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Dawand Jones 'can't wait,' teammates confident as he approaches ultimate test from T.J. Watt in first start

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/09/16/dawand-jones-cant-wait-teammates-confident-as-he-approaches-ultimate-test-from-t-j-watt-in-first-start/>

BEREA — Luke Wypler remembers exactly when he witnessed Dawand Jones' freakish athleticism for the first time. It was the day they met while Wypler was on a recruiting visit to Ohio State.

"I was with a few other guys on the team and they all went to play basketball," Wypler told The Chronicle-Telegram on Thursday. "This is back when he was still 415, 420 (pounds). He was on that court covering point guards, I was like, 'Oh, my god, this is unbelievable that someone this big is able to move like that.'"

Jones (6-foot-8, 374 pounds) is the story of the week as he'll make his first NFL start Monday night in Pittsburgh at right tackle and be charged with blocking outside linebacker and 2021 Defensive Player of the Year T.J. Watt. Wypler probably knows Jones better than anyone with the Browns after spending three years together in Columbus before Jones was drafted in the fourth round in April and Wypler two rounds later.

"He's a very, very cool, easygoing guy," said Wypler, a center. "I think that's what he's going to carry over into the game and he's going to play just fine.

"I'm excited to see what he's able to do on Monday night."

Deshaun Watson knows what's at stake Monday night, with chance to 'show the world what we got'

Jones came off the bench in the second quarter of the opener last week when two-time All-Pro Jack Conklin went down with torn knee ligaments. Conklin is headed for surgery and done for the season, so the starting job belongs to Jones.

He won't have any time to ease into the role. Watt is a three-time All-Pro who had three sacks, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery in Pittsburgh's 30-7 opening loss to the 49ers.

NFL analyst Brian Baldinger offers high praise for rookie T Dawand Jones

"Big task at hand," Jones said Thursday. "Can't wait, honestly. I couldn't ask for nothing else.

"Great player, great guy. I've been watching film nonstop. That's already me but had to be on top of it for sure this week. Just knowing he has so many moves in his arsenal, just got to stay sound."

Jones expects the Steelers to "definitely make me a target."

"I have to step up to the plate, step up to the challenge," he said.

Pass rush seeks to build on opener, keep creating confusion, wreaking havoc with versatility

Jones replacing Conklin wasn't a given. James Hudson III was a fourth-round pick in 2021 and started seven games in his first two years as Conklin battled injuries.

The tackles were told the depth chart during the week before the opener, and as Conklin was driven off the field on a cart, Hudson stood in the middle of the field to give Jones a pep talk before his first NFL snap.



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Notes: Jim Schwartz most proud of way defense played together in opener

"There's probably some words I can't repeat, but he definitely gave me some good confident talking, 'Nobody can mess with you. Once you play to your length and your strengths, nobody can really get around you,'" Jones said.

Hudson had been in the same spot, being suddenly thrust into action.

"I was just telling him to trust himself, go in there and play with confidence," Hudson told The Chronicle on Saturday. "Just be him. Don't let anything throw him off. Just wanted to tell him keep his head on, just let it fly, have fun."

Jones' quick ascent followed slow starts to rookie camp and training camp. Under intense supervision by veteran line coach Bill Callahan and with a commitment to improve, his loads of potential started to be realized.

"He just keeps doing what he's been doing, dominate every time he goes out there," Wypler said.

Even though Jones faced a lot of talent in the Big Ten, including Michigan's Aidan Hutchinson, the No. 2 pick of the Lions in 2022, Watt is a unique challenge. He's got elite rush moves and a relentless drive.

"He just does not quit," Jones said. "He has a motor of just nonstop moves and my major thing is if I get to limit him to some of them, using my length and my strength to my best ability, I can minimize whatever he has to throw at me."

Jones will try to counter Watt's ability to dip and turn the corner with size and wingspan.

"Kind of leaves the chest open a little bit during the pass game, so probably using that," he said of Watt. "But there's other things to it, making sure I get back. There's a limited amount of things because he's a great player, obviously, all around."

Jones shared the credit for his quick progression. He was baptized by fire practicing against defensive ends Myles Garrett, Za'Darius Smith and Ogbo Okoronkwo and took pointers from Conklin on his punch and work ethic.

This was the first week he's spent with the starting offense, which should help communication and cohesion. He needs to be in lockstep with right guard Wyatt Teller, particularly in the run game, where Jones has had more issues than in pass protection.

"I've seen a real focus," All-Pro left guard Joel Bitonio said. "It's a big ask of him, but he is very focused on taking those steps to be ready to play."

The focus must be balanced with calm under the intense spotlight of the Monday night lights.

"My emotions, they're really the same every time I go into a game," Jones said. "Never get too high, never get too low. So honestly, just play the game just like any other game."

The quote didn't end without reality setting in.



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"It is primetime," he said. "Everybody's watching you, so you can't let nobody down, can't let yourself down, can't let the team down and that's just my main goal."

Wypler believes Jones has the right temperament.

"I think all those emotions, yeah, it's overwhelming, especially for a rookie this early on in the year who necessarily wasn't maybe expecting to be in this position," he said. "But I think like anything this sport's just a game and something we've been doing for a very long time, so I think he's going to be able to compartmentalize all those emotions and be able to go out there and execute really well."

"I think it's going to be a fun night," Hudson said. "I'm excited for him. He's excited. I'm ready to see him go ball."

The guy in harm's way is saying the right things about trusting the rookie.

"I'm very confident," quarterback Deshaun Watson said. "He likes the challenge. He likes to be able to go out there and just play football and do whatever he can for this team, and he's been learning from all the guys across the line, asking questions. He's going to make sure that he's ready and prepared to go."

Even if Jones didn't expect to be in this spot a week ago.

"But it's here," he said. "God wouldn't put you in this moment if he didn't want you here. So it's up to me to go attack it and go grab it."



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Browns 6-pack: Rookie O-lineman Dawand Jones gets a chance to prove his worth

By Zac Jackson, The Athletic

<https://theathletic.com/4868885/2023/09/17/browns-steelers-monday-night-football/>

A six-pack of thoughts on the Cleveland Browns ahead of their big Monday night game in Pittsburgh.

1. I'm fascinated by Dawand Jones. He's a mountain of a person. He appears to have made huge strides in a relatively short amount of time. We haven't seen much of Jones, even if you include the preseason, but we've seen enough to know why the Browns were willing to draft him and think they could eventually have a gem.

Jones is a rookie and now a starter after Jack Conklin's season-ending knee injury. How about a prime-time road game and a primary matchup with all-world edge rusher T.J. Watt for a real welcome to the big leagues moment?

The Browns were always betting on offensive line coaches Bill Callahan and Scott Peters getting the best out of Jones. Nobody's timetable for that was right now, and Jones is certainly in a different world than he was a week ago. I don't think this will be similar to what Cleveland did with James Hudson III in Pittsburgh, in what became Baker Mayfield's final game for the Browns two seasons ago. I expect Cleveland to give Jones plenty of help on Watt, and to give him some early power run plays to help settle in.

I think Jones will have good and bad moments. I think the Browns believe he'll grow exponentially from a mental standpoint over the next month. What they really expect from him Monday night is probably a solid performance, certainly not a perfect one. But they can't change much about what they want to do and how they want to attack the Steelers. When Deshaun Watson drops back, the Browns don't want him worrying about whether Jones knows or can handle his assignments.

"There are no redshirts in this league," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said last week.

The ideal plan for Jones was for him to have kind of a redshirt season. Conklin's contract suggested he was supposed to be the right tackle for now and at least the foreseeable future. Now, Jones is in and his development is a key part of helping Cleveland's offense continue to improve. I watch Jedrick Wills Jr. on the left side and think the Browns might have an offensive tackle problem soon.

Maybe Jones will change that perception. Maybe Wills will change that perception. Maybe I'm just wrong — that's happened once or twice before. I think the Browns can win Monday night and deliver a not-so-subtle message to the AFC North as a whole in doing so. I also think they could find themselves in a bad place thanks to the Steelers' outside linebackers, Watt and Alex Highsmith.

2. Obviously, an injury in a Saturday practice is less than ideal, even if Amari Cooper (groin) ends up being able to play Monday night. If the Browns lose Cooper for any amount of time, that's going to hurt the passing game in multiple ways. Cooper was injured during practice, so Cleveland didn't know his game status Saturday afternoon and was in position to potentially have to scramble with everything from the early play script to the preferred third-down calls to even the shape of the active roster.

When Cooper is available, everything seems to run more smoothly with the passing game. See last week's big third down late in the first half on what became a touchdown drive as just one example. Cooper is generally going to draw the opposition's No. 1 cornerback, and Watson can always trust that Cooper will be where he's supposed to be.

The Browns' game plan against the Steelers is going to include testing the middle of the field with David



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Njoku, and we've seen since the spring that Elijah Moore will line up just about anywhere. The Browns can plug in rookie Cedric Tillman and speedy veteran Marquise Goodwin for some of Cooper's snaps if necessary.

For now, we'll stay out of big-picture ramifications for the passing game if Cooper misses time, because we just don't know. But any kind of issue limiting Cooper is something that could end up hurting the offense.

The Browns have until 4 p.m. ET Monday to make any roster moves or call-ups for this week's game. It's probably unlikely we'll get much of a real update on Cooper before then for strategy reasons, and Cleveland would only be required to change or address his current designation of questionable if Cooper doesn't make the trip Sunday afternoon.

3. Just run it, right? Nick Chubb looked last week like he's still the best running back on the planet, and with Pittsburgh now having to play without Pro Bowl defensive end Cameron Heyward, an already suspect run defense looks like it could be in a weakness versus strength situation.

It's not like the Browns can just run it. But they can use Watson's mobility to keep the Steelers from keying on Chubb, and they can count on Chubb to make superhuman plays. He has a track record of doing such things.

With Cam Heyward out and Nick Chubb coming to town, how will the Steelers adjust?

Over the next several weeks I'll be watching how the Browns use play-action and designed rollouts to continue to develop their offense. Goodwin could have had two touchdowns last week, and those deep plays aren't being tossed away. We've seen Steelers safety Minkah Fitzpatrick roaming the middle of the field against the Browns before, and he has made his share of big plays. It will be interesting to see how aggressive Stefanski wants Watson to be early, and where the Browns think they can attack the Steelers' secondary.

4. If this game becomes Steelers quarterback Kenny Pickett being forced to drop back and complete passes to the sideline or the deep middle, the Browns will win. And maybe win big. If Pittsburgh can run the ball, hit a few quick screens and get away from some tackles, it'll be able to move the ball. I've written a lot about the Browns' offense having an element of surprise and mystery on its side early in the season, and given the circumstances last week, the Steelers might have a little of that on their side Monday night, too.

When you're down 20-0 before you even get a first down, which happened to Pittsburgh in Week 1, your standard game plan goes out the window. Why were the Steelers down 20-0? Were they really that bad? Or are the San Francisco 49ers just that good? Let's go with all of the above and understand that Cleveland doesn't get to carry over any of its points from last week, either.

The Browns clearly like their defense and how their players fit in new defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz's schemes. The Steelers have a new coordinator, Teryl Austin, but they're still running much of the same defense they've been running for a long time. I expect both defenses to have success early, and I think both offensive play callers will be looking for favorable situations to mix in some things that are either new or designed to catch the opponent off guard in hopes of creating big plays.

5. I know Stefanski has addressed the Browns' awful history in Pittsburgh this week. I know he's told his players that the Steelers haven't lost a home Monday night game in more than 30 years and ran down some of the other numbers as a way of trying to fuel them, at least a little.



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How the Browns can put history behind them by defeating Steelers in Week 2

I also know that no ghost of the Steelers' past is going to bring down Chubb or keep Myles Garrett from recording strip-sacks. Yes, Steelers coach Mike Tomlin's teams have rebounded from awful performances before. But nothing in the NFL happens automatically or easily, and the Browns aren't playing last week's game, a 2007 game or any other game. They should see a Steelers team without Heyward and wide receiver Diontae Johnson and see one they can beat.

Since the NFL expanded the postseason in 1990 — there are lots of historical reference points this week — 64 percent of the teams that start 2-0 make the playoffs. Only 42 percent of teams that start 1-1 make the playoffs. Nobody knows what November and December might bring with injuries, bounces or matchups, but no historical references are necessary to believe that it's going to take a really good team to win road games in this edition of the AFC North. If the Browns are really as fast and nasty on defense as they looked last week, they'll go in and dictate the pace. The Browns are built for right now, for this moment and the kind of stage Monday night brings.

If they're not the same old Browns, they'll force turnovers and fight their way to 2-0.

6. If things go well for Cleveland, Chubb will have a big game. Njoku will have a big game. Watson and Stefanski will keep the Steelers guessing. The Browns' defense will make (and keep) Pickett uncomfortable.

The special teams units were an understated part of last week's domination, and they'll have to be good again. It was just one game, but last week we saw the blueprint for the Browns really playing bully ball if they can play with the lead.

What's the flip side? There's the obvious, like losing the turnover battle. Like giving up big plays. Like letting Watt and Highsmith hit Watson too often — or having to play from behind late with "Renegade" blaring on the stadium speakers and Watt rushing against a rookie. To me, the Browns win if they blend just enough offensive creativity with a Chubb-first game plan, and if their defense stays in situations that it can dictate with the pass rush. I think Cleveland is the better team, but I can't imagine Pittsburgh is actually as bad as it looked for most of Week 1.

Unless there are defensive touchdowns, it should be a low-scoring battle. Punting, field position and finishing tackles will matter. It sort of feels like first to 17 wins.



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The Browns' defense appears transformed under new coordinator Jim Schwartz

By Tom Withers, Associated Press

<https://apnews.com/article/browns-analysis-jim-schwartz-defense-8245779e01b6a99cf1deef9ff7389587>

CLEVELAND (AP) — The Browns' most significant acquisition this offseason wasn't on the field for a single snap in Sunday's season-opening win over Cincinnati.

Jim Schwartz received a game ball.

Cleveland's new defensive coordinator designed a plan that overwhelmed quarterback Joe Burrow and the Bengals, who managed just 142 total yards and six first downs in a rain-soaked 24-3 loss to the Browns.

With All-Pro end Myles Garrett leading the charge — while also showing off some basketball moves — the Browns pressured Burrow from the start, hurrying the newly minted \$275 million QB into making bad throws on a day when just gripping the ball was a challenge.

Burrow managed 82 yards passing — by far the worst performance of his NFL career — against a rebuilt Cleveland defense that showed off its depth, versatility, swagger and an aggressiveness that has defined Schwartz's career.

The fiery 57-year-old former Detroit head coach, who won a Super Bowl as Philadelphia's defensive coordinator in 2017, was hired by Cleveland coach Kevin Stefanski in January and tasked with repairing a defense that was awful last season.

So far, Schwartz has delivered.

With his input, Cleveland's front office revamped its defensive front, acquiring three-time Pro Bowl end Za'Darius Smith in a trade to pair with Garrett, and signing free agent end Ogbo Okoronkwo and tackle Dalvin Tomlinson.

On Sunday, Schwartz kept the Bengals and Burrow guessing by moving his linemen from side to side, from inside to outside. Cincinnati struggled to counter.

"In real time you can see it," Okoronkwo said. "They're pointing everywhere. They don't know who to block, who's dropping, who's coming. It's a beautiful thing. It all was executed perfectly."

Smith set the tone on the first play, coming off the left side and hitting Burrow just as he released the ball. Although Cleveland only had two sacks — Garrett essentially closed the game with his — the Browns were credited with 10 hits on Burrow.

Schwartz has the Browns playing fast and physical. And, maybe most important, with confidence.

From the moment he arrived, Schwartz was intent on making his mark. He's demanded excellence and accountability, and it doesn't take long to locate him on the practice field. Actually, you'll hear him before you see him.

"I'm not everybody's cup of tea," he said last week when asked about his coaching style.

But it's effective. Schwartz is building trust along with a Cleveland defense that couldn't have had a much better debut.



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"It worked out exactly how coach Schwartz said," Okoronkwo said. "So we listen to coach Schwartz, and in coach Schwartz we trust."

WHAT'S WORKING

Along with the defense's demolition job, Cleveland's often suspect special teams were on point.

Newly acquired kicker Dustin Hopkins made all three field-goal attempts in slippery conditions. Cleveland fans erupted in cheers that were mixed with relief when Hopkins split the uprights on his 42-yarder in the second quarter.

Hopkins credited long snapper Charley Hughlett and holder Corey Boroquez, who averaged 47.3 yards on seven punts.

WHAT NEEDS HELP

Like Burrow, Deshaun Watson had a tough time throwing what Stefanski called a "heavy ball" in the steady, soaking rain.

Watson finished 16 of 29 for 154 yards. Not bad, but he misfired on some makeable throws, including a deep one to Marquise Goodwin for a potential TD.

STOCK UP

Plenty of choices, especially on defense. But with the passing game compromised, the Browns turned to reliable running back Nick Chubb, who churned out 106 yards, averaging 5.9 per carry.

Chubb also had a team-high four receptions, perhaps a taste of how he'll be used more this season.

STOCK DOWN

Running back Jerome Ford bounced back nicely from a fumble on his first carry, but the Browns have to know they can count on the second-year back to fill in for Chubb without making mistakes.

Ford's promise as a rookie is one of the reasons the team didn't retain Kareem Hunt or D'Ernest Johnson.

Starting right tackle Jack Conklin suffered a season-ending left knee injury in the first half. It's the 29-year-old Conklin's second major injury in three seasons.

His loss will force massive rookie Dawand Jones onto the field earlier than expected. Jones held his own against the Bengals, and he'll get a tougher assignment next week — Steelers edge rusher T.J. Watt.

KEY NUMBER

2 — Sunday's win was only the Browns' second in Week 1 at home since 1999 in 18 tries. Cleveland has also won consecutive season openers for the first time since 1993-94.

NEXT STEPS



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A Monday night visit to Pittsburgh to face the Steelers, who are stinging from a Week 1 thumping by San Francisco. Watson hasn't been in Cleveland long, but already has a handle on one of the league's nastiest rivalries.

"They hate us. We hate them," he said.



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Cedric Tillman ready to 'go with the flow' as Cleveland Browns rookie nears NFL debut

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/09/09/browns-rookie-cedric-tillman-ready-go-flow-nfl-debut-cleveland-cincinnati-bengals-tennessee-draft/70757942007/>

BEREA — Cedric Tillman isn't worried about adjusting any kind of pregame ritual for Sunday's season opener against the Cincinnati Bengals. The Browns rookie receiver doesn't really have one to adjust.

"I [am a] go-with-the-flow kind of guy," Tillman told the Beacon Journal this week, "so whatever I'm feeling that day is usually what I do."

The Browns are hoping Tillman's feeling like the player they saw at the University of Tennessee. That's what led them to select him in the third round, No. 74 overall, in April's draft.

What Tillman is rightfully feeling is the anxiousness that comes with seeing one's NFL debut closing in fast. He's one of 10 Browns rookies who made the 53-man roster ahead of the opener, a number that includes seven draft picks, two undrafted free agents and one waiver-wire pickup (cornerback Kahlel Hailassie).

"I'm excited," Tillman said. "My teammates and I have been working really hard. We're all excited to go out there and play."

Cleveland Browns wide receiver Cedric Tillman (89) is tackled by New York Jets linebacker Jamien Sherwood (44), and cornerback Brandin Echols (26) during the Hall of Fame Game on Aug. 3 in Canton. Tillman may be one of 10 rookies on the Browns roster, but he stands alone in one regard. The 6-foot-3, 215-pound may not be a first-round pick, but he was their first draft pick.

That puts a certain level of expectation on him. Those expectations, though, don't always take into account the natural acclimation process a rookie goes through that first season.

During the preseason, Tillman fared well enough adjusting on the field. He had seven catches for 115 yards in four preseason games.

That is just the tip of the iceberg for him in the education process.

"Still learning everything," Tillman said. "Like I said, first NFL experience. Really just taking it day by day."

There was plenty for Tillman to process as he adjusted to the NFL experience. Some of it had nothing to do with his own individual abilities, but with various aspects of the Browns' offensive system.

The offense Tillman ran at Tennessee, especially his final two seasons under coach Josh Heupel, was one of the more unique ones in college football. That includes him being split out wide past the numbers on virtually every play, a high-tempo pace and a lack of huddling between plays.

Those adjustments, while they may seem minor, can be a major one for a rookie, especially on top of everything else a rookie is dealing with while climbing the learning curve.

"It's a lot for a rookie to come in, especially in the system where you never really got in the huddle," offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt said. "So the communication, the verbal information that was delivered in the huddle is new to him, so he's growing. I thought he had an excellent camp for a young guy, and he'll be instrumental for us throughout the course of the season as well."



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One thing that has helped Tillman is his approach on the practice field. Or, more specifically, his willingness to absorb what's going on during practice.

What that has done is allow him to minimize the amount of time Tillman has spent getting up to speed, because he hasn't been going over the same ground over and over because of not grasping the concept at hand.

"What's been most impressive about Cedric and I've been most pleased about is his ability to, when he makes a mistake, to correct that mistake," receivers coach Chad O'Shea said. "He's not a repeat error guy, and oftentimes we see players that are young, rookie players and young in their development, that repeat errors. He has definitely had some mistakes along the way, but he's corrected those things and he has improved."

Part of that is from Tillman's own background growing up as the son of former NFL receiver Cedric Tillman. Part of that is from his willingness to accept the tough coaching from O'Shea and others since he's come into the league.

There's also a big part of that from the environment within the position group. Tillman has sat back and watched veterans like Amari Cooper and Marquise Goodwin, and even those like Elijah Moore and Donovan Peoples-Jones who have less than five years of NFL experience, and tried to learn lessons from them.

The biggest one?

"Just how to be a professional," Tillman said. "Just watching those guys day in and day out, how they approach the game. Just trying to apply it to myself."



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How Maurice Hurst II ended up back with the Browns (and why he's so happy about it)

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/09/how-maurice-hurst-ii-ended-up-back-with-the-browns-and-why-hes-so-happy-about-it.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- It wasn't the most straightforward way to make the Browns 53-man roster.

But never underestimate the power of NFL bookkeeping to get the job done.

While Maurice Hurst II was initially waived by Cleveland on cutdown day, it wasn't due to anything regarding his preseason or style of play. The Browns wanted him back, but had to make way for linebacker Jordan Kunaszyk on the 53 before placing him on IR -- had they put him on IR initially instead of the 53, he would have had to miss the entire season, and not just the minimum four games.

Two days later, when the Browns were able to move Kunaszyk, Hurst was back in the building.

"They let me know pretty early that's what was going to go on, so I had a good understanding that they wanted me here and wanted me to play in Week 1," Hurst told cleveland.com on Wednesday. "I had a really good idea of that. So I was pretty understanding of what was going on beforehand."

Communication on Cleveland's part was key.

There wasn't much thinking involved after that for Hurst, who impressed throughout camp and the Browns' four preseason games.

"There's other teams that you kind of look at when you do get released like that and you kind of see the lay of the land," Hurst said. "But I was super excited to be with this team and excited with what we were doing and what Coach (Jim) Schwartz brings. And them taking the chance on me made all that more meaningful to be back here and helping this team win in whatever way possible."

Hurst initially signed with the Browns on March 18, agreeing to a one-year, \$1.24 million contract. It wasn't the kind of free agent deal he envisioned for himself, but after two seasons hampered by injuries, it's the one he got. And it's one he found motivation in throughout the spring and summer months.

He played in all four of the Browns preseason games, recording eight total QB pressures and 2.0 sacks, showing off his strength as an interior rusher.

"He did a really nice job just going back all the way to the spring to the summer, the preseason games," Kevin Stefanski said last week. "He acquitted himself well in all those reps that he got. A veteran, like you mentioned. Knows this game, knows how to operate in this scheme. So excited to have him."

Even though it's his first year in Cleveland, the Browns remained impressed with Hurst's knowledge of Schwartz's system, too.

That knowledge has come quickly for Hurst, which is part of what has made him an underrated addition to the D-line. The last two years Hurst was in San Francisco under defensive line coach Kris Kocurek -- a Schwartz mentee. Kocurek coached the defensive line under Schwartz from 2010-13 while the latter was serving as the head coach of the Lions.



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Dalvin Tomlinson called Hurst one of the “biggest technicians” along the line over the summer, and Hurst really took to becoming the guy his teammates came to with questions.

“It definitely can be a scheme that it’s difficult to break out old habits, so just helping each other kind of grow from that,” Hurst said. “And just piggybacking off of some of the techniques that we’ve all learned across the years. So things like using my hands and things like that -- like Dalvin has been really influential in helping me progress and using my hands more and not just jutting up field without hands and not really knowing how to control the man with my hands.”

Hurst’s other big asset this preseason has been the most basic.

His availability.

It’s a luxury for a guy who’s had the last two years derailed by injuries, playing in just two games over that time. Both of those appearances came in 2021 for the 49ers before ankle and calf injuries sidelined him the rest of the way. He suffered a torn bicep during 2022 training camp that cost him the entire year with San Francisco after he underwent surgery and was placed on injured reserve.

In Cleveland so far, Hurst has only missed one August practice due to getting poked in the eye -- an injury he still (jokingly) has a gripe about.

“I was mad they held me out practice, because I was like, ‘Man, I don’t want to miss anything this year,’” he said. “I wanted to have that perfect attendance going into the season, but certain things happened, so now I have a cool dark visor on during the games, which is nice for me.

“I’ve been extremely blessed to be in that position to make it through healthy and be able to play in all the preseason games and extend my snaps and not really miss practice for anything besides getting my eye poked out for a day.”

With all the work he’s done already, it’s undeniable that Hurst has an opportunity to revive his career in Cleveland.

Schwartz likes to rotate his D-linemen often, comparing them to relief pitchers in baseball, with the philosophy of wanting to keep guys fresh. Even just practicing that way has helped create depth that players, including Hurst, are excited for everyone to see with the season officially kicking off Sunday against the Bengals.

“We know how talented we are and it’s just a matter of putting that on film and we all have so much ability in that two-deep,” Hurst said. “When someone comes off the field, you don’t skip a beat, but you have someone with a new ability coming in. So it’s a really unique situation to be in and I’m extremely excited to see how it all plays out throughout this season.”



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Juan Thornhill is thinking big with this Browns defense and knows what it takes to get them there

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/09/juan-thornhill-is-thinking-big-about-this-browns-defense-and-knows-what-it-takes-to-get-them-there.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Browns safety Juan Thornhill has high expectations for his new team's defense this season. What we saw in the preseason, he believes, is just the start.

"We scored in like three straight preseason games, getting safeties, getting pick sixes and things like that," Thornhill said on Wednesday. "But I'm super excited about it because we haven't even had everyone out there."

We got a glimpse of the Browns defense in the second preseason game against Washington -- they notched a safety when Za'Darius Smith drew a hold in the endzone -- but the final preseason game against Kansas City offered the closest thing to reality.

Even then, projected starters like Myles Garrett, Grant Delpit, Anthony Walker Jr. and Sione Takitaki sat and Kansas City decided to rest their starters -- Shane Buechele started the game and he's on Buffalo's practice squad now -- so while it might not have been all-the-way- real, it was still spectacular.

Thornhill returned an interception for a touchdown on the Chiefs' second possession. Rodney McLeod picked off a pass on the next series. It was the type of dominant performance you want to see from a defense going against an overmatched offense.

This week, the Browns defense will get a real test against a group that, once again, should be one of the league's best passing attacks. Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow said on Wednesday he's ready to go and the Bengals boast the top receiving trio in the league with Ja'Marr Chase, Tee Higgins and Tyler Boyd.

This is the kind of test a defense looking to prove itself should want.

"I'm just super excited about it, getting the full package out there," Thornhill said.

He's not holding back, either, with how good he thinks it can be, even if people on the outside don't fully see it yet.

"We have a really good roster and they want to believe it, but they're not a hundred percent sure," he said. "But I mean I know that this team can be very special. It can be one of the best defenses of all time, honestly. This defense has that type of skillset here that we can be serious in this league."

Thornhill's confidence starts with the defensive coordinator, Jim Schwartz, who knows a thing or two about getting the best out of a unit. Schwartz has what is shaping up to be one of the best defensive lines in the league with Garrett and Smith bookending things. He has a two-time Pro Bowler in Denzel Ward at one corner and an up-and-coming Martin Emerson Jr. on the other side with Greg Newsome II, the Browns' 2021 first-round pick, in the slot.

Ward's status for the opener is still uncertain as he progresses through the league's concussion protocol, but if the Browns defense has a full deck of cards, Schwartz will be ready to deal.

"He always finds a way to pull a rabbit out of the hat," Thornhill said. "You never know what's coming, but I'm really excited about it."



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This defense has had talent before and Browns fans know as well as anyone how offseason bravado doesn't always translate to on-field success. Thornhill knows, too, talent is a good starting point, but it's not everything.

"Talent is a huge factor and some teams, they don't have all the talent, but they have that culture," Thornhill said. "I would say that here it's a little different. We have all the talent, now it's just time to bring it all together and bond with your brothers and do the right things off the field that's going to make us better on the field."

Thornhill, in some ways, is a microcosm of the Browns defense as a whole. The talent is there, but he feels like he hasn't been able to show people what he's capable of doing in the NFL. Kansas City selected him in the second round in 2019, but a torn ACL ended a promising rookie season before the playoffs and the Chiefs' first run to a Super Bowl title.

He didn't hesitate when he was asked if people have seen the best of him yet in his career.

"No, definitely not," he said. "I played pretty well in my rookie year, tore my ACL, second and third year was kind of a struggle just because I'm trying to bounce back from it."

He came back to play in every game the following two seasons, but admitted he didn't feel like himself until last season.

"They say it's nine months, but I tell people it's more like two years," Thornhill said. "Honestly, it's like nine months to get back on the field and to be able to function. But to actually feel like a hundred percent and back to yourself, it takes about two years."

He had to learn to trust his knee again.

"You're just constantly thinking about things," he said. "I remember there were times where there was a play that I could have made and I'm jumping to intercept the ball, but instead of looking at the ball, I'm looking at the ground to figure out how I'm going to land. Certain things like that can affect your play and, I mean, it showed, I'm missing a lot of plays, giving up touchdowns because of me thinking about my knee. But when you're not thinking about it, it allows you to make those plays."

He had what he thinks was one of his best seasons in 2022 and got rewarded by the Browns in free agency with a three-year, \$21 million deal. Getting paid hasn't changed his mindset of trying to prove people wrong. He noticed, for example, when Pro Football Focus put out a list of the Top 32 safeties in the league in June and he wasn't on it.

"No disrespect to anyone on this list but there is not 32 safeties better than I am," he tweeted.

He repeated the sentiment when the list was brought up on Wednesday.

"I can say confidently there's not 30 safeties that's better than me in this NFL league," he said. "So I got a chip on my shoulder, I got a lot to prove and I'm not going to really sit here and complain about it. I'm just going to go and put on on Sundays and just show the fans what I got."



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Which isn't dissimilar to the defense he's joining as a whole. The talent is there. People recognize it's there. The NFL, though, is about proving it on the field.

"It's simple, just go out there and play football and put up the numbers," Thornhill said. "That's the only way you do that."

After two up-and-down years, this is a defense with a lot to prove, just like Thornhill, now in his fifth season and ready to show the NFL world what he and this defense are truly capable of doing.



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Myles Garrett feeling at peace with himself and his game, wants to make most of what he believes is a special team

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/09/06/myles-garrett-feeling-at-peace-with-himself-and-his-game-wants-to-make-most-of-what-he-believes-is-a-special-team/>

The only way Myles Garrett would've looked more relaxed was in a hammock and flip-flops.

As the reporter approached for their annual interview prior to the start of the season, Garrett lay flat on his back on a large orange pad used to cushion the blow when players dive during drills. The 6-foot-4, 272-pound defensive end had discarded his helmet, jersey and shells after practice.

Garrett did the entire 12-minute interview in the same supine position, hands behind his head. The image matched his personal goal for the season, which begins Sunday against the Bengals at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

"Play freely," he told The Chronicle-Telegram on Monday. "It's about playing with no pressure, no burdens. It's a new year, it's a new team. Don't worry about the outside noise, whether that's offense, defense, special teams.

"We have the world in front of us and we have a whole bunch of talent. We have a bunch of guys that enjoy being around each other and want to see each other prosper. You don't get that a lot across the league. You usually have some kind of a hiccup or some kind of bump in the communication or in the chemistry. Right now, everyone's on the same page, everyone's on board and you can't squander opportunities you have like that. So I want to see us really just maximize the potential that we have and have fun doing it."

Garrett, 27, is a two-time first-team All-Pro, a four-time Pro Bowler and could join Hall of Famer Reggie White (1986-88) as the only players with 16 sacks in three straight seasons. The perception lingers that Garrett could do more.

As he strives for freedom, he acknowledged getting distracted by things he couldn't control in the past, such as the coaching or struggles of the offense.

"I feel like the majority of us did," he said. "It's hard not to get caught in stuff like that, but you have to have a level of maturity and focus and discipline to center yourself, center your teammates and bring everyone back on the task at hand and right the ship. And it's easier said than done for some people, but we have a lot of leaders and a lot of people who are willing to step up and be leaders when the time comes. So I think that won't be a problem."

A year later

The outside expectations for Garrett are immense and include strong leadership, which critics have questioned if he provides. He's more introverted and not as vocal as many traditional locker room leaders but was voted a captain for the second straight season and has been more hands on in tutoring the young ends.

His tenure hasn't been without flaws. He was suspended for the final six games in 2019 after hitting Steelers quarterback Mason Rudolph with a helmet and missed a loss to the Falcons last year with shoulder and biceps injuries sustained when he wrecked his Porsche 911 Turbo in a one-car crash.



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Not being available for his team deserves scrutiny, and Garrett was asked how the accident changed him.

"I'm very grateful for still being here and happy I still get to play this game with this group of guys," he said. "And it was very possible, if things were slightly different, the effect could have been majorly different."

"So very grateful that I had such a good group of people around me, friends, family, organization that was here for me when I needed it. And I had to adjust my game that season to compensate for things that I was going through. But I feel like we're now full-tilt and I can give my all to my team how it should be."

Garrett didn't want to spend much time reflecting on the accident, which followed a history of speeding.

"I remember my dad telling me a story what made him slow down," he said. "So I feel like there's always something that makes us re-evaluate what we're doing and how we're doing it."

The accident was another reminder that one decision can have a significant impact on the team.

"The Browns will always be the Browns, that name on the front of the jersey, whether I'm there or not there, it's going to carry on and continue to be as great as it is," Garrett said. "But those players that are on that team, they'll feel the impact of me not being there, whether it's my leadership or whether it's my play on the field through the week or on Sundays. Being able to be there for them is a privilege and an honor."

"So not being there, I know that that's definitely felt and I don't like letting people down, disappointing people, especially the guys that we've worked so hard around and with. So I'm just glad that we're in this situation now."

A little help

The line was transformed around Garrett in the offseason, creating optimism the defense will be significantly improved. With tackle Dalvin Tomlinson and ends Za'Darius Smith and Ogbo Okoronkwo lined up next to him, the hope is offenses won't be able to devote as much attention to Garrett.

"Any one of them can get off themselves. They can all win one-on-ones," he said. "But if I got to get double-teamed to take pressure off of them and allow them to make plays, so be it. It's not about my numbers or them helping me, it's about how we can help each other. We all want to see each other prosper and however the offense chooses to attack us, we're going to try to exploit them in whatever weaknesses that they display."

Garrett was the most double-teamed edge rusher in the league last year but still managed 16 sacks to tie the franchise record he set the previous year. He has 74.5 sacks in 84 career games, along with 142 quarterback hits, 77 tackles for loss, 13 forced fumbles, 13 passes defended and four fumble recoveries.

He wouldn't go as far as to call the consistent double teams a badge of honor.

"It's a level of respect," he said. "Some teams, especially how they do it with the tight end on the line or tight end following me wherever I go, teams are saying, 'We're picking this guy, putting a circle on him and we're going to try and take him out the game.' And so it's like a challenge in a way."

The goal of the revamped front is to make the choices difficult for the offense.

"The more guys you can throw at an offense, and what you're trying to do is create one-on-ones," coach



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Kevin Stefanski said. "Now, ultimately, you'd love to create one-on-ones for everybody at times, but you know that Myles gets a lot of attention. So that's something that the other side has to think long and hard about, how they want to dedicate their protection plan. Do they want to slide to Myles? Do they want to put a tight end over there? Do you want to put a running back over there? Do you want to max protect? Those are all things that each week teams think about when facing our rush."

Prime time

The freedom missing during games was abundant during training camp. Garrett wasn't allowed to hit quarterback Deshaun Watson, so left tackle Jedrick Wills Jr. was left to block him one-on-one as the offense concentrated on executing its plays.

Garrett dominated the matchup but wasn't ready to say this was his best camp in seven years.

"I don't really think about it like that, particularly for myself," he said, adding his big toe feels good after it was dislocated in February running the obstacle course at the Pro Bowl. "I'm sitting down, I'm watching film, I'm studying the other guys and trying to find things I can help them and try to motivate them."

"And I'm picking things up on myself. How can I improve this rep right here? Whatever it is, find something. Whether it's the burst I had after disengaging from a block or going for the ball and just trying to find what it is to take the next step, and there'll never stop being steps. No matter what kind of success that we have, we can always continue to improve."

That's the attitude Stefanski wants.

"I talked to him and all our guys about we want the best version of our guys and myself included," he said. "So you hope that every year you're getting a little bit better at something and another lap around the sun gives you some good perspective in that way. So, yeah, I put Myles in that category of somebody that's constantly growing, constantly getting better."

That's a scary thought for opponents.

"Myles is a beast," said safety Rodney McLeod, who signed in the offseason. "What can't he do? He's Superman out here and you'll see him running sprints with us in the DB group to being over there (with the) D-line. It is impressive to watch him up close and personal over this time and you really witness just what makes him great and it's all the little things that he does on a daily basis."



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Browns pass rusher credits those who 'without them I wouldn't be Za'Darius Smith today'

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/09/04/zadarius-smith-credits-high-school-teammates-opening-path-nfl-browns-vikings-packers-ravens-kentucky/70716951007/>

BEREA — Za'Darius Smith's football career was held in the hands of about 15 young men.

Smith was a going to be a senior at Greenville High School in Alabama in 2010 when the itch to play football for the first time overtook him. So, during the summer, he went to Greenville's coach, Ben Blackmon, to see if he could come out for the team.

"He was like, 'Man, I've been trying to get you to play for years,'" the Browns defensive end recalled in an exclusive interview with the Beacon Journal. "'But it wouldn't be right if I let you come out there and the senior teammates, your senior teammate been there all spring, all winter or summer. They've been basically working and you haven't, you've been playing basketball.'

"So he was like, 'I want you to do something for me. I want you to go ask all the seniors in your class to play football if they would be cool with you coming out to play.'"

More than a decade later, getting that approval still resonates for the three-time Pro Bowl end. Up until that point, it was basketball, not football, that was Smith's love.

Browns defensive end Za'Darius Smith warms up before drills June 6 in Berea.

