

# NFL Draft: The legacy of Robert Morris' only draft pick survives almost 20 years after his untimely death

Published: Sunday, May 11, 2014 4:00 am

By Lauren Kirschman [lkirschman@timesonline.com](mailto:lkirschman@timesonline.com) | [1 comment](#)

It's been 20 years since Tim Hall made the play, but it doesn't seem that distant. The memory still brings a smile to the face of former Robert Morris coach Joe Walton. He remembers his son, then a graduate assistant, raising his arms in celebration as Hall streaked by during school's first football game.

Someone took a picture of that moment. It's still hanging in Walton's den in Beaver Falls. It was Hall's first game in a system he barely had time to learn, but that didn't seem to matter as he took off down the sideline, leaving a celebration in his wake. Walton kept the photograph, but he doesn't need it to recall the catch that launched a school's legend and, as it turned out, its football program.

Walton can see it clearly. Just like he can see Hall sitting in the old football offices, hunched over as a graduate assistant helped him with math. Just like he can see the running back shaking off defenders at practice to gain 12 yards when he didn't yet know any plays.

It's the ending, though, that lingers the most. The tragic conclusion to a story that started 21 years ago with a single phone call and ended on a street in Kansas City just five years later.

Hall — a player Walton still affectionately calls Timmy — still is the only player drafted from Robert Morris. After playing two seasons for the Colonials, he was taken by the Oakland Raiders in 1995. Hall was shot on Sept. 30, 1998, when a driver pulled up alongside his car at a stoplight. His friend, the apparent target, ducked and survived unharmed. Hall was killed. His murder hasn't been solved.

"The fact that we only had him for two years was just too bad," said RMU senior associate athletic director Marty Galosi. "I wish we would've had him for four. And the fact that he was only

alive for 22 years was a downright shame as well. He had so much to give not only as a football player, but as a person.”

### **‘Best recruiting phone call that we ever made’**

Robert Morris retired Hall’s No. 45 jersey. It’s hanging in a hallway in Joe Walton Stadium with an autographed picture tucked inside the frame. There’s no doubt he was the springboard for the Colonials’ football. Walton often thinks about what would’ve happened if they didn’t have him that first season, how the trajectory of Robert Morris’ program would’ve changed.

But for as much as Hall meant to the program as a player, those that knew him talk about him as a person first. To Galosi, then the Robert Morris sports information director, Hall was the athlete who never let him down off the field. Not even once. He didn’t miss appointments. He did everything with a smile.

To his agent Ralph Cindrich, Hall was the client who struggled not to address him as Mr. Cindrich — even after prompted to call him Ralph day after day. His need to show respect came naturally.

Hall’s death hit Cindrich harder than even the loss of relatives.

“It changed me somewhat dramatically,” Cindrich said. “Up to that point, I had always been able to control and hide my emotions. With Tim I had no chance. His mom invited me to speak at the funeral. I couldn’t keep my composure. Tim would’ve been embarrassed. I was embarrassed myself.”

Hall ended up at Robert Morris because of a phone call from graduate assistant Dave Harper to Dante Payne, a defensive back from Cincinnati, the year before Robert Morris’ program started competing.

Payne brought Piante Crew — a friend from Kemper Military Academy in Missouri — with him on his visit. When Crew arrived, he mentioned some teammates the coaches might be interested in. The first was wide receiver Robert Frazier. The second was Hall.

It took a while for Hall to find his way to Robert Morris. He didn’t come with Frazier, Cruz and Payne at first. He had major schools interested and wanted to see if he could make it. But when

it didn't work out, he reached out to Frazier. A phone call from Harper later, Hall jumped on a bus and paid his own way for the 40-hour trip to Robert Morris.

"That phone call to Dante Payne had to be the best recruiting phone call that we ever made," Walton said. It produced five Robert Morris starters.

When Hall arrived in the middle of the week, Robert Morris was already in training camp and set to play its last scrimmage that Saturday. He didn't know the system. He didn't know a single play. But when the scrimmage came around, the struggling offense couldn't even get a first down. A frustrated Walton looked at his backfield coach and said, "Let's put that new kid in and see what he does."

They ran one of the only plays Hall would know: Sweep left. He bounced off two different defenders to run for 12 yards. Then they ran sweep right. Different direction, same result. Hall went 25 yards, eluding two defenders and making another miss. Soon after, Walton announced the scrimmage over.

He'd seen enough.

Walton told his backfield coach to spend "every minute of every day" with Hall until the Colonials' first game. He picked out five runs and four passes that he wanted Hall to know. That's all they practiced.

Nobody expected Hall to burst through the defense the way that he did in that first game. Nobody expected Robert Morris to win that game, let alone the six other games it won its first season.

And certainly nobody expected that image to hang on Walton's wall 20 years later, forever frozen in time.

"He was a big-time college player," Walton said. "He should've been in a major school. I don't know how we got him."

**'He went up there, and he blew them away'**

Even with all of Hall's promise, no NFL scouts were looking for a player at Robert Morris, a program just two years old when Hall finished his college career. But Walton knew he had a prospect, and he still had his contacts from coaching in the NFL. He reached out to Cindrich, who at that time was one of the top agents in football and representing several top 10 picks.

Walton told Cindrich he had a player, a 5-foot-9, 205-pound running back that ran a 4.7 40-yard dash. Cindrich wondered how he would ever place him, but Walton had an idea. He was good friends with Pitt coach Johnny Majors, so he asked if Hall could attend the university's pro day. "He went up there, and he blew them away," Walton said.

At first, none of the scouts paid much attention to the Robert Morris running back working out in the corner. Cindrich asked them to come over at some point, just to meet Hall and give him some attention. He shouldn't have bothered. As soon as Hall ran the 40, they came running from 100 yards away.

Walton estimated he would be clocked at 4.7. He ran a sub-4.4 instead.

"Pitt didn't have anybody close to that type of speed," Cindrich said. "By the second time (he ran), we had a little crowd. ... We drew some people."

Cindrich knew they would be OK after that. He was right. Teams started sending people to Robert Morris to give Hall physicals and watch his tapes and work him out.

He wasn't Robert Morris' secret anymore. The word was out.

"I remember the day he was drafted," Galosi said. "I was just thinking to myself, we just finished our second year of football, and we had a player not go as a free agent, but get drafted. He really almost got to where he wanted to go there. It's such a shame what ended up happening at the end."

'It was something that hit me like a left hook and knocked me completely out'

Hall had recently been cut by the Raiders before he left his house that night to get groceries for his mother. His friend offered to drive.

Walton and Cindrich had both been fielding phone calls from teams interested in signing him. Then Kansas City coach Marty Schottenheimer reached out to Walton. It would've been a good fit; the Chiefs ran the ball more than Oakland. Schottenheimer was excited about Hall.

Cindrich talked to Hall about his prospects the night before he was killed. When his mother called the next morning, Cindrich thought it was about a trip Hall was scheduled to take.

"It took a while to compose myself," he said. "I spoke with the people in the office. I was visibly shaken, my voice was cracking. It was something that hit me like a left hook and knocked me completely out."

More than two decades later, Hall's fingerprints still linger all over Robert Morris. There's the photograph on Walton's wall, the jersey in the stadium's hallway, the signed poster in Galosi's office. Perhaps his biggest legacy, though, is the football program itself, the one he sent bursting out of the gate when everyone expected it to stumble.

"It set the tone for our following years," Walton said. "We got more interest from high school teams. Everybody knew who we were now. My name helped some, but the fact that we did so well that first year and that Tim Hall got drafted after the second year, recruiting got a lot easier."