

# NFL draft: Texas' Caden Sterns, fueled by Jon Gruden's criticism, eager to move on Longhorns drama

By Eric Edholm

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Many once thought Texas safety Caden Sterns could have been off the NFL draft board by Day 2.

Following a Big 12 Defensive Freshman of the Year performance in 2018, Sterns — a highly touted, five-star prospect rated ahead of fellow Texan Jaylen Waddle coming out of high school — looked to be a future first-round pick. That season, he intercepted four passes, broke up another eight, blocked a field goal and made three tackles for loss.

The next two seasons featured some bumps in the road. To the surprise of some, Sterns declared early but wasn't selected in Round 1 on Thursday night. He remains hopeful and excited for what lies ahead. "I can tell I am ready," Sterns told Yahoo Sports this week. "It's something I have seen in myself. I've shown what type of player I can be. I wish I could have shown it more.

"Things didn't turn out the way I wish they did. That's just part of my story now. I just feel I am 100% ready to play at the next level."

Injuries were the biggest roadblock to Sterns not taking the next step in Austin. He suffered a knee injury late in the 2018 season, which carried over to 2019; that and an ankle injury derailed his 2019 season, resulting in four missed games. He also was set back by a toe injury this past season.

Sterns played a combined 16 games over the past two seasons, making only one interception and five pass breakups. He never looked like the rangy, ballhawking, game-changing center fielder Stern did as a freshman.

Longhorns fan message boards lit up Sterns at times over the past few seasons, which is par for the course for a player failing to meet high expectations. When he heard similar criticism from an NFL head coach — directly to his face — it struck a different tone for Sterns.

Jon Gruden wasn't afraid to call out Caden Sterns' play

Las Vegas Raiders head coach Jon Gruden isn't one to sugarcoat things or beat around the bush. He came right out during a pre-draft Zoom meeting with Sterns and delivered the hard truth: Gruden, just like Longhorns fans, expected more out of Sterns when he watched his college game tape.

Sterns' reaction to the criticism? He was all ears.

"It was actually really cool," Sterns said. "[Gruden] was coming in hot. He was just straight-up with me. He really just expects more out of me. He wanted to see more on my film. At times it was inconsistent. I was dealing with a lot when I was playing, in terms of being injured. A lot of other stuff was going on, too" "He was testing me a little bit. I was like, 'Wow, I am talking to Jon Gruden now, and he's telling me the hard truths I need to hear.'"

“My tackling is not where it needs to be,” Sterns said. “It’s a weakness of mine for sure. Taking better angles to the ball, better technique in tackling — it’s something I need to clean up.

“[Gruden] had some pretty interesting things to say to me. It was great feedback, and it shows he sees a great player inside of me, which I do too. He just wanted it to come out.”

Sterns' pro-day performance changed the narrative

Some of that natural ability came out in Sterns' pro day. He didn't measure out with tremendous size at a shade under 6-foot and 202 pounds, and his 14 bench-press reps were considered below-average. But everything else he did that day gave the look of a highly trained athlete.

(He lasted until Saturday in Round 5 of the draft, where the Denver Broncos selected him with the 152nd overall pick.)

Sterns measured with strong length for a safety, with a 77 1/8-inch wingspan and 32 1/4-inch arms. His 40-yard dash — a time of 4.4 seconds — that really opened eyes. The hesitancy Gruden saw on tape might have shown a player who didn't always maximize his terrific athletic skills, offering a mirage of a slower player.

“I think people really didn't expect that out of me,” Sterns said. “But I expected it out of myself. I saw people predicting I would run a 4.6 or something. That just fueled me even more to show them what I can run.”

On top of that, Sterns turned in great results in the vertical jump (42 inches), broad jump (128 inches), 3-cone drill (6.96 seconds) and short shuttle (4.13 seconds). It helped revive his stock and reminded observers that this was a player with first-round expectations not long ago. Sterns credits heading to EXOS for pre-draft training, which helped get his body right and improve his nutrition.

“I came in with a little chip on my shoulder,” he said. “I trained hard for it.”

“After the pro day, putting up those numbers, I was [showing teams] I am healthy,” he said. “I never had surgery. I just had all these nagging things that [added up]. Now it's time to show I can stay healthy.”

The 'Eyes of Texas' alma mater controversy

Sterns said he isn't anxious to get a fresh start in a different state, even if he couldn't be blamed for feeling that way. There are still hurt feelings and controversy swirling from the aftermath of the school's “Eyes of Texas” alma mater song.

Last fall, following the race discussions across the country amid the pandemic, the school's students raised concerns about the song's minstrel roots and requested it no longer be played at Longhorns games. This led to many Longhorn donors and boosters threatening to stop giving money to the school.

Sterns said last fall that he wasn't going to sing along with the song if it was played. He then revealed on Twitter that some of those boosters and alumni threatened to take it out on players if they didn't fall in line.

“It was a team meeting, and [former] Coach [Tom Herman] and the AD told us about [the notes from boosters],” he said. “I don’t want to dive too deep into it. But I said what I said, and I’ve moved on from what happened.

“I’ve been through a lot. We all have.”

In the end, Sterns wished Herman (who was fired at season’s end) and the Longhorns program the best — even those who wanted to hurt Sterns and his teammates for their stance on the song.

“I came to Texas because it was close to home and I wanted to get the program back on track. We wanted to be a top program in the country. Win the conference, compete for [national] titles. It just didn’t work out that way during my time.

“I want the school to get there, I really do. I wish I could have done more.”