However, once football took hold of Smith, it didn't let him go. He rode that love to a college education — first at East Mississippi Community College, where he won a national junior college championship in 2011, before spending his final two seasons at the University of Kentucky, where he developed into a fourth-round draft pick of the Baltimore Ravens who blossomed into nine-year NFL vet.

"They always say, man, treat people nice, man, you'll get treated the same way back," Smith said. "I was never mean to those guys. Like I said, they always wanted me to come out and play football, but I never did. And for them to just go off of, yeah, he'll be good out here. It all worked out, man. And without them I wouldn't be Za'Darius Smith today."

Those 15 high school classmates, though, were just the start. They would be, as they say, the top of the funnel.

Jimmy Brumbaugh finds 'hungry' Za'Darius Smith at East Mississippi CC

It was during his two seasons at East Mississippi Community College that Smith met the coach who became one of the biggest influences in his post-high school life. In his second year there, in 2012, the school hired Jimmy Brumbaugh to coach the defensive line and help lead the strength and conditioning program.

The two hit it off immediately. It didn't hurt that, unbeknownst to either of them initially, Brumbaugh and Smith's cousin, Davern Williams, had been teammates at Auburn University.

Nor, to Brumbaugh, that Smith had a voracious appetite — both literally and figuratively.

Defensive Line coach Jimmy Brumbaugh gives instructions during a University of Kentucky football spring practice April 2, 2014, at the Nutter Training Facility in Lexington, KY.

"It was really interesting when I first met him because he was only about 240 pounds, and in junior college



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we didn't have much to eat," Brumbaugh said by phone from Conroy, S.C., where he's currently the defensive line coach for Coastal Carolina. "He was always trying to get that cafeteria open to gain weight and do this and do that, but the thing of it was, like I said, he was always hungry. He always wanted to get better. He would always ask me questions and we would always go and do extra."

Their first year together at East Mississippi Community College was also their last one together there. It wasn't, though, their last one together.

Za'Darius Smith finds first dynamic pairing in Bud Dupree at Kentucky

Brumbaugh was hired in 2013 to be the defensive line coach on Mark Stoops' first coaching staff at Kentucky. He brought with him his prized pupil Smith, ready to step up his level of education on the football field to the SEC.

"A lot of times it's good that the guys don't have a whole bunch of bad habits, and he was a guy that didn't have a bunch of bad habits," Brumbaugh said. "But he had a skillset because he had length and he had good initial quickness and burst and so he had a good skillset. It was really learning the physicality aspect and different things.

"I think really at Kentucky when we moved him inside to play inside, it really helped him from a standpoint of being physical at the line of scrimmage, and it's carrying over to the National Football League."

Smith's two seasons at Kentucky coincided with the final two seasons of another eventual NFL pass rusher, Bud Dupree. With Smith rushing more from the inside and Dupree from the outside, the duo combined for 26 sacks and 36 tackles for loss over their two seasons in Lexington.

Pittsburgh Steelers linebackers Bud Dupree (48) and T.J. Watt celebrate a sack on Cleveland Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield (6) on Oct. 18, 2020, in Pittsburgh.

It wasn't the last time Smith found himself paired with a talented edge rusher. From Dupree to his new Browns teammate Myles Garrett, he's more than happy to have more edge rushers with him.

"I use that to my advantage," Smith said. "I would say having guys to compete with every day. Sometimes, a lot of guys come to practice and they don't want to practice sometimes. Guys get a little lazy when they get November, December sometimes, but I always had somebody to compete with me. If I didn't set the standard, that guy would set the standard that day and I would try to keep up with his standard."

Kentucky coach Mark Stoops sees a 'grown man' in Za'Darius Smith

Those early Kentucky teams under Stoops struggled to get their footing in the ultracompetitive SEC.

Despite Smith and Dupree, the 2013 Wildcats went 2-10, while their senior season ended in a 5-7 record.

"I've seen him a little pissed off, banging some people on the practice field, maybe getting mad," Stoops said by phone from Lexington last week. "He would always pull it together quick. I mean, he's a serious guy. That's one thing that just because he's pleasant and he has a smile and you've got a great nature about him, he's very serious about his craft.

"And that's what you love as a coach. ... You're going to affect somebody either in a positive way or a negative way every day, and those are the type of guys that I want around that are going to affect people in a positive way."

Part of that, Stoops said, is because of a certain maturity Smith brought with him to Kentucky. It was a maturity that belied someone who had just started playing football a couple of years earlier.



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Kentucky's Mark Stoops lets the refs know he is not happy with a call against Ball State on Sept. 2.

"What I always appreciated about him is I just felt like when you look at Za'Darius, you just feel like that's a grown man, even back then," Stoops said. "Certainly he is now after being a professional for so long. But at that point, and it was early in my tenure at Kentucky, my first years, and to have a guy come in and just the approach that he had, the work ethic, the way he carried himself, the way he was, he walked around and looked like a grown man and he acted like a grown man, and we needed that because we were far from a good team. But he certainly was a great, one of the first couple pieces to help us on our journey."

Za'Darius Smith matures as a pro as playing time grows with Ravens

It's been nearly a decade since Smith's journey took him from Kentucky to the NFL. It led him to Ravens, and he credits the likes of Elvis Dumervil and C.J. Mosley for being the early influences on transforming him into a pro.

Part of that, Smith acknowledged, was learning to deal with the circumstances. Over his first three years with the Ravens, he played in 42 games, but only started eight combined games.

Smith's fourth season in 2018, which was also his final one in Baltimore, was when the breakthrough started. He played in all 16 regular-season games, starting eight, while recording 8.5 sacks.

Browns quarterback Josh McCown fumbles as he is sacked by Ravens linebacker Za'Darius Smith in Baltimore's 28-7 win.

"Going into year four, I had the opportunity to play more," Smith said. "My first three years, I didn't get it. I struggled a lot with what I was just talking about, but year four it clicked for me and I think I led the team in sacks that year, man. And from then on out they've been up ever since."

Smith's journey took him in 2019 to Green Bay, where he was a Pro Bowler in his first two seasons. He recorded a career-high 13.5 sacks that season, then followed it up with 12.5 sacks in 2020.

A back injury sidelined Smith for most of 2021, and he eventually signed with the Minnesota Vikings, for whom he went on to a third Pro Bowl season with 10.5 sacks. However, the Vikings sent him to the Browns in mid-May, along with sixth- and seventh-round picks in 2025, for fifth-round picks in 2024 and 2025.

"Z, that's my guy," Browns defensive tackle Dalvin Tomlinson said early in training camp. "Yeah, his energy he brings to practice every single day is amazing. He helps the young guys with technique and things he's learned over the years on different teams, and he shares his knowledge like we all do and it's just great how he's still willing to learn and still a student of the game."

Cleveland Browns get a 'sage' version of Za'Darius Smith

The Smith who arrived in Cleveland is one who's no longer just hoping for his fellow seniors to approve of him coming out for the team. He's not the undersized community college lineman trying to add weight, or the NFL rookie trying to find his way.

Instead, Smith's the sage veteran, trying to impart the lessons of his own journey.

"When you're a younger guy, man, you don't have any patience," Smith said. "And as you get older, you know certain things are going to happen when it happens. And for me, I've had that. I've had certain times where they try to put me at a position where I wasn't comfortable with but, hell, I still had to learn it."

"I try to tell the young guys today, if they're trying to put a lot on your plate, you can get full off of it if you



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do it right. So you can make a lot of money. But, for me, I've learned that, man, and I took all my tools, I took all my tools and want to basically pass it down to the younger guys."

In a way, it's Smith paying things forward. It's paying forward the lessons he learned as a younger player himself in the NFL from players like Dumervil and Mosley.

It's paying forward the lessons of college. It's paying forward the teachings of Brumbaugh and Stoops and other coaches.

Maybe more than anything else, it's paying forward what those 15 or so young men in Greenville, Ala., did for Smith to change his life forever.

"I can't thank them enough, man," Smith said. "I need to get back home to do something for that Class of 2011. Those guys who basically helped me get to where I am today. Like I said, if they would've said no, man, I don't know where I'd be at right now."



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Ronnie Hickman, Mohamoud Diabate thrilled to make team but know work's only getting started

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

https://www.brownszone.com/2023/09/03/ronnie-hickman-mohamoud-diabate-thrilled-to-make-team-but-know-works-only-getting-started/#goog_rewarded

As roster cuts were being made Tuesday, safety Ronnie Hickman flashed back to draft weekend in April. He didn't get a call during the seven rounds despite being a fixture at Ohio State for two years, leaving him with an uphill climb to make an NFL team.

He knew the phone would ring this time ... one way or the other.

"I want to say around like 10:30 in the morning," Hickman said last week. "I was laying in bed. I knew the call was coming at some point. It kind of felt like draft day all over again, I was joking with my family."

Pretty soon they were celebrating, the joy sweeter after going undrafted.

"Extremely special," he said. "A lot of emotions. So just kind of using those emotions to drive me and help me get to the point to where I'm at now."

A spot on the initial 53-man regular-season roster was the first goal, but Hickman realizes he can't relax. The roster changes throughout the year, so nothing's guaranteed.

"The rent's due every day, for real," he said. "So it's a small sigh, but ... you gotta earn it every day."

Linebacker Mohamoud Diabate has traveled a similar path to Hickman's and shares a mindset. He got the good-news call from general manager Andrew Berry as he relaxed in the hotel.

"He told me he was proud of me," said Diabate, who wasn't drafted out of the University of Utah. "Initial reaction was just happiness. Just really excited to get to work. It's not really too big of a celebration, in my opinion. It's just, yes, now I have the opportunity to keep going, keep working, keep improving, keep doing what I plan on doing in this league."

"So as long as I keep my mindset on improving every day and becoming a better football player, a better teammate, being better at every aspect of the game, everything will be all right."

Diabate and Hickman trusted their agents with the negotiations that led them to Cleveland after the disappointment of not being drafted. The Browns jumped on the chance to sign them.

"We were really excited about getting both," assistant general manager/vice president of player personnel Glenn Cook said. "It's the wild, wild West post-draft, so you've got to be aggressive with anybody that you're interested in. And those two, we definitely put our gas down on the pedal to acquire them."

He credited the college scouts with identifying them as quality prospects.

"They did a great job of putting us in position to be ready post-draft to sign guys like Mohamoud and Ronnie and we saw the talent, we saw the potential and then they came here and they performed," Cook said. "So it started with them and just the coaching staff doing a great job of getting those guys ramped up, putting them in position to make plays and then ultimately they did it."



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Hickman and Diabate showed up throughout training camp but caught the eye and earned the affection of fans by making big plays in the preseason. Hickman (6-foot-1, 209 pounds) had three interceptions, and Diabate (6-4, 225) made a tackle in the end zone for a safety vs. the Eagles and added a forced fumble.

"This game is about opportunity," Hickman said. "You never know when your number's called, but when your number's called, you got to make the play, and not only for yourself but for your teammates."

Hickman and Diabate are behind veterans on the defensive depth chart but could see the field right away on special teams. They wouldn't have made the team without being able to contribute in the kicking game.

"If I'm being honest, the most important," said Hickman, who predicted a national championship for the Buckeyes. "Whenever you're on the field, you want to make a play and allow the coaches to trust you and the players to trust you. So whenever you get a chance, you got to make the most of it."

The lesson was taught by veteran safety Rodney McLeod, who's in his 12th season after going undrafted. Safety D'Anthony Bell is another source of inspiration after making it as an undrafted rookie last year.

"A big thing that I'm fortunate to be a part of was just being able to be a sponge to a guy like Rodney, a guy with a lot of years and experience under his belt and luckily he was willing to share it all," Hickman said. "Whether it was questions just off the field, on the field. He was a guy who was an open book."

"I was right in D'Anthony's ear, just because he came from it. He did the exact same thing I did. So he's been a huge help, as well."

A quick mindset reset was required after the shock and sadness of not getting drafted, as Hickman understood his goals were still attainable.

"A hundred percent," he said. "Things happened quick and there's still a lot of people who would kill to be in the shoes that I was in, being an undrafted guy. So once you think about it from that perspective and realize that you got a chance to do something 1 percent got to do and realize that it's a blessing, it kind of worked out."

Diabate quickly settled in and loves "everything about being a Cleveland Brown."

"So I was really happy to know that that was going to continue," he said. "Very happy to have the opportunity to keep showing what I'm about."

"I definitely appreciate all the Cleveland fans having my back and wanting me to represent this team. That means a lot. So love and respect to all of them, all the Cleveland Browns fans around the nation."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Here's how Browns star Nick Chubb is using comic book videos and art to connect with fans

By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/09/05/browns-nick-chubb-batman-sunday-knight-comic-book-art-hype-video-nfl-week-1-bengals/70592231007/>

After Nick Chubb saw “The Batman” movie last year, the Browns four-time Pro Bowl running back armed his utility belt with a new idea.

A monologue delivered by Batman actor Robert Pattinson late in the film motivated Chubb to write his own speech for a hype video he and one of his close friends, Nate Jones, had envisioned.

“We took that and ran with it,” Chubb told the Beacon Journal.

Nick Chubb's Batman character in the final Sunday Knight Comic poster of the 2022 NFL season. It turns out the man many consider the NFL's best pure ball carrier — and the ultimate strong, silent type — has the ability to tap into a creative side, especially when his favorite superhero is involved.

The hype video posted on Chubb's Instagram profile two days before the 2022 season opener includes footage of him training at his alma mater of Cedartown High School in Georgia interspersed with Browns highlights and comic book-style artwork.

The video has received more than 68,000 likes on Instagram, and the positive feedback prompted Chubb and Jones to collaborate on the weekly release of comic book-themed art throughout last season.

For the second consecutive Browns season, a collection of artwork known as Sunday Knight Comic will be unveiled and sold online.

This time, there will be one comic produced each month instead of one every week, Jones said in a recent phone interview, and another video is in the works to unveil the first piece of art of 2023 before the Browns host the Cincinnati Bengals in Sunday's season opener.

The Sunday Knight Comic illustrations depict Chubb as Batman battling villains based on the mascots of Browns opponents. They're printed on posters and hoodies, both of which can be found on [SundayKnightComic.com](https://www.sundayknightcomic.com).

“It's fun, for sure,” Chubb said. “I mean, everybody loves Batman, and I kind of make that my identity here. It works for me and Cleveland — the dark, gloomy city it is.”

Nick Chubb's Batman character in Sunday Knight Comic before the Cleveland Browns opened the 2022 season against the Carolina Panthers.

How Batman helped the friendship of Cleveland Browns running back Nick Chubb and Nate Jones grow. Chubb and Jones bonded while the latter served as a student assistant running backs coach at the University of Georgia when Chubb was a Bulldogs freshman.

Later, Jones got out of the coaching business and started a media company.

So when Chubb sought to connect with football and Batman fans through a hype video, he enlisted Jones. And Jones brought videographer and producer Randy Olson into the fold for the project.

“Nick gets hit up by every talented person in America to do work with him,” said Jones, who was raised in



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Gainesville, Georgia. “But he is so loyal to his friends and his hometown people and the city of Cedartown and his friends from Georgia that he loves sharing his success with the people that mean the most to him.”

Nick Chubb's Batman character in Sunday Knight Comic before the Cleveland Browns played the Atlanta Falcons in Week 4 of the 2022 NFL season. Chubb is a native of Georgia. On the billboards in the background of the poster, Chubb is illustrated on the left as a University of Georgia player and on the right as a Cedartown High School player.

One of the reasons Chubb, 27, and Jones, 31, grew close is because they possess an affinity for the Dark Knight.

“The only toys that I had growing up were Batman toys,” Jones said, “so we both have this weird obsession with Batman.”

Last year, Chubb, Jones and some of their friends visited a movie theater together to watch “The Batman.” Chubb and Jones left the theater discussing how they wanted to feature a Pattinson-esque monologue in the hype video.

“We were like, ‘Dang, that gave us chill bumps!’” Jones said. “And [Chubb] was like, ‘I’ve got to recreate that for the video.’”

“We walked away, and it was like, ‘That’s it! We need a monologue from Nick talking in the tone of Batman, using some workout clips and some comics.’ So that’s what we built.”

An artist overseas and Cleveland rideshare drivers played key roles in the development of Sunday Knight Comic

Another breakthrough occurred when Olson found an artist, Ezequiel Rubio Lancho, through Instagram to create the Sunday Knight Comic images. Rubio Lancho lives in Spain, but he communicated with Jones, Olson and occasionally Chubb through direct messages to bring their imaginations to life.

“[Chubb] wanted to make it about the people of Cleveland and get them excited through his story and his obsession with Batman,” Jones said. “... We would explain in detail our vision, and [Rubio Lancho] would come up with it.

“I would talk to Uber drivers when I came and stayed with Nick and would go to [Browns] games and ask Uber drivers what the most iconic Cleveland symbols were. So in each poster, we kind of built in different subtle shout-outs to the city through conversations with Uber drivers and people that I know in the city.”

Nick Chubb's Batman character in Sunday Knight Comic before the Cleveland Browns played the Los Angeles Chargers in Week 5 of the 2022 NFL season. Chubb wanted Zeus to be depicted in this poster, Chubb's close friend Nate Jones said.

Chubb provided input at times and approved each installment of Sunday Knight Comic before it went public.

“There were certain things that Nick had opinions about,” Jones said. “He really likes Zeus. So Week 5 when we played the Chargers, that artwork of Zeus spiking the thunderbolts on Nick’s Batman character was inspired by him.”

Operating Sunday Knight Comic “was more of a hobby than it was a full-time job,” Jones said, and it netted less than \$1,000 for the entire season.



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Chubb noted “winning would help” sales. Because he is the epitome of a team-first player who's focused on the Browns emerging victorious, Chubb was reluctant to promote Sunday Knight Comic on social media during the week of a loss.

When times are good, though, Chubb relishes opportunities to remind fans about his passion for Batman, something he's learned he has in common with many of them.

“I do enjoy it just because it's something I'm really interested in — my love for Batman — so it makes it easier for me to be all in,” Chubb said. “I mean, Nate tells me to post stuff [on social media] all the time. I don't really do it, just because it's not who I am, but it definitely makes it easier for me.”

Cleveland Browns are glad Batman has given Nick Chubb something in common with so many fans who are starving for wins like he is

A few years ago, Browns offensive right tackle Jack Conklin revealed he had begun broaching the subject of Batman with Chubb in an attempt to lure the introverted star out of his shell. Since then, Conklin has been delighted to see Chubb's enthusiasm for the Caped Crusader catch on with the Cleveland fan base.

“He is a quieter guy, and it's cool to see him find his way of connecting,” Conklin said. “He doesn't have to go out of his way to act like something different. He's his own person.

“Above all, he's a great person. We all know what type player he is. He's a generational player. It's awesome to see him stick to who he is and be who he is.”

Browns running back Nick Chubb signs autographs for fans on Oct. 9, 2022.

The theme of the speech Chubb wrote for the 2022 hype video is centered on Browns fans — and the elite runner they adore — being fed up with losing.

“Five years in with nothing to show for it really has me questioning everything,” Chubb, a 2018 second-round draft pick (No. 35 overall) of the Browns, said in the video. “Have I done enough? I still feel like I can do a lot more. I'm finally starting to understand now. My only goal is to protect the people of Cleveland and lay everything down on the line for my teammates.

“No one else is coming to save us, but everyone is out to destroy us. But no more of that — no more bad luck, no more mistakes, no more embarrassments, no more excuses. If you aren't with us, you're against us.”

A Cleveland Browns Star Rises: Nick Chubb's Batman fandom has origin story centered on inspiration

With the Browns coming off a record of 7-10, Chubb's message is just as relevant now as it was a year ago. A new season will rise from the ashes when the Bengals visit Cleveland Browns Stadium for Week 1.

“More than anything in the world, he loves the people in Cleveland,” Jones said. “He loves the fans.

“He doesn't say much to the media, so anything that he can do to give [fans] excitement and joy and share the same passions with them that he has, he wants to do it.”

Chubb's legacy as a Cleveland sports hero will only continue grow if he can help the Browns achieve the level of success he craves.

Nick Chubb is a fixture at high school: How Nick Chubb remaining 'one of the guys' at his alma mater in



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Cedartown, Georgia, keeps him ready for Browns season.



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Safety Rodney McLeod a Browns coach on the field

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald

<https://www.news-herald.com/2023/09/04/safety-rodney-mcleod-a-browns-coach-on-the-field/>

The new league year in the NFL begins with a wave of free agency signings, followed by the draft, followed by signing undrafted rookies, followed by carefully selecting veteran free agents still unsigned.

Rodney McLeod was part of the latter group when the Browns signed him on May 5. He was one of those undrafted rookies in 2012. The St. Louis Rams signed him to a three-year, \$1.44 million contract two days after the draft ended. Eleven years later, he is still going strong. He is the poster boy to show other undrafted rookies how hard work can result in a long career.

“Just think about what Rod has done in his career,” safeties coach Ephraim Banda said. “That’s another undrafted free agent who’s been in this league for twelve years, and how his play in every room he’s ever been in raised the level of everyone in the room.”

McLeod will be an important part of the defense when the Browns open their season Sept. 10 against the Bengals at Cleveland Browns Stadium. The Bengals are likely to open with three receivers — Ja’Marr Chase, Tyler Boyd and Tee Higgins — which means McLeod could be on the field for the opening snap.

“He has a lot of experience in this scheme, so he kind of came right in and could run it immediately,” head coach Kevin Stefanski said after practice Sept. 4. “He has a heady way about how he plays.

“I can’t tell you how many times he’s calling out routes before they happen just because he’s seen a bunch in his career. So I think one of his strong suits is just his ability to diagnose things quickly when looking at the offense.”

McLeod played four seasons for the Rams and then became an unrestricted free agent in March 2016. Several teams, including the Browns, tried to sign him. He ended up with the Eagles. His arrival coincided with the arrival of a new defensive coordinator in Philadelphia — Jim Schwartz. Schwartz is in his first year as defensive coordinator for the Browns.

McLeod and Schwartz were together for five seasons in Philadelphia. McLeod started every game he played in during that span. He intercepted nine passes from 2016-20. His experience in Schwartz’ defense makes him a coach on the field for the Browns.

“It’s helped tremendously,” McLeod said. “Me being in this defense for five years of my career and winning the Super Bowl (2017 season), just having a lot of experience on tape, able to come in and just be an extra set of eyes and able to share my experience and help guys get up to speed a little quicker.”

Cornerback Denzel Ward did not practice Sept. 4 because he is still in concussion protocol. Ward was injured Aug. 26 in a preseason game with the Chiefs.

Stefanski has not announced a timetable for Ward’s return. McLeod said he expects Ward to be ready for the Bengals.

“We’re encouraged that he’ll be available for us,” McLeod said. “We’re allowing Denzel to take the time necessary, doctors to do their job and hoping that he’s there when we need him. When he’s on the field, he’s a weapon for us, somebody who we need come Sunday in order for us to have great success.



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"But if he's not, it's next man up. We hold everybody to the same standard and expect the same results."

The Browns top three cornerbacks if Ward doesn't play would be Greg Newsome, Martin Emerson and Kahlel Hailassie or Mike Ford.



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Jerome Ford back after hamstring injury, and team confident he's ready to be No. 2 RB

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

https://www.brownszone.com/2023/09/02/jerome-ford-back-after-hamstring-injury-and-team-confident-hes-ready-to-be-no-2-rb/#goog_rewarded

CLEVELAND — The preseason wasn't what the Browns envisioned for Jerome Ford.

With Ford slotted to take the leap into the No. 2 running back role in his second season, the organization hoped for a full training camp and a couple of exhibition games to get him prepared. The strategy went out the window when he left practice Aug. 7 with a strained hamstring.

Despite the time away from the field — he didn't play in the preseason and only returned to practice Tuesday — the plan never changed. He will open the season Sept. 10 as the top backup to Pro Bowler Nick Chubb.

"It meant a lot to me," Ford said Thursday of the unwavering support. "Ever since I got here, Coach (Kevin) Stefanski, AB (general manager Andrew Berry), they've always been in my ear, always a help, anything that I need, and that's just a good thing and I'm grateful for them."

The Browns were confident enough in Ford, a fifth-round pick out of the University of Cincinnati, they let No. 2 back Kareem Hunt leave in free agency and didn't add a veteran behind Chubb.

"Jerome has had a very nice progression in getting more comfortable in our scheme and just by nature of time spent in the meeting room and with the coaches," assistant general manager/vice president of football operations Catherine Raiche said. "He's just again shown progression every step of the way, both on field or in the classroom. And those were things that helped the coaches with feeling comfortable."

Dustin Hopkins believes timing is right for him to kick in 'notorious' Cleveland

The season is a week away, yet uncertainty remains on just how he'll be used.

The last few years Hunt replaced Chubb on third down and about every third series. Chubb's role is expected to grow, including on third down and as a pass catcher.

Receiver Elijah Moore will also be used out of the backfield, so Ford figures to get his time giving Chubb a breather and making sure he isn't overused.

"I don't know the role yet, but whatever role I'm given, I'm ready to do," he said. "Coach has been preparing all of us for everything, so whether Nick's helmet comes off or something or he needs a shoe tied on the sideline, we'll be ready for whatever the situation is."

Ford said he wasn't worried the hamstring injury would cause him to miss the start of the season, is feeling "pretty good" and ready to roll. He lamented not playing in the preseason after getting only eight carries for 12 yards as a rookie.

"Just seeing everybody compete and not being able to be out there and compete and have fun with the team and jell with everybody while playing football, it was definitely disappointing," he said.

He stayed on top of the playbook and game plans.

"Meeting with coaches and the fact that if you don't show up to meetings you get fined, so definitely



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trying to avoid fines,” Ford said. “But also, of course, wanting to stay in phase with everybody and what everybody else was learning, going to meetings, taking notes and still keeping the same routine even though I’m not practicing.”

The coaches trust Ford as a receiver out of the backfield given his history as a wideout. The other key to playing on third down is pass protection, and Stefanski said he’ll be ready despite the lack of playing time as a rookie and in the preseason.

“Disappointed that he didn’t get preseason reps, but he’s played for us before,” Stefanski said. “He played in the preseason last year. He played in games last season. So he’s somebody that we do have a lot of confidence in.”

Ford’s greatest impact as a rookie came as the kickoff returner. He missed four games on injured reserve with an ankle injury but averaged 24.1 yards on 30 returns. With return specialist Jakeem Grant Sr. out for the year with a ruptured patellar tendon, Ford or newly acquired running back Pierre Strong Jr. is likely to handle kickoffs.

Ford said he “definitely” would like that.

“We’ll see,” Stefanski said. “Obviously Jerome did it for us last year, did a nice job. So he’s certainly a candidate, but we have multiple guys that can do it.”

Early in camp Chubb raved about Ford’s speed and versatility and noted he’s “matured a lot more” in Year 2. Ford credited Chubb for teaching him to be a pro.

“Nick does literally everything the right way,” Ford said. “I don’t think Nick ever had a fine. The way he warms up, gets ready for practice. He’s there late in the ice tub, cold tub, pretty much everything, the way he carries himself.

“I’m just starting to be able to get into my groove where I can be like, this is what I need to do before practice, I know I got to get here a little bit earlier and I’m going to stay a little bit later.”

As he tries to get in game shape by the opener, Ford’s applying lessons learned from Chubb, including running about 40 yards after each carry in practice.

“That’s something that he taught us to do,” Ford said. “So I feel like I do enough of that throughout the days and I killed myself to practice this week. I should be ready.”

Ford mentioned avoiding fines twice but said that hasn’t been a problem.

“No, not really, but it is pretty scary to find out somebody’s taking some money out your check,” he said. “It ain’t fun at all.”



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Deshaun Watson elected among five season captains

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/31/deshaun-watson-elected-among-five-season-captains/#goog_rewarded

CLEVELAND — The Browns had one change among their captains from last year.

It's a big one.

Quarterback Deshaun Watson was elected a captain in a vote by the players, joining defensive end Myles Garrett, left guard Joel Bitonio, linebacker Anthony Walker Jr. and long snapper Charley Hughlett. Watson wasn't a captain a year ago, as he opened his first season in Cleveland by serving an 11-game suspension following more than two dozen sexual misconduct accusations.

Dustin Hopkins believes timing is right for him to kick in 'notorious' Cleveland

His selection this season speaks to the dramatic change in circumstances. He said early in training camp he's in a much better headspace and said recently he's taken ownership of the offense.

Notes: Cade York clears waivers, chooses Titans' practice squad

"Deshaun, that's very, very natural for him to lead," coach Kevin Stefanski said Thursday after practice at Cleveland Browns Stadium. "I think he's comfortable leading from out in front. I think he's comfortable from leading and letting his teammates get credit and that's just something that he's always done his whole life.

"And just the way he's integrated himself into this football team is impressive to watch. From the course of the moment he got here till now, just seeing how he's gotten to know everybody on his team, how he pushes them, how he motivates them. I think you're seeing a lot of examples of high-quality leadership from Deshaun in particular."

Browns make cornerback switch, sign 15 guys to practice squad

Stefanski became coach in 2020, and last year was the first time he had season-long captains. Garrett, Bitonio, Walker and Hughlett were picked then, too. Running back Nick Chubb was the fifth one.

The players will select a game captain each week to serve as the sixth captain for the coin toss. Stefanski announced the season captains to the team in the post-practice huddle.

Zone Coverage Podcast

"I've said it before, leadership comes in all different styles and it comes in different shapes and sizes and you vote for captains and it is really important," Stefanski said. "We also have a leadership committee and we have players represented from every position there. So you don't need that C (on the jersey) to determine that you're a leader."

The leadership committee is comprised of a player from each position group.

"That's a group that I talk to every week about all things under the sun," Stefanski said. "And then your captains are the group that you send out to midfield and they kind of represent who you are and what



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you're about."



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Browns' Dustin Hopkins blocking out the noise of kicking in his 'notorious' new home

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/08/30/dustin-hopkins-embraces-challenge-notorious-new-home-cleveland-browns-cade-york-nfl-kicking-trade/70716727007/>

BEREA — Kickers know and kickers talk. One of the things they talk about is where they have to ply their trade.

Dustin Hopkins has been in many of those conversations. One place in particular, has come up often when they talk about the most "notorious" places to kick.

It's the place where Hopkins will now call home: Cleveland Browns Stadium.

"You've got a handful of places in the league that are notorious, and Cleveland's one of them," said Hopkins, who was acquired by the Browns Monday from the Los Angeles Chargers for a 2025 seventh-round pick. "I'd say Buffalo's up there, maybe a Chicago, and I'm sure there's some places I'm missing. ... They're on the lake. You're up north. You're in a tough division. There's nothing blocking the wind coming off the lake. It's just sweeping in there."

It's the environment which has swallowed up many a kicker since Phil Dawson, who handled the Browns kicking from their 1999 franchise rebirth until 2012. The most recent was Cade York, who lasted one season and a subsequent preseason before being cut on Tuesday after being a fourth-round draft pick in 2022.

The trade for Hopkins was a direct result of York's kicking inaccuracies, which plagued his rookie season. The second-year pro, though, became expendable when those struggles carried into this preseason, including critical misses late in the Browns final two preseason games in Philadelphia and Kansas City.

That led the Browns to pull the cord on keeping around York despite having expended a high mid-round draft pick.

"It's really tough," assistant general manager/vice president of player personnel Glenn Cook said Wednesday. "Cade's super competitive. He cares a lot. I'm sure he wanted things to be different. I think everybody's disappointed probably with how it played out, but all of these decisions are tough when you're trying to make these types of calls."

The call came to Hopkins, who spent essentially the last two seasons kicking in almost perfect conditions in Southern California. The veteran kicker spent at least parts of seven years with the Washington Commanders, going 163-of-194 on field goal from 2015 until he was released six games into the 2021 season.

The Chargers picked him up for the final 11 games of that season, then started last season with him. He was 27-of-30 on field goals with Los Angeles.

However, Hopkins would be limited to just five games last season due to a hamstring injury. When he returned this year, he found himself in a training camp battle with the kicker who replaced him down the stretch last year, Cameron Dicker.

"I had had an honest conversation with Tom (Telesco), the (general manager) for the Chargers, and basically just asked him, did you see me in y'all's future or did y'all see you going with Cam?," Hopkins said.



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"And he was honest with me, told me, which was awesome. He just let me know."

What Telesco didn't let Hopkins know about was where the possible destination was going to be. That is, until about an hour before word of the trade leaked out.

Even then, the fact it was Cleveland was a slight stunner to Hopkins, who acknowledged it wasn't a spot he has contemplated heading. Now he comes to a place which has spent the last decade as a kicker's graveyard, in part because it's a place kickers themselves speak of like old mariners would of a legendary sea monster.

Hopkins, though, isn't allowing those thoughts to creep into his mind, especially before he ever kicks a field goal in the stadium. He did not try a field goal, but was 2-of-3 on point-after kicks, in his lone regular-season appearance in Cleveland while with Washington in 2020.

That first chance will come on Thursday, when the Browns hold the final practice of the week at the stadium. They'll have the weekend off after that before coming back to start game-week preparations for the Sept. 10 season opener against the Cincinnati Bengals.

"I don't read too much into external things just because I don't think it's helpful," Hopkins said. "I try to control what I can control. The location, obviously this is a notorious place to kick. It's a tough place to do this job. At this point in my career, I always tell myself, I try to be focused on the process and not the results."

"Obviously we're in a results-oriented business. I know the results eventually have to be there. But I tell myself I'm process-oriented and the results will come, so kicking in a place like this and knowing that I need to be at my best is kind of an exciting challenge, even though a tough one at the same time."



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Marquise Goodwin is more grateful for life and his Browns opportunity 'because it could've very well ended'

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/08/marquise-goodwin-is-more-grateful-for-life-and-his-browns-opportunity-because-it-couldve-very-well-ended.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Marquise Goodwin danced his way onto the field on the first day of Browns training camp at The Greenbrier Sports Complex, and never stopped smiling even though he was sidelined with bloodclots in his legs and lungs the whole time.

Watching him mentor young receivers such as Cedric Tillman and Elijah Moore, you never would've guessed the harrowing ordeal he went through in the spring when he was diagnosed with the potentially life-threatening clots after experiencing shortness of breath.

Had he not caught them in time, he knows he might not be around to enjoy his 11th NFL season and those sweet hugs and kisses from his toddler daughter and son after practice.

"I'm just more grateful," Goodwin, activated off the non-football injury list on Sunday, said. "I think my perspective has changed in that sense. Just more grateful for life, more grateful for opportunity. Because it could have very well ended. It could have been my last play in minicamp, so I'm glad just to be back on the field for real."

The diagnosis of clots that could've derailed his career came as a shock to Goodwin, 32. A world-class speedster, he lit it up in Browns minicamp, catching two long bombs from Deshaun Watson, and everyone imagined the possibilities of stretching the defense. But then he had to admit he was unusually winded.

"It was more alarming than scary," he said. "I'm protected. I'm guided by God, so I really don't have too much fear in anything. I know it's all in his hands and out of my control, but I was kind of alarmed at the news."

Despite a regimen of bloodthinners and a period of rest, Goodwin had no doubt in his mind he'd be back.

"That's why I stayed here every day with a smile on my face," he said. "Positive attitude because I knew I was coming back."

Did doctors assure him he'd be back?

"Nobody can even guarantee if I'll be alive tomorrow," he said. "Credit to the doctors though, for all the hard work that they did to help get me back, the trainers, (head trainer Joe Sheehan) and his staff did an incredible job in helping me make sure that I was safe every day and to get back in full health."

He could easily have stayed home with his wife, Morgan, and their two kids for those first nine days of camp rather than stand out in the heat every day, taking mental reps from the sidelines and wishing he could practice. But he insisted on being with his teammates.

"I love being out there and just having fun," Goodwin said. "I'm 32, I'll be 33 in November, and what I found out playing football is that if you don't have fun with this game, it could be a long, very long year. So just credit to my teammates for embracing me and allowing me to be myself, to come out and smile and just be a happy dude and to dance and sing and do whatever it is that I feel when I'm out on the field. As long as I'm taking care of business."



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Goodwin has been through so much adversity in his life, including the loss of three premature sons and his younger sister, Deja, crippled by cerebral palsy, that this was just one more fire he had to walk through.

"Another hurdle that I had to jump over," he said. "You know what I'm saying? A lot of things that are thrown our way we have to overcome and I'm just glad that I was able to."

With Deja unable to walk, she remains his motivation, as he revealed during minicamp.

"I'd be doing her a disservice if I were to not go and maximize my sport ability," he said then. "If I'm not out running, jumping, catching footballs and just sitting around and being lazy and complaining, I'd be doing her a disservice."

Surely, he could wear a smile and inspire teammates in the face of adversity if his sis could do the same every day.

"I don't know how to not be happy and upbeat," Goodwin said. "That's just a part of my genetic makeup. It is what it is. I'm not out here faking. That's why it's so easy for me to do it every day. I can't sit out here and pout when something don't go my way. Life hasn't gone my way yet. I'm waiting on God to let me get in charge and do things how I want to do, but if I did, then I probably wouldn't be here."

Signed to a one-year free agent deal in the offseason, Goodwin served as an inspiration not only to his teammates during camp but to his coaches.

"That's pretty special for the young man (to be back on the field), and I don't know that I've ever been around a player who's as locked in as he is without practicing for a long time," Stefanski said. "And Coach (Chad) O'Shea and I were just talking about that as he got out here. In every meeting he's locked in, every walkthrough, every game. That's hard for a player that's not getting any reps to play that role for himself, for his teammates. So, I'm proud of the young man. I'm excited for him. I know as a team, we're excited for the boost that he gives us."

Goodwin thanked Stefanski for his kind words.

"It's just part of my job," he said. "I'm a professional player. Coming out here, I approached my job the same way."

When he wasn't conditioning off to the side, he was right in the thick of it, helping to coach up young receivers such as Tillman, who hung on his every word.

"I'm naturally a big brother," he said. "I'm the oldest of 12 kids, so it's like I'll be doing myself a disservice if I didn't say something to him that I saw that would make him better. And I just try to embrace any guy that is willing to listen and I've been around the game and seen some things, so I just give what I can and thank you to Ced and guys like him who have embraced that in me and listened and taken on the things that I've given him."

He's marveled all summer at what he's seen from third-year receiver Elijah Moore, acquired in a trade with the Jets. Moore has been an all-purpose weapon, flying out of the backfield, whirling out of the slot and giving Amari Cooper a run for his route-running money.

"Electric, I mean, fast, hands, routes, just ready to go," Goodwin said. "I'm excited to see what he'll do this



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year for sure. I'm glad we got him."

With a different view of the offense, from the outside looking in, Goodwin likes what he sees.

"The offense has no ceiling," he said. "Obviously we got some things and some areas that we can get better in. I'm glad that we haven't arrived yet and defined ourself yet, so I'm excited to see where we can take it. Just keep getting better every day. Not putting the cart before the horse, you know what I'm saying? Just taking it one day at a time and just focusing in together and getting better."

He joked that he "barely made it through practice" on Thursday and isn't sure what other medical hurdles he'll have to clear. But just like he had no doubt he'd be back, he expects to be on the field Sept. 10 against the Bengals.

