

Underdog' Sean Murphy-Bunting and 'physical' Tampa Bay defense ready for Kansas City

- [By George Pohly gpholy@medianewsgroup.com](mailto:gpholy@medianewsgroup.com); @GPohly on Twitter
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Sean Murphy-Bunting (23) celebrates after intercepting a pass thrown by Aaron Rodgers of Green Bay during the NFC championship game in Green Bay on Jan. 24, 2021.

- Matt Ludtke -- Associated Press



Sean Murphy-Bunting is pictured during his Chippewa Valley playing days.

- Submitted photo

Sean Murphy-Bunting sees himself as an actor someday, a candidate to play himself in a movie about his life.

But that can wait.

Right now, Murphy-Bunting has a leading role as a starting cornerback for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, who play the defending champion Kansas City Chiefs at 6:30 p.m. Sunday in Super Bowl LV at Raymond James Stadium, the Bucs' home field.

"It would be the biggest moment of my life," Murphy-Bunting, 23, said when asked what a victory in the NFL championship game would mean.

Murphy-Bunting's path to this point was an unlikely one. He wasn't courted by top college programs — "I was a no-stars (recruit)," he said — coming out of Chippewa Valley High, and he left Central Michigan with a year of eligibility remaining to enter the 2019 draft, in which the Buccaneers drafted the 6-foot, 195-pound Murphy-Bunting with the 39th pick.

"I've always felt like an underdog," he said.



The Tampa Bay Buccaneers' Sean Murphy-Bunting intercepts a pass intended for Green Bay's Allen Lazard during the first half of the NFC championship game in Green Bay, Wis., Sunday, Jan. 24, 2021.

Matt Ludtke -- Associated Press

Murphy-Bunting has helped the Tampa Bay defense shine this postseason.

While quarterback Tom Brady, who signed as a free agent in the offseason, and tight end Rob Gronkowski, who came out of retirement to hook up with his former New England teammate, draw the most attention, Murphy-Bunting has made an NFL-high three interceptions in the playoffs, including one against Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers in the NFC championship game last Sunday.

The Bucs gave up 26 points to No. 1-seeded Green Bay after allowing 23 to Washington and 20 to New Orleans in earlier playoff games.

“We’re a fast, physical, hit-you-in-the-mouth defense,” Murphy-Bunting said. “We’re growing, getting better all the time, and we play for one another.”



Sean Murphy-Bunting of the Tampa Bay Bucs listens to a question during a Super Bowl media session.

Murphy-Bunting, who had one interception during the regular season, said several factors contributed to his thievery in the playoffs.

“I’m definitely seeing the ball a lot more,” he said. “Given the calls we’ve had, I’ve been able to get my eyes on the quarterback.

“I’ve been in the right position at the right time.”

The Bucs' roster was built with the help of shrewd draft picks. Eight starters, Murphy-Bunting included, and a pair of key reserves were selected in the past three drafts.

Carlton Davis, drafted in 2018, plays the corner opposite Murphy-Bunting. The safeties are Jordan Whitehead, a 2018 pick, and rookie Antoine Winfield Jr.

“We don’t look for recognition, we’re just playing for each other,” Murphy-Bunting said of his teammates in the backfield. “It means a lot knowing that the people in the front office trust us to grow as a group, to develop like we have in a fast league.

“We’ve got to be ballhawks, create turnovers any way possible. It would be great if we can put points on the board ourselves (against the Chiefs).

Tampa Bay has won seven consecutive games, including its three postseason contests, since a Week 12 loss to Kansas City.

The Chiefs built a 17-0 lead in the first quarter of that game at Tampa, but then the Bucs got some traction before KC left with a 27-24 victory.

Murphy-Bunting said the Bucs' experience against the Chiefs and speedsters like Tyreek Hill will help in the Super Bowl.

"They were out-scheming what we had going on, but we know that we can play with those guys," he said. "Everybody's good in the league. The separation comes in the way you prepare for a game, the discipline, the technique.

"It's like my coach says: It's a neck-up thing."



Sean Murphy-Bunting takes the ball to the basket during a Chippewa Valley game.
Submitted photo

Murphy-Bunting grew up in a home with five brothers.

"I played every sport," he said.

At Chippewa Valley, he played football, basketball and baseball.

“I think ‘athlete’ is a great description of him – he was so athletic,” Chippewa Valley football coach Scott Merchant said. “The word ‘competitor’ also comes to mind. He hated to lose at anything.”

Murphy-Bunting first thought his future as a college athlete would be in baseball.

But as a senior at CVHS, he became a two-way football standout as a receiver and defensive back, and Central Michigan piqued his interest in that sport with a scholarship offer.

Murphy-Bunting had seven interceptions in 38 games at CMU. As a junior in 2018, he was a first team All-American Conference selection and the Chippewas’ Defensive Player of the Year.

Those years turned out to be prequels in a career that could see Murphy-Bunting climb to the top of the NFL.

“I’m an actor at heart,” Murphy-Bunting said as he good-naturedly made a case for playing himself in a biopic. “I’m not that good at acting, but I’m trying to be good.

“In the end, it always works out the way God wanted it to work out.”



Tampa Bay's Sean Murphy-Bunting (23) and teammates celebrate after Murphy-Bunting intercepted a pass intended for Green Bay's Allen Lazard during the first half of the NFC championship game on Jan. 24.
Matt Ludtke -- Associated Press