

From OU to the NFL: Nik Bonitto

By Bob Pryzybylo
Sooner Scoop
April 29, 2022

Oklahoma fans breathed a sigh of relief when Nik Bonitto returned to the Sooners for the 2021 season, and he made it count.

Bonitto has been a dynamic playmaker on the defense the last couple of seasons and he's taking those skills to the next level.

Bonitto has found his next home, being selected by the Denver Broncos with the No.64 overall pick in the NFL Draft. The final pick of the second round.

2021 stats: 39 tackles, 15 TFL, seven sacks, FF, three FR

Career stats: 117 tackles, 32 TFL, 18.5 sacks, INT, FF, three FR

OU just doesn't go into Florida and land elite defensive prospects. But that's what former defensive coordinator Mike Stoops was able to do with Bonitto. From his game-clinching interception at Baylor in 2019 and onward, Bonitto was tremendous for the Sooners.

He had so many good and great moments in 2020 and 2021 that it almost became hard to pick just one. Things like his 2020 outing vs. Texas and his fumble return at Kansas State in 2021 didn't make the cut.

Bonitto proved to be an elite pass rusher in the last two seasons, making it all the more confusing that OU didn't just unleash him in that role nonstop.

The Sooners haven't made a huge dent in Florida with defensive recruits, but OU can now absolutely point toward Bonitto as someone who was able to find success when he chose the crimson and cream.

He was easily one of the leaders of the defense and became one of the more consistent performers, no matter what was asked of him.

Best game

2021 vs. Nebraska: 23-16 win. A rivalry renewed, and Bonitto was phenomenal. He had five tackles, including three for loss and two sacks in the narrow win. He essentially sealed the deal with a third down sack on the final drive of the game, making sure the Sooners didn't face the possibility of being upset by the Huskers.

He says...

"Well, it just depends what team, what scheme they're running. Some guys want to be able to have me on outside linebacker. Some guys want to have my hand in the dirt. Some guys want me inside or some guys want me to do all three of depending on what the packages are. So it just depends on what teams are talking to me. I prefer coming off the edge, but I'm very capable of doing all three." – Bonitto

OU football: Three things to know about Nik Bonitto for the 2022 NFL Draft

By Robb Hibbard
The Oklahoman
April 28, 2022

OU football linebacker Nik Bonitto is hoping to cap his career as an Oklahoma Sooner by being selected in the 2022 NFL Draft Thursday through Saturday, April 28-30.

The 2022 NFL Draft begins at 7 p.m. Thursday, April 28.

OU Pro Day notebook: Perrion Winfrey looking forward to playing position he's 'truly supposed to play' in NFL

Bonitto, a native of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., was a consistent starter on the Sooners' defense the past two seasons. Bonitto, who majored in communication at OU, started in every game the Sooners played in 2020 and 2021.

OU football: Here are the OU football players in the transfer portal & those declared for the 2022 NFL Draft

Here's some basic information about Nik Bonitto:

High school: St. Thomas Aquinas
Height: 6-feet, 3-inches

Hometown: Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Here are three things to know about Oklahoma football linebacker Nik Bonitto for the 2022 NFL Draft.

'He's taken off from then': How Nik Bonitto's interception in OU's 2019 win at Baylor boosted his career

Nik Bonitto is among OU football record-holders

Bonitto, who began his NCAA career with the Oklahoma Sooners in 2018, ranks 13th all-time in quarterback sacks at OU with 13.5 — third-best among linebackers.

He recorded 117 tackles, including 32 for loss, in his 39 career games.

Nik Bonitto honored while playing for the Sooners

In 2021, Bonitto was named the Big 12 Defensive Player of the year by PFF. Other honors he's earned during his OU football career include:

Bednarik Award semifinalist

All-Big 12 Second Team

Academic All-Big 12 Second Team

OU's Nik Bonitto (11) lines up during a 16-13 win against West Virginia on Sept. 25 in Norman.
Nik Bonitto: Savior of the Sooners' 2019 season?

During the 2019 OU football game against Baylor, the Sooners found themselves down 25 points in the second quarter.

OU came back to beat Baylor 34-31, and Bonitto made the key play in the game.

The Sooners had stormed back to take the lead in the game's final two minutes. But the Baylor offense was on the move.

Baylor quarterback Charlie Brewer threw in Bonitto's direction. Bonitto, who had dropped a sure interception earlier in the game, didn't let this one get away.

The win — and the OU football season — was preserved.

Former Oklahoma Sooners: A look back at Nik Bonitto's Oklahoma Career

By John Williams
Sooners Wire
April 4, 2022

Over the last two years of his career, few players had as much of an impact on the defensive side of the football as Nik Bonitto did for the Oklahoma Sooners. As Pro Football Focus' highest-graded pass rusher across the 2020 and 2021 seasons, the Sooners were witness to a dynamic player that could affect both the run and the passing game.

