

OHIO STATE FOOTBALL RECRUITING

Ignatius' Gonzalez Is First Verbal For 2003

Cleveland St. Ignatius wide receiver/defensive back Tony Gonzalez became OSU's first verbal commitment for 2003 when he contacted the coaching staff on April 5.

Gonzalez (6-1, 190, 4.36) is a standout two-way player for St. Ignatius' Division I state championship team.

"I wanted to get it out of the way early," Gonzalez told BSB. "I sat down with my parents and we evaluated everything. We looked at all the possibilities, including the football program, the education, how close it was to home, how well we liked the coaches and the situation of playing time."

"When we factored all of those things in, it was clear that Ohio State was the best place for me."

RECRUITING OUTLOOK with Steve Helwagen

Gonzalez also had firm offers from the likes of Iowa, Maryland, Louisville, Boston College, Oklahoma State and Miami (Ohio).

"I e-mailed them on (April 5) to let them know," Gonzalez said. "Then I called (defensive backs coach Mel) Tucker after practice that day. He got (head coach Jim) Tressel on the telephone and I talked to him as well."

"They seemed pretty excited."

Gonzalez's father played at Michigan and his brother, Joe, will be a senior defensive back at Indiana this fall. Plus he had a cousin, Dave Becker, who was a walk-on linebacker at OSU.

"It's just a great football tradition," Gonzalez said of his new school. "They have a huge stadium and you get all the exposure you could ever want."

"Every Saturday, you come out there and play in front of a hundred thousand people in the Horseshoe and millions on TV."

Gonzalez played in 13 of St. Ignatius' 15 games this past year, missing two due to injury. On offense, he caught 42 passes for 1,112 yards (24.1 average) and 10 touchdowns. Defensively, he had 56 tackles and six interceptions for the 11-4 state champions.

He came up big in St. Ignatius' two state tournament games. He caught five passes for 152 yards and a touchdown in the 49-20 semifinal win over Massillon Washington. Then he had seven catches for 144 yards in St. Ignatius' 37-6 championship game rout of Cincinnati St. Xavier.

Gonzalez could line up at receiver, cornerback or safety for the Buckeyes.

"I'll go and do whatever is best for the team," he said. "It seems like I will probably start out on defense. I like to think I could play on either side of the ball if I had the chance."

Gonzalez fits the mold of a Tressel recruit: He holds a 3.39 GPA and has

already scored an 1150 on the SAT.

Cincinnati Princeton Senior Could Be Late 2002 Addition

Ohio State brought in a 25-man class on signing day in February. But with early enrollees Maurice Clarett and Michael Roberts already in school, the Buckeyes can count them against last year's class.

That would allow the school to potentially sign an extra player or two if a scholarship is available this summer.

OSU seems to have dialed in on Cincinnati Princeton wide receiver/defensive back Darren Barnett, who is working furiously to improve his academic standing before graduating in June.

Barnett (5-11, 180, 4.45) visited OSU with close friend and signee E.J. Underwood of Hamilton on April 6. He said the coaches told him they would likely sign him if he qualifies.

"Right now, the coaches are telling me they need more time," Barnett said. "They want to see how my grades pan out. Obviously, it would be a big edge if I can qualify."

"They said they want to come down and watch me run track and then wait it out until the end of the school year. They said I would be a great candidate for the one scholarship they have left."

Illinois also has said it would offer Barnett if he qualifies. LSU has also been involved. If he fails to qualify, he could go to Bowling Green as a Prop 48.

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"It's real exciting for me," Barnett said. "I've waited my entire life for an opportunity to play big-time college football. Ohio State is right up the road from Cincinnati, plus they put a lot of guys in the pros. I just need to do my part to try and get there."

Barnett said he currently has a 2.30 GPA to go with an 18 on the ACT. With that score, he would need a 2.375 GPA or higher to qualify.

"I think the coaches see how I've improved academically," he said. "They see I have that urgency. I started off real bad, but my grades are coming up. This is my last hope and I want to play. I know I have to buckle down and do this."

Barnett has been a three-year starter at Princeton. As a senior, he had 91 catches with 16 going for touchdowns. He also had two punt returns for scores and two of his six interceptions went back for TDs. His team reached the second round of the Division I playoffs before finishing at 8-4.

"Ohio State said they are in need of DBs," Barnett said. "They believe I might be able to come in and compete right away. I want to help out any way I can. I've been playing defense my whole life."