His agent, former NFL player Barry Gardner, says Sterns standing up for his beliefs — while knowing not everyone would approve of them — is a testament to his character.

“You have a player with high expectations, who has taken on a leadership role with the team, and he’s faced with injuries, COVID, the race debates, this controversy with the song and everything else,” Gardner told Yahoo Sports, “and his teammates are looking to [Sterns] for guidance and leadership.

“That told me everything I needed to know about his character. I’ve known him since he was 16 years old, and I knew he had it. But seeing him handle the controversy head-on and stand up for it like a man, that let me know he’s going to be able to handle almost anything thrown his way at the next level.”

# After Eye-Opening Career at Texas, Caden Sterns Ready for the NFL

By Travis Recek  
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Since stepping on the field as a sophomore for the varsity team at Cibolo Steele High School, Caden Sterns has been a guy loaded with potential as a football player. In high school, he helped the Knights reach the state title game his junior season. As a senior, he emerged as a 5-star recruit and was named the defensive MVP of the prestigious Army All-American game.

“I’ve put so much time in since a young age,” says Sterns. “It really started in high school when I was working so much, became a workhorse and dedicated to my craft.”

After high school, Sterns headed just up the road to Austin to play for the University of Texas. He became a starter at safety his freshman year and had an immediate impact on the field. Sterns had three interceptions in his first four games as a college player. He finished that season with four interceptions and helped Texas get to 10 wins and a victory in the Sugar Bowl.

“I came in, had a fast start, really did some amazing things,” says Sterns of that freshman season.

2019 was a little different story for Sterns. He was hurt for parts of the season and missed a couple of games. He came back strong for the Alamo Bowl win over Utah, with eight tackles and one tackle for loss.

“Sophomore year I battled through some injuries, nothing too serious but some nagging injuries,” says Sterns.

Then came 2020, a year filled with challenges. Sterns again played hurt, most notably a turf toe injury that kept him out of the Oklahoma game. He had 52 tackles in the seven games he played, and had a game sealing interception in overtime against Texas Tech.

“It was definitely challenging, a lot of curveballs thrown at you,” said Sterns of the 2020 season. “You had COVID, you had social justice issues that shook things up. It was challenging but it was still fun. I learned so much from it that I’m appreciative for and I’m grateful. A lot of my teammates got close regardless of what the media tries to portray that it was divided, it wasn’t at all.”

One of the biggest issues that came up throughout the season was the controversy surrounding *The Eyes of Texas* and some players, like Sterns, who decided not to stay on the field after a game when the school song was being played. He admits that it was difficult to deal with.

“It was. I felt like it was guys portrayed as bad guys. What was actually trying to get accomplished with that got so switched up and trying to turn people against one another,” says Sterns. “Nobody was trying to get rid of it, just trying to innovate it where everybody can feel special and take pride into the school they want to.”

After the loss to Iowa State, Sterns decided his time at Texas was done. He opted out of the final few games and decided to enter the NFL Draft.

“There was not too much left for at Texas in terms of trying to accomplish some goals,” says Sterns. “It was an honor to play at Texas but my goal was to play at a high professional level since I was younger, so I’m going to fulfill that.”

Sterns says he learned a lot during his three years at Texas and feels like he has plenty to prove as he moves on to the pros.

“It was up and down but really opened my eyes to how much business-like it is, and the higher level you go up in this profession, the more business and cutthroat it can get,” says Sterns. “There’s a lot of people doubting me, coming up with this narrative I’m not fit for it or I regressed. I have much belief in myself. I do have a lot to prove but at the same time it’s nothing I can’t do.”

He’s motivated to make his dream come true. Sterns is now in Arizona training for his pro day and hoping to make an impression on NFL teams to get picked high in the upcoming draft, a moment that will help him realize a lifelong goal.

“It would mean the world to me. I’m excited but my goal isn’t just to get there, my dream is to stay there, dominate and create a legacy in the league,” says Sterns. “Do what I came here to do which is also change people’s lives and motivate.”

# Caden Sterns, Tre Flowers, more former San Antonio high school standouts team up to raise \$50K for food bank

By RJ Marquez  
KSAT  
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A group of former San Antonio area football standouts are showing that no matter where the game takes them, they will always come together to support their home communities.

The Faith Family Food Team, which is made up of former San Antonio area high school football stars including LA Rams running back Malcolm Brown (Steele HS), Seattle Seahawks defensive back Tre Flowers (Judson HS) and Texas defensive back Caden Sterns (Steele HS), is hoping to raise \$50,000 for the San Antonio Food Bank.

Other players taking part in the campaign to feed local families include Texas offensive lineman Derek Kerstetter (Reagan HS), Georgia wide receiver Tommy Bush (Clemens HS) and UTSA defensive back Rashad Wisdom (Judson).

The campaign went live on Tuesday. Sterns posted on the food bank's web site that the group wanted to come together and make a difference in the community they value and love.

"It came to our attention that there was a huge need of money providing food for families due to the inconveniences of COVID-19," Sterns wrote. "Coming together and becoming a team as a community hasn't been more important, so please donate, share, and repost so we can provide meals for those in need."

The San Antonio Food Bank has ramped up its service to the community in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

The demand for the food bank and its services have been unprecedented since COVID-19 swept through the area. The food bank fights hunger and feeds thousands in the San Antonio area and throughout Southwest Texas.

Even though the goal for the Faith Family Food Team is \$50,000, Sterns posted "anything helps and all donations are greatly appreciated. God bless and stay safe!"