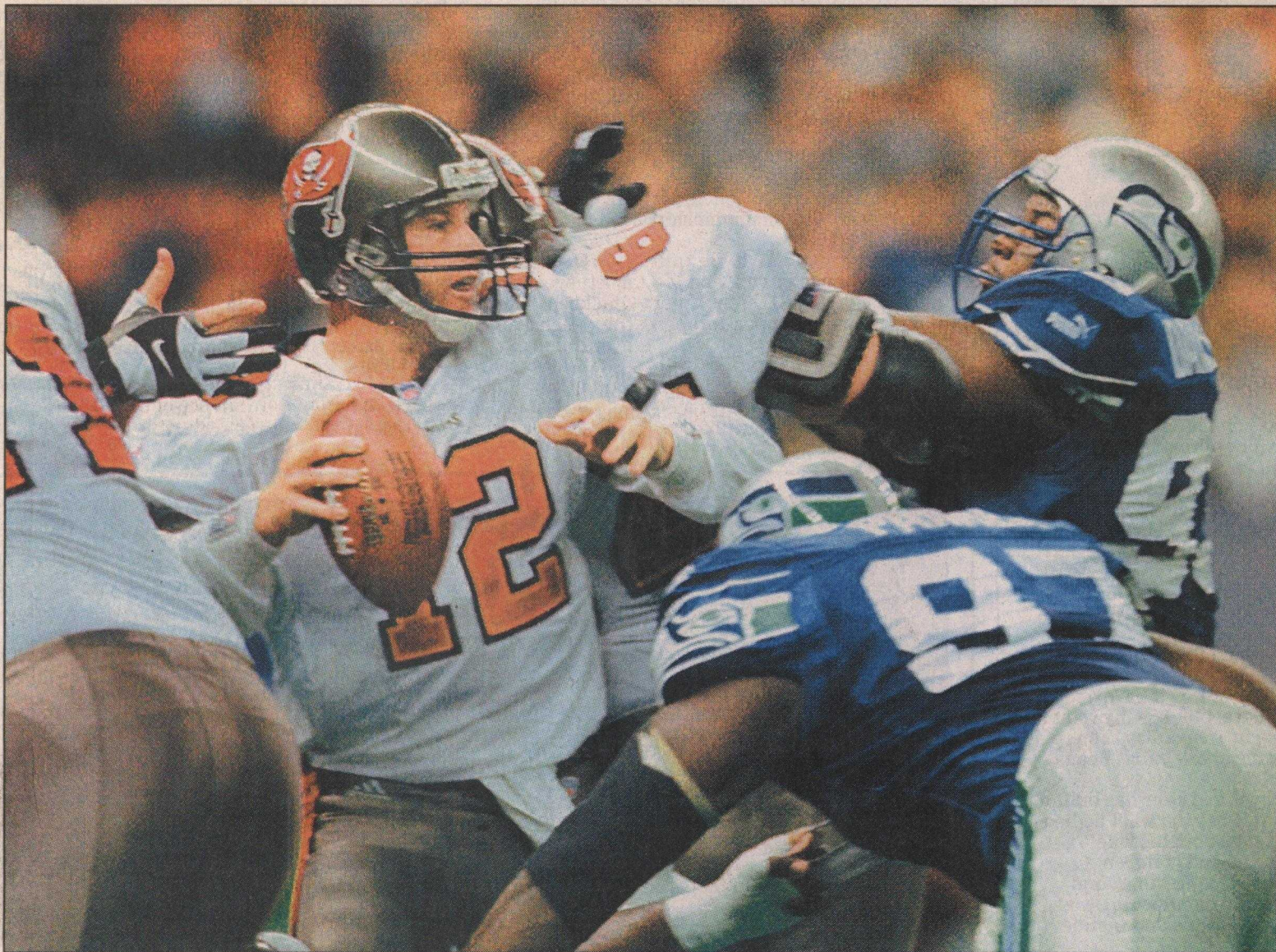


In a vicious and controversial business, Trent Dilfer is in the ...

Eye of the Storm



The Associated Press

Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Trent Dilfer has kept his cool in the face of adversity.

12-29-99

From Aptos High to Pro Bowl, Trent Dilfer remains resilient

Editor's note: This is the seventh in a series of profiles on the Top 10 athletes in Santa Cruz County history, as voted by Sentinel readers.

Bio D

By DAVID KIEFER

Sentinel assistant sports editor

WE STRIVE for fame, for success, without considering the pressures and struggles that come with it.

But the truth is, celebrity comes with a price. Trent Dilfer knows this as much as anyone.

With perhaps more athletic ability combined with physical stature than anyone in Santa Cruz County history, Dilfer seemed destined for stardom since his days at Aptos High. And he lived up to that promise with what seemed an effortless football career at Fresno State University.

