

A day on the bubble with Packers' Alonzo Harris

By [Michael Cohen](#) of the *Journal Sentinel*

Green Bay — The uneasy union of heart rate and time hinges on a gold iPhone in the center of a conference room table. Owned by Alonzo Harris, an undrafted running back from Louisiana-Lafayette who signed with the Green Bay Packers in May, the phone dictates emotions for everyone present, and each call possesses the unwelcome ability to make blood pressure spike and everything else freeze.

The Harris family, consisting of his mother, stepfather, girlfriend and 2-year-old son, gathered here in the executive boardroom of the Wingate by Wyndham hotel with the goal of never hearing the phone ring at all. It is the morning of Saturday, Sept. 5, and each team has until 3 p.m. to submit its 53-man roster to the National Football League offices. Only the players being cut are contacted by their respective teams.

"No news is good news," Harris said his agent told him the night before. The less chirping from his iPhone, the better.

Which explains the hollowness at 2:14 p.m., 46 minutes before the finish line that doubles as an invitation to celebrate, when the screen in the middle of the table lights up. Harris, who already endured a false — and later retracted — report about being waived earlier in the day, takes a deep breath and pushes the phone to his ear with the hand he broke during pass protection 10 days prior.

"Hello," he says, feebly.

The voice on the other end belongs to Rob Sheets, Harris' agent, who called with an update after speaking to a personnel man from the Packers. But Sheets receives another call before he can finish the story. He quickly hangs up and promises to call back soon.

"That is a cliffhanger for real," says Chris Williams, Harris' stepfather. "That's the best way to describe it."

"I was off the cliff," says Harris' mother, Tywana, who immediately begins to pray.

Ten nauseating minutes pass. Harris, sweating, tries and fails to focus on the college football highlights playing on a laptop. Williams, standing, scrolls through Twitter and shares anything he reads that might defuse the tension. Alonzo Harris Jr., crawling beneath the table, is scolded for playing too close to an electrical outlet.

When the phone finally rings, Sheets speaks briefly to Harris and then asks to be placed on speakerphone.

"Based on all the information we've been able to glean thus far," Sheets says, "I feel pretty good about the situation. We'll know in 30 minutes. If you haven't heard from me,

the Packers or anyone else in 30 minutes, go down to the local store and buy a bottle of champagne."

The countdown to a dream is on.

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9:39 a.m.: Harris emerges from the hotel elevator a different man, the gnawing stress of cut day outwardly apparent more than five hours before the roster deadline.

Harris, a burly 6 feet 1 inch and 235 pounds, with an inviting smile and laid-back personality reflective of his Alabama roots, is uncharacteristically fidgety, anxious. His tongue flicks back and forth on a series of mint candies. His eyes, glassy and low, suggest a lack of sleep even before Harris admits he went to bed around 4 a.m., a mere 60 minutes from his typical waking hour during training camp.

"You scared me half to death when you called," Harris says to a reporter, thinking the call meant something much worse.

Harris, 22, agreed to let a reporter from the Journal Sentinel experience the turmoil of cut day with him and his family inside the hotel where most rookies spend camp. The six-hour window Saturday offered an all-access look at life on the edge of an NFL roster, where lifelong dreams are defined by fragility.

Wearing a white Packers T-shirt with green letters and a pair of silver basketball shorts, Harris nestles into a desk chair in a conference room off the lobby. He faces away from the foyer, where teammates Matt Rotheram, an offensive lineman, and Mitchell Henry, a tight end, are waiting for a shuttle to take them to the facility at Lambeau Field for breakfast. When they return a few hours later, both will have been cut.

Harris ignores the parade of teammates behind him — James Vaughters, cut; Bruce Gaston, safe; Ed Williams, cut — by telling stories about his childhood in Gadsden, Ala. Raised by his mother, Harris was both the youngest and the biggest of five siblings — three sisters, one brother. He discovered football through a van window at the age of 6 or 7, begging his mother to let him play while en route to the grocery store.

Smitten by the sport, Harris viewed football as a gateway to rewarding his mother with a better life. A plant worker, Tywana Harris made ends meet for a family that, at the time, lacked an adult male presence. Days when the electricity or water flicked off were nullified by booming holiday celebrations, like the year his mother gave him and his sisters a Nintendo 64 for Christmas.

"Still to this day we play Mario on the (Nintendo) Wii together," Harris said.

But a broken third metacarpal on his right hand, suffered in practice Aug. 26, endangered the opportunity to gift his mom the new house and Lexus she always wanted, to provide for his son, who turned 2 years old six days earlier.

The injury, which required Harris to wear a club on his dominant, ball-carrying hand, sent him spiraling into a funk. "It was just the end of the world," said Harris, who burst into tears when he called his mother and sisters to share the results of the X-rays. His time with the Packers, he believed, had expired.

"They're big on availability being the best ability," Harris said. "So I'm like, OK, if I can't do anything, then what am I still here for? What are they going to keep me for?"

He peeks at his phone. More than four hours of waiting still remain.

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11:13 a.m.: The drive from the hotel to McDonald's is a short one, barely more than a mile, but for Harris it offers a welcome reprieve from the pressure, from the small conference room, from the lobby where players wait after being cut.

He asks to hear a few minutes of Dr. Dre's new album, "Compton: A Soundtrack," and fields a call from his agent, who wants to make sure Harris is hanging in there. The car pulls into the McDonald's parking lot, which is when a stressful day gets downright weird.