"It's really up to the staff and the trainers to make sure that I'm ready to be in a position to help the team," he said. "I feel great right now and I think that's what's most important. I'm healthy and I'm able to be back on the field, so I'm just happy to be here."



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Jedrick Wills Jr. takes lessons from losing battles vs. Myles Garrett, prays 'for everybody else he has to go against'

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/24/jedrick-wills-jr-takes-lessons-from-losing-battles-vs-myles-garrett-prays-for-everybody-else-he-has-to-go-against/>

BEREA — Jedrick Wills Jr. ended up facing the wrong way after a nasty spin move. He looked like he was standing still after the pass rush seemed synchronized with the snap. He had no answer for the speed and agility around the edge.

The outstanding training camp of defensive end Myles Garrett had to come at the expense of someone. Wills, the Browns' starting left tackle, has been that someone for the last month.

'Self-driven' Deshaun Watson says he's not motivated by QB rankings, knows he must prove again he belongs with best

Wills, the No. 10 pick in the 2020 draft, is in his fourth camp going one-on-one with Garrett and has the scars to prove it. This year has seemed worse, with Garrett raising his game to another level.

That's saying something for a former No. 1 overall pick, four-time Pro Bowler and two-time All-Pro who's coming off two straight 16-sack seasons.

"There'll be certain positions where you think you have him in a block and he'll just completely move his body in a way that he should not be able to move," Wills said Wednesday. "You never get used to that."

Wills isn't wishing for success for the Browns' opponents but appreciates the hell their tackles will soon experience.

"I pray for everybody else he has to go against," Wills said.

Juan Thornhill was hurt when Chiefs didn't re-sign him but excited to face them in preseason finale

He's grateful for the personal trials.

"It's helped me a lot," Wills said. "When I go against other people, it's just crazy how much the game slows down. But going against him as a whole, that's a challenge."

Coach Kevin Stefanski agreed with a reporter's assessment Garrett has been in the backfield all the time during camp. He's made life difficult for Wills, quarterback Deshaun Watson and the offense by exploding off the ball and wrecking play after play.

"That's nothing new going against Myles for Jed," Stefanski said. "It's great, great work for him. We judge all the work that we get, it's not just the work that he gets vs. Myles."

"That's a great, great opportunity for him to go up against the best there is in the business. That only makes you better."

Rookie tackle Dawand Jones got a taste of the torture Wednesday as the starting defense faced the backup



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offense. Garrett moved from his usual right end spot to line up across from Jones at right tackle.

Garrett took three reps there and would've had three sacks of rookie Dorian Thompson-Robinson if he were allowed to take down the quarterback. Garrett is a problem for everyone.

The difference for Wills and the other Browns tackles in camp is they don't get much help. The matchup is usually one-on-one, something Garrett rarely sees during the season. He was the most double-teamed edge rusher in the league last season, while having the highest win rate, according to ESPN.

Wills realizes the difficulty of the challenge and takes that into account when evaluating his practice performance.

"You have to look at the good things you do," he said. "There's always a reason why he'll win, but he's just good at what he does, But you just have to look at the things that I do well and what I can fix to put myself in a better position to block him. And especially when I do win, I mean, you got to look at the things that I do well and just look at what he does, too. So it's a mental game that you kind of got to play with yourself a little bit."

Knowing the whole time facing someone as good as Garrett every day is beneficial in the long run.

"Definitely," Wills said.

This is an important year for Wills, whom Stefanski said arrived at camp in great shape and with a great attitude. He's under contract through 2024 after the Browns picked up the guaranteed fifth-year option on his rookie contract in the offseason, but questions remain about his dedication and effort and whether the Browns will commit to him with a long-term deal.

"He's really progressed," line coach Bill Callahan said earlier in camp. "We came out of last year's film evaluation and we saw a lot of positive things in his play. We saw steps. Now, we want it to be more physical. We want it to be, I would say, more consistent in terms of the finish. We like to see that finish become more violent, more physical. We're pushing that."

"We've had long conversations about that. And Jed, he's a great kid and he takes constructive criticism well. He takes challenges well, so he's up for it. He wants to get better. He's shown that in the offseason, he's shown that in training camp, he's becoming a more consistent pass protector. And I know that he's really challenged to get better and improve because there are some big things out there ahead of him."

Blocking for Watson could be the ultimate test for Wills. The Browns are expected to pass more, and Watson uses his athleticism to extend plays, which requires the linemen to keep blocking.

"It is definitely an adjustment, but in the long run it's helpful, especially when he can make plays like that with his feet," Wills said. "So just knowing that there's a forever clock in the back of your head just to kind of let him run around and make plays."

"He never stops and there's always, even if the play breaks down, there's always an opportunity for him to make a play."



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What's been special about the Browns defensive line this preseason? Dalvin Tomlinson knows

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/08/whats-been-special-about-the-browns-defensive-line-this-preseason.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- There's been times this preseason when Dalvin Tomlinson is out on the field and looks to his left, then his right, and only one word comes to mind.

"Wow."

It's hard not to say that when you have the pass rushing corps the Browns do, headlined by Myles Garrett, Za'Darius Smith and Ogbo Okoronkwo.

"I got those three guys, I'm just like, I might actually get a one on one," Tomlinson said with a laugh on Wednesday. "And I don't got to worry about the double team because you have to respect all three of them and all three of their pass rushes is crazy. I'm still trying to learn some stuff from them and yeah, when I'm out there with those guys it's just like, you know what? This is something special and I can't wait until Week 1."

Based on Tomlinson's praise, so far it sounds like everything has gone according to plan in Jim Schwartz's defense.

The line has always been his bread and butter as a defensive coordinator, with his scheme focused on everything starting with pressure up front, rotation, allowing his ends to line up wider to generate more favorable matchups, and expecting more out of his tackles in the middle than just eating up double teams.

It's the stuff of dreams for a guy like Tomlinson, who has the athleticism and size to flush QBs out of the pocket.

"You don't have to just hold up blocks the whole time," Tomlinson said. "You could go get some (tackles for loss), get some QB hits, some sacks and stuff like that and it's built for us to be more productive up front. I feel like that's something you pray for your whole football career since you was a kid playing D-line."

It's also helped that the unit has been overhauled from a year ago, hoping to beef up pass rush production around Garrett. The Pro Bowler tied his own franchise record with 16.0 sacks last season, but the next most sacks on the team came from Taven Bryan with 3.0.

Smith, who was Tomlinson's teammate last season in Minnesota, was the Browns' biggest acquisition of the offseason. Okoronkwo and Tomlinson were also offseason free agent signings -- with Tomlinson getting the largest contract this Browns regime has ever given to an interior D-lineman at \$57 million over four years, including \$27.5 million guaranteed. The Browns also signed free agent Shelby Harris two weeks ago to help beef up the interior line.

"Shelby, one of the funniest people I've met," Tomlinson said. "But it's been good. He is been picking up the defense well and he just blended in with all the guys as soon as he got here and great guy, great player and feel like we're building some good chemistry already so far."

There's some non-anecdotal evidence that the chemistry has been building, too.



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Schwartz has stayed consistent with rotating linemen in and out. In the spring he used the analogy of a relief pitcher in baseball and said you could see nine or 10 linemen rotating throughout a game. He's also experimented with using five down linemen and moving guys to different spots along the line -- especially Smith, who can be a dominant interior rusher.

Tomlinson and Smith got some experience together doing that in Minnesota last year, so it's been somewhat familiar for them.

"It's super fun and it just makes the game that much more exciting because we can show a lot of different looks that people probably aren't expecting," Tomlinson said. "And Za'Darius is a guy, he could play anywhere, he's just that athletic. I'll be messing with him, I'm going to move him down to a nose and I'm going to end the whole series or something like that just to make him mad. But yeah, it's super crazy and the game planning is going to be super exciting for the upcoming season with that."

Even with all the new faces to the unit however, there's no doubt that it's still Garrett's room.

He's the star of the show, and continues to embrace that, according to his teammates. Tomlinson was the latest player to describe Garrett taking on a more vocal role off the field -- something he's been criticized for in the past.

"Myles will pretty much take the young guys and stand up in the front of the room just to explain a simple detail for them, just to improve their pass rush to a whole new level," he said. "Myles, he's been energetic ever since I got here, giving good energy and just the way he's been leading the young guys, like the D-ends and stuff like that is just -- he's actually teaching them on new levels. And even teaching me some stuff because he's looking at things from a whole different point of view and I feel like in our room we can all learn from each other and that's the biggest thing."



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Browns' Deshaun Watson knows he must prove he's elite

By Jake Trotter, ESPN.com

https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/38244846/browns-deshaun-watson-knows-prove-elite

BEREA, Ohio -- Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson says he has no issue with no longer being ranked among the NFL's top passers heading into the season.

"You can't focus on that because that ranking is always changing," Watson said. "And for me, I missed two years of football, so I shouldn't be in those rankings, to be honest. If you're asking me, I haven't played ball, I haven't played enough football the last few years to even be up there. So I got to go out there and prove and show what I got to do to get back in those conversations."

Watson is entering his first full season as Cleveland's starting quarterback. He played six games last year for the Browns after serving an 11-game suspension for violating the league's personal conduct policy after he was accused by more than two dozen women of sexual assault and sexual misconduct during massage sessions.

Watson also sat out the 2021 season after requesting a trade from the Houston Texans. The Browns traded for Watson in March 2022 and sent the Texans three first-round draft picks before signing Watson to a new five-year deal worth a record \$230 million guaranteed.

Watson led the NFL in passing yards in 2020 and was generally considered to be among the top quarterbacks in the league. But Watson struggled after his return from last year's suspension. In six games, he posted a QBR of 38.3; only Russell Wilson, Mac Jones, Davis Mills, Carson Wentz and Baker Mayfield had worse QBRs among starting quarterbacks. Jacoby Brissett, Cleveland's backup who filled in for Watson last year, had a QBR of 60.0 over 11 games. Watson was not listed among the league's top 100 players in the NFL's annual preseason player rankings.

Watson, however, said he's not concerned with his standing in any quarterback rankings.

"For me, I just lock in on what I need to lock in on and just focus on my tasks," he said. "Everything else will take care of itself."



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Jim Schwartz wants defense to use 'badassery' on way to becoming best in NFL

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/21/jim-schwartz-wants-defense-to-use-badassery-on-way-to-becoming-best-in-nfl/>

Coordinator Jim Schwartz wants the defense to lead the league in effort, passion and other intangibles. Cornerback Greg Newsome II summed up the abstract goal in one word: badassery.

In his first season as coordinator in Cleveland, Schwartz's goals go beyond funny, vague, intimidating terms.

"He has high expectations for us," Newsome said Sunday after a training camp practice. "He coaches us hard, but that's because he has high expectations. So when we set a standard for us as players and we're not being to that standard, we expect our coaches to push us harder and harder.

"And with him, he's going to coach us hard because he doesn't think we should be a top-10 defense or a top-eight defense. We're trying to be the best defense, so we're going to hold ourselves to that standard and he's going to push us every single day."

Newsome said Schwartz's definition of domination and badassery includes the defensive backs hitting, the linemen running and everyone celebrating each other's success like a family.

"Really that's one of Coach Schwartz's biggest things with our toughness, our effort and our passion," cornerbacks coach Brandon Lynch said. "Our guys really have that internal camaraderie amongst each other."

Chemistry was an issue last season, along with communication breakdowns in the secondary. The Browns were tested by big-time receivers A.J. Brown and DeVonta Smith last week in joint practices with the Eagles and held up well, much better than a year ago.

"I feel like we've always had a lot of talent, but I just feel like what we do outside of the building, always together, literally every single day guys are doing stuff together, getting food together," Newsome said. "So I just think that camaraderie that we have, not only in the secondary, around the whole, entire defense and the whole team, is just amazing. So I think it is definitely showing on the field."

The two days of practice vs. the Eagles also reaffirmed the optimism regarding the remade front four. Pro Bowl end Myles Garrett was joined in the offseason by ends Za'Darius Smith and Ogbo Okoronkwo and tackle Dalvin Tomlinson.

"They were doing amazing out there against arguably one of the best O-lines in the league," Newsome said. "So just seeing that was super positive."

Newsome is a key part of the excitement and expectations surrounding the defense. The first-round pick in 2021 has been solid in two seasons but has missed seven games with injuries/illness and hasn't made as many big plays as he wants — no interceptions, forced fumbles or fumble recoveries. He has 15 passes defended, 79 tackles and a half-sack.

"I definitely don't think I'm even close to the level that I can get to, but for me it's just coming out every day, just working," he said. "I kind of try to speak stuff into existence, but my stuff is just more going to come from me being out there playing."



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"I don't want to say too much, I just want to go out there and make some strides every year. But I definitely don't think I'm close to my potential."

He believes his role under Schwartz will help unlock the promise. Newsome grew frustrated last season with how then-coordinator Joe Woods used him.

Newsome was a starter at outside corner and moved into the slot in nickel and dime packages. He was originally excited about the dual roles but felt he was asked to take on too much responsibility in the run game when lined up inside.

"I'm super pleased," he said of how Schwartz is using him. "I'm once again able to show my versatility when I am inside gladly."

"I said last year I kind of felt like more of a little bit of a linebacker, but I think my role is amazing. He's expecting me to do a lot of things on the inside. So I'm super excited for it. I'm just trying to do whatever it takes for us to get to where we need to get to."

Newsome will start on the outside, and during camp Schwartz and Lynch have rotated who's in the slot, including No. 1 corner Denzel Ward. The plan is to mix and match and vary assignments depending on the opponent.

"It's really by committee," Lynch said. "We value versatility, like we've said a lot, organizationally."

The preseason included a hiccup for Newsome, as he missed nearly two weeks with a groin injury suffered during practice. He returned for the joint sessions in Philadelphia.

"I feel good," he said. "Finally able to get out here and make some plays, be back with the guys."

He's confident he'll be where he wants to be when the Bengals and their outstanding trio of receivers — Ja'Marr Chase, Tee Higgins and Tyler Boyd — visit Cleveland Browns Stadium for the opener Sept. 10.

"Yeah, for sure," Newsome said. "Sadly, I've had this happen before. I'm always engaged. I credit myself on being one of the smartest guys out there, so I'm definitely able to take a lot of mental reps."

"I think it just allows other guys to go out there and make plays. Obviously I would love to be out there, but it gave guys like Caleb Biggers and Cam Mitchell some more reps and show what they can do. I try to find a positive in every negative."

Newsome's smile is evidence, and the attitude is appreciated.

"Positive energy is always the best energy and with us being the tip of the spear for our defense, it's really good to see him leading the charge in that," Lynch said.

Schwartz's scheme is simpler than Woods', and the expectation is fewer miscommunications.

"It's just the sense of urgency that Coach Schwartz coaches us with," Newsome said. "He doesn't accept mediocre, so when we get out there, we get new coverages and guys aren't making the same mistake



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twice, which is a good thing. I think the sense of urgency that we're playing with and learning with and our teachers are teaching with is just at an all-time high."



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Why Elijah Moore is cool playing 'wide back' for the Browns; and if he's Torrey Holt or Isaac Bruce from Amari Cooper's comparison of the duo

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/08/why-elijah-moore-is-so-cool-playing-wide-back-for-the-browns-and-if-hes-torrey-or-isaac-from-amari-coopers-golden-comparison.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Elijah Moore is down with playing “wide back” for the Browns this season Deebo Samuel-style if they ask him to run the ball part-time as well as play receiver.

If training camp is any indication, it's exactly what coach Kevin Stefanski has planned for his multi-purpose receiver.

In his lone series of preseason against the Commanders on Aug. 11, Moore motioned out of the backfield into the slot on the opening play and caught a 6-yard out from Deshaun Watson. Unfortunately for him and for the Browns, he suffered a rib injury on the play, but fought through it two plays later when he took a handoff and sprinted 18 yards up the left side.

Next up was a trip to the medical tent and a slow gait to the locker room in the pouring rain with a towel on his head. But the two plays were a sneak preview of how the Browns plan to use Moore this season.

“It's really super-fun,” Moore said. “I feel like there's a lot that I can do and I'm grateful that I'm being able to have the opportunity to do it, so I can't do nothing but thank God I'm in this position.”

He returned to practice Sunday and said he feels good rib-wise. He said he's still taking it day-by-day and fine-tuning things to be ready for the Bengals on Sept. 10.

Question is, will they be ready for him? It's catch-Moore-if-you-can with all the ways the Browns are using him.

“There's not really a limit to what he can do,” Stefanski said Sunday. “He's a very good outside receiver, a very good inside receiver. You can put him in the backfield, put him in the wildcat. I think there's really just no shortage of what you can do. And I say that just because of the skill set and because of the intelligence.”

In addition to tearing up the turf as a youngster for Davie, Fla., near his hometown of Fort Lauderdale, he carried the ball some in high school at St. Thomas Aquinas and a little bit at Ole Miss under coach Lane Kiffin. There, he lined up 22 times as a running back, and four times at quarterback, rushing for 71 yards on 21 carries (3.4) with no TDs.

“Yeah, some of my other teammates always joke with me and be like, ‘You're back at Davie,’” Moore said. “It always feels good to do more than just what's expected for me to do.”

Moore (5-10, 180) has no qualms about his dual role. There were reports last season that Samuel was over the whole “wide back” thing -- something he disputed -- but Moore is embracing it.

“Whatever they want me to do, another way to get the ball and score, so I don't care how I get it,” he said. “I just want the ball.”



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He's not concerned about the stigma these days of playing running back and a dual role devaluing him.

"I don't worry about that," he said. "I know I'm not a running back and I know I'm not lining up there strictly for the whole game. At least I hope not. So yeah, I play receiver that can do a lot of things."

Despite not carrying the ball much since those Davie days, Moore seems poised to take off with the chore.

"With the lining him up in the backfield, he hadn't done a ton of that," Stefanski said. "But just if you think about the person and think about the player and what he's able to handle, we just felt like it'd be something that he can do. Not to say that we'll do it every game, or maybe he'll be there all 50 plays in one game. It's really by game plan."

Stefanski didn't have to twist Moore's arm to bolster his job description.

"Any player, when you're talking about moving around a formation, 'Hey, we can give you the ball this way, we can get you the ball this way.' They're always open to that," Stefanski said.

From the moment Moore landed on the Browns' doorstep after his trade from the Jets in March, Stefanski hit him up with all the big ideas he had for him.

"I kind of knew," Moore said. "I just didn't know it was going to be maybe as much or as little. I guess it's by game plan."

The Jets' second-round pick in 2021, Moore carried the ball only 10 times for them in two seasons, five as a rookie for 54 yards and a TD, and five last season for 5 yards. According to Pro Football Focus, he's lined up in the backfield three times in his 1,205 pro snaps.

But those numbers will soon get left in the dust, possibly by the first quarter of the season when the Browns face their three AFC North foes in the first four weeks. At that point, Browns cornerback Greg Newsome II, who often covers Moore in the slot, will be thanking his lucky stars that he's on his own sideline and not over there.

"Man, it's crazy," Newsome said Sunday. "Sometimes I've got to guard him in the backfield. Sometimes he'll take a handoff, sometimes he'll motion out. It's just so much that he can do and it's definitely hard for us. (I'm glad) I don't have to play against him in the games. It's going to be hard for the other team. But yeah, I just love that he's able to do so much. He can run the ball, as seen in preseason. Obviously he's one of the most elite route runners, so it definitely puts pressure on the defense."

What makes him so slippery, Newsome said, is his dangerous combination of agility, speed, hands and route-running.

"Man, first of all his low center of gravity, he can get out," Newsome said. "But then he's also 4.3 fast—so it's like a guy who's smaller, he's shifty, it's hard to get hands on him, but he's super fast. He really could do everything. So it's definitely hard because a guy that can run any route in a route tree, makes him very dangerous."

Moore is so good that the Browns missed him terribly during their two joint practices against the Eagles last week, where he sat out the first day and participated only in individual drills the second day. On Day 2, Watson was picked off twice, and almost thrice had the cornerback's foot not been out of bounds.



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"I wanted that practice — that specific week — more than any other week," Moore said. "It was really annoying to me. But it is what it is. I'm taking steps forward. I've got to be positive."

He couldn't help but think from the sidelines that he could've helped his man Watson out had he been able to do team.

"Of course those thoughts do go through my head, but it's practice," Moore said. "We're going to have our ups and our downs. I guess it was just a day that they got the best of us, but come game time, I'm pretty sure we're going to be stepping in the right direction."

The key for the Browns with Moore is to keep him healthy. The more they expose him to getting tackled by linebackers, the greater his chances of getting hurt. As a rookie, Moore was humming along with 43 catches for 538 yards and 5 TDs in 11 games before a quad injury resurfaced and cost him his last five games. Last season he stayed healthy, but was limited to 37 receptions and 1 TD in a season in which he felt unwanted by the Jets and clashed with former Jets and current Rams offensive coordinator Mike LaFleur.

But he's had some contact from the big men so far this summer, and he's there for it.

"Definitely had to get my mind right, going back there, lining up in the backfield, but it's football," he said. "I've been playing football since I was little. I get the ball, try to let nobody touch me. That's it."

Ecstatic to be where he's valued so highly, Moore spent much of the offseason attaching himself to Watson's hip, getting to know him and honing their timing, whether it was in Puerto Rico or at the University of Miami for Watson-hosted workouts.

"Coach harps on us about picking up your brother," Moore said. "And when that's your dawg, when that's one of your best friends, you're going to make sure that you pick him up. So I think it's super important that we did that and that we continue to hang out and know each other on a personal level."

He's also gotten extremely close to his South Florida comrade Amari Cooper, his route-running mentor and unofficial life coach. So when Cooper said last week in Philadelphia that he thinks he and Moore can be like Torry Holt and Isaac Bruce from the 1999 Rams' Super-Bowl winning "Greatest Show on Turf," Moore was over the moon. Bruce is in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and Holt is a nine-time semifinalist.

"You can't do anything but get excited when the guy who's been in the league has high praise as far as that," Moore said. "I just come to work every single day ready to put my best foot forward, and at the end we are going tally it up."

So, is he Holt or Bruce?

"You've got to ask Coop, man," Moore said with a smile.



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Austin Watkins Jr. 'really ain't worried about' roster spot, only that 'work's paying off'

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/08/21/austin-watkins-jr-focus-work-not-whether-cleveland-browns-roster-receiver-preseason-star-usfl-nfl/70632082007/>

BEREA — The last player the Browns added to their roster before they held their first training camp practice was Austin Watkins Jr. The wide receiver may turn into one of the last players to make their initial 53-man roster when cutdown day arrives next week.

"I really ain't worried about that," Watkins said after the Browns' preseason tie against the Philadelphia Eagles last Thursday. "Whatever God got planned for me, he got planned for me."

What no one seemed to have planned for was what Watkins has done over the Browns' first three preseason games. Granted, that's partially because of the amount of opportunities he's had over those three games due to the rotations and availabilities at receiver.

Still, it's about making the most of the opportunities when they're presented to you. Watkins has done that by turning 24 preseason targets into 15 catches for 245 yards and two touchdowns.

Cleveland Browns wide receiver Austin Watkins Jr. (80) makes a catch in front of Philadelphia Eagles safety K'Von Wallace (42) during the second quarter Thursday in Philadelphia.

"Oh, yeah, it feels good," Watkins said. "Feel good. It's like the work's paying off."

Watkins' work has included a journey that started shortly after the 6-foot-3, 210-pound receiver finished up his college career at UAB. That led him to the 2021 Senior Bowl in his home state of Alabama.

That's where Kellen Mond first noticed the receiver. At the time, Mond was another draft prospect like Watkins, having just completed his final season quarterbacking Texas A&M.

More than two years later, it was Mond who was throwing Watkins passes in the NFL, albeit in preseason games.

"He's obviously been able to impress a lot since he's been here," Mond said after the tie with the Eagles. "I had him in Senior Bowl — he was on my team and he was impressive when he was out there. ... Sometimes it takes certain guys to get opportunities, and he's done a great job with it."

Cleveland Browns wide receiver Austin Watkins Jr. (80) is grabbed by Philadelphia Eagles cornerback Kelee Ringo (37) after making a catch Thursday in Philadelphia.

The most recent time out was Watkins' best job. He was targeted 14 times, catching seven of them, for 139 yards and a touchdown in Philadelphia.

Mond was the quarterback for eight of those targets, three of the catches and 70 of the yards. He also threw the touchdown to Watkins, an impressive play on which the receiver came back between two Philadelphia defenders to make the catch, then turn upfield into the end zone.

"I mean, he's big, he's physical, he's really fast, got good hands," Mond said. "So, you know, just your quality receiver, and, you know, since he's been here he's made a lot of big-time plays. He's going to continue to get better and we'll definitely find ways to get him the ball."



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For Watkins, the last month has been the opportunity he's been waiting for after previous tryouts in NFL with the San Francisco 49ers and Tampa Bay Buccaneers. He also spent time in the CFL on the practice squad of the Saskatchewan Roughriders.

Cleveland Browns wide receiver Austin Watkins Jr. (80) picks up yards after a catch against Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Zach Cunningham (52) Thursday in Philadelphia.

The strong performance with the Browns comes immediately on the heels of one season spent playing in the USFL for his hometown Birmingham Stallions. Despite catching just 16 passes for 197 yards and a touchdown during the Stallions' championship season, the Browns were impressed enough with him to eventually sign him when Marquise Goodwin was placed on the non-football illness list before camp.

It has been a signing that has turned heads, including those within his own position group.

"I'm going to be selfish towards the receiver room, but that was my favorite part about the whole preseason this far was seeing him do his thing," teammate Elijah Moore said Sunday of Watkins. "It's a really good moment to see somebody else shine, especially someone that you see out here who may not have as much opportunity as everybody else and then goes and makes it worth his while. So, man, kudos to him for sure."



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Elijah Moore just wants the ball and having 'super fun' being used in variety of ways

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/20/elijah-moore-just-wants-the-ball-and-having-super-fun-being-used-in-variety-of-ways/>

BEREA — Elijah Moore isn't picky. He's happy to line up in his primary position of receiver or take a turn at running back — as long as he's involved.

"Whatever they want me to do, another way to get the ball and score," he said Sunday after training camp practice. "So I don't care how I get it, I just want the ball."

Training Camp Log, Day 15: Here comes the heat; Amari Cooper has big day

Moore (5-foot-10, 180 pounds) played running back in the youth leagues of Davie, Florida, then transitioned to receiver in high school and college. In three years at the University of Mississippi, he lined up in the backfield 22 times as a running back and four times as the quarterback. In two seasons with the Jets, he lined up in the backfield only three times in 1,205 snaps.

That number will increase with the Browns, who plan to take advantage of Moore's versatility. He's not going to replace Pro Bowl running back Nick Chubb as the workhorse but could get snaps as the third-down back or a change-of-pace on early downs.

Moore had 21 rushes for 71 yards at Mississippi and 10 carries for 59 yards and a touchdown with the Jets. When he realized what Browns coach Kevin Stefanski had in mind, the undersized Moore knew an adjustment was necessary.

"Definitely had to get my mind right, going back there, lining up in the backfield, but it's football," he said. "I've been playing football since I was little. I get the ball, try to let nobody touch me. That's it."

He made it clear he doesn't expect or want to be in the backfield for too many snaps.

"I play receiver and can do a lot of things," he said.

He enjoys the variety.

"It's really super fun," he said. "I feel like there's a lot that I can do and I'm grateful that I'm being able to have the opportunity to do it, so I can't do nothing but thank God I'm in this position."

The Browns liked Moore when he came out in the 2021 draft, but the Jets selected him No. 34. When he became available this offseason, general manager Andrew Berry pounced, dropping from the second to the third round of the draft to get him in a trade.

Moore has been a star of camp and one of the most intriguing parts of it. He's lined up predominantly at receiver — wide and in the slot — but also in the backfield. He's run the option with quarterback Deshaun Watson, gotten straight handoffs and caught passes as the running back.

"The first day I got here, they was showing me what they had a feel for and then I feel like as soon as they seen me practice and see what I got to do, they was just experimenting," Moore said.

In his only preseason action — one possession against the Commanders — he played receiver and running



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back and had a catch for 6 yards and a run for 18.

"Some of my teammates always joke with me and be like, 'You back at Davie.' That was my little league town," Moore said. "It always feels good to do more than just what is expected for me to do."

Stefanski spent the offseason searching for ways to make the offense more explosive and efficient while unlocking the talents of Watson. The playbook has evolved, and Moore is the signature upgrade to the personnel.

"There's not really a limit to what he can do," Stefanski said. "He's a very good outside receiver, a very good inside receiver. You can put him in the backfield, put him in the Wildcat. I think there's really just no shortage of what you can do. And I say that just because of the skillset and because of the intelligence."

"With lining him up in the backfield, hadn't done a ton of that. But just if you think about the person and think about the player and what he's able to handle, we just felt like it'd be something that he can do. Not to say that we will do it every game, or maybe he'll be there all 50 plays in one game. It's really by game plan."

Stefanski said all players like creative ways to get them the ball and that Moore welcomed the addition of roles.

"Elijah is a big part of what we want to do and he's a big part of who we are," Stefanski said. "So it's our job as coaches to find ways to get him involved."

Moore has a simple reason for embracing the flexibility.

"I just love football and I feel like if you love football, you'll learn to be good at whatever they need you to do, especially at this level," he said. "There's a lot of good players in the league. You've got to have respect for that, too. So whatever they need me to get done, I love it. So I think I can get it done."

The benefit of having Moore in the backfield with Watson is twofold. It forces the defense to adjust and can create matchup problems.

"I don't think they would expect me to be back there and if they do, I don't think they expect me to run the ball," Moore said. "I think they probably think I'm going to run a route, which I'm going to do that, too. So you're going to pick your poison on what you think I'm going to do. If you guess wrong, man, we got you."

And if the defense tries to cover him with a linebacker like a normal running back?

"I feel like me or a linebacker, what you think? I like me any day," Moore said.

Cornerback Greg Newsome II has been stressed trying to match up with Moore during practice.

"Man, it's crazy. Sometimes I got to guard him in the backfield. Sometimes he'll take a handoff, sometimes he'll motion out," Newsome said. "It's just so much that he can do and it's definitely hard for us. But I don't have to play against him in the games. So it's going to be hard for the other team."

"I just love that he's able to do so much. He can run the ball, as seen in preseason. Obviously he's one of the most elite route-runners, so it definitely puts pressure on the defense."



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The concern with giving Moore too many carries is the physical punishment. His ribs were injured vs. the Commanders when he fell on the ball after his catch. He missed one day of the joint practices with the Eagles last week and was limited to individual drills the second day.

"I feel good," he said. "I needed a couple days to get it right and now it's just fine-tuning it up again."

He had been looking forward to going against the Eagles, so it was "really annoying" when he wasn't able to practice fully. He wondered if his presence in team drills in the second practice would've helped the offense, which struggled in the matchup.

"Of course, those thoughts do go through my head, but it's practice," he said. "We're going to have our ups and our downs. I guess it was just a day that they got the best of us, but come gametime, I'm pretty sure we're going to be stepping in the right direction."



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Dalvin Tomlinson honors late mother by helping grieving families, designing special tattoo

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/15/dalvin-tomlinson-honors-late-mother-by-helping-grieving-families-designing-special-tattoo/>

Dalvin Tomlinson doesn't have any tattoos — a rarity for a professional athlete — but has the design for when he's finally ready to endure the needle.

The work required is intricate and extensive but the inspiration simple: Honoring his mom, Melinda, who died when he was 17 from heart disease and kidney failure and “was everything” to him.

“It's a lot. It's a back tattoo,” Tomlinson, the Browns' new defensive tackle, told The Chronicle-Telegram during a one-on-one interview in training camp. “It's a dragon with my mom's name in it. And the dragon's gonna be blowing flames towards the upper part of the back. And it's gonna be the Egyptian gods Horus and Anubis with their staffs crossed with the Egyptian eye over it. And Horus and Anubis is gonna represent me and my brother and our mom always looking out over us.”

The plan is for the artwork to cover from the shoulders to the waist of the 6-foot-3, 325-pounder. Hence, the hesitancy.

“I've been on the fence for a good little minute now,” he said.

Even without the tattoo, Tomlinson pays great respect to the memory of his mom. He misses her often, especially at life's biggest moments, and has worked with charities that help families who've lost a parent. His dad, Willie, died when he was 5.

“The biggest thing, you never know whose day or life you may change just by having a conversation or even just smiling at 'em,” he said. “You never want to see kids go through it, losing a parent at a young age, and I just want to let those kids know, yeah, your parents want you to live on. And also you just have to honor them throughout your life.”

Tomlinson said it's “always gonna be tough” not having his mom but made it through the initial devastation with the support of aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. He knows not everyone is as fortunate, and Melinda raised him to “be a blessing to others while you can be.” He's worked with Kate's Club in Georgia, Good Grief in New Jersey and Brighter Days Family Grief Center in Minnesota.

“So being that person, that rock for somebody, that's like the biggest benefit for me, just to be able to be there for them,” Tomlinson, 29, said. “Because I don't think I would've got through that on my own. So being there to help somebody through a grieving process, it means everything.”

One of the most powerful moments helping a family came during his four years with the New York Giants — he was a second-round pick in 2017 — before joining the Minnesota Vikings for two seasons.

“The oldest son, him and his dad was working on a car together,” Tomlinson said. “And he wanted to finish the car in his dad's honor. And just sitting there talking to him, having the whole conversation, you could tell how much it meant to have somebody else they looked up to and idolized go through the same thing. And it just opened their eyes that much more and just helped them in the recovery process of it.

“And it's never gonna be easy, but just to make it a little bit easier is the least I can do.”



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He shared his story with teammates early in camp in West Virginia and said defensive end Ogbo Okoronkwo was stunned because Tomlinson seems like “a happy person all the time.” He has a great laugh and big smile.

The Browns made Tomlinson one of their first additions in free agency in March, signing him to a four-year, \$57 million contract with \$27.5 million guaranteed. The Browns were awful on the interior of the line last season, and Tomlinson was a target to improve the dreadful run defense and bolster the pass rush under new coordinator Jim Schwartz.

Receiving the megadeal was one of the occasions when not having his mom really hit Tomlinson. She was his “biggest fan,” and football helped him deal with his grief as he stayed “focused on all my dreams and aspirations she wanted me to accomplish.”

“I guess you could say it made me a lot stronger going through that process,” he said. “It never goes away. It just gets a little easier every day.”

AN INTERESTING GUY

Tomlinson has been called a Renaissance man for his intellect and varied interests. He picked Alabama over Harvard, was a three-time state wrestling champion, plays a variety of instruments, loves superheroes and draws.

When asked after a post-practice weightlifting session which passion he wanted to discuss, he picked video gaming. He adds quite a twist, as he designs gaming personal computers.

“Just taking all those little pieces and putting it together and making it work,” he said.

He had been intrigued by the idea, then built his first PC in one night during the COVID-19 quarantine. He’s made two more, improving each time, and said they stack up favorably with the most popular gaming systems.

“Oh, they all surpass it,” he said. “With the new gaming consoles, Xbox and then the PlayStation 5, they got 120 refresh rate, which is like the max. Our game PC is easily doing 240-plus.”

For those unfamiliar, that means speed.

“Way faster,” Tomlinson said. “The game is way smoother. And then I could play the game and probably catch up on a Netflix show or something on the other monitor.”

He’s been gaming his whole life and is partial to shooting and battlefield games but doesn’t “really discriminate.” He uses the games to disconnect from his busy life and reconnect with college friends and former teammates.

“I always try to get on the game a lot during the season,” Tomlinson said. “Helps me relax and it’s a good getaway from everything.”

HELPING HAND

Tomlinson doesn’t have a Pro Bowl on his resume but has established himself as a reliable starter. He’s started all 93 games he’s played, missing only five in six years. He’s totaled 288 tackles, 26 for loss, 13



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sacks, 37 quarterback hits, seven passes defensed, two forced fumbles and two fumble recoveries.

"He's a pro, really fits in well with our guys," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "A very, very conscientious person, very intelligent and likes to work. So you watch him in his individual drills and out here in practice, he doesn't shy away from the work at all. So I just think he fits right into who we are."

Tomlinson is the one sure thing at tackle for the Browns. Incumbent starter Jordan Elliott has already played way too much in the preseason to feel good about his job security, veteran Shelby Harris was signed Thursday, third-round pick Siaki Ika is a rookie, Maurice Hurst has an injury history and Tommy Togiai hasn't shown much in two-plus years.

Tomlinson was signed to have a transformative impact and believes he will.

"I feel like everybody could benefit across the board, especially on the defensive line," he said. "I feel like I got some tools I could bring in and help out, especially in the run game, as well as be disruptive in the pass rush."

He'll turn 30 on Feb. 28 but is convinced he's yet to play his best ball. In 13 games last year with the Vikings, he had 42 tackles, three for loss, 2.5 sacks, 10 quarterback hits, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery.

"For some reason I feel like I get better and better every year. So it's weird," he said with a laugh. "The sky's the limit. Even though it's going into Year 7, it doesn't feel like it, I still feel like a young guy in the room. So I try to learn from everybody, as well. And I feel like there's a lot more good football to come."

He credited love of the game for the consistent improvement.

"It just grows and grows every time you're out here on the field, and the next thing you know it's offseason again and you're missing the game," Tomlinson said. "You just want to grind up much harder to get better. I might be a little bit wiser, too."



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Jordan Akins failed in baseball, survived and thrived in football, hopes to become downfield threat for old friend Deshaun Watson

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/16/jordan-akins-failed-in-baseball-survived-and-thrived-in-football-hopes-to-become-downfield-threat-for-old-friend-deshaun-watson/>

Jordan Akins ran down the right sideline during practice, reached back for the slightly underthrown pass and plucked it off the back of the defender. Akins has reinvented himself as an athlete several times and hopes the next iteration is as a downfield target for old friend and quarterback Deshaun Watson.

“The plays that we have stretch the field,” Akins, a sixth-year tight end, told The Chronicle-Telegram during a one-on-one interview in training camp. “I feel like it’s going to create a lot of opportunities. When the ball is in the air, I feel like it’s mine.”

His journey to Cleveland was long and winding with unusual detours. He arrived as a 31-year-old former minor league baseball player, signing a two-year, \$3.9 million deal as a free agent in March as part of the Browns’ plan to add big plays to the passing game and make Watson more comfortable in his second season in town.

“I’m very excited, man,” said Akins, who will complement starter David Njoku. “I just want to be somewhere where I can showcase my talent and thank God I signed here and they give me the opportunity to do that.”

Akins spent the last five seasons with the Texans despite a pit stop with the Giants. He’s started 26 of 73 games, catching 151 passes for 1,755 yards, an 11.6 average, eight touchdowns and 86 first downs.

He’s coming off a career year, even though he began the season on the practice squad. He started three of 15 games, tied a career high with 37 catches and set career bests with 495 yards, a 13.4 average, five touchdowns and 23 first downs.

Akins is confident he can take his game to another level if given the opportunity. He’s been used predominantly as an “in-the-flat” tight end with catch-and-run capabilities and is eager to make plays down the field.

