

Former Edwardsville Standout A.J. Epenesa Enjoys Successful Rookie Season, Bills Advanced To AFC Championship Game

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BUFFALO - It was a big jump from college to the National Football League, but A.J. Epenesa made the transition from the defensive line of Iowa to the Buffalo Bills. Epenesa was very active in helping the team advance to its first American Football Conference championship game since the 1994 season.

Although the Bills lost to the defending champions Kansas City Chiefs 38-24 on Jan. 24 at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, the Bills went 13-3 in the regular season, tying a franchise record set during their Super Bowl string in 1990 and 1991, winning the AFC North Division championship, its first division title since 1995, and won their first postseason games since the same season in defeating the Indianapolis Colts 27-24 as the number two seed in the AFC Wild Card Game, then winning over the Baltimore Ravens in the AFC Divisional Playoffs 17-3.

Epenesa and the rest of the team didn't have any of the usual off-season camps and activities, such as rookie training camp, organized team activities, among others, and preseason training camp was severely limited, with no preseason games played this year, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. After being inactive in the team's opening game, Epenesa appeared in 14 games in the regular season, starting in one, and had 12 tackles, nine of them solos, and recorded his first NFL sack on Jared Goff in the week three win over the Los Angeles Rams at Bills Stadium on Sept. 27. In the postseason, he had two solo tackles in appearing in all three games.

In a video posted on the Bills' website that followed the game against the Rams, Epenesa described the feeling of recording his first NFL sack.

"It was crazy," Epenesa said. "I wanted to go get one bad; that's what it's all about, getting those sacks and chasing the quarterback. I was able to see Goff take off out of the pocket, and all I thought about was to get there, get there, get there. So I ran, it took everything I had to get there, and get after him."

Epenesa also described the feelings of his parents after seeing his first sack.

"The first thing I did when I got home was call my parents in, and talked to them," Epenesa said, "and they were just ecstatic. They had some family friends over to the house back home in Illinois, and got to spend some time with people going on. I know they had a good time and were extremely excited, and I gave them that phone call afterward."

Epenesa also learned much from the veterans on the Bills' defensive line, and gave them credit for helping him learn the system and helping make his transition to pro football smooth.

"Having vets like Jerry Hughes, Mario Addison, Trent (Murphy). I mean, we've got a lot of veteran guys on that D-line, and all of them have been really helpful for me, whether it's learning the defense, or outside of football and stuff like that, and just being friendly, too. I didn't know a lot of people coming up here, obviously, and all of them have been really friendly, pulling me into the program as well. But it's been a huge blessing for me to be able to learn from guys like this. They've been around the league for double-digit years, multiple guys, and so, they know what they're doing, and so on. Learning from those guys is something I should take advantage of while I have it."

Epenesa felt the biggest adjustment to playing in the NFL was the size of the players and the speed of the game.

"The guys are all just big and fast," Epenesa said, "so the biggest adjustment is the physical one, I think. Just getting used to how fast these guys are moving, getting your own speed up, and getting a feel for the strength of the game at this level."

Another big adjustment was having to play many of the early season games without fans in the stands, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. As the season went on, the Bills and the state of New York allowed a limited number of fans to be in attendance at games, and during the two home playoff games, the Bills Mafia, as the team's fan base is known, made a huge amount of noise in supporting the team.

"Focus, I mean you can hear calls and stuff better," Epenesa said, "but when it comes to bringing energy and juice, nothing compares to the fans, and having them and their electricity there. I haven't been able to meet the Bills Mafia on a Sunday yet, but I know from my experience being at school that bringing the fans and all that, that brings certain electricity in the air, and really gets the team going sometimes. But that's been the kind of challenge since the season started, bringing our own juice as a team, bringing our own energy, and bring the team along with ourselves, and not relying on other people to do that for us."

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