Barnett's friendship with Underwood helped the OSU staff recognize him.

"E.J. and his dad have been putting the word in for me," Barnett said. "They've been helping me by telling people I'm a good player and a good person off the field. I'm a guy they can spend their last scholarship on."

"I met E.J. in the eighth grade when we were playing basketball against each other. We played together after that in the spring and summer. Since then, we've just clicked. We talk all the time and we go to acceleration training together."

"E.J. knows us being together up there could be a good thing for Ohio State."

OSU Signees, Prospects Attend Spring Practice

Underwood and Barnett were among a collection of OSU signees and prospects who made it to at least one of the team's first three spring practice sessions.

Signees attending the early sessions included Justin Zwick, Bobby Carpenter, R.J. Coleman, Doug Datish, Tim Schafer and Rob Sims. North Carolina offensive lineman Derek Morris and his father used Morris' spring break to also make the trip up to Columbus.

"Some people go to Florida and Cancun for spring break," Tressel said. "Other guys go to the frigid spring practice here. It's fun for them. They enjoy coming out and peeking in the huddle and trying to find out what's going on."

Zwick, for instance, was keeping a close eye on junior quarterbacks Craig Krenzel and Scott McMullen.

"I just wanted to come down and be around practice," Zwick told The Associated Press. "I've been excited for it to start. I'm looking forward to summer coming and just trying to be around it as much as I can."

"My time will come. I've just got to sit and wait for it."

Perhaps the top junior to watch OSU in the first week was massive West Chester (Ohio) Lakota West defensive tackle Brandon Maupin (6-5, 270, 4.9), rated among Ohio's top 20 junior prospects.

Avon Lake, Ohio, defensive back Brian Jones (6-1, 180, 4.4) also attended an OSU spring practice.

"I like Ohio State, Notre Dame, Virginia, Wisconsin and Penn State," Jones told Bill Kurelic of The Ohio

Football Recruiting News and the BSB Internet site (ohiostate.rivals.com). "Every school in the Big Ten except Penn State has offered me a scholarship."

"I really liked it a lot (at OSU). I like Coach Tucker a lot."

Jones, playing alongside OSU signee Mike D'Andrea, had 32 tackles and four interceptions on defense and rushed for 1,100 yards on offense. He also has a 3.75 GPA.

Miscellaneous Notes

Rumors continue to persist that St. Henry, Ohio, junior quarterback Todd Boeckman (6-5, 215, 4.75) has verbally committed to Ohio State.

"No, I haven't committed to anyone," Boeckman told Kurelic.

OSU, Pittsburgh, Maryland, Iowa and Miami (Ohio) all have offered Boeckman, who threw for over 1,700 yards and 14 touchdowns last year.

"I'm going to Maryland for a day or two of their spring practice and I'm going to visit Ohio State for a spring practice, too," Boeckman said. "I'd say Ohio State is still my favorite."

Michigan, Notre Dame, Tennessee, Kentucky and Syracuse also have expressed interest in Boeckman.

G&W Recruiting Report recently issued a list of 100 prep stars to watch for next year. The list includes 10 Ohio prospects.

They include Boeckman, Warren Harding defensive back Prescott Burgess, Akron St. Vincent-St. Mary defensive lineman Sian Cotton, Massillon Washington defensive end Shawn Crable, Cleveland Glenville defensive lineman Michael Hearn, Cleveland Glenville defensive back Dareus Hiley, Youngstown Ursuline tight end Louis Irizarry, Massillon Washington wide receiver Devin Jordan, Cincinnati St. Xavier



Todd Boeckman

defensive lineman Nick Larkin and Strongsville offensive lineman Dan Pribula.

Ohio's Future Stars has completed its 2002 spring issue. It includes rankings of the state's top 200 seniors-to-be, the top 100 juniors and top 30 sophomores. Plus

it looks at the national top 100 as well.

We will examine some of these rankings in an upcoming edition.

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OHIO STATE FOOTBALL PROFILE

Opponents Often Find Gonzalez Flying By

By ERIC LOUGHRY

Buckeye Sports Bulletin Staff Writer

They started out together in the defensive secondary at Ohio State, but cornerback Ashton Youboty didn't know what to make of Anthony Gonzalez at first.

