

Marcus Martin winding down historic career

By Justin Kraus

Sports Editor

Slippery Rock senior defensive end Marcus Martin is a man who needs no introduction. He has one of the longest lists of awards for any athlete in history, both academically and athletically.

Martin's career at Slippery Rock almost didn't happen. Martin was originally committed to The Rock's archrival, Indiana (Pa.). It was thanks to his high school teammates at West Mifflin that he came to SRU.

"Shamar [Green] said 'just come up, hang out we'll have a good time.' I went up here, and ended up loving it, everything about it," Martin said. "Just as a recruit, I felt like I was part of a team already."

"He visited with Shamar and the rest is history," Long-time SRU head coach George Mihalik said.

Mihalik is a man who has coached thousands of football players throughout his life, but his recruitment and subsequent coaching of Martin are memories that he holds close to his heart.

"Marcus is the only guy that I did two home visits on," Mihalik said. "You knew he was going to be all-conference and even all-American, [but] to be the greatest in the history of college football, no. As good as he was, you're talking about the best ever. It's to his credit, his work ethic and desire and passion to be the best, and he is."

Once Martin was here, he was redshirted for reasons out of his control, regarding a college class he took in high school that wasn't transferred properly.

"The redshirt year was tough on him, because we had a little snag with an academic grade," Slippery Rock head coach Shawn Lutz said. "Shoot that doesn't matter, because now he's an academic all-American."

"When we heard that [he had to sit out], I was crushed," Mihalik said. "I remember saying 'Marcus, five years from now you'll be happy about this, we don't see it now, but five years from now you'll be happy.' I think he's glad that an unplanned redshirt came about."

It's easy for a coach to say that a player is grateful for sitting out a year, but Martin resonated with both he previous and current coaches sentiments.

"Everybody kept telling me it was a blessing in disguise, when you are fresh out of high school it's hard to see that," Martin said. "I think back and I'm so thankful that it happened, it truly was a blessing in disguise."

Even in his redshirted season, Martin set the tone he would carry off the field for his career by being named a Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference (PSAC) scholar-athlete. Since then, Martin was named a PSAC scholar athlete three more times and in 2015 was awarded a Division II Athletics Directors Association academic achievement award. Those awards are dwarfed by Martin's latest academic honor; he was announced as one of 13 finalists for the 2017 William V. Campbell trophy. All 13 finalists receive an \$18,000 postgraduate scholarship. This award is presented to the best scholar-athlete football player in the nation, regardless of division.

"Now he's one of the 13 finalists for the William Campbell award, the Heisman of academics. That's what I think a lot of people miss, is what a relentless person he is on and off the field," Lutz said.

"The work you do in the dark brings you into the light," Martin said. "There was a lot of tears of joy when I first told my parents, my mom was crying at work and everyone was asking her what happened."

Coming into the 2017 season, one of the big spotlights was on Martin to break the NCAA Division II all-time tackles for loss (TFL) and sack records. Martin made quick work of the TFL record, recording his 78th and record-breaking TFL in week three versus Lock Haven. Martin currently has 90.5 TFLs, 13.5 more than the second-place person, still with at least one game to play.

"He gives everything he's got. It's a lot of detail and focus, and every year he's gotten better," Lutz said. "That's what I credit to him as a guy who just always does those little things which have turned into big things."

The big record was the NCAA all-time all divisions sack record, which Martin was a favorite to break coming into the season. After the longest sackless streak of his career (three games), Martin recorded 4.5 sacks versus Clarion University on Oct. 28. to break the record.

"If you told me Marcus Martin would be the all-time sack leader in college football history, I would have never predicted that," Lutz said.

Everybody can read the countless accolades that Martin has accrued throughout his career, but that magic is truly felt by his teammates and coaches. Slippery Rock linebackers' assistant Mike Grata had the unique experience of both being a teammate with Martin and coaching him. Grata played with Martin for his first three years on the team, and has coached him the past two years.

"There is nobody on the team who is going to outwork him," Grata said. "That was his mindset as a true freshman, and he carried it throughout his four years here. He wants to be the best."

Playing next to somebody who is quite literally a walking legend is a feeling that only a select few will get, and Slippery Rock's other defensive lineman know how much that means to them.

"It's a relief, you know if anything goes wrong he's always going to be there to correct it. He's just an amazing athlete." Junior defensive lineman Tim Soave said.

"It's a great experience to be around someone this great, what you can learn from the way he lives and the way he plays," Sophomore defensive lineman Trey Blandford said. "It's not just how he plays, but what he does off the field"

Of course, playing with Marcus also gives personal advantages, as other teams will undoubtedly key in on the



PARIS MALONE / THE ROCKET

Senior defensive end Marcus Martin sacks Clarion quarterback Jeff Clemens on senior day. This sack broke the all-time NCAA all-divisions sack record and was Martin's 54th in his career.

NCAA's all-time sack leader.

"His aspect of the game is trying to get there as fast as possible, as quick as possible to be the first person there, so I gotta live up to that," Freshman defensive end Garrett De Bien said. "Sometimes I won't get there faster or quicker, but he'll be making the plays."

