believes in doing the right thing, but he also believes in doing the extraordinary thing."

Friends and associates all paint the same portrait of Tillman: a highly intelligent, intensely loyal and fiercely driven overachiever with a complex personality — he climbed atop mountains to meditate in college — but simple needs. He drives a Volvo station wagon, lives in a modest home in Chandler, a Phoenix suburb, and wants nothing to do with cellphones.

"He's the perfect poster boy for

any type of service," Ferguson says. "The Rangers are getting the kind of guy they should want."

Adds Lyle Setencich, the former linebacker coach at ASU: "They're going to find a guy who has great pride in his conditioning. He won't stop competing unless there are four, five broken bones. That's his nature. He's unusual."

That was evident early.

At Leland High in San Jose, Tillman was far more than a standout running back-linebacker. "There wasn't a coach who didn't want him on his team or a teacher who didn't want him in his class," says Lloyd, who still coaches at Leland.

Tillman continued to set himself apart at Arizona State. When coaches there told him they were considering redshirting him, he said fine but told them he had scheduled only four years of college in his life. They passed on the redshirt, and Tillman went on to graduate summa cum laude (3.84 grade-point average) in 3½ years; he was the Pacific-10 defensive player of the year his senior season.

"He's the most special personality I've ever coached," Setencich says. "I love Pat Tillman. Guys talk about heroes and stuff like that. Pat Tillman is my hero."

Ferguson saw something special in him, too, and drafted him in 1998. He was the 225th player taken but made the tough transition from linebacker to safety, won a starting job and broke the Cardi-

nals record for tackles in 2000.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he ran for president some day," Ferguson says. "I just loved him because he loved the game and had a passion. I tried to get him to marry one of my daughters. He's the kind of guy you'd like to bring home."

Money no object

A year ago, as a restricted free agent, Tillman was offered a five-year, \$9 million contract. He turned it down. "He wanted to stay at Arizona," Bauer says. "He said, 'Frank, I really think we have something going here.'"

He played for \$512,000. Early this spring, the Cardinals offered him \$1.2 million for the next three years, but Tillman told Bauer to put the offer on the backburner. Then, after his honeymoon, he told Bauer he was headed for the Army.

"I said, 'What, are you crazy?'" Bauer says. "He said, 'No, I really want to do this.'"

"I respect his decision as much as I respect him, immensely, and I support him," Cardinals coach Dave McGinnis says. "When a man can follow his convictions in life, that's truly admirable."

Tillman told Bauer and the Cards he wasn't finished with football. He plans to return in three years. Nobody who knows him doubts that's what he'll do.

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