The five touchdowns a year ago gave him a boost.

“It gives me a lot of confidence,” he said. “I already have confidence going on the field and playing. If you give me one-on-one with a defender, I know how to manipulate him, know how to move him. I know how to win.

“Of course, it gives me confidence because I know I can do so much more in the red zone. Not only win choice routes, but go over the top however you want it. I feel like I’m a hybrid and I got some special talent.”

A pair of items on his resume help make the argument.

He was a center fielder drafted in the third round in 2010 by the Texas Rangers out of Union Grove High School in Georgia. He hit .218 with 24 homers in four years in the minors — playing in Arizona, Spokane,



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Washington, and Hickory, North Carolina — and the skills translate.

“Tracking a 100 mph baseball, a little round ball, it slows so much down,” Akins said. “You gotta react in like 1.3 seconds, you gotta do so much. But when the ball’s in the air in football, you can just concentrate on the laces, you can concentrate on the tip of the ball, it’s so many focus points on the ball. So it slows it down a lot for me.

“That gives me the advantage to get YAC (yards after catch) because once I see the ball, I can kind of memorize where it’s gonna be. So by the time I catch it, I kind of have my eyes upfield and looking at my defenders.”

When he made the decision to ditch his major league dream and attend the University of Central Florida in 2014, he was a receiver and kickoff returner. At 6-foot-4, 225 pounds, he could fly.

“I was more outside, downfield, running a lot of crosses, a lot of posts and corners,” he said of his route tree. “So it is good to put that back in my repertoire.”

Coordinator Alex Van Pelt plans to make good use of Akins.

“His strength obviously is in the pass game, his ability to run vertically with speed and his ability to make plays on the ball,” he said. “His hands are strong, had a big catch over top of a defender the other day, things like that. He runs really good routes, strong hands.”

Akins transitioned to tight end after two years and a torn anterior cruciate ligament. He’s up to 250 pounds and working to improve his run blocking with a different technique taught by the Browns and their emphasis on the run game.

He rested the knee early in camp but has been back practicing and caught a pass for 5 yards Friday against the Commanders. He always figured to be the No. 2 tight end, but his role could grow with Harrison Bryant sidelined by an undisclosed medical condition.

The relationship with Watson — they played together in Houston from 2018-20 — made the transition to a new team easier and should translate to combined success during the season.

“It’s very helpful,” Akins said. “I know certain gestures that Deshaun does that tells me what direction to go. I know certain gestures he does that tells me he’s gonna run down the field so I can just push my defender deeper and give him more room, more yards to run the ball. So it’s like we’re on one accord. We know how to move and we take care of each other.”

He can tire of talking about his time in minor league baseball but knows it’s “part of my history.” He loved baseball and his family needed money, so he decided to sign with the Rangers vs. go to college to play baseball and football.

“Being from where I come from and knowing my struggle that I had to put some food on the table,” he said. “So I went with my dream and I had to do what I had to do.

“Baseball taught me so much, the business behind the sports. That was my dream to play the majors and I thought it just would come easy. I didn’t even really know about the minors. It taught me that I constantly had to grind and get to where I want to be. And when I got there, it still wasn’t over.”



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A self-described country guy, Akins spends his free time grilling, fishing and with his two daughters. Switching sports and building a career in the NFL makes his long, strange trip a success.

“If some people was in my shoes, they wouldn’t be able to finish the journey,” he said. “I failed in baseball, but baseball is a game of failure. So I took that and I flipped and it motivated me. I’m here now. Thankful to God.”



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Cleveland Browns' Nick Harris takes personal journey through recovery from injury

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/08/13/nick-harris-cleveland-browns-center-gains-appreciation-during-knee-injury-recovery-preeason-nfl/70549530007/>

CLEVELAND — The pain Nick Harris felt in his knee as he lay on the field in Jacksonville was one thing. The Browns center knew in the moment the injury was season ending.

What Harris didn't realize in the moment was the mental and emotional anguish that was going to come along with the physical pain. He also didn't realize just how it would take him much longer to rid himself of that than anything it took to repair his torn-up knee.

"I mean, it was truly a journey, mentally mostly," Harris told the Beacon Journal after Friday's preseason game against the Washington Commanders. "Obviously with what transpired, you're not in control of a lot of things in this life, and that's something I wasn't going to control of. It was tough for the first few months of that. I was in deep depression and just upset and 'Why me?'"

The clock had move passed midnight as Harris reflected in front of his locker at Cleveland Browns Stadium. That made it Aug. 12, exactly one year to the day of when his life was turned upside down.

Harris was in line to take over the starting center position as he ran out for the Browns' preseason opener against the Jaguars last Aug. 12. On the second play, though, his leg got caught and buckled under the weight as he was dealing with a bull-rushing Jacksonville defensive lineman.

The damage was immediately understood, at least in the terms of it being season ending. However, it was more than a usual ACL or MCL tear.

"I dislocated my kneecap, and in doing that I tore my VMO (vastus medialis oblique)," Harris explained, "so my inner quad muscle. I also tore my MPFL (medial patellofemoral ligament), which is the ligament that connects your kneecap to the inside of your leg. So, yeah, it was a big boy injury. It was a big boy injury, and it was a lot."

Harris underwent surgery on the injury in August. That was able to repair the damage done to the knee and surrounding ligaments.

It couldn't repair what was going on in Harris' mind, though. As he recovered and watched free-agent Ethan Pocic take the center job that seemed destined to be his, Harris closed himself off from others, from family to friends to those in his football life.

"It took me a long time to even reach out to people because I was almost embarrassed of the situation," Harris said. "I felt like I let a lot of people down, and obviously it's a weird thing to say, but when you're in that situation, it has that ability for me just because I was so excited to be in that position and I felt like I worked so hard for it. ... I didn't talk to anybody for months."

Cleveland Browns personnel check on Browns center Nick Harris (53) after he was injured during a preseason game against the Jacksonville Jaguars on Aug. 12, 2022, in Jacksonville, Fla. That slowly started to change as Harris started physically feeling better as well, around his Nov. 13 birthday. It started by talking to the people you would most expect one to talk to in a time like he was going through.



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Harris opened up to his mom and his sisters. He started allowing close friends back into the conversation.

More important, Harris looked in the mirror. What he saw was a tough guy playing the victim's role, and he didn't like it at all.

"I couldn't control it, so I didn't want to be a victim to it," Harris said. "I was able to accept the situation for what it was, put my head down, and even the stuff that happened in the offseason after that, I can't control any of it, so what's the point of going crazy and making it an issue? ... It's a fundamental human thing that I think people kind of get confused is there's so many things in this life that we try to control, and I was just able to just control what I can control."

Harris couldn't control how the journey began that night in Jacksonville. Once he took control of his recovery, especially the mental aspect, the process took off for him.

Despite only being about eight months removed from the surgery, Harris was in the building as an active participant in the Browns' offseason program when it started in April. That included all of the on-field aspects, including OTAs and the June minicamp, which is when he began to truly feel all the way back.

That's carried into training camp and the Browns' two preseason games. Harris started the Hall of Fame Game against the New York Jets, playing 19 offensive snaps, and he came in to replace Ethan Pocic against the Commanders and played 44 snaps.

"He's another guy, you talk about injuries, that has bounced back and worked really, really hard to put himself where he is right now," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said Saturday. "He's great in our meeting room. He's a younger player, but he does everything the right way. I think he's a great person for our young players to look up to see a guy that really works on his craft."

Cleveland Browns center Nick Harris during OTA workouts on June 1, 2022, in Berea.

Those players can also see someone who found, in arguably the darkest moment of his life, a pathway to the light. In fact, as Harris reflects on the 365 days since his life was altered on Jacksonville, he may even call it a turning point of sorts.

"It was a lot, but I'm glad it happened," Harris said. "Honestly, as ironic as it sounds, I needed it. It humbled me in ways that I can't even explain just as a human, as a football player. It made me appreciate a lot of different things in my life, my relationships with my family, my people that I can confide into, my priorities in life."



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Grant Delpit excused from Browns vs. Commanders preseason game to graduate from LSU

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/08/grant-delpit-excused-from-browns-vs-commanders-preseason-game-to-graduate-from-lsu.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Safety Grant Delpit no-showed for the Browns preseason game against the Commanders Friday night at Cleveland Browns Stadium, but he had a great reason.

Delpit, the Browns' second-round pick in 2020, graduated this weekend from LSU, where he starred from 2017-2019. A member of the Browns' communications said he earned his degree in Kinesiology.

With many of the big-name starters such as Myles Garrett, Nick Chubb and Joel Bitonio resting this game anyway, it was a perfect time to miss a meaningless game.

LSU tweeted a photo of Delpit holding his Jim Thorpe Trophy for the nation's best defensive back in 2019, and his national championship Trophy from the Tigers' national championship that year, while wearing his graduation sash and gear.

Delpit announced after that award-winning junior season that he was foregoing his senior year to enter the draft, and the Browns selected him with the No. 44 overall. But he always had a goal of going back and getting his degree.

Unfortunately for Delpit, he ruptured his Achilles in training camp that summer, and missed his entire rookie season. He came back in 2021, and has gotten progressively better over the past two years.

During the first week of training camp at The Greenbrier Sports Performance in West Virginia, Delpit revealed where he had the bar set for himself this season.

"Greatness, man. Greatness," he said. "I haven't shown anything. And that comes from being out here every day, putting in the work. You can't have any excuses when it comes to getting on that field. You can't take plays back when you get to the season.

"I missed my first year. I'm always wanting to do more. I have way more to give. As a team, we have way more to give. That's what we're working on right now. I have high expectations for myself, the highest, and I'm going to hold myself to that."

He also held himself to getting that degree, and he checked that box on Friday.



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Cleveland Browns gift local football team new gear

By Zach Verda, WKBN

<https://www.wkbn.com/sports/cleveland-browns-gift-local-football-team-new-gear/>

BEREA, Ohio (WKBN) – With some help from the Cleveland Browns, the Liberty High School football team will be rocking brand-new helmets during the 2023 season.

While visiting the Browns' training camp on Wednesday in Berea, the Leopards were surprised with 85 brand-new helmets that the team will don during road games.

The white Xenith brand helmet features a panther claw strike through both sides in school colors, with a white face mask to pair with it.

Head coach Joe Simon and team were presented the gift by a few current Browns, including former Ohio State cornerback and two-time Pro Bowl cornerback Denzel Ward.

The Leopards will open up the season in their new helmets as they hit the road to take on Edgewood on Friday, August 18.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Myles Garrett and Za'Darius Smith are '1+1=3' for Browns when it comes to edge rushing

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/08/myles-garrett-and-zadarius-smith-are-113-for-browns-when-it-comes-to-edge-rushing.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- Throw basic math out the window when it comes to the Browns' edge rushers.

Twelve days into training camp, the full picture of Jim Schwartz's defense is yet to be realized as the Browns continue to install and try and avoid giving everything away in the preseason.

But so far, the pairing of two Pro Bowl edge rushers in Myles Garrett and Za'Darius Smith has been as-advertised.

"It's a one-plus-one-equals-three type of thing when they're working together and interacting," defensive line coach Ben Bloom said on Wednesday prior to practice. "They're positive influences on each other. When you have another vet in the room with that type of production and success, I think that can elevate your individual focus and learning about the game. I mean, all of them, they love the game. They love to learn. I can see them talking to each other and sharing."

The Browns executed a mini overhaul this offseason of their edge rushers and defensive line as a whole, with Ogbo Okoronkwo and Dalvin Tomlinson being the other big offseason additions.

Smith was the move of the spring for the Browns, however.

He's averaged 12.0 sacks in each of his last three full seasons -- and that's not counting 2021 when he missed all but one game with the Packers due to a bulging disc in his back that required surgery. He was a Pro Bowler in each of those three seasons as well.

Smith's 8.5 sacks were tied for first in the league with the Patriot's Matthew Judon after seven games last season with Minnesota. He was on pace for 20 but injured his knee in Week 9, which hampered him the rest of the way. He tried to fight through, knowing the contract incentives he was trying to hit, but fizzled out with his sack production and finished the year with 10.

Throughout his career, Smith says he has often been misunderstood. He was plagued by misconceptions that he was a bad teammate at his last two stops in Minnesota and Green Bay for growing disgruntled with his contracts toward the end of his tenure at both stops.

It's a reputation he's refuted, and one the Browns haven't seen as he's teamed up with Garrett, who tied his own franchise mark last season with 16.0 sacks.

"Za'Darius, for lack of a better term, he's like a blue-collar or hardworking, humble guy," Bloom said. "I mean, he's a big name in the NFL. He's had a lot of career sacks. He's had multiple contracts, but I don't think that has allowed him to go far from his roots. I think he still identifies as the guy that didn't play a lot of high school football and has a basketball background and had to go to JUCO to get offers and then a fourth-round pick."



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"So he's outperformed most people's expectations, not his own, but what you would expect from a guy with that background. So I think he holds onto that a lot. He knows why he's had a successful NFL career and it has to do with his work ethic and his toughness, and he continues to do that every day. So it's fun to see a guy like that and it's really good for the group when you have a veteran who handles himself that way around the younger players."

Garrett and Smith did not play in the Hall of Fame Game, which the team used mostly to get a look at younger players.

The defense was a simplified version of Schwartz's wide-nine scheme against the Jets, and as the Browns continue their installation, we likely won't have the full picture of how lethal the Browns' pass rush can be until they are playing real games.

But so far, we've seen the Browns experiment, including with rotating players in and out quickly and moving Smith, a good interior rusher, to the inside of the line. Ideally both players will draw attention, making it harder to double team one or both.

In some of the practice moments we've seen already, it's hard to not want to rewind the tape in real time to get an idea of what is going to be out on the field come September.

"We know what we can be, but the focus isn't on that," Bloom said. "It's more on what are we going to do today to get better? How are we going to play better together? But yeah, I think we all know what it could be, but that's, again, we'll let that materialize naturally and that'll come from our hard work and our consistency."

If it materializes how they want, one plus one could equal a whole lot more than three for the duo's combined sack total.



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Meet the Browns safeties coach who bartended before he started playing college football in his mid-20s

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/08/if-jerome-ford-isnt-returning-kickoffs-for-the-browns-who-is.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Charlie's Long Bar at the Hyatt Regency Hill Country Resort and Spa in San Antonio has the longest copper-top bar in the state of Texas.

El Colegio has the best margarita on San Antonio's River Walk.

Browns safeties coach Ephraim Banda knows this because he's worked at both. Banda set out on his own when he was 18 years old with a dream to play football but didn't get the opportunities he was looking for after high school. So instead, after a brief attempt to walk on at TCU, he started bartending in his hometown of San Antonio.

He had a knack for it, too, and met people from all walks of life.

"I can talk with anyone at any bar," Banda said. "I've had a lot of different people I've had great conversations with over the years."

He met CEOs and executives. He remembers meeting comedian George Lopez and UConn women's basketball coach Geno Auriemma after he won a championship.

He was making good money, more than many of his friends who had college degrees. He bought a car and a house and could bring in six figures in a year.

"I got into bartending to kind of pay the bills, but also just get my grades up," he said. "What wound up happening is I made a bunch of money, more than all my friends that were getting out of school. And I was doing well for myself down on the River Walk."

But football -- it's in Banda's blood.

Just ask his brother.

"I liked football," Justin Banda said. "My brother loved football. He watches football different than you and I do. He plays football different."

And he doesn't give up on what he wants very easily.

How important was football to Banda? How relentlessly was he willing to chase it? So much that he started playing college football on the wrong side of 25; Important enough that he was willing to sleep on locker room floors and go straight from late nights working behind bars to morning lifts; important enough for him to take on the work of coaches years younger than him just to get a foot in the door.

Football was the end game, but the relentlessness it took for him to get where he wanted were planted as a young boy, watching his father show him the way.



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‘My job was to set the example and how they were going to turn out was up to them’

Ephraim Banda

From playing sports, to fishing trips, the Bandas made the most out of their time together.

Banda swears he likes spaghetti -- at least his wife Crystal’s spaghetti.

“But before I met my wife, I could not eat it anymore because that’s all we ate as kids,” he said.

Banda’s father, Dan, was raising Ephraim and Justin while he worked and went to college.

Dan Banda is a former military man who went straight from high school to the Marines. Growing up in a military city like San Antonio meant there were plenty of airplanes flying near former Kelly Air Force Base and other bases in the area and seeing the B-52s and C-5s helped fuel his passion.

The middle of 10 kids in a low income family, Dan Banda knew how to do things efficiently and learned how to make the best out of having very little.

“To eat you’d have to get in line, eat quick and get out,” he said. “It wasn’t the big sit-down dinner. It was a quick -- you’re next, eat, sit down and move on.”

Dan’s father worked for the local school district while his mother handled the homefront. She’d sew her own clothes and her kids’ clothes. If they didn’t want to wear them, well, too bad. What other options were there?

Next to their small house, there was an abandoned park with two baseball fields where Dan and his siblings would play. Dan learned to drive in those fields in a ‘57 Chevy.

His grandfather was a sharecropper responsible for 20,000 acres of corn, wheat and cattle and Dan’s father would send the kids to live with him in the summer in a 1,000-square foot home. They’d ride horses, fish, milk cows and mess around with the tractors. In the fall they’d go back home -- back to a home only slightly larger -- and go back to school.

By the time Ephraim and Justin went to live with Dan full time, he was working on aircraft components at Kelly Air Force Base and going to school, working to earn his associates and bachelor’s degrees a little at a time. He was also giving his boys a crash course in responsibility.

The boys knew what was expected from the former Marine. They knew how to get their bags together and get to school on time.

The family lived across the street from the elementary school, near SeaWorld, an area Justin described as the middle of nowhere, woods everywhere, at least before San Antonio started blowing up. The school crossing guard was stationed in front of their house. The boys would send Dan a message on his beeper while he was at work letting him know they made it to school.

Dan would come home from work and feed them Hamburger Helper or spaghetti before he’d head off for his college classes. Ephraim took on the responsibility of making sure things got done.

“He was an old man at a really young age,” Justin said of his brother. “He took care of me, took care of my a-- alot for sure. But he was very responsible. I think my dad trusted him to be (responsible for us) and he



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never wanted to let my dad down, he never wanted to let himself down. But my dad put a lot of trust in us and especially my brother for that type of stuff.”

Ephraim Banda

Dan Banda found ways for his sons Ephraim and Justin to have fun.

There wasn’t much money for recreation, but Dan found a way with what little time they had.

They fished a lot. Sometimes, on weekends, they would rent a little room and spend their nights fishing. They’d go to Garner State Park about two hours west or head south to Port Aransas on the Texas Coast. Justin remembers camping trips with his dad’s military friends -- hiking, running around the woods, playing sports, spending time outdoors.

They both remember Ephraim playing football, too, and by his teen years, he was a star at Taft High School. Justin got used to being known as Ephraim’s brother.

Dan went to every game, even if Ephraim and Justin have no idea how he managed to do it. It’s something he still does.

Over and over on the PA system Dan would hear, “Tackle, Ephraim Banda.”

Ephraim had opportunities to go to smaller college programs, but he had bigger goals. He didn’t want to go to a lower division. He wanted to go to a big program. He admits now it was a mistake, but it’s part of the reason he ended up in Dallas after high school.

The other reason: Dan had a rule for his sons: when they turned 18, they needed to go out on their own, go be men.

“My job was to set the example and how they were going to turn out was up to them,” Dan said. “They have to go from 18 and on.”

While Dan might admit now he didn’t really mean it, Ephraim took it to heart. He moved out at 18 and never went back.

Initially, his goal was to walk on at TCU.

“I went up there and was enrolled in junior college, taking hours, trying to get into TCU as a preferred walk on, which, looking back on it was just a bad idea in terms of money and everything,” Banda said. “But it was an up and coming program. That was when LaDainian Tomlinson was there. Coach (Gary) Patterson was killing it, and he was just starting it out, but it wasn’t what it is now. I had big aspirations, go there, walk on, get on scholarship, blah, blah, blah. Which wasn’t going to happen looking back on it.”

So he ultimately made his way back to San Antonio.

“I knew that I still loved football, I still wanted to do it. I still wanted to play,” he said, “but kind of regrouped. And that’s kind of when I started to get into bartending.”

To stay in shape while he was bartending, Banda played in a semi-pro league in San Antonio. He was running the team and calling defensive plays. It was six-man football and his brother, Justin, played with him.



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"Man, those hits -- those hits were brutal," Justin said, "because you've got a lot of field to build up a lot of speed."

Dan recalls the intensity watching the games -- he really does mean it when he said he attended all of Ephraim's games -- and was surprised at the speed. It's also where he noticed something else.

"I would watch him coach -- I mean it's just a sport where you have referees, you have some control, you have some pretty rough fields, but I think he did it to stay mentally and physically in the sport," Dan said, "and when he started coaching, he was so calm, and I'm not even calm watching the game."

It was one of those moments as a parent when he realized something about his son.

"You don't need to be on the field," Dan thought, "you need to be on the sideline coaching."

The issue, though, was even getting back into football. Banda wasn't fresh out of high school anymore. He wasn't a hot recruit. He was probably at this point even older than most players making the switch to coaching as graduate assistants.

Sometimes the right opportunity at the right place at the right time presents itself.

'My goal the whole time was to get into coaching'

Mike Santiago ordered 200 jockstraps when he was putting together the equipment for the University of the Incarnate Word (UIW) football program he was tasked with starting from scratch.

"There's still 199 jockstraps sitting there, you don't need jockstraps anymore," Santiago said. "It just was something that I put on my list. The only guy that wore jockstraps was me."

Santiago, a longtime coach who had just been fired from his position at Utah State, spent his first two weeks on the job at the private Catholic school in San Antonio working in a hallway. It was three months before he could hire any staff. Every Tuesday he had to attend a meeting about the construction of the team's stadium.

"Not only didn't I know the answers, I didn't understand the questions," he said.

As for the team, Santiago didn't just need players, he needed bodies. So he wasn't about to turn away Banda, even if he was in his mid-20s -- and the word "mid" might be doing some heavy lifting here -- when he showed up in his office one day looking to play.

"It was like, 'Really?'" Santiago said. "Well, hell, I needed bodies. Come on."

Banda knew where he was in life. He was not going back to college football with any dreams of NFL glory.

"My goal the whole time was to get into coaching," Banda said. "I knew at that point I wasn't going to play beyond college. I realized that just wasn't what I was going to do. Now. I knew I still had tread on the tires and I could play, and I did."

He was a core special teams player at UIW but he also knew his role in a locker room full of freshmen in a program just starting out.



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"It was kind of like having a coach in the locker room," Santiago said. "So when I'm not around, he can validate things. I mean, when the coaches aren't there, he could validate, he could talk to these kids. He was a teammate so he could talk to them. And I'm sure it got hard for these kids, especially that first class."

It was hard for Banda, too. His first year at UIW in 2008, he had to make his own way.

He was still bartending and if his shift went late, he would drive straight to the facility after work. He'd sleep on one of the player couches or, if one of the strength coaches was there, he might let him sneak into the locker room and sleep on the floor. After the morning lift, he'd go to class and then find places to steal sleep throughout the day before practice -- a buddy's couch or on the cot he kept in a friend's dorm room. Sometimes he'd sleep in his car.

After spring practices, while guys were showering and goofing around in the locker room, he'd pull out his black shirt and dress pants he kept in his locker and get ready to go work at the bar. Then he'd start all over again.

The good nights were when the bar was dead and they would close up shop by 10 or 11 p.m.

Eventually he got put on scholarship and things got a little easier, but during his second season at UIW, an injury ended his playing career. It was time for his coaching career to begin.

'It was validation of hard work and being loyal and knowing your role'
Manny Diaz uses the word "relentless" to describe Banda. He would know. Banda attached himself to the current Penn State defensive coordinator early in his (relatively) young coaching career.

Before he ever met Diaz, though, he had to start his slow climb where every coach does: the bottom.

The start of a football coaching career is not glamorous or lucrative. For Banda, it started with a folding desk set up next to stinky laundry. He'd go to accounting to pick up money and use his connections on the River Walk -- where he used to make a pretty good living -- to set up recruiting dinners. He broke down film, drove equipment trucks, set up headsets on the sidelines and, yes, washed the laundry next to that folding table.

The start of a football coaching career also happens because of strong connections and Banda's ability to network -- a skill he honed as a bartender -- and his relentless work ethic created some strong connections.

Remember how the strength coach at UIW would sometimes let him in the facility to sleep? It was Caesar Martinez, now the assistant director of football sports performance at USC.

Martinez got hired away from UIW as the assistant strength and conditioning coach at Texas, but he didn't leave Banda behind for long. Martinez helped Banda make the jump from UIW to a GA job with the Longhorns.

"He was the first one to be able to pour gas on the fire," Banda said. He calls Martinez a brother.

The jump from UIW to graduate assistant at Texas, a storied Power Five program, is no joke. It's doing all the grunt work the coaches need you to do so the players and staff are in the best position to be successful -- and then dropping everything to go write a paper or work on a group project.



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Banda credits many people with his rise through the ranks -- he mentions Duane Akina, a legendary defensive backs coach who has mentored him since his Texas days. There's Blake Baker, now the defensive coordinator at Missouri, who was also a GA at Texas. You learn quickly talking to Banda he doesn't forget the people who helped him -- and the list is too long to fit everyone.

But you can't tell the story of Ephraim Banda without Manny Diaz.

Banda says with a laugh he's known Diaz longer than his wife. Diaz, the defensive coordinator at Texas under Mack Brown from 2011-13, took notice of Banda early, especially as he learned more about his story.

"I've always been fascinated by people in this profession who had some sort of time outside of football for a couple reasons," Diaz said. "I think, first, it just gives you a great appreciation of what we get to do every day. And second, you've got to understand the grind of working in the 'real world.'"

Diaz was impressed with Banda's organization and work ethic. After Diaz was swept up in the firing of Brown in 2013, Banda was retained at Texas and spent a year working under Charlie Strong while Diaz went to Louisiana Tech. When Diaz went to Mississippi State as defensive coordinator in 2015, he brought Banda with him as a senior analyst, a small step up the ladder but still not close to the final goal.

Diaz, however, gave Banda the opportunity to do plenty of on-field coaching because Diaz trusted Banda -- he knew the defense. Banda was beginning to get other job opportunities to move up into a real coaching role, but the advice he kept getting was to stay patient.

When Diaz landed as defensive coordinator at the University of Miami, Banda's patience and loyalty paid off and his career began to skyrocket.

Mark Richt was the coach there and Diaz wanted to bring Banda with him as his safeties coach -- it would be the first time Banda would have his own position room.

"I mean, come on, right? Who's going to hire a senior analyst -- even though he is coaching, but he is not actually on the field. Who's going to hire that guy?" Banda said. "It's the University of Miami."

Banda was actually about to take a job at Jackson State. He didn't want to be a senior analyst anymore. He was ready to start making things happen. Then Diaz called him. Banda would be getting a call from Richt soon.

"I'm like, 'Oh s---,'" Banda said. "He called and we talked about it and I ultimately got the job. I was excited. And for me it was validation of hard work and being loyal and knowing your role, doing your job pays off, focusing on what's important and being where your feet are."

Diaz had pounded the table for Banda and it worked.

"Mark trusted my evaluation of Ephraim to allow us to hire him as an on-the-field coach at that time," Diaz said. "That's always the big break in this profession. You don't ever know that you're going to get, when you're a GA or a quality control coach, will you ever get one of those spots? So for Mark to trust my evaluation and to give him one of those spots at a place like the University of Miami spoke highly of my confidence in him."



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Diaz looks for three things when he gives someone a position to coach. Are they dedicated to maximizing the abilities of their players, competent in the game but also able to teach it? Do you care about the players you are there to serve? Will you put in the work to be a great recruiter?

"He connects very well. I think that's also why he was a great recruiter and he was joking, that goes back to his bartending days," Diaz said. "But he sees people where they are, he's a good listener and he's a good communicator with people. But then inside the building, he's also hyper detail oriented and does a good job of being able to break things down into small bits, which make him a good teacher."

Even though Banda had worked in the Big 12 and SEC, he knew people were going to doubt if he could recruit at a place like Miami. It ignited another fire in him.

"The first year or two, I went in there with a chip on my shoulder and just went to work and did the same things I'd done in every other place and proved myself day in and day out," he said.

After Diaz took over as Miami's head coach in 2019, he named Banda his co-defensive coordinator. Two seasons later, Banda became the defensive coordinator at Utah State.

"It was becoming obvious that it was going to be time for him to be able to run his own defense," Diaz said, "and when the Utah State opportunity came around, I thought it was the right time and the right place."

In 2021, when Utah State went 11-3 and won its first ever Mountain West Championship, Banda's defense ranked fourth in the nation in fourth down conversion percentage, eighth nationally with 11 forced fumbles and 27th in the nation in third down conversion percentage. They held each of their final three opponents to 13 or fewer points for the first time since 1983 and five of their last six opponents to 17 or fewer points. They finished tied for second in the nation with 114.0 tackles for loss.

Year 2 presented more challenges for Banda due to injuries, but he was ready to come back strong in Year 3 -- until another opportunity came along.

'He won that job'

Banda's a grinder by nature. He has a saying: sleep's for broke people and I'm not broke.

More important than money for Banda is growth and an opportunity for growth came along this last offseason when his agent, Clint Dowdle, told him there was a potential opportunity with the Browns.

Banda nearly balked. He had worked so hard to become a coordinator -- and he was a groundbreaker. He was one of only two Hispanic defensive coordinators at the FBS level at the start of the 2022 season -- the other was Diaz.

Did he want to go back to being a position coach again? College football pays pretty well, after all.

This was an opportunity for growth, a chance to work under and learn from new Browns defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz. There weren't many connections between the Browns coaching staff and Banda, but in the end, he matched what they were looking to hire.



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"We were looking for a lot of things in that role, but somebody that was really a good young football coach with energy and experience, and I think Ephraim, he's a really good coach," Stefanski said. "He came highly recommended, (we) talked to a lot of people about him. That was an expansive search when we hired Ephraim, so he won that job, and he did a nice job throughout that process. But very, very intelligent for a young coach, has really seen a lot, has been everywhere, if you will, and I think relates really well to our players."

"It's your ability to inspire and motivate players. It's your ability to bring energy every day. It's your ability to teach technique and to teach scheme. And he checked all those boxes," Browns defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz said, "and he'd been around a lot of good people in college, and he was a guy that was on the radar and he was ready for when his time came for the interview, and he's done nothing to dissuade us from thinking that was a good decision."

Banda doesn't know if he was the Browns' top choice or not, but he has another saying: "I'm never anyone's first choice, but I'm always the right choice. At the end of the day. I make sure that happens."

'It was exactly what I needed'

There was something else Banda considered in taking the job in Cleveland. When he was doing his research, he heard from coaches who had worked for Stefanski about the environment he creates, how you can coach and still be a family man.

It mattered because in the midst of all that grinding, that relentless pursuit of football, something happened in Texas early in his career that made him see there was more to all of this than just football.

Banda was working a camp. He was in charge of greeting people and there was a kid named Darien checking in. His mom, Crystal, was with him.

"She was a single mom sitting up there on a hill. She was wearing black shirt -- Longhorns -- black shorts and she was a single mom, a lot like my dad, just trying to find a way to create memories for her son," Banda recalls. "She brought him to Texas camp and I actually spotted her on the walk up."

He kept an eye on her and talked to her all three days of the camp.

The two eventually got married. Banda doesn't call Darien his stepson, he calls him his son, and he and Crystal have a young daughter together named Aamani.

It's another reason Cleveland appealed to him.

"What changed in me, I became a family man. I became a husband and a father, and when I heard about how Kevin creates really good work environments and people love working for him, that mattered more than the NFL to me," Banda said.

His whole perspective changed when Crystal showed up.

"When Crystal came into the picture, you saw his game, personally and from a career standpoint, it just jumped so many notches," Justin said. "And at that point I was like, 'Oh s---. Okay, cool. This guy's got a partner who's all about it, who's super supportive.'"

It brought balance to Banda's life in a profession where it can be hard to find.



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"It was exactly what I needed. God knew exactly what I needed," Banda said. "I needed Crystal and Darien in my life to progress and to continue to grow off the field, which ultimately helps me on the field. Without meeting her and having (Darien) in my life -- the change in me came from the growth that I had when they became my family."

"She's his better half and that better half contributes a lot to the success of who he is and what he's done," Justin said. "And I think he would be the first to admit that. And then having a daughter, that's a huge part of him. And seeing all this and understanding it, seeing it from the outside and going from here to there -- she was a huge part of that too. A huge part of that."

Becoming a family man helped, first, give him something outside of football but also helped give him an even bigger reason to keep grinding.

It's a grind he learned from his dad who managed to raise his boys and make the best of whatever situation arose.

"My dad gave me a better life than he had," Banda said, "and I'm giving my family a better life than I had."

There's still work to do on this coaching journey, of course, but he's come a long ways since those late nights on the River Walk, a journey that often felt longer than that copper-top bar he used to stand behind at Charlie's Long Bar.



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Browns DE Isaiah Thomas has matured on and off the field this year thanks to major life events

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/08/browns-de-isaiah-thomas-has-matured-on-and-off-the-field-this-year-thanks-to-major-life-events.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- Isaiah Thomas is a different man than he was a year ago.

In his second season with the Browns, the edge rusher out of Oklahoma has redefined his “why” as a football player thanks to two major life events: the birth of his daughter, Aubri, and proposing to his fiancée, Kelbi, this offseason.

“My lovely daughter, she’s 11 months old now,” Thomas told cleveland.com on Saturday at The Greenbrier. “That’s my best friend right there. She drives me every day. Literally I’m going out there in that last team period. I’m just thinking of why I do this, think of who I do this for. And that’s definitely helped my maturity off the field. It’s developed me into a better man.

“I definitely credit my fiancée to that a lot, as far as me maturing and focusing on what’s in front of me instead of what was behind me or what I could be doing and whatnot. And having her in my life has helped me tremendously to focus on football. That’s my key focus every day.”

Last year, Thomas came to Berea as a seventh-round pick -- someone whose chances to make the 53-man roster were murky. But knowing his daughter was on the way last August, Thomas fought hard in camp. He recorded two sacks in the preseason opener against Jacksonville and still worked despite having to play in a cast after fracturing a bone in his hand and missing a few days for Aubri’s birth.

By the end of camp, he had removed nearly all doubt about whether he would be able to make the roster.

It would have been a lot for anyone to handle, let alone a rookie who started the offseason as a bubble guy -- for Thomas though, he considered these life changes his X-factor.

“Who’s to say if I didn’t have a daughter or my fiancée that I would’ve been as locked in and as focused or as motivated to do what I need to do on the field?” he said. “It’s helped me a lot. Me getting those two (preseason) sacks and then coming back, I fractured my hand, but I was still able to perform with the club and had some good games down that road. I just credit that to my supporting cast, these coaches for believing in me for one, and simply just giving me a chance to show that.”

Thomas had a small sample size of defensive snaps in 2022 compared to a lot of his teammates, but he showed flashes.

Against the Ravens on the road, he recovered a crucial fourth-quarter fumble that was forced by Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah, sticking with the play after making a mistake on a potential tackle a few seconds prior. The following week, he recorded the first sack of his career, taking down Joe Burrow in the Halloween win over the Bengals. There were less flashy moments too, like when he blew up a play against the Falcons that allowed Jordan Elliott to get a sack, or against the Patriots when he showed he could set the edge on an attempted reverse.

He ended the year with eight total pressures and two batted passes on 162 total defensive snaps, according to Pro Football Focus.



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The confidence booster the sack alone provided was also a key for Thomas heading into this offseason.

“For me to be able to, for one, as they say, get your first one,” he said. “And now I’m just trying to build off that and I feel like I’m in a great position to do so with the opportunities that I’ll be having in this preseason and following that up in the regular season, God willing.”

If the Browns keep Thomas around, he’s ready to show he isn’t done growing.

The defensive line has suddenly gotten more crowded, but Thomas plans to use his maturity and do what he did last year: Come to Berea every day and work.

Perhaps the biggest move the Browns made this offseason was trading for Za’Darius Smith, another Pro Bowl edge rusher to highlight alongside Myles Garrett. Cleveland also signed Ogbo Okoronkwo, who showed plenty of upside with the Texans starting his final eight games and recording five sacks in those contests -- he also happens to be Thomas’ former college teammate at Oklahoma.

Just over a week into training camp, Thomas can already talk at length about what he’s picked up from both.

“The way (Ogbo) uses his leverage is beautiful and how he uses his rip when he’s low and uses it to rise up -- little touches that,” Thomas said. “Za’Darius talks a lot about eyes, he talks a lot about where it starts off as a O-lineman. He says pick up on tendencies like that. When they’re breaking out the of the huddle, look at their eyes, see where they go up.

“So moments like that is what I’m picking up on. Tiny little tidbits. And then when it comes out here, it’s just second nature. I go out there, tell myself to stay on my track, look at the O-line, hear the call, and I just run and go with it.”

He’s excited about the possibility of what he can do in defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz’s scheme, where a lot of the thinking has been removed -- Schwartz wants to rotate guys to keep everyone fresh, and have the defensive line serve as the “engine of the defense” as Thomas said, giving his edge rushers ample opportunities to get after opposing quarterbacks.

Thomas is getting a chance to show what he can do in the defense. On Tuesday during the Browns’ first training camp practice in Berea, the Browns weren’t hesitant to throw Thomas out in team drills. When Za’Darius Smith was off to the side with trainers getting looked at, Thomas was the next man up on the left side of the defensive line opposite of Myles Garrett

He’s also working even when he’s not in drills.

A common sight throughout the early days of training camp has been Thomas picking Garrett’s brain on the sidelines.

“He’ll tell me what I’m doing, what I’m showing too much of, what I can do better,” Thomas said. “And it’s great to have from the inside, it’s hard to question his leadership because for one, he leads by example with his play. Then two, I think just because he’s not a rah-rah guy in the media that doesn’t get a lot of posts on Twitter or whatnot, people think he’s not a leader, which isn’t the case at all.

“He’s a leader with like how you guys have seen with me on the side, or with Alex (Wright) on the side talking about hand placement, steps and leverage moments like that. And then in the meeting room he’s



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even more of a leader. Sometimes he takes over the film room. And we need a guy like that and obviously that's why he's the best, if not one of the best defensive players in the league. So I'm fortunate to have him alongside me."

So much has changed for Thomas over the last year that has played a role in his NFL trajectory.

And yet, while he tries to continue to learn and grow, there's one big thing that hasn't changed -- it probably never will, and it's probably for the best that it doesn't.

"I still have that mindset of a seventh-round pick," Thomas said. "I've still got a lot to prove, and I know I belong -- I know do. I still want to show that given an opportunity. So I've just got to keep developing every day on and off the field."



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Deshaun Watson moving forward heading into his first full season since his suspension

By Rob Maaddi, Associated Press

<https://apnews.com/article/deshaun-watson-new-season-959ed3acda9aed3971e6fdcefa9250c3>

CANTON, Ohio (AP) — Deshaun Watson received a warm greeting from NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, embraced Aaron Rodgers and was all smiles at the Hall of Fame game.