But being a high National Football League draft pick and signing a multi-million dollar contract created even higher expectations.

The NFL can be a monster. And being an NFL quarterback may be the most demanding job in sports, especially when that player is blamed by fans and coaches for a team's problems.

Dilfer has found himself in that

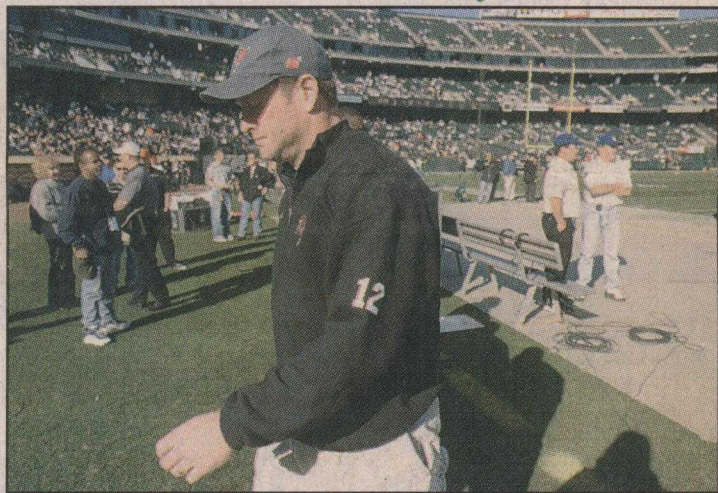
#4 ALL-CENTURY TEAM TRENT DILFER

position. But rather than fall apart, Dilfer has grown stronger and handled himself with grace — refusing to blame anyone else and taking responsibility for his own actions.

He's been benched, and beaten, and his career is at a crossroads. But Dilfer, 27, has exhibited a maturity in the face of adversity. He's developed a strength of character that has allowed him to shrug off the criticism and grow in confidence in spite of it.

"Why am I here?" Dilfer said. "God chose me to be in this situation. There's a reason why I'm here, and I think it's a lot bigger than playing football."

Dilfer sparked the Tampa Bay Buccaneers to the verge of its first NFC Central Division title since 1981 and won't be on the field to make it fulfilled. He had a 7-3 record as a starter this year until breaking his right clavicle while being driven into the artificial turf



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

of Seattle's Kingdome Nov. 28.

He recently was given the OK to start rehabilitating the shoulder, but said it's unlikely he will be ready to play unless the Buccaneers advance into the playoffs. And, if they do, any playing time will probably only come in relief of rookie Shaun King.

A big, tough kid in high school, Dilfer, now 6-foot-4, 230 pounds, was a perfectionist in many ways. He starred in football — as a safety and as an option quarterback — and on the basketball court and golf course.

His first sport was soccer at age 6. He played it for nine years "and loved it," he said. "To this day, it might be my favorite sport to play."

Trent Dilfer left the field at Oakland two weeks ago uncertain of his future with Tampa Bay.

Please see DILFER — Page B2

Dilfer

Continued from Page B1

But there were others — baseball, cross-country, track and field, as well as football, basketball and golf. Somehow, he combined athletic success with a 3.85 grade-point average.

As an Aptos High senior, he passed for 1,126 yards and 15 touchdowns, ran for 398 yards and was the top punter in the Santa Cruz Coast Athletic League. In basketball, he led the SCCAL in scoring (20.6 points) and rebounding (11.2). And, in golf, led the Mariners to a league title.

Fresno State was the only major-college to offer him a chance to play quarterback. But despite beginning as a walk-on, Dilfer earned a scholarship with performances such as a 24-7 Freedom Bowl victory over USC and setting an NCAA record for most consecutive passes (271) without an interception.

He was a hero in Fresno, returning from the Freedom Bowl victory to a city-wide parade, and a drive around town the next fall would inevitably take one past a Dilfer-plastered billboard.

NFL scouts took notice of his size and his stats. And, at a tearful press conference, Dilfer announced he would leave college after his junior year and was selected as the sixth pick in the 1994 NFL draft by the Buccaneers.

