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For Browns tight end David Njoku, chief is now more than a nickname — it's 'a great honor'

By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2022/08/04/cleveland-browns-depth-chart-david-njoku-age-chief-nigeria-africa-nfl-training-camp-harrison-bryant/10216867002/>

BEREA — David Njoku concedes he didn't really know how to react at first when the women of his family's Nigerian village bowed their heads to show him respect.

The undisputed No. 1 tight end of the Browns has been nicknamed “Chief” since he was a middle school student because people thought he resembled his father, Innocent Njoku Sr., who has long held a chieftaincy title.

Whenever Njoku scores touchdowns for the Browns, he leaps and flings the ball toward the ground, a popular celebration he dubbed “The Chief Slam.”

But chief is no longer merely a moniker for Njoku, who headlines a tight end group also occupied by primary backup Harrison Bryant.

On March 16, Njoku was formally named a chief, an honorary title granted in recognition of his humanitarian efforts.

“All my life, I've been always called 'Chief,’” Njoku, 26, told the Beacon Journal last week during Browns training camp at CrossCountry Mortgage Campus. “To have the actual title bestowed upon me, it was a great honor.

“I give God all the glory. I want Him to take all the credit because without Him, I would not be here.”

Another Cleveland Browns tight end to watch: Basketball-turned-football player Marcus Santos-Silva fighting for roster spot

A key figure in Cleveland's competition at defensive tackle: Taven Bryan already loves crazy Browns fans and finds Northeast Ohio weather appealing

By the way, Njoku has grown accustomed to others bowing their heads in his presence.

“After a while,” he said, “it became second nature that I welcomed them.”

Felix Kumah-Abiwu, the founding director of the Center for African Studies and an associate professor in the Department of Africana Studies at Kent State University, said Njoku's new title signals to villagers he is someone they should emulate.

“They are looking up to David for direction,” Kumah-Abiwu, a native of Ghana who has followed Njoku's football career, said by phone. “So in essence, he's on the top of the social ladder in the community now. He has moved from being a commoner to a very distinguished circle of traditional leaders.”

Cleveland Browns tight end David Njoku snaps a selfie with fans after the NFL football team's football training camp in Berea on Monday.

How Cleveland Browns tight end David Njoku has stayed connected to Africa throughout his life



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A first-generation American, Njoku is the seventh of Innocent Sr. and Stella's nine children. The two oldest children were born in Nigeria before their parents emigrated from the West African country in 1987.

Njoku, who grew up in New Jersey, had traveled to Nigeria a handful of times before the Browns traded up to draft him in the first round (No. 29 overall) out of the University of Miami in 2017. Since then, he has regularly visited his family's homeland and donated food, water and essentials. He also funded the construction of a borehole, which was completed early this year, to provide a source of fresh water.

The project contributed to Njoku becoming a chief, a process initiated upon his father's recommendation. Among the requisite steps were meetings between Njoku and His Royal Highness Eze Barr. Martins Uchegbu, the king of Umuozu Autonomous community, the village from which the Njoku family hails.

"To become an honorary chief, you must really achieve a lot," Kumah-Abiwu said. "The village has recognized his achievement and the elevation of his community, his family name, his country and Africa. The work that he's doing, supporting financially, building a borehole to supply water, that's a major achievement. David has really distinguished himself as a good citizen of his community."

Defensive coordinator Joe Woods has something cooking in Cleveland: More bite, less bark: Browns defense sharpens attack skills with Alpha Dawgs competition

Because of tradition, Njoku explained, he couldn't become a chief unless his older brother, Innocent Jr., held the title.

"So they inaugurated him as a chief, too," Njoku said, adding his younger brothers, Evidence and Charles, became princes.

Osi Umenyiora, a former All-Pro defensive end and two-time Super Bowl champion with the New York Giants, received a chieftaincy title about a decade ago when his late father, a king in the family's Nigerian village for 45 years, rewarded him for a long track record of philanthropic work.

"It's something that I'll never forget for the rest of my life," Umenyiora, who was born in London and lived in Nigeria from the ages of 6-14, said during a phone interview.

"It's a very, very big deal, especially if you grow up in that area, you grow up in that environment, which we did. It's the highest title you can get other than being a king."

Umenyiora said Njoku is the only other NFL player he knows of who is a chief, adding former defensive end Adewale Ogunleye is a Nigerian prince.

"There's nothing you can compare it to in America," said Umenyiora, who earlier this summer helped lead the NFL's first official events in Africa. The league held a talent identification camp, a flag football clinic and festivities for fans in Ghana. Umenyiora and Browns linebacker Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah were among the players of past and present who made the trip.

Cleveland Browns tight end David Njoku runs for yards after a catch during the NFL football team's football training camp in Berea on Monday.

Browns TE David Njoku says he plans on doing much more for Nigeria



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When someone becomes a chief, a glamorous, festive ceremony is conducted, Kumah-Abiwu said.

One of the houses owned by Njoku's father was chosen as the venue for the inauguration. The family knew it needed to use a property with enough land to accommodate a substantial crowd.

“There were roughly 15,000 people there, so when we walked out of the house, we walked around to each tribe, each village, and we shook the hands, we waved and everything,” Njoku said. “It was really presidential, and it was an awesome feeling.”

It proved to be an emotional experience for Njoku, one he considers a major life event, even for someone who owns a list of momentous occasions, such as being drafted five years ago, becoming a father in 2020 and signing a four-year contract extension worth a maximum of \$56.75 million in May.

“It's definitely up there because not only was I inaugurated as a chief, but I also was able to give back to my community again and see all the happy faces,” he said. “The faces of hope was really what drove me the most.”

Njoku revealed he aspires to start an agency to help talented Nigerians break through in sports, entertainment and other industries.

“This is just the start, I believe,” Njoku said. “I plan on doing much more for my home country.”

The favor was returned when a nickname turned into something much more significant.

“I was very appreciative of the love they gave back to me,” Njoku said.



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No more fooling around: Jordan Elliott rededicates himself after lacking commitment first two years

By Scott Petrak, Brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2022/08/05/no-more-fooling-around-jordan-elliott-rededicates-himself-after-lacking-commitment-first-two-years/>

BEREA — Jordan Elliott’s workout routine the previous two offseasons would’ve been a waste of his gym membership.

Elliott trained occasionally, not obsessively like teammates and peers around the league.

“It was bad,” the defensive tackle said last week in a candid interview with The Chronicle-Telegram. “Probably like once or twice a week.”

Kevin Stefanski awaiting ‘clarity’ on Deshaun Watson suspension before adjusting practice plan

What was he doing instead?

“Bullsh—,” he said.

Playing video games? Partying?

“Not even partying, just not focused, just not where I needed to be,” he said.

Elliott, 24, changed his routine after the 2021 season. He stayed in town and worked out five days a week at Browns headquarters with the team’s strength staff and alongside right guard Wyatt Teller and center Nick Harris.

“I saw him make that decision, taking that part serious, taking the work from day to day, Monday through Friday serious,” Teller said.

Elliott’s body is the proof and the payoff. He’s 6-foot-4 and bulked up to 325 pounds — “I feel like this is my real weight” — but looks like he weighs 280, according to coordinator Joe Woods.

Defensive line coach Chris Kiffin can’t stop raving about Elliott.

“I think he left at the end of last year realizing going into Year 3 he’s not where he wants to be,” Kiffin said. “He got stronger, he got faster, his feet are unbelievable and he’s moving really well.”

Training Camp Log, Day 8: Storm interrupts practice, forces team into field house

KNOW THYSELF

Elliott was a third-round pick out of Missouri in 2020, No. 88 overall, and general manager Andrew Berry envisioned him as the future of the team’s tackle position. The Browns loved his quickness and disruptiveness from the interior and identified an intangible that could end up jump-starting his career.

“Jordan has an incredible level of self-awareness,” Berry said after drafting him. “That was one of the things that really resonated with us and stuck with us is really just his eye toward self-improvement, his ability to reflect and just the strides that he has made even in college.”



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For two years in the NFL, Elliott's evolution was on hold.

"I've definitely had self-awareness but I didn't have the motivation," Elliott said. "The lack of focus, the lack of attention to detail, just not being a pro.

"I was self-aware but I wasn't self-aware to the point I wanted to improve. It's taken me just till now to understand it."

Notes: Martin Emerson Jr. has intelligence, ability to go along with impressive size

Kiffin said he didn't see complacency or a lack of commitment from Elliott, but something finally clicked internally.

The lack of impact in two seasons helped light the fuse. He's played 32 games, including four starts, totaling only 41 tackles, none for loss, a half-sack, four quarterback hits and a pass defended.

"Honestly right after the season, I wasn't satisfied," he said. "I knew I had to make changes if I wanted to expect something different, like I can't expect a different outcome and just be the same person.

"Just that desire, maybe that shame or embarrassment of how I was performing because it wasn't to the level I wanted in my mind."

Zone Coverage podcast

Elliott got married in March to Symmone and credits her with helping him stay focused and being supportive despite the sacrifices in time spent as newlyweds.

"I'm just always up here," Elliott said of the team facility. "That's the difference, I want to be up here. I'm constantly trying to find ways whether I'm recovering, studying film, I'm up here.

"I look at home as just a temporary place now, as before I couldn't wait to get home. This is my home now. So definitely have a newfound love for the game."

Kiffin said it's "big-time" for Elliott to realize his shortcomings and that he's started to take to heart the lessons taught by veterans.

"A lot of that just comes with age and wisdom and growing with experiences, seeing it out here," Kiffin said. "He's gone through Sheldon Richardson the first year, then Malik Jackson the next year, so being able to pull from those guys and learn. And I'm sure those guys told him, look, nothing's guaranteed in this league. It speaks volumes that he's able to do that himself."

THE TIME IS NOW

Elliott's expected emergence this year arrived right on time.

Jackson and Malik McDowell weren't re-signed, leaving vacancies at the starting tackle spots. Berry hasn't invested a lot of resources in the interior of the line, so the Browns were counting on Elliott to step into a primary role.



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“I guess it’s pressure, but not in a negative way, it is just you gotta have pressure on you sometimes to make you take that next step,” he said. “So that’s kind of how I’m looking at it. I’m excited about it.”

“Now he knows the expectations, what’s going to be asked of him and we definitely need him to step up for us this year,” Woods said.

Elliott and Taven Bryan, a former first-round pick of the Jaguars signed to a one-year deal in free agency, have been the starters through a week-plus of training camp. Behind them are Perrion Winfrey, a rookie fourth-round pick, and Tommy Togiai, a fourth-rounder in 2021.

Berry hasn’t added a proven veteran despite the lack of successful experience at the position.

“We’re at a position where we’re trying to develop young players along with some free agents,” Woods said. “We have some youth at the defensive tackle position but they’re talented. So along the way they’re probably going to make some mistakes as they’re growing into the position and learning it, but I think that’s just the process we’re going to have to go through this year.”

Elliott feels good about the group and said Bryan and Winfrey fit what Woods wants.

“Just that explosive, up-field type of D-tackle, disruptive,” Elliott said. “That’s definitely them, like to the core.”

As Elliott’s focus sharpens and the game slows down in his third training camp, the lessons learned from the veterans he’s played with — Richardson, Jackson, Larry Ogunjobi, Myles Garrett — have begun to resonate.

“I definitely learned from them, technique things, just off-the-field studying things, but I didn’t implement those things until now,” Elliott said. “That’s definitely a lot of knowledge that I learned from the guys and it’s a blessing that I can recall that information and utilize it now.”

ENVISIONING A FUTURE

Elliott wants so much to be different moving forward — eliminating the “inconsistent play,” building on his improved “maturity,” establishing himself as a key piece of what could be a dominant defense.

“It has taken me just till now to understand it, to be honest,” he said.

What he doesn’t want to change in the future is his employer.

When he was drafted he talked about his mom’s boyfriend having had a dream about the Browns taking him.

“I just felt like it was something that was meant to happen,” he said at the time.

He still does. Despite the self-inflicted issues of the last two years.

“I definitely feel like this is home, and that’s why I’m trying to just stay consistent so that it remains that way,” said Elliott, who has two years left on his rookie deal. “I love it here. I love the city, love the fans, the atmosphere, just good energy.” “I definitely feel like this is home, and that’s why I’m trying to just stay consistent so that it remains that way,” said



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No. 3, a necklace and a legacy: Browns rookie David Bell and his mission to remember his late teammate Dijon Anderson

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2022/06/no-3-a-necklace-and-a-legacy-browns-rookie-david-bell-and-his-mission-to-remember-his-late-teammate-dijon-anderson.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- David Bell wanted a custom piece of jewelry to commemorate his draft night.

He chose a chain with the pendant in the shape of a bell -- a play on his name -- and the clapper inside of the bell shaped like the letter D, a design drawn up by his cousin.

The true meaning on this piece of jewelry, however, was less visible: an inscription on the back, RIP D3.

"D3" is Dijon Anderson, one of Bell's teammates and best friends from Warren Central High School, located on the east side of Indianapolis. On May 5, 2017, a month before his graduation, Anderson was shot on the west side of Indianapolis. He died 18 days later. The crime remains unsolved.

Back of David Bell's silver necklace in the shape of a bell with the inscription RIP D3.

David Bell had a custom chain made prior to draft night. On the back he put the inscription "RIP D3" in honor of his high school teammate and best friend Dijon Anderson, who was murdered in 2017. Christa Frazier/Submitted photo

Anderson's influence has been ever-present in Bell's life, even after those tragic events five years ago.

"It impacted me a lot," Bell told cleveland.com. "Losing a friend at the age of 16 is heartbreaking, someone that was close to you. You see it in movies, but it happened in reality."

In the years since Anderson was killed, Bell has made it his personal mission to keep his friend's memory alive. It's the reason he donned a No. 3 jersey at Purdue, remains close with Anderson's family, and found a way to incorporate him into draft night.

Bell just arrived to the NFL, but Anderson has been on this path with him all along.

David Bell and Dijon Anderson in high school, each wearing football jerseys

Browns rookie receiver David Bell (L) seen here when he was in high school at Warren Central (Indianapolis) alongside one of his best friends and teammates Dijon Anderson. Anderson was murdered in 2017, and Bell has made it his mission to keep his friend's memory alive. Christa Frazier/Submitted photo

A friendship formed on the field



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On the fifth anniversary of Anderson's death, it was serendipitous that his mother, Christa Frazier, was doing an interview.

"It was just like a perfect moment to shed some light on this dark day," Frazier said. "But Dijon was an amazing kid. I don't even know how to explain the joy of who he was when he was young. He automatically just at 6 years old, made MVP and I'm like, 'Who is this kid?' And he just, I mean, he flourished his whole life after that.

"Football was his life. And every time you saw him, he had a football, or he was out there throwing the ball, or making friends just to play a game of football."

FanDuel Sportsbook promo: \$1,000 risk-free bet

DraftKings Sportsbook promo: \$1,000 Deposit Bonus Match + \$50 Free Bet

MGM Sportsbook promo: \$1,000 Risk-Free Bet

Caesars Sportsbook promo: \$1,500 Risk-Free Bet

Barstool Sportsbook promo: 2 for 1 New Player Bonus: If your first bet loses, get an equal free bet up to \$1,000

Football is unsurprisingly what drew Bell and Anderson together in the first place. Anderson -- who was two years older -- took on a big brother role.

"They were always together doing something with football, traveling or practice -- that was their own personal thing," Frazier said. "Those two eat and live football. So they were on the field mostly, not hanging out. They were just always there at the football field."

They also could bond over the fact that they were on an accelerated path. Both were moved up to Warren Central's varsity team during their respective freshman seasons, so Anderson helped Bell find his way in that regard. The two lived down the street from one another, so Anderson shuttled them to and from school and practice.

Cleveland Browns 2022 Rookie Minicamp, May 13, 2022

Cleveland Browns receiver David Bell has prioritized keeping alive the memory of his former high school friend and teammate Dijon Anderson. Joshua Gunter, cleveland.com

Jayson West, who was the head coach at Warren Central from 2013 through 2020 and is now the head coach at nearby Franklin Central, had a front-row seat watching Bell and Anderson battle on the field growing up.

They were different in their approach, but what made them similar is they had the same goal from possession to possession: Dominate every play.

"Dijon was very confident, loud, would talk, very, very focused," West said, "where David was



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quiet, methodical, and again, focused on the same goal. But both of them were very, very fearless football players. Neither one of them possessed that elite 40 speed, but they were always the fastest players on the field because of their confidence.

“Both of them were very similar in how they didn’t make a lot of mistakes twice. They were very ‘autocorrect’ players.”

Anderson received a football scholarship to Southern Illinois, and was the team’s top cornerback during the 2016 season, a year in which he made 62 tackles and six interceptions.

In practice, he provided some of the best competition Bell could have asked for during those formative years.

“I’d win some, he would win some,” Bell said. “So it was definitely a back-and-forth battle. Just that competition helped me prepare for college. I definitely grew and I still have that same type of competitiveness. I think it will definitely translate to the NFL.”

Christa Frazier and son Dijon Anderson stand near the field following a high school football game

Christa Frazier with her son, Dijon Anderson, following a Warren Central football game. Anderson, one of the best friends of Browns rookie receiver David Bell, was murdered in May of 2017. Christa Frazier/Submitted photo

“He carried that legacy”

Before he was killed, Anderson was poised to take the next step in his own career in May of 2017. After graduating high school on June 5, he was supposed to pack up and head to Southern Illinois for offseason training before his freshman season.

He never got that chance.

Anderson’s death reverberated throughout the community and Warren Central football program, where over the years, top players made an impact by looking out for underclassmen coming up behind them -- like Anderson did with Bell.

“Like I said at the church that day, his passing was more of a movement,” West said. “I don’t even know if I’ve healed from it, because he has had such a huge impact on my life and it was tough for us all to recover. Every time you go in a locker room, and you see where he used to stand, or the interceptions he’d have in certain parts of our home end zone on the field.

“Those memories are always there because he was one of the greatest memory creators that I’ve ever been around. He just made every day pretty, pretty fun, pretty light.”

Two years later, when Bell went to Purdue on a scholarship of his own after blossoming as a four-star recruit, he wanted to find a way to keep those memories from home alive.



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Before heading to West Lafayette, he approached Frazier asking if he could take over Anderson's No. 3 with the Boilermakers.

"After Dijon passed, David asked if he could wear his number," Frazier said. "I'm like, 'yeah.' So many people have asked me. Not everybody gets to carry that. But David promised me, he was like, 'I'm going to be successful with this and I'm going to make my brother happy, and I'm going to make you happy.' And that's what he did.

"Even though it's a hard situation, David carried that. He carried that legacy. And I mean, he shined so bright on this city and just carrying Dijon's name and his own name. It's amazing. I'm so proud of him."

Bell became a high-production receiver at Purdue. He amassed 2,935 career yards on 232 receptions with 21 touchdowns and just 11 drops. As a junior last season, he was a first team All-American, the Big Ten receiver of the year, and a first-team All-Big Ten honoree.

But he never got too big to remember where he came from, or to honor his friend. He remained in touch with Frazier and the rest of Anderson's family even as his own life branched out.

"It's extremely important," Bell said. "I know I'm a big name on my side of town and in my community. But before that, it was him. A lot of people in my school knew who he was, and just so we can keep his name alive. And when people see that No. 3, they just don't see that number, they know who it is, they know that's Dijon Anderson who wore that. It's just a big representation of where I'm from on the far east side of Indianapolis. Now, I just want to keep that going."

Christa Frazier looks at a necklace David Bell is wearing.

Christa Frazier looks at the necklace Browns rookie receiver David Bell had made for his draft night. The back of the necklace said "RIP D3," in reference to Christa's son Dijon Anderson, who was murdered in 2017. Anderson and Bell were high school teammates and best friends. Christa Frazier/Submitted photo

Upholding the legacy

Bell can't know how exactly Anderson would have reacted to seeing his former teammate get drafted by the Browns at No. 99. He can make a pretty good guess, though.

"I think he would have said he was proud," Bell said. "He had a very outgoing character, so he probably would have cracked a few jokes, but he definitely would have said he was proud. He would have been in the league if the situation didn't go the way it did. He definitely would say he's proud of me."

Frazier never passes up a moment to tell Bell how proud she is, either. She attended Bell's draft night celebration and got antsy with each passing pick as the end of Friday night neared and Bell was still on the board.



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But before Bell was selected by Cleveland in the third round, he showed her the engraving on his necklace, a moment that brought tears to her eyes and one that brought their relationship full circle.

“I’m getting chills right now,” Frazier said. “The memory that he keeps about Dijon, he makes sure it’s stamped somewhere with him. ... He showed me that necklace. And I was just like, ‘Oh my God David, I cannot believe this, oh my God, this is amazing.’”

“It’s heart-filling for us because he hasn’t forgotten. I must continue to say that, because you just think that some people get in the zone of who they are, and then they’re big and they get big-headed. But David is so humble. He’s so humble. He always goes back to his roots and where he came from. And that’s what I love about him.”

In Cleveland, Bell has plenty of changes that lie ahead.

He’ll get acclimated to a new role in a new offense, and to NFL life. He’ll also have a new number, No. 18, as No. 3 wasn’t one of the options the Browns gave him to choose from when he picked his new jersey, he said. While Bell won’t be wearing Anderson’s number in Cleveland, he’s still focused on keeping his memory alive and maintaining that connection with Anderson’s family.

Frazier has already promised to attend as many games as she can.

“It’s like you’ve done what you’re supposed to do and you’re going to shine no matter what number you are,” she said. “You made it. That’s all that matters. I’m so proud. I’m so proud of him and I can’t say that enough.”

Bell’s number may have changed, but at this point, Anderson’s memory, influence, and impact are too big to be contained in a single numeral, anyway.

When Bell plays, no matter what number he wears, you’re seeing Anderson’s legacy.

“The way I keep his name alive is just being able to perform on the field,” Bell said. “I think a lot of people know the story. And every time I get a chance, I talk about what happened and just make sure that I bring awareness to his name.”

So far, he’s off to a good start.



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Nick Harris sees 'perfect opportunity to let loose' in 2022

By Anthony Poisal, clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/nick-harris-sees-perfect-opportunity-to-let-loose-in-2022>

Nick Harris had no reason to panic when he learned he'd be starting in one of the Browns' biggest games of 2021 just two days in advance.

Harris, a 2020 fifth-round draft pick, had spent most of his career until that point on the sidelines. He was a backup to center JC Tretter, who was placed on the COVID-19 list two days before the Browns' Christmas Day kickoff against the Packers at Lambeau Field. Playoff implications were on the line, and the Browns had to turn to Harris to fill the hole in the interior.

When Harris heard the news, he thought back to the practice reps he had taken in the 19 months since he was drafted. He felt comfortable and confident on the practice fields in Berea, and he didn't see any reason why he'd feel different in front of the thousands of raucous fans in Lambeau.

"I've been here for two years and I was like, 'Well, it's time,'" Harris said in an interview on Cleveland Browns Daily. "I was just ready. I was like, 'Let's do it.' I just wanted to portray myself as a professional and just do my job."

The game ended in a 24-22 Browns loss, but the offense had no drop-off with Harris in the middle of the offensive line — he allowed zero sacks and snapped the ball smoothly, which is all the Browns could've asked.

Most importantly, Harris felt as though he belonged.

"I just felt comfortable," he said. "I was just like, 'Oh, I like this.'"

That feeling has stuck with Harris as he entered the offseason with the goal of becoming the Browns' starting center in 2022. He could be next in line after the Browns released Tretter in March, although he'll still have to compete for the job in training camp after Cleveland signed Ethan Pocic in free agency.

Harris' NFL sample size is small. He's only played more than two offensive snaps in three games in the league, but he played relatively well for a player that won't turn 24 until November and was regarded as a prospect who would need a few years to develop. His other two high-usage games were in 2020, when he needed to fill in as a right guard for the injured Wyatt Teller and Chris Hubbard in Weeks 15 and 16.



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The waiting period for Harris, though, will be over if he can secure the job in August.

"I didn't take (waiting) as a negative at all," he said. "Obviously, there's times when you wish you were in there, but this is part of the process ... All I gained was knowledge and practice reps with (the offensive line)."

Tretter, an eight-year veteran who had started all but one game for the Browns at center since 2017, was one of his biggest resources. He mastered the ability to stay healthy and consistent on the field, and Harris compiled a long list of tips and advice to follow in his footsteps whenever the time came.

Harris said Tretter told him to reach out to him if he ever needed more tips, even though he was no longer on the team.

"Just hearing him say that showed me he knew how he helped me, and we understood our relationship," Harris said. "He's a consummate pro, and it felt good for him to be like, 'If you ever need anything, reach out.'"

"It was bittersweet because I did learn a lot from him."

Aside from a trip to Pompeii with his girlfriend, Harris hasn't taken many days off in the offseason. He's been completing daily workouts and training at CrossCountry Mortgage Campus and has been following nutrition plans from the team to ensure his body is in top shape for when training camp begins in July. He and other Browns players will be back on the practice fields for the start of offseason workouts on April 19.

A lot of work is left for Harris to meet his goal of being a starter in 2022, but he's never been one to feel pressure — as his lone start in 2021 suggested.

More starts could be on the way for Harris in the future, and he's ready to seize them.

"You learn, and when you get your opportunity, it's time to go," he said, "and I feel like this is a perfect opportunity to let loose now."



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Alone in a dark room: Browns' Chris Hubbard details his long mental health journey **By Marla Ridenour, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2022/05/04/cleveland-browns-chris-hubbard-reveals-mental-health-struggles-depression-marital-strife-therapy/9616513002/>

Chris Hubbard took a ballroom of nearly 300 people through his mental health journey on Tuesday, and the Browns offensive tackle didn't hold anything back.

The death of his grandpa and "sidekick," Jimmy Myers, to prostate cancer threw Hubbard into a deep depression during his freshman year at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

The murder of his 19-year-old cousin, Shannon Fields, shot in the back of the head at a hometown Columbus, Georgia, nightclub when Hubbard was 21, prompted him to leave college for two weeks. In a conversation earlier that day, Fields told him he was ready to get off the streets, escape his world of gangs and drugs, and asked if he could come live with Hubbard in Birmingham. Hubbard agreed.

"It was more than just cousins, we were like brothers," Hubbard said. "It hit me hard. I didn't sleep, I didn't eat, I lost a lot of weight. I felt like I couldn't protect him. You always want to protect the people that you love."

The disappointment of going undrafted in 2013 after his then-agent told him he'd be a fourth-round pick sent Hubbard into a back room crying. The Pittsburgh Steelers soon picked up Hubbard as an undrafted free agent and Hubbard spent five years there, his rookie year on the practice squad.

The Browns signing Hubbard to a five-year, \$35 million contract with nearly \$18 million guaranteed in March 2018 as the team scrambled following the retirement of left tackle Joe Thomas brought more pressure. Growing up in a two-bedroom house with six women and his grandfather and struggling to afford two meals a day, Hubbard had never seen that kind of money.

"In my head, I'm thinking, 'The amount of people I have to take care of because I want to make sure they have what they need and they don't continue to struggle,'" Hubbard said.

On top of that, his marriage was on the rocks and he and his now ex-wife, Tamara, had a young son, Creed.

"Me and her were going back and forth. It was just a roller coaster ride," Hubbard said. "We had a seven-bedroom house ... That's too much space for me. I'm sleeping upstairs, she's sleeping downstairs.

"I had hard times where I would drink. I would drink and be in a dark room and not want to come out."

Hubbard finally turned to therapy.

Browns offensive lineman Chris Hubbard hopes to help others by sharing his personal struggles with mental health. [Ron Schwane/Associated Press]

Hubbard, 31, poured out the details of his story at the annual May luncheon of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Summit County at the Akron/Fairlawn Hilton. The appearance of Hubbard, a NAMI



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ambassador, was delayed over two years by the COVID-19 pandemic. To make sure he connected, he stayed for an hour after the event to talk, pose for pictures and sign autographs.

“It’s really amazing to be able to express my story and get the feedback when everybody comes up to you and how they can relate,” Hubbard said.

Since he joined the Browns, Hubbard has discussed how he sought help when he and Tamara were having infertility issues before Creed, now 5, was conceived. But Hubbard revealed his struggles go back much further than that.

“A history of events to try to overcome and try to battle through,” he said. “There were a lot of events that I didn’t handle correctly. I’ve had my fair share.”

Hubbard said he still goes to therapy and finds peace on long nature walks, “Just to hear the birds chirp, to get out in the sun and decompress.”

But Hubbard said the reason he makes talks like Tuesday’s is the crisis that hit him from all sides when he signed his free-agent deal with the Browns in 2018. The Browns brought back the valuable backup on a one-year deal for 2022 even though he ended his previous two seasons on injured reserve.

“A lot of people don’t know the inside of the NFL. It’s a lot. Mentally taxing, physically taxing, emotionally taxing,” Hubbard said, thinking back four years. “You don’t really get to see family like you want ... I’m so close to my mom and my grandmother, if I could grill out for them every weekend I would.

“[The Browns] loved what I could do, the versatility I had was right for them. When it came to the contract, it was the most I’d ever seen in my entire life. The responsibility, it really, really hit me. Then on top of that my marriage wasn’t going good. During this whole process of making my transition from Pittsburgh to Cleveland, I had a long road ahead of me and I had to mentally and physically prepare myself to get ready for the upcoming season to try to make it work for me, which I did.

“It was just a difficult time in my life where I really struggled bad. No one really knew until I talked to people about what I was going through. I had a therapist to help me out along the way. Once a week, twice a day we had those meetings with my therapist.”

Browns offensive lineman Chris Hubbard hopes telling his story will help others cope with their mental health issues. [Kirk Irwin/Associated Press]

Hubbard’s Overcoming Together foundation addresses mental health issues, but just because he’s helping others doesn’t mean he doesn’t need help himself. He said he has days when he knows he needs to check in with someone close and talk. He hasn’t always found what he needs in NFL locker rooms.

“When you’re in that locker room, some people have so many masks on and hide behind the mask and hide behind all these nice things that we can afford,” Hubbard said. “At the end of the day, your life and your well-being is the most important thing in this world. When you’re hiding everything and you’re not having these tough conversations in the locker room, it really does make a difference when you’re able to be honest and be open with one another about what’s going through your head.



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"For a long time, I kept it all bottled up on the inside. But when you're able to physically get into somebody's space and be able to open up and share the things that you've encountered, it makes a person really change their whole mindset about what they may be going through. You never know who you may touch."

