

In a career rife with unpredictability, Vikings' Sam Bradford is calm as can be

A year after being traded just before the start of the season, Bradford is eyeing a big step forward

- by Cody Benjamin
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MANKATO, Minn. -- Another early-August afternoon wraps up at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and you can feel the pull of a community that knows full well, beyond another quietly anticipated [Minnesota Vikings](#) season, it will no longer play host to its purple-padded heroes during the summer.

Fans are out in swarms, embracing their NFC North underdogs as much as the steamy weather not often associated with the team's Midwestern territory. Sen. Al Franken is among them, a celebrity symbol of what kind of draw the Vikings have not only on Mankato but an entire state that still seeks, in persistent but reserved "Minnesota-nice" optimism, a championship.

Predictably, then, the rush to surround Mike Zimmer's roster as it closes the book on another week of training camp practices is swift, and it is purposed. Disguised as selfie poses and autograph requests are fan efforts to show these Vikings they are adored, especially since these Vikings will be fleeing for newer camp facilities in 2018 ... and efforts to show these Vikings the pressure is on.

Teased with a 5-0 start to general manager Rick Spielman's "all-in" 2016 campaign, these fans were left to flip channels in another slow, cold Minnesota January after the Vikings' offensive line crumble proved to be just the first domino in a slide back to mediocrity. These fans shout "Ted-dy, Ted-dy!" any chance they get, but they're probably at least a year removed from seeing [Teddy Bridgewater](#), the first promising homegrown quarterback Minnesota has had since ... [Tarvaris Jackson](#)? ... if ever again. These fans, months after losing a troubled, albeit beloved, franchise icon in [Adrian Peterson](#), are ready for results.

Their hunger is seen as they pour out from the stands in droves, clamoring for players' attention post-practice and, deeper down, clamoring for signs of success from a team so often undone by the unlucky, the improbable or, well, incompetence.

Behind it all, the hordes of fans and the frenetic buzz for the 2017 Minnesota Vikings, stands the most cool and unflinching member of the entire crowd.

He also happens to be the key to the Vikings' season.

Drifting in the background as his teammates shuffle toward Vikings faithful and the Mankato dorm rooms that are housing them until the real games begin, he's recognizable for a few reasons. His No. 8 jersey, coated in red as is tradition for quarterbacks at [NFL](#) practices but still reminiscent of his earliest days in the spotlight, a Heisman Trophy winner-turned-No. 1 overall draft pick. His slender 6-4 frame, a tower next to teammates [Case Keenum](#) and [Taylor Heinicke](#). His scruffy look, although not quite as scruffy as his mid-November days with the [Philadelphia Eagles](#), the

team that shipped him west a mere week before the 2016 season began. And, of course, his nameplate -- a clear ID for a quarterback whose career has unfolded unlike any other.

He is [Sam Bradford](#).

Thrust onto his third team in as many seasons with eight -- count them, eight -- days to get ready before the Vikings' first game an offseason ago, he proceeded to set a league record by completing 71.6 percent of his passes and throwing his way to a career-best 99.3 QB rating in 2016. That came after a whirlwind stint in the City of Brotherly Love, where he played under two head coaches, and back-to-back ACL tears to the same knee to cap a black-and-blue start with bad St. Louis [Rams](#) teams. And yet he knows even he isn't immune to the grumblings of the fans -- and the judgment of the media -- both in and well outside of Mankato's chaotic magnification of all things Vikings.

Calm and content, Bradford doesn't sweat it.

"Regardless of what you do in this league, there's going to be people out there that always try to play the flip side," he said, "[talking] about the negative, [talking] about things you could've done better. I just choose to ignore all that stuff. I really don't pay attention to really anything in the media just because whether it's good or bad, I don't need the affirmation, and I don't need to hear the critiques."

He knows there are plenty of detractors who might assume he has that stance because he has already made millions as an NFL quarterback. But if money was the end-all, be-all, Bradford could have stepped away from the game long ago. He smiles when debating whether he wants to be like 40-year-old [Tom Brady](#), still kicking in the pros, before settling: "Man, I take it a day at a time; I really don't think you can look into the future for anything."

He also has a knack for being a perfectionist, and in an offseason that he says with a laugh is finally without an ACL recovery or an adjustment from a trade, he feels like a man who knows exactly what he's doing -- and that he's in charge -- under center. In other words, he feels more ready than ever to take the field -- and take a step forward -- once again.

"It feels good, obviously, to be here, to be able to come out here in a system that I finished the year in here last year," he said. "Our communication process at the line of scrimmage is much better than what it was last year just because I was here [this summer]. We have a chemistry with everyone in the huddle right now. It's nice to be able to go to the line and change plays and have everyone understand what we're doing."

That alone, of course, could be reason for Bradford, amid the push for gridiron prominence in Minnesota, maintaining a worry-free attitude, especially considering the former University of Oklahoma stud posted a 20-to-5 TD-to-interception ratio *without* any chemistry in his seventh NFL season.

For the quarterback, though, it goes deeper than that.

Much like [Carson Wentz](#), his Philadelphia successor whose brand has virtually become synonymous with his Christian beliefs, Bradford says his every triumph, every failure and every outside opinion those highs and lows inspire are drowned out by a faith instilled by his family. It was first publicly on display in college, when he was a star in "[I Am Second](#)," a video series about celebs putting God first, and talked about reading the story of David and

Goliath on game days. Now, headlined by a low-key attitude, perhaps considered annoyingly nonchalant by skeptics, it is showcased through a trust in a plan far more unpredictable than his own.

"St. Louis, I obviously went through some pretty tough times with the injury, and then to go to Philadelphia and then to end up in Minnesota, a lot of things came at me that were a little bit unexpected," he said. "I think it's just a great lesson in having faith and having trust and understanding that sometimes, what we think our plans should be doesn't always align with what God's plan for us actually is. That's when you have to push aside your pride ... by allowing Him to take control of our lives, it really reduces a lot of our own stress."

Bradford says his parents, Kent and Martha, made sure he understood his faith as the pressures of football, of going pro and of embracing a spotlight unlike that of most athletes overtook his everyday life. And he notes they are simple sources of inspiration themselves. While he's as focused on bringing the Vikings a Lombardi Trophy as anyone, he also knows how to remove himself from the weight of expectations and remember how much Mom and Dad mean to his journey. Neither has missed a single one of his games since his days with the Sooners, and Mom traveled from Oklahoma to see her son at a pair of camp practices this week.

"When you're going through camp, going through the grind, just to be able to see a familiar face and see your mom, being able to talk to her after practice for 15 minutes, it's kind of nice to know that someone who doesn't care about football is out here watching practice," Bradford says. "She just wants to know how I'm doing, how the dorms are, how the food is -- all the mom things."

There's not much, the quarterback's reflections suggest, that will strip Bradford's surgically repaired and much-maligned self of contentment. Now, if only all the peace of mind would translate to fulfilled goals on the football field.

As he begins his strut toward the masses, ready to encounter the walls of Vikings faithful who would much prefer those goals to be fulfilled, he's given the chance to make a bold proclamation about Minnesota's 2017 standings. He's asked if he has anything to say to the defending NFC North champions, the disdained-in-Mankato [Green Bay Packers](#), now that he is fully healthy, with more chemistry than ever, and all those good personal vibes to rub off on a hopeful playoff contender.

But Bradford is a man of the unpredictable. He doesn't take the bait.

"We don't get into that stuff," he laughs.