

Jamezell Lassiter: From San Miguel School Flag Football Team to SEC Football at Vanderbilt University

Football has been part of Providence's Jamezell Lassiter's life since he was six years old when he started playing youth football for the Edgewood Eagles and then later for the Mount Hope Cowboys. While his football skills became evident at an early age, his desire to also excel in the public schools he attended, however, barely existed. His parents worried about what to do. They realized maybe a change was needed. They decided to enroll him when he was a 5th grader in Providence's San Miguel School, a small Lasallian middle school for boys from diverse and challenging backgrounds.

His athletic skills impressed his San Miguel classmates. Flag football, soccer, basketball—Jamezell could do it all. He was a natural athlete. But the transformation of Zell, as he likes to be called, happened in the San Miguel classroom.

It was the San Miguel School's culture and its expectations for its students that helped to propel Zell beyond his football skills into a potential life changing opportunity. This past February, Zell (San Miguel '19, LaSalle Academy '23, Deerfield Academy '24) announced his acceptance to Vanderbilt University to play football for the Commodores and to study at one of the country's most prestigious universities.

Vanderbilt, as college football fans know, is a member of the most elite college football league in the country, the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Yes, that SEC that includes such big-time football schools as Alabama and Georgia, and in the coming football season, Texas, as well.



Photo courtesy of Vanderbilt Athletic Department

In a recent interview Zell indicated that he probably wouldn't be going to Vanderbilt this fall, if he hadn't attended San Miguel. "I wasn't much of a student when I got to San Miguel. I cruised at my earlier schools. At San Miguel the teachers and Principal Ms. Soltys made me realize that my academics were just as important as my football abilities. Ms. Soltys was looking at my grades all the time. She pushed me to embrace learning, not just football. Thanks to the San Miguel School, I became a good student and got all A's and just a few B's when I went to LaSalle."

Zell also revealed that he brought a super competitive attitude to San Miguel. “I hated to lose. I would yell at my classmates if we lost a soccer match or a basketball game. Dean of Students Taysha Paulo, who coached the basketball team, straightened me out. I was often a real jerk when we lost. Ms. Paulo taught me what it means to be a teammate.”



The Rhode Island football world learned about Zell when he played for the Rams at LaSalle Academy from 2019-2022. Under Coach Geoff Marcone’s tutelage, Zell earned first team all-state football honors as a running back in 2021 and 2022, totaling over 2,000 running yards and 25 touchdowns during those two seasons. The frosting on the cake was a Super Bowl win over archrival Bishop Hendricken in 2022.

College football teams came calling. Zell got scholarship offers from Brown, URI, Navy, and Army. But Zell was injured during a portion of his senior 2022 season and didn’t get all the playing time that he got in 2021. Coach Marcone convinced Zell that a year at a prep school would give him better competition on

the football field and more challenging academics to provide scholarship possibilities at a wider array of top notch colleges. He steered Zell towards Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts.

Coach Marcone said the Zell Lassiter was a rare student athlete to coach. “He not only was a great athlete on the field. He had solid grades and discipline in school. He made savvy choices in his daily life, and he has earned this opportunity at Vanderbilt. It was a privilege to coach someone like Zell and to help guide his future.”

Zell completed the 2023 football season at Deerfield where he helped Deerfield to a 7-3 record. Though relatively small at 5’8”, Zell has dedicated hours every week to strength conditioning and is now a muscular 190 lbs. Deerfield Coach Brian Barbato used Zell as a running back, slot receiver, and punt returner giving Zell more opportunities to gain yards, showing colleges that Zell could be a “triple threat” for a team.

Coach Barbato revealed that “Zell Lassiter bounces off tacklers and has a rare combination of power, speed, and vision. He is the complete package. Vanderbilt is lucky to be getting this young man. He is a great athlete with great character. They will be a better team with Zell as a teammate.”

This June Zell will head off to Nashville to begin pre-season football camp at Vanderbilt. Even with the skill set that Zell possesses, football at Vanderbilt against SEC opponents

will be a challenge for him. The Vanderbilt Commodores have long shared the lower tier of the SEC with Kentucky. Last year the Commodores finished with a 2-8 record. SEC insiders are predicting maybe 3 or 4 wins this year for Vanderbilt.

As gifted as Zell's character and football skills are, his journey to this point has not been easy. Growing up in the inner city, often on the edge of poverty, is a challenge where choices you make every day can make or break you. Family finances also have always been a factor in his life. It was apparent when interviewing Zell how grateful he is for all the people who have helped him get this far—his parents, Tanyetta Ellis and James Lassiter; his grandmother Rheta Ellis; the San Miguel School; the teachers and coaches at LaSalle; and the teachers and coaches at Deerfield.

If Zell does get some playing time as a freshman, perhaps on special teams, this coming football season, he won't be facing tacklers from North Kingstown High or from the Loomis Chaffee School. It will be big dudes from Texas, LSU, and Alabama trying to plant his face into the football turf. Is Zell nervous about the competition? Nope. According to Zell, "What football player wouldn't want to play against the best competition? And no matter what, I'm going to be getting a super education!"