Not long after beginning his Buckeye career, Gonzalez — a two-way standout at Cleveland St. Ignace High School as a receiver and cornerback — went to OSU coach Jim Tressel and asked if he could move from safety to receiver. The coach granted the request, ending Gonzalez' stint as a defensive back before his first week at Ohio State was through.

Listed at 6-0 and 200 pounds, by his own admission Gonzalez doesn't exactly look the part of either a Division I-A receiver or safety.

However, it didn't take long for Gonzalez to show Youboty and his other teammates he belonged. Soon after moving to receiver, Gonzalez drew coverage from starting cornerback Dustin Fox in practice.

"His freshman year, nobody realized how fast he was," Youboty said. "We were doing one-on-ones, and Fox is supposed to be a fast corner. (Gonzalez) runs by Fox and everyone's like, 'Whoa!'"

"Everyone was surprised. But after that, everybody knows his speed. The good thing about Tony is his deception. Opposing teams don't really know about him because of (Santonio) Holmes and Teddy (Ginn)."

Michigan didn't clue in to Gonzalez' speed last year until it was too late. On the fifth play from scrimmage — a third-and-long situation — quarterback Troy Smith avoided a rush just long enough to unload a deep ball to Gonzalez, who had a few steps on Michigan safety Ernest

Shazor on a post route.

It was Gonzalez' job to occupy the safety on the play. He said Shazor didn't really pay much attention to him. By the time the safety did, it was too late. Gonzalez was gone, hauling in the pass 40 yards downfield and sprinting the remaining 28 yards to the goal line untouched to give the Buckeyes a 7-0 lead in the 37-21 win over UM.

According to Smith, opponents tend to underestimate Gonzalez. "And then he runs right past guys like a blur — don't even know he's there," Smith said.

From The Shadows

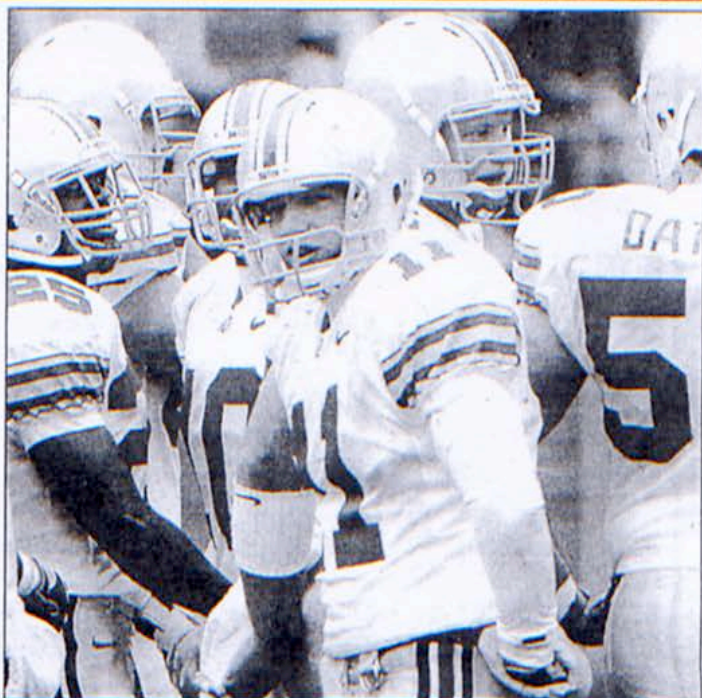
It was Ginn's emergence in the second half of last season that provided the primary spark to OSU's offense, giving OSU another threat besides Holmes at receiver — not to mention out of the backfield and fielding punts — but Gonzalez came up big late in the season, too, despite not reaching double figures in receptions for the year.

He played briefly in the season opener against Cincinnati but didn't see the field again until the sixth game of the season, pulling in his first career reception late in a lopsided loss at Iowa.

"I didn't think I was going to play that week," Gonzalez said. "My parents didn't even go to the game. It was the only game they missed. So I don't know if I was expecting it, but you always have to be ready, certainly, and anything can happen — especially in a game like football where there are so many injuries. Anything can happen at any time."

In Smith's first start at quarterback, Gonzalez had two catches for a pedestrian 21 yards in a win over Indiana.

It was his first of only two multiple-catch games of the season — the other coming against rival Michigan — and he would finish with just eight receptions, but they went for an average of 22.4



JEFF BREHM

GOING, GOING, GONZO — A dangerous weapon in his own right, Anthony Gonzalez sometimes gets lost in all the talk about stellar receivers Santonio Holmes and Ted Ginn Jr. Gonzalez averaged 22.4 yards on eight grabs last season.

yards and he had two touchdowns.