Hubbard made that clear with his conclusion.

"I'm glad you were able to hear my story," he told the audience. "I hope it touches your heart and you can take this along with you through your life and tell your story as well. You guys are not alone. We're all in this together."



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Browns' Grant Delpit overcomes ruptured Achilles and COVID-19 to make it to Christmas Day game; Feels for Takk McKinley

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/12/browns-grant-delpit-overcomes-ruptured-achilles-and-covid-19-to-make-it-to-christmas-day-game-feels-for-takk-mckinley.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns safety Grant Delpit prayed that Takk McKinley suffered just a twisted ankle or bruised foot when he went down in Monday's 16-14 loss to the Raiders.

On COVID-19 reserve at the time, Delpit watched the game from home and hoped it wasn't what he thought it might be.

"Then they came back from commercial and I saw the cart," he told cleveland.com on Thursday.

After the game, he heard the grim news that McKinley suffered a season-ending ruptured Achilles that will require surgery, just like Delpit did during the 2020 training camp before his rookie season.

"Yeah, I was sick for him, honestly, because it's just a long, nagging injury," Delpit said. "It's a very painful one, and it's going to take a strong mind to get through that. It's very tough to see other people go through it. But at the same time, knowing who he is and seeing his love and drive for the game, it's going to be good."

Delpit hasn't had a chance to console McKinley yet, because he just got sprung from COVID-19 reserve on Thursday and has been at home. But the moment he can, he'll have some words of encouragement about an injury that claims the NFL career of about 25%-30% of the players who suffer it.

But these days, players can make it back in as little as 6-8 months.

"I'm looking forward to talking to him," Delpit said. "I don't want to say it's nothing that you can't come back from. It's a tough one, but it's not as hard people think. He'll be back."

Besides, he's watched how hard McKinley has worked since the Browns signed him to a one-year free agent contract in the offseason.

"Takk has the energy of a crazy man," Delpit said. "His motor and his drive are crazy. After practice in camp, he was so tired and almost passing out because he goes so hard."

What's more, McKinley was playing some of the best ball of his career lately, with eight pressures and a strip-sack in the 24-22 victory over the Ravens two weeks ago.

"He was making a lot of plays and playing really well," Delpit said.

Delpit's return from his ruptured Achilles so inspired his teammates that they voted him their 2021 Ed Block Courage Award winner, given annually to a member of each of the 32 NFL teams who best exemplifies the qualities of Ed Block – the former head athletic trainer of the Baltimore Colts – based on courage, compassion, commitment and community.

"I was honored to receive it," he said. "It's a bad injury but it's not the worst injury in the world. It's not like one of these back or neck issues or something like that. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be back, but to me, I'm just looking at it as another injury."

With everything Delpit has been through in his life, he wasn't about to let a ruptured Achilles take him



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down. At the age of 6, he and his family had to evacuate their home in New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina. While in Memphis for what they thought was the weekend, they saw their house under water on TV, only the roof visible.

“We came back and there was nothing,” he said in 2020.

Delpit and his family moved in with his cousin, former NFL fullback Lorenzo Neal in Houston, and made a new life. So starting over is nothing new to Delpit. Overcoming adversity is in his blood.

“It was pretty tough, but that’s something a lot of people had to go through,” he said. “I wasn’t the only one.”

When he ruptured the Achilles — on the same day in camp that his good friend and former LSU teammate Greedy Williams suffered a season-ending nerve damage in his shoulder — he never asked ‘why me?’ He also never pondered that his career could be over.

“Naw, never,” he said.

Delpit fought his way back, and by May, nine months out of surgery, he was backpedaling faster than most folks could ever dream about running forwards. He also had to overcome a pulled hamstring in training camp, but never hung his head.

Finally, in Week 2, he made his NFL debut against the Texans, notching six tackles and a sack-fumble that helped preserve the victory. Heading into Saturday’s game in Green Bay, he’s eighth on the team with 41 tackles, and has one sack, one interception and a forced fumble in 12 games. With Ronnie Harrison Jr. still on COVID-19 reserve and John Johnson III ruled out with his hamstring injury, Delpit is expected to start his fifth game of the season.

“It’s been a long time coming and I’m glad that it’s finally here, and I’m getting a lot of work done and getting on the field and makings plays,” he said. “The season hasn’t gone the way we wanted it to, but I’m glad I’m back and glad I’ve got the team that I have around me so we can finish the season off strong and end on a good note.”

While he sat home watching the loss to the Raiders, he was overjoyed to watch Williams swipe the interception off Derek Carr with 2:47 left in the game and the Browns ahead 14-13. Unfortunately, the offense went three-and-out, and the Raiders kicked the gamewinning 48-yard field goal as time expired, but he was happy for his friend.

“Man, that was a great moment, seeing how hard he’s worked and to make a play like that to put the offense in a good spot to win the game, it was good,” Delpit said. “It didn’t work out but it was great to see him make that play.”

Delpit and Williams haven’t talked much about how grateful they are to both be back and contributing in a big way.

“We try not to make a big deal out of it,” Delpit said. “We’ve still got a job to do. It’s just life. It’s like it was in college, we’re just out there playing football, really. You tend to look back on the journey after the season.”

Delpit has long envisioned a game like today’s, which has classic written all over it if the Browns can pull it off.



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“As a kid, I always used to watch football on Christmas Day, so it’s kind of a dream come true playing, and in a historic field like Lambeau on Christmas Day, with everybody watching,” he said. “So it’s definitely been a goal of mine.”

It almost wasn’t to be. Delpit tested positive for COVID-19 on Dec. 17th, and sat out the Raiders game. For six straight days, he drove to the Browns facility hoping for a negative test, and it never came. Finally, on Thursday, he got the great news.

“I breathed a sigh of relief,” he said. “I’m just really excited to get back with my teammates in a very important game.”

The hardest part, he said, was feeling great most of the time he was out. The Browns still have 17 players testing positive.

“When it first started, I had a little sinus, but that’s it,” he said. “I’m vaccinated, so I guess that helped me a little bit. I was just sitting at home not really being able to leave, running a little bit, finding a field or doing some yoga at the house, trying to stay active. It’s just annoying, you know. I’m glad to be off it. It’s a serious problem in today’s world. We’ve just got to all be safe and healthy.”

The Browns were as relieved as Delpit for that negative test, considering that cornerback Greg Newsome II tested positive on Wednesday and will sit out his third straight game, the previous two with a concussion. Cornerback Troy Hill is also still on the virus list, meaning the Browns are down four of their key defensive backs. Lucky for them, they also got cornerback A.J. Green back on Friday.

“We want to be the best unit in the league and no matter’s who’s out there, so we’ve got to uphold that standard,” Delpit. “We’ve got to make it known.”

He knows what he’s up against today in reigning NFL MVP Aaron Rodgers, who’s thrown 30 touchdowns against only four interceptions and leads the NFL with a 110.4 rating.

“He’s one of the greatest,” Delpit said. “Much respect. Just watching the film, he’s a great quarterback. He fits the ball in places, tight windows, makes plays on the run and just ad-libs, just a great quarterback, so it’s going to be a challenge. But I’m ready for it. We all are, especially after coming off of last week’s loss.”

What sets Rodgers apart, he said, is his composure.

“He’s not really like a Tom Brady-fiery guy,” Delpit said. “He’s kind of like laid back and he just makes plays and he kind of knows what’s coming. He’s seen it all before, so it’s definitely going to be a challenge. We’ve got to try to come with something he’s never seen before, or be perfect in what we do. That’s what you’ve got to do when you’re facing great quarterbacks.”

Delpit is fine with the world not believing the 7-7 Browns can upset the mighty 11-3 Packers, winners of the NFC North. The Packers are 7.5-point favorites.

“We just need whoever’s in this building to believe it and really go out there and handle business,” he said. “We strap up just like they strap up. Records are not whatever. So we do the same preparation. We’re both going to be on that field, so whoever wants it more is going to win.”

Delpit believes the Browns will be able to count on Myles Garrett, who’s questionable with his serious groin injury.



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“I know he’s going to do everything to play,” he said. “We’ve got full faith in him and he wouldn’t miss it.”

Last Christmas, Delpit was rehabbing the Achilles and missing a chance to go to the playoffs. This Christmas, he’s in the thick of it and hoping to shock the world on national T.V. today to keep the Browns’ playoff hopes thriving.

“It’s great,” he said. “My mom (Endya) and sister (Grace) are coming to the game, so that’s going to be a cool experience. Obviously, we want to get the extra Christmas gift for all of the Browns fans out there — and hopefully be the Grinch for the Packers.”

Browns Fanatics Revenue 2021



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Kareem Hunt dedicates My Cause My Cleats to 'Build the Bridge' initiative created by his youth mentor

By Anthony Poisal, Clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/kareem-hunt-dedicates-my-cause-my-cleats-to-build-the-bridge-initiative-created->

Mac Stephens heard a familiar voice and a tap on his shoulder as he settled into his seat at Rocket Mortgage Arena and turned his head.

Stephens, the head football coach at Cleveland Heights High School, was stunned to see Kareem Hunt standing — and eventually sitting — next to him for the Cleveland Cavaliers game against the Brooklyn Nets on Nov. 22. Stephens had been a mentor for Hunt, who grew up in the Cleveland area and trained with Stephens when he was in middle school, and the two have kept in touch as Hunt has built an NFL career that's now in its fifth season.

Coincidentally, both happened to have tickets next to each other, and both were thrilled to unexpectedly have a couple hours to catch up and enjoy the game.

"(Me and my son) were sitting there, and then all of a sudden, Kareem sits right next to us," Stephens said. "It was a crazy moment, but I was thankful to catch up with him."

One of the things Hunt discussed with Stephens struck a personal note and was the highlight of the evening.

Hunt told Stephens that he was inspired by the "Build the Bridge" initiative, which Stephens, along with Cleveland Heights assistant football coach Kahari Hicks, created in 2020 when social unrest accelerated across the country following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd.

The initiative was designed to empower, develop and unify high school football teams through meaningful interactions between programs of different racial and/or socio-economic demographics, and it continues to be a huge success. Over 30 schools initially signed up to participate when it began last year and participated in team activities, such as a 7-on-7 scrimmage. In June 2020, "Build the Bridge" held a symposium at the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and a football showcase camp was held a year later in Willoughby.

On Sunday, "Build the Bridge" will receive even more attention thanks to Hunt.

He, as well as CB Greg Newsome II, will don cleats with the initiative's logo for Sunday's game against the Ravens as part of the Browns' My Cause My Cleats week, which allows players to share powerful stories and inspiration through custom cleat designs with signature meanings during pregame and throughout the team's matchup.

Hunt informed Stephens at the Cavs game he'd be wearing the cleats, and Stephens was overjoyed.

"To be quite honest, it really caught me off guard," Stephens said. "It just came out of the blue. We were just talking, catching up and wishing him luck for the rest of the season."

"When he said that, I was pleasantly surprised. It's a testament to who he is as a person."

For Hunt, the cleats not only represent a great cause, but also his appreciation for an initiative that started in his home city from a man he's respected since his first days of football. His cleats are a mix



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of brown, black and white colors, which replicate the look of the logo and the meaning behind the initiative: to break down racial barriers and bring people of different backgrounds together.

"I love what Coach Mac is doing," Hunt said. "He always believed in me, even at a young age when I couldn't see that I had a chance to make the NFL.

"I understand what he's trying to do with 'Build the Bridge,' and it's all something that really caught my eye. It's a great feeling that I can do this for him and show the world what it really means."

For Stephens, Hunt's choice is yet another way for "Build the Bridge" to continue to grow. The meaning of the initiative has already been driven to hundreds, if not thousands, of student athletes, coaches and others in Northeast Ohio and beyond. Hunt's nod to it Sunday will further ensure that the message will continue to be delivered.

"It makes you feel good because when you're doing all this coaching, you hope you leave a positive impact," Stephens said. "So for him to strike up that conversation and tell me what he was doing, it was all just a pleasant surprise."



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Denzel Ward gives 'big credit' to mom, family after Walter Payton Man of the Year nomination **By Anthony Poisal, Clevelandbrowns.com**

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/denzel-ward-gives-big-credit-to-mom-family-after-walter-payton-man-of-the-year-n>

Denzel Ward wished he had one more person standing with him Wednesday at his interview podium a day after he was named the Browns' Walter Payton Man of the Year nominee.

Ward, a fourth-year cornerback veteran, was honored to receive the award, which recognizes one member from each of the NFL's 32 clubs for their exceptional performance on the field and their dedication to the community. It's one of the most prestigious nominations an NFL player can receive, but he didn't earn it alone.

His mom, Nicole, has been instrumental in teaching him how to be an outstanding human being in addition to a great football player. She's also been one of the most important contributors in Ward's Make Them Know Your Name Foundation, which strives to help others prevent heart-related fatalities with early detection and life-saving intervention. The foundation was created after Paul G. Ward Jr., Ward's father, unexpectedly passed away due to cardiac arrest in 2016, and both Ward and his mom have helped the foundation educate and impact the lives of many people in Northeast Ohio and around the country.

"(The award) is a big credit to my mom," Ward said. "She's the backbone of the foundation, and my brother as well and the rest of the family. She should be standing up here with me explaining and talking about this. She definitely deserves it."

Ward, who grew up in nearby Macedonia, has done a tremendous job representing his family and his foundation's cause since he was drafted fourth overall by the Browns in 2018. He's been a frequent donor for heart health awareness initiatives and has visited schools to provide them with AEDs, CPR kits and training to teach students and teachers about the potentially life-saving effects the devices offer. In 2019, he hosted more than 400 kids at a Make Them Know Your Name Football Camp, which was free to kids Grades 2-8, in Macedonia. He has also hosted other fundraisers for his foundation to help make a truly significant impact and will wear cleats dedicated to his foundation for the Browns' "My Cause My Cleats" campaign for Sunday's game at FirstEnergy Stadium.

Ward doesn't need an award or any recognition for him to continue his commitment toward a cause that strikes a personal chord to his family, but he's proud to see the progress of their work pay off to a degree worthy of the honor.

"I'm definitely honored to be able to represent Cleveland and the foundation for such a prestigious award," he said. "It's a great opportunity, and I'm looking forward to any opportunities to be able to give back to the community."

The award, however, not only recognizes honorees for their off-the-field work, but also for their contributions as a player, too. Ward meets that criteria and has become one of the cornerstones of the Browns defense, and his 2021 season has further solidified that status.

He's tied for the team lead with three interceptions, all of which were recorded in November, and leads the Browns with eight passes defensed. Cleveland has held opponents to 20 points or less in five of its last six games, and Ward's talents have been a big reason why.



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"He does everything by the book," said safety Grant Delpit, who received an award of his own this week, too, with the Ed Block Courage Award. "He's a great teammate and a great guy off the field. He's a great overall guy, and I'm glad he won that award."

It's all well-earned for Ward, whose best moment about the award wasn't when he learned he won, but when his mom did. He said she laughed and smiled upon learning that he was the nominee, and her phone was filled with the same congratulatory texts and phone calls as his.

Together, they've created a foundation that would make his dad proud.

"I wish my foundation didn't have to start for the reason that it did," he said, "but I think he'd definitely be proud. I'm just looking forward to continuing to build on the foundation and be an impact in this community."



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'Smile, smile, smile': Aunt who raised Browns' D'Ernest Johnson still running alongside a Pop Warner fence

By Marla Ridenour, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2021/11/19/florida-aunt-who-helped-launch-career-cleveland-browns-running-back-dernest-johnson-celebrates/8644625002/>

BEREA — D'Ernest Johnson's mother, aunt, brother, girlfriend and agent were at FirstEnergy Stadium on Oct. 21, when Johnson made his first NFL start on "Thursday Night Football."

In Immokalee, Florida, his aunt Undreas Harrison was "screaming and hollering" in front of the television. Watching him rush for 146 yards and a touchdown and earn a game ball against the Denver Broncos, she experienced a flashback.

Harrison recalled one of Johnson's early games in Pop Warner, when she ran the length of the field with him, she outside the fence yelling, "Go! Go!"

Johnson lived with Harrison for 15 years, starting when he was 3. Her voice filled with pride when she discussed his fight to reach the NFL in a phone interview Thursday. She was appreciative to hear that so many of his teammates, touched by his journey, have embraced him, with Nick Chubb calling him "lovable."

Parts of that journey — like when Johnson direct messaged all the teams in the Alliance of American Football in 2018 asking if they wanted to see his highlight video — Harrison learned about after the fact. She didn't hear many details about the six months he spent fishing for mahi-mahi off the coast of Key West, Florida except for his occasional comment about how tired he was.

Browns running back D'Ernest Johnson (30) could be a big part of the offense on Sunday with Kareem Hunt still on injured reserve and starter Nick Chubb coming off a bout with COVID-19. [Bob DeChiara/USA TODAY Sports]

By then, the University of South Florida product had left Immokalee for Gainesville, where Harrison said Johnson was providing for his now 6-year-old son D'Ernest Jr., "D.J." to her.

When Harrison learned Johnson, now 25, was going to be a father, she said she wasn't thrilled and told him, "If you're man enough to get it, you better be man enough to take care of it."

"He knew how I raised him. Him and his brother, I'm so proud that they're stepping up to the plate and doing that, taking care of their kids," she said. Johnson and his girlfriend Jasmin Brown now have a baby daughter, shown in the most recent episode of "Building the Browns."

But no matter what job Johnson held, nothing obscured his relentless drive to continue his career.

"D'Ernest was tenacious about football," Harrison said of Johnson as a child. "Football was like in his DNA. He loved football, loved football, loved it."

"When he was 4 or 5 when they put him in pads, a lot of them used to be out there just messing around, but he was always focused. A lot of people used to come up to me and say, 'He's the best one on the team' because he played defense and offense."

Browns running back D'Ernest Johnson (30) took a difficult journey to his spot in the NFL and he has become a favorite among his teammates because of his dedication and attitude. [Steven Senne/Associated Press]



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After toiling on special teams for two years, Johnson has become a valued member of the Browns in his third year in Cleveland. As the Browns (5-5) host the Detroit Lions (0-8-1) Sunday, Johnson may again be a big part of the running attack behind starter Chubb, activated off the reserve/COVID-19 list Friday with rookie Demetric Felton. Kareem Hunt, the other half of the Browns 1-2 punch, remains on injured reserve.

Marla Ridenour column: 'That ain't nothing but God': D'Ernest Johnson epitomizes Browns culture with career night

In the 17-14 victory over the Broncos, the Browns were without Chubb and Hunt, both out with calf injuries. In Sunday's 45-7 loss at New England, nearly the entire running back room — Chubb, Felton and John Kelly — landed on the reserve/COVID-19 list. Johnson, baffled and thankful he did not test positive for the virus, was the lone bright spot, rushing 19 times for 99 yards and leading the Browns in receiving with seven catches for 58 yards.

He showed the Browns his mettle with 2:42 remaining and his team behind by 38 points, catching a Case Keenum pass out of the backfield and running for 18 yards.

"He finished on the sideline late in the fourth quarter where he could have easily stepped out of bounds but he's like 'No, I'm going to show that I can finish this game,'" Browns left guard Joel Bitonio said Thursday. "That's all you want, man. I think he has the potential. He's shown people that he can play running back in this league and that's huge for him."

Offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt was just as impressed with the seemingly meaningless reception by Johnson.

"He had two defenders coming in on him. Nine out of 10 backs in this league would have stepped out of bounds, and he put his shoulder down," Van Pelt said Thursday. "This guy loves football, and I love that he is in our room."

Woods addresses lack of adjustments comment: Browns DC Joe Woods takes criticism, including from Myles Garrett, in stride, makes changes, looks to rebound

Harrison helped launch that dream, signing up Johnson for Pop Warner and driving him to his practices and games.

She took in Johnson and his older brother Tshumbi when D'Ernest was 3 and Tshumbi 4. Their mother, Harrison's niece, was young and wanted a more stable life for her sons. Harrison, 53, who will finish her 26th year working in the cafeteria for Collier County Public Schools in 2022, eventually needed help caring for her sickly mother, and even as teenagers the boys were willing.

Immokalee is a football hotbed, Harrison said. Sports runs deep in the family and not just on the male side. Harrison played volleyball, basketball, and softball, and Johnson's grandmother ran track. D'Ernest and Tshumbi made the varsity football team as high school freshmen.

At South Florida, Harrison said then-coach Willie Taggart, now at Florida Atlantic University, used to call Johnson "Junkyard Dog."

"He wanted to win. No matter what position coach Taggart put him at, he'd go in and do what he had to do," she said.



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After Johnson left college, Harrison knew Johnson had a few dark days as he tried to break into the league.

“He went through a rough time, I talked to him and he was depressed, he thought he wasn’t going to make it there,” Harrison said. “I said, ‘Don’t give up on your dream.’”

When she found out he wrote all of the coaches before he latched on with the AAF’s Orlando franchise in the now-defunct league, Harrison said she told him, “You weren’t playing about that.”

Cleveland Browns running back D’Ernest Johnson (30) celebrates after scoring a rushing touchdown during the second half of an NFL football game against the Pittsburgh Steelers, Sunday, Oct. 31, 2021, in Cleveland, Ohio. [Jeff Lange/Beacon Journal]

Getting that chance took more than the messages as none in the AAF initially answered.

“I actually got the [general manager’s] number from one of my college teammates and college coach,” Johnson said on Oct. 28. “They gave me the number and I kept calling every day. Every single day I kept calling until they finally said, ‘We’re going to bring you in for a tryout.’”

When he got a tryout with the Browns in 2019, he was headed to a yoga class with his girlfriend and the person on the phone told him he had about four hours to catch a plane. He threw some things in a bag and rushed to the airport.

Harrison has been watching most of this from afar. She saw Johnson play once in Cleveland his rookie year. The family also attended Browns’ preseason games in Tampa in 2019 and in Jacksonville this year.

With Johnson thrust to the forefront this season, Harrison thought back to the day Johnson signed on May 16, 2019.

“When we FaceTimed he said, ‘Oh, my God, it seems so unreal.’ But I said, ‘You did it, D’Ernest. You’re in the NFL,’” Harrison said.

“That dream had been such a long time. He’s so happy. Even as a kid, he was always smiling. Smile, smile, smile.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Extensions for guards Wyatt Teller, Joel Bitonio show Browns' commitment to smash-mouth running game

By Zac Jackson, The Athletic

<https://theathletic.com/2947280/2021/11/11/extensions-for-guards-wyatt-teller-joel-bitonio-show-browns-commitment-to-smash-mouth-running-game/>

On Tuesday, the Cleveland Browns signed right guard Wyatt Teller to a four-year extension worth up to \$56.8 million, almost half of which is fully guaranteed. Wednesday, the team announced a three-year extension for Teller's tag-team partner, Joel Bitonio, the team's longest-tenured player and undoubtedly one of its most important. Bitonio appears to be just peaking now at age 30 and will likely finish his career with the Browns on an extension through 2025 worth a reported \$48 million.

That, friends, is putting your money where your (smash) mouth is.

The Browns are the league's best rushing team. That run game is driven by one of the league's best offensive lines, and nine games into the season Pro Football Focus grades Teller as its No. 2 guard and Bitonio at No. 3. Teller has taken off in the past two seasons in the Browns' wide-zone offense under the tutelage of head coach/play caller Kevin Stefanski and offensive line coach Bill Callahan. Bitonio has long been steady and often spectacular, and in lining up these two deals consecutively there's a clear commitment to keeping the line strong and growing the team's power-first identity.

Getting the chance to play January football in typical Cleveland January weather would complete the blueprint, and the signatures of Teller and Bitonio on their respective new deals are a part of that push. Where past Browns administrations tended to just paint fancy slogans on various walls, general manager Andrew Berry and Stefanski clearly are following their formula of finding (and keeping) players who are "smart, tough and accountable."

Bitonio is working on his fourth straight Pro Bowl, and in the team statement announcing Bitonio's extension, Berry said the Browns view Bitonio as a potential future Hall of Famer.

"After last season, we decided that one of our major football priorities would be to make Joel Bitonio a Brown for the rest of his career," Berry said. "Joel is one of our most decorated players and is the ideal personification of our 'tough-smart-accountable' mantra. We value Joel's high-level performance, leadership, consistency and durability. We are all excited about this extension and hopeful that at the end of his career, we will all be looking forward to celebrating Joel's gold jacket fitting in Canton."

Both are often seen at the second — or even the third — level of the defense throwing open-field blocks, the most famous of which came last Sunday when Teller left his feet and leveled Bengals safety Jessie Bates on a 70-yard touchdown run by Nick Chubb. It's not that the Browns were rewarding that play alone, but that kind of relentless effort and a strong finish from Teller have become staples of his game.

"I got a full offseason with Coach Callahan (last year) and took a big stride in technique and fundamentals," Teller said. "This year, (I've been) getting a little bit more consistent and not having splash plays or bad plays. (This contract) truly is amazing. I am thankful for the fans of Cleveland. Offensive linemen are loved and they are glorified here."

Financial matters

This is all new to the Browns. First-world problems and such, right?

There's not much recent precedent for the Browns having to budget to retain their own good players — or to



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have any real salary-cap considerations at all. Because this administration is tight-lipped on most things, especially when it comes to internal financial business and contract matters, there's always going to be some level of guessing and speculating that goes on.

That said, when the Browns hand out around \$100 million to the guard position in about 24 hours, it's not really speculating to say the offense will continue to be built around playing bully ball and dominating with the run game. Right now, quarterback Baker Mayfield is still on a rookie contract and the Browns can currently spend freely at other spots. But given the going rate for quarterbacks on second contracts, their priorities could change over the next two seasons.

For now, though, the Browns' priorities are clear.

Cleveland came into the season with around \$20 million in available cap space, enough to both think that at least one extension might be coming during the season and for the team to have enough flexibility in case something completely unforeseen happened. It's almost certainly not a coincidence that the Teller extension came after the trade deadline passed, but Teller had remained healthy while putting another half-season of excellent work on his resume, so it was time. Pairing Bitonio's deal with Teller's was also a way of rewarding good work and, to a lesser extent, maintaining harmony in the locker room. Teller turns 27 in two weeks and is a big part of the team's future. The Browns wanted to ensure Bitonio would be a part of that, too.

There's always a message sent when a team signs a player to an extension. Or cuts a player. Or doesn't extend a player. It's been a wild few weeks for the Browns, and though the team moving on from Odell Beckham Jr. after this season was always the most likely outcome, doing it at midseason before spending a bunch of money on guards can be taken as a strong statement about the franchise's values and priorities.

It's clearly a big season for Mayfield, too, and he has struggled a bit to this point. But Mayfield didn't get hot until November and December in his two previous strong seasons, and maybe as Mayfield gets more comfortable with his injury situation, he'll play the way he did last season once Beckham was out of the lineup due to injury.

That was the best version of Mayfield and the Browns. If the Mayfield of late last season (and last week) reappears and the Browns get healthy, they are fully capable of making another run at the playoffs, and Mayfield can assert himself as the long-awaited, long-term answer in Cleveland at the game's most important position. If not, well, the status of the quarterback position will continue to hang over everything the Browns do no matter how many millions get dumped into further establishing a power run game.

Finalizing an extension for Chubb, especially at what appears to be a team-friendly rate, was a no-brainer last summer. Even without trying to decipher anything on Mayfield or cornerback Denzel Ward, both have guaranteed fifth-year options for 2022. With the cap taking what's expected to be a significant jump in 2023, the Browns always held the option to wait to do anything with Ward or Mayfield. And they were always going to prioritize players like Chubb and Teller, whose rookie deals were set to expire after this season.

Stacking the strengths

A bout of COVID-19 issues will test things this week, but the Browns were already invested heavily in their run game. Chubb got a \$12 million signing bonus in late July and was never going anywhere. Kareem Hunt, who's currently on injured reserve, signed a two-year extension before last season that keeps him under contract through 2022 at around \$6 million per season. The Browns run more multiple tight end sets than any other team in the league, keep a fullback both on the active roster and on the practice squad and were carrying additional running backs on both the active roster and practice squad long before Hunt got hurt in Week 6.



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At the moment, Chubb, rookie utility man Demetric Felton and third-string back John Kelly are all on the COVID-19/reserve list, leaving D'Ernest Johnson as the only running back on the active roster. Johnson's big game in Week 7 says the Browns trust him — and the offensive line — to produce if he's needed.

It always seemed a little out of whack that Beckham and fellow wide receiver Jarvis Landry carried the team's two highest cap numbers, but it's clear that boosting the offense was the top priority when Stefanski and Berry took over ahead of the 2020 season. Right tackle Jack Conklin got \$30 million guaranteed in free agency, tight end Austin Hooper got \$23 million guaranteed and the first draft pick of the new regime was left tackle Jedrick Wills Jr. Ahead of this season, the Browns spent \$6 million to keep tight end David Njoku via his fifth-year option, but most of the pre-2021 resources were spent on remaking the defense.

Now, 21 months into the Berry-Stefanski era, the Browns appear to be set for at least next season at every spot on offense except wide receiver; again, the team's priorities are becoming clear. Defensively, the Browns have at least one cornerstone player at every level — Myles Garrett up front, Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah at linebacker and Ward, Greg Newsome II and John Johnson III in the secondary.

Perhaps Bitonio explained it best.

"I think (this) just points to our identity," he said. "We want to be a team that wins in the trenches up front, both offensive line and defensive line. I think Wyatt and myself give us a versatile ability to run outside zone schemes, to run power schemes and to run gap schemes. It gives us the ability to run both and have two guards that you can pull either way, and both (being able to) do those kinds of things really gives you an opportunity for your offense to be multiple."

Big-picture questions linger, though some pertaining to this year's team will be answered soon. Can the Browns be healthy and consistent enough over the next two months to make another playoff appearance? Especially given this week's investments, can the offensive line dominate as the weather turns and the stakes increase? Clearly, the Browns are betting on the latter answer being "yes."

"(Teller and Bitonio) are good football players," Stefanski said. "I know it is easy to say (they excel in) the run game, but they are good football players. They are good in the run, and they are good in the pass."

"I just think we are able to do multiple things. There is a multiplicity to our offense based on the personnel. ... With those two guys in particular, there are multiple things they can do. They can pull, they can gap scheme and they can zone scheme, so that obviously helps us from a versatility standpoint."



