

HARDY NICKERSON – BIO

Early Career

Born and raised in Compton, California, Hardy Nickerson lettered in track and football at Verbum Dei High School, located in the Watts section of Los Angeles. After a stellar high school career playing both Center and Linebacker, and helping lead the Verbum Dei Eagles to 2 CIF Section Championships and while sustaining a 25-game winning streak, Nickerson went on to play at the University of California at Berkeley. During his Cal career, he was a three-time team MVP (1983-86), earned first-team All-Pac-10 honors, Sports Illustrated Defensive Player of the Week, and tallied 501 total tackles, still second on the school's all-time list to this day. Nickerson excelled both on and off the field and graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology.

Professional Background

In 1987, Nickerson was drafted in the fifth round (122nd overall) of the NFL Draft by the Pittsburgh Steelers. While he initially found playing time on special teams, he quickly established himself as a stalwart at inside linebacker, accounting for 426 total tackles during his 6-year Steelers career from '87-'92. In 1993, in the first class of NFL free agency, he headed south to join the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, where he would star in the middle of the Bucs 4-3 defense. In his first season with the Buccaneers Nickerson established himself as a force. He tallied a record-breaking 214 tackles, was selected as a starter in his first Pro Bowl, and also earned prestigious first-team All-Pro honors. From '93-'99 while playing for the Bucs, he averaged 118 tackles per season, earned 5 Pro Bowl selections, and 4 All-Pro honors.

In 2000, Nickerson became a free agent again and headed north to play for the Jacksonville Jaguars. He sustained a season-ending knee injury that year, but came back the following year to lead the team in tackles with 116. In 2002, Nickerson joined the Green Bay Packers for his final career year and helped lead them to the NFC North Division Championship. During his phenomenal 16-year career as an NFL player, Nickerson started 200 of 225 career games played, totaling 1,867 tackles, and averaging 137 tackles per season. He also recorded 21 sacks, 12 interceptions, 60 passes-defensed, 23 forced fumbles and a dozen fumble recoveries.

Nickerson's long list of achievements also includes a second-team selection to the NFL 1990s All-Decade Team, as well as being selected as the recipient of the Byron "Whizzer" White NFL Man of the Year Award in 1998. The "Whizzer" White award is given annually to one NFL player who best serves his team, community and country in the spirit of Byron "Whizzer" White, who was a Supreme Court justice, professional American football player, naval officer, and humanitarian.

Coaching Background

As a player, Nickerson's strong leadership and knowledge of the game led him to serve as a mentor for countless players and teammates. Consequently, it was a natural progression to make the move from on the field over to the sideline as a coach. This new journey began in 2004 when he was offered a training camp internship position with the Chicago Bears through the *Bill Walsh NFL Minority Coaching Fellowship Program*. Nickerson later coached linebackers for the Chicago Bears in 2007, helping linebacker Lance Briggs make the Pro Bowl that season.

After leaving the Bears due to health issues within his family, Nickerson returned to coaching in 2009 as the linebackers' coach at Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland, California. He coached the linebackers, including his son Hardy Nickerson, for one season, and in 2010 became the Varsity Head Football Coach for the next four years. Proving his ability to coach players at all skill levels, he was instrumental in developing many young players into elite athletes. Under his leadership, Nickerson's coaching staff helped produce nearly twenty collegiate scholarship athletes. Also during his tenure at Bishop O'Dowd, he helped lead the Dragons to multiple league titles. Nickerson also made numerous coaching appearances across the country for various football camps, clinics and elite football programs.

