

H-F grad Pauling with Cincinnati during historic football season

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Will Pauling was shaking a little bit when he took his first snap as a freshman with the University of Cincinnati football. The Homewood-Flossmoor 2021 graduate was understandably nervous taking the field with a national championship contender.

"I almost forgot my assignment but after a few plays, I was all right," he said.

Pauling is part of a team competing in an unprecedented season. The Bearcats played Alabama in the Cotton Bowl on New Year's Eve. A win means they'll play for the national title. Cincinnati is the first Group of Five team to qualify for the College Football Playoff since the current system was put in place in 2014.

There's a palpable buzz on campus, Pauling said. When people learn he's a football player, he'll be congratulated whether it's in class or at the supermarket.

"It's been good for me as a young guy, coming in and going to the College Football Playoff," the slot receiver said. "Now I know for the next few years, I know what it looks like and what it takes to get

back to where we want to be in the coming years."

The early portion of the season was frustrating, admits Pauling, a wide receiver for H-F. He's behind a few upperclassmen on the depth chart and wasn't seeing the field as much as he'd hoped. He sat down with coaches a couple months ago and agreed it would be best to take a redshirt season, meaning he can only play in up to four games but gains an extra year of eligibility.

"This freshman year has been a blessing for me," Pauling said. "Coming out of high school, I was always that guy. This has been kind of an adjustment being behind some older guys. Overall, it's been a really good year, though."

Another big adjustment, Pauling said, was getting accustomed to the amount of time needed to be a college football player. That doesn't just include practice, weight room, film room and games. It's also classes and school work while finding a way to maintain a social life.

He's also working on being a better teammate. When his on-the-field contributions aren't as impactful as they may be in the future, he's focusing on off-the-

field ones like staying positive and helping other guys out in any way he can.

Pauling saw action in three games during the regular season, catching a pass for six yards against Southern Methodist. He can play in one more and keep his redshirt, so seeing the field during a college football playoff game is a real possibility.

He's already seen some of the best environments the sport has to offer. The Bearcats were ranked No. 4 when they beat No. 5 Notre Dame on Oct. 2. They topped Houston Dec. 4 in the American Athletic Conference championship to finish 13-0 and hold a spot in the CFP.

"We had so many fans travel to Indiana that you could hear them chanting over the Notre Dame fans," Pauling said.

The NCAA allows 15 practices to prepare for the Cotton Bowl. That gives Cincinnati coaches some extra time to work with younger players like Pauling.

Almost all of the players in front of Pauling in the receivers room are juniors or seniors. Pauling may have an opportunity in front of him as early as next season. He's hoping the extra practice reps make a difference.

"I've been trying to use that to my advantage so I can showcase who I can be," Pauling said. "I've never been big on personal goals but while I'm here my motivation is to become the best version of myself that I can possibly be."

Bearcats coach Luke Fickell has been the subject of rumors for most of the year suggesting he'll be a candidate to lead other programs. Pauling said he likes playing for Fickell, a coach who always makes sure his players are doing well inside and outside the game.

He told his team to ignore those rumors.

"Coach Fick is big on just eliminating all the outside noise," Pauling said. "Things are going to go a certain way so he's always trying to tell us to eliminate the outside noise and control what we can control."

Players were able to go home for Christmas. They left for Dallas the day after.

Cincinnati went into the game as an underdog but that's not how it views itself, Pauling said.

"No Group of Five team has ever done this. We're embracing being on the big stage," he said.



Provided photoes

H-F graduate Will Pauling is with his parents, Gerald and Eugenia Pauling, after the University of Cincinnati's AAC championship victory.



Provided photo

Will Pauling is carried aloft by teammates at the University of Cincinnati after the football team won the AAC Championship title.