His phone buzzes with a new text message in the group chat between the Packers' running backs. Rajion Neal, presumed by many to win the No. 3 spot behind Eddie Lacy and James Starks, wrote to tell his teammates he had been waived.

That the Packers cut Neal, who had more than 150 total yards and a touchdown during the exhibition season, staggers Harris and surprises audiences on social media. Harris' body shakes as he waits in line at McDonald's.

"I'm just shocked," he says.

With his appetite nonexistent, Harris brings a 10-piece chicken nugget meal with extra barbeque sauce back to the hotel for his son and his girlfriend, Allie. A long night of watching college football exhausted Alonzo Jr., better known as A.J., who has developed a habit of crying whenever Allie, his mother, attempts to change the channel.

Harris retreats to the conference room, the outside of which is adorned with decorations welcoming the men's soccer team from Western Illinois. The Dr. Dre album resumes with the first verse of popular rapper Kendrick Lamar, interrupted almost immediately by a flurry of activity on Harris' phone.

Sheets calls wondering if Harris saw the report on Twitter saying he had been released. Lacy sends a text asking if the tweet, published at 10:42 a.m. by a reporter from the Green Bay Press-Gazette, is true.

"He's just as confused as I am," says Harris.

The angst bubble finally bursts when client and agent confirm no one from the Packers has called. A short while later, the report is retracted and replaced by an apology. False alarm.

Harris, as it turns out, was ordering chicken nuggets at the exact moment he was falsely cut. His receipt from McDonald's is stamped 10:43 a.m.

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12:15 p.m.: The source of Harris' motivation arrives in the boardroom wearing a new pair of Nike sneakers and a white T-shirt with black letters that spell DRAFT PICK. The cheesehead at the end of the table, the one customized with an Air Jordan sticker, belongs to him.

In bounces A.J., a walking, talking sugar packet of a toddler whose goals in life are to consume candy and copy his daddy. Once he says hello to his grandparents, the show begins.

"Fuuhball! Fuuhball!" A.J. yells, pointing to the laptop showing a football game. At 2 years old, A.J. is hooked on what his father hopes will be the family business. He fusses when mom chooses cartoons over a Clemson game. He giggles when dad lets him push buttons on the video game controllers.

Though A.J. is far from understanding what it means to compete for a roster spot, the idea of telling his son he failed in Green Bay tormented Harris throughout the week. His sleep dwindled to as little as three hours per night. His appetite waned. He asked himself, realistic or not, how A.J. would interpret a speech from dad explaining that he'd been cut.

"Just me walking in the room knowing that he won't even understand it," Harris said, "just to say it, that's a lot."

His mind reverted back to the hundreds of hours dedicated to learning a playbook that resembled "Chinese words" when the coaching staff first gave him an iPad during the spring. As many as 500 pages were covered in a single installation period on a single day, Harris said, and the next day ushered in 500 more. He likened the complexity of the Packers' playbook to running a high school offense in pee-wee football.

The classroom sessions, often led by offensive coordinator Edgar Bennett, were a frustrating exercise in self-confidence. The players who were bold made eye contact with

Bennett to suggest they knew the material. Those who were nervous averted his gaze and risked being singled out in front of their peers.

"I got something wrong," Harris said, "and that feeling just — I didn't like it. I just felt like probably the dumbest person on Earth."

Beginning in organized team activities, Harris and a trio of fellow rookies — quarterback Brett Hundley, defensive tackle Christian Ringo and tight end Kennard Backman — formed something of a study group that logged hundreds of hours outside of the required practice and classroom sessions. Days began at 5:30 a.m. at the facility; sleep was pushed off until 11:30 p.m. or midnight.

The rookie support group held nightly meetings to review plays, hot routes, checks, motion patterns and everything else that comprises a "high-powered offense," as Harris described it. On off-days they went to the facility anyway, practicing the Xs and Os they studied electronically the night before.

To help Ringo, the lone defensive player in the group, they set up garbage cans and chairs in the parking lot behind the hotel to mimic offensive linemen.

"Me and Brett would be on the opposite side," Harris said. "We'll run a couple run plays or play-actions while he did his defensive techniques up front. The (hotel guests) probably thought we were out of our minds."

In time, Harris said his classroom performance improved. The day he correctly answered a question in front of the whole offense remains one of his proudest moments of camp.

"That felt wonderful," he said.

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2:59 p.m.: The uneasy union of heart rate and time hinged on a gold iPhone that never rang. Owned by Harris, the phone stayed silent — 2:56 p.m., 2:57 p.m., 2:58 p.m., 2:59 p.m. — as a spot on the 53-man roster crept closer.

At 2:56 p.m., he spun A.J. around in a desk chair while staring off into space. A deep exhale gave way to an exasperated smile.

At 2:58 p.m., his attention turned to the college football highlights airing monotonously on the laptop. "That's a touchdown," he whispered to himself, mustering anything to pass the time.

And at 2:59:fifty-something p.m., a mere seconds before the deadline, the room froze as Harris' phone rang for the final time. It was Sheets, his agent, who happily explained that he had not heard a thing.

"It's official, son!" Tywana Harris shouted. "We are Green Bay Packers."

Harris, sweaty and relieved and exhausted, collapsed in his mother's arms, the tension melting from his body.

It was after 3 p.m. The countdown to his dream was complete.