The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender. ~Vince Lombardi

Every fall since fourth grade, 22-year-old Keifer Burke of Brady has strapped on the football pads and cleats.

It's been a focus, a routine, a way of life for nearly as long as he can remember.

"I've always loved football," said Burke, a 6-foot-3, 280-pound defensive end who played his final game for Chadron State College in the first round of the NCAA Division II football playoffs last month.

That love of the game is why Burke is considering forgoing his final two semesters of college and training for the next level.

In his pee-wee years and all through high school at Maxwell, Burke played running back. He trampled over, around and through opponents.

Burke dedicated himself to training for football as a sophomore and was a stand-out both his junior and senior years, leading the Wildcats to a 9-1 season as a senior and earning invites to multiple all-star contests.

It was in high school that Burke adopted a quote by longtime NFL coach Vince Lombardi as his message to live by: "The harder you work, the harder it is to surrender."

“I tell myself that pretty much every day,” he said.

After graduating in 2008, Burke chose to walk on at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln his first year of college.

After a semester, he knew it wasn’t the right fit and he transferred to Chadron as a scholarship player.

“I was recruited as a linebacker,” he said of CSC. “After a week they asked me to try defensive end and that’s where I’ve been ever since.”

Burke earned Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference post-season honors his sophomore, junior and senior seasons.

KEIFER BURKE

As a senior and an Eagle captain, Burke was named a Division II pre-season All-American and he backed up the early honor with 71 total tackles, including 16.5 tackles for loss at a combined 60 yards to put him in the college’s all-time top 10.

Burke was named NCAA Division II, Nebraska Division II and Beyond Sports Network Defensive Player of the Week for his performance against New Mexico Highlands on Oct. 20 and was invited to play in the annual DII vs. NAIA Senior Bowl.

“It’s nice to feel like I’m on top,” he said. “I have high expectations and I feel like I work hard to reach my goals. It’s just good to have it all come together.”

Now, Burke waits for the call that might take his football skills one more level.

Pro scouts kept an eye on him throughout the fall and the possibility remains that he will be trying out for a team in the spring.

“I’ve been through the grind. I’ve fought through the injuries,” he said. “I want to know I have a legitimate chance before I take that next step.”

That’s why rather than jumping into a university pro day in the spring, he wants to hear from the NFL.

When the call comes, he said, he’ll be ready.

“I’m all in if it happens,” he said, “but I’m not going to gamble if I don’t have a real shot.”

If NFL tryouts and fall training camp aren’t in the cards, Burke said he will return to Chadron to finish his bachelor’s degree in sports and recreation management.

“Either way, I’m always going to have those friends I’ve made in Chadron,” he said. “We’re like a big family and that’s a gift I wouldn’t trade for the world.”