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West outlasts
John Marshall

Sports

Graves matures as player and student

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MANKATO — When Jesse Graves was a freshman at Minnesota State, he rarely owned up to mistakes, preferring to slough those off or blame someone else.

Five years later, the Mankato East grad has matured and knows he has to be accountable.

"I've grown up," he said. "I've learned how to handle different situations."

Graves and the Minnesota State football team open the season tonight at Truman State, and five years ago, it was hard to imagine that Graves would be a starting safety and one of the leaders of the defense. He came out of Mankato East thinking he would play some football and live the college life.

But the senior has realized that there's more to being a student-athlete, concentrating on his degree in ethnic studies with a minor in sociology, which he will finish this spring.

"It's been a real good experience," he said. "Sometimes, I wish I could have gotten away. Every college has its pros and cons, and staying (in Mankato) has had its pros and cons. I like being close to the people I grew up with, but at the same time, I would have liked to get away."

Graves spent his freshman season playing special teams and handling the long-snapping duties, but he left after that season and spent the summer at North Iowa Area Community College in Mason City.

"I didn't like the way the program was being run (at Minnesota State)," he said. "(At NIACC), the coaching staff was young and the facilities weren't very good so that didn't work."

Graves returned to Minnesota State and red-shirted in 2006.

"I didn't expect (the Minnesota State coaches) to welcome me back, but they were good and it was easier than I thought it would be," Graves said.

In 2007, Graves began to get some snaps in the secondary. He started 10 games last season, making an interception in the playoff



John Cross

Senior safety Jesse Graves said maturity has been the key to his success with the Minnesota State football program.

Jesse Graves' career stats

	T	A	Int.	Rec.
2008	10	18	1	0
2007	18	8	1	0
2006	Redshirt			
2005	3	2	0	0
Career	31	28	2	0



game at Ashland University.

Coach Todd Hoffner, who was new to the program last year, isn't sure how Graves' career started, but he's impressed with how it's developed.

"He's very genuine, very cordial," Hoffner said. "He's been through a lot, and he's maturing into a fine, young man. He has a lot of the qualities that we like to see in our players."

Graves' role will expand this season as he takes over the play-calling duties in the secondary. The defense has a few new faces, and Graves will be responsible to get the back end lined up properly in the right coverages.

"Leadership is a natural thing, but it can also be learned," he said. "I've been

here so long that the defense comes naturally to me. I can help the guys because I've been on the rollercoaster.

"It's all about how you come across. I think there's a fine line, that if you're messing up a lot, I'll be in your face, but I'd rather be the happy guy who's always smiling and helping everybody get it right."

The Mavericks are coming off their most successful season in 16 years, and Graves said reaching the playoffs was a lot of fun, despite the first-round loss.

"I think we came together as a team," he said. "We enjoyed the success, and we have a lot of team chemistry. We've got a lot of new guys (on defense), but they're a lot of good guys, too."