

You won't remember SMU's holder after Saturday's game at Navy — he'll never forget it

By [Dan Steinberg](#) November 11



Garrett Krstich takes a quiet moment before a game against East Carolina last season. (Grant Halverson/Getty Images)

A few weeks after Garrett Krstich had surgery to repair three tears in his labrum last January, SMU released its 2015 football schedule. Among the road trips was a Nov. 14 game, in Annapolis, against Navy.

At the time, Krstich could barely throw a football five yards. He was a walk-on who had already played four seasons, and who couldn't afford graduate school. The Mustangs had a new coach and a highly touted quarterback in junior Matt Davis. Krstich had no idea whether his career was over, but it sure didn't seem promising.

"Honey," his mom told him, "I think it's time to move on."

Krstich had other ideas. He wanted to finish his career with his friends, his classmates who would remain on the team as fifth-year seniors. And he wanted to play a game at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium, where his father Jeff once starred for the Midshipmen. Jeff proudly had showed a teen-aged Garrett the stadium in 2007, during a trip to Maryland for the Army-Navy game. Garrett, then a freshman in high school, toured Navy's locker room, tried on a Navy helmet and tossed a football with a friend while walking around campus. It's one of his final memories with his father; a few weeks later, Jeff died suddenly after suffering a heart attack during a pickup lacrosse game.

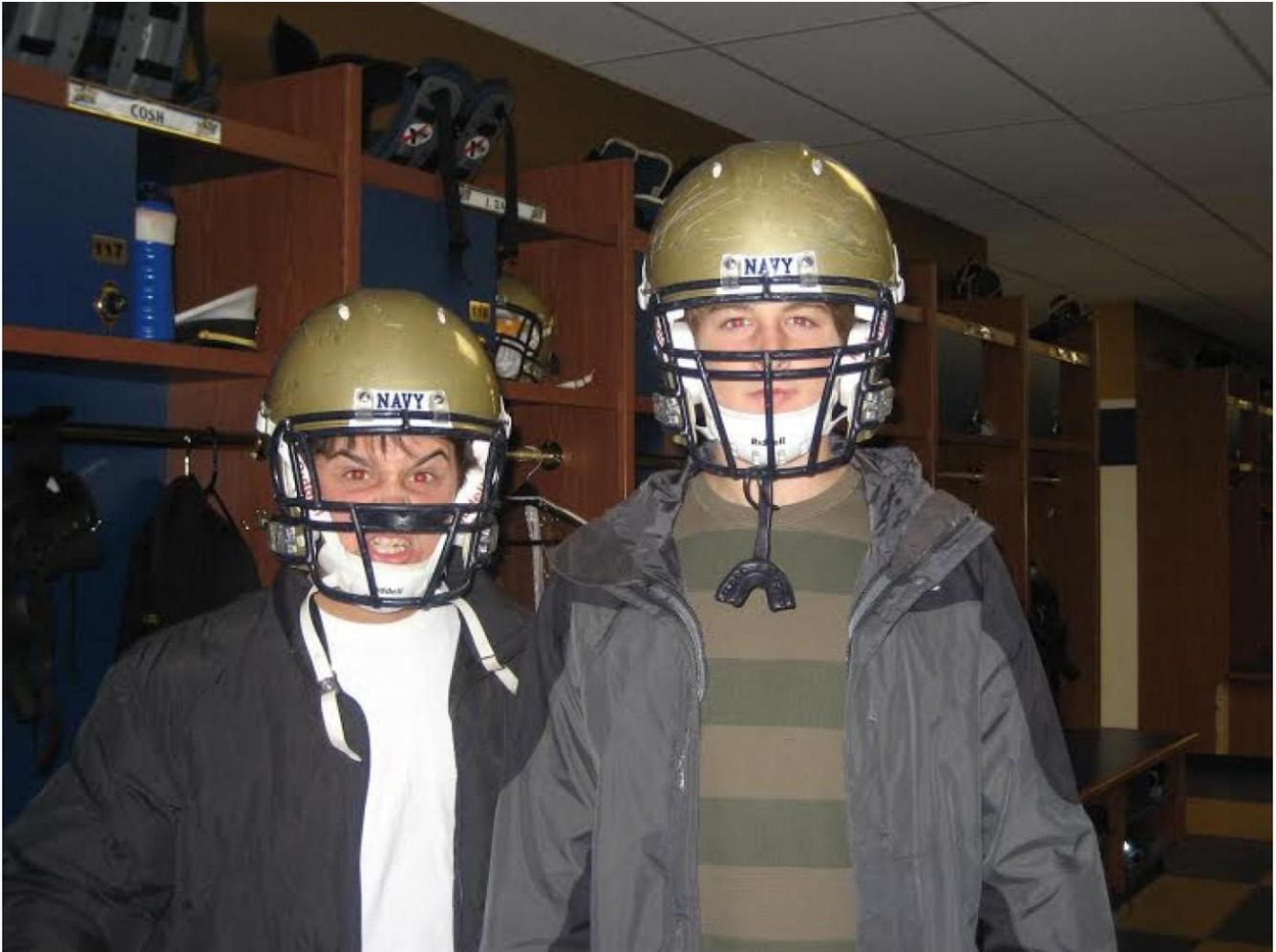
“When I found out about this game, it just switched [something] in my mind,” Krstich said this week. “I was like, I’ve got to be there. I’ve got to be playing on the team. I’ve got to be involved somehow — even if it’s just being a signaler. I’ve just got to find some spot on the team, so I can take that field.”

