

“TRUE”

By Jake May

It began as a canned response from a reserved, first-year defensive back hailing from the tiny town of Cordele, Georgia. As the young player went about his business with a quiet, determined commitment that caught the attention of teammates and coaches, they took the word and spun it into a nickname. Former Wildcat safety Kyle Queiro recalls the first time he peered across the line of scrimmage at Montre Hartage.

“It was during summer 7-on-7s,” said Queiro. “I wanted to play offense and test the young guys. He stepped up, and I tried to run a go-route right by him, but he stayed with me step for step. His first rep, he stuck with me at full speed.”

Hartage, lightly recruited out of high school but committed to Georgia Southern University by February of his senior year, switched his allegiance to Northwestern after receiving a call from Dan and Susan Jones Family Head Football Coach Pat Fitzgerald on Super Bowl Sunday. After talking briefly with his father, Hartage accepted the full scholarship the day before National Signing Day without ever stepping foot on campus.

“It was an opportunity I had been wishing for since I was a little kid,” said Hartage. “It was a Power-5 conference school and a top-notch education. It was very eye-opening for the community I was representing at the time.”

That community – Cordele, Georgia – is a town of just over 11,000 people that sits two hours south of Atlanta and dubs itself “The Watermelon Capital of the World.” A four-year varsity standout at Crisp County High School, Hartage credited his old defensive back coach Terry Snell as someone who molded him from a young age into a cerebral, preparation-oriented player.

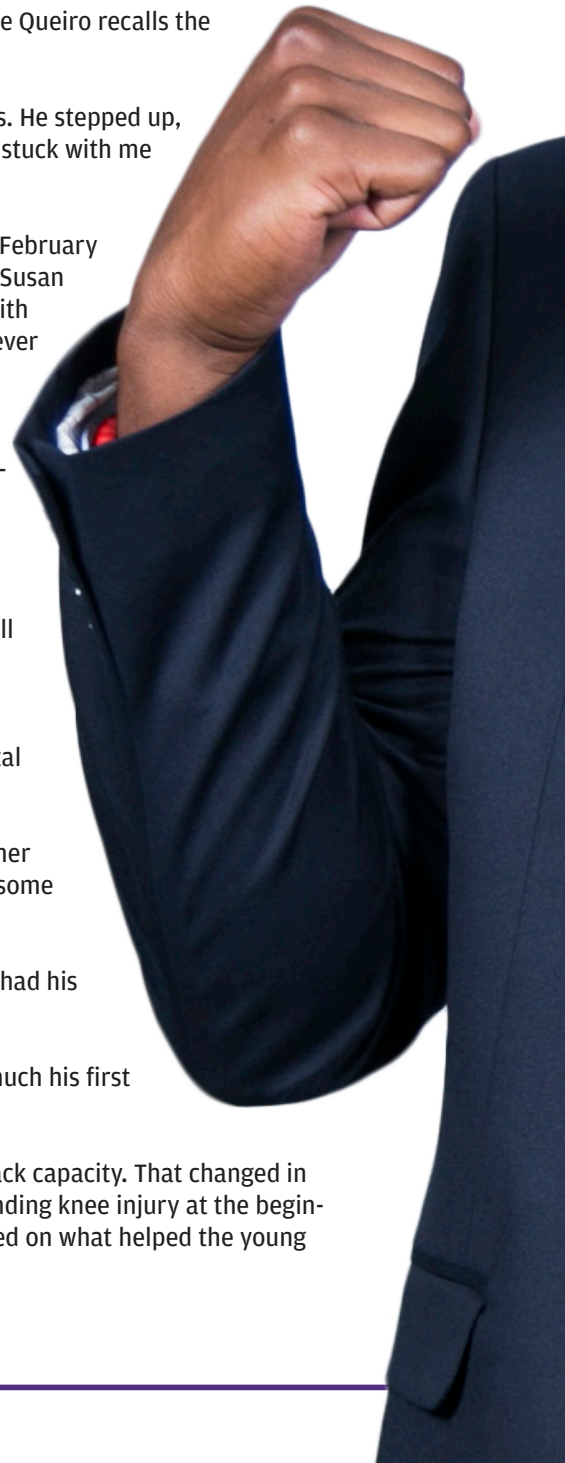
“He was straightforward and passionate, and he prepared me mentally for whatever may happen on the field,” said Hartage. “From ninth grade on, he molded me and that strong mental approach.”