Finishing up his four-year run as a high school head coach, in 2014 he moved on to coach linebackers in a familiar location – the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers. During his two years with the Bucs, he worked with Pro Bowler Lavonte David, who finished third in the NFL in total tackles in both 2014 (146) and 2015 (147). Rookie Kwon Alexander also had a breakout season under Nickerson, totaling 59 tackles and two interceptions. Alexander was named NFC Defensive Player of the Week after totaling 11 tackles, one interception, one forced fumble and one fumble recovery in an overtime win over Atlanta. Entering the 2016 NFL season, Nickerson was hired as linebackers coach for the San Francisco 49ers, but just for a short time, being ultimately lured to the University of Illinois with a promotion to Defensive Coordinator. He spent nearly three seasons (2016, 2017 and most of 2018) as Illinois' defensive coordinator and assistant head coach (2018 season).

At Illinois, Nickerson helped to produce outstanding seasons in his first year from senior defensive ends Carroll Phillips and Dawuane Smoot, while his son Hardy Nickerson led the team in tackles with 107. Phillips was named Illinois' first All-Big Ten first-team selection in five years after finishing the regular season ranked seventh in the nation in tackles for loss (TFL) per game (1.7). Smoot, who was drafted in the third round by the Jacksonville Jaguars, added 15.0 TFLs as they combined for the second-most TFLs between teammates in the Big Ten and the Illini were 10th in the nation in team TFLs per game (7.9). Smoot (third team) and Phillips were both All-Big Ten performers under Nickerson, while sophomore linebacker Tre Watson and the younger Nickerson were honorable mention picks. Nickerson Jr. started all 12 games and was fourth in the Big Ten in tackles per game (8.9). In 2017, Nickerson helped safety Bennett Williams to ESPN.com's Freshman All-America honors and the BTN.com All-Freshman Team. During the 2018 season, he resigned after experiencing life-threatening health issues stemming from job-induced stress.

Titles and Accomplishments

After 40 years of experience as a high school, college and NFL player, as well as a high school, college and NFL coach, there is not much that Hardy Nickerson hasn't accomplished or achieved. His 16-year career as an NFL linebacker was an extraordinarily long one, especially for that position. As a player and coach, his accomplishments include:

- 5 Pro Bowl selections
- 4 All-Pro selections
- 1990s NFL All-Decade 2nd Team
- Byron "Whizzer" White NFL Man of the Year
- NFL Walter Payton Man of the Year Runner Up
- 2-time recipient of NFL's Ed Block Courage Award
- NFLPA Linebacker of the Year
- NFL Pro Football Hall of Fame Nominee
- John Madden's All-Madden Team
- Tampa Bay Buccaneers Defensive Captain – 6 years
- Buccaneers Team MVP – 3 years
- 3 time NFC Defensive Player of the Week
- Buccaneers Team Leader in Tackles – 4 years
- NFC Central Division Title
- Pittsburgh Steelers Team Leader in Tackles – 3 years
- Jacksonville Jaguars Defensive Captain – 1 year

- Green Bay Packers Defensive Captain – 1 year
- NFC North Division Title – 2002
- University of California at Berkeley Athletics Hall of Fame
- Verbum Dei High School Hall of Fame
- Name Plaintiff in historic *White v. NFL* case which successfully granted unrestricted free agency to all NFL players
- Keys to City of Tampa awarded by Mayor Greco
- “Hardy Nickerson Day” proclaimed on Jan. 26, 1994 by the City of Tampa
- PewterReport.com’s Buccaneers Coach Of The Year
- BucsNation.com’s Buccaneers Coach Of The Year
- NFL’s High School Football Coach Of The Week – Northern CA
- NCS Scholastic Team Award – Bishop O’Dowd Football (first time in school’s history for Varsity football team to be awarded academic achievement honor)

Nickerson also achieved much notoriety from his philanthropic work and as an active leader in the community. His own Hardy Nickerson Foundation provided educational tools and programs for disadvantaged youths. He mentored numerous children through the foundation’s program “Hardy’s Huddles”, and also helped to create numerous other programs including “Hardy’s Homeworkshops”, which provided after-school tutoring assistance in partnership with the Boys and Girls Clubs, and “Education Expedition”, a summer bus tour of colleges. Besides work within his foundation, Nickerson has dedicated much of his life contributing to charitable causes and events.