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Joel Bitonio, Wyatt Teller extensions 'points to our identity'

By Anthony Poisal, Clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/joel-bitonio-wyatt-teller-extensions-points-to-our-identity>

The Browns have developed and benefitted from having two of the best guards in the NFL in 2021, and they spent this week ensuring both of them would stay in Cleveland through 2025.

Wyatt Teller, the No. 2-ranked guard this season according to Pro Football Focus, signed a four-year contract extension Tuesday. Joel Bitonio, the No. 3-ranked guard, signed a three-year extension — which is added to the previous extension he received in 2017 — on Wednesday.

The news comes as no surprise to anyone who's seen the work both have delivered in the trenches. From punishing pull blocks that open gaping holes in the run game to consistent pass protection for QB Baker Mayfield, both have been tremendous weapons to the success the Browns have built in the last two seasons.

"I think it just points to our identity," Bitonio said. "We want to be a team that wins in the trenches. I think Wyatt and myself give us a versatile ability. To have two guards that can pull either way ... really gives us an opportunity as an offense to be multiple."

For Bitonio, his streak as the longest tenured member of the Browns is set to continue for another four years. A second-round pick in 2014, Bitonio has exemplified the relentless spirit the franchise has needed to escape the struggles prevalent throughout an 18-year playoff drought, which ended with the help of his third consecutive Pro Bowl season in 2020.

Bitonio's unwavering positivity and ability to always look forward has permeated throughout his teammates in the locker room every season since he was a rookie. It's made him a fan-favorite in Northeast Ohio, too, and is one of the reasons why the Browns didn't hesitate to ensure Bitonio had a chance to finish his NFL career with the team that drafted him.

"It's pretty special," Bitonio said. "You look around the league, and there's great players that play on multiple teams, three or four teams. It's such a tough business to stick with one team because you have so many different coaching staffs and things that happened, but it's truly an honor to finish my career here and hopefully it sets up that way."

"I don't know anything else. I just know the Cleveland Browns way, and that's how I want to finish it. I think we do have something special here."

The work isn't over, but the Browns took a major step this week toward ensuring the success they've built won't be going away anytime soon.

Cleveland views Bitonio and Teller as cornerstone pieces toward long-term success, and both are ready to keep excelling and working toward making the Browns an even better football team.

"When you get good players in this league, you want to keep them," Bitonio said. "That's been a thing you see with our last few extensions, and I'm proud to be a part of that group. Hopefully we can continue to build this thing."



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D'Ernest Johnson's remarkable path to NFL, and Evan Mobley's quick ascension with Cavs: Jason Lloyd's final thoughts

By Jason Lloyd, *The Athletic* <https://theathletic.com/2924018/2021/10/31/dernest-johnsons-remarkable-path-to-the-nfl-and-evan-mobleys-quick-ascension-with-cavs-jason-lloyds-final-thoughts/>

Tim Ruskell and Steve Spurrier used to meet at the Marriott in Tampa, Fla., whenever they wanted to watch film of prospects. Ruskell, who worked in NFL front offices for 20 years and previously served as general manager of the Seattle Seahawks, was trying to build the roster as GM of the Orlando Apollos of the Alliance of American Football league with Spurrier serving as his coach. The two men didn't have an office or headquarters at the time, so the Marriott sufficed.

They were fairly set at running back, but both men kept fielding daily calls and messages from D'Ernest Johnson asking for an opportunity in the fledgling league. Johnson was calling coaches and executives across the AAF, but Ruskell and Spurrier were the only ones willing to listen.

They didn't have a lot of video to watch of Johnson at the Marriott, but Ruskell remembered him from South Florida. Johnson didn't run well during his pro day at USF and that was enough to destroy his draft value. Any chance Johnson had at latching on with an NFL team realistically ended with his poor pro day. He fell into the football abyss, from which it's nearly impossible to crawl out. Nevertheless, Johnson persisted and, finally, Ruskell and Spurrier relented and offered to bring him in for a look.

"His 0-10 (yards) time is as good as anybody. But there's no second gear," Ruskell told me this weekend. "We get so carried away with those numbers. Especially if he's not at a big school, you're not going to stand on a table for guys like that. There's no 'go by the gut' scouting anymore. It's all analytics, unfortunately."

Indeed, Johnson is a scouting throwback. He just needed an opportunity. His 146 yards and a touchdown for the Browns last week against the Broncos wouldn't have been possible without his persistence and one team's willingness to look past the raw data.

Johnson didn't dazzle the Apollos with his speed, yet every time Spurrier put him into a practice drill or a game, he did something positive: a block, a tough run or a catch out of the backfield. Johnson's hands were so good, he ultimately became the Apollos' punt returner despite his lack of speed.

"We'd do what Cleveland did: We'd get in the I formation and run the ol' iso play, toss sweep, every now and then a lead draw," Spurrier told me. "That's a play people forget. Offensive coordinators forget about the draw play and the lead draw play. D'Ernest ran all those plays beautifully. ... We'd get a lead and give it to him and let him put the game away."

Spurrier was walking into the Florida-Georgia football game Saturday afternoon when he called me to gush about Johnson. Ruskell likes him so much he called me from the middle of his 15-day European cruise down the Rhine on his way to Budapest.

"He's a great kid with an incredible story," Ruskell said. "He's an easy guy to root for."

Once the AAF folded, Ruskell began reaching out to old NFL contacts to try and get Johnson an opportunity. One of the scouts on Orlando's staff had a connection to a scout in Cleveland. They were able to convince the Browns to give Johnson a look.



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"I told everybody I could, 'Forget whatever you've got on him.' His burst and acceleration are as good as anyone," Ruskell said. "Just give him a chance. You let him get his foot in the door and you're done."

Jadeveon Clowney (Ken Blaze / USA Today)

Jadeveon Clowney will play in his seventh game Sunday as a member of the Browns, one shy of his total from all of last season. Clowney has played a full season just once in the past five years, something that Spurrier believes has contributed to why Cleveland is his fourth stop in as many years.

Spurrier coached Clowney at South Carolina and called him "one of the best football players I've ever coached." But he also gave Clowney more freedom than perhaps some other players received.

"A few times, the trainer would clear him to play and he'd say, 'Coach, it's bothering me.' I'd say, 'Well, we'll sit you out this one. We shouldn't need you this week, but be ready next week.' He was such a valuable player, maybe he earned the right to have a day off occasionally."

During his junior year at South Carolina, Spurrier said Clowney had some friends trying to convince him to take the year off to avoid injuries. He believed he was nearly assured of being the No. 1 pick even if he didn't play that season. Spurrier was concerned he could sit out.

So when Clowney missed a weightlifting session, South Carolina's strength and conditioning coach wanted to bring Clowney in at 6:30 a.m. to run. Spurrier wouldn't allow it.

"I said, 'No, no, no. He might change his mind and say, 'Hey I can take this year off and still be the first pick,' " Spurrier said. "But now he needs to try to play every week if he can. Hopefully, he can play through some of the small injuries. You've got to play through those."

"He's in the NFL now. He's not better than everybody else. He needs to understand that probably and try to do what everyone else does."

So far, so good.

Evan Mobley (Ethan Miller / Getty Images)

I wrote in May that the Cavs should hope Evan Mobley is available to them in the draft, so I fully expected him to be good when he got here. He's been even better than I expected.

Mobley's 23 points in Friday's loss to the Lakers is a career high, but that will be surpassed again and again as the season progresses.

"He's going to be a damn good basketball player in this league," LeBron James said. "Cleveland has a good one. They've done a good job over the years in the draft, I'll say."

Mobley is third among rookies in scoring, second in rebounds, third in steals and fifth in assists. His defensive win shares leads all rookies, and he's shown an ability to guard on the perimeter and in the post.

I'm not convinced Lauri Markkanen is a long-term solution at the three, and I've often wondered if Mobley could grow into the role. The Cavs are comfortable allowing Mobley to switch onto opposing wings in certain defensive sets, but they don't want him chasing threes for an entire game right now. Nor do they want him banging against some of the league's bigger, more physical



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centers, which is why the traditional power forward role is a natural fit for him — for now.

Still, I wonder if Mobley could eventually become a full-time wing. He already sees the floor so well and has proven he can make an NBA 3-pointer. If Mobley eventually expands into a wing player, his size and length could change his trajectory from future All-Star to one of the best players in the game. For now, the Cavs are thrilled to finally have a cornerstone for this franchise. Once Mobley learns how to become a better screener, the Mobley/Darius Garland pick-and-roll combination should be deadly for years to come.

About two weeks before the NBA's opening-night deadline for rookie contract extensions, I was told that the Cavs and Collin Sexton were on track to get an agreement in place for something in the neighborhood of \$20-25 million a year. A few days before the deadline, I was told talks hit a "snag" without any further explanation.

The two sides ultimately parted without a deal. Preserving the relationship now will be key, particularly since Sexton's 2018 draft class broke a record with more than \$1 billion in extensions. Emotions are involved when a deal isn't struck in a situation like this, given how this organization positioned Sexton for so long. I've been vocal about how the Cavs have miscast Sexton in a role for which he wasn't suited for a number of years.

Sure enough, Sexton's side originally asked for the type of money De'Aaron Fox and Jamal Murray received, according to one source with knowledge of the talks. Both young guards received max contracts and had numbers comparable to Sexton, but the Cavs weren't interested in anything close to that.

Ultimately, one source with knowledge of the negotiations said the Cavs determined they wanted to see how Sexton fit alongside Mobley, who is clearly the future of the franchise. With Garland due for a big-money extension next summer and Jarrett Allen already on the books for \$100 million, the Cavs were hesitant to do anything lofty with Sexton until they see how he fits now.

It's early, but Sexton's usage rate thus far is the lowest it has been since his rookie season. The Cavs are playing without the ball in his hands so much, which is a good thing.

It won't shock me if Sexton finally lands in a reserve role at some point this season. Most teams I've spoken to have viewed him as a reserve for years. Bringing him off the bench would reset his market value going into restricted free agency next summer and better align him with his true value across the league.

It's rare — though not unprecedented — for players to remain with the same team after failing to reach an extension on a rookie contract. The easiest example of a deal still getting done is Tristan Thompson, who entered restricted free agency in 2015 before agreeing to a new deal with the Cavs after training camp began.

Jimmy Butler is perhaps the most high-profile example. Butler didn't sign an extension when first eligible in Chicago but instead cashed in with a monster fourth season and a \$95 million extension from the Bulls in 2015 when he was a restricted free agent. Similarly, Otto Porter Jr. failed to reach an agreement with the Wizards when he was eligible for a rookie extension and instead signed a max deal with Brooklyn as a restricted free agent in 2017 that Washington ended up matching. The Wizards, however, traded Porter less than two years later.

By my count, 31 players drafted in the top 10 between the 2013-17 drafts failed to reach extensions when eligible. Of those 31, only six remained with those same teams on new deals.



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Can Sexton be the seventh? We'll find out next summer..



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Greedy Williams opens up about his dead shoulder, hurtful 'fake injury' attacks, and plans to 'shock the world' in '21

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/03/greedy-williams-opens-up-about-his-dead-shoulder-hurtful-fake-injury-attacks-and-plans-to-shock-the-world-in-21.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Aug. 24 was a surreal day at Browns training camp. First, second-round safety Grant Delpit was carted off the field in what seemed like slow motion with what proved to be a ruptured Achilles tendon.

Shortly thereafter, his former LSU Tigers teammate Greedy Williams felt a jolting shock in his shoulder while making a tackle and walked into the fieldhouse with a trainer, holding his arm at his side. At the time, he had no idea he was walking away from his 2020 season.

"I go in there, and I'm thinking Grant sprained his ankle, nothing serious," Williams told cleveland.com in an exclusive interview on Tuesday. "So when I get into the training room, he's laying back with a towel over his face and I see a little tears. I'm like, 'Wow, this must be really, really serious'"

Williams, the Browns' second-round pick in 2019 and starting cornerback, went over to ask what happened, and Delpit didn't want to tell him at first.

"He just kept crying," Williams said. "He said 'I think I tore my Achilles.' I was just like, 'Whoa.'"

Williams felt so bad for his close friend, who was slated to be the Browns' starting free safety last season, that he didn't think much about the lingering tingling in his right shoulder.

"I thought, 'It's just a stinger, I'll be out at practice tomorrow,'" Williams said. "I ain't trippin. I had ice on the shoulder, but I was just sitting there and supporting [Grant] and letting him know, 'Man you'll be back, sometimes in this game you have to take time off, just regroup and come back better than before.'"

Little did he know that he'd have to take his own advice soon.

How it happened

"We were doing this tackling drill," Williams said. "It's supposed to be receivers running towards the sideline and we just wrap them up like formal tackling or whatever. It got out of hand and guys just started hitting like crazy with all of their force. I went and tried to hit a guy with all my force and he ducked his head into my shoulder and ran through my shoulder."

He felt a searing sting in the right shoulder and then his whole arm went numb, like someone flipped off the switch.

"I had never felt anything like it before," he said. "I couldn't move it, so that's why if you see on the video I was carrying it [close to his body] because I couldn't feel my arm."



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By the time he got into the training room, some of the feeling had returned, but the shoulder was still sore. The Browns described his injury as “day-to-day” and believed he’d be on the field soon, gearing up to take a big leap in his second year opposite Denzel Ward. But day-to-day soon turned into “week-to-week,” and Williams’ condition was shrouded in mystery.

“After like three or four days, it was still kind of numb and sore, so we waited for like a week or two weeks and it was still the same way,” Williams said.

Depression hits

The doubts and the depression crept in almost immediately, and Williams struggled to keep his head up. He had overcome a demoralizing draft day slide into the second round, and missed the first four games of his rookie year with a pulled hamstring. He was eager to return in 2020 and show the NFL world what he could do.

“I never missed a game in college,” Williams said. “I came back and I was like ‘OK, I’m ready to go. I got my feet wet, it’s my time.’”

Every couple of weeks, Williams underwent an electromyography test in which fine needles were inserted into the shoulder to get the muscle to fire.

Each week, nothing.

“It was very stressful,” Williams said. “I’d always go in very hopeful and it just wasn’t responding.”

Everyone needs a brother like this

Fortunately for Williams, his older brother, Deandre Fuller, came to visit from Louisiana the day before the injury — and settled in for the long haul.

“He only had like a weekend bag,” Williams said. “He wanted to stay and see how the injury would go and just be here while I’m going through tests and stuff like that. He stayed the entire time, like the whole six months.”

Fuller helped get Williams to his appointments, and to his treatment protocol at the Browns facility, where he also had to undergo daily COVID-19 testing. He also helped pull Williams out of the doldrums after those failed EMG tests every couple of weeks.

“He helped me not think about it as much,” Williams said. “Every day, he just motivated me to keep going and he hyped me up every day, because normally I’d just sit back and just be stressed.”

Game days were some of the most difficult days of all. Williams had watched the Browns’ culture change before his eyes, and winning unfold on the field after a difficult 6-10 season in 2019. It crushed him not to be a part of it.



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"I wanted to be out there," Williams said. "Just sitting and watching and not being on the airplane and not being at the facility around the team, it put a lot of stress on me."

Fighting his way back with Delpit

Williams also relied heavily all season on Delpit, with whom he was supposed to form one half of a dominant defensive backfield in 2020. Two Tigers tearing it up for the Browns.

"We rehabbed at the same time, so we definitely built up a bond so strong," Williams said. "We just kept talking each other to motivate each other. It was a big thing to be by his side, and to have him by my side. We just kept growing."

On Sundays, they'd watch the games together and envision what they could accomplish if they were out there.

"We'd just chill and had a little brother bond," Williams said. "At times it was like, 'Why us?' But we just didn't think about it. We just did all of the work that we needed to do to get back out there and we grinded every day like we were getting ready for the game."

Williams and Delpit "were talking more about LSU and we kind of maintained what we were and kept motivating each other day by day instead of just rushing and talking about the future."

On Oct. 25, another former LSU Tiger joined them on the Browns' injured reserve list when receiver Odell Beckham Jr. suffered a torn ACL.

"I'm like, 'Wow, like what like what's going on? Is this not the LSU guys' season?'" Williams said.

The two Tigers encouraged Beckham as much as they could, but he did his rehab in Arizona "while me and Grant were grinding it out inside the facility."

Reality sets in

As the season slipped away and Terrance Mitchell held down the fort in his spot, Williams came to grips with the fact he might not play at all in 2020. Finally, on Oct. 12, the Browns placed him on injured reserve and acknowledged that his season could be over. By that time, Williams knew that he had suffered severe damage to the axillary nerve in his shoulder, which impacts the deltoid muscle among others. He was told it was at least a 6-12-month injury.

"The trainers, the coaches, the players, everybody was involved, texting me like, 'We know you're going to shake back from it, just keep your head up, just keep going,'" Williams said. "Even [GM Andrew Berry]. I hopped on Zoom meetings with AB, and he was just telling me how proud he was of my off-the-field work and how I was attacking my rehab. Everybody motivated me to keep going, so that kept me pushing."

The Trolls Attack



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At the same time, Williams had to deal with fans and trolls on social media accusing him of faking the injury and not having the heart and desire to play the game.

“That was kind of one of those things was messing with me too,” Williams said. “People don’t understand really what nerve damage is. It’s a serious matter for your health. Nerves are weird. They work on their own time, so you just never know.”

Williams struggled to convey to fans what he was going through, and the Browns played it close to the vest.

“I thought about posting a picture of my shoulder before it happened so you can see that my body is retracting to support the muscle,” he said. “The nerves have the muscle turned off. It’s a lot going on.”

He tried to convince the doctors that he could tackle with only his left arm, but they quickly shot that down.

“They were like, ‘It’s nothing to joke about, like this your life,’” Williams said. “I was told if I damaged it again [before it was healed] it’d be for life. Hearing things like that make you take more seriously what’s going on.”

It’s also why the criticism on social media was so hard to take.

“I put a lot of work in for year two,” Williams said. “I wanted to be the best of the best. It was like, ‘Wow, I actually miss a whole year and people think it’s a fake?’ It’s not a fake. I don’t fake injuries and, you know, I’ve just never been that type of person. I love the game of football and I respect it so well. How could I fake an injury like that?”

He reveals it’s axillary nerve

Ultimately, Williams tweeted in December that it was the axillary nerve to help his critics understand that this was a real injury with a real name that they could look up.

“Just do the research on it, and you’ll see like the time frame,” he said. “Because me personally, I didn’t know nerves were that serious until I had the injury.”

Williams also received advice from his nephew Justin Rogers, who plays football for UNLV and has come back from serious nerve damage in his leg.

“He tore his leg up in high school really bad and he was telling me just like, like ‘It’s going to come back. Like, it’s no doubt it don’t come back,’” he said. “Because his leg was like my shoulder. The nerve was taking forever to come back. He said, ‘Once it comes back, you’ll get like a high, a high sting in your shoulder’ and things like that. He really helped me get through it.”



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Williams also drew inspiration from Washington Football Team quarterback Alex Smith, who made it back onto the field in October after a life-threatening leg injury and infection that required 17 surgeries.

“Watching his process and what he did and he had his family supporting him, as long you’ve got that support, man, you can always keep going,” Williams said. “Them building him up and not letting him give up, that was the main thing I saw from him and it definitely gave me the [motivation].”

Princess Khloe comes through

By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, Williams got just the elixir he needed to keep fighting. His fiancée, Taquanna Houston, and his daughter Khloe, who turned 4 last weekend, came up from Shreveport and stayed through the end of the season. Previously, they had remained at home because of COVID-19 concerns and Khloe being in pre-school.

“She’s the Energizer Bunny,” Williams said, lighting up when talking about her. “Before she got up here, she wanted a little puppy. So I surprised her with the little puppy and she loved this dog so much. It’s like, without this dog there’s no her. That was one of the best things for me, to see my daughter interacting with this dog. She loved it to death, and she was dressing up the dog. It kind of took my mind off thinking about the injury and rehab and stuff like that.”

The Prince is coming soon

Williams got more great news on Feb. 13 when he popped a balloon and blue confetti flew out, revealing that the baby he and Taquanna have on the way is a boy. Like LeBron James’ chalk toss, he sprayed the confetti high into the air.

“I wanted a boy really bad and, surprise, thank God, we’re having a boy,” he said. “And it’s amazing man, I’ve been online shopping and making sure she’s taking her vitamins and getting all the good nutrients that my son needs. We’ve just been happy and excited.”

The baby is due July 10, “so I’ll spend a couple of days with him and then I’ll be back out getting work in.”

One thing he won’t do is name the baby Andraez Jr. after his real name.

“I want him to be better than me and have his own tradition at whatever he does,” Williams said.

The impending arrival of his son has motivated him even more to come back better and stronger. From the moment Khloe was born, Williams was a changed man.

“Taking on the parenthood role, everybody says it’s tough, but it’s actually amazing,” he said. “Just to watch your kids smile, just be happy and to give them a lot of love and support, it’s always been my thing. [I always knew] once I have a kid that it’s never about me anymore. Everything I do is about the reputation of Khloe and my family. Before I do anything, I think about them first.”



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The shoulder awakens

Around the same time of the gender reveal, Williams felt his shoulder coming back to life. A new beginning in so many ways.

“When I was first able to just to reach across my body, and hold it by myself, it was just like a big shock to me and I was happy,” he said. “I couldn’t wait to tell [the Browns medical staff] about the progression and how the shoulder was moving. It’s been it’s been a lot of excitement from there on out.”

Williams arrived back in Cleveland on Monday and had a great checkup with the Browns medical staff that day. He estimates he’s about 60% of the way back, with five months to go before the start of training camp.

“The [doctors] said, ‘You know, we see it,’” Williams said. “They were just like ‘keep working, keep going.’”

The fateful EMG test

But the true test came Wednesday when he had to undergo the intimidating EMG test. Would the muscle fire? Would it finally respond? It did, and he felt the same exhilaration he did tossing the blue confetti in the air during the gender reveal.

“#ReturnOfGreedy is official!” he tweeted on Thursday. “God is real!!”

He’s so excited, he won’t even hold it against the trolls who accused him on social media of dogging it. he knows they’re a vocal minority.

“This is kind of just my little sermon to the fans,” Williams said. “Don’t give nobody no negative feedback when they’re hurting and down. Just always be supportive an don’t ever think a player is just taking time off. We actually do read the comments and sometimes it can get under your skin.”

He’s confident he’ll get an enthusiastic reception when he returns in the fall and “I just imagine running on the field and I’ll probably just jump in the stands and shake hands and just let everybody know I’m back and I’m better.”

When the Browns made the postseason for the first time in 18 years and beat the Steelers in the playoffs, Williams was their biggest fan.

“All I could do was tweet and go live on Instagram, and just enjoy the moment like I’m there,” said Williams. “It was just very exciting.”

The Browns have said they’re counting on Williams to start opposite Ward again this season, and share the defensive backfield again with Delpit, who’s making great strides in his comeback from the Achilles surgery.



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Williams has been told the nerve will never get back to 100% but that he'll be able to play at a high level with it at 85% to 90%. He might not be ready for mandatory minicamp in June if there is one, but plans to be ready to start the season.

"I'll be the better Greedy," he said. "[The injury] gave me time to have more knowledge of the game, so it wasn't all bad. I was sitting down taking notes, doing what I do, getting ready for 2021 and shock the world."



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Greg Newsome II displayed all the traits the Browns saw long before they made him a first-round pick

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/06/greg-newsome-ii-displayed-all-the-traits-the-browns-saw-in-him-long-before-they-made-him-their-first-round-pick.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- It's not often a team can find a nearly perfect fit at No. 26 in the draft. With so little control of what can happen in the hours leading up to the selection, it's mostly a waiting game to see if things fall your way.

They might have fallen almost perfectly.

"Greg (Newsome II), he was one of the guys who we targeted throughout the draft process," Browns EVP of Football Operations and General Manager Andrew Berry said shortly after making Newsome their first-round pick. "He fits really our profile for the Cleveland Browns. ... A great physical talent. ... He fits the smart, tough, accountable profile that we want out of our players that we really bring in the building."

The traits Newsome brings aren't new. They allowed him to leave a big impression at the high school where he spent three years, Glenbard North in Carol Stream, Illinois, before he left to attend IMG Academy his senior year.

The player the Browns are getting in Newsome is older, bigger and has developed beyond those years at Glenbard North, but the core of who he is was evident to those people who knew him as a player and person back then.

'Great physical talent'

Ryan Wilkens, the head football coach at Glenbard North, also coaches on the track team. During an indoor track meet, Newsome, who also did jumps, was placed in the 200-meter race during his sophomore year. He'd never raced the distance, so they put him in the first heat -- aka, the slow heat.

He won by what Wilkens guessed was 40 or 50 meters. Wilkens told the head track coach Newsome might just earn them some points. As they started announcing the places -- sixth, fifth, fourth -- Wilkens' hopes faded -- until Newsome was announced as the winner.

Bruce Donash, who coaches defensive backs for Wilkens, discovered Newsome's athleticism in another sport -- watching him play freshman basketball. Newsome played freshman football, but Donash didn't get to see much of him on the field.

Donash likes to scour the basketball team for defensive backs because so many of the skills translate, so he was used to watching young players like Newsome closely.



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“He was so much faster than everybody else,” Donash said. “He would just blow by people. Defensively, he’d make steals and he was very aggressive. He’d steal the ball and go the length of the court and put it in. He was just head and shoulders above everybody else.”

“His athletic ability was off the charts compared with other guys on the floor,” Joe Larson, head basketball coach at Glenbard North, told cleveland.com in a text message. “He would fly up the floor with the ball as point guard.”

Joe Vazquez, an offensive and defensive lineman on the football team, knew how good Newsome was on the football field, but it’s a play on the basketball court he’ll never forget -- Newsome calmly sinking a buzzer beater for a win.

“That’s when I was like, ‘Wow, he’s actually really good at basketball, too,’” Vazquez said.

But this isn’t a track or basketball story. This is a football story.

Richard Smelko, Glenbard North’s defensive coordinator, took notice of Newsome in a quiet moment before he even arrived at the high school. Newsome’s youth team would practice after the varsity team and watching Newsome play catch and do things on the sideline allowed Smelko to see that Newsome was just a little bit different.

“You’d watch him go about his business on the sideline and do things, you had a pretty good idea that this kid’s going to be a good high school player,” Smelko said.

Newsome arrived at Glenbard North alongside a strong group of players. The freshman team won the conference. One member of the group, Anthony Marre, who played running back and outside linebacker, moved to Carol Stream in eighth grade and immediately noticed Newsome.

“He could fly,” Marre said. “He was crazy fast.”

Jayleen Fitzpatrick, another teammate, called Newsome an old-school defensive back.

“A guy who’s real fast, is real field-smart,” Fitzpatrick said.

Donash recalled a matchup against rival Wheaton-Warrenville South during Newsome’s junior year. The Panthers were trailing when their rival ran a sweep away from Newsome, who was playing safety. Newsome ran the ballcarrier down 40 yards downfield on the opposite side and prevented a score. The Panthers defense stiffened, forced a turnover and the offense converted it to a score of their own.

“It totally turned the game around,” Donash said, “but only because of his pursuit. He just had a relentless pursuit to the ball. He was the last last chance we had to stop a touchdown. And he did it.”

‘Smart, tough, accountable’



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Ask any youth or high school coach and they'll tell you: on-field communication is a constant battle. Players have to talk to each other. They don't always do it.

During a 7-on-7 tournament between Newsome's sophomore and junior years, a Northwestern coach approached Donash and complimented him on how well the defense communicated. Donash told him it was because of Newsome, who has a knack for knowing where players were supposed to be.

He picked up on things quickly. Smelko and his staff only had to teach him things once. He recognized the tendencies of receivers and offenses. He'd know the route a player was going to run based on his stance or how he came off the ball.

"More times than not, he was running the route before they were," Smelko said.

Newsome was a film junkie. The team would watch 30 to 45 minutes a day together and players would be expected to do more film study on their own. The staff could see how much they were watching through the film system they used.

Newsome was watching two to three hours a night. It showed on the field. He was seeing entire plays develop before the ball was snapped.

"During live plays, live games, he was always the one saying, 'Here comes a sweep, here comes a pass.' He was always calling it out," Marre said. "He was always able to see it before it happened and that was crazy to play with."

Even on the offensive side, where Newsome played receiver, he was quick to recognize opportunities. In a playoff game against East St. Louis, a powerhouse who went on to win the state title that season, Newsome split out and immediately recognized he was uncovered. He got the quarterback's attention, the Panthers snapped the ball quickly and got it out to Newsome and he ran it for a 77-yard score.

He was his usual self on the defensive side, too.

"He was calling everything out, making plays left and right," Marre said.

Wilkens called Newsome another coach on the field.

Newsome wasn't at Glenbard North long enough to be a captain, but players, even older ones, paid attention to him.

"When Greg spoke," Smelko said, "guys listened."

Flipping the switch

Northwestern head coach Pat Fitzgerald compared Newsome to Clark Kent.



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“A really nice guy off the field, just kind of really studious and a great dude,” Fitzgerald said on a Zoom call with media the day after the Browns drafted Newsome to the city where the character was created, “and then he goes on the field and becomes Superman.”

Dannae Pope is the school resource officer at Glenbard North. He takes his responsibility seriously and makes it a point to get to know all the kids. Over Newsome’s time, Pope developed a relationship with Newsome, his grandmother and mother, Crystal. It’s who Pope credits for Newsome being the mature-beyond-his-years high school student he got to know.

Pope never had a single issue with Newsome. He was respectable, funny, humble.

“He seemed to be the same person no matter who he was with and I’ve never heard anybody say anything bad about him,” Pope said. “Have not heard one adult in the building say anything bad about him. He was a very even-keeled kid.”

That was Clark Kent. What about Superman?

Pope, in his role, was on the sidelines for most athletic events and saw firsthand how Newsome could flip the switch. He called Newsome, who was about 150 pounds back then, little man.

“You’re going to get trucked out there one day,” Pope would tell him.

Then Newsome would walk across those lines.

“Get on the field,” Pope said, “he’s like a dog.”

Newsome wasn’t shy about talking.

“Very easy to coach, gregarious, doesn’t have a lot to say off the field,” Wilkens said, “but you get him and his buddies on the field, they jaw a lot. And he’s really, really effective at it.”

‘He earned it’

Marre was at a White Sox game on the first night of the draft. Right as third baseman Yoan Moncada hit a three-run blast for the Sox, Marre saw Newsome’s picture pop up on his phone, which he was using to monitor the draft. His teammate was going to Cleveland.