His first big play came at Purdue on a 38-yard catch and run over the middle late in the fourth quarter to set the Buckeyes up for the game-tying score in the eventual loss.

It was his catch against Michigan that made him known to Buckeye fans, though.

"It's not like I did that much last year," Gonzalez said. "I had eight catches. That's hardly any. But the fact that it was in that game I'm sure boosted my notoriety a little bit."

"It was nice to do that in that game. That was a dream come true for me. I've been waiting to play in that game for my whole life."

In the Alamo Bowl, Gonzalez again struck early to give the Buckeyes a lead right out of the gate. On OSU's third play from scrimmage he made a diving catch just across the goal line of an underthrown pass from Justin Zwick for a 23-yard touchdown.

Gonzalez capped off spring practice with a game-high four receptions for 33 yards and a touchdown — a 6-yard toss

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from Todd Boeckman caught in the back of the end zone — in an unseasonably cold and wet Scarlet and Gray Game.

"When he really stepped up about midyear and really became a part of our attack, we felt that really helped us," Tressel said after the spring game. "He continued to do that the entire spring, not just this game. He made some good plays this spring game, but he had an excellent spring, period."

With the strong finish, Gonzalez won't sneak up on — or by — anybody as a sophomore.

"He just had a slow start last year, and this year he's going to really pick it up and you're going to see a lot of him," Ginn said.

Still, with Ginn and Holmes at receiver, Gonzalez doesn't expect too much attention to come his way.

"I'm sure when teams look at the scouting (report), I'm probably the last name that comes to mind because Teddy and Antonio are so talented," Gonzalez said. "It's difficult to make a name when you've got guys that great in front of you."

That's fine with him. He doesn't mind being the third option.

"It opens up a little bit because they have to focus on Ted and they have to focus on Antonio because they're such great players," Gonzalez said. "And then it's up to me — or whoever's in there — to take advantage of the opportunities."

Finding A Home

Gonzalez wasn't sure if he'd ever have an opportunity when he arrived at OSU.

With 50 tackles and four interceptions from his cornerback spot as a senior at St. Ignatius, he was The Associated Press' co-Defensive Player of the Year in Ohio in 2002.

He also caught 33 passes for 900 yards and 11 TDs at wide receiver, though, and that's where he expected to play for the Buckeyes.

Instead Gonzalez was slated as a safety. After just a few tough days there he got the nerve to approach Tressel.

"I asked if I could move because I had a miserable time trying to play the safety position," he said.

Gonzalez didn't have the easiest time at receiver, either, as a freshman. He was intimidated, not sure if he belonged.

"I think the main thing that set me back was a lack of confidence," he said. "Going in, it was difficult for me to have the confidence that I needed, being that they had just won a national championship and I look out and see Chris Gamble, who's an incredible athlete, Mike Jenkins, guys like that, and it was a little intimidating. I guess I wasn't mentally prepared as much as I should have been."

To help him through that first season, Gonzalez leaned on his older brother, Joe, who was then a senior safety at Indiana.

"Having a brother who was going through Big Ten football at the time certainly helps because I could call him with any questions I had," Gonzalez said. "And I did pretty (often) my freshman year — just talking to him, seeing how he was doing. And then he, of

course, would ask how I was doing. He helped me a lot, and still does to this day."

Gonzalez eventually was noticed on the scout team in the redshirt season of 2003. He was offensive scout team player of the week for the look he gave the defense leading up to the Penn State game. By the time the Buckeyes

returned from the Fiesta Bowl in Tempe, Ariz., he had made up his mind that he could play for the Buckeyes.

"When we first got back immediately after the season ended, that's not when I became confident," Gonzalez said. "But that's when I told myself, 'All right, now you've really got to get after it. You need to be a part of this football team.'"

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OHIO STATE VS. MICHIGAN

Gonzo's Clutch Catch Set Up Winning Score

Anthony Gonzalez will be the first guy to tell you that he isn't as physically gifted as some of Ohio State's other receivers.

He usually lines up in the slot to take advantage of his underrated speed, yet he doesn't see himself with nearly the same kind of skills as Antonio Holmes or Ted Ginn Jr.

