

# Harris embraces strategic makeover

By [Bethany Bradsher](#)

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Recruiting can be an art form, according to East Carolina wide receivers coach Donnie Kirkpatrick, and never more than when the prospect is a high school quarterback who is really best suited for another place on the field.

It's a familiar storyline to coaches on the recruiting trail:

The recruit has outstanding skills and has always played quarterback, because that's where most high school coaches put their best athletes. But the recruiter knows the player probably won't make a college quarterback, so the challenge is to transform him into the position that optimizes his abilities.

Not every player manages to make that transformation, but Kirkpatrick is guiding one success story — Dwayne Harris — as he becomes a bigger part of the Pirate offense every week.

Through five games, Harris has more than double the yards of any other Pirate receiver — 28 catches for 295 yards. He has also collected 74 rushing yards on 13 attempts and has even thrown one complete pass — for 35 yards against North Carolina.

If Harris is honest, he has to admit that one of the main reasons he chose East Carolina was the assurance that he would get a chance to play quarterback. The Pirate coaches were true to their word and tried Harris as signal caller during his freshman year, but soon they began to talk to him about adopting other roles.

"We thought he could have played defensive back, he could have played receiver, he probably could have played running back," Kirkpatrick said "I think the first year or so, you kind of hold on, you still want to be the quarterback. Everybody just grows up wanting to be the quarterback. It's a natural thing."

Every quick player with good hands may set his childhood sights on quarterback, but Kirkpatrick has noticed a shift in recent years with the advent of the Wildcat offense. Teams like ECU thrive with a halfback who runs, catches and throws.

It's the model that helped Florida receiver Percy Harvin accumulate 32 touchdowns (13 receiving and 19 rushing) in his career as a Gator and become an immediate contributor with the Vikings, and Harvin has become an example for Harris.



Donnie Kirkpatrick



Dwayne Harris

(Photos: ECU SID)

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• [Talk FM Replay: Game Day Countdown](#)

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• [Monroe: Kevin's Keys to the Game](#)

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"He has taken on this role of realizing the hybrid, as we call him, the H-back, slash, the whole bit is just as good if not better than quarterback," Kirkpatrick said. "He's the decathlon guy. He can do all the events. I think he's having a lot of fun with it right now."

His sophomore season was marred by a foot injury two-thirds of the way through the season, but he still finished the season as the Pirates' top receiver with 58 catches for 654 yards. As a junior, he is even more comfortable with his role and with the players who protect him and get him the ball.

As a former quarterback, Harris feels a strong connection with Patrick Pinkney that has contributed to his average of 10.5 yards per reception.

"It was hard to change the position and get a feel for it," said Harris, who went to Tucker High School in Stone Mountain, GA. "But once I got in there and learned the position and started playing it to the best of my ability, I'm loving it. I can't complain. I'm on the same page with Pat on everything. I already know what a quarterback is looking for."

Part of Harris's preparation had to happen in the offseason, when he focused on lifting weights and running to start the fall with the requisite bulk and speed to survive in the open field.

"From a physical standpoint, it's a lot tougher going from quarterback to wide receiver, blocking and running routes and getting tackled all the time," Harris said. "But I got a little bigger, got a little stronger, got a little faster, so everything weighs out in the end."

Harris would love to work toward a shot in professional football, but as a communications major he has also always wanted to work as a publicist, representing sports or music stars. His communication skills have improved on the field, too, Kirkpatrick said, as he has gained confidence in his new role and become more vocal with younger players.

When he has time between classes and practice, Harris might come to the football offices just to watch film — something he never did as an underclassman.

"Now he knows he has the respect of all the players and all the coaches," Kirkpatrick said. "And I think he's more confident now. He speaks up a lot more."

Despite inconsistent efforts against West Virginia and North Carolina, Harris feels like he's part of an efficient team whose drive matches its skill. Against Southern Methodist's action-packed offense, he hopes to push his teammates to match the Mustangs point for point.

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"We've got to come out and put up as many points as they're putting up and just help our defense out a little bit," he said. "We're getting back on our feet. Right now I feel confident with the offense and defense. We're just going to keep moving, and hopefully good things will happen."

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10/07/2009

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