Pull Quote: “You have to have a lot of confidence as a quarterback. When things are going well it’s very easy to think, wow all these people love me. Or when things are going bad: man, I suck. Everyone in the world hates me. When who you are as a quarterback seeps into who you are as a person, that’s when you’re gonna have some issues.” -Tanner Morgan

Cover photo of adam weber: Portrait of Adam Weber taken on March 18.
Page 3: Gophers' quarterback Tanner Morgan looking for a target during a game. Courtesy of Brad Rempel.
Page 5: Gophers' quarterback Adam Weber looking for an open receiver during a game. Courtesy of Brad Rempel.

Brad Rempel

Inventing a university quarterback

The quarterback position is continuously evolving, from Adam Weber in the late 2000s to Tanner Morgan over a decade later at the University of Minnesota.

By Tony Liebert

Tanner Morgan’s journey to becoming the starting quarterback on the University of Minnesota football team started before he reached the age of 10. While others were running around just “being kids,” Morgan was working with a specialized coach on fundamentals: footwork, drops and throwing.

Now go back a generation to another star quarterback for the Gophers. Adam Weber didn't have a trainer or quarterback coach. He didn't even know whether he would be playing quarterback long-term until he got to ninth grade. He's not sure he would have been as dedicated as Morgan.

The names Tanner Morgan and Adam Weber fill the program’s record book, which has won national championships and is one of the most storied programs in the country. Weber is the all-time leader in yards and touchdowns; Morgan has the most wins.

The quarterback position is the most important and nuanced position in America's most popular sport. It has undergone a rapid reinvention in recent years. As Morgan's experience shows, those with the physical attributes and skills to make it to a major college program, and possibly to the NFL, increasingly are singled out early. Players are faster and stronger. And while the quarterback has long been a high-profile position on any team, the advent of social media has revolutionized recruitment and made the focus even more intense. In the pro game, for those who make it that far, stars like Lamar Jackson and Patrick Mahomes do things that few could have imagined.

Youth football is a quarterback's first steps

Starting as early as second grade, rambunctious kids are able to expend energy on the youth football field. Often, the quarterback is the coach's son; sometimes it's the most athletic player on the field. Once players are identified as quarterback material, that's usually where they stick.

For youngsters like Morgan, whose college career ended last fall, it starts getting serious with a throwing coach, a sports psychologist or more commonly an all-around quarterback coach.

Morgan's first football coach was Mike Parker, who played at the University of Kentucky and worked for Pro Football Focus (an analytical football website). "That started in third, fourth grade; basic fundamentals for a long time. Coach Parker was the first guy that I worked with. He taught me how to throw. We would do footwork and drops, just teaching me the basic fundamentals of playing quarterback really helped me at a young age," Morgan said.

Morgan recalls he also was a "nasty" pitcher in Little League, but his father advised him to switch to third base to preserve his arm for throwing on the football field.

High school is often where players first begin to refine their skills — and quarterbacks get a taste of being a celebrity, on the field and off. Both Morgan and Weber started for their teams as high school freshmen, and both say their parents helped them. Weber's father toured the opposing team's stadium with him before his first start to acclimate him. Morgan's dad, uncle and brother were all on coaching staff at Hazard High School in eastern Kentucky, but he still was one of the youngest kids at the school.

"There are a lot of great football players that come from that area, and a lot of strong dudes," Morgan said. "So I had to adapt quickly."

If they want to do it, Morgan said he highly recommends the kind of specialized training he had. Getting to the highest level is a journey that starts at the ground level.

Even though he might not have been as dedicated, Weber is impressed with the next generations of quarterbacks.

"Things have changed drastically," Weber said. "I was always doing other stuff. I would rather go play a pickup basketball game, than do an hour with a specialized trainer. I commend kids these days. There is a lot asked of them and a lot of pressure with them when it comes to money spent."

The winding road getting to a Division I football program

Being the starting quarterback on a football team isn't just about the team's success, although that's certainly important. The recruiting game, social status and leadership make quarterbacking about much more than touchdowns.

Morgan, from Kentucky, and Weber, from Minnesota, had very different recruitment journeys to Gophers. High school is the time for many kids to grow up. With Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms beginning to take off in the late 2000s when Weber was in college and early 2010s when Morgan was in high school, that journey continues to evolve.

“Twitter was how I got recruited. I had to DM coaches on Twitter, coaches were DMing me. I had to be posting stuff on Twitter. This is what I had to do. I want to get recruited,” Morgan said. “I had to post this highlight film. It’s how a lot of kids get noticed, through social media.”

Current college football hopefuls have their Twitter profiles flooded with offer announcements, official visit distinctions and highlight tapes. High school athletes are asked to essentially be their own agents; something that didn’t exist 15 years ago. Adam Weber didn’t even have a cellphone with a camera by the time he left college in 2010.

