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by **Paul Daugherty** - INSIDE COLLEGE FOOTBALL

## Two years after being homeless, Gilyard has Cincy on brink



Mardy Gilyard almost left Cincinnati after poor grades cost him his scholarship. Instead, he worked three jobs to pay for his classes and stick it out with Cincy

Now, after a 1,000-yard season, a BCS berth and NFL dreams are in sight

Two years removed from working three jobs to pay his tuition, Cincinnati's Mardy Gilyard is breaking receiving records and enticing NFL scouts.  
Jim Owens/Icon SMI

The young man living in his car is passing out free sack lunches in the park downtown. He's fresh from his construction job, so he looks a lot like the people he's feeding: dirty blue jeans; hooded sweatshirt; size-12, steel-toed Red Wing boots. A homeless man, feeding homeless men. Charity squared.

In two years, he would be breaking pass receiving records on an undefeated team and playing in a game for a conference championship. NFL scouts would assess his worthiness as a No. 1 draft pick. The red carpet would roll right out there. It would be clean and waiting.

But he wasn't thinking about that now. Couldn't even imagine it. Now, he was wondering where he would sleep that night and how cold it would be.

**Mardy Gilyard** did not spend every night for six months folded up in the driver's seat of the green 2002 Pontiac Grand Am, lent to him by the brother of his then-fiancée. That's urban legend in Cincinnati, and it is mythic. Fact is, Gilyard did lots of time, in the fall and winter of 2006 and 2007, on living room couches and dorm-room floors.

But not this night. This night, he'd spend shivering in the car. After he worked construction, sold cutlery door to door, delivered some pizzas and fed the homeless in Washington Park.

In the fall of 2006, former University of Cincinnati coach **Mark Dantonio** revoked Gilyard's scholarship. He'd come to school, but not gone to school. His grades lacked. That was a problem. Here was a bigger one: Gilyard already had registered for classes. He owed the school almost \$10,000. He didn't have a dime.

That'd be the end for most kids, especially kids from a place like Bunnell, Fla., a proud, but poor town between Jacksonville and Daytona Beach. Bunnell owns all the standard urban calamity -- drugs, shootings, domestic violence -- but also a lot of the virtues families need to survive. Mardy was loved and cared for. But nobody had a spare 10 grand to offer him.

The ledge awaited, and it was narrow. Gilyard wanted to jump off and go home. At home, nobody would let him. He called his mother.

"Mama, I'm coming ho --." He didn't get to finish the sentence.

"No, you're not," said Ms. **Viola Gilyard Crudup**, a formidable woman. "And if we see you here, we will ship you back."

Mardy took another shot, this time with **Otis**, his older brother by nine years. In Viola's single-working-parent household, Otis was brother, babysitter, man of the house to Mardy. He'd advised his kid brother to attend college closer to home. Stay in Florida, he'd suggested, where people know you and will look out for you, where your fame is recognized.

Mardy chose Cincinnati. Now, he wished he hadn't.

"Tell mama to let me come home," Mardy asked Otis. "Let her know I made a mistake. I need to come home and regroup"

Otis: "No."

Mardy: "OK, bro'. But I don't have a scholarship. If I stay, how am I gonna pay?"

"You got into the mess," Otis offered. "Figure a way out of it."

Mardy Gilyard has caught 75 passes this year for 1,052 yards. He has 21 receiving touchdowns the last two seasons. He has scored four more times returning kicks. He is the metaphor for how fifth-ranked Cincinnati plays the game. The Bearcats' offense is a 33-rpm record, playing at 78-rpms. Nobody is spinning faster than their senior wide receiver.

Next spring, he'll likely be a late first-round or early second-round draft pick, a 6-foot-1 burner with very good hands and unchallenged toughness. A slot receiver and return man, in the mold of **Wes Welker** and **T.J. Houshmandzadeh**. If the fairy tale ending plays out, he'll sleep in a car again. But only if he wants to.

How did this happen? How did the redemption song of the college season find its way into the iPod rotation? What sort of person is homeless, yet spends his limited free time feeding other homeless? Talk about irony. Who is this guy?