One year after Goodell and the NFL vigorously tried to suspend the three-time Pro Bowl quarterback a minimum of one season for alleged sexual misconduct before settling on 11 games, Watson is moving forward. He says he's a changed person. Coaches and teammates have praised his leadership, work ethic and attitude. Media see a noticeable difference in his demeanor.

All that's been missing is obvious contrition.

Watson didn't show any when he spoke candidly at the start of training camp about off-field issues that caused him to sit out the 2021 season and 11 games last year after he was traded to Cleveland. He also was fined \$5 million and had to enter a counseling program because he was accused of sexual assault and harassment during massage sessions by two dozen women.

Watson shared how he spoke to the team about his tough upbringing living in public housing, watching his mom battle cancer and not having a father figure. But then he blamed the media for "directing and narrating something else" and didn't take ownership of actions that the league's disciplinary officer called "predatory."

"I've done this work a really long time and I'm not all about immediate retribution and crash and burn people, but I am about holding them accountable and giving them an opportunity to change the way they interact with people, to change the way they treat people," Rita Smith, a senior adviser to the NFL hired in 2014 to help shape the league's policy on domestic abuse and sexual assault, told the AP on Friday.

"I am in that camp with Deshaun Watson. I want him to be better. But the amount of harm that he caused other people is something he needs to step up to, acknowledge, and then to say this is not behavior that I will engage in ever again. ... I don't want him to be ostracized. But I do think that he needs to come fully to the place where he can say something I did was inappropriate."

Watson says he didn't take the league-mandated therapy sessions lightly.

"I really cherish those moments and I want to learn," he said.

Perhaps Watson has expressed remorse privately during counseling. But he hasn't stated it publicly.

Before Thursday night's game — a 21-16 victory for Cleveland in the NFL preseason opener — Jets fans shouted derogatory comments at Browns fans wearing Watson's No. 4 jersey. Two men stood outside one entrance to Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium selling brown-and-orange T-shirts with vulgar references to Watson, women and massage therapists.

"The public will know he's taking responsibility if he says that out loud to the rest of us," Smith said. "My preference would be: 'I engaged in behaviors that hurt people and I will not do that again.' If he would just say that, I think a whole lot of us could move on and not be concerned about future interactions that he



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may have.”

There’s no doubt Watson has made a positive impression on teammates and an organization that mortgaged its future to get him.

“I was very impressed on how he handled everything,” Titans offensive lineman Chris Hubbard, who played in Cleveland last season, said on the AP Pro Football Podcast. “He approached it as a person that didn’t seem like what the media portrayed. He didn’t show it at all. He’s very humble, very nice.”

Browns coach Kevin Stefanski raves about the way Watson works hard on the field and the football classroom.

“I think that’s what his teammates love about him, is that they know how committed he is to the team,” Stefanski said.

Watson is trying to make the most of his second chance. The NFL has seemingly embraced him after fighting for a severe punishment last year.



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Dorian Thompson-Robinson's extensive experience at UCLA obvious in NFL debut

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/06/dorian-thompson-robinsons-extensive-experience-at-ucla-obvious-in-nfl-debut/>

Dorian Thompson-Robinson didn't flinch in his first NFL action.

On national TV, under the primetime lights — when they were on — he led the Browns to a 21-16 comeback win over the Jets on Thursday with two second-half touchdown drives in the Hall of Fame Game. He went 8-for-11 passing for 82 yards, a touchdown and a 124.1 passer rating and rushed five times for 37 yards with a long of 15.

He attributed the comfort level to his extensive playing time at UCLA.

Joe Thomas gets biggest win of career, celebrates Hall of Fame enshrinement with family, friends, former teammates, fans

"I think that accredits to my 48 starts or whatever it is before I got here, as well as the Shrine Game and everything like that," Thompson-Robinson said after the game. "So definitely wasn't my first go-around with the NFL setting. I was definitely a lot more comfortable than previous years."

The experience attracted the Browns and was one of the reasons general manager Andrew Berry drafted him in the fifth round in April, No. 140 overall. In five years with the Bruins, Thompson-Robinson completed 63.3 percent for 10,710 yards and 88 touchdowns and rushed for 1,826 yards and 28 TDs.

Need proof rookie tackle Dawand Jones has improved conditioning? He played entire Hall of Fame Game

"I would say that's certainly one of the things that we were excited about being able to draft Dorian was how much football he has played in his life and in that college career," coach Kevin Stefanski said Friday. "How many times do we talk about banking reps and getting reps in the preseason and getting reps in the offseason? And he's one that has played in a lot of games and been in a lot of big ones, so I think all of that serves him well."

Thompson-Robinson's versatile skillset was also evident after he replaced Kellen Mond to start the second half.

Notes: Injuries continue to shuffle receiver depth chart; Daylen Baldwin waived after serious hamstring injury

He scrambled twice on his first possession to set up Demetric Felton's 16-yard touchdown run. He played a role in the score, too, throwing a lunging block on cornerback Jimmy Moreland to seal the edge as Felton bounced the run outside. On the winning drive, Thompson-Robinson went 4-for-4 passing for 44 yards, including the 22-yard touchdown to receiver Austin Watkins Jr.

"He did a nice job of operating," Stefanski said. "And it's fun to see our guys play ball and you're playing in a game so it's live. So to see the rush trying to get home, he made a few plays with his feet. He did a nice job. There's plenty of stuff to clean up, as you can imagine, and that's definitely what we're prepared to talk to him about."



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Thompson-Robinson is slight at 6-foot-2, 203 pounds — 20 pounds less than starter Deshaun Watson — but isn't afraid to put his body at risk. He took a couple of hits along the sideline — one penalized for being late — on his scrambles.

"My job is to get first downs and touchdowns," Thompson-Robinson said. "I've been in a lot of situations over my five years at UCLA and some of those popped up tonight and just trying to be able to get first downs."

Stefanski wants his quarterbacks to be productive as runners and protect themselves.

"We talk about it with the quarterbacks when it's time to get down and slide when you can," he said. "There are other times where you really can't slide because you're in a crowd and sliding is going to expose your upper body and your torso to some contact. So those are things we'll continue to talk about."

"It's the first time he's been tackled since December maybe. So just getting back in the rhythm of that is important."

Thompson-Robinson appears mature beyond his 23 years of age. He knows new Jets quarterback Aaron Rodgers from his time in Southern California, and they shared a moment after the game Thursday night.

"Just how proud he is of me," Thompson-Robinson said of their conversation. "He's been keeping up with me for a couple years now and so for us to be able to start to form that relationship now that I'm in the league with him. I think it's pretty special for me because I've been watching him my whole life. But I think just overall his message is just keep going, keep doing what I'm doing, keep my head down and keep working hard, too."

Thompson-Robinson said they met at a seven-on-seven charity event and he was able to pick Rodgers' brain a bit. Rodgers then sent him a Packers jersey and message after the draft.

"He's a talented kid," Rodgers said during an in-game interview with NBC. "He's a West Coast kid. I really enjoyed watching him at UCLA."

"I told him to slide tonight, though, he took an unnecessary shot right there. C'mon, DTR. Get down, buddy."

Thompson-Robinson is expected to make the roster as the No. 3 quarterback behind Watson and Joshua Dobbs and perhaps down the road become the backup. He took the first step in his first NFL game, because he looked like he'd been there before.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Coordinator Jim Schwartz wants defense to lead league in pair of intangibles — effort and passion for game

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/01/coordinator-jim-schwartz-wants-defense-to-lead-league-in-pair-of-intangibles-effort-and-passion-for-game/>

BEREA — The fans provided a jolt of energy Tuesday in the first training camp practice open to the public.

Intense defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz wants his group to be self-reliant. He demands the players bring the juice on a daily basis, which was evident in the first part of camp at The Greenbrier. The defense continued its strong play Tuesday.

“We put an emphasis on that,” Schwartz said Tuesday before practice. “We’re going to try to lead the league in effort. We’re going to try to lead the league in passion for the game and things like that.

“And that doesn’t just happen on Sunday. You got to practice it. And the guys have responded well to that message.”

The Browns are expecting great things from the defense after Schwartz was hired and the line overhauled following a 7-10 season and the firing of coordinator Joe Woods.

Schwartz is in his 15th year as a coordinator, including winning a Super Bowl with the Eagles after the 2017 season, and was a head coach of the Lions for five seasons. General manager Andrew Berry traded for end Za'Darius Smith, signed end Ogbo Okoronkwo and tackles Dalvin Tomlinson, Maurice Hurst and Trysten Hill and drafted tackle Siaki Ika and end Isaiah McGuire.

The line drills, led by position coach Ben Bloom, are a fury of action and yelling. The players hit sleds, run around giant hula hoops and work on firing off the ball. Bloom never stops encouraging and correcting.

“Oh, very important. That’s what our defense is built on,” coach Kevin Stefanski said of effort. “And Jim, as you guys have seen, and as you’ve probably heard, makes sure the players know where they stand in that given moment, in that given practice. So he’s demanding of it.

“And just the style in which we play defense here with Coach Schwartz. That is how we operate, it’s how we get off the ball, it’s how we attack the ball. So the defensive staff has done an outstanding job so far.”

Myles Garrett, a two-time first-team All-Pro and the franchise’s all-time sack leader, is the unquestioned cornerstone of the front four and the defense. Berry has surrounded him with proven, respected veterans in Smith and Tomlinson to share the responsibilities.

“When your best players are also your hardest-working players ... we expect to hold our best players the most accountable,” Schwartz said. “But that’s one thing to say, to hold your best players the most accountable. Where you’re really getting somewhere is when your best players hold themselves the most accountable.”

He’s seen that from Tomlinson and Smith, who’ve made a strong first impression. Smith with his energy and vocal presence, and Tomlinson more by example.

“Any time you sign a free agent, any time you give a guy a contract, you’re telling the rest of the guys in the locker room, ‘Hey, this is what we’re all about right here,’” said Schwartz, who needed help with his



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Spider-man reference. "With great power comes great responsibility. Well, with a great, big contract comes great responsibility. It's not just about the play, it's about all the stuff.

"And I like those guys. Those guys have all done it in their own way. Each guy is a little bit different, but when you talk about the D-line, you talk about the group. It's a mentality of all for one, one for all. And those guys are leading the way with that."

Garrett has beaten left tackle Jedrick Wills Jr. on a consistent basis since the lines started squaring off Friday. Add Tomlinson breaking up a Deshaun Watson screen pass to Nick Chubb on Tuesday and rookie cornerback Cameron Mitchell intercepting Watson, and the defense has made for some rough film sessions for the offensive staff and players.

Schwartz knows the road is just beginning.

"We're not ready yet," he said. "It's still a work in progress. When you're learning a new technique, a lot of times when all of a sudden it becomes pads or becomes a first preseason game, you tend to resort back and then you just got to plow through that.

"So we've had setbacks, but we want to trend like the S&P 500, where over time we're making progress. We don't want to be that cardiac rhythm where we're up one day and down one day."

The line will be supported by a secondary led by the cornerback trio of Denzel Ward, Greg Newsome II and Martin Emerson Jr. The linebackers remain an unknown, as starters Anthony Walker Jr. and Sione Takitaki haven't returned to team drills following serious injuries last season. Schwartz disagreed their absences have made it difficult to assess the position group.

"I sort of look at it the other way, it gives more work to the younger guys who can use it," he said. "And it also forces all those guys to act like vets and to operate efficiently like vets. You get a security blanket having A-Walk and Tak out there, and then nobody else takes that next step. Nobody else really grows up.

"You throw them in the pool and they have to make all the calls, you saw it last year with those guys, they had to go out and play. Now they're getting more and more and going against whatever first group on offense. Our standard's our standard. We don't get graded on the curve because we have a young player or a rookie or anything else out there."

Schwartz doesn't pull any punches.

"He's very honest," Stefanski said. "Sometimes that can be taken as brutal honesty, but I just think he's very authentic in his nature. He's been doing it at a high level.

"I know from my perspective, I get to see a guy who coaches them hard, but it's fair. He's just going to call it like it is."

Looming over camp and the preseason is the start to the regular-season schedule. The Browns play all three AFC North rivals within the first four weeks.

Schwartz doesn't want his players looking ahead.

"If you ask these guys about the first three opponents today, I would hope that they wouldn't know any of the three because they're just worried about practice today and the emphasis of practice and competing



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and their technique," he said. "And if we do a good job of that on a daily basis, then we'll be ready for those first three opponents.

"If we're here Aug. 1 and we're thinking about Week 3, we're in the wrong business and we're not going to make any ground. So I like where the guys are, come out on a daily basis and work."



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Browns' Sione Takitaki, Anthony Walker Jr. gain 'new appreciation' for each other in rehab

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/08/07/sione-takitaki-anthony-walker-jr-cleveland-browns-gain-new-appreciation-injury-nfl-training-camp/70542295007/>

BEREA — Anthony Walker Jr. and Sione Takitaki have shared a position room with the Browns for more than two years now. However, it took the worst moments in their respective football careers to truly bring the two together.

The two Browns linebackers have played together since 2021. Their second season together, though, ended painfully for both.

Walker suffered a season-ending torn quad tendon in Week 3 against the Pittsburgh Steelers. Takitaki suffered a season-ending torn ACL in Week 13 against the Houston Texans.

As they continue to work their way back to playing form, they have found themselves forming a special bond that wasn't there before.

"You got a lot of competitive guys and a lot of alphas in the room, you know what I mean," Takitaki said prior to Monday's practice. "So we would get into it a little bit before, but I felt like both being injured definitely bonded that relationship. We were able to grow. I was able to learn about him. He was able to learn about me and we was working out together. So that's very motivating too."

Both had been taking the slow path back to full practice participation. While both had gone through some individual drills off and on during the first week-and-a-half, they had not gotten involved in the 11-on-11 drills.

That changed on Monday, when those two — along with receiver Jakeem Grant Sr., who's coming back from a torn Achilles from last August — took part in those drills for the first time since last season. Takitaki even recorded an interception of Dorian Thompson-Robinson in a red-zone 7-on-7.

"Two guys that are big leaders in the linebacker room, on the defensive side of the ball and for our football team," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said prior to Monday's practice. "They both play with great passion. They both are great workers in the weight room, in the meeting rooms, you name it. So not surprising that they bond together over those types of things."

Both linebackers had a chance to not still be teammates this season. Both were unrestricted free agents during the offseason, but both elected to re-sign with the Browns.

In fact, the Browns brought back all three potential free-agent linebackers who had ended the season on injured reserve. Jordan Kunaszyk was placed on the list the day before their Week 17 game at the Washington Commanders with a hand injury that hasn't cost him any time this camp.

Once they both knew where they would be playing this season, they both went to work

"It's funny how God works sometimes, put somebody in the same position as you and have to bring you guys together," Walker said during the first week of training camp. "We were rehabbing together pretty much all offseason. Even during the summer, we both didn't go home, we stayed in Cleveland and like you said, built that bond. Once you get to know someone a little deeper and understand why they are the way



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that they are, you appreciate 'em a little more."

One of the biggest things both learned about the other was the commonalities they shared. That went beyond football to their passion for football and dedication to hard work.

Yet, even in those commonalities, they found some differences.

"I'm kind of one of those guys, let's knock out what we got to do," Takitaki said. "Anthony is very detailed. Everything he does from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. is going to be very detailed out. And some days I might just, whatever's thrown at me, I'm trying to go with the wind. But Anthony, he's very, he's got this on his 5 p.m. schedule, he is going to knock it out."

For Walker, it was almost like finding the opposite about his teammate. It was the way Takitaki attacked every step of the rehab — in some ways, pulling Walker along with him — that resonated.

"During this rehab, obviously seeing him go to work every day is you get a newfound appreciation," Walker said. "A lot of guys don't want to go through that, me included. So for us to do that every day when we didn't want to and we didn't have to. Some days we could take off and we're like, nah, we're coming in, we're going to get some extra work to see that, to have somebody go through that with you, definitely a new appreciation there."



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Rodney McLeod helps teammates adjust to Jim Schwartz, learn new scheme while preparing for role as third safety

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/08/07/rodney-mcleod-helps-teammates-adjust-to-jim-schwartz-learn-new-scheme-while-preparing-for-role-as-third-safety/>

BEREA — Rodney McLeod is the Jim Schwartz whisperer for the Browns defense. After five years together with the Eagles, McLeod can interpret Schwartz's schemes, screams and sayings for his new teammates.

"I call him Coach McLeod," safeties coach Ephraim Banda said in minicamp. "His ability to just bring knowledge, not only for me but for the players in the room, has been big."

The Browns signed the 33-year-old McLeod in May as one of the final pieces in an offseason defensive overhaul that included the hiring of Schwartz, a former head coach in his 15th season as defensive coordinator. McLeod has started 138 games in an 11-year career and is expected to fill the third safety role behind Juan Thornhill and Grant Delpit.

McLeod said he picked the Browns for the chance to win and reunite with Schwartz, whom he called genuine and caring. He said the examples are everywhere.

"Every day, whether it's him loving you up or whether that's him coaching you to get the most out of the player," McLeod said Sunday during training camp.

Schwartz ruffled feathers when he arrived in Philadelphia in 2016, but his message quickly reached the players. The Eagles won the Super Bowl after the 2017 season.

McLeod agreed Schwartz can be an acquired taste as players adjust to his style, which can be seen as abrasive. He's often loud and unfiltered.

"I think guys are starting to understand who Jim actually is and that at the end of the day, it's just all about winning and wanting to see the best for his players," McLeod said. "And so guys have been able to respond well."

"He's very demonstrative. He holds guys accountable at all costs. He's not going to tolerate any nonsense. And so if you're not familiar, you could think he could be doing it out of ill intent, but in actuality for Jim, it's all part of his plan and his process."

McLeod joked that Schwartz was the smartest person in the building outside of himself. Schwartz uses the brain that earned him an economics degree from Georgetown to motivate in a variety of ways.

"He challenges you at all fronts," McLeod said. "A lot of it is based on a mindset, how are you going to respond to it? Because that's what life is about. That's what the game is about. And so it's good to see guys responding the right way, especially this past weekend, being able to go out there, put things on tape for the younger guys, seeing them all come together, pull out a win and do it in the manner that we did."

The 21-16 win over the Jets in the Hall of Fame Game followed nearly two weeks of training camp. McLeod was asked for a progress report on his teammates grasping Schwartz's attacking scheme.



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"Guys are picking up the system very well. I think we're right where we need to be," he said. "More plays are starting to be made and that has a lot to do with guys now having more familiarity with the scheme. They're not necessarily thinking about, 'OK, where do I necessarily have to line up?' They're thinking about, 'OK, what's the offense doing? How do I put myself in position to make plays?' So it's good to see right now at this point in camp."

Like most of the veterans, McLeod didn't play vs. the Jets. But he deserves credit for accelerating the learning curve of his teammates by dropping knowledge on the field and in the meeting room.

"Being in the scheme for so long, being around the league for a substantial amount of time, all of it's beneficial, all of it's helpful," he said. "Always just looking to be an additional set of eyes out there for the guys."

The younger guys in the secondary have been eager to absorb the wisdom.

"Oh, man, it's amazing," cornerback Greg Newsome II said. "I'm a sponge, so I'm just getting around him, trying to get a bunch of information and he already knows how the defense is supposed to be run. So it definitely helps us in the backend."

McLeod embraces the roles of teacher and leader — cornerback Denzel Ward noted he called a meeting of the secondary early in camp — but will also be counted on to contribute on the field.

For his career, he has 18 interceptions, 60 passes defended, 11 forced fumbles, nine fumble recoveries, three touchdowns, two sacks and 689 tackles, including 23 for loss. Last year in his only season with the Colts, he started 15 of 17 games with two interceptions, a touchdown, eight passes defended, a fumble recovery and 96 tackles, including eight for loss.

Schwartz wants versatility from the safeties, and McLeod doesn't have a preference how he's used.

"Really just line me up wherever, I'm going to get the job done," he said. "Last year was my first time I really took on a role in playing down in the box and put up some of my best numbers. So just really here to do whatever is needed for the team."

"I like being down more in the box, a lot more action, of course, but I lived the majority of my career in the post, so whatever the team needs I'm willing to do."

As Schwartz decides when to use three safeties, three cornerbacks or both in the sub packages, that flexibility will come in handy.

"It's nice to have smart football players and versatile football players," coach Kevin Stefanski said.

"Rodney's a guy that can line up inside and outside, deep and short. That's the part for our defense and our defensive staff to put together packages where he can help us."

A career starter, McLeod realizes as the third safety his playing time will be determined by opponent and matchup.



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"It's a lot different, but I've accepted that and understand that's what's asked of me this year," he said. "I'm just really looking to be an asset to this team. I'm really fending for a championship, so that's my purpose and that's what I'm here to do."

The Browns haven't come close to a championship in more than 30 years, but the expectations are lofty this year and McLeod believes Schwartz is helping by being a "culture shifter."

"I feel like that's what's needed," McLeod said. "It's obviously established by the coach, but it's another thing when the players actually take ownership in it. And you can see that starting to form here."

The Browns are getting a lot from McLeod for a one-year, \$1.3 million contract: coach, player, leader, culture changer.

"We can't put a dollar amount on the value that provides to your football team," Stefanski said.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

How Sione Takitaki has impressed during ACL rehab, and why he's hopeful for his defensive role

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/07/how-sione-takitaki-has-impressed-throughout-his-acl-rehab-and-why-hes-hopeful-for-his-role-in-browns-defense.html>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. -- Sione Takitaki isn't sure when exactly he will be 100 percent again.

That's just the nature of season-ending injuries. And it's a reality the linebacker has gotten used to over the last seven-plus months, as he works his way back from an ACL tear that came during a breakout, contract season.

But the good news is everything's going to plan so far -- maybe even better than originally anticipated.

"I feel like we're ahead of schedule right now and we'll play it by ear as we continue to go," Takitaki told cleveland.com on Friday after the Browns' training camp practice at The Greenbrier. "Obviously want to be out there Game One, but we'll see how it gets going as we continue."

The fact that Takitaki is even able to hope for a return in the season opener against the Bengals is a testament to how hard he's worked to get to this point.

He went down in Week 13 against the Houston Texans on a special teams play, and in January said he was on track for an October return, about 10 months out from his surgery date.

He didn't have to begin training camp on the physically unable to perform list, and has been participating in individual drills every other practice so far.

"He has worked so hard," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "I'm not kidding, he's lived in the facility. When he gets the final go and he's going -- when exactly that is, I can't tell you. But it's certainly a testament to the work that he's put in that he's put himself in this position."

Unsurprising given how hard Takitaki has worked to even get to a second contract with the Browns.

He had always been strong against the run ever since the Browns drafted him in 2019. But showing his ability to fly around the field, he became a reliable every-down player when the Browns needed him most in 2022, shifting over to middle linebacker after both Anthony Walker Jr. and Jacob Phillips suffered season-ending injuries.

He tied a career high by playing 498 defensive snaps, even with missing Cleveland's final five games of the year. He amassed 69 tackles. He also had one sack and one forced fumble -- which both came on the same play as he took down Joe Burrow for a strip sack in the Halloween win over Cincinnati.

Yes, had he stayed healthy he may have had a chance at a bigger payday for his second contract -- but he did enough to show just how valuable he could be for the Browns defense, and was still able to return to Cleveland like he wanted.

"I was on the field a little bit more," Takitaki said. "Sometimes when you're out there taking those reps, you can make plays. So I felt like I was given the opportunity to go out there and showcase, and that's really why my production kind of spiked up."

As devoted as he was to making the most of those reps, he matched that in his rehab post-injury, staying in



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northeast Ohio for most of the offseason so he could focus on recovering at the team facility.

Getting rid of crutches was a milestone. So was being able to do pool workouts. The big one was being able to run for the first time. But it was a paradoxical experience as the milestones came quickly, but not quickly enough for his liking.

"When I was able to run, I was like, OK, we can knock this thing out," he said. "It's crazy because I feel like it went super fast and I wasn't kind of keeping up on the daily stuff. I was just trying to attack every day."

Walker also stayed in Cleveland for most of the offseason, rehabbing his torn quad tendon, and has had a front-row seat to watching Takitaki work.

While the two were going through the same process, Walker comes away from the offseason even more impressed by his teammate.

"He loves the game so much and he's always trying to find ways to get better," Walker said. "But during this rehab, obviously seeing him go to work every day, you get a newfound appreciation. A lot of guys don't want to go through that, me included. So for us to do that every day when we didn't want to and we didn't have to. Some days we could take off and we're like, nah, we're coming in, we're going to get some extra work to see that, to have somebody go through that with you, definitely a new appreciation there."

Whenever his full return comes, Takitaki is hopeful he can build off of his 2022 performance.

He'll return to a new defensive scheme now manned by Jim Schwartz, one that requires the linebackers to read and react to what the defensive line is doing and serve as the cleanup crew.

Given his athleticism, he's hopeful it could be a good fit.

"I feel like this game definitely fits my style," he said. "Everybody has told you guys that it's an attack style defense, and so I feel like that's what I'm used to from high school to college and having it here in the league. But then we got a bunch of guys and the room is filled with talent from top to bottom, so we're excited for that."

The days rehabbing have been difficult, but Takitaki has done everything he can to give himself the best chance to succeed.

Some uncertainty may still lie ahead, but for now he's grateful to get the chance to return to Cleveland.

"I'm just happy to be back with the guys, being able to play here and there and just kind of get my feet up back under me," he said. "I told you guys I was going to make it back. I'm real confident I can with where I'm at right now."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Za'Darius Smith on being misunderstood, flipping the 'sorry Browns' script, and vibing with Myles Garrett

By Mary Kay Cabot, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/07/zadarius-smith-on-being-misunderstood-flipping-the-sorry-browns-rep-and-vibing-with-myles-garrett.html)

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/07/zadarius-smith-on-being-misunderstood-flipping-the-sorry-browns-rep-and-vibing-with-myles-garrett.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Like Deshaun Watson, Browns defensive end Za'Darius Smith was asked to get up in front of his new teammates at The Greenbrier resort last week during the early days of training camp and share his 4H's: history, heartbreak, heroes and hopes.

His compelling story included a lot about the misconception that he was a bad teammate at his last two stops — in Green Bay and Minnesota.

In Smith's view — and in that of his teammates — nothing could be further from the truth. He learned how to be a team player and a leader from his first mentors in Baltimore such as Terrell Suggs and Elvis Dumervil, and takes the role very seriously.

A church-raised man and father of three mini-Z's -- including a month-old daughter Zoe -- bad teammate is just not how he rolls.

"I feel like once you're happy and you having fun, it's a lot of negativity going to try to come around you, but I block out the noise," Smith told [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/07/zadarius-smith-on-being-misunderstood-flipping-the-sorry-browns-rep-and-vibing-with-myles-garrett.html) in a one-on-one interview on Friday. "If they're talking about you, you're doing something good. So I'm going to just let 'em keep talking and I'm going to keep improving on my game.

"I know I don't have everything yet in the bag, and I'm still learning too as a player. But with all the negative stuff, you don't even pay attention to that. I see a lot of younger guys go through stuff like that and they kind of basically hit rock bottom from it. But for me, that just adds fuel to the fire, and I'm going to just keep being me as a player and as a person."

In Green Bay, then-defensive coordinator Mike Pettine coaxed a career-high 13.5 sacks out of him in 2019 and 12.5 in 2020.

But things went south in 2021 when he opted to have back surgery before the season and missed all but one game. Smith says the Packers turned their back on him after the surgery, a notion that coach Matt LaFleur disputes.

Nevertheless, the player who combined for 26 sacks in two seasons in Green Bay — most in team history since sacks became an official stat in 1982 — was suddenly a villain in the eyes of the NFL.

"It all started in Green Bay when they said I was a bad teammate and we all know that's not me," Smith said. "We couldn't come together on the back injury and they thought that I would never be the same again. I don't know what made 'em think that, but I still went to Minnesota, had what, (9.5 sacks in nine games) but then I had a knee injury.

"But type of stuff happens. When you get a new opportunity, you just make the best of it."

Smith, who turns 31 on Sept. 8 — two days before the Browns' opener against the Bengals — spurned the Packers by signing a three-year, \$42 million deal with the Vikings before last season so he could kick Green



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Bay's tail twice a year. He had reportedly agreed to return to the Ravens, but opted for the more lucrative deal in Minnesota.

The Revenge Tour got out to a rousing start with a 23-7 victory over the Packers, and 8.5 sacks in his first seven games to tie for first in the NFL before a knee contusion against the Bills derailed his NFL Defensive Player of the Year aspirations. He had only 1.5 sacks the rest of the way, including a half-sack in the final seven games for a total of 10.

"It was a struggle," Smith said. "My contract was set up in a way to where basically the money was supposed to be earned through dressing out each and every week, so I couldn't take breaks. If I would've taken a break, I would've missed out on \$6 million.

"I still tried to give it my all. I'm a team player. I'm going to do whatever it takes for me to still try to be productive, but I wasn't as productive as I was at the beginning. A lot of people (were) like, 'oh yeah, Z fell off.' That wasn't the case. We all know the case. People get hurt. It's f----- football."

But with a lack of guaranteed money left on his Vikings deal, Smith wanted out, and pre-emptively tweeted a goodbye to Vikings fans and the organization in March. The team had no plans to trade him then, but shipped him to the Browns in May for what amounted to a bookkeeping move that saved them \$11 million. The Vikings kicked in sixth- and seventh-round picks in 2025 for two fifth-rounders in 2024 and 2025.

The Browns then gave Smith what he really wanted — a one-year deal with \$11.71 million guaranteed — and a chance to hit the jackpot again after the season.

But in the midst of it all, charges of "bad teammate" resurfaced.

"As you can see, I'm not going to change as a person," he said. "I'm a happy dude, love, love playing football. Got a chance to start my senior year of high school playing football. And from there I've been in the league going on nine years now. I love the game, I love everything about it. Love being around my teammates, the locker room.

"I love making everybody happy and also helping a young guy. That's where I feel like my leadership comes from, and I'm going to just keep doing what I'm doing and try to hopefully get that Defensive Player this year."

Browns defensive tackle Dalvin Tomlinson, who played with Smith in Minnesota last season, knows as well as anyone what kind of teammate he is.

"He's super motivational," Tomlinson said. "He's going to give you some energy, give you some juice. When you feel like you're a little tired or something, he's going to come jump around and joke around with you to get you going a little bit more. He learns your reason why you're playing this, and he just reminds you, 'Hey, you're doing this for this.'

"When you're going on play No. 12 on a drive or something like that, he's like 'keep pushing DT', stuff like that."

Smith and Myles Garrett



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Smith stepped into Myles Garrett's world, and has received a warm welcome. Coming off a season in which Jadeveon Clowney resented getting switched to the tougher blocker, Garrett respects Smith's talent and leadership ability. A three-time Pro Bowler, he's averaged 12.0 sacks in each of his last three healthy seasons, and is widely regarded as one of the most fearsome pass rushers in the NFL.

"He's lighthearted, great sense of humor, fun guy, but has a lot of knowledge to bring to the room and plenty of experience — more experience than I believe anyone else on our d-line -- and he's been there," Garrett said.

"He's been to the precipice, he's been at the top of the hill and he knows what it's supposed to look like. He's worked with some of the very best in the game and we just have to be willing to listen. We have to give him our undivided attention and allow him to lead us when the time comes."

As for Garrett's own leadership skills, Smith hasn't found them lacking like former Browns defensive lineman Malik Jackson did.

"I only saw good for Myles in helping the younger guys in the locker room," Smith said. "I like the way he goes in and lets the young guys know it before anything else happens. He shows great leadership. We all can improve on something, but I wouldn't say he's not a good leader."

He said he and Garrett, who's had a club-record 16.0 sacks in each of the past two seasons, are getting accustomed to each other on and off the field.

"There are some things he knows he can help me with and some things I know I can help him with," Smith said. "It all works hand-in-hand and we're getting through it each and every day."

As for becoming the best pass-rush duo in the league -- how Garrett once described him and Clowney -- Smith will reserve judgment until he sees how it looks in pads a few more times.

"But I feel like we've got two guys on the edge and the big guys in the middle and also backups," he said. "This D-line is going to be something special this year."

He acknowledged that two candidates for NFL Defensive Player of the Year on the same team is a rarity, "but the guys upstairs, they know what they're doing and they know how to create duos."

Playing opposite Garrett, he knows offenses will have a tough call on whom to double or chip-block. Last season, Garrett was the most double-teamed edge rusher in the NFL.

"I hate it for the guys who are on the opposite side of the ball," Smith said. "They're going to have to find a way. It would be good for sometimes the slide to go to Myles and that'll create one-on-ones for me, and when they want to come to me, that'll create one-on-ones for Myles and (Tomlinson). It all works hand-in-hand."

The key, he said, is for him and Garrett to want the best for each other. In the case of his predecessor, Clowney felt Garrett was the favorite son.

"I think Myles likes the right side more, but we've been doing a lot of switching to where he can take the left side and I can take the right side just to get a feel for things," Smith said. "Obviously if I'm winning on one side, I want him to come win on that side of it. If he's winning on the other side, I want to go win on that side too. It's more about sharing and caring, helping each other get better each and every day."



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A fourth-round pick of the Ravens who spent his first four seasons there, Smith learned from the likes of Suggs, Dumervil and CJ Mosley how to play unselfishly, and to help the younger players.

"A lot of younger guys don't have that in the league — that leadership group that wants to give them the game," Smith said. "They talk about older guys wanting to be more selfish, but we play as one. If one messes up, we all mess up. If I help a younger guy, I feel like I was part of his success."

Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said he has been happy with Smith's commanding presence. On his lone veteran day of rest in camp, he chose to run sprints in the steamy heat.

"Z has been awesome," he said. "He practices really hard, he's after my own heart with how he works out here on the field. He's a leader. He's done it at a high level in this league. He's been through a lot in this league so I think just him imparting his knowledge of things that he's seen is so important to our young guys."

Jim Schwartz gets him

An old school player with old-school influences and mentality, Smith appreciates new defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz letting the vets do their thing.

"He's leaving it up the older guys in the leadership room, what we think it should be like," Smith said. "I give him the props. He always wants us to talk as players and he's more of a player's coach. That's what you want nowadays because it's a younger generation now and every guy wants to have their input."

"But if we play as one, we can go so far in this league and hopefully win our division and then go to the AFC (Championship Game) hopefully the Super Bowl. With our coach listening to players, I love him so much about that because a lot of coaches in this league don't do that. Let's be honest, they don't."

Schwartz's faith in the vets has inspired Smith and Garrett to help coach up the younger players such as Alex Wright, Siaki Ika, and Isaiah Thomas.

"Coach (is like), '(Dang), Z knows what he's doing. Z knows his job. I'm not going to mess with Z. I'm going to just let Z do what he need to do to help the younger guys,'" Smith said.

Sorry, not the Sorry Browns

Part of Smith's speech to his teammates included flipping the script on the Browns, who haven't always been respected in the NFL. He knows it first-hand from playing in Baltimore during the Browns' 1-31 stretch of 2016-17, and from playing in Green Bay for three seasons.

"We've got a lot of doubters," Smith said. "I was just telling (Coach) how people — when they hear the Cleveland Browns it's, 'Oh we're sorry.' I said, 'We've got to change that aspect of how we look at our football team,' and what it's going to be is us doing the little things right.' It starts in the locker room."

A three-time Pro Bowler and second-team All-Pro, Smith said he and the rest of the defensive linemen are still trying to come up with a new nickname, and that the old Dawgs need new tricks.

"We're taking it one day at a time right now to get the playbook down pat and just all of us playing as one right now," he said. "But when that happens — hopefully before the second preseason game — we should



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have a name hopefully.”

Smith, who boasts five division titles in his eight seasons, is also trying to instill the tough, hard-nosed, take-no-prisoners brand of AFC North defense that he played in Baltimore and faced twice a year against the Steelers.

“Trying to bring that dog mentality to the team,” he said. “I’m not going to say they didn’t have it before I got here, but I only know one way, and that’s going forward and knocking somebody south. Defense wins championships. So if we keep that same attitude, we’ll be dominant up front, and won’t nobody be able to stop us.”

In Smith’s view, the revamped Browns have it all covered now from A to Z.



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Browns WR Elijah Moore answers for 1st time if he dropped expletive on former Jets coordinator

By Mark Kay Cabot, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/07/browns-wr-elijah-moore-answers-for-the-1st-time-if-he-dropped-that-expletive-on-the-former-jets-coordinator.html>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — Browns wide receiver Elijah Moore says he was raised better than to tell a coach what the whole world thinks he said last season.

For the first time, Browns receiver Elijah Moore answered if he actually told former Jets offensive coordinator Mike LaFleur to “go f--- yourself” as well as “you suck” last season as was reported and widely shared.

“I didn’t say that,” Moore told cleveland.com in a one-on-one interview after practice on Tuesday. “No. But at the same time, it’s like I’m in New York so things are going to come out and it doesn’t even matter anymore. If I said it or if I didn’t, they’re going to look at me how they want to look at me. You can’t please everybody. It just sucks that stuff like that was coming out.”

Zack Rosenblatt of The Athletic reported that Moore, acquired by the Browns in a trade with the Jets in March, hurled those two phrases at LaFleur on Oct. 20, four days after he got zero targets in a victory over the Packers. According to Rosenblatt, multiple people who witnessed the interaction told him the same thing. Moore was sent home that day by head coach Robert Saleh to cool off, and reportedly requested a trade that night. He sat out a victory over the Broncos that week, and was back on the job on Monday.

His denial Tuesday of the expletive-laden exchange aligned with LaFleur’s in a press conference the following week.

“There was 100 percent no blowup,” LaFleur, who was let go by the Jets after the season and hired as Rams coordinator, said. “There was a conversation. We’re all on the same page.”

The Browns actually tried to trade for Moore after the flap last season, but the Jets wouldn’t let him go. Finally, in the process of trading up Aaron Rodgers and loading up on new receivers, they were willing to part with Moore.

Moore, who tumbled from five TD catches in only 11 games as a rookie in 2021 to one last season, stressed it’s not in his nature to say something like that to an elder.

“One thing I can say about myself is I’m never disrespectful,” he said. “Even in spur of the moment and things get heated and hot, I still try to approach it — just like in a corporate job — that they still have authority and power over you. Why would you ever say something to mess up the blessing that I’m in? I realize that it’s a blessing.

“So I would never — emphasis on never — be disrespectful. But people take things different ways. Guys, we’ve got egos. You don’t know what’s being said behind the scenes. What people have got to understand is that they’re not in those rooms hearing what’s going on, what’s said and how it’s said.”

Moore, 23, said his biggest regret of the whole saga is that everyone got the wrong impression of him.

“I feel like moral of the story is that I’m not this kid that people painted me to be,” he said. “I know who I am, my teammates know who I am. And that’s the difficult thing about life. I’m just realizing as time goes



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on, that I can't please everyone. I can't tell every single person that hates me or thinks I was selfish or doing this or doing that that's not me."

Moore wanted to defend himself at times, but took the advice of his mom, Elisa Poux.