Still, he appreciates the simpler environment he knew.

“You see other people are being highly recruited and you’re posting a lot of videos, and you think, 'Do I have to do that to get recruited?'” Weber said. “It’s a challenging landscape. I am glad that I am not in high school now, and I feel for those people that are dealing with those challenges of what social media presents.”

As a lifelong Gophers fan growing up in Shoreview, Weber’s college decision was relatively easy. Morgan grew up a Kentucky Wildcats fan, but his first official scholarship offer came from Wake Forest, a small private school in North Carolina.

Memphis, Toledo and Western Michigan also were eventually on his short list. At the time, the head coach at Western Michigan was P.J. Fleck, who Morgan quickly built a close relationship with on his visit. Once Fleck accepted the head coaching position at Minnesota, he recruited Morgan, who committed and found his new home.

While Weber and Morgan’s journeys to Minnesota took different routes, their college careers have plenty of similarities. Both quarterbacks began their careers in Minnesota alongside new head coaches. Both also had first year head coaches when they started with the Gophers.

“I knew like three guys on the team when I got [to Minnesota],” Morgan said. “I had to earn the respect of my teammates and that wasn’t something that just happened overnight. I think I earned their respect because we were all going through the same thing together. That first year it was dirty, it was hard.”

Both Morgan and Weber tackled starting roles the following seasons, and it took off from there. With over 100 combined collegiate starts between the two of them, both quarterbacks are two of the best to ever wear the school colors maroon and gold.

With that level of success, comes some level of fame. At a major university like Minnesota, the football team is often the most popular team, and the quarterback is the most popular player on it. While most college students are having fun on weekends, Weber and Morgan had to prepare for next week’s game.

“People definitely started recognizing more, but I enjoyed that; you always have to enjoy that part of it,” Morgan said. “If there was ever a time that I didn’t want to, I would just throw on a hat or hoodie or something like that, but it’s not like it was a huge issue. I always thought it was cool.”

By the time Morgan earned a bachelor’s degree in human resource development and master’s degree in sports management, he enjoyed his time at home hanging out with his friends and teammates after games. Weber remembers that he didn’t have to wait in line for bars.

“It was a really cool experience, but I want to be known as a person first and the football side of it is a separate thing,” Weber said. “I was fortunate when I was coming through college. There wasn’t all this social media and cameras, so you could really be a normal person.”

As the big man on campus, Weber always remembered your reputation can take years to build and be ruined in a second.

Morgan had a slightly different take on being the Gophers’ quarterback and part of the university community.

The art of being a quarterback

As much as the quarterback position has changed off the field, it has arguably changed more on it. Football is increasingly emphasizing safety, and rules continue to change. Some things won't.

“There are some things that are non-negotiable,” Morgan said. “That’s being able to throw the football accurately, being able to throw the football with anticipation and being a leader.

Weber added the quarterback has to bring the team of 110 guys together, whether that's leadership or fellowship.

"When you're standing in the pocket; I hate to use the analogy 'the bullets are flying at you,' but it kinda feels that way sometimes with D [defensive] linemen coming at you," Weber said. "You have to remain calm, cool and collected; scan a defense and throw the football accurately and on time."

Playing the quarterback position at a major university comes with a lot more responsibility than just being a leader on the field. You're the face of a program that many people build their fall weekends around.

"You have to have a lot of confidence as a quarterback. When things are going well it's very easy to think, 'Wow all these people love me. Or when things are going bad: man, I suck. Everyone in the world hates me,'" Morgan said. "When who you are as a quarterback seeps into who you are as a person, that's when you're gonna have some issues."

While modern football rules give more protection to the quarterback position than other players when it comes to late hits and unnecessary roughness, Weber's explanation for these rules remains the same. Quarterbacks are asked to know the plays better than anyone, make the right adjustments before the snap and then make the right decision among all the chaos of a normal football play.

At the highest level in the NFL, the quarterback position is in a transition period, too. Longtime main-stays like Tom Brady, Payton Manning and Aaron Rodgers are all retired or on the back-end of their career, and a new generation–headlined by players like Mahomes, Jackson and Burrow are coming up with completely different skill sets.

"Traditionally, you had to be 6-foot-3, stand in the pocket and throw the football," Weber said. "Now it's like, maybe you're 5-foot-10 and you can run and scramble and that's okay. It's now proven that you can do that in the NFL."

The now flexible height standards are making quarterback positions more available for athletes to pick up, according to Weber.

Tanner Morgan is currently preparing for his professional football career, hoping for a chance to catch onto an NFL roster. Adam Weber is nearly 10 years removed from a three-year NFL stint with the Denver Broncos and Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

“Guys are getting trained at a younger age. There are more resources out there to become a better quarterback, and you are seeing guys out there that are extremely athletic that can play the position at a high level,” Morgan said. “The quarterback position is only going to get better.”