Fitzpatrick was watching the draft, too. He’s making the move from playing at a JUCO school to Grand Valley State. He drew inspiration from seeing his former teammate get selected.

“He really paved the way for us,” Fitzpatrick said. “You continue to stick to it and continue to grind and just keep going.”

Pope was at Newsome’s draft party. He saw Newsome get the call out of the corner of his eye and he saw Newsome take control of the room that erupted into chaos -- exactly like he’d expect.



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Newsome checked the boxes of what the Browns wanted with their first-round pick. He was going to Cleveland.

“(Going to the NFL), that’s a one-in-a-million shot,” Pope said, “and he earned it. He deserves i



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'Believing I'm the Best'

By Anthony Poisal, clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/greg-newsome-browns-draft-northwestern-believing-i-m-the-best>

The Browns' first-round pick has always found a way to become one of the best players on a football field. Now, he's looking to do it again in Cleveland.

Greg Newsome II leaned back against the couch cushion and sat silently as friends and family members around him discussed the same question he had heard for months:

Where is Greg going to play in the NFL?

The 2021 NFL Draft had advanced into the final picks of the first round, and Newsome, the 20-year-old Northwestern prospect with hopes of being one of the first cornerbacks selected, was still on the board. Donning a black suit, silver cross necklace and curly haircut that grew from his head like a firework, Newsome was starting to feel the true anxiety of the draft for the first time all night.

"I was thinking I was going in the teens," Newsome said. "The nerves were just kicking in. I knew it was going to happen, but I was also like, 'Wait, what if it doesn't happen. What if I don't get picked?'"

Three cornerbacks had already been picked ahead of him. He thought he'd receive a call from the Indianapolis Colts, owners of the 21st overall pick. No call came, so he expected to hear from the Tennessee Titans at pick No. 22. They selected a different cornerback, Caleb Farley.

Newsome set his phone on the table and exhaled. At the beginning of his draft party, which took place in a luxurious VIP lounge of a fitness center in Oak Brook, Illinois, Newsome, a Chicago native, spent time chatting with nearly every person who attended his party.

Now, he was mostly silent.

Finally, at pick No. 26, Newsome's phone vibrated with a call. He sprung forward, picked it up and hushed the room.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Greg," said Megan Rock, the Browns' Player Personnel Coordinator. "This is Megan from the Cleveland Browns. I'm going to connect you to a Zoom call with our general manager, head coach and ownership group. I'll hang up and text you the link."

Newsome tapped the hang-up button, perked his head up and told everyone in the now-silent room his new home.

"Cleveland."



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The lounge erupted with yells and fist pumps while Newsome stared forward, placed his elbows on his knees and tried to hide his smile.

"Where I should have went is Cleveland," Newsome said later that night in his first interview with local reporters. "That's where I got picked, and God has put me in that position on purpose."

Newsome didn't feel as though he had time to celebrate, though. He certainly could've after completing his self-made path to Cleveland, one that included several experiences of ascending to the top of the competition, no matter where it took place. From youth football, to high school, to Northwestern, Newsome has always found a way to become one of the best players on the field.

Cleveland is Newsome's next setting, and he isn't done proving himself yet.

"I know a lot of first-round picks in the past feel like they've made it," he said. "I don't feel like I've made anything yet."

When Greg was 6 years old, he wanted to quit football.

He hated how heavy the pads were. He hated how long every practice felt. He hated how he was always one of the smallest kids on the field.

And he hated his position: tight end.

Crystal Newsome, Greg's mom, hated his position, too, but she wasn't going to let her son quit football before he even played a single game. That's what Greg wanted, but that's not how she was going to handle life with her third child and first boy.

"I don't raise quitters," she told Greg whenever he'd pout. "We started this, and we're going to finish."

Ms. Newsome was the type of football mom who wasn't afraid to be hands-on with her son's development. She planned on attending every practice and game and would keep an eagle eye on Greg. She knew he would never be the biggest kid on the field, but he always seemed to be the fastest.

So she didn't understand why he was playing tight end, a position in youth football that, unlike the NFL and higher football ranks, rarely allows for running or catching the football.

"You know how they ran their sprints during practice? He would run circles around them," she said. "He would beat people, and it wasn't even close. I was like, 'Why would he play tight end, and clearly he's the fastest kid on the team?'"

After the final practice before the first game, Ms. Newsome pulled the coach aside and put in her request: "Just give him a chance."

When the play came, Greg fell in love with football.



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He swept across the line of scrimmage to receive a handoff on a reverse play, then he tucked the football to his oversized chest pads, turned upfield and ran as fast as he could. No one touched him.

Touchdown. The play worked so well that it became one of the first plays his team called every game for two years. Greg found the end zone every time.

"From that day on, he was their starting running back because he was the fastest kid," Ms. Newsome said. "Now, he loves the game. Once he scored that first touchdown, he never complained about going to practice."

Newsome's speed made him one of the top players on both sides of the ball all the way through his high school career at Glenbard North in Carol Stream, Illinois, and by his junior year, he was one of the top players in the state. He earned All-Conference honors in both his sophomore and junior seasons and recorded nine interceptions in that span, which led to a commitment to Northwestern before he started his senior year.

But he wasn't done building his high school resume yet.

Newsome elected to attend IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida, for his senior year. The academy is a haven for the top youth athletes around the world, and Newsome fell in love with their program when his 7-on-7 team, Midwest BOOM, traveled to the facilities for the national championship.

"I just wanted to be challenged," Newsome said. "In Illinois, I had my spot solidified. At IMG, it made me compete even more. It allowed me to compete with the best of the best, and I just wanted to be the best player I could be going into college all the way."

One play at IMG Academy might've changed Newsome's football trajectory forever.

Newsome was never a full-time cornerback before IMG. He had always been a safety or wide receiver, but Antonio Banks, the defensive backs coach at IMG, wanted to insert Newsome at cornerback in relief of their starter, who was struggling against the opposition's top receiver.

Newsome lined up for his first play, read the fade route from the offense and leaped in front of the receiver to snag the interception.

"The rest was history," Banks said. "We wanted shut-down corners. He didn't blink. He got on the field and he took care of business."

Newsome finished the year with 17 passes defensed and two interceptions — numbers that drew attention from Arkansas, Minnesota, Iowa and Syracuse.

All of those schools made an offer to Newsome, but he had no interest to sway from his original commitment.

He was going to Northwestern, and he had plans to be great.



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Heart On His Sleeves

By Anthony Poisal, clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/heart-on-his-sleeves>

Greg Newsome II wanted to make sure everyone knew what he stood for on Day 1 of the 2021 NFL Draft, one of the most important days of his life.

Newsome, one of the top cornerbacks of the draft class, is a massive advocate for all things equality. When dozens of cameras were set to be trained on him for Round 1, he didn't want to wear a suit with an array of fancy colors and stylings that made him appear like the millionaire he was about to be.

Instead, he wanted to display red messages of important phrases stitched over a black jacket.

The phrase "Women Can Ball Too" was sewn across the left sleeve. "Black Lives Matter" and "Say Their Names" were on the back. "Stop Asian Hate" was on the right sleeve.

"I didn't want (the phrases) on the inside," Newsome said. "I wanted it outside — so that everyone can see it."

Newsome made a statement on what's most important to him before he could even complete his first NFL interview. As he was shown on TV celebrating with friends and family after the Browns drafted him with the 26th overall pick, everyone tuned into the draft could see his passion for speaking up about social justice and equality.

"People aren't getting treated [equally] just because of how they look. That's just obviously not OK at all," he said in an interview with local reporters later that night. "I'm just trying to get the message out and just trying to be somebody that people know — the people that are getting marginalized and things like that — they know that at least Greg Newsome is going to be somebody that is going to push for them and try to get them equality."

Newsome didn't wait until he got to the NFL to start voicing his messages. Just ask his girlfriend, Veronica Burton.

Burton, who plays on Northwestern's women's basketball team and has been dating Newsome since 2018, has heard his voice several times on the court. He's one of the team's biggest fans, both because of his overall love for basketball — the first sport he truly embraced as a kid — and because he believes women don't get enough credit for their talents in the sports world.

"He really loves women's basketball and women's sports in general," Burton said. "He was at the Big Ten Tournament for me this year, which meant a lot because he was gone for a while in Arizona for training. He found a way to make it out there for his support."

Newsome's outpouring of support for the women's team started when he realized the massive difference in attendance and overall attention they received compared to men's sports — and, particularly, the football team.



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Northwestern football went 3-9 in Newsome's sophomore year, but Ryan Field always popped with energy from over 30,000 fans.

The women's basketball team, meanwhile, lost just four games and was one of the best teams in the Big Ten. They rarely cracked more than 1,000 fans per home game.

"(The women) weren't getting any recognition from the school at all," he said. "They were the best team, and we (the football team) were horrible my sophomore year. The women's basketball team was like 30-2. They barely lost, and they weren't having any type of support.

"I was like, 'How?'"

Newsome couldn't stand it. So he decided to attend as many of the games as possible.

Starting his sophomore year, he rarely missed a Northwestern women's basketball home game and would occasionally travel for away games. He also was a frequent spectator for women's soccer games and lacrosse games, and he always made sure to bring a pack of friends with him as long as everyone followed one rule: be loud.

"Him and all those guys he brought with him were the loudest people in the gym every single time," Burton said, "and it really makes a big difference because you just don't have that in women's games, really."

Newsome's passion and energy for women's sports is just one example of how he's taken a stand in what he believes in.

In the spring of 2020, he and Burton attended a gathering and walk in Evanston following the murder of George Floyd that invigorated movements for racial equality and social justice. Newsome also frequently voices his support for those movements on social media and isn't afraid to push his messaging out to his growing number of fans.

"He feels some sense of responsibility because he's in that position with a bigger following," Burton said. "He feels that responsibility and opportunity to use his voice."

Now that he's in the NFL, Newsome plans to continue to build a presence off the field and throughout the communities of both his old home in Chicago and new home in Cleveland.

He plans on being a frequent player in attendance throughout the Browns' numerous community efforts, and he hopes to soon establish himself in Cleveland as a player who not only made an impact on the field, but also throughout the communities in Northeast Ohio.

"That's something I've been thinking about since I was young," he said "I want to affect the inner city and affect the youth, just being around and showing them a positive person will help them a lot. I want to be able to get in the city in Cleveland and Chicago and just give them knowledge and show somebody who can be positive.



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"I want to show them a positive role model they can follow."



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Myles Garrett's mom Audrey: The untold story of why COVID-19 really sacked him, insight into the helmet incident, and more

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/04/myles-garretts-mom-audrey-the-untold-story-of-why-covid-19-really-sacked-him-insight-into-the-helmet-incident-and-more.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Audrey Garrett will have a front-row seat at the NFL Draft Friday night when her son Myles takes center stage to announce the Browns' second-round pick — just like she has for every big event in his life.

In the last year and a half alone, she's been there for him through the helmet incident, his blockbuster \$125 million contract extension from the Browns last offseason, a scary bout with COVID-19, and more.

But Myles isn't the only world-class athlete Audrey has reared. A former college track and field star herself, she has also raised Garrett's older brother Sean Williams, a 2007 first-round pick of the New Jersey Nets; and Garrett's older sister Brea, the 2014 NCAA champion in the weight throw from Texas A&M. She also has stepdaughter Tiffanie Garrett, who's like one of her own.

Audrey's unique situation landed her the lead chapter in a recently published parenting anthology called "Creatrix," by Blake Gunther. The book is co-authored by Chris Mueller and Mary Fischer-Nassib, the mother of former Browns defensive end Carl Nassib, now with the Las Vegas Raiders.

A former technical writer and current doctoral candidate in Strategic Leadership, Audrey agreed to sit down with me to talk about the book and share her insights on Myles, and after an hour and a half, we felt like we were just getting started.

So grab a cup of coffee, or maybe even some wine — Audrey jokes that either red or white was just fine during the pandemic, as long as there was plenty of it.

Come for some straight talk from a world-class mom, stay for the little truth bomb at the end:

Myles has asthma and his dad almost died of COVID-19

Audrey revealed that the real reason COVID-19 kicked Myles' butt physically last season is that he has asthma. The reason it sacked him emotionally is because he lost his great-grandmother to it over the summer, and almost lost his father, Lawrence, to it right before training camp started at the end of July.

"We got it in July and going into August," Audrey said of her and her husband. "It almost cost Lawrence his life. It was touch and go. He had COVID-induced pneumonia. The breathing was compromised. It's my understanding that they intubate you at 88% oxidation. He was at 89."

Lawrence was so sick that he told his daughter Brea "I'm scared to sleep because I'm scared I won't wake up."



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What Garrett's teammates didn't know is that he flew back home to Arlington, Texas, on the eve of training camp in late July to visit his parents from a safe distance, unsure if it would be the last time he ever saw his dad, whom he considers one of his few best friends.

"We wouldn't let him get any further than the driveway to lay eyes on his parents because we didn't know, technically," Audrey said. "Lawrence sat in a chair in the garage and then I had to help him back into the house, and it was like leaning on the car for five minutes. Just walking from the bathroom to the driveway was like you ran a marathon for him. It was bad."

When Lawrence and Audrey went to get tested for the first time, Lawrence couldn't generate enough saliva to get tested.

"He was so out of it at the testing location, they called an ambulance and took him immediately to the emergency room," Audrey said. "From there, [they said] 'You've got COVID-induced pneumonia. Go home, good luck because we can't intubate you now.'"

When Audrey went back to pick him up, "he was sitting on the curb outside. Because they can't do it. They're in there fighting for people's lives on a ventilator."

Lawrence was so worried about infecting Audrey, he refused to sit in the passenger seat.

"We have an SUV," she said. "He opened the back and he crawled in the back in the third row area and just laid in this little area, because he was like, 'If you don't have it, I don't want to give it you.' He was like 'roll down the window.' And we got him in the house and it was really bad."

Within a couple of days, Audrey lost her sense of taste and smell, but generally had mild symptoms of the virus. Lawrence, on the other hand, almost passed out, so they called the ambulance again and he was taken to a different hospital."

For the second time, Lawrence was sent home, but this time with some medication. Audrey also called one of her college sorority sisters, who's a physician, and asked for advice.

"She put us on a protocol," she said. "She went natural, holistic, bone broth, [vitamins] and within a couple of days we were both feeling much better, and we were still in the thick of it, as far as timewise of what they say COVID lasts."

On Nov. 18, Garrett began feeling sick and was kept home from the Browns practice facility for two days. By Friday, he had tested positive for COVID-19 and was placed on the virus reserve list and ruled out for the Eagles game at FirstEnergy Stadium. Missing the next game against the Jaguars too, Garrett was far sicker than he let on at the time.

"What people don't realize is, Myles has — and actually all three [of her biological kids] actually have asthma, and it's something I gave them genetically," Audrey said. "And it's ironic because you don't view elite athletes as being, respiratorally challenged."



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“But every year, Myles goes through a phase where he needs an inhaler, he goes through a bronchitis phase, a sinus infection, and it’s happened since he was a little person. And it just so happened COVID hit him in that same time frame.”

Audrey and Lawrence didn’t come to visit during that time “because we couldn’t subject ourselves,” Audrey said. “My husband said he didn’t think he could live through it again. So, we had to kind of FaceTime with him. He has a girlfriend that lived up there with him and a guy friend that works for him, and they got nothing in the same house, and Myles was like, ‘This took me down.’ ”

Garrett, who also put on a few pounds during the two weeks off because he couldn’t work out, admitted when he returned for the Titans game Dec. 6 that COVID “kicked my butt.”

Little did he know it would keep on kicking him for the rest of the season, especially during games when the asthma kicked in. In fact, when the virus struck, he was atop the NFL leader board with 9.5 sacks, and was a legitimate candidate for NFL Defensive Player of the Year. But he coaxed only 2.5 more sacks out of his COVID-ravaged body the rest of the season to finish sixth in the NFL with a total of 12.

“It was hard watching him struggle,” Audrey said. “I’m always keeping an eye on him, especially in cooler weather. When you have asthma like that, and you’re trying to be an athlete, you’re sucking in cold air in lungs that are already just kind of compromised. It was rough watching him. They didn’t show it a lot on TV during games, but he’d be kneeling on the sideline, or sucking in oxygen on the sideline. As a mom, that was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done was to watch him go through that stuff.”

After a victory over the Giants on Dec. 20, Garrett suffered a coughing fit in the locker room that rattled him. He revealed it in his postgame video conference, coughing throughout the interview, and also tweeted “F-COVID” after the game.

But in spite of the asthma, the same condition that prompted his fellow Browns defensive lineman Andrew Billings to opt out for the season, Garrett “never considered it,” Audrey said.

He did have other reasons to curse the virus, however.

“My husband had a 100-year-old grandmother, who early in the COVID fight, lost her life to COVID,” Audrey said. “We had just celebrated her 100-year birthday, and within a couple of months, COVID had taken her. And so [Myles] was losing people. Even though it wasn’t COVID-related, We lost several very close family members in the first half of 2020 that were just, it was bad. Our family probably collectively has lost maybe 10 or 11 people, not necessarily COVID-related, just the loss.”

Audrey said her sister died this February after a battle with cancer “and I was just praying, I didn’t want 2020 on her headstone. It just would have been a horrible reminder of how horrible 2020 was for us.”

But Audrey and Lawrence recently drove to where Myles was vacationing in Texas, and were happy to see him back to himself.



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“They were out in the park, throwing the football, playing frisbee with the dog,” Audrey said. “He’s back. It’s one thing about being in Texas, if you work out in Texas in this heat — it’s not really hot yet, but when he came in his rookie year, he definitely had a level of physicality just conditioning-wise that he hasn’t had since because he really hasn’t had the ability to come back and work out in this Texas heat. If you can get some Texas heat going and get yourself in condition, watch out.”

Inside the mind of the Browns deep thinker

With the worst hopefully behind them, Audrey found a silver lining in the virus.

“If COVID doesn’t do anything else, it should just remind us to love one another as much as possible because tomorrow is not promised to you in any capacity,” she said.

Supporting Garrett through the Helmet Incident

Garrett’s bout with the with the coronavirus came almost exactly a year after The Helmet Incident in which he ripped off Mason Rudolph’s helmet and struck the QB over the head with it during a nationally televised Thursday Night Football Game on Nov. 14, 2019, a 21-7 victory over the Steelers.

Garrett later revealed that Rudolph called him the “N-word,” a charge that Rudolph vehemently denied.

The incident resulted in what amounted to a six-game suspension for Garrett, but took such an emotional toll on him that he contemplated quitting football, he told cleveland.com last year.

“We were there that night,” Audrey said. “Lawrence and I go to every game. I’ve missed a few, but my husband has been at every game and it just so happened that was a game where we were both in attendance. I was actually riding in the car with Myles, so when it happened on the field, Lawrence and I are sitting there. I don’t watch football. I watch Myles. Then I always go back home and I watch the game but during the game, I’m in mommy mode. I’m trying to make sure my child is not hurt and so I was like ‘Oh my God, he’s swinging the helmet, Oh, my God.’ ”

Knowing her son as she did, Audrey surmised that “some stuff went down. Myles doesn’t have that temperament. He has Lawrence’s temperament. Audrey would’ve hit you with the helmet, probably twice. He’s mine, I promise, but his demeanor is that of his dad’s.”

Audrey acknowledged that she and Lawrence were concerned about Myles’ level of competitiveness when he was young, because he was so mild-mannered.

“And when he hit Mason, Lawrence and I were like ‘Oh snap,’” she said. “First I’m concerned, is the young man hurt? My [next] thought was, what the hell did he say?”

They went to the car to wait for Myles and it took him an uncharacteristically long 90 minutes to emerge.



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"He couldn't talk in the car," Audrey said. "He was hot. And we probably got halfway to his house and he said, 'He called me the N-word.' He said 'I was hot.'"

Audrey understood the sentiment, and Myles' instinct to protect himself.

"But my mind also went to 'Oh my God, do I call his mother? ...That's still somebody's child and that could've been very, very harmful,'" she said. "So I was in mommy mode for me and mommy mode for her at the same time."

The Garretts supported Myles through one of the darkest hours of his life.

"We're not saying it was right," Audrey said. "We're saying we're going to support you through it. We're going to lift you and support you in a way that you come through this whole because one thing doesn't define a person's life."

Knowing how much the whole thing troubled Garrett, especially the erroneous perception that he was a dirty player, Audrey broached the subject a few weeks later.

"I said to him, 'Have you ever considered just walking away and leaving this alone?'" Audrey said. "And he said, 'Yeah, mom, I actually have.' He was like 'I'm not just a football player. I have options. And I'm cool if I walk away.'"

Myles talked through it with Lawrence, and ultimately opted to forge ahead. His reinstatement by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell in February of 2020 coincided with his previously scheduled trip to Tanzania as NFL captain of Waterboys, the organization that supplies clean drinking water to the poor.

"This was nothing Myles did to help his image," Audrey said. "All these things were already in place, because that's where his heart is. Did he do something wrong? Yes, but he wasn't going to hide."

Over the summer, Garrett used his wider platform to effect more change, paying for the funerals of victims of police brutality, and spearheading the Browns' social-justice initiatives.

"Myles is more focused on making an impact on the world than anything," Audrey said.

She watched a more mature Garrett return to the Browns determined to repay the team and his teammates for sticking by him.

"Those are his brothers in arms, so I think he came back with a determination to redeem himself with his brothers on the field," Audrey said. "Myles has an inner fire that it took a long time to light, but good gracious when it got lit. ...And I think one of the things that that lesson taught him, is it's a work family. He got to see the support that his teammates gave him off the field when nobody was looking."



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Audrey was proud of Myles for approaching Rudolph after the season finale in Cleveland to shake hands.

“But if he hadn’t, I’m just as cool,” she said. “Ironically when he approached [Steelers coach] Mike Tomlin, that was the one that tickled me because our families go back a bit growing up in the same area....What was he talking to Mike Tomlin about? ‘My mom playing Words with Friends with his brother Ed (laughter).’”

Guess whose idea ESPN’s The Body Issue was?

What self-respecting mom wouldn’t move mountains to have her son pose nude in ESPN The Magazine’s ‘The Body Issue?’

Audrey, who attended Hampton University on a track and field scholarship, began eyeing “The Body Issue” for Myles years ago, and manifested it in 2019.

“I’ve been wanting that body issue since there was a body issue,” she said. “I appreciate a good body. I’m a former athlete, so I love muscles. ...Saquon Barkley’s shoot was [even] better than Myles’Anyway, I reached out until I got to the right person who could get me to the right person to get him in this body shoot and Myles has always been very proud of [his body]. I used to have to tell that boy, ‘Put on a shirt, sir.’

“In my house, the boys were not allowed to walk around shirtless in the house because they have a sister. And that meant she had to be fully clothed too, I mean I just, it’s just a matter of respect, you don’t leave the house, or be outside unless you’re playing sports, with no shirt on.

“So, as he was building into this Greek God that he was in high school, when he started lifting weights, he became very, eight-pack, you know? I mean let’s celebrate the human body. I believe in celebrating it — male and female. If I could have got Brea in there. I would have too.”

Audrey said Garrett was intrigued from the start.

“He didn’t say no when I asked him if he’d do it,” she said. “I said, ‘[You’d be] covered appropriately,’ and I showed him a couple of issues. And he was like, ‘Oh that’s cool. Will you really be able to get it done?’ And I was like, ‘Yeah.’ I can be rather rather tenacious about some things when I really want them done.”

Audrey and Lawrence traveled to Joshua Tree with Garrett for the event, but made themselves scarce during the actual photo shoot. When they saw the prints, they loved them.

“To me, it was really about the artistry of it,” said Audrey.

Her next mission? To get Jadeveon Clowney into the now all-digital version of the issue. Audrey got to know Clowney a few years ago when he was represented by Myles’ agent Bus Cook. When she first approached him with the idea, he told her he needed to get in better shape.



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"If he's gotten his body to where he needs it to be, I'm gonna try to get him in the digital [issue]."

Raising Myles, one of her three world-class athletes

The hardest part about raising Myles was delivering him at 11 pounds.

"I knew once I had Myles, I wasn't having any more children," Audrey said with a laugh.

After that, it was smooth sailing. With Myles coming 10 years after Sean and 2 1/2 years after Brea, Audrey had the benefit of hindsight.

"Myles was the easiest kid ever," she said. "Brea would talk for him, and he literally didn't have to say anything. He was a kid who never asked for anything, and he was easy to please. He never complained. He was just an easy kid to take care of."

With the family's heavy emphasis on academics for all of the kids, Myles didn't start playing football until junior high.

"He had one year [in grade school] where he attempted to play football and he was out there in the Texas heat and it's not for the feint of heart, and he came off that field, and he was like 'Daddy, I don't want to play football,'" Audrey said. "I couldn't believe Lawrence let him quit, but he was the youngest, so we were a little more lax with him."

Besides, Garrett fancied himself a basketball player like Sean, the No. 17 overall pick of the New Jersey Nets in 2007 out of Boston College.

"He was always outside in the driveway playing basketball with Sean, and his passion was actually basketball," Audrey said. "He actually got two offers to play at the Division I level, but he was Myles Garrett 'the football player' at that point."

One of them was from Providence College head coach Ed Cooley, who had recruited Sean at Boston College.

"As a family we had known him for a long time, and then when he got to see Myles, he was like, 'Are you kidding me? How does this happen? How is nobody offering this kid?'" Audrey said. "But most most people saw Myles as the up-and-coming college football player at that point."

Before that, Garrett had to undergo surgeries on both feet to correct his flat feet, one operation at age 11 and one at age 12.

They discovered the issue when Lawrence went in for back surgery, and the surgeon told him it all began with his feet. They told him Myles had the same feet, and he urged them to bring him in.

"His bones were collapsed," Audrey said. "He had no arch, no anything. So they put in arches and they snipped a tendon in the back that was too tight."



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Garrett was largely confined to the couch for six months after each of the surgeries, unable even to play pickup basketball.

“Before those surgeries, Myles couldn’t even dunk the ball,” Audrey said. “He had no hops whatsoever. So when you see him doing the standing [60-inch box] jump, it’s amazing because the kid had no jumps until he got that surgery. At that point he started dunking the ball and became the freak athlete Myles Garrett.”

Even now, Garrett’s feet hint at the road he’s traveled to become one of the most dominant pass rushers in the NFL.

“If you ever watch him walk, he walks with his left foot kind of turned in,” Audrey said. “Always very slow in his gait when he walks. In fact, when you see him run and he pushes off, his left foot is kind of turned in.”

But flat feet were the least of Garrett’s worries at times as a kid. His big brother — his hero and his role model — got hooked on weed and it cost him his career at Boston College and in the NBA, where he bounced around before landing in the D-league, the Chinese Basketball Association and the Turkish League while also giving the NBA another go.

Sean’s struggles, including an arrest that made ESPN, took such a toll on the family that Garrett shunned marijuana and alcohol, and still has yet to drink a beer.

“The one thing that I will always say — and I think Myles would say same thing — Sean was the best big brother he could have asked for,” Audrey said. “Because while he was in the midst of his own struggles, he was also talking to his younger siblings about ‘this might not be the path for you. I know I’m making these choices and you’re seeing me, but this is my journey.’”

“Myles observed some things, and decided that wasn’t the path for him. He got a front seat to what it was like to choose an alternate path, but Sean is the biggest supporter for Brea and Myles. He always has been. When he went into the [NBA], the one thing he did consistently was reach back to his siblings, and make sure they were involved.”

The hardest for Myles during Sean’s troubles was watching Audrey break down.

“Myles is very sensitive,” Audrey said. “There’s no way to hide as a mother when you have children in the house. The pain, I mean, I was crying. It’s very humbling to see your child’s face go across the ticker of ESPN that says he’s been dismissed or might have been arrested or whatever. They’re calling your child names and they don’t know the inside child, but I know the hearts of my children.”

Like they did later with Myles, the Garretts supported Sean through the ups and downs and are proud of the man and father he’s become.

“Sean walks to the beat of his own drum,” Audrey said. “He’s comfortable in his journey. He’s like ‘I made decisions. I had consequences from my decisions, but it all makes me the man that I am.’”



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Coming clean

Audrey, who does speaking engagements on parenting and has the lead chapter in *Creatrix*, had a confession to make.

“I don’t like children,” she said. “I never have.”

She didn’t break a smile. Wasn’t joking, not even a little bit.

“I’m not that woman,” she said. “I’m not and it’s so ironic, because my siblings all wanted children, and I’m the only one out of four that had them. I didn’t have a maternal bone, until I had children, I did not know that I had the capacity to love anything like I love those three children that I gave birth to, and my bonus child is just like mine too. I will fight a bear for her.

“With that said, because I didn’t appreciate the gift of motherhood, in the midst of it. I was so busy trying to get them to be like little people, adults, because I’m just not a kid person. Then, as they grew up, I understood the value of childhood when Sean left. And it gave me a better appreciation to kind of slow down and appreciate the younger kids, when you see how quickly that first one went out the door, and I think that’s when I really started trying to smell those individual roses. But I would tell anybody, ‘I’m not a kid person, naw, you can have them.’”

Ultimately, Audrey’s children have brought her greatest pains and biggest and “not because of ‘I’m drafted No. 1 or I’m in the first round or I’m a national champion.’ Your biggest high can come when nobody’s watching.”

It’s watching Myles with a sick child, Sean feeding the hungry, Brea caring for Audrey’s sister in the final stages of cancer in February.

“It has nothing to do with athletics,” she said. “It’s the heart that they have within that is my greatest joy. As I said at the end of the chapter of *Creatrix*, at the end of the day, we’re just walking each other home and I don’t mean home as your address, my address. Be kind to one another upon the journey.”



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Myles Garrett admits he was 50% after COVID-19 because of asthma; says it hurt to lose shot at NFL Defensive POY

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/06/myles-garrett-describes-how-asthma-worsened-his-covid-19-and-how-it-hurt-to-lose-a-shot-at-nfl-defensive-poy.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- Browns defensive end Myles Garrett acknowledged Wednesday that he was half the player he used to be last season after his asthma worsened his COVID-19 symptoms and cost him two games.

He also admitted 'it hurt' to lose a chance at NFL Defensive Player of the Year after leading the league with 9.5 sacks in his first nine games before the virus, and tying for second with four forced fumbles. He managed only 2.5 sacks in the final five games to finish sixth in the NFL with 12.0.