"She said I was going to run myself thin," he said. "So I can't live for that anymore, doing or thinking that that's possible. I just can move in the right direction now."

The Jets' second-round pick in 2021 out of Ole Miss, Moore relied heavily on his faith in God, his family and friends, and especially his mom during that difficult time.

"My mom, she's like my superhero," Moore said. "I feel like a lot of moms, most probably every mom, if they tap into it, they have superpowers to be caring, and to be loving. And I felt that. I can't even explain it. I'll do anything for that woman."

In the midst of the controversy, Moore couldn't imagine anything worse.

"You're like, 'Man, why is this happening?'" he said. "It feels so hard. Now, it's like, 'I got through that.'"

What's more, he now understands why it all unfolded the way it did.

"I realized it prepared me for what's about to come," he said. "I already know it. It's no secret. I'm more grateful for where I am right now. Either way, I'm going to be positive and I'm going to kill a lot of people's motive or whatever."

He has no hard feeling against the Jets for how things transpired, or for trading him to the Browns, which he didn't see coming in the spring. He'll miss out on a chance to play with Aaron Rodgers, but he feels he's in a better place.

"At the end of the day, I was grateful that they picked me," he said. "I was honored that they took a chance on me and I can't ever be mad at that. I had a great amount of joy there as well. It just didn't end up how I wanted it to. What I continue to coach myself up on is just to be levelheaded. I'm just going off how I feel, and I feel really good."

The Browns couldn't be happier so far with Moore as a person and a player. He's been the highlight on offense so far, especially with No. 1 receiver Amari Cooper sidelined the past three practices with a minor injury. Moore has developed excellent chemistry with Deshaun Watson and is being used in multiple ways.

"Speaking of taking your craft seriously, he practices hard and he takes it very seriously, which is great," Kevin Stefanski said. "It's fun to be around a guy that really works at it. And then he's taken the bit on everything we've asked him to do, of trying to make sure we move him around the formation, trying to use things that we know he's done well in his past and also challenge him with some new things. But a very, very locked-in player."

Moore appreciates that Stefanski is showcasing him in this scheme and making him feel valued.

"I feel like coach just does a good job, of seeing people how they want to be seen," he said. "And I think that's a talent and a gift when a coach already knows what you're good at. When you're on that same page, it's fun. Football becomes the kid game like it is."



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Moore, who is 5-foot-10, 178 pounds, has been lining up inside, outside and in the backfield this camp, and can't wait to show what he can do.

"I feel like I'm very hardworking, consistent, smart, explosive, and just can kind of do whatever you need me to do," he said. "I'm a great listener and I pick up on things fast and I just love football."

A graduate of football powerful Saint Thomas Aquinas in Fort Lauderdale, Moore has also become close to Cooper, his fellow South Florida native. They have an unspoken bond from growing up there and playing football in that hotbed of talent. During special teams drills and other offensive breaks, they sometimes work off to the side on catch drills, perfecting their craft.

"Obviously, having the chemistry of where we're from helps," Moore said. "But the conversations we have outside of the locker room are more about things that go on in life and how to maneuver through those. Amari is a good character that, if you have the opportunity to get to know him and talk to him, you'll see. You won't see it right away because he's not going to say much, but he's definitely outspoken once you get to know him. I'm grateful to have a guy like that who wants to share."

Moore has also grown close to Deshaun Watson and developed more of an understanding of him when he listened to his life story in the team meeting on Saturday night as part of Stefanski's 4H program — history, heartbreak, heroes and hopes.

"I feel like the whole offense is getting close with him," Moore said. "When you hear someone's story, it makes you fight harder for them. And then just seeing him grind. That's the part he can't hide. A lot of people grind, but as a quarterback, as your leader — just from what we hear all the greats do and stuff like that — he matches every step of that. It gives me more of a trust in him because he's standing here strong, smiling. We're all happy and ready for him to ball."

Before he delivers his own 4H's to the team, he wants to give it a lot of thought.

"You want people to feel you, but you also don't want to be up there extending yourself," he said.

Moore's 4H's will undoubtedly include plenty of time on what happened in New York last year, and how it helped him develop as a person and a player. At 23, he knows he's still a work in progress and will continue to make mistakes. But in his mind, it all worked out for the best.

"I'm just grateful to be here now," he said. "I'm grateful to be on this team with these coaches and my teammates here and I feel loved and that's all that matters. I'm going to let my play and how I work and how I focus speak for me. I'm 23, growing and I'm trying my best."



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Grant Delpit reveals what he expects of himself and addresses his expiring Browns contract

By Mark Kay Cabot, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/07/grant-delpit-reveals-what-he-expects-of-himself-and-addresses-his-expiring-browns-contract.html>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — Grant Delpit has the bar set so high for himself, he feels he hasn't even come close in his first two healthy seasons with the Browns.

In the final year of his rookie contract, he hopes he gets plenty more years here to achieve his goals.

"Greatness, man. Greatness," Delpit said Saturday on Day 7 of Browns training camp. "To myself, I haven't shown anything yet. Greatness. And that comes from being out here every day, putting in the work. You can't have any excuses when it comes to getting on that field. You can't take plays back when you get to the season."

The Browns' second-round pick in 2020 out of LSU, Delpit refuses to use his ruptured Achilles late in training camp as a rookie as an excuse. The injury cost him his rookie season, and he spent much of 2021 working his way back to his former self.

"No, I don't think (it's the Achilles)," he said. "I mean, a lot of guys deal with injury. I'm just hard on myself, I guess. I just expect greatness from myself, that's all I'm saying. So y'all take that how you want to, but I just know I have so much more to give."

Although Delpit grabbed a team-high four interceptions in 2022 and led the team with 105 tackles, he ranked only 57th among qualifying NFL safeties by Pro Football Focus with a 63.6 grade. He knows he's capable of much more, and intends to prove it.

"We'll have to wait and see," he said. "I missed my first year. I'm always wanting to do more. I have way more to give. As a team, we have way more to give. That's what we're working on right now. I have high expectations for myself — the highest — and I'm going to hold myself to that. And we need to start fast this season, especially with our three division games in the first four weeks, so we won't expect nothing else."

With uncertainty over whether or not the Browns will extend his contract, Delpit made it clear this is home and that he wants to be here long term. He missed the Browns' playoff campaign of 2020, and has endured back-to-back losing seasons.

"Of course (I wanted to be here)," he said. "I built a brotherhood with these guys. These guys are my brothers and I expect highly from them, they expect highly from me. And I've grown to know these guys and I love them and we'll go out there and get it done this season."

He stressed that the expiring contract isn't on his mind as the Browns hurtle toward a pivotal season. The top-paid safeties in the NFL are making between \$13 million and \$19 million a year.

"I love this game with everything in my heart," he said. "I want that end game, the end result that we all want in this team more than anything in my soul. With winning comes great things and that's what we need to focus on."

Delpit (6-3, 208) explained what the greatness he's seeking might look like.



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“(It’s) being around the ball, getting to the ball, just making plays, being that leader in the defense, taking control,” he said. “Being that voice, being that nerve center of the defense, man, to just get everybody on the same page and be that guy that people can see that’s out there every day.”

What it doesn’t need to include, he said, is a Pro Bowl.

“I don’t care about a Pro Bowl, really,” he said. “That’s a fan vote. I’m not worried about that.”

Kevin Stefanski expects Delpit to take another step up this season.

“I thought Grant really came on last year,” he said. “I think that he had some really high moments. He continues to build on that. Very smart, heady player – physical, makes great plays on the ball, very good ball skills. So, I just think it’s a matter of just building on what he’s been doing.”

Delpit believes that Jim Schwartz’s attack-minded scheme will benefit the secondary tremendously.

“So we have a great D-line, DBs love that,” he said. “So when they get after the quarterback, man, good things happen for DBs, and as long as we stick in coverage and as long as we’re alignment-, technique-sound, it’s going to be good things. We’re aggressive, we’re not sitting back, we’re not conservative. We’re not playing just to tag runners and give up yards. We want to go make the plays, we want to be aggressive and we want to go make something happen.”

Delpit noted that the Browns must get more takeaways if they hope to be a dominant defense. Last season, they tied for 20th with only 20 takeaways, and tied for 21st with only 11 interceptions.

“The Cleveland Browns are 23-6 in the past (three) years that we’re even or better in the turnover ratio,” he said. “So that number needs to be higher. We need to set ourselves up right on defense. We need to go get the ball. When the ball is in the air, it’s ours. Offense, don’t give it away. That’s like one of the most important stats in football is that turnover ratio. We need to be at the top leading the league in that.”

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With quarterbacks in the AFC North such as Lamar Jackson and Delpit’s former LSU friend Joe Burrow, Delpit knows the defensive must do its part.

“Make it hard on the quarterback,” he said. “You don’t want to make stuff easy like busted coverages, stuff like misalignments and stuff like that. Takeaways have a lot to do with the quarterback as well. Just making a throw that he might see in sticky coverage and stuff like that. Quarterbacks are too good. It’s the NFL They’ll tear you up when you allow them to. So we just need to be sound.”

Delpit will work with two new safeties this year in Rodney McLeod and Juan Thornhill, and all three will be on the field together a lot in Schwartz’s scheme.

“I know the lay of the land,” Delpit said. “These are new guys, but Rodney is on year 12, Juan is on year six and made it to two Super Bowls. Rodney’s been to one. So those guys know what it takes to get there. I know the coaching here, the atmosphere they’re going to bring, the mentality, it’s all going to work hand



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in hand.”

With a new coordinator, a new scheme and an infusion of talent on defense, Delpit is confident the Browns can reach the Super Bowl if they do the little things right.

“That’s our end goal as a team,” he said.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Why rehab was so boring for Jakeem Grant Sr. and how he likens his role in the return game to Steph Curry

By Dan Labbe, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/07/why-rehab-was-so-boring-for-jakeem-grant-and-how-he-likens-his-return-role-to-steph-curry.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- After Jakeem Grant Sr. suffered his first ruptured Achilles in 2018, he was told there was maybe a five percent chance he could rupture it again.

Last August, the diminutive receiver who, at 5-foot-7, has built an eight-year career and become one of the game's most dangerous returners, ruptured the same Achilles again during a training camp drill.

"I guess I continue to beat the statistics, good and bad," he told cleveland.com in an interview earlier this week.

Grant knows a thing or two about beating the odds. A sixth-round pick by the Dolphins out of Texas Tech in 2016, he has stuck in the league for his return ability and has developed over time into a player who can contribute on offense.

Before his injury in camp last year, Grant appeared destined for a bigger role in the Browns offense, using his speed and versatility to add to the receiving corps. The injury, in fact, happened on an offensive play, an inside fade throw from Deshaun Watson. Grant said it felt like someone kicked his Achilles, which he knew didn't happen, and knew the feeling immediately.

"I saw Larry (Jackson, strength and conditioning director) first. And he was like, 'What's wrong?' I was like, 'My Achilles.' And I punched the ground."

He repeated his self diagnosis as more teammates and coaches gathered around.

"I was sick," Grant said. "I was hurt."

He also couldn't help but feel he had let everyone down.

"Everybody was depending on me to change the return game and to take our team to the next level," Grant said.

Instead, Grant spent the season doing the boring work of rehabbing.

"It is extremely boring, I can tell you," he said. "I was in a cast and boot for four-and-a-half months, and only thing I could do was clamshells, sidelines and glute exercises in the core. And I'm talking about so boring. And then it's like 10, 15 minutes and I'm done. And it's like I'm done for the entire day. And it's like, what do I do with my whole entire day?"

Grant couldn't go out to practice because he was on crutches or a scooter and even if he could have been out there, it would have been hard to watch.



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"It becomes a love and hate," he said. "I want to be out there, but I hate watching."

Grant likened it to being a boxer -- just him and a trainer working alone.

"You're fighting and you're training by yourself. It's just you and the trainer, which it was majority of the time, me and (Browns assistant athletic trainer) Pat (Rock). And we had great conversations. Pat kept it fun and we talked trash to each other, but it was just boring because the milestone is so far away and it's like, I'm only getting one percent better, one percent better."

Cleveland Browns wide receiver Jakeem Grant Sr. catches a pass

Browns receiver Jakeem Grant was looking at an expanded role on offense last season for the Browns. John Kuntz, cleveland.com

With an Achilles injury, rest is important. This wasn't a situation where Grant could do one more turn in a practice drill, do one more rep in the weight room or catch one more punt off the JUGS machine.

"I'm the type of guy that I always want more. I want to do more things," he said. "I like to do a lot of things just to get better and work on my weaknesses. If I feel like my calf is not strong enough, I'll try to do an extra set. And they're like, we had enough today. We don't want you to come back sore tomorrow and (the injury is) irritated and you can't do anything the next day."

So he spent his downtime with his kids -- he has a son and twin daughters -- and did some streaming, something he wants to do after his career is over. While he was doing streams playing Call of Duty or NBA 2K, he actually found encouragement from fans.

When he had too much time alone and too much time to think, he leaned on people around him -- he singled out Rock, receiver Amari Cooper and tight end David Njoku -- along with his family.

"Whenever I was thinking, I was like, man, I don't know man, I don't know if I can do it, if I can come back from it. Because the process is so long and you're not able to do anything. So you have a lot of time to sit there and think and reflect. And I'm just like, man, am I ever going to get back? Am I going to be ready by camp? All these negative thoughts start to come into play, and you're human. So how I beat those negative thoughts is by the people around me, the support that I had around me, the support system."

Grant has been slowly working back onto the field, doing work on the side during the early parts of training camp. He caught some kickoffs on Tuesday during special teams work. He said he noticed a difference in his recovery coming out of minicamp in the spring.

"It was just, now I feel like I can cut off of it, I feel like it's strong. And when I say I feel the best I've felt in a long time, even back when it happened the first time, I feel better than I did when it happened the first time, which is unbelievable," he said.

Grant turns 31 in October, so recovering from a second Achilles to once again become one of the best returners in the game would certainly surprise people. It's part of what's driving him.



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"I get to go out there every single day to prove people wrong over and over again that didn't think I would come back from this," he said.

He's spoken to new special teams coordinator Bubba Ventrone and he's excited to get an opportunity to play under a coordinator he's gone against in the past.

"It's almost like I have the green light, like Steph Curry in the return game," Grant said. "And I love that about him and that trust that I have, that trust that I've gained to him. I just got to continue to do that and just continue to be one of those guys that continues to do everything right and Bubba will lead me to another Pro Bowl."

Grant is already looking forward to his first opportunity to catch a punt or kickoff in a game.

"I think there will be butterflies because I never had a year off and I never missed a season," he said. "There will definitely be butterflies. But once I get the first one, all of them go away. Once I catch the ball and it's time to go, all of it goes away. And I'm just ready for that first one."

What can people expect?

"It kind of feels like the dog that's in the crate for X amount of time and you're at work and stuff and you finally come and let him out," Grant said. "He has to go to the bathroom and he wants to just run around, stretch his legs. That's how I feel, like a mad dog running loose that's been in the cage for a long time and I just can't wait. I really cannot wait."



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New number, fresh perspective have Greg Newsome II excited for Year 3

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/07/26/new-number-fresh-perspective-have-greg-newsome-ii-excited-for-year-3/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — The large oval on the back of his jersey is obvious for everyone to see.

Greg Newsome II hopes the changes in Year 3 go much deeper.

The NFL amended its rules this year to allow players to wear No. 0. Newsome jumped at the chance, dropping No. 20.

“I was just super excited,” the cornerback said Tuesday during training camp at The Greenbrier Resort. The players are off Wednesday. “I was presented the opportunity. I think it was pretty cool to be the first Cleveland Brown ever to wear zero. So that was a little behind it.

“And then going into this next year, I kind of wanted a fresh start with everything.”

Notes: Greg Newsome II says he had ‘great’ experience at Northwestern but calls hazing scandal ‘troubling’

Newsome was the No. 26 pick out of Northwestern in 2021. His first two seasons were solid — 26 starts in 27 games, 15 passes defended, 79 tackles, a half-sack — but unspectacular and occasionally bumpy.

Missing from the resume are memorable plays. He doesn’t have an interception or turnover of any kind, following one interception in three seasons at Northwestern. The cynics on social media were quick to point out the new number matches his NFL INT total.

Training Camp Log, Day 4

The zero on the white practice jersey jumps out, so Newsome was asked about quarterbacks seeing it as a bull’s-eye and targeting him.

“I hope so. I get a little bit more production, so I hope that’s what it causes,” he said.

Newsome has had chances at picks, including an easy one he dropped last year in a win in Houston. Coach Kevin Stefanski said the evaluation of his performance is more nuanced.

Myles Garrett says he continues to grow as leader, reacts to criticism from former teammate Malik Jackson

“You have to be so careful with interceptions similar to sacks,” Stefanski said. “With sacks, it’s a stat that everybody uses for the defensive line and for defenses. But really we’re looking at quarterback pressures, (they) are so important to us when it comes to (the) defensive line. Similarly with the secondary, you need the ball to get thrown your way in order to have an interception, and then so how many balls are coming your way? What are you doing when the ball does come your way? Are you defending the player? Are you knocking the ball away?

“We love interceptions. Our DBs love interceptions, and that’s something that’s a goal for all of our guys. But I think it can be a little bit misleading.”



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The hope of a fresh start reaches beyond interceptions.

Newsome was a full-time starter last year but moved into the slot when then-coordinator Joe Woods would go with a nickel or dime package. Newsome felt he was playing a linebacker role at times and didn't like it. The frustration sparked rumors he wanted to be traded, which he's denied repeatedly and adamantly.

He was also a victim in a robbery in June, when defensive tackle Perrion Winfrey and a friend said they were robbed at gunpoint. Newsome said he waited at the nightclub for them to come back and pick him up but they were robbed and Newsome's truck stolen. Winfrey was released by the team last week after being identified as a suspect in an alleged aggravated robbery incident.

"I'm all about this team, all about trying to get this team to our goals," Newsome said. "So, yeah, definitely all that stuff is in the past, just ready to move forward.

"I'm going into Year 3. I've been in the league for two years now, and I think I'm ready to really make that next jump. So that's kind of what I mean by fresh start. So I kind of wanted to just change everything and (the number) was one of the things."

Jim Schwartz was hired to replace Woods as coordinator and made it clear Newsome's role would be whatever is best for the team. He's bounced between outside and the slot early in camp — No. 1 corner Denzel Ward has done the same — and sounded as if he's embraced the dual role.

"Oh, I love it," Newsome said. "Versatility. Some of the greatest in the game — Marlon Humphrey, Jalen Ramsey — a lot of them play inside and out, and now I think I'm going to be able to really showcase my versatility this season.

"Me and (Schwartz) had countless conversations and it's just going to be a lot of man-to-man (coverage) and versatility. So I'm going to be able to showcase myself inside, outside. Wherever he needs me to play for his defense to be successful, I'm ready to do it."

Newsome said it's too early to tell what will determine who'll be in the slot when, but opponent and matchup will likely be important factors.

Schwartz brings a history of success but also an in-your-face personality. Newsome said no adjustment was necessary.

"I think I play better like that," he said. "A guy like that who's hard-nosed, he's only going to accept greatness. I love that. Because that's how I kind of hold myself. So a guy like that, I'm super excited and he's been doing a great job so far."

The Tuesday practice was the first competitive one of camp. In a red zone drill, Newsome gave up a touchdown to rookie receiver Cedric Tillman but claimed Tillman pushed off. On the next snap, Newsome pressed and wouldn't let Tillman off the line, forcing an incompletion.

"The defense, we want to lead this team," Newsome said. "So every single day we're going to try to bring energy. It's hard going against those guys, man. I think we got one of the top offenses in the league, so doing a good job against them is only going to prepare us to go against anybody in the league."



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The expectation is the experience of the first two seasons leads to a breakthrough.

“I’ve been seeing this for the last two years. I know what to expect now,” he said. “It kind of feels like my junior year at Northwestern when everything’s slowed down and I’m just out there playing fast, so I’m hoping that that happens this year, too.”

“I definitely think this could be my best season, but what I’m really just focused on is trying to help the team win. If we’re not winning and I’m playing great, that doesn’t mean anything.”



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Cleveland Browns defensive end Ogbo Okoronkwo turns a teenager's secret into a NFL career

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/08/01/ogbonnia-okoronkwo-cleveland-browns-teenagers-secret-nfl-career-nigerian-houston-oklahoma-free-agent/70501209007/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — The money was the thing that set off Augusta Okoronkwo's motherly intuition.

Her 16-year-old son Ogbonnia was asking for it regularly. He would tell her it was for things like "Gatorade or socks or a mouthpiece," but never that all of that was part of a bigger secret he was keeping from his parents.

Behind their back, Augusta and Benson Okoronkwo's son had taken up the same thing so many other teenage boys in Houston had done. Ogbonnia — better known as "Ogbo" — Okoronkwo had been bitten by the love of football.

"I never ever showed or expressed any want to play any type of sport besides skateboarding," Ogbo, the Browns' defensive end, told the Beacon Journal during the team's training camp trip to The Greenbrier. "So it was more like an, 'all right,' maybe she thought I was just trying to get extra money from her, but she was just like, well, if you say this is what you need it for, it was more of a thing like that. Just being a mom."

The Okoronkwo's were living in a place where football is, as Ogbo admits, "a religion." It was a place where football players, even in high school, were looked upon as something beyond mere mortals.

Browns defensive end Ogbo Okoronkwo takes part in drills Wednesday, June 7, 2023, in Berea. So it wouldn't seem like playing the sport of choice in town would be a reason for a teenager to hide that fact from his parents. Except that, in many ways, football was a relatively foreign concept for the Ogbo's Nigerian-born parents.

"My parents aren't from America, so they really harped on academics," Ogbo said. "They didn't really feel a need for me to be doing anything if it wasn't academics or working towards getting an academic scholarship so they wouldn't have to pay for my tuition, of course. So I knew when I started playing football, they wouldn't support it."

Okoronkwo's father, Benson, had immigrated to the United States to pursue a pharmacy degree at Texas Southern University. Augusta, meanwhile, worked as a nurse.

Texas prep stars now Browns teammates: New Browns DE Ogbonnia Okoronkwo wants to 'just get after quarterbacks' with Myles Garrett

While Okoronkwo eventually told his mom what he was doing during his junior season at Alief Taylor High School, it wasn't until after that year that he let his father in on the secret. However, seeing was believing for Benson Okoronkwo, and that didn't happen until he was convinced by his wife to go to nearby Katy, Texas, where their son's high school team was playing against the No. 2-ranked team in the country.

"My dad had no clue," Ogbo recalled. "But my dad came, he saw me play. I had a really good game. There were like all these schools here to see me. I balled out, because I knew they were there. I had this crazy



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game and ... that's how they found out I played football."

Turns out, the choice to pick up football was a productive one for Ogbo Okoronkwo. The scholarship offers, which he initially hid from his parents as part of his secret football life, came pouring in.

What once was a teenager's secret passion has turned into a life-altering journey.

"Football just sort of cleaned up my whole life in all aspects," Okoronkwo said. "Even away from football, what I took away from football is like, OK, just being accountable, being where you say you're going to be, people depending on you to be where you say you're going to be. All those things just go hand-in-hand with life."

Texans linebacker Ogbonnia Okoronkwo looks to defend during a game against the Jaguars, Sunday, Jan. 1, 2023, in Houston.

Okoronkwo has worked his way into a productive pass-rush specialist as he enters his fifth NFL season, and first with the Browns. After three years and 33 games played with the Rams, including a Super Bowl championship in his final year there, he played for his hometown Houston Texans last year, recording a career-high five sacks and nine tackles for loss in 17 games.

That led him to sign with the Browns on the first day of free agency in March. Okoronkwo joined free-agent signees Dalvin Tomlinson and Maurice Hurst Jr., along with trade acquisition Za'Darius Smith, as big offseason pick-ups to help reshape a defensive line that was shaky at best a season ago.

"His strength is crazy," Tomlinson said of Okoronkwo. "You wouldn't expect Ogbo to be that strong. The way he sets edges, it's crazy. He's just so fluid when he pass rushes and stuff. I said before, it's just every time I see him rush, it doesn't seem real, like somebody playing Madden or something with him out there every time he puts his hand in the dirt."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Demetric Felton Jr. feels right at home back at running back for Cleveland Browns

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2023/08/05/demetric-felton-jr-back-cleveland-browns-natural-home-running-back-ucla-nfl-preseason-dawand-jones/70515202007/>

CANTON — Demetric Felton Jr. admitted it was a lot like riding a bike. After you've done it once, you never really forget how it's done.

Felton's first two seasons with the Browns have been spent, in a lot of ways, out of position. The former seventh-round pick out of UCLA was drafted as a running back, but has played mostly receiver out of necessity.

In Thursday night's Hall of Fame Game win over the New York Jets, Felton finally got to go "home" to the comfortable surroundings of the backfield. He couldn't have been happier about it, either.

"It felt good being able to get those many reps," Felton said after the game. "I haven't been able to in a while and, like you said, getting back to that rhythm, it just felt really good."

Felton's performance backed those words up. After only returning punts in the first half of the preseason opener, he lined up at running back behind his former UCLA teammate, quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson, when the Browns took possession with 12:58 remaining in the third quarter.

Cleveland Browns running back Demetric Felton Jr. (25) runs with the ball as New York Jets safety Ashtyn Davis pursues during the Hall of Fame Game Thursday in Canton.

That's when Felton went to work helping the Browns offense get to work erasing an 11-point halftime deficit. He carried the ball five times on the 11-play drive, gaining 38 yards, including a 16-yard touchdown run on which he initially was bottled up at the line of scrimmage before bouncing to the right and into the end zone.

"It was big," rookie right tackle Dawand Jones said. "I wasn't here last year. We watch film and, like you said, see him play receiver and now you see him being an elusive back. Reminds me a little of (former Charger, Saint and Eagle) Darren Sproles. He's definitely fast and twitchy."

Felton finished with a team-high 46 yards on seven carries. Over his first two years with the Browns, spanning 24 regular-season games, he had carried the ball just eight times for 20 yards.

According to Pro Football Focus, on only 20 of Felton's 205 career offensive snaps has he lined up in the backfield. The versatility to line up both at running back and receiver was what made him appealing to the Browns, and he said it's helped him craft a more well-rounded game for himself.

"Yeah, I feel like they all just helped me with each position and each way," Felton said. "Being able to have that versatility and go back and forth is really huge and valuable, I think."

Felton also returned Thursday to a spot at which he's been utilized before with the Browns — punt return specialist. He comes into this season with 39 career punt returns, including 32 as a rookie in 2021.

With other potential return men like Jakeem Grant Sr. and Jaelon Darden sidelined for the Hall of Fame Game, that role was all Felton's. He averaged 2 yards on five returns.



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"Yeah, it's huge for me to be able to show that I can be helpful on special teams," Felton said. "That's something that I've been trying to work a lot in the offseason just to give them more trust in me."

Felton's locked into a battle to be, ostensibly, the No. 3 running back behind Nick Chubb and Jerome Ford. With neither of those players dressed for Thursday's game, the first half went to multi-year practice-squad player John Kelly Jr. before Felton's chance arose.

Cleveland Browns running back Demetric Felton Jr. (25) and wide receiver Anthony Schwartz (10) celebrate after Felton scored a touchdown during the second half against the New York Jets in the Hall of Fame Game Thursday in Canton.

How the competition breaks down from here remains anyone's guess. If Felton continues to put in work like he did in Canton, though, he has a chance to make it a very stressful decision.

"I mean, he made some very impressive plays there with people around him and around his feet and just extra effort," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said. "So he had a good night, obviously returned all those punts. So was quite productive for us."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Joel Bitonio believes he's playing better than ever as he hits 10-year milestone

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/07/26/joel-bitonio-believes-hes-playing-better-than-ever-as-he-hits-10-year-milestone/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — The achievement doesn't come with a gold watch, party or cake, but reaching a 10th NFL season is certainly worth commemorating.

Left guard Joel Bitonio has gotten to a decade after being a second-round pick in 2014.

"It's a pretty cool milestone," he said Tuesday during training camp at The Greenbrier. "After my rookie year I was like, 'All right, I played in the league, I want to take it year by year, but 10 years would be pretty special to get in.' And we're at Year 10, so that's pretty cool. Not too many people play 10 years, so it's really a combination of luck and skill and having the opportunity.

"But it's a little different, you know what I mean. Going into Year 10, you're getting a little bit older, but I love it. I love it out here and ready to go."

New number, fresh perspective have Greg Newsome II excited for Year 3

Bitonio started every game as a rookie then missed 17 games over the next two years with injuries. He's played every regular-season snap since and is putting together a resume worthy of Hall of Fame consideration. He's been to five straight Pro Bowls and was a first-team All-Pro the last two years.

Myles Garrett says he continues to grow as leader, reacts to criticism from former teammate Malik Jackson

"There's guys that you come across in your career and you watch them on tape, and as you're watching it, you'll say, 'teach tape,' and you'll tag the play. I'm going to grab that clip and that's going to be how we teach that technique, because he does it so well," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "Joel's somebody that is constantly in game, in practice doing it exactly the way you want it done. So he's a teach-tape player. He's done it at a high level for a very long time.

"In terms of his skillset, I don't know that there's many guards that have the combination of power, movement skills, the ability to pass protect. So he's really a guy I see as a very complete player and a great person off the field, as well. I mean, he's a huge part of what we do. He's a huge leader for this football team."

Training Camp Log, Day 4

Bitonio has been the longest-tenured Browns player for years, and at 31 years old feels he's playing the best ball of his career. He shares the credit with Stefanski, line coach Bill Callahan and coordinator Alex Van Pelt.

"I try and get better every year and I think I've improved," Bitonio said. "Throughout my college career it took me time to develop. I was improving there. I got to the NFL, I was injured early in my career, so there was a couple years there where it was a little stagnant. But I think since then with Coach Callahan, Coach Stefanski, AVP, the whole offensive staff have really put me in a very strong place to do the things I like to do and it's been really good. I feel good the last two, three years playing at a very high level."

The grizzled veteran is going through something new, as the Browns opened camp away from team



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headquarters in Berea for the first time in his career. He misses the fans but appreciates the team being together in a secluded environment. He thinks the resort could be haunted and is getting used to the old-timey décor.

“It’s beautiful out here by the way. They talk about West Virginia, it’s very beautiful,” he said. “The floral patterns are a little bit older, but they do a good job. I think great-great grandma’s house. I got a lot of green and pink in my room, so it’s a little bit different. My kids like the chairs, I FaceTime them and they’re like, ‘Can we see the green chairs again?’ So maybe we’ll have to get those for our house.”



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Rookie Cedric Tillman accepts hard coaching, vows to learn from rough reps, wants to be great

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/07/29/rookie-cedric-tillman-accepts-hard-coaching-vows-to-learn-from-rough-reps-wants-to-be-great/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — The hook route Friday wasn't run correctly. Receivers coach/pass game coordinator Chad O'Shea let rookie wideout Cedric Tillman know in no uncertain terms and wasn't going to let him move on until it was perfect.

Tillman, the team's first pick of the draft in the third round, ran it a second time and the pass went off his hands. The third time was the charm, and the rest of the receivers could continue the drill.

Pads are back, and real hitting begins Saturday

"Coach O'Shea, we're just perfectionists. So if it's one step too long, one step too short, go back and do it again," Tillman told The Chronicle-Telegram on Saturday after training camp practice at The Greenbrier Resort. "He wants me to be great, I wanna be great. So I may not like it in the moment, but in the end it'll pay off.

"That's something in the moment I knew it was wrong, so I don't have a problem with Coach getting on me."

Notes: Wyatt Teller praying for Joe Burrow, knows it 'sucks' to have calf strain

Tillman, the No. 74 pick out of the University of Tennessee, has had a typical start to his first NFL camp. He's made several catches but has failed to pull in others, including a couple in which he went up and tried to twist his body. He's expected to fit in the receiver rotation behind Amari Cooper, Elijah Moore and Donovan Peoples-Jones.

"That's very normal rookie stuff," coach Kevin Stefanski said of the redo Friday. "Coach O'Shea coaches his players hard. They have a ton of respect for him. He's never embarrassing people. But you know that when you're out there, Coach is going to get on you if you mess up.

"And Ced's a very conscientious kid. He's also a rookie, so he's going to make mistakes like all the young rookies do. And it's a matter of not making the same mistake twice."

Training Camp Log, Day 6: Starting O-line back and, hopefully, better than ever

Tillman said he had no trouble putting the episode behind him.

"It happens. It is what it is. Next-play mentality," he said. "That's why I say never get too high, never get too low."

The Browns had their most intense practice Saturday, as it was the first full-length one in pads. Tillman caught an in route from Kellen Mond off play-action and was the target on passes broken up by cornerbacks Denzel Ward and Cameron Mitchell. He ran a fade in the end zone against Ward, the team's No. 1 corner and a former Pro Bowler.



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"Going against Denzel and all these other corners that we have on our team is gonna get me prepared for the Sundays," Tillman said. "Especially Denzel's been one of the best at his position since he's been in the league. My mentality is if I can beat him, if I can get good reps against him, I can do it damn near against anybody."

Tillman asks Ward after if he gave anything away in his routes.

"Denzel's one of those guys, he doesn't mind coaching me up, even though he plays on the opposite side of the ball," Tillman said. "So he's been real huge in my development."

Tillman also has mentors in veterans Cooper and Peoples-Jones. While the rookie isn't shy about asking questions, he mostly observes.

"I'm a visual learner, so I like to watch," Tillman said. "A lot of stuff Amari does, it's really hard to teach. It's kind of just his own style, but I just try to watch him. And DPJ, we have similar kind of games. Just try to see what he does, try to see how he's a professional, his note-taking, his consistency on the field, and just try to mimic that."

Peoples-Jones is in his fourth season and has solidified himself as a strong contributor, catching 61 passes for 839 yards and three touchdowns last year. He said Tillman is receptive to advice.

"It's a lot of stuff that can happen on the field, off the field. It's a big transition for him," Peoples-Jones said. "So honestly just being there for him, I went through experiences."

"He's growing every day."

Tillman said his biggest adjustments have been the playbook, speed of the game and going against an NFL defense.

"Getting used to NFL football, professional football," he said. "So I'm learning day by day."

The next milestone is the Hall of Fame Game vs. the Jets, the preseason opener Thursday night. The Browns are expected to rest their veterans, so youngsters like Tillman should get a lot of time.

"Obviously I know my first NFL game is coming up. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to it," he said. "But I'm gonna focus on these next couple practices so I know what to do so I can go out there and ball."



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Grant Delpit chasing greatness personally and for team in final year of rookie contract

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2023/07/29/grant-delpit-chasing-greatness-personally-and-for-team-in-final-year-of-rookie-contract/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — Grant Delpit expects greatness from himself.

The safety is running out of time to meet that expectation with the Browns.

Delpit, the No. 44 pick in 2020, is in the final year of his rookie contract. The Browns will have serious salary cap decisions to make after the season, so he will likely have to play much better than in the previous two seasons — his rookie year was lost to a torn Achilles — to earn a big-money extension.

Rookie Cedric Tillman accepts hard coaching, vows to learn from rough reps, wants to be great

“Greatness,” he said matter-of-factly Saturday when asked what he plans for this year. “I haven’t shown anything. To myself, I haven’t shown anything yet.

“Greatness. And that comes from being out here every day, putting in the work. You can’t have any excuses when it comes to getting on that field. You can’t take plays back when you get to the season. As the defense as a whole, that’s communication, that’s technique, that’s anything we’re going to perfect out here. When we get to Week 1, the game is already won by then.”

Training Camp Log, Day 6: Starting O-line back and, hopefully, better than ever

Delpit would love if personal and team success led to a long-term extension.

“Of course. I built a brotherhood with these guys,” he said. “These guys are my brothers and I expect highly from them, they expect highly from me. And I’ve grown to know these guys and I love them and we’ll go out there and get it done this season.”

He said he’s not focused on the uncertainty that lies beyond 2023.

“That’s not on my mind,” he said. “I love this game. Everything in my heart, man. I want that end game, the end result that we all want in this team, more than anything in my soul. So that’s all I’m focused on. With winning comes great things, and that’s what we need to focus on.”

Delpit (6-foot-3, 208 pounds) arrived in Cleveland with the potential of stardom. He was the second pick in general manager Andrew Berry’s first season, had won a national championship at LSU and been a two-time consensus All-American and the Jim Thorpe Award winner as the nation’s best defensive back.

After the Achilles injury in training camp ended his rookie season, he started 23 of 32 games over the next two seasons. He totaled five interceptions, 13 passes defended, a forced fumble, a sack and 171 tackles, including seven for loss.

“I just know I have so much more to give,” he said.

He was asked what that would look like and joked about good things being written about him.



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"No, man, being around the ball, getting to the ball, just making plays, being that leader in the defense, taking control," he said. "Being that voice, being that nerve center of the defense, to just get everybody on the same page and be that guy that people can see that's out there every day."

"I have high expectations for myself, the highest, and I'm going to hold myself to that. And we need to start fast this season, especially with our three division games in the first four weeks, so we won't expect nothing else."

Delpit showed flashes of the playmaking he desires at the end of last season, which ended with the Browns 7-10 and out of the playoffs for the second straight year. Three of his team-high four interceptions came in Weeks 16 and 17 — one in a Christmas Eve loss to the Saints and two in a New Year's Day win over the Commanders.

"I thought Grant really came on last year," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "He had some really high moments. He continues to build on that."

"Very smart, heady player, physical, makes great plays on the ball, very good ball skills. So it's a matter of just building on what he's been doing."

Delpit finished the year with 105 tackles, four for loss, and 10 passes defended. He started 16 of 17 games — he was benched for the first three snaps vs. the Dolphins for a violation of team rules, the only snaps he missed all season. He was ranked 57th by Pro Football Focus among qualifying safeties.

"The Cleveland Browns are 23-6 in the past (three) years that we are even or better in the turnover ratio," he said. "So that number needs to be higher. We need to set ourselves up right on defense. We need to go get the ball. When the ball is in the air, it is ours."

The defense tied for 20th last season with 20 takeaways, including tied for 21st with 11 interceptions. The plan is for the aggressive style of new coordinator Jim Schwartz combined with the additions of ends Za'Darius Smith and Ogbo Okoronkwo and tackles Dalvin Tomlinson and Siaki Ika to make a big difference.

"Make it hard on the quarterback," Delpit said. "You don't want to make stuff easy like busted coverages, like misalignments. That's going to make it easy on the quarterback. Just making a throw that he might see in sticky coverage. We want to make it hard on them."

Delpit is the holdover at safety and was joined in the offseason by free agents Juan Thornhill and Rodney McLeod. Delpit's expected to be the primary strong safety with Thornhill in center field and McLeod joining in three-safety packages.

"These are new guys, but Rodney is on Year 12, Juan is on Year (5) and made it to two Super Bowls. Rodney's been to one," Delpit said. "So those guys know what it takes to get there. I know the coaching here, the atmosphere they're going to bring, the mentality, it's all going to work hand in hand."



