

Mark Atwater picks Coe over UNI

Written by Jim Ecker

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Linn-Mar senior Mark Atwater has decided to make football a family affair at Coe College next season.

Atwater said Monday night he's turned down an offer to join the University of Northern Iowa as a preferred walk-on and will join his father and brother with the Kohawks instead.

Atwater's father, Larry, is the defensive coordinator at Coe. His brother, Jordan, is a defensive back and will be a junior with the Kohawks next season.

Atwater said he'll play quarterback at Coe. Northern Iowa viewed him as a defensive back, but he said he would have been happy to play either offense or defense in college.

He said his decision came down to two factors: Northern Iowa did not offer any scholarship money, and he felt a strong tug to join his father and brother.

Atwater took an official visit to Coe College last Wednesday, although he's certainly been there many times before.

"It was too much the right fit," he said. "It just wasn't the right fit at UNI for me. Nothing to do with money, really. If I really wanted to pursue the walk-on, I would have.

"I've always thought of myself as a defensive guy," he said. "For me, it was more of a 'fit' decision. I don't care where I play."

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Atwater was one of the mostly highly decorated football players in the state last fall after leading Linn-Mar to an undefeated regular season and the No. 2 ranking in Class 4A. He starred at quarterback and linebacker for the Lions.

He made the Des Moines Register elite all-state team at linebacker and also made the INA all-state team as a linebacker. He was named the Metro Player of the Year and also was named the Mississippi Division Player of the Year in the Mississippi Valley Conference.

Atwater completed 63.9 percent of his passes for 1,715 yards and 25 touchdowns with only six interceptions. He also rushed for 808 yards and 12 touchdowns, giving him 2,523 yards of total offense and 37 TDs in 11 games. In addition, he made 53 tackles.

Northern Iowa Coach Mark Farley called Atwater Sunday night and said he wanted Atwater to join the team, but that he wasn't able to offer any money.

"It wasn't the news I wanted," said Atwater. "Last weekend they offered me to come in as a preferred walk-on and he said he'd call later in the week and offer me money if there was any money, but there was no money on the table."

Atwater called Farley Monday night and politely said he won't be joining the Panthers. "I actually just got off the phone with him," Atwater said at 6:15 p.m. Monday.

Larry Atwater has been an assistant coach at Coe College, his alma mater, for 21 years. He said he'll be proud to have both of his sons on the team next year, but otherwise had to decline comment due to NCAA recruiting rules.

Atwater said his father was excited when he told him the news about joining the Kohawks. "He kind of looks at it both ways," said Atwater. "He said I'm glad you're going to come play here, but I'm sad you don't get that shot (at a bigger school)."

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Football practice at Coe next season could be interesting with Mark Atwater at quarterback, Jordan Atwater in the defensive backfield and Larry Atwater running the defense.

"I'll be going against him every day in practice, him and my brother," said Mark Atwater. "So it will be an interesting four years, I'm sure. I'm very excited."

Coe College is an NCAA Division III school that does not offer athletic scholarships, whereas Northern Iowa is an NCAA Division I program. Atwater said he also visited Illinois State and the University of Iowa, but had no scholarship offers.

"Nothing really panned out for me too much at the end," he said.

Atwater said he plans to compete for the starting quarterback job as a freshman. Brad Boyle, an all-conference quarterback, was a senior this past season at Coe and the backup quarterback (Jared McNutt) attempted only one pass all year.

"I'm not going to lie. I'm going to be trying to compete for the job right away," said Atwater. "I'm going to do everything I can. Obviously they have a senior (McNutt) who's been waiting for this, but I'm going to try to push as hard as I can to get it."

Atwater said he plans to study education at Coe and wants to be a teacher and coach, just like his father. Larry Atwater is the chairman of the physical education department at Coe.

"I want to be a head coach in the Big Ten or Big 12 at some point in my life," he said. "That's kind of my ultimate goal."

Atwater said he's wanted to be a football coach for a long time. "Probably since I was about 6 and I saw my dad doing it and I knew it was what I was going to do."