"I didn't feel like I was getting off the ball," Garrett said via Zoom after organized team activities on Wednesday. "Athletically, I felt like I had it. Conditioning-wise, I felt like I was like 50%."

After sitting out victories over the Eagles and Jaguars while COVID-19 'kicked his butt,' he returned Dec. 6th against the Titans and was shocked at how much he struggled to breathe during the 41-35 shootout.

"I don't think I've ever had to use oxygen so frequently so early into a game," he said. "I don't think I had like a huge amount of snaps, but I was like hanging on. Once you get tired, you start losing the play, so you're trying to think of what you're supposed to do here. If you're thinking what you're supposed to do here, you can't think about the alternatives or the options off that, the pass-rush moves or the rip or release for run blocks.

"Once you're thinking about just trying to remember the play, you're not thinking about running calls. Things start to slip. You're not thinking about alternatives you can do with your hands, so you start to just rely on one move. All this stuff starts to weigh on you. So I'm just trying to get my conditioning back, and I'm fighting through that when I get into games and to practices. I think I had it like a quarter, maybe a quarter and a half, and then I was honestly emptying the tank. I don't think I've ever felt like that."

In obvious distress during games, Garrett often needed oxygen between series. Following the Giants game Dec. 20, he had such a violent coughing fit in the locker room after the game that he was still visibly shaken during his post-game Zoom conference. The virus and its aftereffects lingered all the way through the divisional playoff loss to the Chiefs, and he was never the same. When Chad Henne scrambled 13 yards on the backbreaking second-last play, Garrett didn't have the wind to chase him down.

But he's confident that's all behind him now.

"To not feel like that, it's great," he said. "I feel the best that I have since last year before COVID. It's a wonderful feeling. I feel like it was kind of a long road. Now that I am back, I'm feeling well-conditioned and feeling back on my feet, and the world is ahead of me."



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It was so bad that Garrett wouldn't wish it on his most vaunted foe.

"I hope nothing like that happens to me or anyone else," he said.

He can relate to Browns defensive tackle Andrew Billings, a fellow asthmatic who opted out last season because of COVID-19. Signed as a free agent last year from the Bengals, Billings was back on the field for organized team activities Wednesday and eager to begin his Browns career.

"Yeah, I don't blame him for [opting out]," Garrett said. "I have asthma as well, and that's probably why it hit me so hard. So, just going into it, I feel like we have the vaccine, and we have another year of protocols to keep our players and our staff safe. Now I feel like it's just up to us to get the job and the work done.

"A guy like AB, I don't think he has any worries of how he can be taken care of, and I think he has many different avenues he can take to remain healthy and keep his family safe. I'm just glad we can all get together for this time and work on getting to know each other."

Garrett, who's treated fans to videos of him box-jumping and dunking this offseason, 'retired' as a pickup basketball superstar at the urging of coach Kevin Stefanski, but added bulk to his 272-pound frame. When he stepped to the podium in his green suit to announce a Browns pick during the NFL Draft in April, he looked like The Incredible Hulk. But he wouldn't admit that he's added weight when told that a Steelers player said he looked bigger.

"I can't tell you that," he said. "I have to leave it as a mystery to them. If he thinks I look larger than usual, I have to have him shook when I run up on him. I'm glad they think that. I've been working hard. I feel like I've been trying to elevate myself every year."

Bulking up is a departure from two offseason ago, when Garrett trimmed down to add speed. But he's determined that ramping up the power and explosiveness is the move for 2021.

"I've been working on my progression one or two times a day for four or five days. I think it is going to pay off big time, but I don't think I lost any speed. So I don't want them to get any ideas that I'm a little bit slower because that's not the case."

In the Browns' workout video competition, Garrett is right up there with Odell Beckham Jr., who's hurtling back from his torn ACL with a vengeance, and Jarvis Landry, who trains with the intensity of Jerry Rice. But seeing his teammates tearing it up motivates him.

"I love seeing my guys working," he said. "For me, it's I have to outwork the man I was the day before. I always have to be better. Nothing in life stays the same. You either are getting better or worse, and seeing them getting better, I want to elevate myself but be me. I know we're on the same team, but I can't let anybody outwork me. If I can beat the man I was yesterday and try to catch him, then I can always stay one step ahead."



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Garrett took it upon himself to show up for OTAs this week along with a number of other big-name defenders to help the new and young guys get acclimated. The Browns have about 15 new faces on defense, and will have as many as nine new starters.

“I just have to make sure they fall in line,” he said. “We have a good thing going. Whether you’re coming here from another team or are older or younger, we all have to put on the same uniform and same standard. We’re all held to that same standard, and that will lead to success. I have to treat those guys like they’re all one of my own, whether they have been here for as long as I have been here or they just got here on Monday.

“We hold each other accountable and I hold them accountable and try to get them to work as hard as me, and if they catch me when I am stumbling or I am falling, I think we will be successful.”

Garrett has already certainly won over one of his new teammates in Anthony Walker, the former starting middle linebacker for the Colts who was signed as a free agent.

“Freak of nature, honestly,” Walker said via Zoom. “Huge person. Huge human being. Probably the most flexible big guy I have ever seen as far as the stuff that I’ve seen him do in the weight room. Strong. All of that stuff. He’s as advertised is what he is. Just watching him on TV and now being able to be his teammate, I am much happier to be his teammate than him sacking my quarterback [Philip Rivers] in the end zone last year.”

Fifty-percent of Garrett is better than most NFL players. But if he’s 100% this year, be afraid.



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Myles Garrett expresses 'love of Cleveland' by unveiling downtown mural

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/myles-garrett-expresses-love-of-cleveland-by-unveiling-downtown-mural>

Myles Garrett has always been committed to using his platform to leave a footprint in Northeast Ohio.

Garrett, the Browns' 2020 Walter Payton Man of the Year — which recognizes NFL players for their commitment to the community in addition to their on-field excellence — played an active role throughout last season in creating and encouraging dialogue about social justice issues and racial equality. He also was instrumental in assisting with COVID-19 relief efforts and teamed up with Cleveland Hope Exchange and local businesses last season to provide more than 24,000 pounds of food and additional resources to those in need amid the pandemic.

He left another stamp on the city Thursday. This time, it was visual.

In collaboration with local artist Glen Infante, Garrett unveiled a "Cleveland is the Reason" mural as part of Infante's #VoicesofCLE public art project, which was created in 2020 following civil unrest over social justice issues and is meant to provide a platform, especially for those of color, for expression and to spark the necessary conversations and actions to inspire change.

The mural was inspired by Cleveland icons of sports, culture, and rock 'n' roll and features paintings of Jesse Owens, LeBron James, Jim Brown, Machine Gun Kelly, Tracy Chapman and Toni Morrison. The mural is located at the Cleveland Visitors Center on Euclid Avenue and was created in collaboration with Downtown Cleveland Alliance (DCA), Destination Cleveland and Greater Cleveland Sports Commission.

"It was for a love for Cleveland, honestly," Garrett said. "It was a passion and compassion for people, so I just wanted to give everybody something to look at and smile upon when they come down the street."

The mural was unveiled one week before the NFL Draft begins in Cleveland, which will welcome Ohio residents and football fans across the country.

"We're thrilled for the location of this mural," said David Gilbert, president of the Greater Cleveland Sports Commission. "We're lucky that our office is in such a central place to downtown, such a vibrant place. And also just the fact that these two organizations in Destination Cleveland and Greater Cleveland Sports Commission, that both are key to selling our city to the world, we really can think of no better place for the mural."

For Garrett, contributing to the mural was a perfect way to encapsulate two things he loves most: art and Cleveland.



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Garrett has previously expressed love for poetry and other forms of artwork and expressed an interest in weaving his artistic interests with his appreciation for Cleveland. Ever since the Texas native arrived with the Browns as the first overall draft pick of 2017, Garrett has expressed admiration for how the city has embraced him as a leader for the Browns and the city.

Now, with a colorful mural officially on display in the heart of Cleveland, Garrett has one more way of visually showing how strong his bond is with the city.

"Being able to work with an artist and see his process and finished product is great for what I want to do, and it turns out great for Cleveland," Garrett said. "It's a city that has accepted me. It's my second home."



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'I have a confession to make': One couple's roller-coaster ride on the NFL fringe

By Bo Wulf, The Athletic

<https://theathletic.com/2687309/2021/08/04/i-have-a-confession-to-make-one-couples-roller-coaster-ride-on-the-nfl-fringe/>

It's the Cleveland Browns' first playoff game in 18 years and no one can believe what's happening. Playing in Heinz Field against a Pittsburgh Steelers team that has dominated them for the better part of eternity, the Browns are without their head coach and their Pro Bowl left guard. They haven't really practiced as a team all week. Yet somehow they're winning 28-0, and it's only the first quarter.

In the stands, Marissa Morris' phone is blowing up. Friends, family members, acquaintances she hasn't spoken to in years — they're all texting her exclamation points because this is just too crazy. They know how much it means to her.

Finally, she decides it's time to come clean.

She thumbs out a message to Zac Jackson and Jason Lloyd, who cover the Browns for The Athletic. Their podcast "Civilized Barking" is one of several Morris produces.

"I have a huge confession to make," she writes. "Michael Dunn is my boyfriend."

Michael and Marissa first met when they were freshmen at the University of Maryland.

"We didn't start dating until Michael's senior year (in 2016)," she says over Zoom while sitting next to Michael inside her mom's house in New Jersey. "Well, the end of my senior year and the start of Michael's redshirt senior year. It was like May, right before graduation. Or no, we started in September —"

"I'll take over," says Michael.

Dunn originally joined the Maryland football team as a walk-on. Today, he's 6 feet, 5 inches tall, 307 pounds. Then, he was about 80 pounds lighter. By the time his redshirt senior season came around, he was nearing 50 career starts and had his sights set on playing in the NFL.

That fall, Marissa drove down nearly every weekend from New York, where she was a news producer at PIX11. Cupcakes in tow for Dunn and the bale of teammates he lived with, she went to nearly every game. Marissa's mom, Lisa Murray, knew right away it was serious.

"I thought this girl was allergic to the kitchen," Murray says. "It was hysterical. Who does she think she's fooling?"

Dunn's NFL prospects changed when he caught the first pass of his college career on the aptly named "River Dunn" trick play. With one defensive back standing between him and the end zone, he attempted a stiff-arm and jammed his shoulder into the ground so hard he tore his labrum. He ended up missing just one game, but his decision to play through the pain and postpone surgery



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until after the season unwittingly torpedoed his draft stock. As a likely late-round pick, he fell out of the 2017 draft entirely.

It wasn't until June that the Los Angeles Rams gave him a spot on their 90-man roster for training camp. He was buried on the depth chart as the third-team right tackle.

From afar, Marissa was investigating. Now working for MLB.com producing some of its digital shows and podcasts, she put her journalism background to work combing through social media for any sign of an update on Michael. She'd notice the offensive line running sprints on the live stream of practice and ask what happened. She was the journalist pestering him with questions.

"And I'm like, 'Good. Yeah. Uh-huh. Fine,' says Dunn. "Like, Marissa, it's 9 p.m., I have to be up in like five hours."

Marissa flew out for Dunn's disastrous first preseason game. He played only a handful of snaps, committed a holding penalty and was too nervous to perform at his best.

The Rams released Dunn during roster cutdowns but immediately signed him to the practice squad. Then he was cut two days later.

Dunn moved in with Marissa and her mom that fall while he waited and hoped for more opportunities. He worked out for the Bills at one point and was told the Rams were still fond of him, but nothing materialized. Marissa was grieving the recent loss of her maternal grandmother and logging long hours in New York City. Meanwhile, Michael spent his days working out, playing backgammon with Murray and serving as the taste tester for dinner every night.

"She's the planner, and I'm legit living in their household, not making any money," Dunn says. "It didn't even look like I was heading toward a job. It was like I'm working out just to work out at this point. So she'd be asking 'What's next?' And I was just like, 'I don't know. Let's let this ride out a little bit.' And she was very supportive of that."

His next chance came the following February when the Rams signed him again. This time, he'd have a full offseason to learn the playbook and a fully healed shoulder. He was also playing guard, which was a better fit given his stature.

Then the Rams drafted three offensive linemen and Dunn was released in June.

That summer, Dunn resolved that if he didn't end up in training camp with an NFL team, he would be done with football. Or rather, he would accept that football was done with him.

Two days into camp, the Jaguars signed him. There, he made an impression on offensive line coach Pat Flaherty, who appreciated that Dunn never had to be taught something twice.

"He kind of grows on you," Flaherty says.



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Once again, Dunn was released during final cutdowns. Once again, he was signed to the practice squad. He moved into an apartment close to the Jaguars facility and excitedly sent Marissa videos of the place. A big man needs a big bed, so he replaced the queen-size bed with a king. Then the Jaguars cut him in October, which is when he learned one of the cardinal rules of life on the bubble: never commit to a long-term lease. After some haggling with the apartment complex, he handed it all over to the guy who took his job.

A month later, the Jaguars brought him back to the practice squad. This time, he stayed in a hotel. He felt himself making strides under Flaherty's tutelage. Then three things happened on the Jaguars' locker cleanout day on Dec. 31, 2018. First, Dunn was told the team was letting him go. Second, Flaherty was fired. Third, his agent pushed him to consider signing with the upstart Alliance of American Football.

When he called Marissa from the airport to break the news, it felt like rock bottom.

On Jan. 5, 2019, Marissa found out she had breast cancer.

More specifically, she had a malignant phyllodes tumor. Phyllodes tumors account for about 1 percent of all breast cancers, which meant Marissa needed to find a specialist for what came next — a bilateral mastectomy. If everything went well, her body would be fully rid of the disease and she'd be no more susceptible to future cancer than anyone else her age. But time was of the essence.

Obviously, Michael's AAF dilemma took a backseat. He wanted to stay with her in New Jersey, but Marissa insisted he report to training camp with the league's Birmingham Iron. She had her mom and the all-encompassing buoy of an extended family with 21 cousins within a few miles. She also figured she could use the distraction.

After a truncated tour of the area's top hospitals, Marissa found the perfect fit at Johns Hopkins, where her would-be doctor had recently published a paper on phyllodes tumors.

On Jan. 31, she underwent successful surgery. Hours later and still in the loopy post-operation haze, she was on the phone with Michael. Everything went well and she was feeling good. Did he want to FaceTime? No? Why not? Oh, you're going to play video games with your teammates? So can we FaceTime now before you go? Where are you anyway? Hold on, let me check your location. Wait a second, are you at the airport? Why are you at the airport?

Michael, of course, was flying in to surprise her. He just underestimated her abilities as an investigator.

It's trite to say the months that followed were difficult. To say nothing of the emotional toll, her body was healing. Marissa was tethered to drips on both sides of her body. Her chest was sore and her body weak. During the surgery, expanders were inserted to prepare her body for the reconstructive surgeries that would follow. That meant that every day she dealt with the pain of her skin expanding. She had her mom by her side at every turn serving as a de facto nurse and her extended family providing emotional support, more nursing help and lots and lots of meals.



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Marissa gets emotional when talking about that time because of what everyone around her went through. She talks about the burden her mom carried throughout the ordeal and how hard it must have been for Michael to feel so helpless from a distance.

But Marissa was right. The AAF was a nice distraction.

“I remember your first game,” Marissa says. “I still had drains in me. I barely could do anything. We all were watching —”

“I wasn’t even starting.”

“Yeah, he didn’t start.”

Before that game, Dunn told Marissa he was going to quit if he didn’t play. The whole point was to catch the attention of an NFL team, and that wasn’t going to happen from the bench. He ended up replacing an injured player midway through the first game, then started every subsequent game while shifting across different positions and showcasing the coveted versatility needed for a backup offensive lineman.

He and Marissa found ways to stay connected from a distance. Sometimes, that meant Marissa sending Michael sudoku for him to print out so they could race to see who could finish first. It also meant long film sessions. Dunn is obsessive about re-watching his performance, but there were no tablets for players in the AAF like there are in the NFL. Instead, Marissa would DVR the games so Michael could later watch over FaceTime while asking her to pause. Stop there. Rewind. A little further.

In late March, Marissa was cleared to travel. Nervous and still very weak, she checked her bags so there was nothing to carry onto the plane. She made it to Birmingham excited to see Michael and watch him play in person for the first time in a while. A day or two after the game, Michael booked Marissa a massage. Within that hour of relaxation, the league folded.

“I was honestly happy,” she says, “because he got what he wanted out of this with film, playing multiple positions.”

Back at his second home in New Jersey, Dunn could now accompany Marissa and her mom on Marissa’s follow-up visits to Johns Hopkins. A few days after the AAF shut down, the three of them were in the parking lot outside the hospital when Dunn got a text from Flaherty, his former position coach with the Jaguars who was now with the Miami Dolphins.

Michael had a new job.

Year 3 didn’t turn out to be special. A few days into Dolphins training camp, Flaherty was fired, leaving Dunn without his most vocal supporter in the organization. He was released during roster cutdowns and, this time, there was no practice squad.



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Miami was nice though. And because Marissa's new job with The Athletic allowed her to work from anywhere, they posted up in Florida for a couple of months. Once again, it looked like the NFL was probably finished with Dunn. But no one was worried about the future.

"My perspective on a lot of this stuff changed," Marissa says, her voice cracking. "I wasn't as much 'What's next?' With everything we went through, I was like, 'It'll figure itself out.' I went from being a super-planner to, 'There's more important things than football.'"

Enter the XFL. At first, Dunn scoffed at the idea of playing in another upstart league. He was even less enthusiastic when the Seattle Dragons selected him in the sixth round of the league's draft ... for offensive linemen. Eventually, he relented and quickly won a starting job. After five games, one of Dunn's teammates tested positive for COVID-19 and the league halted operations. A slew of XFL players quickly signed with NFL teams that spring, but no one called Dunn.

He prepared for the inevitable. An econ major and three-time all-academic Big Ten member at Maryland, he took online classes and earned a certificate in business management. The house in New Jersey was a typical quarantine scene. In the garage, there was Michael working out in what he had refashioned into a personal gym. Marissa's stepfather was on the phone in his basement office running his printing business. Murray was in the dining room conducting remote gym class with her elementary school students in her 38th year as a teacher. And on the second floor, Marissa was planning, recording, editing and uploading about 25 podcasts a week.

Because of the pandemic, the NFL trimmed offseason roster sizes from 90 to 80, eliminating 320 jobs from players like Dunn. For the first time, he couldn't picture an NFL future.

"The toughest part was ... not really being able to accomplish anything I wanted to accomplish," Dunn says. "I knew for the rest of time it would be awkward to talk about. People would be like, 'Oh, you played football?' And they'd be like, 'Were you in the NFL?' and I'd be like, 'I don't know.' Like, I don't know. She always said yes. My mindset was just different."

"He had his goals," Marissa says.

"I had my goals. My goal was never to start in a playoff game. It was to just feel a part of a team for one year basically."

In August, he took his final shot. Dunn asked Flaherty, who lived nearby, to put him through a filmed workout. At the local Pop Warner field, Marissa recorded the whole thing on her phone. When it was over, Dunn thanked Flaherty for all his support through the years and returned to his car, where he had three missed calls. After four of their offensive linemen opted out of the season, the Cleveland Browns were bringing Dunn in. He never had to send anyone the video.

The league's rules for the 2020 season ended up working in Dunn's favor. For one, the quarantine period for new players disincentivized teams from bringing in free agents for workouts to replace players already in the building. Plus, the expansion of practice-squad rosters to 16 helped keep Dunn's spot relatively secure. Finally, he was part of a team.



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He still chose to rent month-to-month on the furnished two-bedroom apartment.

Inside were the makings of a pandemic sitcom. Marissa was not allowed to use the shower when Michael was on Zoom for a team meeting, lest the sound of the water running come through if he was called on. He wasn't allowed in the kitchen when she was recording an episode. She quizzed him about game plans. He lurked in the YouTube comments of her live broadcasts. This time, the apartment complex wouldn't let Michael replace the bed and the queen size was too small for both of them. So they pushed the single bed next to the queen-size bed to give them both enough room.

“(We’ve been together five years) and I’m in a sleepover,” Marissa says laughing.

Very few of Marissa’s coworkers knew about her proximity to the NFL orbit. For one, she is vigilant about not blurring any journalistic lines. She wanted the writers who cover the Browns to be able to say whatever they wanted about Dunn or the offensive line without taking her into account. There is also the ubiquitous burden of being a female in sports.

“It’s hard being a woman in this business,” she says. “We met in college. A lot of people meet their spouse or significant other in college. I never wanted it to be like, ‘Oh, she’s just dating a football player.’ ... You’re judged on so many things.”

“I always love how she says, ‘I never wanted to be judged by my relationship,’” says Dunn. “And I’m like, ‘Your relationship with a camp body offensive lineman?’”

Football-wise, the Browns were having their best season in decades. On Nov. 15, Dunn played in his first regular-season game as one of the players temporarily elevated from the practice squad. In typical roller-coaster fashion, he, Marissa and his parents had to wait out a rare weather delay before kickoff. After the game, a 10-7 win in which Dunn played two snaps on special teams, Marissa, drenched from the rain, raced home to get back to the apartment in time to produce the Browns postgame podcast.

Dunn was elevated for three more games over the next few weeks and even played an offensive snap in a jumbo set against the Jets. Then, on Dec. 23, Dunn achieved another long-awaited first. After four years, six teams and three leagues, he was finally signed to an active NFL roster.

“It’s amazing to see the person you love and care about follow their dreams through so much adversity and achieve them,” Marissa says. “So many people would have quit, so many people would have been done. He believed in himself.”

The Browns secured their first playoff appearance in 18 years in the regular-season finale with a win over the Steelers, who rested most of their starters. The excitement in Cleveland was quelled the next day when head coach Kevin Stefanski and left guard Joel Bitonio were among the players and coaches on the team to test positive for COVID-19.

From 2017 to 2020, the same four-year span during which Dunn was toiling on the outskirts of NFL relevance, Bitonio played every single offensive snap. Dunn was crushed for his teammate and concerned for Bitonio’s young children at home.



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Then, as Michael and Marissa processed the news in their split bed, it dawned on him. “If Joel’s out, I think I’m gonna start.”

“Are you serious?” she asked.

For his part, Dunn’s level of preparation was no different. But he did have to get creative without access to the facility. In stepped Marissa to bark out mock cadences in the apartment’s parking lot so he could work on his pass sets. His nerves were calm until Saturday night, when the team arrived at its hotel in Pittsburgh.

“All of a sudden it hit me,” he remembers. “Oh my gosh, what is about to happen?”

Before the game, Dunn sat in his locker with his head in his hands. On the sidelines, he couldn’t bear to watch the Steelers’ opening possession. He perked up as his teammates went crazy when the Browns defense scored a touchdown on the game’s first play from scrimmage. The rest of the game was the kind of fever dream required to deliver a franchise’s first playoff win in 27 years.

Dunn didn’t just hold his own in the first start of his NFL career. He dominated.

“I think (the Steelers) really feel like they can take advantage of the left guard Michael Dunn replacing Joel Bitonio,” Cris Collinsworth said on the broadcast after an early 17-yard Nick Chubb burst, “and yet (the Browns) go right over Michael Dunn with that run.”

Chubb ran for 21 yards on the next play thanks to Dunn’s seal. The drive was punctuated by an 11-yard Kareem Hunt touchdown run during which Dunn blocked Steelers All-Pro defensive end Cameron Heyward to the ground. In the third quarter, the broadcast showed a full highlight package of his standout performance. Then he helped pave the way for a 40-yard Chubb touchdown on a screen pass that salted the game away.

Attendance that night was limited to family and friends — each player was given a two-ticket allotment (much to the chagrin of Michael’s dad, who purchased a big block of tickets before the state of Pennsylvania limited the attendance guidelines midweek). Marissa was covered by a teammate’s tickets so Michael’s father and sister could attend too.

As ever, Dunn’s ascension meant the roller coaster was due for a dip, which happened when he strained his calf in the fourth quarter. The injury knocked him out of the game and landed him on injured reserve. But there was no killing the mood this time around. Dunn figures he rewatched the game about three times a day the following week. He allowed one single pressure on 33 snaps in pass protection and graded out as the team’s top offensive lineman on the night.

“I almost think of it as that’s a wrap for that whole four-year journey, four-year story,” Dunn says. “It ended with that playoff game. And now let’s get into the next book.”

In February, Michael finally pulled one over on Marissa. It wasn’t easy.



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In order to get her to come along for the ride to Maryland, Michael asked his friend in the athletic department to send him a text about a non-existent recruiting event. He knew she'd do anything for the program that brought them together.

"I knew that at some point she would sneakily look at my phone," says Michael.

"Which I did! Who doesn't?"

"So I knew I needed some kind of proof," Michael says.

When they arrived on campus that Saturday morning, Marissa thought he parked in an odd place.

"The entire walk, she's like, 'Where are we going? Where are we going?' I just wasn't answering," he says. "I'm like, we both know what's going on right now."

When they arrived at the right spot, Michael dropped to a knee in full view of the photographer he arranged to capture the moment. Too overcome with nerves to remember the words he planned, he got right to the point. Would she marry him? Of course she would.

This summer, there were two major projects. The first, wedding planning. The big day is Feb. 26, 2022, 13 days after Super Bowl LVI. The second was snapping, because Dunn's offensive line coach thinks center might be his best position. Through the first week of Browns camp, Dunn has cross-trained at guard and center. He's still competing for a roster spot, but this time it looks like he has the inside track. Then again, some of the offensive linemen who opted out last season are back. Nothing in this league comes easy.

"That Steelers game was so incredible," he says, "and I'm so honored to have been a part of that, but after just a couple weeks of it, I was like, 'OK that was fun, now let's make the 53-man roster at the start of the season.'"

Marissa, who was recently declared cancer-free at her 2 1/2-year checkpoint, recognizes how far they've come and how hard Michael has worked. She also emphasizes how fortunate he is to have been able to afford to chase his dream. It's humbling to think of all the talented players who aren't able to ride it out until they get the chance they deserve. That's why she's still riding the high of that Sunday night in Pittsburgh.

"It was beyond proud," she says. "So many emotions all in one. So many downfalls and setbacks. For him to be on that field and finally doing what he was doing, proving to everybody throughout his career that didn't necessarily believe in him and didn't think that he had what it takes to play in that league on that highest level was just unbelievable.

"What, now I'm talking too much?" she says, looking back at her fiancé.

"No no. I love the passion."



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Browns guard Wyatt Teller loves the process and it's getting results

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/08/browns-guard-wyatt-teller-loves-the-process-and-its-getting-results.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- In the aftermath of the Browns' divisional round loss to the Chiefs in January, NFL Films tweeted a clip of Kansas City safety Tyrann Mathieu taking on Browns right guard Wyatt Teller on a blitz.

It didn't go well for Mathieu. The Chiefs got a tackle for loss on the play, but Mathieu, who ended the play on the ground with Teller on top of him, walked back to the defensive huddle and said to his teammates, "77 just put me on my ass!"

Get in line. It was one last bone-crushing block from a breakout season for Teller that included lots of videos of him putting defenders in similar positions.

"They won," Teller said in an interview with cleveland.com on Wednesday when the Mathieu clip was mentioned. "So it's like, obviously, you can enjoy it a little bit more when you win. So it's a bittersweet feeling."

Teller isn't on social media, so he's not always aware when something he did is going viral, at least not right away, like the Mathieu video, which currently has 1.7 million views on Twitter.

"You don't notice it," he said of the moments when he has caught the attention of the NFL social media world.

But he does hear about it when he makes those waves. Like when a video was posted of him carrying an alligator on his shoulders. He didn't know it was going viral until he started getting texts about it.

"All of a sudden, you have people texting you like, 'Oh my gosh, that gator picture,'" Teller said. "You're like, 'How the heck did you see that gator pic?'"

Sometimes his wife, Carly -- the two were married in April -- will tell him about something she sees on social media or gets from a Google alert she has set up for him.

Other than that, Teller is focused on there here and now and not so much the noise around him.

He's entering his fourth season in the league and his second as a full-time starter. The Browns acquired him from Buffalo a few hours before their preseason finale in 2019 along with a 2021 seventh-round pick, giving back fifth and sixth round picks in exchange.

After starting seven games as a rookie for Buffalo, he started nine games for the Browns in his first season with the team. In what was supposed to be one of the more prominent training camp battles in 2020, Teller quietly and efficiently won the job and started 11 games last season -- he missed



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three games with a calf injury and two more games with an ankle injury -- landing on Pro Football Focus' first-team All-Pro list and second-team All-Pro by the Associated Press.

This is an important year for Teller, who is a free agent for the first time after the season. It's also the first time he's had a real offseason with a team and the first time he's had a clearly defined role.

He knows just because he had a good year last year, full of those Twitter-worthy clips, there's no time to bask in his accomplishments.

"You see good things, you do a lot of good things, and it's something to build on," he said. "But it's not something to hang your hat on."

Process over result

There's another play from the Chiefs game Teller remembers. It was his last one of the season, a 2-yard completion on 3rd-and-11 from Baker Mayfield to Kareem Hunt. The Browns punted and never saw the ball again.

Chris Jones was credited with a hit on Mayfield, and he got by Teller to get it.

"Chris Jones was better than me that day, right?" Teller said. "And now it's my mindset to be like, 'Alright, if that's what he was doing, if I was stapling him in his chest and he was lifting my hands, that's not gonna happen again.'"

Teller wants to measure himself against the best. He knows if he wants to get to the next level, it's about doing it against players like Jones.

"He's one of the best in the league," Teller said. "That's where it's like, 'Alright, that's the guy that I've got to beat.' That's the mindset of, 'Alright, this guy's talented, but so am I.'"

He remembers a play against Steelers linebacker T.J. Watt, too.

"T.J. came right under my pads and got me down and threw me to the ground and was talking smack," Teller said, "and I was just like, yeah, that's not gonna happen again."

Talking to Teller about his season a year ago makes it clear it's about process, not results for the 26-year-old fifth round pick out of Virginia Tech.

"Every coach has jargon and every coach that I've grown up with is, 'Hey, work, work, work,'" Teller said. "And it's not until you get older that you realize that the work is an equalizer."

Teller, who started out as a defensive lineman in college, knows it's not easy to match the athleticism many defensive linemen bring. He said there's a reason he doesn't play on that side of the ball anymore.