That headiness and maturity made an early impact on his new Northwestern teammates. Former Wildcat defensive back Godwin Igwebuike noticed the shy, laid-back kid from Georgia showed some spine his first year.

“He consistently put in the work and was always where he needed to be,” said Igwebuike. “He had his ups and downs his first year but showed sparks of what he was capable of.”

Queiro added, “From a corner standpoint, he picked it up fast. But he didn’t necessarily play much his first year.”

Hartage played all 13 games as a true first-year, but mostly in a special team/reserve cornerback capacity. That changed in the run-up to his sophomore year, as starting cornerback Keith Watkins II suffered a season-ending knee injury at the beginning of fall camp. Hartage stepped in as the new starter opposite Matthew Harris, who reflected on what helped the young player adjust to his new role.



“The biggest thing is his work ethic,” said Harris. “When he got on campus he wanted to play, and not just play but be one of the greats. I had no doubt he would step up to the plate.”

Hartage’s studious approach to film and his impeccable physical preparation groomed him well to assume the starting role. Both Queiro and Igwebuike made remarks about Hartage’s high scores on recently retired associate head coach Jerry Brown’s weekly film quizzes. Even in player group chats, Hartage would frequently send film clips during the week prior to Saturday’s game.

“This guy is two years younger than [Godwin and me] and is showing us up because it looks like he works harder,” said Queiro. He described how Hartage approaches each week, watching the game film a few hours after the final whistle before immediately immersing himself in the quarterback and receiver assignments for the upcoming week, learning their tendencies, strengths and favorite routes.

Queiro said film prep was the main thing he picked up from Hartage that he took with him to the next level. Igwebuike agreed, adding Hartage’s commitment to taking care of his body was the habit he tried to replicate the most, saying, “I always saw Montre in the training room. It’s a rare level of commitment and a real sign of maturity.”

Hartage took a different tact when speaking about his transition into a starting role, talking more about the areas where he made the biggest strides.

“I knew I had the talent and the IQ,” said Hartage, but the self-belief and confidence characteristic of top corners at every level needed to develop for him to thrive as a starter. To Hartage, being confident means knowing he is a better player and more well-prepared than the guy lining up across from him.

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Former Wildcat defensive back Matthew Harris



“When a wide receiver comes to the line of scrimmage, they’re coming into your territory.

It was about having pride in your assignment and your territory,” said Hartage. Help from coaches and teammates smoothed the transition to starter. Hartage credited Coach Fitzgerald, Coach Brown and Coach Matt MacPherson as his biggest aides. He compared Coach Brown to a sponge, squeezing water onto the different areas Hartage could clean up. As for Coach MacPherson, Hartage compared him to his old DB coach Terry Snell.

“I appreciate guys who have a template for success,” said Hartage. “He lives by the code and dies by the code...it’s a very well-polished set of expectations and values.”

He also grew close with Harris as the new starting cornerback tandem spent more time together. Their relationship grew from a tutelage of sorts into a friendship to its current state, where Harris thinks of Hartage, “like I think about my blood siblings.” After pausing for a moment, Harris elaborated on why Hartage made such an impact on him.

“He was a profound thinker. Every time he opened his mouth, profound things came out,” he said. “He cherishes genuine friendships.”

Despite the support from Evanston, Hartage never forgot about his network back in Cordele. His father, who he consulted right after the news broke about the Watkins injury, and mother served as both counselors and templates for success. Hartage said he learned the values of hard work, honesty and graciousness from them, mentioning they instilled in him a polished set of expectations and values like those he admired in Coach MacPherson.

