

# Ball carrier, faith warrior

*SJV seminarian serves God on the field while amassing hundreds of rushing yards*

By Dave Hrbacek  
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Three years ago, Jordan Roberts was enjoying life as a star running back for the University of South Dakota in Vermillion.

Then, a double dose of heartache gut-punched him in October 2012.

First, his girlfriend of seven years broke up with him. Then, less than 24 hours later, his best friend committed suicide.

His fragile faith seemed woefully insufficient for this double whammy, like a quarterback trying to escape an all-out blitz.

“Those two things combined was probably the greatest pain that I’ve ever experienced as a human being. I was just screaming, I broke a bunch of stuff. It was bad, it was really bad,” said Roberts, 22. “I really had nowhere to turn. I hit rock bottom, and I looked for answers.”

Before long, he decided to turn to God. That simple act eventually led him 300 miles to the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul and St. John Vianney College Seminary, where he enrolled last spring.

He has become a standout running back for the Tommies, who are 6-0 this season, and he inspires the hopes of both players and coaches that he can help lead the team deep into the Division III playoffs next month and possibly its first national championship.

“The national championship is our goal, but we are completely focused on the process — the daily process — and doing all the little things right,” said Roberts, a junior studying philosophy and health promotion who grew up in Wyoming.

For Roberts, the “little things” include an active, daily prayer life, plus an intentional practice of the Catholic faith. He grew up attending a variety of nondenominational churches, then was introduced to Catholicism by his high school football coach in Wyoming, Don Julian.

But, he didn’t become interested in learning more until after the death of his childhood friend, Nicholas Bazemore.

“That’s where my faith conversion really exploded,” he said. “I got involved at a local Newman Center that was right by the dorm that I was living in. And, I got plugged into a FOCUS Bible study — Fellowship of Catholic University Students. And I met some great men there that were really key in my walk with God. They taught me a lot and they got me out of the hole that I was in.”

In January 2013, he went to a FOCUS conference in Orlando, Florida, which was the spark that set his heart on fire for the Catholic faith. He enrolled in classes for Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and started taking them three to four times a week from a priest on campus. He joined the Church in October 2013, one year after his friend died.

Eventually, he started thinking about the priesthood and how to discern the call. He learned that men from Sioux Falls would go to St. John Vianney, so he planned a visit there last fall.

“St. Thomas was actually playing St. John’s



Jordan Roberts spends time praying the rosary and reading Scripture as a seminarian at St. John Vianney College Seminary, even as he works diligently on carrying the ball for the University of St. Thomas football team. *Dave Hrbacek/The Catholic Spirit*

[University in Collegeville] that weekend, so I got to watch that game and visit the seminary,” he said. “I absolutely fell in love with the place. . . . The brotherhood here, I could feel it instantly, and I was so attracted to it. I was so attracted to the seminary, the school, the football team. I thought, ‘That would be amazing if I could be here.’ I prayed the entire way back to South Dakota.”

He made quick work of the lengthy application — taking just three days to fill it out — and was quickly accepted. It did not take long for him to make a positive impression on Father Michael Becker, SJV’s rector.

“What you find with Jordan is a deep gratitude to God for the opportunity to be in seminary,” Father Becker said. He noted that having Jordan at SJV has created a bond between the football team and the seminarians, some of whom wear costumes to the games, calling themselves Caruso’s Crew, after head coach Glenn Caruso. They chant special cheers throughout the game, especially when Roberts bursts for a big gain or scores a touchdown.

But, there may be no bigger fan of the 6-foot, 220-pound running back than Caruso himself, who called seeing Roberts carry the ball “an absolute joy.”

“Holy buckets, I love watching him run,” he exclaimed.

To be sure, the eighth-year coach must be pleased with Roberts’ stats for this season — 730 rushing yards in six games for an average of 121 per game, plus 14 touchdowns, including four against archrival St. John’s in a 35-14 win Sept. 26.

But when he takes time to describe Roberts and what he means to the football team, he spends more time talking about his faith and character than about his numbers.

“He’s the type of kid that if someday your daughter came to the doorstep with a guy like Jordan Roberts, you’d be the happiest parents in the world,” Caruso said. “He balances all of those things that are most important in life, and he doesn’t spend much time worrying about those things that are not very important. And, in a day and an age all the more devoted to style over substance,

I find that entirely refreshing.”

That’s precisely why the coach easily agreed to give Roberts Sundays off to spend time with the men at SJV, even though it’s a busy day of football preparation that involves watching film of the previous game and preparing for the next opponent.

It’s also why he made a special trip to a gift shop in Rome when the team visited over the summer, after taking his star running back to the top of St. Peter’s Basilica for a view of the city.

“He was on my mind that day,” Caruso said. “We took a walk up to the cupola, which was pretty astounding. You can see all of Rome.”

On the way back down, they went into a gift shop, where Caruso bought Roberts a Pope Francis medal. On the back, he wrote an acronym — MYPABW — and told Roberts to go figure out what it stood for.

He couldn’t, so the coach explained it to him the next day — May Your Path Always Be Worthy.

“That little acronym has changed my life completely,” Roberts said. “Every single day, with every single decision, you’re at a crossroads. You can choose the easiest path or the harder, more worthy path.”

For Roberts, the worthy path involves taking his faith onto the field. He prays before and during every game, and recalled a sense of peace he felt when his team played St. John’s. He is bold about sharing his faith with teammates, and said they all have shown nothing but respect for him.

At the moment, Roberts is pondering and trying to discern two distinct possibilities — life as a priest and life as a player in the NFL. The latter dream stretches back to the fifth grade, while the other is a recent development.

“There’s very few people that I respect more than priests, and I love the vocation of the priesthood,” he said. “Right now, I’m discerning if that’s for me. It’s a process. I don’t really have an answer right now, but hopefully I will at some point.”

In the meantime, he aims to carry the pigskin for the Lord and, hopefully, continue to give Caruso’s Crew plenty of reasons to cheer.