"If we were as fast or as strong as them," he said, "we'd be playing defensive line, too."



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So, like his head coach Kevin Stefanski preaches, it's about the work for Teller. He doesn't need to look far for motivation, either -- just to his left, in fact.

"If I see (left guard) Joel (Bitonio) and (center) JC (Tretter) working that hard, I have to do more, right?" Teller said. "They're (eight, nine) years in, it's like, OK, if that's what they're doing, what were they doing at year 2, year 3, year 4 that really put them ahead to get them where they are today?"

It was last year when he truly started to understand the process. It's not coincidental it came when Bill Callahan took over as his offensive line coach. Callahan liked Teller in Washington -- he was almost drafted there -- and Teller's agent was working to get Teller a chance to work with Callahan before the Browns hired him.

"First meetings we had (with Callahan) were on how to be a pro," Teller said, "not technique or fundamentals, how to be a pro. Outwork your competition, all these different things that really come into where my mindset was, but also like, wow, that's what I need."

Callahan helped Teller understand he needed to embrace what he was good at. If you're a big, strong guy with long arms, get on the defender and win at the line, don't sit back. Use your physical gifts.

Callahan wants Teller to be not just a mauler, but a technical mauler. It's about making a defender not just worry about what's happening behind the line of scrimmage but what's happening on it.

"You're worried about the backfield, but you're also worried about that right guard coming to rip your face off," Teller said. "It's like, now I gotta worry about that jerk at right guard."

The first nail on the wall

Teller finally got to meet Joe Thomas in person. He was unable to last year because of COVID protocols. The future Hall-of-Fame left tackle has been in Berea this week performing his NFL Network duties.

Teller described himself as "almost fan girl" when meeting Thomas, interrupting a conversation the Browns legend was having with his former teammate, Joel Bitonio.

"I came up, I said, 'Hey, Joe, nice to meet you.' 'Hey, Wyatt, nice to meet you, too.' He's a wealth of knowledge," Teller said. "He's an awesome guy. He's funny. He's got a good sense of humor. He's a good guy to be around."

Thomas spent his entire career in Cleveland, something Teller wouldn't mind doing.

"Your mindset is you want to stay," he said. "I don't want to leave. I love my house. I love the city. I love the community. But that's the business side."



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He's very familiar with the business side. He remembers Bills head coach Sean McDermott texting him after he was traded to check in and make sure he was doing OK. That's the personal side.

It was the business side, however, that sent him three hours west just before the start of his second season and gave him the opportunity he has now.

He leaves that side up to his agent, but he understands everything pending free agency brings.

"This is a year that I could change my family's outcome forever," he said.

He hopes he changes it in Cleveland. He also understands there's only so much money.

"We have a great team, and that's not a bad problem to have," he said. "Oh, my gosh, we have five guys that we have to sign. That's a good thing."

Because, while the future might be unclear, in the moment, the Browns are running it back on offense and Teller sees all the things that went into making his year great and appreciates he still has it.

"I had a great (right) tackle. I had one of the smartest centers I've ever seen in my entire life," he said. "Our backfield is crazy. Our quarterback is one of the best move-the-pocket (guys) I've ever seen in my entire life. We have some of the best receivers who can get open. I mean, we are blessed. I'm blessed to have that opportunity."

And like any offensive lineman, he knows his job is to help everybody else.

"The mindset is, look, I'm gonna do so well that it's gonna make Nick look better. It's gonna make Baker look better. It's gonna make everybody look better and then we're all gonna get paid," he said. "If it's here, we all dream for that."

What he's been told by older veterans is not to think about the contract. He can't control it.

What he can control is his effort and where he can get better. His consistency; his pad level sometimes gets a little high; his work in the passing game. Even in the run game, where he excelled, there might have been seven out of ten plays where he did everything right, but what about those other three plays?

"Sometimes you can't control who you're going against. (Defenders) are paid too," he said. "So it's like, 'Alright, I'm gonna outwork that guy right now. Even though he's more talented, I'm gonna get in his face, I'm gonna stay on his body. I'm gonna do whatever it takes to legally get it done.'"

For Teller, it's about process, not just result, whether it's what happens on the field in 2021 or what happens after the season. The last 365 days have changed things for him on all fronts. His profile in the league has risen. He got married. He found what he hopes will be his home for a long time.



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“These are the kinds of times that, you’re an old man, you have kids running around the house, and you’re like, you know, those were the days,” he said.

Save those moments for another time, though.

“If you look at the future, it’s not a bad thing,” he said, “but you want to focus in the present.”

Right now, it’s about building on the moments like the one NFL Films captured, when one of the game’s best safeties couldn’t help but notice him -- building on those moments, not simply being satisfied with them.

“It’s not something to hang your hat on,” he said, “but it’s the first nail on the wall. That’s a good play. It’s a good part of my career. But that’s all it is. It’s a part of the career. It’s not your career.”



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Kevin Stefanski explains why he's grateful the Browns passed on him the first time around in 2019

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/02/kevin-stefanski-explains-why-hes-grateful-the-browns-hired-freddie-kitchens-over-him-in-2019.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Kevin Stefanski was disappointed when the Browns hired Freddie Kitchens instead of him in 2019, but now he counts it as one of his life's greatest blessings.

Not only did he have a chance to call plays for a full season for the first time -- and two playoff games -- he also got to spend the year in Minnesota working alongside one of the greatest offensive minds in football in longtime NFL coach Gary Kubiak, who was brought in that year as Mike Zimmer's assistant head coach and offensive advisor.

Stefanski, a leading candidate for 2020 AP NFL Coach of the Year which will be announced on Saturday night, already had an all-star lineup of mentors in his Vikings career, from head coaches such as Zimmer, Leslie Frazier and Brad Childress — who gave him his start and brought him along -- to coordinators such as Norv Turner and Pat Shurmur.

But spending that lone season with Kubiak, who has four Super Bowl rings as a coach including two as an offensive coordinator, helped catapult Stefanski to his 11-5 season with the Browns in his rookie year, as well as the club's first playoff berth in 18 years, where they beat the Steelers in the wild card round and then lost to the defending Super Bowl champion Chiefs in the AFC divisional round.

Before Zimmer gave his young offensive coordinator the gift of Kubiak, he had only three games' experience as an interim coordinator and playcaller at the end of the 2018 season when he was pressed into service for the fired John DeFilippo. If the Browns had hired him instead of Kitchens in 2019, the learning curve on gameday would have been steep.

"Not many people are lucky enough to have a setup like that," Stefanski told cleveland.com. "It was such a valuable year for me to grow. I'm thrilled that I was able to have that opportunity under coach Zim, with Coach Kub. It really made me better."

Stefanski, 38, already knew Kubiak from his son Klint Kubiak, the Vikings quarterbacks coach who was an entry-level assistant in Minnesota in 2013. Stefanski was assistant QB coach. Klint and Stefanski became fast friends because of their shared experiences.

"He was a much better safety than me (at Colorado State)," Stefanski, who played at Penn. "We both went to Jesuit high schools, both ended up coaching offensive ball. I have three brothers and the Kubiaks are three boys, so it really is a similar upbringing. I knew what [Gary] was about because I knew what Klint was about, and the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Likewise, Kubiak, who won a Super Bowl as head coach of the Broncos, had already come to know and admire Stefanski before he worked with him in 2019.



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"I was a fan of his for a few years," Kubiak told cleveland.com. "Even when I stepped away from being a head coach, I used to keep notebooks on young coaches and what they were doing. And I knew a lot about him as a coach and a teacher, so I had a lot of good vibes about what he was going to become."

One of the first things that impressed Kubiak about Stefanski was the way he went about blending the existing Vikings staff with the four new assistants Kubiak brought with him, including Klint as QB coach.

"Most guys in that situation would say 'OK, here's how we're going to do it,'" Kubiak recalled. "But five of us were new and Kevin said 'Let's go with what you all have been comfortable with. I'm fine. I can adjust.' He's so bright, he was the one that kind of gave to some of my verbiage so we could all catch up very quickly."

Stefanski, who revered Kubiak, also did that out of respect for the 10-year head coaching veteran, eight with the Texans and two with the Broncos, where he won Super Bowl 50 over the Panthers in the 2015 season.

"I felt it was the best way to maximize his impact both on me and on the offense," Stefanski said. "And then on top of that, just his experience as an offensive mind, specifically as it relates to the play-action game was something that I wanted to learn from him, and mine him for everything he was worth."

Kubiak, who retired from the NFL last month after replacing Stefanski as Vikings offensive coordinator in 2020, remembers the transition to working with him was easy "because we had both grown up in the West Coast system. I came in with a group of guys that I'd been coaching with forever, but Kevin and I were speaking the same language within a week."

Stefanski soaked up as much knowledge as he could of Kubiak's offense, specifically nuances of the play-action game and the wide-zone scheme that he's known for. A disciple of Mike Shanahan, Kubiak runs the version of the West Coast scheme — complete with plenty of bootlegs or "keepers" — that he and Shanahan passed down to others such as 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan, Packers coach Matt LaFleur and others.

The scheme has been wildly successful and has produced not only a long line of great quarterbacks, but also AP NFL Coaches of the Year such as the Rams' Sean McVay, a Mike Shanahan disciple who won it in his first season with the Rams in 2017 at the age of 32.

"For years, that scheme has been very hard on defenses, when you talk about defending the run game and the play-action game," Stefanski said. "And I had never been in that scheme specifically. I've been in other ones, and I had my own thoughts about the run game and play-action game, but to be able to be exposed to coach Kub and the different nuance that he had into those plays was incredible for me."

The devil, he said, is in the details, and "that's where I think coach Kub's impact on me, was huge."



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The impact on Baker Mayfield has been enormous too. Once Stefanski learned Mayfield and vice versa, Mayfield took off in the scheme, throwing 20 touchdown passes and only two interceptions over his final 12 games after that pick on the first play of the 37-34 victory over the Bengals on Oct. 25. Over his last nine regular-season games, he was one of the hottest quarterbacks in the NFL, ranking even higher statistically than reigning Super Bowl MVP Patrick Mahomes.

“To Baker’s credit, we asked him to do so many things he hadn’t done before,” Stefanski said. “He worked his butt off at it and he just kept getting better and better. He was a sponge when it came to giving him different techniques and different types of plays. And there’s so much more there. We have a ton of room to grow both with Bake, but also specifically with the offense.”

Kubiak, who talked to Stefanski each week throughout the season, marveled at Mayfield’s transformation.

“What what you saw was how well he knew his quarterback by the end of the season,” Kubiak said. “To watch that kid probably play his best football of his career the last six weeks of the season, just tells you how much Kevin learned about him and put him in the right situations as time went on.”

Another key, Stefanski said, is matching up the multi-faceted system -- which marries the run and the pass and blurs the lines between the two pre-snap -- with your personnel. There were things he could do here that he didn’t with the Vikings, and vice versa.

“It’s something you saw with us in the Browns this year, with some of the guard pull gap-scheme runs, where we had the guys to do it,” Stefanski said. “And I think that’s where coach [Bill] Callahan’s influence comes in, so if you’re if you’re worth your salt, you’re trying to both maximize what your coaches can bring to the table, while also maximizing what your players do best.”

With the Vikings, Stefanski called plays from the sideline while Kubiak helped from upstairs. The result during that 10-6 season was an offense that finished No. 8 in the NFL with 25.4 points per game, and sixth in rushing. Kirk Cousins finished No. 4 in the NFL with a 107.4 passer rating, throwing 26 touchdowns against only six interceptions, which are typical numbers for the QBs in the system.

“[Kubiak] was awesome,” Stefanski said. “He was the eye in the sky, and he really helped in between series with what he was seeing. He’s called so many big games and he’s called the plays and won a Super Bowl. When you’re on field level, you’d better have a very trusted lieutenant up there, and Gary was more overqualified than you could ever imagine to do that.”

Kubiak, who won two of his Super Bowl rings as offensive coordinator of the Broncos, relished the mentor role.

“Kevin had zero ego,” Kubiak said. “He’d ask, ‘What do you think here or there,’ but he had to go make decisions and my job was to be there and support him and help in any way I possibly could. He was ‘help me out, feed me, talk to me’ — with all coaches not just me. He’s a great listener all great leaders are usually great listeners.”



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Kubiak recalled the turning point of the 2019 season after Week 4 when the Vikings got beat 16-6 by the Bears to fall to 2-2.

“We got our butts kicked really good,” Kubiak said. “Chicago had a top defense that year and they really got after us. When I watched Kevin walk in the meeting on Monday with the players, and how he went about the defeat and talking to them, getting his teaching points across and getting them to move on to the next week, that’s when I witnessed something that was very impressive.”

The Vikings went on to win their next four games, just like the Browns did after they got blown out 38-6 by the Ravens in the opener. Like the Vikings, the Browns overcame the crushing defeat to make the playoffs, and advance to the Divisional round.

“In our league, everybody’s a hell of a coach when things are good,” Kubiak said. “It’s the people that get their players over disappointment and responding to adversity that are really successful in the NFL.”

Early on in that first year together in Minnesota, Kubiak told general manager Rick Spielman and Zimmerman of Stefanski “‘this kid’s special.’ In their mind, I had only been around him a short period of time, but I felt I knew him a lot better than that.

“I could just tell. I’ve been around some of these great coaches like Kyle [Shanahan] and Matt [LaFleur] and Robert [Saleh] who got a head job now [with the Jets] and when I was around this young man, it was just very obvious he was going to be very successful.”

Kubiak’s notes on Stefanski were highlighted by his path to the head coaching chair.

“What struck me was the way he came through an organization,” he said. “He started as an assistant to a head coach [Childress]. Then he became a quality control coach, a running backs, a tight ends coach, a quarterback coach, a coordinator. And yet his dad [Ed Stefanski] is a GM in pro basketball, so Kevin has seen it all.

“You can tell he’s done his homework along the way, and he’s taken advantage of all the good people he’s been around.”

Kubiak, 82-75 as a head coach and 5-2 in the playoffs, couldn’t have imagined being a rookie head coach in this COVID-19-marred season.

“We talk about that all the time,” Kubiak. “The fact that he did all of that with that organization through the COVID issues is remarkable. He put together a tremendous staff, and getting a guy like [offensive line coach] Bill Callahan was really important. For him to put it all together so quickly under such extreme adversity tells you a lot about him as a leader.”

The icing on the cake, Kubiak said, was that the team was able to go into Pittsburgh and beat the Steelers 48-37 in the wild card game with Stefanski stuck in his basement with COVID-19.



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"His leadership was on display that day," Kubiak said. "To go play a playoff game without your head coach, I think we can all honestly say that may never happen again.

"But the way they went in there and played was just a tremendous reflection on Kevin and the job he did."

Kubiak talked to Stefanski the day he was placed on the COVID-19 list and every day leading up the Steelers game.

"I know how hard it was on Kevin, but he never once complained," Kubiak said. "As a matter of fact, I can remember his exact words to me when we talked the Saturday before the game. I said 'Everything's going to be all right' and he said 'Kub, I'm good. The good Lord's been great to me and they're ready to go and they've worked their tails off.' He was so positive and they played exactly the way he talked."

One of the biggest things Stefanski learned from that season was how to bring a staff from varying backgrounds together and make sure everyone is heard.

"It's one of the things I'm most proud of with our coaches here at the Browns is how people are able to collaborate and operate ego-free," he said. "We just get a lot of things done when you do it that way."

By the same token, Stefanski has passed along to his Browns assistant coaches just how much it helped him to learn from Kubiak in 2019.

"We have to take a major step in professional development — all of us — and the coaches have heard me say it already," he said. "We're going to find ways to do that because if you're staying stagnant and if you're not getting better you're doing a disservice to your players."

Kubiak was also struck by how well-rounded Stefanski was in every aspect of his life.

"He's got a beautiful family," Kubiak said. "His kids are mini-me and his wife's awesome. He's got his stuff together. Football is something he's really good at, but what he's really special at in my opinion is leadership, and that's something you can't teach.

"It's something that you have that air about you that just exudes people want to follow you. People believe in what you're doing and they want to be on your side because they have so much confidence in your ability to lead a group and that's how he comes across. Kevin has a tremendous ability to be very demanding but very composed, and it's really hard to find those two ingredients."

Even now, it's as if Kubiak is still in Stefanski's headset.

"I'll watch a play and I can hear Gary talking about what was great about the play what he didn't like about that play," Stefanski said. "We'll run certain plays that I know are right up Gary's alley and then we're running other ones that I know he's probably going to give me a call and say 'Hey, what were you doing here?' So he's always front of mind for me."



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Kubiak, as humble as Stefanski is, appreciates Stefanski's kind words, but "whatever he got out of being with me, I got just as much from him, I can promise you that," he said.

Stefanski has already NFL Coach of the Year from the Pro Football Writers of America and The Sporting News, and could have his name called again Saturday night for the most prestigious AP award.

"It's a group effort all the way," Stefanski said. "I've been blessed to have so many great mentors. I stayed in one spot and so many great people came in and out of my life. I also hope that I continue to have an evolution based on the coaching staff we have here, and I'll continually strive to be better."

Kubiak, for one, hopes the AP NFL Coach of the Year Award goes to Stefanski on Saturday night.

"I look at the way they go out," Kubiak, who retired to his ranch in Texas, said. "They went in there and beat the Steelers and were right there with the Chiefs (a 22-17 loss in the AFC Divisional round) until the final whistle. For him to accomplish what he did in such a short amount of time under such extreme adversity, the award is well-deserved."

Stefanski knows he might not be up for such an honor if not for that pivotal, career-changing season he spent with Kubiak.

"You can measure experiences in time, or you can measure them in impact," Stefanski said. "And that was an extremely impactful period of time."



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Anthony Walker finds “perfect fit” in Cleveland as he tries to accomplish goal of winning Super Bowl

By Scott Petrak, brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2021/03/22/anthony-walker-finds-perfect-fit-in-cleveland-as-he-tries-to-accomplish-goal-of-winning-super-bowl/>

Just one look.

That’s all it took for middle linebacker Anthony Walker to be convinced the Browns were the right choice for him. He visited Browns headquarters Thursday and signed a one-year, \$3.5 million deal Friday.

“I took one visit in college to Northwestern University and I committed right away and I was kind of locked in on doing the same thing in Cleveland,” he said Monday on a Zoom call. “Take one visit and you will know if it is the right fit or not right away and I thought it was the perfect fit, honestly.”

Walker, 25, has plenty of reasons for believing Cleveland is ideal for him, starting with the potential for greatness.

“We play this game to win the biggest trophy in it and that is winning the Super Bowl,” he said. “That is my No. 1 goal. It will always be my No. 1 goal.

“The next part of that would be to help us become the No. 1 defense in the NFL and whatever that takes. Whatever happens after that, it is all gravy. I want to win and that is why Cleveland is the place I chose.”

Walker (6-foot-1, 230 pounds) was a fifth-round pick of the Colts in 2017 and started 46 games over the last three years. For his career, he has 343 tackles, 19 for loss, three interceptions, 11 passes defensed, 3.5 sacks, two fumble recoveries and a forced fumble.

The Browns beat the Colts 32-23 on Oct. 11, and Walker saw his new team “trending in the right direction.”

“You want to be a part of that,” he said. “Seeing them play last year, seeing the pieces they are adding this year, you know they are building something special.”

Quarterback Baker Mayfield is a huge piece of that. Walker said he told his teammates before the October meeting that Mayfield was legitimate, and his first note from film study was that Mayfield can make all the throws.

“One of my teammates texted me the other day and was like, ‘Oh, I see why you were defending Baker Mayfield in our locker room, because you wanted to go play for Cleveland,’” said Walker, who added Mayfield texted him right after he signed. “I told them before, Baker Mayfield impressed me in college. The way he played at Oklahoma, obviously he always had that chip on his shoulder being a walk-on, and nothing but much respect to him for that.”



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Walker said the only way to stop the “elite” Mayfield was to get to him quickly with the front four because of Cleveland’s “really crazy” talent at receiver and tight end.

“One of my close friends was like, ‘You’re going to play for the Warriors on offense,’” Walker said, referring to former NBA juggernaut Golden State.

General manager Andrew Berry spent the first week of free agency working to raise the defense to the level of the offense. He signed safety John Johnson III, end Takk McKinley, safety Troy Hill and Walker, re-signed linebacker Malcolm Smith and agreed to a deal with tackle Malik Jackson.

The new faces join All-Pro defensive end Myles Garrett and former Pro Bowl cornerback Denzel Ward.

“One thing I will always say is you have a guy that can get to the quarterback and a guy that can shut down half of the field,” Walker said. “That makes my job a lot easier. Just make sure nobody catches the ball over the middle and make sure I am at my gap with the run fits.

“Myles Garrett that can get to the quarterback in two seconds. Denzel Ward, who can lock down any side of the field, any receiver. Fortunate enough to be playing with those guys. This is special.”

Walker was the signal caller of the Colts defense and played 66, 79 and 68 percent of the snaps the last three seasons. He takes pride in and earned praise for his extensive film study.

“This is a guy that plays hard, plays fast, plays nasty,” coach Kevin Stefanski said last week when his signing was announced. “He can be a quarterback for the defense out there. Really intelligent, heady player.

“Just in spending some time with him, he loves diving into the X’s and O’s of this game.”

Walker’s impact on the Colts was much greater than what he did on the field, which was obvious in the reaction to him leaving. His former teammates were devastated.

“I know that I’m going to miss you, bro,” linebacker Darius Leonard said in a goodbye video. “I have to thank you for absolutely everything. I wouldn’t be who I am without you. You’re so smart on the field and off the field. It sucks that this thing called football is going to separate us.”

Walker appreciated the love.

“Definitely always great to have the respect of your peers and close friends,” he said. “Leaving Indy is not an easy thing to do. I built some great, lasting friendships over there with a lot of great people, especially with Darius Leonard, who played right next to me for three years. It is definitely bigger than football.”

Walker spent four years building a legacy with the Colts. On a one-year deal and with championship goals, he’ll have to quickly establish himself with the Browns.



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“You come in and you be yourself,” he said. “You do not try to be anything other than yourself. I am not really a rah-rah guy or anything like that. I come in every day with the same mentality to come in and get better with my teammates.

“I think that is the most important thing your peers respect, the way you come in and grind with them every day.



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Grant Delpit eager to 'give the fans what they want,' return to field with revamped Browns D **By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com**

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/grant-delpit-eager-to-give-the-fans-what-they-want-return-to-field-with-revamped>

Grant Delpit can't wait to stop waiting.

He's done quite a bit of that over the past year. First, he needed to wait to find out where he'd be drafted in the 2020 draft. Delpit, the 2019 Jim Thorpe Award winner and standout safety from LSU, went into the draft with first-round prospects, but he waited until Day 2, when the Browns called him to inform him he was coming to Cleveland.

But more patience was needed. Delpit tore his Achilles after the first week of training camp and never had a chance to officially start his rookie season. He wouldn't have a chance to make his NFL debut until 2021.

"The toughest part was just knowing that you work your whole life just to get somewhere, and then anything can happen off the wall and you're forced to sit back and watch," he said in an interview with Best Podcast Available. "That's the toughest part, but it's life, so it happens."

Delpit, however, can see the finish line for his rehab and the starting block for his first full NFL season. He said he's a few months away from returning to full health, which means he'll be in a good spot for training camp, where he'll look to prove himself as the same talented, versatile safety the Browns valued when they selected him 44th overall in 2020.

"I've put so many hours in the weight room," he said. "That's just part of life when you're playing in the league. I'm doing everything I can to get on the field."

When Delpit does return, he'll play around a few different and new faces that should help turn the Browns defense into one of the most improved units in 2021.

Starting with his own position group, Delpit is expected to play a key role with free-agent addition John Johnson III, who played every defensive snap with the Los Angeles Rams last season and brings an aggressive, fast-paced style to the secondary. Ronnie Harrison Jr., whom the Browns acquired via trade last season in the days after Delpit's injury, is a talented and young prospect, too.

All three safeties are capable of playing anywhere on the field, which should give opposing offenses plenty to think about when they digest the wide array of formations the Browns figure to have in their playbook.

"The depth is great," Delpit said. "Everybody wants to have depth, and everybody we have can play. We've got all the pieces. Now it's time to put it together and make it work."

The defense has been upgraded elsewhere around Delpit, too. Troy Hill, who built a career-best season with the Rams in 2020, has come to Cleveland and is poised to make an impact in the slot



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cornerback role. Anthony Walker will play a major role at linebacker, while Takkarist McKinley and Malik Jackson are new additions that could be candidates to start on the defensive line.

And now there's Jadeveon Clowney, one of the top free agents remaining who signed with the Browns on Wednesday. With Clowney and Myles Garrett — the only two edge rushers who have been drafted No. 1 overall in over a decade — the Browns' defense should provide plenty of stress to quarterbacks.

That makes life more fun for the secondary, too.

"I just thought to myself, 'Man, it's about to get scary,'" Delpit said. "Hopefully, we can all put it together as a whole defense."

There couldn't be much more for Delpit to look forward to when he's finally able to strap an orange helmet back on and return to the field. Among all the free-agent signings, Delpit's talents are one more thing Cleveland has to look forward to with a new-look defense in 2021.

For Delpit, the wait has been long, but he knows it'll be worth it.

"It's been a long time coming," he said, "but hopefully I can give the fans what they want, give myself what I want and what my family wants."



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Grant Delpit helps Houston mother replenish home following damages from winter storm

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/grant-delpit-helps-houston-mother-replenish-home-following-damages-from-winter-s>

Grant Delpit surveyed the damaged floors, ruined cabinets and busted walls inside the home of Jesecia Johnson in Houston, Texas, and had a flashback.

Johnson, a mother of two children, needed help to repair the destruction caused by a rare winter storm that hit Texas in February. The freezing temperatures and snow and ice accumulations burst multiple pipes in Johnson's home while the property was already without electrical power, and the leakage created flooding across her kitchen, bedrooms and bathroom.

For Delpit, the photos of the damages — and hearing the voice of Johnson as she told him her story — invoked the same feelings of shock he remembered when he was 6 years old.

That was when Hurricane Katrina in 2005 forced his family to evacuate their home in New Orleans, Louisiana, and move to Houston. Their house was ravaged by floods from the Category 5 storm, and he couldn't help but remember those feelings of grief as he viewed the damage to Johnson's home.

"It all definitely hit home a little bit," Delpit said. "I know what it's like to have your house torn up ... and to have your family uprooted from the world."

After hearing her story and seeing the photos of her house, Delpit felt the urgency to help Johnson and her family get their home back. He donated \$10,000 toward repairs, which helped Johnson restore their house with new carpet, cabinetry, walls and a fully renovated kitchen.

"I am so honored, so blessed and so grateful," Johnson said. "Grant is truly an angel from afar. It was a blessing to see the brightness in his eyes that made me see the light again at the end of the day."

Following the storm, Johnson's family continued to live in the house despite the structural damages — which included a caved-in kitchen ceiling, broken pipes in two bathrooms and flooding across nearly every room in the house — and stayed afloat with meals and other resources thanks to charitable members of the community.

Her insurance, however, wasn't able to provide full assistance to restore her house. She reached out to The Goldie Legacy, a nonprofit organization committed to mobilizing individuals to serve their communities, to seek any kind of financial help.

That's when Delpit stepped in.

When he heard about Johnson's story through the foundation, he wanted to act fast to get her back on her feet. He committed to the donation and made multiple visits to Johnson's house over the course of the repairs, which are now fully complete.



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Johnson had tears in her eyes and was overwhelmed with a sense of gratefulness when she heard Delpit was going to assist in covering a large chunk of the payment. Those emotions arose again when Delpit visited the house to see first-hand what impact he was making to her family.

"He's my little angel," Johnson said. "It was so unexpected to have him come in and put a seed into my life. There's no more worries. No more sleepless nights."

When the renovations began, Johnson's house was practically stripped to its foundation. Walls were torn down and furniture was removed, and Johnson's kitchen, which suffered the most damage, was set to be completely re-installed with a new sink and cooktops.

Now, after three months of being unable to cook for her kids, Kamaryn (17) and Kaden (14), Johnson can return to her normal motherly duties thanks to Delpit's financial aid.

Delpit, of course, has a free invitation to stop by for a meal.

"If he's in Houston again, he can call me up," Johnson said with a chuckle. "I don't mind doing that at all."

For Delpit, the feeling of knowing the comforts of Johnson's house have been restored provided loads of fulfillment. He didn't want Johnson to endure the same long-term level of trauma he remembers from his family when Hurricane Katrina displaced them, and as someone who called Houston his refuge after the storm, he didn't hesitate to give back to someone enduring a similar encounter in the community.

"It was cool to see it and cool to be a part of it," he said. "It definitely reminded me of our house, so it was just great to see her family's home get renovated and taken care of."



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John Johnson III's Boston College roommate, former St. Ignatius star Kevin Kavalec, pumped up Cleveland and knows he'll love it

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/03/john-johnson-iiis-boston-college-roommate-and-saint-ignatius-star-kevin-kavalec-sold-him-on-cleveland-and-knew-hed-love-it.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — For new Browns safety John Johnson III and his college roommate Kevin Kavalec, a former Saint Ignatius High School star, the first letters of their last names were just as important at Boston College as their varsity letters.

“We got paired up as roommates that first summer before our freshman year because it was alphabetical,” Kavalec told cleveland.com. “We were roommates for basically the next four years.”

Johnson, signed by the Browns last week to a three-year free agent contract worth \$33.75 million, vowed as a freshman that he'd make it to the NFL someday.

“He would literally lay in bed and watch highlight tapes of the great defensive backs,” said Kavalec, who was a starting defensive end for B.C. “This was back in 2013 when Patrick Peterson was king of the league, and he'd watch highlight tapes like that and he'd say ‘that's going to be me one day.’”

A native of Middleburg Heights and investment banking associate at Cleveland's KeyBanc Capital Markets, Kavalec never doubted Johnson.

“He was very serious about it, and he never let that get out of his head,” Kavalec said. “He just stuck to it and was committed to that and never wavered on his confidence or his ability to get to that level.”

Johnson kept the faith despite not becoming a regular starter until his junior year, making a freshman mark on special teams and then starting two games as a sophomore before an arm injury sidelined him for the final five regular-season games.

“He was a phenomenal player on special teams his first two years,” remembered Kavalec, who is sixth in Boston College history with 33 career tackles for a loss.