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Browns receiver Amari Cooper making plays, fighting through injury as he develops his connection with quarterback Deshaun Watson

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2023/01/browns-receiver-amari-cooper-making-plays-fighting-through-injury-as-he-develops-his-connection-with-quarterback-deshaun-watson.html>

LANDOVER, Md. -- Amari Cooper caught the football at the Washington 36-yard line on Sunday, an out route on third-and-5, plenty good for a first down. He spun towards the left sideline and Commanders cornerback Kendall Fuller got caught in the spin cycle and, just like that, with 10:07 left in the third quarter, Cooper was racing down the sideline, Commanders linebacker David Mayo giving chase.

Cooper, on the run, did something he said he almost never does -- glanced up at the video board behind the endzone to make sure he wasn't going to get caught.

"I did peep at the screen," Cooper said after the Browns' 24-10 win on Sunday. "Usually I wouldn't, but as we all know, I'm kind of banged up. I could have ran a little faster, but that would've hurt. So I was looking like, 'Do I really need to open up?'"

You wouldn't know by watching Sunday's second half Cooper is dealing with a core muscle injury, one he isn't sure -- or isn't saying -- whether it will need to be addressed surgically in the offseason. Cooper was on the receiving end of the Browns' three biggest passing plays against Washington, including his 46-yard catch and run to give the Browns their first touchdown of the day and a 10-7 lead.

Recommended Browns stories

They were Cooper's only three catches of the game -- he was targeted four times -- but you felt the impact of his three catches, including a 26-yard touchdown in the fourth quarter with 5:21 left to put the game away.

The one catch of his that didn't finish in the end zone converted a third-and-9 in the third quarter, allowing quarterback Deshaun Watson, five plays later, to find Donovan Peoples-Jones for a 13-yard catch and score, giving the Browns a 17-7 lead.

"Third down, you gotta have it or you're off the field," Cooper said. "I think it's kind of double dipping for me, that's how I look at it, because I know if I get that first down on that third down, I not only make that catch but I give myself another opportunity in the next three downs to make a play."

All of this productivity, even while injured, is the result of Cooper's college days. He admitted he wasn't always a fan of playing hurt, of putting out tape when he wasn't 100 percent.

"When I was at (Alabama), I had to learn the hard way. I kind of lost my spot a little bit. (Alabama head coach Nick) Saban was like, 'Hey man, keep taking yourself out of the game,' -- you know what I mean? And he sat me down and talked to me. He made me view it another way. He was like, 'Sometimes you're not a hundred percent, 80 percent of you, 75 percent of you might be better than a hundred percent of the guy who's behind you. And 80 percent of you might be enough to still dominate the guy who's in front of you.'"

Once he cleared the hurdle of playing hurt, Cooper was finding he would sometimes have even better games when he wasn't 100 percent.



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Now, playing through his injury is helping him grow his connection with his new starting quarterback.

"I know it was only three catches, but it was three big catches," Watson said, "and I know Amari, he's still trying to get fully healthy."

The connection between the two is growing on and off the field. Watson said he and backup quarterback Jacoby Brissett lean on Cooper and the film study he does on cornerbacks to understand what they like to do in different situations.

"When you have a veteran like Amari, there's a lot of conversation that occurs between the quarterback and Amari in practice, in between periods, about what he's seeing and how he's going to run this route," head coach Kevin Stefanski said. "And I think that great dialogue shows up then in the game and you see those two are very much on the same page."

Sunday's performance for Cooper wasn't as much about quantity as it was quality, and he gave Watson quality work at the receiver position.

"I'm hoping I'm with him for as long as he continues to play," Watson said. "Until he retires. He's super good. He's still trying to get healthy and the play that he made today while not being healthy, I mean, the sky's the limit for him -- and really no limit for him. He can be as good as he wants to be."

Even if he needs to sneak a peek at the video board every now and again in the process.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Browns host Snowball Distribution event for Project ACT families at CrossCountry Mortgage Campus
By ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/browns-host-snowball-distribution-event-for-project-act-families-at-crosscountry>

The team continued to show their compassion and support of fans, surprising local kids and families with a night filled of gifts, pizza, and memories during the Browns' Snowball Distribution event at CrossCountry Mortgage Campus.

Twelve families from Project ACT arrived at the facility expecting pizza and left with bags of gifts and an unforgettable evening thanks to the great work of Project ACT and the Browns. Project ACT works in Cleveland Metropolitan School District, a partner district of the Browns "Stay in the Game! Keep Learning Everyday" Network, to provide support services for youth in temporary living situations.

Throughout the night, players played catch and interacted with the families learning about their situations and goals as well as providing advice and encouragement. Before the night was over, everyone received a pizza and snacks to take home.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

How Jarvis Landry influenced Donovan Peoples-Jones before the Browns even drafted him

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2022/12/how-jarvis-landry-influenced-browns-receiver-donovan-peoples-jones-before-he-was-even-drafted-by-cleveland.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- Donovan Peoples-Jones cracks a smile when he's posed the question.

Just how weird will it be on Saturday, as the Browns play the Saints, seeing his former teammate and mentor Jarvis Landry walk in to FirstEnergy Stadium for another team?

"That will be different," Peoples-Jones told cleveland.com this week. "That will be different. But I love Jarvis, so I'm excited to see him."

The interview with Peoples-Jones occurred before Landry was headed to injured reserve, and before the Saints' receiver was ruled out for this contest, idle this week with an ankle injury.

But for most of this week leading up to this game, Landry was, understandably, the story.

Peoples-Jones -- and the rest of the Browns for that matter -- have been nothing but complimentary since Landry left, but especially this week. The receiver has been widely-regarded as one of the key figures in the culture change in Cleveland, following the extremely lean 1-15 and 0-16 years that eventually turned into a playoff berth in 2020. Through his four seasons in Cleveland, Landry caught 288 passes for 3,560 yards and 15 touchdowns. He was released in a cost-saving move in March.

Recommended Browns stories

Peoples-Jones and Landry of course bonded when they became teammates after the Browns -- but Landry's influence on DPJ goes further back than Cleveland.

During his college days, when Peoples-Jones was trying to find his way at the University of Michigan, he and fellow wide receiver Tarik Black used to pore over videos of Landry and former Browns teammate Odell Beckham Jr. The two best friends at Michigan did all they could to emulate the two most-famous best friends in the NFL.

"Just ball drills, a lot of ball drills," Peoples-Jones said. "Those guys are leaders. The impact I feel like that those two made on young kids careers, you can't really measure it. You can't really measure it, the things that those guys do, what kids emulate to be at a young age. Those guys are awesome."

As Peoples-Jones was preparing for the draft, his relationship with Landry grew and went beyond just watching those highlight and training videos.

The Detroit native officially met one of his football idols in the spring of 2020, when he went down to Florida to train with Landry ahead of the NFL Scouting Combine that year.

And then of course, when they became teammates after the Browns drafted Peoples-Jones in the sixth round, that influence went even farther, giving Peoples-Jones a front row seat as a rookie to see how Landry worked day in, day out, and getting the guidance from an incredibly vocal personality. Peoples-Jones is the first to admit that because of the kind of leader Landry is, he was sad to see him go this offseason.



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"I would say it was because I loved playing with him," Peoples-Jones said in a media scrum this week. "Just the competitor that he is, the dog that he is on the field. What he meant to me in my growth and development on the field and off the field. Like, I said, he was a role model, a leader, and that's Jarvis Landry.

That influence isn't lost on Peoples-Jones now, even with Landry gone and without him suiting up Saturday.

This season, stepping up as the Browns No. 2 receiver behind Amari Cooper, Peoples-Jones is putting up career numbers. He's caught 57 passes for 782 yards, both career highs with three games still left to play. He's been extra impressive with contested catches -- his 11 this season gives him a top-15 mark in the NFL, according to Pro Football Focus.

Peoples-Jones may be the last one left in Cleveland of the trio of himself, Landry and Beckham, but he hasn't forgotten what they did for him throughout his formative years.

"That's just Jarvis as a person," Peoples-Jones said. "He's a fiery guy, a leader, role model, very vocal. So I'm sure that's followed everybody that he's ever been around."

"My relationship with them, I would describe it as a really good relationship. Those guys have always helped me in whatever I needed help in. They've been there, showed me the ropes and allowed me to learn from them both on the field and off the field. So like I said, those guys are just leaders. I'm really, really appreciative of them and those are my brothers now. I wish the best for them all the time."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Rookie Cade York on begging Browns for 68-yard field goal: 'I wanted to break the record'

By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2022/12/15/browns-rookie-kicker-cade-york-68-yard-field-goal-begging-mike-priefer-bengals-ravens-justin-tucker/69722713007/>

BEREA — Days after Cade York unsuccessfully pleaded with the Browns to kick a 68-yard field goal in Cincinnati, the rookie didn't waver.

"If I'm asking for the kick, I think I can make it," York told the Beacon Journal on Wednesday in the locker room at team headquarters.

"I wanted to break the record. That was it."

Justin Tucker set the NFL record for the longest field goal made when he nailed a 66-yard attempt last season, and the five-time All-Pro kicker and the Baltimore Ravens (9-4) will face the Browns (5-8) at 4:30 p.m. Saturday at FirstEnergy Stadium.

With the Browns trailing by 10 points Sunday in a 23-10 AFC North road loss to the Cincinnati Bengals (9-4), York wanted a shot when quarterback Deshaun Watson spiked the ball to stop the clock, setting up second-and-10 at the 50-yard line with three seconds left in the first half.

Cleveland Browns QB talk: 'I have a long way to go': Deshaun Watson won't put 'timetable' on improvements

The CBS telecast showed an animated York lobbying to Browns special teams coordinator Mike Priefer on the sideline. York repeatedly pointed to himself and raised his arms while saying, "Come on," among other things.

"I've never been set up so perfectly to have a chance like that before," York said. "Three seconds left in the half. Really not much repercussions if things don't go well on it. So I think that was more what it was about.

"I know it may not have looked great on TV, but it was more me being confident, saying, 'I want it.'

"I had some people mention, 'Why were you like crying about wanting to kick?' It wasn't really supposed to be like that. Obviously, the camera paints a picture, but it was more just I wanted the chance to go hit it." Cleveland Browns place kicker Cade York (3) warms up before an NFL football game at FirstEnergy Stadium against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Sunday, Nov. 27, 2022, in Cleveland, Ohio.

York, 21, didn't get his way. Coach Kevin Stefanski called a Hail Mary. Watson's desperation pass into the end zone fell incomplete, and the Browns were behind 13-3 at halftime.

Priefer supported Stefanski's decision.

"I'm looking at the yard line, and I told Coach [Stefanski] what I thought was a good yard line to get to, and we weren't quite there yet," Priefer said. "And Cade's over there campaigning, which I love. I love the competitiveness of the young guy. I kind of chuckled. Somebody said I was laughing, but I was smiling because I was pleased that he wanted to kick that.

"But he doesn't look at the big picture of we have to cover with a lot of big people against a return man.



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They're going to put a guy deep like we would underneath the goal post, and if [his kick is] short, they're going to bring it back. That's a hard thing to cover for. We have two D-linemen on our field. We have six offensive linemen on our field-goal unit. We have a snapper, a holder and a kicker. So it's going to be tough to cover with those guys against a good returner.

"That's why I'm glad we didn't kick that in that situation. A game-winner, obviously, you have to [kick]. I think we were close on the Hail Mary, so I think the percentages say go with the Hail Mary there. Maybe if it's 5 yards closer, maybe we go for [the field goal]."

Browns player scheduled for free agency: 'Monotonous' work pays off for Browns' Ed Block Courage Award winner Jack Conklin

Cleveland Browns rookie kicker Cade York practices field goals under the watchful eye of special teams coordinator Mike Priefer before the preseason game against the Philadelphia Eagles on Sunday, Aug. 21, 2022 in Cleveland, Ohio, at FirstEnergy Stadium.

York said he didn't talk to Stefanski about his verdict, but Priefer delivered the message and explained the thinking.

"Prief mentioned that they were worried about if I hit it short, they wouldn't want a return on it," York said. "Obviously, I didn't really care about that, but just they thought it was a better idea to throw it."

Although York conceded the kicks he practiced in pregame warm-ups weren't as long as 68 yards, he added, "I just knew I could make it."

Browns vs. Ravens: Cleveland Browns dealing with challenge of Baltimore Ravens QB uncertainty

Priefer said he would rather have "a volunteer" like York in that scenario than some of the kickers he has coached in the past who would "kind of back into the shadows" instead.

"I think as we get more confident with [York], he gets more confident and continues to mature as a young kicker, maybe you do kick those," Priefer said. "But you gotta look back — he's had a couple blocked that were low. Those are the things that go through my mind all the time.

"The weather was actually pretty nice. The wind was blowing slightly in that direction, so that would've been the direction to kick that in. But I was happy that he did [state his case]. He is competitive, and he's very confident and I love that about him."

Cleveland Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski watches during the second half of an NFL football game against the Cincinnati Bengals, Sunday, Dec. 11, 2022, in Cincinnati. (AP Photo/Aaron Doster)

Stefanski said he didn't see York imploring Priefer on the sideline.

"But it's good that your kicker has confidence, and it's good that they don't lack confidence," Stefanski said. "It's like anything else, they want the ball in a big moment, just like a point guard wants the ball or a receiver wants the ball. That's the mentality of guys who want to help the team. We'll continue to make decisions that are best for the team. If it calls for it, I think Cade will be ready to go."

Browns defense suffers blow: Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah latest Cleveland Browns linebacker to land on injured reserve

A fourth-round draft pick (No. 124 overall) from Louisiana State University, York has made 20 of 26 field



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goals and 28 of 30 extra points this season. He has made 4 of 4 field goals from 20-29 yards, 7 of 9 from 30-39 yards, 5 of 6 from 40-49 yards and 4 of 7 from 50 or more yards. His successful attempts from 50-plus yards have been from 58, 55 and 51 (twice).

York has had three field goals blocked — 60 yards against the Ravens on Oct. 23, 53 yards against the Bengals on Oct. 31 and 34 yards against the Buffalo Bills on Nov. 20.

“The thing with Cade ... is getting the ball up in the air — great elevation,” Priefer said. “Ever since the Buffalo game, he's done a really nice job of getting the ball up in the air. That's been the emphasis.” Cleveland Browns place kicker Cade York (3) exchanges words with a Cincinnati Bengals player after an extra point during the second half of an NFL football game at FirstEnergy Stadium, Monday, Oct. 31, 2022, in Cleveland, Ohio.

The scene this past weekend in Cincinnati provided Priefer with a flashback to Oct. 2.

York made a similar push for a long field goal in the event the Browns had reached a certain yard line in the waning moments of a 23-20 road loss to the Atlanta Falcons, Priefer said. However, the offense never advanced to the range York had in mind.

More on Deshaun Watson:Amari Cooper still looking for 'fireworks' as Deshaun Watson settles in for Browns

Obviously, York isn't likely to place limitations on himself.

“I'm always pretty fired up,” he said. “I want to go out there and hit field goals.

“But I understand that they have a game plan, and it's ultimately their decision.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Browns host 2nd "Small Business Impact Program Showcase" in partnership with JumpStart

By Anthony Poisal, [clevelandbrowns.com](https://www.clevelandbrowns.com)

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/browns-host-2nd-small-business-impact-program-showcase-in-partnership-with-jumps>

The Browns on Wednesday hosted their second Small Business Impact Program Showcase — as part of their partnership with JumpStart — inside the Kardiac Club at FirstEnergy Stadium.

The showcase offered local entrepreneurs from the Cleveland area a chance to pitch their business to a panel of three judges, similar to ABC's "Shark Tank" TV show, with the winner earning \$10,000 for their business. All participants provided the judges with information about how their businesses have grown, challenges they face in their industries and stories about what drives them to become successful owners. The judges also asked them questions following their presentation.

Participants included iSlay Cakes, Unique's Passion, Urbane Vodka, Hola Island Provisions, Pleasant Picnic and Gourmet Girl Custom Cupcakes, with Gourmet Girl earning the top prize of \$10,000. All other entrepreneurs still received a \$2,500 boost for their companies and graduation of JumpStart's 12-week long small business impact program to prepare them for their pitches.

"We've all learned a lot," said Adenike Harper, the owner of Gourmet Girl. "It's mind-blowing how much I've packed into my mind at this time, but to know that the Browns love the community and want to support us this way is awesome. As a Clevelander, you are automatically a Browns fan. I'm a Browns fan, and to know that I've been invested into by my team is major for me."

The second Small Business Impact Program Showcase is the final of four total events the Browns and JumpStart partnered to create in 2022. The Browns announced the partnership in August with JumpStart, an organization committed to helping entrepreneurs grow by providing high-impact services, pathways to capital and critical resource connections.

"Small Business Training Camp" and "First and Tech" Happy Hour event were previously hosted by the Browns and JumpStart in the late summer and fall and were designed to help educate and provide networking opportunities for entrepreneurs in the Cleveland area looking to elevate their small businesses.

"The variety of entrepreneurs that were exposed to the services and programming that jumpstart provides, in partnership via the support from the Browns, speaks to the commitment that both JumpStart and the Browns have to our community to encourage businesses to thrive in Northeast Ohio," said Lorne Novick, Chief Services Officer for JumpStart. "This is about retention. This is about helping businesses succeed in our entrepreneurial ecosystem, and helping the Northeast Ohio entrepreneurial ecosystem thrive. So the partnership that we've received from the brands and support we've received from the Browns, again, has taken that effort to an entirely different level."

The Showcase was also one of the events the Browns completed on Day 2 of "10 Days of Giving," where Browns players, coaches and staff will participate in special community events and make meaningful contributions to deserving organizations or individuals.

Any interested business owners who would to participate in future entrepreneurial programs from JumpStart are encouraged to visit <https://www.jumpstartinc.org/smallbiz/>.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

The inside story of Anthony Schwartz's mental health struggles this season: 'Don't be scared to find a solution'

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2022/12/browns-receiver-anthony-schwartz-opens-up-about-mental-health-struggles-hoping-to-help-others.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- The breaking point for Anthony Schwartz came in August, after the Browns' final preseason game against the Chicago Bears.

Schwartz, a second-year receiver looking to carve out a consistent role in the Browns offense, had just dropped two passes, bringing his total to five dropped balls in just three preseason games. While the Browns always stressed they still believed in the speedy receiver out of Auburn, he knew what was being said about him on social media and the vitriol that was being hurled his way.

Even worse, he could feel the overwhelming pressure he was putting on himself.

"I was just in the locker room like damn near breaking down, almost having a panic attack," Schwartz told cleveland.com on Friday. "That kind of just set it off where I was like, I need help. Because if not, this isn't gonna be fun for me, and it can really affect my life."

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And so began Schwartz's journey over the last three months to improve his mental health and deal with the anxiety that was impacting him on the field. It's a journey he now wants to share for the first time, starting with the NFL's annual My Cause My Cleats charitable campaign this Sunday. Schwartz will wear custom cleats representing the United Way of Greater Cleveland as the Browns take on the Texans.

There's no denying it wasn't an easy start to the season for Schwartz. The opening week of training camp he strained his knee and missed just over a week of action. It was the second year in a row his preseason was impacted by an injury. The third-round pick missed most of the offseason and training camp ahead of the 2021 season with a hamstring injury and also missed three games last year with a concussion.

Battling back from that camp knee injury and finding a groove was undoubtedly a major source of stress entering his second year, but there was also a matter of increased expectations.

Ever since he arrived in the NFL, Schwartz has been known for his speed and football IQ -- but he's also needed some development when it comes to actually catching the ball. It's understandable, then, why those preseason drops weighed so heavily on him.

"Going into year two I know a lot was expected out of me," he said. "So I feel like I just kind of overdid it in my head, and at that point it just sort of spiraled down. It felt like the whole world was crashing down at one point."

When Schwartz was at his lowest, following that postgame breakdown, he knew it was time to get help.

His first stop was to talk it out with the Browns' sports psychologist, Dr. Mayur Pandya.



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"I kind of went through some struggles, coming back from an injury and not performing the way I thought I could and from that point," Schwartz said. "I kind of was in a funk. He helped me get out of that."

Talking about his struggles on the field and his anxiety helped, as did other common anxiety-reducing tactics.

Schwartz, like a large chunk of his Browns teammates, has taken up meditation. He meditates alone the night before every Browns game, and with Pandya the day of each game. His goal going forward is to try daily meditation, too.

"That kind of just helps me just calm down, calm my anxiety, calm everything down so I'm able to just go out and perform," Schwartz said.

He's also really focused on mindfulness, a common technique used in talk therapy that focuses on bringing your attention to the present moment, rather than worrying about the past or what lies ahead.

Schwartz was so focused on improving for the future and on not dropping passes that the pressure was causing the opposite effect -- like a batter at the plate who wants to hit a home run so bad that he ends up striking out.

"Just kind of taking a step back to be like, just enjoy what's going on right now," Schwartz said. "Don't worry about what the next play is or what happened that last play. Just worry about you. Whether you're on the bench, just don't even worry about what's going on right now. Just take in the moment and just kind of enjoy the moment, because when it's gone, you're going to regret not enjoying it."

On top of these therapy techniques, there's also been one major habit change: learning how to block out what is said about him on social media.

Schwartz admits that early in the season the social media criticism coming his way for those dropped balls wore on him. But as he's worked on managing his anxiety, he realized that his own performance needs to be his top priority, not what people are saying about it.

"It got to a point where I'm just kind of like, we're gonna focus on me, like all the outside noise, just got to block it out," he said. "And that's kind of whether it's on social media or in the game, it's kind of just let it be. Let them be and I'm going to control what I can control."

It's helped that Schwartz has gotten nothing but support from the Browns as an organization, from his teammates on up.

Swing tackle Chris Hubbard has himself been open about his mental health struggles. An ambassador for the National Alliance of Mental Illness, he created the Overcoming Together Foundation, which will be represented on his own cleats this week. Schwartz said Hubbard was key in helping him get to the point of realizing it was OK to ask for help.

"Chris Hubbard, he's a big advocate for mental health, and that kind of just led me to that point," Schwartz said. "That this is a thing I need to take serious and a thing that can really help me improve and help me to gain that confidence back."



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"I appreciate all of my teammates. They've all been at my side just helping me keep my confidence up. Building me up whether it's in the game, in practice or just seeing me around. Just putting an arm around me and saying like, 'We trust in you. We got you. We need you.' I've been really appreciative of that from everyone."

The Browns coaching staff also never expressed any doubt in Schwartz, with both head coach Kevin Stefanski and offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt adamant in the preseason that Schwartz would turn it around and bounce back from those early drops.

Wide receivers coach and pass game coordinator Chad O'Shea has also had a big impact on how Schwartz views his anxiety, considering the receiver room has weekly discussions about mental health, book recommendations included.

Those talks in particular have helped Schwartz learn how to block out outside noise.

"I've been very supportive of Anthony," O'Shea said. "The greatest thing about it all is that everyone's on board with it. Everyone feels very strongly about it. The receivers have done a great job of being very active in this area. It's something that we talk about daily in our room is the importance of the mind as it relates to your performance on the field."

And about that on-the-field performance: Schwartz is perhaps finding a stride now that his mental health has become a priority.

He's really embraced a role on special teams, playing most of those snaps on kick return and punt return, but appearing on the punt and kick coverage units, too.

And getting some looks in the offense, last week against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers he showed he can still make big plays. It was Schwartz who got the Browns on the board with a big 31-yard reverse end around, his first touchdown of the year. He earned high praise from Stefanski afterwards.

"I'm really proud of him," Stefanski said. "Anthony played at a very high level, we have a ton of confidence in him and I think he will continue to help this team win."

It hasn't been a perfect journey. He was a healthy scratch against the Ravens on Oct. 23 for the first time in his career. He's also had two drops this regular season, both coming against the New England Patriots. But the biggest development is that he's been able to move on and stay in the present, embracing small, incremental steps of improvement.

"Special teams, offense, not having to think of 30 million things running through my mind, because that can also add to anxiety," he said. "It's just simplified everything in my mind so I can just go out there and perform. I don't have to worry about this or that, just worried about my role."

Schwartz has come a long way from that near-panic attack in the Browns locker room in August. He not only recognized he had a problem, but has taken meaningful steps to solve it, the same way he would adjusting a route he runs, or getting in extra reps on a JUGS machine.

While his mental health journey may not have been an easy one to start, Schwartz is glad he's here now.

And by choosing to speak out, he hopes to show others that journey is not as scary or impossible as it



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may seem at the start.

“Just to show people that your mental health is a real thing,” Schwartz said. “Like it’s not just a made up story that people try to call it. It’s a real thing. Because if you’re depressed, if you’re anxious, that can really affect you, not only on the field but in life. And that’s just one thing I want to show that us athletes go through that too. And that if you’re an athlete you’re not alone in this, everyone’s going through something and don’t be scared to speak out. Don’t be scared to find a solution. Because if not, you’ll just be in that funk.”



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'I was that kid that was annoying as hell.' Jacoby Brissett recalls lessons from Tom Brady

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2022/11/25/tom-brady-buccaneers-vs-cleveland-browns-jacoby-brissett-patriots-quarterbacks/69597152007/>

BEREA – There was a time where Jacoby Brissett wasn't the locker room graybeard. A time where the quarterback wasn't the sage veteran, but the wide-eyed rookie just trying to find his way around the league.

That was 2016, when Brissett was a 23-year-old third-round pick of the New England Patriots. On top of having to try and learn the ropes of being a professional, he had to share a position room with arguably the greatest quarterback of all time.

For Brissett, sharing a room with Tom Brady was akin to a younger sibling sharing one with his older one. He was determined to soak up as much as he could from his then-39-year-old teammate.

"I was that kid that was annoying as hell and kind of just, wherever he went I tried to follow, the places that I could go, and just trying to get as much information," Brissett said Wednesday. "And even during games just talking to him about stuff that he saw about certain things. Obviously not all the time cause the game's a little different, but I was one of those guys that kind of tried to be a sponge."

Whether or not Brady actually wanted all of Brissett's attention, only he can say. Whether or not, in the moment, Brady said something to him – like, "Leave me alone" or "Get away from me" – Brissett, now the Browns' quarterback, can't quite recall.

"He probably did but I probably still said something to him," said Brissett, who started two games that rookie season due to Brady's four-game suspension for Deflategate.

New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, left, shouts while standing near quarterback Jacoby Brissett, right, during an NFL football practice Tuesday, June 7, 2016, in Foxborough, Mass. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Brissett figures to say something again to Brady on Sunday. Only this time, they'll be on different teams when the Browns host the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

For Brissett, it's likely his final start of the season. Deshaun Watson is slated to return from his 11-game suspension next week when the Browns travel to Houston, and has already been named the starter for that game.

Cleveland Browns:'It's just execution': Browns look to restart run game against resurgent Bucs defense

Cleveland Browns defense:'Everybody is watching us': Browns expect Buccaneers to try to exploit run defense

For Brady, it's likely his final start in Cleveland. The 45-year-old retired for a brief moment this past offseason, but unretired for what is now his 23rd season.

Brissett may not have known if he was going to be the Browns' starter when Tampa Bay came to town at the time he signed with them on March 19. He admits he certainly didn't expect to see Brady, who unretired six days before he signed in Cleveland, in the game.



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"No," Brissett said. "I would not think he would be playing right now, but not surprised that he is."

New England Patriots quarterbacks Jimmy Garoppolo, left, Jacoby Brissett, center, and Tom Brady ride through Copley Square during a parade, Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2017, in Boston to celebrate the team's 34-28 win over the Atlanta Falcons in Sunday's NFL Super Bowl 51 football game in Houston.

What shouldn't, and isn't, a surprise to Brissett is the level at which Brady is playing despite his age. The seven-time Super Bowl champion long ago showed that age was just a number for him in terms of his performance on the field.

Brady comes into Sunday's game having won 65 regular-season since he turned 40, which would coincide with Brissett's second season in the league. The next four highest quarterback win totals over the age of 40 – Drew Brees (17), Brett Favre (13), Warren Moon (11) and Vinny Testaverde (eight) – combine for 49.

It's more than just the career accomplishments. Even this season, Brady has been one of the best quarterbacks in the league, leading it in completions (282) and attempts (427), while ranking fourth in passing yards (2,805) and posting the fewest interceptions (two) of any starter in the league.

"I shouldn't be surprised that he's still playing right now," Brissett said. "Just the best to ever do it, playing wise, teammate wise, you know just his love and passion for the game, his understanding of football and his competitive nature. There's just so many things I could say about him."

New England's three quarterbacks, starter Tom Brady, left; backup Jimmy Garoppolo, and third-string Jacoby Brissett bonded in New England.

What Brissett could say most about him goes back to what he experienced as that fresh-faced rookie with the Patriots. By that point in his career, Brady had already established himself as arguably the greatest quarterback ever, and certainly arguably the league's greatest winner.

It was the standard to which Brady held himself that trickled down to those around him. It's what allowed Brissett to experience a Super Bowl championship before he was dealt from the Patriots to the Indianapolis Colts prior to the 2017 season.

Yet, to Brissett, what was most striking was the fact that, despite the high standard of personal success and A-list celebrity, Brady wasn't that person to his teammates. That's why, to this day, he holds him on such a high level.

Tom Brady practices alongside backup quarterbacks Jacoby Brissett and Jimmy Garoppolo during the Patriots' organized team activity Thursday.

"Because everybody looks at him as Tom Brady and he doesn't think he is Tom Brady, I would say," Brissett said. "I know from the first day I met him, he's been the same guy. Honestly, he held me to a higher standard than I probably held myself in the beginning of my career and there are so many things I could say about him."

Things that, no doubt, Brissett could say after he faces Brady on Sunday afternoon.



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Martin Emerson Jr. shares for the first time the story of his challenging upbringing and his journey to the Browns

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2022/11/martin-emerson-jr-shares-for-the-1st-time-the-story-of-his-challenging-upbringing-and-his-journey-to-the-browns.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The day Martin Emerson Sr. had to leave his son, Martin Jr., at Mississippi State as a freshman cornerback and head back home to Pensacola, Fla., he and his older son, Martel, grabbed hold of Martin and hung on tight.

“We all got in the huddle and we cried like it was the end of the world,” Martin Sr. told cleveland.com. “We hugged each other like we were never going to see each other again and we prayed, and then his journey began.”

Martin Jr.’s journey actually began when he was a toddler living with his mom, Tara Davidson, and his brother Martel, three years his senior, in Pensacola.

Martin’s dad was in Florida’s Jackson Correctional Institution at the time, serving a three-year sentence for violating his probation in connection with a resisting arrest charge.

Davidson did the best she could to raise Martin and Martel, but it was difficult to make ends meet as a single mom. The thought of his sons struggling broke Martin Sr.’s heart, and he vowed to become a better man for them when he got out.

“I used to pray, ‘Lord, I know this isn’t the way you want me to live, so show me another way so that I may be able to take care of my family in an honest manner and be there for my sons,’” he said.

Martin Emerson Sr., Martin Emerson Jr. and Martel Emerson

Martin Emerson Sr., Martin Emerson Jr. and Martel Emerson (photo by Thor Nobles, used with permission)

Upon his release, Martin Jr. got a decent-paying job in a factory and began to put the pieces of his life back together. He helped Davidson with her rent and utilities and tried his best to co-parent with her.

“But I wanted a better life for them,” he said.

He wanted structure, discipline, and a stable environment for them. He also wanted custody, but it was hard to come by given his past.

“You have to regain your trust in society,” he said. “You serve your time, but you have to regain your trust.”

Not long after Martin Sr. got out of Jackson, Davidson went to prison herself, leaving Martin and Martel without their mom. Martin Sr. got full custody of the boys, and set about raising them with the same faith and educational values that he had.

“I grew up in a Christian household,” Martin Sr. said. “My grandma was a pastor, my auntie was an evangelist and my uncles are pastors. My father (Marshall) was a historian and a scholar. He always drilled us schoolwork, he drilled us book smarts, he drilled us respect. There were plenty of things he didn’t teach



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me, but he taught me the core things of life.”

But Marshall got into some trouble of his own when Martin Sr. was just a boy, and went away for seven years. When he came back, his son was headed down the wrong road.

THE ROCKY ROAD FOR MARTIN SR.

“I got in trouble when I was 16,” Martin Sr. said. “I was trying marijuana and things kind of spiraled. I got in trouble for possession and some things.”

Marshall wanted no part of a troublesome kid.

“He totally washed his hands of me,” Martin Sr. said. “Here I am a 17-year-old kid wondering which way to go, and I had no guidance. My mom (Delorise) worked a lot. She worked double shifts trying to make ends meet. So I kind of got off the mark with that because if my father had said, ‘Hey, son, look, it’s not the end of the world. You only got in trouble. You can bounce back from this ...’ But he didn’t. He just washed his hands of it. Like, ‘Figure it out.’ ”

Instead, Martin Sr. dug himself a deeper hole, eventually ending up in state prison with one toddler son and one on the way.

“Prison was a wakeup call for me,” Martin Sr. said. “Some people don’t wake up. Some people get in trouble and keep going. That kind of that woke me up. I realized how important I was to my kids.”

Martin Sr. got his GED in prison and read his Bible every day. Above all, he charted a course for becoming a great father to Martin and Martel.

“I grew so much in those years,” Martin Sr. said. “I gained as much knowledge about myself in those three years that it takes some people a lifetime to get.”

Delorise never stopped believing in her son, even when he was in prison.

“She always used to tell me how things would be different for me one day,” Martin Sr. “Once I came home, there wasn’t any more trouble, because I had made up my mind.”

STARTING OVER WITH HIS BOYS

When he gained custody of the boys, he moved them to the nicer Brentwood neighborhood of Pensacola, and enlisted the help of his mom.

“She loved her grand boys,” Martin Sr. said. “She was a very spiritual woman, and provided the balance they needed from a woman.”

Delorise filled up the empty spaces left by Martin Jr.’s mom, until she died when he was 12.

“She was kind of like my mom,” Martin Jr. said. “She took us to church every Sunday and sometimes she would pick us up early from school.”

Martin Jr. remembers his aunt taking him and Martel to visit their mom in prison once, but she was in and out of their lives growing up. It was mostly Martin Sr., Martin Jr. and Martel making a way for themselves in the world.



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EARLY SIGN-UP BONUS

\$200!

The boys played all sports growing up, but were particularly good at football. Martin Sr. coached them in Pop Warner football all the way through, and it was evident early on that they both had college and possibly NFL potential.

"He would kind of like bribe me some games," Martin Jr. said. "He was like, 'Every time you score I'll give you \$10.' So maybe I'd score five times a game, he'd give me like \$50. That was so much to me as a kid. He'd do little things like that."

What Martin Sr. didn't reward them for was good grades in school.

"I didn't allow them to have the pleasure of that because I explained to them that I'm not going to reward you for something that I expect out of you in the first place," he said. "I taught them that I expected hard work and good grades, nothing else."

PULLING TOGETHER TO SURVIVE

At one point, the three of them had to move out of their house and into Marshall's small trailer for a few years to help care for him when he was sick.

"We still managed to do all the things we wanted to do," Martin Sr. said. "We were a family. We didn't grow up in a material world. We came from humble beginnings, so we knew how to go back. And it really wasn't nothing because it was just all love."

Working for a power company in Pensacola, Martin Sr. made a nice living for himself and the boys, one that enabled them to have and do things that many of their peers couldn't. But he got fired after seven years when he complained to Human Resources about wages for longtime employees.

"That was my only source of income," Martin Sr. said. "So I started my own business. I started landscaping. I started with a push lawnmower."

After school and on the weekends, Martin and Martel had to cut lawns with their dad.

"They'd go to work and they'd be upset about it," Martin Sr. said. "They'd say 'Dad, we were supposed to do such and such on Saturday.' And I'd say, 'Not this Saturday. We've got work to do.'"

"They didn't get paid, because their payment was us having a roof over our head, lights, water, and food in the house."

The business grew and grew, and Martin Sr. also started training athletes on the side. Eventually he opened a gym, but shut it down after the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I trained myself for therapy because I was going through so much," Martin Sr. said. "It was a lot trying to maintain a household by myself. I was trying to keep Martel in college (in Iowa) and make sure he was good. I was trying to make sure Martin was good and the household was good and it was tough."

"I used working out as therapy. I used working out and church ministry. We were involved in everything possible in ministry because it kept me grounded and focused on a better day."



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For three straight years, Martin Sr. got up every day at 4:30 a.m. and worked out hard from 5 to 6.

"Then I'd come home, load up all of my equipment, go to work, come back home, get dinner ready, go to sleep and do it again tomorrow," he said.

MARTIN JR. INHERITS HIS DAD'S WORK ETHIC

When Martin Jr. was about 12, his dad took him to the gym and inspired him to work out.

"Some days I wouldn't want to go but he was like, 'If this is what you want to do, then you should invest and work towards it,' " Martin Jr. said. "He used to push me so hard, but when it was over, I would think, 'That wasn't that bad.' That's how I got that work ethic on my own."

By the time he was in high school at Pine Forest, he had the six-pack abs and broad shoulders of an NFL pro.

He also had the work ethic. One day, when it poured hard during football practice, most of the kids went home, but Martin Jr. and some of his friends stuck around to continue.

Martin Emerson Jr. and his teammates at Pine Forest High School

Martin Emerson Jr. (far left) and his teammates at Pine Forest High School stuck around to practice during a downpour. (Photo by Tony Womack, used with permission.)

"Martin would laugh and joke and cut up with the guys, but in the classroom, he always did his work," said assistant coach Ryan Vandervort. "If they got distracted in the weight room, Martin got them back on track. At practice, he was very vocal, because they were the last line of defense. Guys listened to M.J."

Martin Sr. was always around.

"He'd come up to practice pulling his trailer," Vandervort said. "He'd come in his work boots covered in dirt or whoever. You knew he was a blue-collar good guy just working his tail off to provide for his kids."

Emerson played quarterback as a freshman in high school, and both quarterback and receiver as a sophomore on the JV team. He had big dreams of playing quarterback in college and the NFL, but about midway through his sophomore year, the varsity coaches needed a cornerback, and called upon him to make the switch. Martel — who had interest from Georgia Tech but didn't get his ACT scores in on time — had excelled at defensive back there, and they figured Martin would too.

"I played my first game at cornerback against (powerhouse) Niceville, and I played against a ranked receiver (Eli Stove who went on to Auburn), and I had a hell of a game," Martin Jr. said. "I had nine tackles, a PBU, and a forced fumble. I got my first offer from from Mississippi State my sophomore year, so I had to stay at corner."

Vandervort marveled at Emerson's ability to excel from the jump.

"I'm pretty sure we got beat that game because they were just a really, really good team," he said. "But for him to get thrown in there and go against a top guy headed to an SEC school, he wasn't scared. He took it as a challenge."



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Emerson had attended a football camp at Mississippi State, where he was spotted by defensive backs coach Terrell Buckley, the former 15-year NFL cornerback and Super Bowl champion with the Patriots in 2001.

"After that camp, just looking at how he performed, how old he was and where he was located, I made the decision that I needed him to be on my team," Buckley said. "We offered him and I was involved in everything from that point on."

Emerson quickly established himself as a lockdown corner at Pine Forest, and his QB dreams evaporated. He was the best player on the team, and helped lead the Eagles to the Florida 5A region quarterfinals as a junior.