On the flip side, Martin's teammates on the opposite side of the ball have a lot to learn from him as well.

"I really knew in the spring going into his first year [how special he was], our offense couldn't block him," Lutz said. "When I saw him go up against three or four year starting tackles like Cory Tucker and he's beating them like they aren't even there, I knew we had a special football player."

2016 all-PSAC selection and Slippery Rock tackle Steve Gaviglia can regularly be seen pancaking opposing defensive lineman during games, but when Gaviglia faces off against Martin during practice, he knows how much that can help him come game time.

"It's great because he's the best around and I know that if I can do a decent job against him, then I can block anyone come Saturday," Gaviglia said.

Conversly, Martin also gave compliments to the offensive players who have helped him over the years.

"Those are the guys I really contribute those sacks to, because they work me every day."

Among his laundry list of honors, Martin is also one of the team captains for this season.

"When you watch him play, you want to play like him," Blandford said. "He shows you how to play and what to do."

A unique part of Martin's personality is how down-to-earth he is; it's rare to ever hear him boasting about his personal accomplishments.

"[My first impression was] how humble he was. For all the achievements he's been awarded, he's very humble. I've never met a person like him," De Bien said.

That facet of Martin plays into his leadership style. Martin is not a screaming-at-the-top-of-his-lungs kind of guy; he is a more reserved leader for the Rock.

"He leads by example a lot, he's a great leader and a great teammate, nothing more you can ask," De Bien said.

"He's more of a visual leader, you see him constantly working at his craft and showing us what to do," Soave said. "He makes sure everyone is doing everything right."

"If you just watch him on and off the field, he does all the right things," Blandford said. "He sets an example for all of us. He leads our D-Line, and we can take a lot away from that."

Martin's influence over his teammates is near limitless; even offensive players get Martin's leadership qualities rubbed off on them.

"He demonstrates a great work ethic, he's one of those people where you can see how he does things and model that," Gaviglia said. "He's got one of the greatest work ethics I've ever seen."

Many fans, players, coaches and scouts have seen Martin play throughout his career, but Lutz is someone who has seen Martin's career in its' entirety in a closer scope than perhaps anyone else. Lutz was an integral part in recruiting Martin and when Martin arrived in 2013 and was redshirted, Lutz was the defensive line coach and defensive coordinator. Lutz stayed in that position for Martin's first three years at SRU, before being promoted to head coach in 2016.

"He wouldn't surprise me with anything going forward, because of his work ethic, his determination, he refuses to

lose, refuses to quit," Lutz said. "I haven't coached many guys like this in my whole 20 year career at Slippery Rock."

As Martin's career winds down, it's easy to look back at his book of accomplishments and focus on his personal greatness, but Martin is never one to do that.

"Everybody has been calling me the GOAT (greatest of all time)," Martin said. "It's hard to put that in perspective, I just feel like another person whose just playing the game of football."

Versus Clarion on senior day, Martin was able to finally close out the NCAA all-division, all-time sacks award, recording 4.5 sacks.

"That's my best memory of Marcus," Lutz said. "You can't ask for a better senior day."

That wasn't what Martin remembered most about the day, as he also scored his first touchdown, returning a fumble 74 yards for the score.

"Once I saw the ball, I told myself I wasn't getting caught. I made it personal after that point," Martin said. "Earlier in the season, my grandma made me promise her I would get a touchdown by the end of the season."

Slippery Rock's only current NFL player, San Francisco 49ers guard Brandon Fusco was drafted in the sixth round of the NFL draft. Fusco is the only NFL drafted player that Mihalik coached, but he sees many similarities between Martin and Fusco.

"Their approach that they had something to prove. They both could definitely play in Division I, I think they were both out to prove a point that you can live your dream by coming to a Division II program, but it's going to take that commitment," Mihalik said. "The fact that you are at Division II is that you have to do that much more to get the attention."

Martin's personal accomplishments are one's that have never been seen before at this level, but the team's accomplishments during his time here are also some of the best SRU has ever had. His senior class holds a 36-11 record, third best in SRU history. This senior class also won back-to-back PSAC championships in 2014 and 2015, the first ever conference titles for SRU. That 2015 season saw the Rock advance to the NCAA quarterfinals and finish 12-2, tied for the most wins in school history. The 2017 Rock football seniors also hold a near-perfect 21-1 record at home over their careers.

The most important part of the experience at SRU for Martin has been the postseason success. Martin has helped lead The Rock to two playoff appearances in his first two seasons, only the fifth and sixth playoff appearances in school history. A win over Kutztown on Saturday will almost assure another playoff birth, which would make Martin and his classmates the third-ever SRU class to make playoffs three-out-of-four years.

Martin's career is the definition of once-in-a-lifetime. No other player in the history of college football has had the tremendous success that Martin has had, all while being a five-time PSAC scholar athlete and a two-time CoSIDA academic all-american. Among all of his outstanding athletic feats, duality as an excellent student-athlete and leadership for one of the best classes in Rock history, Martin's personality is the thing that sticks out as the most special.

The thing you got to give Marcus credit for is that he has God-given athleticism, but he is a tireless worker," Lutz said. "It could be practice or Friday walkthrough, he never changes his approach."