As juniors in 2015, the alliterative duo started together for a defense that finished No. 1 nationally with only 254.3 yards allowed, fifth in passing efficiency allowed (104.66). Johnson's three interceptions were seventh in the ACC. As seniors, their unit was top 10 in eight categories, including ninth in total defense (314.2 yards/game), second in sacks (3.62 sacks) and 10th in takeaways (27).

“I always knew he was behind me and I always felt comfortable that he was going to have the secondary right on every play,” Kavalec said. “That's a great feeling when you're playing defensive end, knowing that the secondary's in the right position. The best defenses I've played on are the ones where all 11 guys are kind of tied in, and believe in each other and have confidence in each other, and he does a great job of instilling that across the defense.”



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What's more, Johnson was always one of the most intelligent players on the field.

"He's a very, very smart football player," Kavalec, who led St. Ignatius to a Division I state title as a junior. "His football IQ is very high, probably one of the smarter players I ever played with. The Browns are very lucky to have him."

Kavalec said Johnson was also a natural captain at B.C.

"He's got a swagger about him and confidence that's kind of just contagious," he said. "He commands respect and instills confidence in the entire defense. He's serious, but he's an optimistic and he keeps practice light. You're going to get your work in, but you're going to have fun doing it. He's just a great guy to have on the field and in the locker room."

It didn't surprise Kavalec that Johnson was voted one of three captains of the Rams' top-ranked defense in 2020, along with Michael Brockers and three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year Aaron Donald.

"As a fourth-year guy in the league to be captain of that defense, there are some pretty big names on that defense, so that's a big deal to me," he said.

Johnson, whose upbeat personality was on display in his introductory Zoom conference Monday, was as much fun to live with as he was to play football with.

"There's never a dull moment with John," said Kavalec. "He's quite the entertainer. So it was a blast, honestly. We had a ton of fun in college. We had a pretty tight-knit group in our dorm. Even in our senior year at B.C. we had a six-man dorm. So it was me, John, [linebacker] Matt Milano -- who just got paid \$44 million by the Bills -- and a couple of other guys. We had a lot of fun together, whether playing [Nintendo 64] or just hanging out watching sports games -- it was a blast."

The Cleveland-centric dorm room also featured Solon High grad Drew Barksdale and Charlie Callinan, whose dad and uncle went to St. Ignatius, so Johnson was surrounded. He watched Kavalec and Barksdale live and die with Northeast Ohio's pro team, including the Browns' agonizing 1-15 season in 2016.

"He saw how passionate I was about Cleveland during our time in college," Kavalec said. "I think it was more subliminal messaging with me just always talking about Cleveland sports teams. We were seniors when the Indians made that run in the World Series, so he watched me going nuts. He has a pretty hilarious video of me after the Rajai Davis home run off of Aroldis Chapman in Game 7, so he definitely saw the passion.

"He knew this town really cared about their teams and I think that's fun to play for."

In the end, Kavalec was an unofficial ambassador for Destination Cleveland during his four years with Johnson, a native of Hyattsville, Maryland.



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“Boston was nice and all, but I always wanted to come back home,” said Kavalec, who lives in Ohio City. “It’s just kind of the thing when you’re from Cleveland, you love it here. It’s hard to get away from it. Honestly, I think it’s a great city. Everything you could want is kind of here, and the people are really friendly and welcoming.”

Kavalec traveled to Los Angeles in 2018 to watch the Rams beat the Packers, and was surprised by what he saw.

“More than half the stadium was Packers fans,” Kavalec said. “John’s not going to be having that in Cleveland. I think he’s going to get a real kick out of having 75,000 fans behind him and not against him.”

Johnson, now 25, will start at safety likely opposite 2020 second-round pick Grant Delpit. He was so excited to sign, he couldn’t wait to come to town last week and see it for himself.

“I just had to come here and make sure everything was real first,” he said with a laugh.

Kavalec picked him up and “gave him the quick 10-cent tour of Ohio City and the downtown area, showed him the quick groundwork of the city, kind of where things are and then we actually headed over to Blue Point [Grille] for dinner, and it was fantastic.”

While at dinner, a couple of customers welcomed Johnson to the city. By then, he had already endeared himself to the Dawg Pound with a woof at the end of his introductory video.

“I think he really enjoyed that,” Kavalec said. “It’s a perfect fit.”

Kavalec didn’t realize until a few days ago that Johnson turned down more money to sign with the Browns.

“He sees how close we were last year [to reaching the AFC Championship Game] and he’s really excited about the future of the team. It’s a young team with a lot of talent on it.”

There’s one moment Kavalec hopes he gets to see first-hand.

“That first game when he straps it on and runs out and sees the Dawg Pound and everything — if COVID’s kind of gone and the Dawg Pound’s full — that’s when it will really hit him and he’ll feel it. He’s going to love it here.”



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A father's tears: Cleveland Browns' Chris Hubbard uses injury as life lesson for 4-year-old son

By Marla Ridenour, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2021/08/10/browns-offensive-lineman-chris-hubbard-returns-dislocated-kneecap/5524598001/>

BEREA — Chris Hubbard does not want to mask his emotions the way his father did.

His son, Creed, came to Cleveland about seven weeks after Hubbard dislocated his kneecap. There were days when his comeback seemed too daunting, and the Browns offensive lineman allowed himself to break down in front of the 4-year-old.

“He knows. He’s been there. He’s watched me cry. He’s seen a lot of it,” Hubbard said.

A mental health advocate who turned to therapy when he and his wife, Tamara, struggled to conceive and now practices daily meditation, Hubbard didn’t hesitate to share what he wants to teach his child.

“I don’t hide anything from my son,” Hubbard said Saturday in a one-on-one interview with the Beacon Journal. “It’s part of life, it’s part of growth. It’s OK to be emotional and that’s one of the things I wanted to show him. I never saw that emotional side from my dad. I never saw my dad cry like that.

“To let him see me cry was probably a big step for me.”

Hubbard, 30, a University of Alabama-Birmingham product who has spent seven seasons in the NFL, had never undergone surgery. When he went down on the second offensive snap Dec. 20 against the New York Giants, he initially thought it was “a nick or something,” and believed he could get back up.

He couldn’t. When he walked to the X-ray room, his kneecap started slipping to the right.

“It was weird, I didn’t scream,” Hubbard said. “I was just like, ‘Doc, my kneecap’s moving.’ It was OK because it didn’t hurt.”

Hubbard considers it a blessing that he avoided ligament damage. During surgery on Dec. 23, he said the kneecap was put back into place and his quadriceps muscle was reattached.

His mother came from Columbus, Georgia, to care for him; he found a positive in that they were together for Christmas. Used to taking two or three showers a day, Hubbard lamented he wasn’t physically able to enjoy even one for quite some time.

While Tamara stayed at their home in Alpharetta, Georgia, Hubbard didn’t want to be separated from Creed.



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“I didn’t want to be too far from him because he’s one of the important things in my life,” Hubbard said.

Speaking publicly for the first time since his injury, Hubbard acknowledged the emotional roller coaster he’s experienced over the past seven months.

“It was a ride,” he said.

Asked whether his tears came from the physical or mental challenges of his rehab, Hubbard said, “I think so much of the mental strain of getting back to where I want to be, that was a part of it. It’s emotional because, ‘Man, I’m not the same.’

“You have to get stronger and it takes time and sometimes I can be impatient. That’s one of the things that I was looking at, ‘I need this to be here now’ because I’ve never had this type of injury or had anything happen to me.”

Hubbard looks at the video of what happened and finds motivation. Starting at right guard, Hubbard was pass blocking Giants defensive end Dexter Lawrence at MetLife Stadium when his right knee buckled.

“Sometimes I look at that play and I’m like, ‘Man, I came a long way.’ Still have some ways to go...,” he said. “I learned a lot about myself as an individual, too, how strong-minded I can be because there were moments when I wanted to just give up. But I know that’s not in me.

“There were different signs, different things that were pulling me, telling me, ‘You’ve still got it.’ That’s one of the things that I live by and I continue to fight for, that I still do have it and I can still get better and better each day.”

Hubbard was forced to watch as the Browns reached the playoffs for the first time since 2002 and earned their first postseason victory since Jan. 1, 1995, beating the Pittsburgh Steelers 48-37 in an AFC wild card game at Heinz Field. The season ended with a 22-17 divisional-round loss to the Kansas City Chiefs.

“That hurt,” Hubbard said of watching from home. “To see them continue to go on and how well they did ... I’m still a part of the team, I’m still happy.

“It did affect me mentally. I had my times where I was like, ‘Man, I want to be out there so bad.’ But I knew for a fact that God had a different plan for me.”

As he saw the Browns arrive at Arrowhead Stadium, Hubbard said he had chills.

“I was like, ‘This is so real. Changing the atmosphere around here. Tremendously,’” he said.

He cherished the support from his teammates and loves the family bond the Browns have created under coach Kevin Stefanski. Asked what he appreciates most about Hubbard as a person, Stefanski said Saturday, “Great teammate.”



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"I think you can judge a lot about a player out here on the field in how they treat their teammates," Stefanski said. "He is always supportive and constantly around the guys offering any help. I think he is just outstanding in that regard."

But Hubbard has been tested emotionally, mentally and physically and knows that's not over.

"It was taxing to try to build something that was lost," he said. "It's still day-to-day. I'm still working on that strength."

As he sat in an Adirondack chair painted in Browns colors, one could tell his right quad is not as large as his left.

"Almost. This quad needs to be built up a little bit more," he said. Browns coach Kevin Stefanski notes Hubbard's hard work

Stefanski said Hubbard looks fine to him.

"I think physically, he is doing really well," Stefanski said. "He's kind of picked up where he left off. In drills and on the field, he is looking like Hubb to me, which is a testament to the hard work he's put in to get to this point."

Hubbard is convinced he can be the same valuable swing lineman who started six games in 2020 at right guard and right tackle and also took some snaps at left tackle.

"I think so. It just comes with time," Hubbard said. "We've got training camp, we've got months and months for football. I'm excited, I just can't wait to get back."

Hubbard said he reduced his body fat by 4% during training and now carries 304 pounds on his 6-foot-4 frame. He believes the fact that he's in a good place mentally has a lot to do with the fact that his body feels amazing.

Hubbard ramped up charity work during pandemic: Browns' offensive lineman Chris Hubbard opens big heart in tackling societal issues

While rehabbing, Hubbard said he kept his "Everybody Eats" food donation days going in Cleveland. He's been working on his new foundation, [Overcomingtogetherfoundation.org](https://www.overcomingtogetherfoundation.org), for two months.

He started a YouTube podcast, Brotherhood the Unveiling, which features weekly guests and invites discussion about mental health, careers, families and relationships. He said those conversations were an outlet he needed.

"I'm just trying to continue to do more off the field because I always feel like it's bigger than me," Hubbard said.



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For 30 minutes each day, Hubbard finds solace in meditation. During training camp, he's usually at his locker or sitting outside listening to songs that inspire him.

When he's home, he relaxes in his backyard with his 95-pound English-American bulldog Capone lying on his feet. He'll sun gaze or watch the sunset and pray.

"No matter how it turned out here on the field, I'm blessed to have another day in life, another day to have fun doing what I love to do. You've got to be thankful," he said.

"Just me and my thoughts, or I'm doing some affirmations of what I foresee in life. I think that's helpful to be able to continue on in your journey in life. It just helps to reassure myself that everything's going to be fine."



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Browns' Jedrick Wills Jr. looks for big leap after facing 'worst-case scenario' as rookie By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2021/08/05/cleveland-browns-jedrick-wills-jr-looks-leap-after-nfl-rookie-year/5481064001/>

BEREA — The adversity Jedrick Wills Jr. endured last season as a rookie extended far beyond what anyone outside of Browns headquarters could have known.

At a glance, Wills learning how to play left tackle for the first time in his life seemed difficult enough on its own.

But Wills made the transition from the right side of the offensive line to the left amid unprecedented circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic. All spring practices and preseason games were canceled, leaving Wills with merely a condensed training camp in which to prepare for his first NFL season and new position.

“It was probably the worst-case scenario,” Wills told the Beacon Journal during his second Browns camp Tuesday.

From offensive line coach Bill Callahan to coach Kevin Stefanski to General Manager Andrew Berry, the Browns were convinced Wills would be able to adapt to left tackle when they drafted him 10th overall out of the University of Alabama. Wills played right tackle for the Crimson Tide, but Berry had just signed All-Pro Jack Conklin a month before the draft to a three-year, \$42 million contract in free agency.

“We had a lot of confidence in [Wills moving to left tackle] because of the mental makeup and because of the physical skills,” Stefanski said Wednesday. “We knew it wasn't going to be perfect early, and for 99% of rookies, it's not perfect early.”

Still, the decision to start Wills right away represented a leap of faith, and he went through growing pains. He was schooled in practices by defensive ends Myles Garrett and Olivier Vernon. He took lumps in games.

And doubt crept into his mind.

“The toughest part of the transition was that doubt,” Wills said. “I feel like almost every athlete is scared to fail and almost every athlete has that fear to fail. It was that way probably until about halfway through the season, just not having that confidence that I usually have.”

“It probably took me half of the games for it to really click, for me to really have that mojo at that position. That's one of the biggest keys is to have confidence, and I feel like I lost sight of that a little bit last year.”

Jedrick Wills Jr. had COVID-19 scare as Cleveland Browns rookie

Even when Wills finally felt as if he had hit his stride, he encountered obstacles.



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The Browns placed him on the reserve/COVID-19 list on Christmas Eve and activated him on Dec. 26. But then they made him inactive Dec. 27 against the New York Jets, and Stefanski said afterward the club was “just following the protocol” by holding Wills out. The starting receiving corps had also been sidelined due to COVID-19 protocols, and the Browns lost to the Jets 23-16 when a victory would have clinched a playoff berth.

“I never ended up having COVID,” Wills said. “I had like a 106[-degree] fever, which is pretty critical, so that was one of the main reasons why they kept me out of the game. I had all the symptoms [of COVID-19], but I never tested positive.”

Wills said he was frustrated but not frightened by his illness. The Browns had to win the regular-season finale the next week against the Pittsburgh Steelers to advance to the postseason for the first time in 18 years. They prevailed 24-22 with Wills back in the starting lineup.

Then after the Browns' 48-37 wild-card win over the Steelers, Wills was injured on the offense's first play from scrimmage Jan. 17 in the 22-17 divisional-round loss to the Kansas City Chiefs. As defensive tackle Derrick Nnadi dived to tackle running back Nick Chubb, Nnadi whipped into Wills' right leg.

“I had a high ankle sprain and a lateral ankle sprain all in one,” Wills said. “I got the best of both worlds.”

“I think that would have definitely made a difference with me being there [for the whole game], and I just can't wait to see what we can do this year in the first game.”

Wills, 22, is hoping for a much better experience in his return to Arrowhead Stadium for the Sept. 12 regular-season opener against the defending AFC champion Chiefs.

“It's a revenge game, and we could've beaten them last year,” Wills said. “We fell short, but it's just an opportunity to get a jump start on the season.”

Browns offensive tackle Jedrick Wills Jr. is helped off the field after being injured early in an NFL divisional-round playoff game against the Kansas City Chiefs last season. Wills can't wait to face the Chiefs again in the season opener on Sept. 12. [Charlie Riedel/Associated Press]

Jedrick Wills Jr. says Cleveland Browns have realistic shot at Super Bowl

Wills spent two months rehabilitating the injured ankle. He worked out in the offseason in his hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, with the trainer he's had since high school, Ted Butler of Operation Athlete. The 6-foot-4¼ Wills added muscle and dropped body fat. He ended last season weighing about 328 pounds. Now he's down to about 313 pounds.

A Pro Bowl selection, Wills said, is “100%” on his radar. That's not all, though.

“The only goal I have is just to come out every week and make a statement for my name, and then whatever comes at the end, comes at the end,” Wills added. “Of course, we're [all about] team accolades. We're all focused on that Super Bowl, and I think that we have a realistic shot at it.”



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The offensive line is among the main reasons the Browns are widely considered a legitimate contender. Wills said he doesn't pay attention to ProFootballFocus.com, so he might not know the analytics-driven website ranked the Browns' offensive line No. 1 in the NFL ahead of the 2021 season.

"We take pride in putting this team on our back, and as far as we go is as far as they go," Wills said. "I definitely think I can contribute even more than I did last year to this group of five men." Left tackled Jedrick Wills Jr., right, helps to clear the way for running back Kareem Hunt during a training camp practice on Wednesday. [Phil Masturzo/Beacon Journal]

Wills started all 17 games in which he appeared, including two in the playoffs. He tied for 57th among the 79th qualifying tackles PFF graded last season. He ranked 27th in pass blocking and 70th in run blocking. He made the Pro Football Writers of America All-Rookie team.

"I thought he was very sharp in pass protection for the most part," Browns three-time Pro Bowl left guard Joel Bitonio said. "You saw why he was a first-round tackle, his athletic ability, the way he moves, how he can move guys. I think O-linemen taking that first- and second-year leap and having an offseason this year a little bit more than last year is going to be big for him.

"I think he can make big moves. I think he has a chance to be in the upper echelon of left tackles. I don't know if it's going to happen this year or next, but if he just keeps working and improving, he has a chance to be really good."

Browns offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt challenged Wills to eliminate pre-snap penalties. Eight of his 11 penalties last season were false starts. The other three were holding.

"Jed had a tougher time than most with the cadence last year, but in his second year, I'm looking for a big jump from him there," Van Pelt said. Jedrick Wills Jr. never practiced on left side of offensive line for Alabama coach Nick Saban

Wills said he appreciated the "good, reflective criticism" the coaching staff provided after the season, and he believes he can be "two times better than last year" because he's way more comfortable on the left side of the offensive line than he was a year ago.

"[Switching to left tackle] was definitely one of the hardest things I've had to do," he said.

Wills played right tackle in youth football, middle school, high school and college. He didn't begin training as a left tackle until the months preceding the 2020 NFL Scouting Combine, using a smartphone to record videos of his techniques for further review. He never practiced on the left side of the line during his days with Alabama coach Nick Saban.

"No, not even one time," Wills said. "I did a little bit of right guard. It's always been the right side.

"It's like doing everything your whole life right-handed and just one day you wake up and it's like, 'Oh, we're going to make you left-handed today.' That's how it felt because I played right tackle or



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the right side, in general, forever. It's completely different footwork. You're stronger in your right leg. You're stronger in your right arm. You have more coordination.”

The day after Wills had been drafted, Berry told him the Browns picked him to play left tackle. Wills didn't mope. He embraced the opportunity.

“I was like, 'Hey, whatever y'all need me to do,’” Wills said. “I hopped on that right away.”

Bitonio did everything he could to help Wills, yet much of their communication came via text messaging because the pandemic forced teams to conduct virtual meetings. Sure, the linemates could talk on the field at practice — provided a COVID-19 issue didn't prompt a cancellation — but if Bitonio detected something on film during meetings, texts would ensue instead of face-to-face discussions.

Former Browns 10-time Pro Bowl left tackle Joe Thomas also became a mentor of Wills, but their interactions were limited to texts and FaceTime calls. They didn't meet in person until Monday, when Thomas visited Browns headquarters on assignment for NFL Network.

Now Wills can communicate better and bond more. He's feels at home with the Browns and at peace with his position.

“I was just talking to Jed yesterday about how it may be only one calendar year, but just how much farther along he is right now, and that's just from a technical standpoint, from a comfort level,” Stefanski said. “So he's in a really good spot.”



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Donovan Peoples-Jones earned trust of coaches as rookie, then made “long list” of improvements before Year 2

By Scott Petrak, brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2021/08/06/donovan-peoples-jones-earned-trust-of-coaches-as-rookie-then-made-long-list-of-improvements-before-year-2/>

BEREA — Donovan Peoples-Jones sells the hook, gets cornerback A.J. Green to buy and blows past him for a long touchdown on the double move.

Peoples-Jones can't shake No. 1 cornerback Denzel Ward on an out but goes low and makes the catch with Ward on his back.

Peoples-Jones runs the comeback along the sideline, jumps high for the sailing throw and snatches it out of the air like Shaquille O'Neal with a rebound.

A drill, let alone a day, doesn't go by in Browns training camp without the second-year receiver creating a highlight and making general manager Andrew Berry look like a genius for drafting him in the sixth round, No. 187 overall. Peoples-Jones even forced a fumble, recovered it and scored on a punt coverage drill Wednesday.

Peoples-Jones doesn't do much self-promotion — it's hard to toot your horn when you don't talk much — but he acknowledged improvement in a lot of areas from a promising rookie season.

“That would be a pretty long list,” he told The Chronicle-Telegram this week.

Coach Kevin Stefanski instructed his staff to send the players home for the offseason with detailed and lengthy improvement plans. Receivers coach/pass game coordinator Chad O'Shea obliged.

“With Donovan, just like everything, there was a long list that I couldn't even talk about right now because I'd kill all your time,” he said Wednesday. “But I'll tell you this, the things we asked him to work on, he came back and you saw progress in those things. That's what's most encouraging.

“Thus far in camp, he has made the most of his opportunities.”

Peoples-Jones is in a crowded competition for playing time behind starters Odell Beckham Jr. and Jarvis Landry. He's got a clear early edge on Rashard Higgins, KhaDarel Hodge and rookie Anthony Schwartz for the No. 3 wideout role, and is playing like someone who'll be a starter in the not-so-distant future.

“Anytime a player is a second-year player, there should be a jump. It is his second lap around the track,” O'Shea said. “He has done an outstanding job of putting himself in position to have the opportunity to contribute here because of his work ethic.”

Peoples-Jones has plenty of size at 6-foot-2, 204 pounds. He takes awhile to reach top speed, but it's an impressive 4.48 seconds in the 40-yard dash. His 44.5-inch vertical jump and 11-7 broad jump confirm he has special explosiveness.



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Quarterback Baker Mayfield said Peoples-Jones got into great shape during the offseason, and Peoples-Jones is off to the kind of start to camp he envisioned.

“Oh, yeah, for sure,” he said. “I just want to come out here every day and play good football.”

His expectations for Year 2?

“Just to be the best me possible,” he said.

How good can that be?

“Good,” he said.

A trend has emerged from all the noteworthy plays through the first week-plus of camp: Peoples-Jones can secure the catch in traffic.

“That’s something that Donovan has worked extremely hard on is his ability to make contested catches,” O’Shea said. “He’s got good strength, that’s one of his characteristics within his skill set that is in his favor, and he needs to play to that.”

Peoples-Jones was friendly and polite during the one-on-one interview conducted on orange and brown Adirondack chairs under a test outside the team facility. Forthcoming, he wasn’t. He seems similar to running back Nick Chubb in various ways.

“Extremely impressive guy Donovan is,” O’Shea said. “He has great professionalism. He works extremely hard. He is outstanding in his assignment.

“He is somebody who just does not say a lot. He goes out there and does it by his actions.”

Peoples-Jones said he loves Cleveland and was able to get a feel for the city despite the difficult pandemic conditions of last season. He enjoys the museums and restaurants.

“I’m a big food guy. Just trying out new restaurants is always nice,” he said. “Cleveland has a lot of different food spots that are really good.”

Peoples-Jones was the 27th receiver taken in his draft class after a disappointing three years at Michigan. He flashed the tremendous traits but never dominated like was expected from one of the nation’s top recruits. He called it a “blessing,” not pressure, to be such a big-time recruit and wouldn’t follow Tom Brady’s lead of obsessing over the sixth-round draft status.

“There’s a lot of different things that motivate me every day,” Peoples-Jones said. “I just try to use all of them. I’m just blessed to be here. Happy to be here. And I’m having a lot of fun.”

Despite pedestrian numbers — 14 catches, 304 yards, two touchdowns in 12 regular-season games — his rookie season filled the Browns with confidence. Pressed into service in Week 7 after



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Beckham's anterior cruciate ligament tore, Peoples-Jones caught the first three passes of his NFL career, including the 24-yard winning touchdown with 11 seconds to play.

He started twice and played 25 percent of the offensive snaps for the year, and when called upon to make a big play, he usually delivered. He's a student of the game, taking his successful study habits from the classroom to the film room.

"He came up big for us in moments last year," Stefanski said. "A really smart player, a conscientious kid who we could put in there and trust him to do the job. He certainly earned our trust over the course of time."

Peoples-Jones credited staying ready and being versatile. He wasn't overwhelmed by the moments.

"I've always felt like I was meant to be in a situation," he said.

His teammates took notice.

"He's a hard worker and he's a special player," running back Kareem Hunt said. "He's definitely a bigger receiver and he can block. He can catch. He's fast."



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Browns guard Joel Bitonio got a delayed taste of the playoffs last year and he's embracing a new standard in Cleveland

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2021/09/browns-guard-joel-bitonio-got-a-delayed-taste-of-the-playoffs-last-year-and-hes-embracing-a-new-standard-in-cleveland.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- The week leading up to what should have been Joel Bitonio's first career playoff game didn't go quite the way he likely imagined it would.

Sure, he still attended meetings -- that was one advantage to the Browns going almost entirely virtual amidst a rash of positive COVID-19 tests -- but other than that, it was just the Browns' stalwart left guard spending a lot of time in his basement, away from his two-year old daughter and pregnant wife, Courtney. When he did venture upstairs, he wore gloves and a mask.

Bitonio, of course, tested positive for COVID the day after the Browns clinched their first playoff berth since 2002 by beating the Steelers.

So instead of preparing for a game, he fired up his Playstation and played an old version of NCAA Football, one of the years when he was in the game. He likes to turn his Nevada Wolf Pack into a powerhouse in dynasty mode, even if it happens long after he graduates.

"I think I was an 81 my senior year, which, a little low, but it's OK," he said.

He watched all the Star Wars movies, starting with "The Phantom Menace." He knows people don't love the prequels, but they came out right in a sweet spot for him age-wise.

"For me, as a kid, I was like light sabers, all the guns and stuff," he said.

He even had time to watch the one-offs, like "Rogue One," which he says is his favorite along with "Empire Strikes Back."

"('Rogue One') just got the juices flowing," he said. "Then you see Darth Vader at the end, which I thought was pretty sweet -- young Darth Vader."

And while taking a few days to hang out in the basement, playing video games and watching Star Wars might not sound so bad, the backdrop of all of it was Bitonio, the longest-tenured Browns player, drafted by Ray Farmer, who has lived the full Browns experience, who has seen former offensive linemates go elsewhere and play in Super Bowls, was going to miss his first playoff game, even after being cautious throughout the pandemic.

His immediate reaction?

"This is BS," he said. "I've done everything right. I wouldn't call out sick if it was a normal week and I felt this way, but we're in COVID. So I was very disappointed."

Then, as he puts it, he stopped feeling sorry for himself and did everything he could to help get his teammates ready to play.

"We have the right guys for the job," Bitonio thought. "Michael Dunn's been working all year, he's going to play well, I think we have a great gameplan, so then I started shifting my focus to helping the guys out."



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Even with confidence the pieces were in place, when it came time to watch the game, he was just like every other Browns fan -- he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Bitonio, watching in his basement, had his wife on speaker phone while she watched upstairs as the Browns ran out to a 28-0 lead. Then it hit him: "I've got a chance to play (next week)."

When he initially got his positive test, he wasn't sure if the way he felt was because of the game or symptoms of COVID-19. He never got severe symptoms, but he did sleep a lot the first two days and, because of the inactivity, his body started to go into offseason mode. He needed to jumpstart the battery.

"Once I got the clear I was like, 'Can I ride the Peleton? Can I get some physical activity?'" he said. "So when I do come back, I'm not going to be totally out of shape."

He returned against the Chiefs and, just like he has in every other game since 2017, played every offensive snap.

Bitonio has talked about his rookie season before, when the Browns started 7-4 under Mike Pettine, only to see the year fall apart. Still, he thought winning in the NFL wasn't so hard.

Then he went through two years of injuries, including a Lisfranc injury in 2016, and the chaos of 1-31. He had a short stint at left tackle.

He was here in 2019 when a season of expectations turned into 6-10 and left him questioning the team's preparedness after a loss in Arizona. In many ways, he had taken on the role of Joe Thomas after the future Hall-of-Fame tackle retired, one of the consistent voices amidst a sea of chaos, never ducking interviews and always thoughtful.

He's never known what it's like to be on a contending team until now and what happened last year has only raised his expectations and that of the team. There's no reason they shouldn't be in the playoffs every year, competing to win a title.

"Now we need to work to make sure we get back there every time," he said. "That's our bare minimum, is get to the playoffs and see what we can do from there."

And while alignment has been a buzz word thrown around since the Browns remade their front office and coaching staff prior to last season, Bitonio said he sees it and, yes, players do feel it in the locker room.

"When I was first here, '14 to '19, there was so much out of Browns camp, a story out of here, a story out of there, someone in our front office or someone upstairs saying something," he said, "and now everything's just the same page. We want guys that are going to work, we want guys that are tough, accountable, resilient. We preach that all the time."

The digital version of Bitonio in the NCAA video game he played while he was stuck in his basement might not have been around long enough to enjoy the fruits of the dynasty Bitonio built. In real life, Bitonio might have finally stuck around long enough to enjoy something great.

When he emerged from his basement last January, there was a new hope.



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Chris Hubbard thought his playing days could be numbered before grinding through long road to recovery

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/chris-hubbard-thought-his-playing-days-could-be-numbered-before-grinding-through>

Chris Hubbard sat on the X-ray table and saw his kneecap slide out of place and to the right.

Minutes earlier, Hubbard, a seven-year offensive line veteran, had fallen to the turf at MetLife Stadium on the Browns' second snap of their Week 15 Sunday Night Football matchup against the New York Giants. He wasn't in pain until he attempted to stand up, felt a sting in his knee and fell to the turf again.

Hubbard had never suffered a major injury until that moment. As he gingerly walked off the field and to the trainer's room, he still didn't feel much pain in his knee — but he wondered whether his season was over anyways.

Those feelings only multiplied when Hubbard watched his knee slide across his leg.

"At that time, I was like, 'Please don't let this be it,'" Hubbard said. "I was just thinking about what was next. It was one of those times where I was like, 'Man, this is a weird feeling. This can't be it.'"

Hubbard's fear was true. He suffered a dislocated right kneecap and torn quad muscle and was ruled out for the year. After holding a vital role as a versatile swing tackle for the Browns offensive line — a unit that ranked among the best in the NFL — Hubbard was forced to sit and watch the rest of the season from the couch.