Over the last two seasons, Bonitto registered 16 sacks, including nine in the COVID-shortened 2020 season. He made his presence felt in big moments and in big games. In three games against Texas, Bonitto registered 4.5 sacks. One of his biggest moments came in the game where Oklahoma fell behind 28-3 to the Baylor Bears. After a second-half explosion put the Sooners in front, Baylor was driving the field.

Bears quarterback Charlie Brewer had driven Baylor just outside of field goal range. Twice, he attempted to throw the ball to the flat. The first time Nik Bonitto read it perfectly and then dropped it. When Brewer went back to the well on the very next play, Bonitto didn't let that one slip throw his grasp and intercepted the pass to end Baylor's comeback attempt.

Bonitto now heads to the NFL draft where he's likely to get his name called inside the top 100 of the 2022 NFL draft. He was named one of Pro Football Focus' more underrated prospects heading into the draft.

Vitals
Ht: 6-3

Wt: 240 lbs

Hometown: Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

High School: St. Thomas Aquinas

247Sports Composite Ranking
four-star | No. 17 OLB | No. 40 in Florida

Career Stats

Defense & Fumbles Table

Year	Class	G	Solo	Ast	Tot	Loss	Sk	Int	PD	FR	FF
*2018	FR	2	2	1	3	0.0	0.0	0	0	0	0
*2019	FR	13	25	18	43	6.5	3.5	1	4	0	0
*2020	SO	10	19	14	33	11.5	9.0	0	2	0	0
*2021	JR	11	23	16	39	15.0	7.0	0	1	2	1
Career			69	49	118	33.0	19.5	1	7	2	1

Accolades

Under Armour High School All-American

First-team Pro Football Focus All-American (2020)

Second-team AP All-American (2020)

Pro Football Focus Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year (2021)

Second-team Academic All-Big 12 (2020)

AP and Coaches Second-team All-Big 12 (2021)

Bednarik Award Semifinalist (2021)

OU football: Sooners linebacker Nik Bonitto embracing preseason accolades, hopes to build off 2020 season

By Austin Curtright

OU Daily

Aug. 13, 2021

Fresh off a breakout season, Nik Bonitto remains hungry for national accolades.

The redshirt junior received a second-team AP All-American selection last fall, but didn't garner much additional recognition. Bonitto was left off the All-Big 12 team entirely, despite boasting a 25.7 percent pressure rate — the highest mark in FBS Division I — according to Pro Football Focus.

The script has flipped recently, however, as Bonitto was named to the USA Today Preseason All-America team on Wednesday, and the Bednarik, Butkus and Nagurski Trophy watch lists in July. The 6-foot-3 outside linebacker said he would embrace being the presumed best player on OU's defense, but knows he still hasn't performed to his potential.

"I feel like, even though I had a good year last year, it wasn't to my standard of what I think I can do," Bonitto said Wednesday. "Because I still have a lot to grow in my game. But it's definitely honoring for sure."

OU coach Lincoln Riley was once unsure if Bonitto would ever survive, much less excel in Norman.

"He was on thin ice at times early in his career here," Riley said at Big 12 Media Days on July 14. "There were some times where you looked at him like, 'Man is he going to make it or not?' ... He had to really turn it around and I give the kid a lot of credit. He's, in every part of his life, taken a dramatic shift."

Bonitto finished last season with the Sooners' second-most tackles for loss and sacks on the team, with 10.5 and eight, respectively. He evolved from the struggling underclassman Riley would've never expected to bring to Big 12 Media Days, to a likely first round NFL Draft pick after this season and a leader among his defensive teammates.

Bonitto's growth contributed to the improvement of defensive coordinator Alex Grinch's unit, which has risen to new heights since he took the job in 2019.

Offensive line coach Bill Bedenbaugh even noticed the difference in the defensive line since Grinch's arrival, agreeing the players look bigger and stronger. Bedenbaugh noted the rapid growth has even helped the offensive line improve just by the competition between the units in practice.

"There's no doubt in my time here. ... It's as deep as I've seen and as talented and as big and as athletic," Bedenbaugh said of the defense. "(It's) as challenging as I've seen since I've been here."

The development of additional pass rushers alongside Bonitto is also important for Oklahoma. Defensive line coach Calvin Thibodeaux said interior linemen find better results when edge rushers create pressure.

“If our guys can stay square and just push the pocket, man you’ll run into some easy sacks,” Thibodeaux said. “When you have a guy that can bend the way (Bonitto) does, and as explosive as he is, if you’re just collapsing the pocket you’ll run into some cheap sacks.”