As for the physical side of the game, Hartage bulked up from 180 to 195 pounds between his first and second season. He worked on learning new techniques and becoming a

61.0

The passer rating for quarterbacks targeting Hartage’s assignment since 2016, ranks the senior third-best in the nation since 2016. (According to Pro Football Focus)

better communicator within the game. As his confidence grew through the continued trust of teammates and coaches as well as simple repetition, Hartage's physical tools began to catch up with his football IQ and the hours devoted to studying film. He began to recognize and diagnose offensive alignments within the game and adjusted himself accordingly. The results reflected that improvement, as Hartage started all 13 games, reeled in five interceptions, accounted for nine pass breakups and secured 48 solo tackles as a true sophomore.

Those numbers stayed consistent his junior year; Hartage once again started all 13 games, collected three interceptions and recorded 49 solo tackles. In a secondary and a defense ravaged by injuries, Hartage was a beacon of consistency. A helpful statistic for understanding Hartage's dominance is opponent passer rating on plays where he covered the targeted receiver. A perfect passer rating is 158.3; the passer rating for

quarterbacks targeting Hartage's assignment is 61.0, which is the third-best mark in the nation (since 2016, minimum of 120 targets). Not only was Hartage healthy, he was dominant.

"This past year, he was the only guy you could lock in at corner," said Queiro. "Him, Godwin and I were on the same plane, working with and learning from the elite guys in the room."

Now that Hartage made the transition from backup to starter and from starter to lockdown corner, he is in the process of becoming a team leader and NFL prospect. The move to a leadership role began the moment he stepped in for Watkins II, but Hartage is no longer one of the younger guys in the room. Queiro, Igwebuike and Harris all moved on, leaving Hartage to lead the secondary, the defense and the rest of the team. So how does a guy who only said one word for the first few weeks of his college career

lead a team?

"He's the same exact guy on and off the field. He doesn't talk that much," said Queiro. "But he doesn't need to...some of the best leaders are guys within themselves that lead by example."

Harris agreed, adding, "He's not a shy kid anymore. He's a man on and off the field." That echoes what Hartage said when asked about stepping into a bigger leadership role, quite literally stating, "I want to set the best example." He added that he plans to do so by showing the younger players how he studies and prepares meticulously for everything from practices and games to weightlifting and film study. Just as important to Hartage is demonstrating mutual respect for the other players because, in the end, they need to be on the same page.

"I want to show the guys I care about them as much as I care about my family at home," said Hartage.

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BUT HE DOESN'T NEED TO...SOME OF THE BEST LEADERS ARE GUYS WITHIN THEMSELVES THAT LEAD BY EXAMPLE.

Dallas Cowboys linebacker Kyle Queiro



MOST PLAYS ON THE BALL IN 2017

Among returning cornerbacks in the Big Ten

**10 // Montre Hartage
Northwestern**

**9 // Lavert Hill
Michigan**

**9 // Josiah Scott
Michigan State**

(According to Pro Football Focus)



Considering Queiro and Igwebuike, both preparing for NFL training camps, picked up on some of Hartage's habits over the last few years, leading by example should not be an issue. Once again, seeing the number 24 jersey line up at cornerback is one of the few certainties heading into the 2018 season. As Queiro put it, "Every spot in the room besides his is up for grabs." Both players want to see Hartage thrive in his new elder statesman role because of the respect he earned as a two-year starter.

"I want to see him set the culture," said Queiro. Igwebuike echoed those sentiments while adding, "He's one of the most important guys on that team right now."

Though a quiet guy by nature, Hartage is far from aloof or unapproachable. Igwebuike spoke glowingly about his personality, calling him an even-keeled individual who makes everyone around him better. The two helped lead team Bible study this past season, and Igwebuike elaborated on how Hartage is a young man invested in himself both on and off the field while also a pleasure to be around.

"[Hartage] has a smile and a laugh that brightens the room," he said. "Guys are drawn to him. He's a well-rounded dude."

Harris spoke about the weeks he spent lying in his room recovering from a career-ending injury during his senior year. Hartage came over frequently to check on his condition and offer nuggets of advice. It was during those tough days that Hartage paid a visit and said something that stuck with Harris to this day.

