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Fitzzy finalist chooses UMaine

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Gorham running back Justin Villacci narrowed his choices to a handful of schools this winter, but Wednesday officially committed to the University of Maine on national signing day.

Villacci, a Fitzpatrick Trophy finalist who rushed for 19 touchdowns last fall, highlights a class of 18 recruits who signed with the Black Bears. He will arrive in August and be converted to a wide receiver.

Villacci said the program's coaching staff and history, along with anticipated facilities upgrades, helped nail his decision.

"When it came down to it, the school that wanted me most was the school that was looking at me all along," said Villacci, who is 5-foot-8, 175 pounds. "They think I have good speed, good hands. They figure they could utilize me a little bit more at receiver."

Villacci is one of the four Maine players among the 18 recruits.

He will be joined by offensive/defensive lineman Donald Clark of Winslow, 6-4, 275 pounds; offensive lineman Matthew Spearin of Limington, 6-2, 275; and Windham tight end Joshua Sundquist, 6-4, 225 pounds, who played a season at Bridgton Academy last fall.

Various factors will hinge on whether or not each will play next season or be redshirted.

"There's different variables for all of them," said Maine Coach Jack Cosgrove. "They've all got a heck of an endurance struggle in front of them. They all have to prepare themselves strenuously between now and then if they do want to play."

Maine recruited Villacci for his versatility, said Cosgrove.

"We just thought he was a good football player," he said. "He can run, catch. He's an elusive, skilled kid. We went out and recruited him, brought him to our campus and hoped he'd fit in with our players. He did."

Villacci said he had memories of Maine's campus from his youth that weren't particularly flattering. That changed after visiting the campus this year and seeing the new workout center for athletes, and hearing about the artificial turf the athletic administration has committed to putting down on Alford Stadium.

"I really don't like the surface they have up there now," said Villacci. "But they're putting a new one in. I've done pretty well on those (synthetic grass-like) surfaces. And they had really updated the other facilities."

Maine ultimately won out for Villacci over New Hampshire, Hofstra, Sacred Heart and Wagner.

Villacci has hopes to play right away, and plans to participate in this summer's annual **Lobster Bowl**.

"I met with the wide receivers coach who said I'm in a position to play next year," said Villacci.

"I'm not sure what they say to the other guys but he did say that. I'd love to go out and play right away."

His coach at Gorham, Dave Kilborn, said the recruiting process was long for Villacci but rewarding.

"I think he realized going into college, especially at the level he wants to play at, it wasn't going to be as a running back," said Kilborn.

"I think they got a great player in Justin. Hopefully he will take advantage of all the opportunities in front of him."

Of the remainder of the recruits, nine are from New Jersey, which long has been a hotbed for recruiting for Maine's coaches.

Five are defensive linemen and another three are offensive linemen.

Maine will be looking to replace five graduates who played on the defensive line, making that position the most open of any heading into the preseason.

Two candidates to step right in appear to be junior college standouts Eric Lee, a 6-foot-3, 260-pound tackle from Changewater, N.J., and Jonas Rousseau, a 6-2, 230-pound end from New York.

"We've got everything covered across the board," said Cosgrove.

"Lee and Rousseau, both are in the (defensive line). So that's a positive. These are older players who have played at a higher level of competition."

Maine, which will open Aug. 30 at Iowa, will look to rebound from a tough 2007 season in which the team went just 4-7 while adjusting to a new offense.

NOTES: Goalie Scott Darling, who plays for the Indiana Ice of the United States (Junior) Hockey League, has committed verbally to the Maine hockey program. Darling, 19, will be eligible to play next year. He is a sixth-round draft pick by the Phoenix Coyotes. "He's a big-game goaltender," said Jason Burkman director of hockey services for the Ice. "He's really come on of late, that's for sure. He's unstoppable in the shootouts, tough to beat him one on one."

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