So Krstich went to spring practices, even though he wasn't physically able to participate, a quarterback who couldn't throw. He went through summer two-a-days, even though he had no idea whether he would be on the team. And a few days before school was scheduled to start, new coach Chad Morris [announced in front of the team](#) that Krstich was getting an athletic scholarship for a final season. That meant, among other things, a second trip to the Naval Academy, this time in the final weeks of his football career, surrounded by family and friends.

“Isn't it crazy?” asked Gwyn Krstich, Garrett's mom. “Life didn't turn out as we planned, but then there's this.”

Navy and football — and especially Navy football — have been central to her family's life. Jeff was an offensive lineman there in the '60s, a two-year letter winner and the team's co-captain in 1969. Garrett watched every Army-Navy game with his father from the time he was born; “it was like our day together, no interruptions, just watching and rooting for Navy,” Garrett said. Their Southern California home is still filled with Navy jerseys, Navy sweaters and Navy flags, and they traveled to see the Midshipmen in person during regular-season West Coast trips and bowl games.

Jeff, whose father also attended the Academy, retired from the Navy as a lieutenant commander after 20 years, including a tour in Vietnam doing helicopter reconnaissance search-and-rescue missions, according to his wife. To the end of his life, she said, his eyes welled up whenever he heard the national anthem. The Navy football team was one of the ways he passed his allegiances on to his son.



Garrett, right, and a friend while touring the Navy football facilities in 2007. (Courtesy Gwyn Krstich)

“So much of that school is embedded in my heart,” Garrett said. And after that trip to Annapolis with his father, “I was no longer just a fan of the academy and Navy football; I was more intertwined in it.”

Those feelings didn’t change even after his own school became one of Navy’s new conference rivals. One of Garrett’s best friends, Paul Quessenberry, starred at the Academy, winning last year’s Roger Staubach Award for leadership and commitment. Jeff coached Quessenberry on youth football teams; Quessenberry kept one of the casings from the 21-gun salute at Jeff’s funeral.

Just last weekend, Garrett and his mother were attending a country music concert in Dallas when they saw the Midshipmen had upset Memphis for one of their biggest wins in decades. Both mother and son started jumping up and down in the middle of the show.

“That’s his dad’s school,” Gwyn said, by way of explanation.



The Krstichs, during their 2007 trip to Annapolis (family photo)

Jeff and the youngest of his five kids were always close, with football as their glue. Gwyn said Garrett was “like a Mini Me” to his dad, and remembers telling friends “if something ever happened to me, those two would be just fine; they were just so in sync.” Garrett had thought about trying to follow his father and grandfather to Navy, and his mom thinks he might have had Jeff not passed away.

Instead, he wound up choosing SMU. The family had lived in Dallas during his middle school years, and he liked the team’s passing offense. But he arrived on campus as a walk-on with virtually no expectations.

“I was like ninth-string,” he said. I was pretty sure if everyone else got hurt, they still weren’t going to put me in.”

During his sophomore year, he broke his foot. During his junior year, he was still the third quarterback. But as a senior, he became the backup, and then got his chance to guide a struggling offense. He wound up starting four games, throwing for 855 yards, and completing 42 passes during a game against East Carolina.

But the Mustangs struggled, and Krstich was battered by opposing pass rushers — “majorly crushed,” as his mom put it — leading to the offseason surgery and doubts about his future. He thought about entering the workforce and moving on. A chance to play at Navy was one of the things that changed his mind.

He’s spent this season as the holder on extra points and field goals, and signaling in plays from the sidelines. (He’s also working on a Master’s in business and sports management.) It’s not a glamorous gig, but you wouldn’t know that by listening to him talk about the perks of being on a team, finishing his career with his friends and acting as a mentor to younger players.

“It says a lot about who he is as a person,” said Quessenberry, the former Navy starter and friend. “I wasn’t the least bit surprised that he was going back. He loves the game. I know he just wants to be around it as long as possible.”

This weekend’s game, of course, is a different sort of perk. Quessenberry and his parents will be in Annapolis. So will more than a dozen family and friends. The Class of 1970 — Jeff’s class — is celebrating its 45th anniversary, so they’re giving Gwyn Krstich and other SMU parents a tour of campus, and then hosting them at their tailgate. Both mother and son have been thinking about their 2007 trip to Annapolis in recent days: how they ran into an athletic trainer who remembered Jeff, how Garrett struck a Heisman pose at the team facility, how he got goosebumps visiting his dad’s old haunts. They’ll think about that some more Saturday.

“Once I get on the plane Friday morning, and I’m kind of sitting there and have some time to digest what’s about to happen, it’ll really hit me,” Garrett said. “I’m just really looking forward to taking that field.”