But after Ohio State's dramatic 25-21 win over Michigan, Gonzalez will have a place in the annals of clutch Buckeye performers.

He may not have found the end zone against the Wolverines, but he's a prime reason that OSU was able to erase the 21-12 deficit they faced with 7:49 to play.

A first-down catch netted 27 yards and put the Buckeyes into Michigan territory. They scored four plays later, cutting it to 21-19.

On the next drive came the play that will keep Gonzalez entrenched in Ohio State football lore long after his playing days are over.

On second-and-5 from the Michigan 30, Gonzalez was supposed to run a simple out route. Michigan brought some heat and rushed Troy Smith, who nimbly avoided trouble and rolled to his right.

He saw Gonzalez — who had broken off into a wheel route before heading back toward the sideline — running free and flung a rocket. It was a bit high, but the sophomore receiver climbed the ladder to get it and gave the Buckeyes a first down at the Wolverines' 4.



JEFF BREHM

NO LONGER FORGOTTEN — You would think Michigan had learned its lesson after last year, but OSU receiver Anthony Gonzalez was a thorn in the Wolverines' side again. The sophomore, who grabbed a TD pass last year, made several huge catches including a 26-yarder to set up the Buckeyes' game-winning touchdown.

INSIDE THE OFFENSE with Mike Wachsman

It was the stuff of which legends are made, but Gonzalez said it was just another play.

"I won't be talking about it," he said. "Maybe some people will. It's not the end. I'm only a sophomore, so I have time."

Two plays later, Antonio Pittman took it in for the game-winning score.

While not exactly a forgotten man, Gonzalez often finds himself as third

banana in Ohio State's passing game. Defenses sometimes forget about him, and he burns them with his speed and his hands.

It happened last year against Michigan when he went 67 yards for the Buckeyes' opening touchdown, and it happened again this year as Gonzalez finished with four grabs for 75 yards.

"If you forget about a guy like that, he's going to make a big play," Holmes said. "He's a guy that takes pressure away from me and Ted. He does exactly what he's supposed to do and he's just there for you."

"He's a great guy to be around. He's smart on the field and in the classroom. We call the guy 'The Wizard' and we just look up to him because he makes the right decisions all the time."

Holmes sees himself as a flamboyant player — and he tested those limits by diving over the goal line on a 26-yard scoring pass from Smith to draw the Buckeyes to within two points at 21-19. But he said on this day, Gonzalez trumped him.

"You have to give the style points to Gonzo for that catch," Holmes said. "He jumped, he stretched ... that was one helluva catch, man. They don't come any better than that. And then when you consider the importance of the catch, the timing of the play ... that made our season. Big-time players step up when the game's on the line, and he stepped up big-time."

That it came against Michigan was a bit ironic for Gonzalez, whose father attended the university and used to take a still-growing Anthony to games at the Big House.

"The hotel where the team stayed was the one we used to stay in when I came to games with him as a little kid," Gonzalez said. "He doesn't root for Michigan, though — he's my fan. Wherever I went, he was going to be happy. He roots for the Buckeyes and was just as happy as anyone."

Pulling Their Weight

Even though it took some drama at the end, Ohio State was fairly dominant offensively against Michigan.

The Buckeyes netted 418 yards — 300 through the air — and gave Smith

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more than enough time to operate by allowing just one sack. Much of that was because of the offensive line play.

"I want to give all the props and respect to the guys up front," Smith said. "The guys on the offensive line to me are everything. Without those guys, this couldn't have happened today."

The Buckeyes had a bit of a lull in the third quarter, scoring no points and tallying just 33 yards on 15 plays.

Some of that was because Michigan adjusted its defensive look, and some was because of execution.

"They were stunting a lot in the second half, but we got it adjusted and by the end of the game they weren't stunting anymore," OSU offensive tackle Doug Datish said. "They were back on their heels a bit."

The Buckeyes didn't panic when they got down, and the guys up front dug down and reasserted themselves.

"We kept fighting," center Nick Mangold said. "Our guys wanted to get in there, especially on that last drive. That's the kind of spirit we had."

"We slowed down a little. I think they made some good adjustments. They kept playing hard. They're never going to give up. They kept fighting and it was just a great ballgame."

Pittman finished with 85 hard-earned yards, none bigger than the final 3 that led to the game-winning touchdown.

"The offensive line never let me down," the sophomore tailback said. "I owe it all to them."