Watching the games rather than playing wasn't hard for Hubbard, though. He frequently invited friends and family over to his Westlake house to cheer on the Browns as they marched to their first trip to the playoffs in 18 seasons and advanced to the AFC Divisional Round. One of the best parts was watching the offensive line overcome injuries and remain one of the best in the league.

"Heck yeah, I wanted to be out there," Hubbard said, "but at the same time, my guys were still chasing something bigger than us, and that was to bring home a Super Bowl."

The most difficult part was everything else.

Hubbard couldn't fully bend his leg for months. He couldn't walk up the stairs. He couldn't drive. Simple tasks that required walking around the house required extra effort. Suddenly, Hubbard, a strong advocate for mental health awareness, faced a battle to combat the anxiety many athletes go through when completing the slow, monotonous process of rehab.

"I was just in my head," he said. "Right after the injury, I just had doubts in my mind about whether I'd be able to play this sport again at the high level I want to."

Hubbard relied on conversations with his family to push through any negativity, but one member in particular provided a constant flow of motivation: his 4-year-old son, Creed.

As Hubbard traveled between Atlanta and Cleveland every other week to complete his rehab, he always found motivation when he'd return home and give his boy a hug. Seeing the joy in Creed was a constant reminder to Hubbard that he wasn't only completing rehab to help himself — he was setting



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an example and creating a path to success for someone who had already changed his world.

"This is something that I want my son to be able to see and something I want to instill in him," Hubbard said. "I want him to know that there are sacrifices in life you will have to make. I feel like this was one of them I needed to make, and I was able to see him grow."

That extra motivation helped push Hubbard through an eight-month rehab plan. He breathed his first true sigh of relief in April when he could torque his knee for a full rotation on a stationary bike pedal. Then came his first squat. Then came his first round of sprints.

By July, Hubbard felt conditioned and ready for training camp. The Browns gradually eased him and other players who suffered season-ending injuries last season into team drills, but it was hard to tell Hubbard had gone nearly eight months without playing football. His versatility was still strong, and he played right tackle for most of training camp and switched to the left in the final preseason game against the Falcons.

Now, after six weeks of training camp and action in all three preseason games, Hubbard is confident he can still be the same reliable swing tackle from a year ago. The Browns believe it, too.

"I think physically, he's doing really well," coach Kevin Stefanski said in August. "He's kind of picked up where he left off. In drills and on the field, he is looking like Hubb to me, which is a testament to the hard work he's put in to get to this point."

Hubbard is expected to suit up for Sunday's much-anticipated Week 1 game in Kansas City. For the Browns, the game certainly holds extra significance as they look for revenge from last year's loss to the Chiefs in their second playoff game.

Hubbard, however, will feel instant gratitude regardless of the result. It'll hit as soon as he steps onto the field and straps on an orange helmet.

He didn't know if he'd ever have a chance to do that again when he saw his knee slide out of place and wondered whether he'd ever make a full return. Now, he's back, healthy and ready to rejoin one of the most promising Browns rosters in decades.

"When I get back out there, I'm probably going to lose my mind," he said. "I just wanted to keep playing football. This is what I love to do, so I'm ready to line back up again."



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Myles Garrett loves loyalty, driven to prove he's No. 1 in NFL and lead Browns to Super Bowl

By Scott Petrak, Brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2021/09/08/myles-garrett-loves-loyalty-driven-to-prove-hes-no-1-in-nfl-and-lead-browns-to-super-bowl/>

BEREA — Myles Garrett tweeted his congratulations to and appreciation for All-Star forward Giannis Antetokounmpo when the Milwaukee Bucks won their first NBA title in 50 years in July.

The admiration for Antetokounmpo is about much more than Garrett's unquestionable love of basketball. What Antetokounmpo did with the Bucks resonates with Garrett in his quest to bring the Browns their first Super Bowl title.

Antetokounmpo signed a contract extension rather than become a free agent, countering the recent trend of NBA superstars relocating in search of more stars on the roster and better odds of winning a championship.

"I love it. I love seeing that," Garrett, the All-Pro defensive end, told The Chronicle-Telegram last week in a one-on-one interview at Browns headquarters. "I remember when the greats of my dad's era used to do that, they stayed where they were drafted and were loyal to their team that was loyal to them. I have a lot of respect for that.

"It's not like I don't have respect for those who decide to just transition to other teams, it's just the fact that the team's good to you and you return that to them."

Pain but gain: Chris Hubbard back in good place following long, grueling rehab

Garrett knows about loyalty.

The Browns stood by him when he was suspended for the final six games of the 2019 season for hitting Steelers quarterback Mason Rudolph in the head with a helmet during the final minutes of a prime-time game. Then they signed him to a five-year, \$125 million extension before he played another down.

"I'm just glad that this team has been loyal to me, they've put a lot of great people by my side and put me in a good position to win and put us all in a good position to win," Garrett said. "I loved watching Giannis win because he's a helluva person, a helluva ballplayer and a down-to-earth guy who deserved it more than anyone."

Garrett can relate to Antetokounmpo.

The most common description of Garrett as a defensive end includes a variation of "freak." He's 6-foot-4, 272 pounds and can bend like a ballerina as he turns the corner to destroy the quarterback.

"Coming in seeing that guy is just ridiculous," rookie cornerback Greg Newsome II told The Chronicle. "He can do it all. He's definitely an amazing athlete."

Antetokounmpo's nickname is the "Greek Freak." He's 6-11, 242 and can do everything on the basketball court, as evidenced by his 50-point, 14-rebound, five-block performance in the clinching Game 6 of the NBA Finals.

Milwaukee is a small market that went 50 years between NBA titles. Cleveland is a small market that



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hasn't won an NFL championship since 1964, two seasons before the invention of the Super Bowl.



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Antetokounmpo is from Greece but calls Milwaukee “home.” Garrett is from Arlington, Texas, but has made a life in Northeast Ohio since being the No. 1 pick of the 2018 draft.

“He is the guy in Milwaukee,” Garrett said. “There’s a lot of guys here. There’s a lot of guys to love, offense, defense, there’s a lot of faces that people are drawn to because of what they do.

“I’m not trying to stand out of the crowd, I’m not trying to put myself out there in the spotlight. I’m just trying to do my job to the best of my ability and if that’s what comes with that, that’s what it is.”


Greg Newsome II uses discipline, attention to detail to make difficult technique change, earn trust of coaches


He may not be chasing the publicity but he’s no shrinking violet. He started his own channel on YouTube and tweeted his frustration about being ranked No. 16 on NFL Network’s list of the top 100 players.

“It means my peers and their coaches and everyone in their building and their facility thinks that there’s 15 guys ahead of me in the league,” he said. “I don’t agree, so I’ve got to go out there and prove it, I’ve got to prove I’m the best.”

Should he be ranked No. 1?

“I couldn’t do it all year,” Garrett said. “For one reason or another, not going to make excuses, but this year I’ve got to be available, have to be on the field and have to prove I’m the best, day in and day out.”

Rememberthis... 15 people better than me... noted  pic.twitter.com/wdDRxFnFi

— Flash Garrett  (@Flash_Garrett) August 25, 2021

The suspension stopped his 2019 season in its tracks after 10 sacks and two forced fumbles in 10 games. He finished last season with 12 sacks and four forced fumbles in 14 games but wasn’t the same after missing two games in November with COVID-19, getting just 2.5 sacks and no turnovers in the five regular-season games that followed as he struggled to catch his breath.

“I do think he had a dominant season,” defensive line coach Chris Kiffin said. “Obviously there was a little bit of an effect coming back with his health, wind and stuff like that.

“I think he has put it out there the type of player he can be — a Defensive Player of the Year type of player. He is hungry to get better, and I am trying to help him get better.”

Garrett has 42.5 sacks and 10 forced fumbles in 51 career games, is a two-time Pro Bowler and was first-team All-Pro last year. He doesn’t have the resume or recognition of Patrick Mahomes, Aaron Rodgers or Aaron Donald, but Garrett believes he’s the most talented player in the league.

“Yes,” he said.

He entered the NFL talking about being the Defensive Player of the Year and becoming a Hall of Famer. The motivation to reach those goals and No. 1 in the top 100 is always front of mind.

“I never stop thinking about it,” Garrett said. “Nonstop. I want to be the best. Even when I’m sitting in



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the offseason and I'm not doing anything, it's how can I get ahead?

"I watch film, try to eat right, try to make sure that I'm taking care of what I need to so I don't fall far behind. I don't want to fall so far behind that I feel like I'm trying to catch up all offseason to where I was before. Stay at a weight and a physical fitness that I feel like is good to maintain and then build from there."

The results are obvious.

"You wouldn't think he'd come back bigger, stronger and faster, I mean, he surprises us every time," Kiffin said. "He's one of the best athletes in the world and he's constantly getting better as a football player every year, every day."

The never-satisfied mindset carries over to practice.

"I just need to do each rep to the best of my ability," Garrett said. "Can't take a rep off, can't end it early, can't have dumb penalties. I just gotta do what I do."

Even without the "snub" by the voters in the top 100 rankings, Garrett would push for excellence. The motivation starts internally.

"Absolutely. I feel like the great players do that, they always have something motivating and driving them, whether it's to stay on top or get there," he said. "And then week by week finding something that just adds fuel to the fire, whether it's something that someone said or something you feel you need to do to get the job done, to get to that mindset to where you've got to go out there and dominate."

The Browns' goal is more tangible, and lasting, than a spot on a list. They're trying to get to and win the first Super Bowl in franchise history.

"I feel like if I'm the best player on the field I give us a good chance to win the Super Bowl," Garrett said. "But I can only make the plays that I can make. I can't do anything out of the scheme, because it's all about the team and it's all about winning."

"(Where I rank) that can be voted and disputed and debated, but winning a Super Bowl, that only happens for one team and you can't really debate that."

As Garrett prepares to start his fifth season Sunday in Kansas City, he's contributed to the organization's improving culture by taking on a larger leadership role.

"I think that's helped the team, try to give them a leader that's on the field making plays, doing things," he said. "Sometimes it's a little bit harder to be led by someone who's not on the field, or who's not making all the plays or getting all the attention. Whether I'm off the field, in the classroom, just walking around on the street in Cleveland or I'm out here on the field, people's eyes are on me. So I have to make use of that, because people are going to want to listen to what I have to say, my opinion, and have to do something with that ability and that platform I've been given."



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David Njoku sees a chance to flip the flip card, wants to remain with Browns

By Marla Ridenour, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2021/08/20/cleveland-browns-tight-end-david-njoku-fueled-new-mindset-after-two-rocky-years/8156304002/>

BEREA — David Njoku has a chance to earn the Browns' No. 1 tight end job this season.

The opportunity is tangible, and it surely plays a part in his change in attitude.

With his God-given size, athleticism and power, he could become a game-changer. In terms of his 6-foot-4, 246-pound body, he's perhaps in the top five in the league. His leaping ability is comparable to some top red-zone targets going back to the 1990s.

Yes, he's 25 and in his fifth NFL season. It shouldn't have taken this long.

The 29th overall pick by the Browns in 2017, Njoku has been the ultimate underachiever. Thus far, his career has been characterized by his tendency to drop easy balls and his detached demeanor with the media.

But Njoku has also witnessed mind-boggling franchise dysfunction. He's never played for a coach who fully grasped his potential. He's never played for a general manager who stuck by him when some observers wanted to run him out of town. He was drafted by Executive Vice President of Football Operations Sashi Brown, who didn't survive Njoku's rookie season.

Most couldn't see past Njoku's game-day mistakes. Browns coach Kevin Stefanski and General Manager Andrew Berry can. They proved that when they picked up Njoku's fifth-year option on April 27, 2020, and allowed it to vest in March.

Now in the final year of his contract, Njoku said Friday he wants to remain in Cleveland and will instruct his agent, Malki Kawa, to seek a new deal.

"Yes, I will. Nothing yet. We're just playing it day by day," Njoku said.

"I'd like to stay here."

That's a total departure from 2020, when Njoku switched agents, hiring Drew Rosenhaus, and wanted to be traded. That came on the heels of the Browns signing Atlanta Falcons free agent Austin Hooper to a four-year, \$42 million contract with \$23 million guaranteed.

In 2019, a broken wrist suffered in Week 2 limited Njoku to four games and he had a dispute with then-coach Freddie Kitchens when he was ready to return.

Asked what has changed, besides recently going back to his original agent, Njoku said, "We're going to leave last year in the past, but what I can say is I'm in a way positive mindset. I'm playing for myself, playing for my teammates, playing for the team. It's a lot easier to work hard that way.

"Mindset changed and everything else got a lot easier."

Njoku questions his 2020 playing time: Browns tight end David Njoku has 'no comment' on whether he believes he's with right team



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Njoku was one of the Browns' standouts in Thursday's first of two joint practices with the New York Giants ahead of Sunday's preseason game. In one-on-one coverage, he leaped high for two balls from quarterback Baker Mayfield, one against former Browns safety Jabrill Peppers, the other against safety Xavier McKinney.

That prompted Stefanski to continue his praise of Njoku.

"Some of those tight ends I have been around over the years, just their sheer size, they are always open," Stefanski said when asked about Njoku. "Dave and Hoop, I think they are very friendly targets for the quarterback."

Njoku and Hooper were among the Browns who worked out in the offseason with Mayfield in Austin, Texas, and Miami. Mayfield appreciates how hard Njoku has worked and how he's elevated his game.

"He's put on some really good weight. He's a large individual to begin with, and that comes with a unique skill set to where he's able to run," Mayfield said Friday. "The thing we've told David is if he sprints and runs, people are gonna be scared for the vertical routes that he can bring to the table, so we're working with him on that."

"He has the natural ability to high point the ball, so we're working on that as well and continuing to grow and expand on that."

Second-year receiver Donovan Peoples-Jones has a similar skill, which Mayfield says "makes me feel very comfortable with the one-on-ones."

"Those 50-50 type balls, it's either theirs or nobody's catching it. It's an easy mindset when they're able to make plays like that," Mayfield said.

When the new league year opened on March 17, Njoku's \$6 million salary for 2021 became guaranteed. He tweeted a GIF of Leonardo DiCaprio making a champagne toast in "The Great Gatsby."

Njoku admitted that commitment helped him change his mindset.

"It showed me that obviously they want me to be here for a certain reason and it excited me that I got to stay here and play with my teammates," Njoku said. "I have great teammates ... There's a lot of work to be done."

Browns tight end David Njoku catches a pass over NY Giants' Jabrill Peppers during a joint practice on Thursday, August 19, 2021 in Berea, Ohio, at CrossCountry Mortgage Campus. [Phil Masturzo/ Beacon Journal]

Njoku, a member of the 2017 team that went 0-16, said last season's turnaround that saw the Browns finish 11-5, make the playoffs for the first time since 2002 and win their first playoff game since Jan. 1, 1995, played a part in convincing him he wants to remain in Cleveland.

"Yes, that's a part of it, too," he said. "Winning obviously cures almost everything. Just winning with my teammates here, it's not really any better feeling than that."

Njoku ranked highest among Browns tight ends in 2020 by PFF: Browns takeaways: Kevin Stefanski on David Njoku, J.J. Watt, Odell Beckham Jr. and more

On this week's depth chart, Hooper is listed as the No. 1 tight end, with Njoku second and second-year man Harrison Bryant third. The Browns lost their No. 4, Stephen Carlson, to a season-ending knee



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injury in Saturday's preseason opener.

There's no guarantee Njoku can flip the flip-card. He might have to agree to an incentive-laden contract to stay. Hooper's contract could be deemed too expensive with Mayfield and cornerback Denzel Ward among those in line for contract extensions. But Hooper said an appendectomy set him back in 2020 and he's determined to have a big year.

At the very least, Njoku's offseason work has set him up to elevate his game and rewrite his Cleveland legacy. That might mean catching the easy balls, too.

Asked about such past failures, Njoku replied, "Well, which one are you referring to, exactly?" When the questioner couldn't recall one offhand, Njoku said, "Whenever you cite it, you let me know, all right?"



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The Education of a Young NFL Front Office Phenom

By Kevin Clark, The Ringer

<https://www.theringer.com/nfl/2021/9/8/22662051/nfl-front-office-phenom-andrew-berry-browns>

Berry starts his day every morning with a CrossFit class at around 6 a.m. The regulars know who he is—the general manager of the first Browns team to win a playoff game in 26 years—and they do not care. “I don’t know how much it really matters in CrossFit when you’re all gasping for air,” he tells me.

“Nobody cares about Baker Mayfield’s extension there?” I asked him at a Browns training camp practice last month.

“Nobody cares about that when you’re doing heavy thrusters,” he said.

Most people around Cleveland, and in the NFL, do care about Berry. To say he is one of the best young executives in the sport is to obscure the fact that he is one of the best executives of any age in football. He is six years younger than any other GM in the league. When he was hired in January 2020, he had a solid decade on every one of his brethren. He is also much better at his job than many of them.

Let’s start in 2009, when Berry’s Harvard football coach, Tim Murphy, told *The Harvard Crimson*, “For my two cents, he’ll be running an NFL team in 15 years. At 37 years old, he’ll be running an NFL franchise. I have no question.” Murphy was way off. It took Berry only 10 years. Murphy doesn’t remember saying this out loud, but he remembers thinking about it often. Berry’s story is of a front office prospect who delivered, like the Trevor Lawrence of front office work, someone who’s been talked up for years and did all the right things during every step of his development. There is no guarantee that Berry will win a Super Bowl or deliver the Browns to consistent contention or anything else. What Berry has delivered is the general consensus that he’s awesome at his job—in his second year running the team, that’s pretty good.

The NFL part of this story starts in September 2008, when Tom Telesco, then the Colts’ director of player personnel, stopped by a Harvard–Holy Cross game while on a Boston College scouting trip. There was a story about Berry in the game-day program and Telesco wrote his name down. “I thought, ‘These are the type of guys we need working in football,’” Telesco, now a top GM in his own right with the Chargers, told me last week.

Berry was, Murphy told me, arguably the best defensive back in Harvard history, even if he was not a true NFL prospect. “Everything just came so easy to him. Not in terms of him not giving great effort—he always gave incredible effort—but he was just so naturally [gifted]. He was our strongest student. To my knowledge, the first and only Harvard student-athlete in history to attain an undergraduate degree in economics and a master’s degree in computer science as a four-year varsity athlete. If he was bigger, he would have had a shot to be an NFL corner.”

The first player Berry ever scouted was himself. “I was a one double-A press-and-run corner,” he says. “I was pretty self-aware that I was not going to go in the first round, to put it kindly. I had a pretty reasonable expectation that my best-case scenario is to sign a free-agent deal. My expectations were tempered, but my desire and work ethic was still there.”

He made it as far as rookie minicamp with Washington and his playing career was over, leaving him with two options. Murphy thought Berry was probably the top Wall Street recruit in the country. Telesco told him that if he wanted to get into football, he should do so that year. “These entry-level jobs don’t pay much,” Telesco explained, and once Berry got married and had a family, it would be



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harder to chase his NFL dream with lower-paying jobs. On the flip side, if he took the football job and it didn't work out, Wall Street would still be there.

"I vividly remember saying, 'I'm a little concerned. You can write your own ticket. The path to where you might want to get in the NFL is just so unpredictable,'" Murphy said. He told Berry that if this is what he wanted, he'd succeed at it. "But I was like, 'Do you know what you're passing up?' And he said, 'Yeah, I do, Coach, but I love football.'"

Berry, obviously, took the football job after college, joining the Colts as a scouting assistant. He said it was an intersection of all of his interests—strategic, athletic, and academic. He did not self-promote, Telesco said, instead letting his work promote himself. This is not altogether common. "He did whatever you asked him to and put all of his work into that. Not every guy who comes into the league is like that. Everyone's always trying to move up the ladder as fast as they can and lose focus on what their current job is," Telesco said.

Berry rose up the ladder faster than almost anyone in league history anyway. He asked what Telesco called "second-level" questions, indicating he always understood the big picture. He picked the brains of his bosses in Indianapolis, including Telesco, Colts GM Bill Polian, and Polian's replacement, Ryan Grigson. He picked things up at his other stops, from Sashi Brown and John Dorsey in Cleveland and Howie Roseman in Philadelphia. There is a chicken-and-egg aspect to his rapid ascent: Berry said he became a GM at such a young age because these executives opened their world to him—Grigson asked him to help with contract work, for instance, and other GMs gave him different responsibilities. But most of the executives I talked to said they opened their world to Berry because he was good at everything and could handle it.

The questions Berry asked in meetings and while sitting around the desks of the guys he worked for led to his current role overseeing a buzzy AFC contender, and now we're talking about the team he's built in the shade in suburban Ohio, as the team walks into the locker room.

The Browns have, on paper, plugged some holes in their roster for the second straight season, signing defensive backs Troy Hill and John Johnson III, as well as defensive end Jadeveon Clowney. Oddsmakers have made them the fourth-highest favorite to win the AFC. Berry has massive decisions to make going forward: Quarterback Baker Mayfield is entering his fourth season, meaning he has just next season's fifth-year option remaining on his current contract. Berry told me last season he "pushes back" on the narrative that a team becomes hamstrung once it signs a quarterback to the kind of mega contract Mayfield may eventually command.

Berry's journey typifies modern football and the people who will lead it. Being the GM of a football team in 2021 is far different than it was even 20 years ago: It involves analytics, near-constant leaps in technology, and much more sophisticated player evaluation. Berry's philosophy starts with the quarterback position.

"Quarterback is the most important position in sports," he said. "And so for me, as I came up under Bill [Polian] and pretty much every stop, this was the belief, and certainly my last stop in Philly: It's make sure we do everything to support that position first and foremost. Because you can do a lot of really great things, but if that position isn't solved and the environment isn't conducive to that player having success, then you're really kind of stuck in neutral," Berry said. "So we're doing everything that we can do to support the quarterback, because ultimately that's the position that's going to drive you. Then, once we get that environment settled, whether it's on-field or off-field, then, really, kind of transition into [other] priorities."

I asked Berry how the Browns were able to significantly improve last season when COVID-19



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restrictions made it so hard for teams to do so. In short, I wanted to know how he built a culture in a year when you could barely meet in person, when every meeting happened on Zoom, and it was hard to introduce yourself to anyone, let alone to an entire organization.

“I think it’s just being yourself,” he said. “I think a lot of people get into organizations or positions and they change who they are. And I think [Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski] and I took the approach that we’re disciplined but in a pretty laid-back way. We wanted to establish a culture of calm,” Berry said.

The “culture of calm” part of his response is important. Murphy said that he used to talk to his staff about Berry having a “preternatural calm to him.” Very few general managers have more big decisions to make with a talented young roster than he does. Aside from Mayfield’s potential extension, the team recently extended Nick Chubb, and has a stable of high-priced players, including Odell Beckham Jr. and Myles Garrett; the Browns rank first in the NFL in the amount they are spending on “high” salaries (which Over the Cap calculates as between \$7.3 million and \$15.8 million). They also, crucially, rank third in money spent on rookie contracts, which means they can afford to carry expensive players. But valuable rookie contracts eventually lead to veteran deals, making it even more important to have a smart GM tending to the team’s business. In a potentially chaotic environment, there is a culture of calm in Cleveland. Berry said he’s never been a big social media guy—he follows NFL news on Twitter just for transaction information. He guessed he’s posted on social media fewer than 10 times since college.

“The world could be ending and Andrew would be quietly figuring out a way to handle it,” Murphy said. “It’s just who he is. That’s why there’s so many accolades in his history. He’s unflappable.”

Which could explain, in part, why Berry is the perfect person to fill the gaps in the Browns’ roster and improve the team every year, especially at an organization that’s had its fair share of chaos. It could also be why, when I asked Berry about the team’s current roster, he refused to get ahead of himself even a little bit—he won’t even talk about any roster move that excites him.

At an awards dinner when Berry was in college, Murphy told Andrew’s mother that her son was one of the most amazing kids he’d ever been around. His mother said, “My Andrew? Have you seen his room?”

“So you see,” Murphy said, “where he gets his humility.”

“I’ll be honest,” Roseman said. “There was no job interview.”

Roseman hired Berry to join the Eagles’ front office in 2019 and, well, that’s the answer I got when I asked him what that meeting was like.

Roseman had heard so much about Berry from Grigson that Roseman had long wanted to recruit Berry if he were ever available. Berry has raved about his one year in Philadelphia, saying earlier this year that Roseman is the best GM in football. Last year, Berry outlined the things he learned from Roseman: aggressiveness, getting to know your locker room, and getting the right mix of people on the roster.

“I appreciate Andrew talking about how he liked his time here, but let’s be totally honest, I’m better for being around him and having him in Philly,” Roseman said.

Roseman said he taught Berry, “You have to be OK with making some mistakes, and that means you’re going to be OK with the fact that sometimes when you’re aggressive, it doesn’t work out,” Roseman



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said. “But unless you’re aggressive—and really this comes from the [early 2000s] Philadelphia Eagles when I was here, and Jeffrey [Lurie] and Joe [Banner] and coach [Andy] Reid—with greatness is gonna come risk. And I think that was important for me to learn early on, and we’re not going to be scared here, and that means that it’s not always going to be popular. It’s not always going to look right. But that’s probably the reason the confetti fell on our head once.”

Modern front office work is different, Roseman said, and he wanted to give Berry exposure to all of it. “You can’t just sit in your office and watch tape,” Roseman said. “You got to deal with the trainer, you got to deal with the equipment guy, the video guy, the security guy, you got to talk to the head coach, you got to talk to ownership, you got to manage your staff. And so I think at the end of the day, it’s resource allocation—the cap and the contracts, the analytics group. So I think you talk about, ‘How are you going to be prepared for that?’” In 2015, Chip Kelly took power in Philadelphia and Roseman was briefly sidelined as the Eagles’ personnel head. He said he spent that year talking to front office members in basketball, baseball, soccer, and hockey, and he noticed that those executives often had more diverse résumés than those in football. “You’re talking about billion-dollar companies and payrolls that are approaching \$200 million on the player side, and you have to hire everyone. So it’s a little bit more of a CEO than has been traditionally thought of, especially as the NFL grows, which is good for everyone.”

Roseman tasked Berry with a wide array of responsibilities: player development, coordinating with the medical and performance staff, helping with the cap and contracts, and talking about big-picture issues.

“Andrew is so inquisitive and so smart that there will be times you’re like, ‘Can we get to this question after the waiver wire at 4 o’clock, dude?’”

“He was always asking questions. He would say, ‘Tell me why. And tell me how you thought about this,’” Roseman said. “And I told him, the thing that I’m most proud of is just watching his actions. He knows I’m obsessed with the O-line and D-line, and he got to Cleveland, and it was like an O-line and D-line fest. I was like, ‘I’m so proud of you, bro.’”

“I’ve gotten into, I guess, a little bit of a board game fetish,” Berry said.

While he was at Harvard, Berry’s brother told him about a game called Settlers of Catan. Berry stopped at a vintage board game store in Harvard Square. “I’d never seen anything like it. It was the first German board game I’d been exposed to. I’d never seen a game with this type of mechanics.” The night before a big game, Berry said he was on “dorm arrest,” unable to leave his room. His roommate and his roommate’s girlfriend wanted to play Catan. “Really, they probably played out of pity,” Berry said. Soon his whole floor was hooked. He’s moved on to other games—Berry and his wife now play Dominion, which he calls a “a deck management game.” He said that any board game recommendation will at least be considered.

“With American board games, like Monopoly, turn-based board games to some degree become boring, because we can just predict the outcomes,” he said. “Whereas with Settlers, I thought, the element of randomness, and the variety of strategies that you could have to win the game, that’s what was appealing. So it was both a new game every time, and a new challenge every time and different strategies can actually win.”

This answer sounds eerily similar to what he said when I asked him what his favorite part of football was. “The roster strategy,” he said quickly. “The roster-building portion in general. It’s my favorite part of the job. I feel like constructing a team, building a team with all the different groups and all the different people in there.”



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In doing that in Cleveland, Berry has completed the work of two of his former bosses, Brown and Dorsey, both of whom were fired within three years on the job. Their work cannot be erased from this roster, despite an almost unbelievable amount of stops and starts on the assembly line. Chubb was selected with a pick acquired when the Browns took on Brock Osweiler's contract via a trade with the Texans in 2017. Cornerback Denzel Ward was taken in 2018 with the fourth pick, which came from Houston the previous year in the Texans' trade up to acquire Deshaun Watson. Mayfield and Myles Garrett were taken with no. 1 picks by Dorsey and Brown, who were in position to do so because the Browns were in the middle of a significant roster teardown at the time. I do not want to relitigate this era, but it is important to mention two things: The first is that you cannot tell the story of the 2021 Browns without talking about this period in franchise history; the second is that Berry was the one who finally delivered good football on the field.

I wanted to delve into Berry's mind. Browns coach Kevin Stefanski first met him in 2013 at the Senior Bowl—they developed a relationship and kept texting and talking through the years. Stefanski doubts anyone is more prepared in the draft and free agency (not letting the other end of the mutual-admiration society down, Berry said there is at least one person who is: Stefanski himself). Stefanski said the thing to remember about Berry is that he was a genuinely good player, much better than Stefanski, who played defensive back at Penn. "He was actually good," he said. "So he has this football acumen, having played really good football for Harvard, and he has this background where he's brilliant and smart. So he's like a nice blend of the football guy, the guy that understands the nuances of contracts, etcetera, etcetera. He's pragmatic."

"I wish he was smarter," Stefanski joked. "That's the damn shame. Couldn't get into Penn, had to settle for Harvard." The topic turned to his age. Stefanski, the reigning NFL Coach of the Year, is only 39, which is young by league standards but puts him five years older than Berry. "It's really annoying," he joked.

I asked Berry to outline his day. He believes in routine. He wakes up at 5:40 a.m. every day, listens to a sermon on the way to his aforementioned CrossFit class, then meets with the Browns' scouting coordinator at 8:30. He does prep work the night before because he believes that once the day gets started in football, very few adjustments can be made. "Once the train gets moving it's hard to change the direction of the tracks," he said. "You need proper balance, you can always do more work, but if you're not in the right physical mindset or mental mindset, the quality isn't going to be very good."

The work has been good. It continues Sunday against the Kansas City Chiefs. It also continues tomorrow at CrossFit.