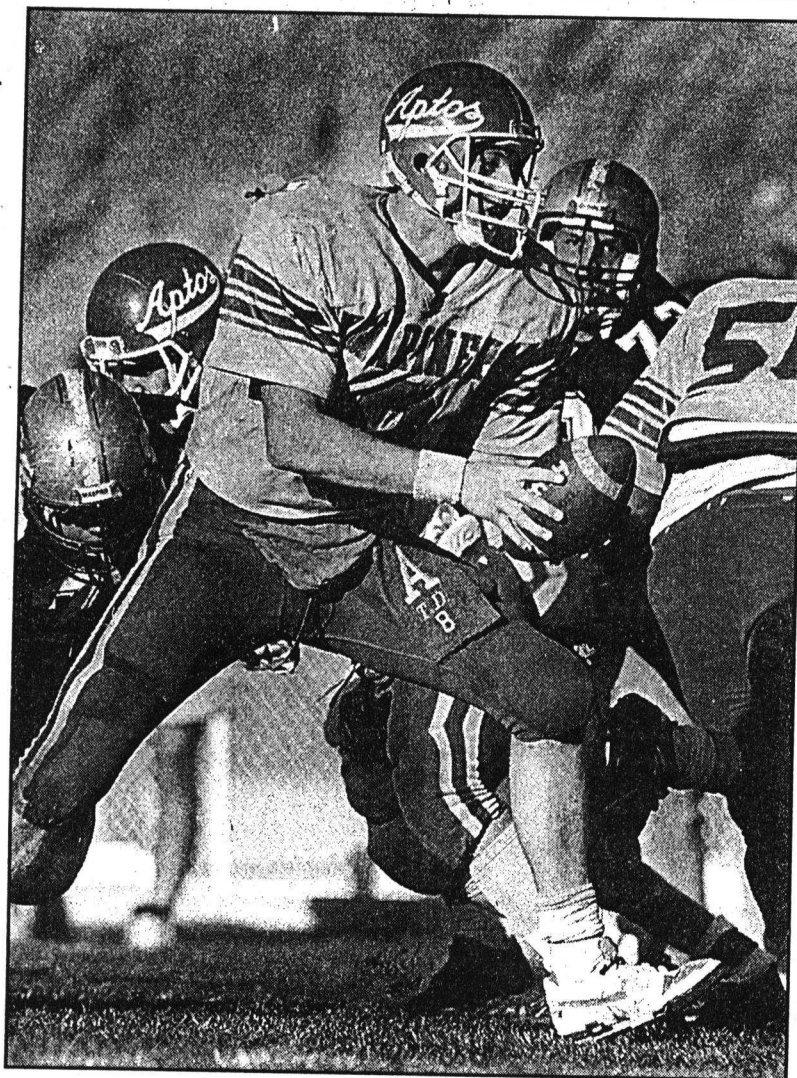
His troubles began as a holdout and then in having to live up to his status as the highest-paid player on his team. He signed a \$16.5 million, eight-year deal.

Dilfer struggled from the outset and, though he developed into a Pro Bowl player in 1997 when he led the Buccaneers into the playoffs for the first time in 15 years, he has been the scapegoat for the misfortunes of a franchise that only recently achieved its second winning season in the past 17 years.

His early career was plagued by interceptions and a shortage of touchdown passes, making him a target of abuse from both the fans and the media. Though he grew into a leader, proved his durability by starting 70 consecutive games, and improved his performance each year, the reputation has continued to trail him.

After Dilfer's three-interception outing in this season's opening 17-13 home loss to the New York Giants, one reporter described a world record broken by the crowd of 65,026. The category: "Lynch mob, world's largest."

After a series of mediocre



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

Dilfer was an option quarterback as an Aptos senior in 1989.

Career Highlights

- Set NCAA record for most passes (271) without an interception.
- Selected to the NFL Pro Bowl in 1997.
- Started 70 consecutive games for Tampa Bay from 1995 to 1999.

performances in the Buccaneers conservative offense, Dilfer was benched by coach Tony Dungy. But Dilfer returned after a week's absence because of an injury to replacement Eric Zeier. Dilfer responded with a more aggressive style of play.

"You need to be allowed to do what you do best," he said. "We can't be concerned with my completion percentage, we need to create big plays in the passing game."

He responded with two outstanding games, both victories, only to see his regular-season end prematurely.

Now, in his sixth-year, Dilfer's career is at a crossroads. His contract is up after this season and general manager Rich McKay must decide whether to

exercise an option and re-sign Dilfer for approximately \$4 million for the next two years, or let him go as an unrestricted free agent. McKay said the decision will be made in February.

If the Buccaneers aren't willing to keep him, Dilfer will probably have to sign for less with another club, perhaps as a backup.

And what of his future?

"I'll be playing football next year," he said. "I'll have a job somewhere, but I really want to be here in Tampa Bay. You're asking me about things I can't control."

Meanwhile, Dilfer has built a life that is beyond what he had ever hoped, with his wife Cassandra, and children Madeleine, 3, Trevin, 2, and Victoria, 10 months. He owns houses in Tampa and Incline Village.

No matter what the future holds, Dilfer has accomplished more in football than anyone in county history. And when he's retired, he hopes his legacy will be this:

"That my character shone far above athletic prowess," he said. "I've seen few do that. But when they do, they've made a huge impact on my life."