Saving His Best

Holmes has been Ohio State's most consistent receiving threat all season, but he's also gained a reputation for showing up in big games.

He scored for the fourth time in three games against Michigan and ended the day with six grabs for 72 yards.

While that's a solid day, there probably could have been more.

"Tone is a guy, as a receiver, who pretty much is open all the time," Smith said. "He could be covered by three guys and he's still going to say he was open. That's the mentality of a receiver. You have to have that. You have to want the ball all the time. It doesn't matter where the ball is going to be thrown, you have to have the mentality that you're going to go get it. Antonio has that."

Holmes let anyone who'd listen know that he was ready to make a game-changing play.

"I kept jawing in Coach's ear that I needed the ball in my hands. I really need to make a play," Holmes said. "We just kept going and made a big play."

And his dive over the goal line?

"I wasn't trying to show off or anything like that," he said. "I was just trying to get to the end zone as quick as possible."

Ginn actually led all Ohio State receivers with nine grabs for 89 yards and had three catches on the game-winning drive.

He felt it was simply the Buckeyes taking what the defense allowed.

"They ran Cover 2 and Cover 3," Ginn said. "We took our shots and played pretty good."

Holmes said Michigan fought to the very end and made the Buckeyes earn everything they got.

"It wasn't a dogfight, it was a war," he said. "Dogfights go on and then quit. That game went on to the very end."

The Best Laid Plans

Ohio State coach Jim Tressel made no secret that he wanted the offense to set the football up in the middle of the field so Josh Huston could hit a game-winning field goal.

After Gonzalez's huge catch, Smith ran an option keeper to the right, which prompted Tressel's decision.

The next play was a handoff to Pittman designed to go to the middle, but a hole opened courtesy of Stan White Jr. and Andree Tyree, and Pittman was able to find the end zone and put the Buckeyes ahead.

While Tressel simply wanted to do the simplest thing, Pittman had other ideas.

"I've got faith in Josh and his legs, but I have faith in my two legs, too," he said. "I wanted to get it in so there wouldn't be any doubt in anyone's mind."

A Michigan defender got some pressure and made contact, but Pittman was able to fend him off.

"Once I had the contact, I was thinking, 'Keep moving, keep those legs pumping,'" he said. "I went to the left and just kind of bounced it out from there. I was kind of surprised that no one else was over on that side because everyone knew we were probably going to that side. But again, give our offensive line credit. They did their jobs and I just ran to the end zone."

Pittman had a willing crew of accomplices in the offensive line.

"The O-linemen got together and said we wanted to punch it in there and make a statement," Datish said.

Smith Does It Again

A year after putting up the single greatest performance by a quarterback in the history of the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry, Smith came back to earth a little bit.

He accounted for 337 yards of total offense — a bit below his 386 from a year earlier — but against the Wolverines he managed his first 300-yard passing day ever.

Smith also picked his spots to run but stayed with plays longer and did his best work outside the pocket.

"I have an understanding that throughout the game everything is not going to go your way," Smith said. "So as long as you believe in your coaching staff and what's being called, good things are going to happen. We didn't try to get out of the things we can do."

Even members of the OSU defense, which made the stops when it needed to, never worried about the game's outcome.

"We have great players (on offense) and it just takes a little bit for those guys to click," OSU safety Donte Whitner said. "Once they start clicking, they're rolling. We have great personnel on our offensive side of the ball, and when they're clicking, they're clicking."

Smith's performance under pressure should have come as no surprise since he's beginning to feel more and more like this is his offense. To that end, he was going to do everything in his power to bring about the victory.

"I sat back and had to think about what do I owe to my guys?" Smith said. "I owe it to them to become the quarterback, to become everything they need me to be on the field. They don't even have to think twice about whether Troy Smith is going to be there for them, to have their back."

He convinced his teammates that the game was still in reach, and all of them paid attention and went out and did their jobs.

"This is a championship team, and that's what championship teams do," Gonzalez said. "They don't back down. It's incredible to be a part of this."

Smith's teammates showered nothing but praise after the game.

"Troy showed composure, leadership, heart, determination," Holmes said. "That describes what kind of guy he is."

Being on the receiving end of a few big-time passes, Gonzalez knows as well as anyone that Smith has that special something that's often difficult to quantify.

"Troy showed what I've known since the day I met him — that he's a great leader and a great athlete who is going to make the big play when you need it," he said. "That's Troy Smith in a nutshell."

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