"Blessed," is all he says. Actually, Gilyard says a lot more. He talks as fast as he plays. But the conversations always ends with that. Blessed.

Blessed to have had three employers who gave him jobs he held simultaneously after Dantonio kicked him off the football team. Blessed to have had friends who let him in. Blessed, even, to have had the Grand Am to recline in. Finally, blessed to have earned a second chance to play football.

"Every day I get here, I feel so blessed," Gilyard said this fall. "I relish every millisecond I have here. I don't expect nothing. Sometimes, you might feel like people owe you something. I don't."

Gilyard keeps the Red Wing boots on a shelf next to his football awards. They still bear the dust from his last day on the job. "Cutting wood," Mardy explained. To clean them would betray their message. "You have to go through something to be something," his mother had told him. Gilyard went through some things.

For six months, his days went like this: Up at dawn to the job site, work all morning. Fetch a change of clothes from the trunk of the Grand Am, or from the back seat, where they'd been placed neatly atop the pots, pans, toiletries and whatever else Gilyard grabbed when he was evicted from his apartment. Work all morning. At lunchtime, find a bathroom, change into the nice stuff, spend an hour selling cutlery door to door.

"Hi, my name is Mardy. Let me show you how these kitchen shears cut through this penny ..."

"He practiced his sales pitch on me," recalled **Laura Ellis**, a UC student Mardy had met through his then-fiancée. "He was passionate about it."

Back to the job site. Off at 4, to a local pizza restaurant, for a few hours of whatever they needed him to do. Then, when time allowed, a visit to Wesley Chapel Mission Center, an oasis amid the urban decay of downtown Cincinnati. Gilyard spent time with the little children there, gathered after school while their parents or guardians were at work. It was there he worked with Ellis.

"He'd come in sometimes with his boots all dirty, talk to the kids, help with Bible study, then go to the park and pass out sandwiches," Ellis said. She put Gilyard up for about a month. "He didn't have anywhere to go," she said.

Gilyard slept on her couch and used her shower, until her two roommates started wondering why "this guy was always here, asleep" as Ellis put it.

And so it went. Gilyard the homeless nomad lived, on occasion, in the apartment of his former teammate **Terrill Byrd**. He stayed in the dorm with another teammate, **Charlie Howard**. Sometimes, he'd just need a night inside, so he could charge his cell phone. The Grand Am's battery wasn't the greatest.

He worked three jobs, he talked to the kids. He handed out sandwiches. He listened to mama.

"He never gave up. That's why I've been in school five years," said Ellis, a Sociology major who will graduate in 2011. "There have been days when I just didn't want to do it anymore. Mardy never had those days."

In the meantime, Dantonio had left Cincinnati for Michigan State. The new coach, **Brian Kelly**, liked what he saw of Gilyard on tape, and told him he could have his scholarship back when he paid the university the money he owed.

Not long after, Gilyard walked into the registrar's office with \$7,000 in cash.

We tend to define "heart" in sports by how much fight an athlete has, or how tolerant he is of pain. Mardy Gilyard's heart comes from a different place. "Sometimes, you just have to hump it out with nothing, and hope and pray something comes out of it," said Otis Gilyard. Otis is a

sheriff's deputy with the Flagler County (Fla.) police. "Mardy motivated himself beyond what even he believed was possible."

Mardy remains in touch with Ellis, and he still goes to see the kids at Wesley Chapel, though not so much as before. "Thank you for showing me how to care about other people," he said to Ellis, not long ago.

Once a homeless man feeding the homeless, Gilyard will go to Pittsburgh on Saturday, his plate full. A win for the No. 5 Bearcats over No. 14 Pitt will clinch an unbeaten regular season and a second consecutive trip to a BCS bowl. "Pride doesn't begin to describe it," said Otis.

As for Mardy, he broke it off with his fiancée, so he doesn't have her brother's Grand Am anymore. He has everything else, though. Things you don't see on a stat line, mostly. "I relish every second. Sometimes, I wish the games would drag a little," Gilyard said. "Once there's none, there's none."

Until next year, when he gets paid to play. If only the guys at the job site could see him now.

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