Bonitto spearheads a defensive line with preseason All-Big 12 selections Perrion Winfrey and Isaiah Thomas, and redshirt sophomore Jalen Redmond, who led the Sooners in sacks in 2019 before opting-out of the 2020 season due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Grinch also said he expects six pass rushers and eight interior defensive linemen to rotate this season.

“We know it, now we got to help the younger guys know it,” Bonitto said of learning Grinch’s system. “Specifically in my group, like Clayton Smith, or Brynden Walker or Marcus Stripling. ... It’s really just as older guys, we got to take it upon ourselves to bring the young guys along and make sure they know the defense as well as we do.”

Growth of OU linebacker Nik Bonitto aiding him in new starting role

By Kelly Hines
Tulsa World
Oct. 21, 2019

Amid a season-ending injury to outside linebacker Jon-Michael Terry, redshirt freshman Nik Bonitto has moved into a starting role for No. 5 Oklahoma.

"I don't know a guy that probably has grown any more than him in our time here from a maturity standpoint," defensive coordinator Alex Grinch said. "As maturity came, his performance went up. I think obviously once your performance goes up, the trust that we have in him from a coaching standpoint continued to grow."

After Terry was hurt in practice last week, Bonitto made his first career start Saturday against West Virginia and recorded his second sack of the year. On the season, he has 23 tackles including 3.5 for lost yardage.

"He had a very up-and-down redshirt year, and to be completely honest, it was probably a little more down than up," coach Lincoln Riley said. "He struggled with the transition a little bit. ... As he's bought-in more, he kind of just hung in there.

"Then after that, you've seen him just buy in more. His confidence level's gone up. I think his trust level has gone up with the staff and everybody around here. And he's just a very, very talented player."

Bonitto has grown up since arriving on campus, having had to accept a redshirt season despite being a renowned four-star recruit from a tradition-rich St. Thomas Aquinas program in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

"Really just on and off the field, making sure I'm doing the right stuff," Bonitto said. "Whether that's attending tutoring, making sure I'm going to class, doing the right stuff in the weight room. All that stuff will help you on the field."

Helping Bonitto develop maturity was Terry, a fourth-year junior who graduated from Victory Christian in Tulsa, and Terry going down with a major injury was hard for Bonitto to see.

"He helped me a lot," Bonitto said. "In the summer, when things got tough with conditioning or weights or the extra reps, he was great in just bringing me along and making me mentally tough and making me more of a leader. With him down, he's trying to make me more of the leader of the group."

In Grinch's speed D, Bonitto has flourished, earning plenty of playing time before Terry was injured.

"Once coach Grinch (was hired), and I saw his vision for the defense, I immediately fell in love with him," Bonitto said. "Just his philosophy of having speed on the field, not to sound cocky, but I feel like that's one my good traits is that I bring a lot of speed to my game. That really intrigued me in to what he was trying to bring here."

St. Thomas' Nik Bonitto commits to Oklahoma, has already signed with Sooners

By David Furones

Sun Sentinel

Jan. 4, 2018

Nik Bonitto let it be known where he will be playing college football during the Under Armour All-America Game.

In fact, the St. Thomas Aquinas edge rusher revealed where he has already signed.

Bonitto signed to play for Oklahoma during the new Early Signing Period from Dec. 20-22. The previously uncommitted prospect was able to keep the decision under wraps and announce the commitment to the Sooners on Thursday night during the the third quarter of the national exhibition, featuring more than 100 of the nation's top high school football seniors at Camping World Stadium on Thursday night.

"I asked the coaching staff if it was a good idea. They said it would be really good, especially for exposure purposes. Originally, I was going to sign in February, but I signed in December just to get it over with.

"Not too many guys get to do this, so I'm really blessed."

Bonitto chose Oklahoma over Texas and Louisville. He visited the Sooners after his senior season on Dec. 15, and went out to see the Longhorns and Cardinals during the season.

"Coach [Lincoln] Riley is really building something special over there," Bonitto said of his announcement on ESPN2. "I can't wait to be in Norman for the next three or four years."

He added postgame: "Just tradition — it's second to none."

A 6-foot-3, 215-pound four-star prospect, Bonitto is the Sun Sentinel's reigning Broward large schools Defensive Player of the Year. Playing both defensive end and outside linebacker, he had 73 tackles, 11 for loss, nine sacks, two interceptions — one for a touchdown — a forced fumble and a fumble recovered.

"Nik is a versatile, dynamic athlete. He possesses the ability to play any position on defense," St. Thomas Aquinas coach Roger Harriott said. "God has blessed Nik with size, speed, athleticism and football acumen. These attributes have enabled him to perform at an elite level."

Bonitto was one of two Broward products to commit at the all-star game with American Heritage receiver Anthony Schwartz, who is bound for Auburn, the other.