"He said, 'This isn't the end,' and I knew he wasn't just talking about football," said Harris. "That's when I knew Montre Hartage really cared about people."

After reeling off eight wins in a row to finish the season and opening the most state-of-the-art facilities in college football, the expectations are high as ever for the upcoming edition of Northwestern football. Upgrading the strength of schedule and playing more nationally-televised games raise the stakes even further, but Hartage and the Wildcats see it as an opportunity to break out.

"We want to have a great mentality that shows confidence and exemplifies savviness," said Hartage, adding, "The best way to knock off opponents is on national TV. In order for us to receive respect, we have to show we are an aggressive, dominant team that wants to win."

Hartage, now in his fourth year in Evanston, watched the program improve along with him, as the group made a bowl game in each of the past three years, winning the last two to create the first postseason winning streak in school history. With momentum building, Hartage pointed to improved team chemistry as the biggest program-wide leap since his arrival. The new facility means nothing without a group of committed, confident players to take advantage of its resources, and Hartage knows that.

“Everyone loves and respects each other. It’s a tight-knit group with a genuine respect for each other that makes everything a little smoother,” he said.

Never one to talk much about himself, Hartage still recognizes his legitimate professional aspirations. He considers football his top priority, but still plans to pursue a Master’s degree—likely in the field of organizational change—if the NFL proves too elusive. But for now, Hartage eyes the league with the confident mentality first honed during his sophomore year.

“I have aspirations to go pro, so I have to prepare like a pro,” he said. “I still have to put in the work, make the plays and be a leader to show teams I’m ready to be a NFL corner.”

Queiro, Igwebuike and Harris are, unsurprisingly, less cagey when asked about their former teammate’s chances at making it to the next level. Queiro mentioned pro scouts already started asking him about Hartage and wants him to be “as greedy as possible”

in chasing the national accolades that, to this point, eluded the rising senior. He envisions Hartage initially making an impact on special teams at the next level and impressing clubs with his intellect and preparation.

Igwebuike spoke more about Hartage’s physical tools—the great eyes, good hands, long arms, quick feet and patience that made him a mainstay on the Wildcat defense. He also touched on Hartage’s flexibility in coverage and the benefits of knowing the day’s assignment would be taken care of no matter the difficulty.

“Montre’s biggest advantage is knowing he can beat his opponent and understanding the commitment and self-discipline it takes to get there,” said Igwebuike. “He’s still an underrated guy, but if you watch him play, you’ll see he has everything it takes to be a top corner.”

Harris agreed, calling Hartage a “silent assassin” with mental tools that elevate him above most college corners. He said the way Hartage prepares for each game—physically and mentally—strongly resembles the preparation habits of Harris’ ex-roommate and current Indianapolis Colts linebacker Anthony Walker, Jr.

“No matter who he goes against, they will know Montre Hartage. And if they don’t, they will get locked down,” said Harris.

With such a bright future laid out in front of him, it is striking how much perspective Hartage maintains. Asked what lies at his core both as a player and a person, he an-

swered, “humility.”

“I know I have peers at home that don’t have the opportunity to live this type of dream,” said Hartage. “I’ve been given this platform to have a voice in my community and in the locker room for people who are intrigued about what I do and what I represent.”

Hartage said regardless of what the future holds, Northwestern football has taught him invaluable lessons he will take with him on his journey. Chief amongst those is the value of open-mindedness, communicating well and showing respect for unique people and what they represent. Those core ideas are evident in the way he speaks thoughtfully and expansively about himself and his family as well as teammates and coaches from high school through each year of his college career.

As for his friends and former running mates, they speak with excitement about what’s to come. Igwebuike wants him, “to continue to keep that Montre’s Island on lock.” Harris does not believe Hartage needs to change anything, but expressed excitement about going to fall practices and seeing in person the team dynamic under one of their new leaders. Queiro brought it back to the first year nickname that turned out to be oddly predictive.

“That nickname got some substance to it after a while,” he said. “They started calling him ‘True,’ but now it’s almost like he’s the Truth.” **N**