So when assistant coach Ryan Vandervort, who became close to Martin Jr. and Sr. on recruiting trips, got a call from Emerson heading into his senior season that he was leaving the school, he was dumbfounded.

"He told me that his dad just got a job in Texas and that they were moving," Vandervort said. "I was sitting there telling my wife, 'Can he come live with us?' He went on and on in great detail, and then Martin told me he was just messing with me. I was so relieved."

Martin Emerson Jr.

Martin Emerson against Arkansas during the 2021 season.AP
ON TO MISSISSIPPI STATE

Martin Jr.'s first choice for college was the University of Miami — he desperately wanted to play at the U — but his recruiting trip put an end to that.

"The kids went out at night and they had a good time and the next morning we had a meeting and Martin was sick because they had gone out and got drunk," Martin Sr. recalled. "I was like, 'Man, you're most definitely not going to this school. I don't care how bad you want to go here.' He was like, 'Dad....'"

"I was like, 'No, this is not the school for you.'"

Martin Jr. was upset, but he ultimately followed his dad's advice and chose Mississippi State, where he went on to become one of the best cornerbacks in the demanding SEC, covering the likes of future NFL stars Ja'Marr Chase, Justin Jefferson, Jerry Jeudy and George Pickens. He also constantly picked the brains of Buckley before Buckley left for Ole Miss in Emerson's sophomore year.

"Martin and another cornerback Jarrion Jones would come and sit in my office for hours at a time," Buckley, the former cornerbacks coach at the University of Akron and current head coach of the Orlando Guardians of the XFL, said.

"They'd try to sit in my chair, and I'd say, 'No, you sit on that side.' We talked ball. We talked family. We talked life. They wanted to soak up all the knowledge of everything and I couldn't have been happier. I got to the point where if they weren't in there, I was a little sad, like, 'Man, where you guys at? You didn't come to hang out with coach.'"

As a freshman, Emerson wanted to start right away, but Buckley preached patience. He knew Emerson had NFL potential and wanted to bring him along right.



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"I have a system where I give you three plays and see how you do on those three," he said. "If you do well, I'll give you more playing time."

Buckley, a first-round pick out of Florida State who grabbed 50 interceptions in the NFL, factored in off-the-field components such as classwork, attitude in practice, and looking presentable when he doled out those freshman snaps.

"He worked his way up and earned five starts as a true freshman," Buckley said.

Once, Buckley overheard Emerson and another freshman "talking like they were high school seniors at the lunch table." He immediately called Martin Sr., who jumped all over his son. Buckley got on him too.

"Martin was so mad at me, he didn't speak to me for a week," Buckley recalled. "I told him, 'I really don't care if you're mad or not. This is how we're going to do it, because where you're headed, I've got to make sure that you're ready for it.'"

Emerson went on to earn the best coverage grade in the SEC as junior, according to Pro Football Focus. He also ranked 11th in forced incompletions in 2020 among Power Five cornerbacks, and allowed one or fewer receptions in six games in 2021 facing some of the fiercest competition in college ball.

Cleveland Browns vs. Baltimore Ravens, October 23, 2022

Martin Emerson Jr. tackles Baltimore Ravens wide receiver Rashod Bateman just short of the goal line during last month's game. John Kuntz, cleveland.com

THE BROWNS GET A STEAL

When the Browns drafted Emerson in the third round, Buckley knew immediately he "was a gem, a steal. They got a top-flight corner and a top-flight person in the third round. He's really a first-rounder. He's a starter. He could've been a day one starter."

As it is, Emerson has started four games in place of Denzel Ward and Greg Newsome II, who have both suffered concussions, and will start his fifth game of the season on Sunday against Tom Brady and the Bucs if Newsome isn't cleared from the protocol by then.

He has climbed to No. 20 among qualifying NFL cornerbacks, according to PFF, the highest-rated among the Browns. He also leads the team with seven pass breakups, including one enormous one in the loss to the Chargers.

With the L.A. ahead 30-28 with only 1:14 remaining, coach Brandon Staley targeted Emerson on a crucial fourth and 1 in Chargers' territory. Emerson knocked down the short pass to 6-foot-4 receiver Mike Williams, who had caught 10 of 13 targets for 134 yards to that point. Cade York went on to miss the 54-yard field goal, but Emerson gave them a chance.

"I feel like I'm born to do this, to play football, to be in this situation," Emerson said. "I feel like I'm here for a reason and I never doubt myself. I never let somebody feel like they're over me or better than me. If you're beaten one time, you've got to do it again, and that's not going to happen too often."

In the 32-13 victory over the Bengals on Halloween night, Emerson broke up two clutch passes and allowed no first downs on 10 targets, holding Tee Higgins to two catches for 8 yards.



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"He's very tough-minded and very competitive," said Browns defensive coordinator Joe Woods. "He wants to be the guy to cover their best receiver. He has that type of mindset. I love that about him. It will help him get through this rookie year."

Emerson was disappointed that his old SEC nemesis Ja'Marr Chase had to sit out that game for the Bengals with a hip injury.

"That's what I want, actually, because that's gonna bring out the best of me," he said. "When I know I'm playing a great competitor, I just know you're going to make me better. I thrive off of that."

Through it all, Martin Jr. feels like he's kicking down doors for other kids in Pensacola who need hope.

"It was kind of rough, but I always knew what I wanted," he said. "I always looked outside and I was like, 'OK, I see what they're doing, I see where they're going,' but I just wanted something different. I always felt like I could do something in a positive way to impact my city."

Emerson didn't even have to look outside for reminders of what not to do.

"Not even just my parents but it was a like a lot of other family members, my older cousins, and my peers, honestly," Emerson said. "I always saw the life that I didn't want to live."

Besides, no one could peer-pressure Emerson into doing anything he didn't want to do.

"I was always the leader," he said. "Everyone gravitated towards me."

Emerson is especially grateful to his dad for turning his life around and pouring his life into him and Martel.

"He molded us into some good young men, so I'm very thankful for him," he said.

Emerson said he is "not as close as I hope to be someday" with his mom, but is confident things will get better. He's grateful for everything she provided in those early years when Martin Sr. was in prison, and Emerson has encouraged him and Martel to remain open to a better relationship.

"If you see someone trying to do right, trying to do better, reaching out in a way that shows forward progress, give them a chance," Martin Sr. said.

Martin Sr. is even more proud of the person that Martin Jr. has become than the player he is. He envisions the positive impact he'll make on the world.

"I see a lot of me in him," Martin Sr. said. "I hear his name on the field and I rewind everything in life that we've ever overcome and that we've ever been through, and sometimes I just drop a couple tears of gratitude."



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Martin Emerson Jr. 'getting into the groove' as Browns rookie faces Bengals' Joe Burrow

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2022/10/30/martin-emerson-jr-gets-groove-cleveland-browns-rookie-faces-cincinnati-bengals-joe-burrow/69593989007/>

BEREA – The first time Martin Emerson Jr. started as a freshman at Mississippi State, he found himself thrust right into the fire.

It was 2019, and Emerson and the Bulldogs were facing undefeated LSU in Starkville. On the other side, the Tigers boasted arguably one of the best college offenses ever, with Joe Burrow at quarterback, Ja'Marr Chase and Justin Jefferson at receiver and Clyde Edwards-Helaire at running back.

"I played pretty good," Emerson recalled this week. "I remember they came in and was 6-0. We played a good first half, second half they kind of took off. We played a good game. Ja'Marr Chase had like 33 yards. ... Justin Jefferson, he was a problem that game, still is."

That was Emerson's introduction to Burrow, who went on to win the Heisman Trophy while leading LSU to the national championship. On Monday, the two former SEC West rivals will face off again when the former starts at cornerback for the Browns when they host the latter's Cincinnati Bengals.

The challenge will be a little less daunting – only a little – because Emerson won't have to face someone else from that 2019 game. Chase has been ruled out for the game with a hip injury that may require a trip to the injured reserve list.

Still, the Bengals will be bringing Tee Higgins and Tyler Boyd with them to Cleveland. And, of course, they will have Burrow, who completed 25 of 32 passes for 327 yards and four touchdowns in that 2019 game against Emerson's Mississippi State team.

Oct 16, 2022; Cleveland, Ohio, USA; New England Patriots wide receiver DeVante Parker (1) makes a first down reception as Cleveland Browns cornerback Martin Emerson Jr. (23) tackles him during the first quarter at FirstEnergy Stadium. Mandatory Credit: Scott Galvin-USA TODAY Sports

The Burrow who Emerson saw as a college freshman resembles the one he'll see as an NFL rookie in terms of playing at an elite level. That only makes the job tougher for not just Emerson, who'll start in place of Denzel Ward for the third game in a row, but the entire Browns defense.

"He's a great quarterback," Emerson said of Burrow, "so I feel like he reads defenses well and he gets the ball out of his hands fast. He's a great player."

Emerson has undergone a baptism by fire in his rookie season. The third-round pick in April was thrust from his first game into a bigger role than some may have expected when Greedy Williams' early-season trip to the injured reserve opened the door for him to play as the third cornerback in the nickel.

Through the first seven games, Emerson has played 310 defensive snaps, with at least 30 snaps a game in six of the seven. Of those snaps, 269 of them have come at a wide corner spot, and 129 of them have come in the last two games against the New England Patriots and Baltimore Ravens.



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That playing time has made an impact on Emerson and allowed himself to get even more comfortable with each snap.

"Just getting into that groove and being confident," Emerson said. "The more reps just makes everything better, just being out there with my team and just building trust with each other. I feel like I'm getting better and just going to keep getting better."

New York Jets wide receiver Garrett Wilson (17) has a pass broken up by Cleveland Browns cornerback Martin Emerson Jr. (23) during the second half of an NFL football game, Sunday, Sept. 18, 2022, in Cleveland. (AP Photo/Ron Schwane)

Emerson is also getting more put on his plate each week. Obviously, starting in place of a Pro Bowl cornerback is a big responsibility in and of itself.

However, schematically, the Browns are dialing more up to utilize the big-bodied, physical corner. Against the Ravens last week, they called a delayed blitz for Emerson on the first play of the second half, and he sacked Lamar Jackson for a seven-yard loss.

"Coach would always tell me, 'Add,'" Emerson said. "If my guy blocks in that coverage, he always told me to add. There's a lot of plays that I didn't add, but I'm finally adding, I've got it fixed. I'm pretty sure I'll add more often."

According to Pro Football Focus, Emerson has been targeted 35 times by opposing quarterbacks. They've completed 21 of those passes for 226 yards, but just one touchdown, that coming in the Week 2 loss to the New York Jets.

For the season, Emerson is fifth on the Browns in total tackles with 27, and tied for fourth in solo stops with 26. He has four passes defensed.

"Just confidence," cornerback Greg Newsome II said of Emerson's growth. "I see him, the mistakes that he's been making, I feel like he's been cleaning those up, but it's his confidence, I feel like he's getting his confidence out there, he's been having a great rookie season."

Emerson has been the victim of a little bit of bad luck on a couple of catches made against him. Back in Week 3 against Pittsburgh, George Pickens made a spectacular one-handed catch for 36 yards despite tight coverage by the Browns rookie.

Pittsburgh Steelers wide receiver George Pickens (14) makes a one-handed catch with Cleveland Browns cornerback Martin Emerson Jr. (23) defending during the first half of an NFL football game in Cleveland, Thursday, Sept. 22, 2022. (AP Photo/David Richard)

Last week against the Ravens, Emerson was again in position in the coverage when Devin Duvernay made a diving catch for a 31-yard gain. That proved to be the longest completion of the game for the Ravens.

Those highlight-reel catches against Emerson do show one thing. Teams are trying to challenge him as the new guy out there in the secondary, and it's something he's willing to tackle head-on.



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The best example came in Week 5 against the Los Angeles Chargers. Faced with a fourth-and-1 from their own 46 with 1:14 remaining and holding a 30-28 lead, the Chargers elected to go for it.

The play was designed to throw at Emerson, who was defending the Chargers' Mike Williams. The rookie made the pass break-up, giving the Browns a shot at potentially winning the game.

"Yeah, that's exciting, for me it is," Emerson said. "I'm up for the challenge. I'm a competitor. I want to compete. That's fun, getting action in the game and just learning. Having good reps and just learning from my bad ones. It's really fun, that's what I came here for, to compete and do my job."



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Browns, JumpStart create networking and learning opportunities for small-business owners at "Small Business Training Camp"

By Anthony Poisal, Clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/browns-jumpstart-create-networking-and-learning-opportunities-for-small-business>

Hundreds of local small-business owners gathered inside the City Club at FirstEnergy Stadium on Wednesday to network with other entrepreneurs and share ideas on how to reach sustained success in the Cleveland community.

The Small Business Training Camp was hosted in partnership with the Browns and JumpStart and featured an afternoon of workshops and panel discussions tailored for local minority small-business owners, which the Browns have sought to assist through four events with JumpStart. The "training camp" was the second of them and followed a Small Business Impact Program Showcase hosted Aug. 29 at FirstEnergy Stadium.

"This is all really exciting," JumpStart Communications Director Vicki McDonald said. "We're really happy to be at FirstEnergy Stadium, and I think partnering with the Browns has been really meaningful for us. It's helped us reach a whole new audience and really deepen our impact supporting small business owners."

About 700 people registered for the event Wednesday and spent time listening to other entrepreneurs who have started businesses in Cleveland and have even managed to expand them to a national level.

One of those entrepreneurs was Cathy Cross, who founded Cathy's Gourmet Ice Cream Sandwiches in downtown Cleveland in 2018. Through serving homemade cookies with classic ice cream flavors in a fun, upbeat atmosphere in her stores, Cross has managed to expand her business to Atlanta and plans to open new stores in Nashville and Houston in 2023.

Cross shared her expertise and experience with training camp participants in a panel discussion about digital marketing. After her discussion, she met with several other participants for a 1-on-1 chat on the club level bleachers in the stadium to share contact information, provide more advice and help business owners expand their network.

"I came in as a business owner and a Black owner who was so supportive of the city of Cleveland and the entrepreneurs that are here," she said. "My main goal was to come here and inspire, encourage and educate them on the nuances of the business and what it looks like — the good, the bad and the ugly."

For many of the entrepreneurs, attending the training camp and taking advantage of the resources it provided will be a huge stepping stone in helping their business take the next step in its development.

"This is so beneficial for anyone who is starting a business or already has a business to be around people who are in the same field as them and looking to grow, learn how it's done and understand the ins and outs of being able to communicate to each other," said Kerri Yarbrough, the founder of The Aura Initiative, a Human Resource ally. "Whether that's done verbally or just watching and seeing what that's like, it's all been really interesting."

The Browns and JumpStart will host two more events in 2022 for local minority small-business



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entrepreneurs. A "First and Tech" event will be held Oct. 11 at the Kardiac Club at FirstEnergy Stadium and will serve as a happy hour event to bring together tech entrepreneurs, innovation stakeholders, players from the Cleveland Browns and investors for networking and inspiration.

Another Small Business Impact Program Showcase, where entrepreneurs will have an opportunity to pitch their business to a panel for the chance to earn \$10,000 toward business, will be held Dec. 7 in the Kardiac Club.



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How Nick Chubb remaining 'one of the guys' at high school has him ready for Browns season

By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2022/09/09/browns-nick-chubb-high-school-weight-lifting-viral-video-2022-nfl-season-opener-panthers-week-1/65742951007/>

When Jamie Abrams became the football coach at Cedartown High School and addressed the program during his first day on the job, he noticed Nick Chubb had joined the players to listen to the introductory speech.

"Like he's on the team," Abrams, now in his third season at the helm of Cedartown, said Tuesday by phone.

Although Chubb has established himself as an NFL star in the four seasons since the Browns drafted him in the second round (35th overall) in 2018, the running back never left his small-town Georgia high school behind.

"Nick just likes being one of the guys," said Cedartown principal Scott Hendrix, the school's football coach when Chubb dominated on the gridiron there.

A couple of Chubb's weight-lifting videos from this past spring went viral on social media because people were blown away by the feats of strength.

Browns running back Nick Chubb signs autographs for fans on Jan. 9, 2022, in Cleveland.

However, the location is more instructive than anything else about the Chubb experience. Those clips were filmed in Cedartown's weight room, and Chubb is not just there once in a while. He's there virtually every day in the offseason, unless he's working out instead at Browns headquarters in Berea or vacationing. It's been this way throughout his entire NFL career and whenever he would have a break at the University of Georgia.

"It pretty much made me the player I am now," Chubb told the Beacon Journal on Wednesday in the locker room at CrossCountry Mortgage Campus. "With my high school trainer and what I've been doing since high school, I've had a lot of success, so I didn't want to change that part of my routine."

2022 Browns season bold predictions: Big start, Myles Garrett's big year and Cade York's big kick

The strategy has paid off. Chubb has earned a Pro Bowl selection in each of the past three years and, with the Browns on the verge of beginning the 2022 season with Sunday's opener on the road against the Carolina Panthers, he feels stronger than ever.

It's an encouraging development for the Browns coming off a disappointing record of 8-9, especially because heavily leaning on Chubb during quarterback Deshaun Watson's 11-game suspension may be the offense's most logical route to success.

"I want to be my biggest and fastest and strongest every year," Chubb, 26, said. "I feel like that's helped me thus far, so I just continue to do it. I don't really like change."

Browns vs. Panthers: Jacoby Brissett ignoring QB noise around season opener

The philosophy is evident in Chubb's offseason approach. Instead of frequenting a state-of-the-art facility and employing high-priced trainers like many other NFL players, he simply returns to his



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old stomping grounds.

“Knowing Nick, he's probably the least fancy person ever,” Browns four-time Pro Bowl left guard Joel Bitonio said. “For him to go back to his high school and be that guy for them, it makes too much sense.

“When he goes back to his high school, he puts in that work, and he's motivated to be the best he can be.”

Cleveland Browns running back Nick Chubb at OTA workouts on Wednesday, June 8, 2022 in Berea,.

Nick Chubb's trust in his longtime trainer has shaped his Cleveland Browns career

Mike Worthington is vital to it all. He has been the football team's defensive line, tight ends and assistant head coach and boys track and field head coach at Cedartown since 2006. He runs the weight room and has been training Chubb since he was 14. Their introduction materialized through Chubb's older brother, Zach, another former Cedartown athlete. Chubb was born and raised in Cedartown, where his mother, Lavelle, raised her two boys and daughter, Neidra.

“Words can't even explain how much [Worthington] means to me and how important him and his family is to me,” Chubb said. “He is like a father to me beyond football. If I need anything, I come to him. I owe everything to him. Every year, he makes sure I'm in the best shape ever, makes sure I'm strong and fast. He doesn't take it easy on me. He pushes me every day.

“He knows me so well. I could go pay a bunch of money somewhere I don't know, and they could kind of take it easy on me. That's what I feel like would happen. They wouldn't really know me that well. The biggest thing for me is just staying down, staying humble and going back to my roots.”

Cleveland Browns season storylines: Deshaun Watson's suspension and Myles Garrett's Defensive Player of the Year push

Worthington calls Chubb “a dinosaur” because he considers his pupil an old-school “throwback.” Chubb typically avoids hype as if it's a linebacker in pursuit. He's famously low-key and fiercely loyal to his Cedartown support system.

Those characteristics have always stood out to Worthington, even more than Chubb's talent.

“When other kids his age would be horseplaying, he was quiet, he would pay attention and he would work,” Worthington said. “He had a certain amount of skill level at a young age, but it wasn't an overpowering skill level. His maturity was always what impressed more than anything. It was always, 'I know you can be good. It just depends on how hard you're willing to work.' We didn't realize he was willing to work as hard as anybody would ever push him. He's not going to get outworked.

“He's just going to do the right things. He's going to take care of his body. He's going to do the things champions do. He's not going to go out and act like a lot of other people. He's not going to vacation a whole lot. He's going to come back, and he's going to work. He's smart enough to understand what he's been doing has been successful, and he's not going to deviate from what's been doing. A lot of people have success, and with that success, they get other people, money, and that distracts them. He will not allow those things to become a distraction.”

Cleveland Browns running back Nick Chubb runs through drills during OTA practice on Wednesday, May 25, 2022 in Berea.



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Nick Chubb weight-lifting videos go viral during NFL offseason

Worthington was one of three people in Cedartown's weight room spotting Chubb when he squatted 675 pounds in May with a traditional barbell and 610 pounds for two repetitions in July using a Tsunami Bar Max, which is designed to bend. The videos spread like wildfire online.

Chubb also power cleaned 425 pounds earlier this year at Cedartown. So far, he has achieved his goal by adding 5 pounds to his maximum power clean each offseason of his NFL career. The 675-pound squat represented a personal best, too.

"I usually stop at 650 just to play it safe," Chubb said, "but I felt better this year, so I went for it."

In training camp, Browns running backs coach Stump Mitchell revealed Chubb's squat videos grabbed his attention.

"The passion that Nick has during the season is exemplified by the things he does during the offseason," Mitchell said. On the other hand, Mitchell added watching the footage, "Hurt my knees and got me concerned because Nick doesn't wear a [weight-lifting] belt when he squats."

Worthington and Chubb insisted they were actually being somewhat conservative with the weight used in those videos.

"I don't know how much I can do," Chubb said. "It's just being smart about it."

Cleveland Browns running backs coach Stump Mitchell and running back Nick Chubb keep an eye on OTA practice on Wednesday, May 25, 2022 in Berea.

A little-known fact about Chubb is he won a state title in weight lifting as a senior in high school. He recalls benching 405 pounds, power cleaning 395 pounds and squatting 590 or 600 pounds back then.

"Hell, there's no telling what he could do," Worthington said. "There's a fine line. At the end of the day, I've got to tell myself, 'Look, he's not a power lifter.' There's a point [where I ask], 'Is it worth it or not?' But we're going to push. That's the thing that separates him.

"A lot of guys have done that kind of training. It's just as you get a certain age, it's tough. They'd rather go to a speed coach and do all these fancy ladders and cones but, to be honest with you, those things are not going to allow him to break tackles. Nick is intelligent enough that he understands in order to do the things he does that you've got to be put the work in, and you've got to be strong. That's why he breaks so many tackles. That's why people bounce off him."

Cleveland Browns running back Nick Chubb runs with the ball as Detroit Lions inside linebacker Alex Anzalone goes for the tackle during the first half at FirstEnergy Stadium, Nov. 21, 2021.
Cleveland Browns running back Nick Chubb mentors players at Cedartown High School

Chubb isn't the only one who benefits from his bond with his alma mater.

"The way he carries himself, he's the perfect role model for our kids," said Hendrix, who will drive from Cedartown to Charlotte, North Carolina, to attend the Week 1 game between the Browns and Panthers.

When Chubb was a senior at Cedartown, Hendrix said the player taught incoming freshmen how to insert the pads into their football pants and set up their lockers without being asked. Abrams explained there is a pheasant hunt fundraiser for the track team during which volunteers drive



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golf carts to retrieve birds. Chubb subjected himself to fetching duty and took one of Abrams' children along for the ride.

In other words, Chubb doesn't strike the people at Cedartown as someone who wants special treatment.

"He walks in the door, and we go to work," Worthington said. "It's not like, 'Hey, here's Nick! Let's take pictures!' I mean, I shut that down."

What do Browns expect from offense?: Amari Cooper is bullish: 'Hopefully it's going to be fireworks'

Chubb has guided several of Cedartown's standout players, including Clemson running back Kobe Pace, West Virginia running back Tony Mathis Jr. and Georgia linebacker C.J. Washington. They have followed Chubb's lead by making a habit of returning to Cedartown for workouts.

"Every year, there's a new kid that comes up who I kind of take under my wing," said Chubb, whose Browns teammates recently voted a captain.

"It's just important to me to go back home where I'm from and kind of lead those guys in the right direction. I didn't have that when I was coming up, so I feel like maybe I could have learned things differently if I did. I'm trying to be that mentor for them."

Cleveland Browns quick hits: Demetric Felton Jr. to fill void in return game

Senior fullback and defensive end Patrick Gardner is the latest Cedartown player to forge a friendship with Chubb. A Batman fanatic, Chubb said he nicknamed Gardner after another superhero, the Hulk, because "he's probably the strongest kid there." The two became workout partners. Gardner stood behind Chubb in both of the aforementioned squat videos to provide a spot.

"I'm just thinking, 'Wow! That's crazy,'" Gardner said. "He's in the NFL. He doesn't have to put that weight on, but he still comes in there and does it like it's nothing. I just want to be like him."

"I've never seen Nick get comfortable. He always does his rep like it's his last rep, and I've never seen him fail a rep ever in the weight room."

"He comes in every day and does his job without a word being said. I never hear him complain. I barely even see him sweat."

Gardner said he speaks by phone or texts with Chubb to gear up for games. Bat emojis are common on the text thread.

Cleveland Browns running back Nick Chubb runs for a 4-yard touchdown during the second half of an NFL football game against the Las Vegas Raiders, Monday, Dec. 20, 2021, in Cleveland. (AP Photo/David Richard)

Cedartown coaches know a competitive fire burns within Nick Chubb

Chubb attended Cedartown's football game on Sept. 2, Abrams said, and his affinity for the school prompted him to buy it an English bulldog, Hendrix said. The school's nickname is Bulldogs. The one gifted by the player who has finished runner-up for the NFL rushing title twice (1,259 yards last season and 1,494 yards in 2019) has been dubbed "Chubb."



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Abrams said Chubb often lifts with the football team in the morning and returns in the afternoon for track practice.

“He helps me coach track,” Worthington added, “but he also does all the speed work and works on flexibility.”

Panthers have star running back, too: Versatile Christian McCaffrey provides 'stress' for Cleveland Browns defense

In high school, Chubb was a state qualifier in the long jump, 100 and 200 meters and 400 relay, but Worthington piled shot put onto his plate when he was a junior and pulled him out of long jump when he was a senior.

One of Worthington's favorite stories about Chubb unfolded during a sectional track meet.

“The guy that was right in front of Nick threw just a really good shot that was the farthest throw of the day, and everybody started applauding him like the guy had already won,” Worthington recalled. “They were just sort of disregarding Nick. I remember looking at him and just being shocked. The next thing you know, he just goes out there and throws a bomb just because they sort of disregarded him. It just showed his competitiveness.”

Chubb's best throw in the shot put was 55 feet, 8 inches. He wound up winning a state title in the event as a senior.

Grudge match for Baker Mayfield: Will quarterback exact revenge vs. Browns?: 'I do hope he feels dangerous' in Week 1

Abrams remembers another time Chubb's competitive spirit emerged. Two years ago, one of the former Cedartown standouts who went on to play college football posted a better time than Chubb while a group ran sprints at the school. The times were recorded with a new Bluetooth system, which tracked a chip worn by the runners.

“At the end, he asked what the best time was and what his time was,” Abrams said. “He puts [the chip] on and then blows the best time out of the water. He didn't have to do that.”

Tales like those give insight to Chubb's mindset. He shared a screenshot late last month on an Instagram story of an ESPN graphic listing him in “Tier 4” of fantasy football running backs.

“That did reach me a little bit just because every year, it's always something new,” he said. “But it is what it is. I can only control what I can control and go out there and do my best.”

It's time for Chubb to take control on the field, and he's confident the offseason grind he endured at Cedartown has steeled him again.



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Browns receiver Amari Cooper is the thinking man's wide receiver

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2022/09/browns-receiver-amari-cooper-is-the-thinking-mans-wide-receiver.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Browns wide receiver Amari Cooper is about 15 minutes into an interview. He's just off the practice field, spending extra time to work routes. It's hot and there's no shade. He spent the first five minutes of the interview catching his breath between answers.

He's answering a question about his favorite route and you can tell he's heard the question plenty of times before. Then he stops.

"Check this out, right?" he says. "All the routes are really the same if you think about it."

How so?

"Check this out," he says again. "What's the difference between a post, a corner and a slant?"

The fear of getting this question wrong in front of one of the game's best route runners is real, so when "The directions" is the sheepish response given, it's more a question than an answer.

"Exactly," Cooper says, "so check this out."

Now he's in motion, showing what he's talking about, pointing to where he is in relation to the quarterback.

"If the quarterback is in there, I'm running a corner route, but if I was over there it would be a post route," he says. "A slant is just a shorter post route. My point is, I'm just cutting in one way or another."

Cooper came to this realization one day when he was working out on his own one offseason, he told cleveland.com in an exclusive interview.

He was practicing the tops of his routes. As he's recalling the day, he's doing the footwork, accompanying each step, saying "boom" on top of the distinct sound of cleats hitting cement.

A curl. *Boom, boom, boom*

A comeback. *Boom, boom, boom*

The tops of these routes -- a stop, a curl, all the routes that come back, were the same.

A slant. *Boom*

It hit him again. He'd just worked the top of a post and a corner route in one fell swoop.

"You go through it really fast, you're like, how many routes am I missing?" he says. "It's like, 'I did them all.'"



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Spend time listening to Cooper speak and it's obvious: he can't help himself when it comes to thinking more deeply about ... well ... everything. He can't just work on routes. He has to understand them. He has to think through them. He has to be challenged by them.

He says his personality type is logician which, with a quick Google search, you find means he's Introverted, Intuitive, Thinking, and Prospecting.

Cooper is the thinking man's wide receiver.

This whole interview was an excuse to ask Cooper one question: Is route running an art or a science?

Cooper answers the question with his own question: "How would you define science?"

Science, for lack of a better way of putting it, has rules. Art is more creative.

"No, I get what you're saying," he says.

Then Cooper refers back to something Cowboys offensive coordinator Kellen Moore used to say.

"In terms of being a wide receiver, being a route runner, some guys have rules and some guys have guidelines," Cooper says.

Every route has rules: three steps, break in, ten steps, break out, five steps, break in then break out. Over time, Cooper says, it's determined this is the best way to run a slant, this is how the quarterback drop matches up with the route, this is how we want this route run.

Cooper is more about guidelines. He sees the route on paper, but there's no defensive back on paper, no one in front of the receiver to manipulate. Routes, for Cooper, are movements and mechanics and instincts and just plain God-given ability all working together to take what's on the paper and make it work on the field.

"There's somebody in front of me that I have to manipulate to get open," Cooper says, "and I think that comes with that art, that comes with experience, playing the position so long."

Take the slant. He used to have a quote on his Instagram page: "A million ways to run a slant."

"If you look at some of my highlights on YouTube, I've run a slant at least seven different ways," he says. "At least."

It all depends, he says, on the DB's leverage, what type of DB he's going against, how far off they are and how close they are in press.

So, yes, there's a way the route is supposed to be run.

"The art," Cooper says, "is the route within the route."



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Cleveland Browns practice, August 30, 2022

Browns wide receiver Amari Cooper is constantly thinking about routes and how to win. John Kuntz, cleveland.com

Cooper hated playing point guard in high school basketball. He hated bringing the ball up the court. He hated calling the plays. He wanted to play shooting guard. He just wasn't big enough.

"I just wanted to be in a position to catch and go score," he says.

The problem was, just like in his route running, he was too smooth and too smart with the basketball in his hands. No one could stay in front of him, a gift and a curse.

Growing up in Miami, he always played sports against older kids.

"If I was over at my cousin's house or something and his friends were outside, I'm playing against them and I always noticed a trend, like, Yo, wherever I go, everybody who's my age, I feel like I'm a little bit better than them and then some of the guys who are a little bit older than me, I feel like I can compete with those guys," he says.

For Cooper, whether it was in the backyard or at an AAU tournament, it wasn't just about being better, it was the formula of where it could lead him.

"I just put two and two together, like, OK, I keep going to all these different places and everywhere I go, it's the same trend," he says. "So in my mind, when I get to high school it's going to be the same way, when I get to college it's going to be the same."

And his route running? It's just something he's always had.

He was able to not be robotic at a young age, to trust his instincts, to know he had to manipulate a DB and couldn't run just straight at him.

"First time I got out there," he says, "I knew how to do it."

Cleveland Browns training camp day 13, August 15, 2022

Part of Amari Cooper's success comes from his ability to read defensive backs and understanding what he can do to manipulate them. Joshua Gunter, cleveland.com

Cooper is no longer showing off route footwork. Now he's playing the role of defensive back.

"Think about it," he says, getting himself in position. "If I'm at DB and you're at receiver and the quarterback is in there, right, and I say I'm not going to give up the inside, so I'm playing to the inside."



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He pauses here to see where cornerback Denzel Ward, who walked out of the locker room for an interview of his own, has gone.

“Got to make sure none of those guys hear me,” he says.

Then it’s back to playing DB.

“I’m inside, right, so I’m taking away the slant, I’m taking away the dig, I’m taking away everything, so I know what I’m not giving up, now I just need to play what I’m giving up.”

This all came out of the question about his favorite route. It turns out, it’s really the one that gets him open.

“If I’m playing that guy, my favorite route isn’t going to be a slant, you know what I mean?”

(His favorite route, for the record, is a post, a great college route against Cover 4 defenses but one the NFL doesn’t use much.)

Unsurprisingly, Cooper is a chess player. He picked it up in elementary school. He loves the process of chess. Some games you pick up and just start playing, like video games. Not chess.

“You take the set out of the box, you take the pieces out, you can’t just start playing,” Cooper says. “You have to learn how to put the pieces on the board, then you have to learn how they move, all before you even learn how to start playing. Then after you learn how to start playing, there’s so many more layers.”

He really fell in love with chess in Oakland when he was a rookie and one of his fellow receivers played. Cooper didn’t win much, but after some time he started getting better. Eventually, it was even.

He has found chess players everywhere he has been in the NFL, including in Cleveland. He mentions quarterback Joshua Dobbs as someone who plays. He’s not sure anyone here is quite at his level yet, but only because he’s been playing longer.

“I’m further along than when I was in Oakland or Dallas, so if I would have come here instead of the Cowboys, me and Dobbs would probably be on the same level right now,” Cooper says.

Then adds, “I’m better than everybody here.”

He’s found similarities in how he plays chess and how he runs routes. There are rules for how the pieces move, but a good player has to find a way to create within those rules, to think multiple turns ahead, to manipulate the other player.

“I would say most chess players who really pick it up and want to be good and continue on that path of playing, I think they’re all mostly like perfectionists,” he says. “They’re trying to be the best possible chess player they can be, they’re trying to make the least amount of errors in a game.”



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Cooper is seeking perfection on the field. If he has 10 targets, he wants 10 catches and he wants 10 perfect routes. He admits it doesn't happen a lot.

"Just because you don't reach perfection doesn't mean you don't leave some games content," he says, "and you leave a lot of games and you say, 'Man, I left this play out there, I could have done this better,' and that's what keeps you going, that's what drives you."

Cleveland Browns mandatory veteran minicamp, June 14, 2022

Amari Cooper has big plans for life after football. Joshua Gunter, cleveland.com

Cooper didn't have much time to read during training camp. Before camp, he was in the middle of four books.

His love of reading started at Alabama. There was a book in everyone's locker, "100 Ways to Motivate Others" by Steve Chandler. Cooper noticed no one was taking the book out of their lockers, let alone reading it. He decided to take it before leaving on summer break.

"I couldn't stop reading it," he says. "Here I am, I probably never finished a book before that time -- maybe one or two -- I finished it and because of the type of book it was, I noticed that it helped me motivate other people on my team."

Every time somebody would be going through something, he would use something from the book.

"So I at least learned like 10 useful things from one book," he says.

If he could learn 10 things from one book, how much could he learn from two or three or 10?

He started a book club in Oakland but stopped when he started getting more interested in real estate books. He didn't want everyone in the book club to get stuck reading real estate books.

His favorite types of books are about psychology, sociology. He loves "Malcolm Gladwell-type stuff."

Cooper launched his own activewear brand -- called Route Runners, of course -- inspired, he says, by reading Nike founder Phil Knight's memoir "Shoe Dog."

It's one of the four books he's currently reading -- or rereading in this case. He's also reading "Contagious" by Jonah Berger, a marketing book, "More Than a Carpenter," a faith book by Josh McDowell, and Gladwell's book, 'Outliers.'

"I never read it before. I read like two or three other Malcolm Gladwell books, I never actually read that one, which was actually probably one of his more famous books," Cooper says, "but it's actually a really good book."

Cooper just turned 28 and has plenty of football left. He also has big plans for after football.



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He wants to be more active in his real estate investments and explore commercial and development opportunities.

Then there's Route Runners.

"When somebody asks me what I'm going to do after football," he says, "I want to be Phil Knight."

On the Route Runners home page, there's a video of Cooper running a route in practice. He jab steps to the outside of the cornerback before cutting back inside and running straight ahead with the defender to his outside. At around 10 yards, he takes two easy steps inside, jab steps inside and then back outside before cutting in. The cornerback is lost at this point and has no chance of following him. The ball arrives over the outstretched arms of a linebacker into Cooper's arms.

Cooper sees three ways to get open: the release, the break and the catch point. He practices all three separately. He thinks about all three constantly. What he can't practice, he visualizes.

He is a tactician, every step carrying a purpose. He anticipates every move by a defensive back.

He's also an artist. He sees the lines on the paper but knows sometimes he has to color outside them to make them work.

In a world with a million ways to run a slant and a million ways for Cooper to go after football, he's always thinking about ways to find the perfect route.



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'Not everybody's Joel Bitonio': Experience, perspective bolster Browns All-Pro's talent

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2022/09/04/cleveland-browns-joel-bitonio-perspective-all-pro-talent-nfl/65467608007/>

BEREA – Joel Bitonio can still remember what was going through his mind as a Browns rookie in 2014.

"Everything's just like, you know, moving so quickly for you at that time," the Browns' All-Pro guard told the Beacon Journal. "I just wanted to know what my play is, which way to go and don't mess it up. I remember telling myself vividly the first time we practiced, I was like, 'Don't step on Joe Thomas' foot, don't step on Alex Mack's foot and I should be good to go if I go in the right direction.'"

Bitonio figured out the right direction to go. He also managed to not step on the feet of the two Pro Bowlers' on either side of him.

Now, as Bitonio's ninth season gets underway, he's no longer the rookie just trying to figure things out. Instead, he's the one who younger players walk into the Browns locker room and seek out advice.

Bitonio couldn't help but be struck by that fact as he reflected with his own mentor during training camp.

"Joe was here this summer and I was talking to him and I was like, I'm pretty when I came into the NFL, he was going into year eight," Bitonio said. "And so now, I'm in year nine and I was like, when I first go in the league, I was like, Joe's so old, like this old guy, you know, just comparative, and I'm like the old guy, 30 years old I'm the old guy. So it's quite a difference."

Cleveland Browns offensive lineman Joel Bitonio cools off during training camp on Thursday, July 28, 2022 in Berea.

The difference for Bitonio isn't just his standing in the locker room as, along with Charley Hughlett, the longest-tenured players on the Browns. It's natural that younger players are going to seek out wisdom from the more experienced.

What makes that advice so valuable to those younger players is the perspective from which it comes. It's a perspective built over literally thousands of plays over dozens and dozens of games.

It's not just about how to handle a specific block or some kind of technique. It's a perspective on how to just be a professional football player.

"They talk about how time slows things down and stuff," Bitonio said. "Now it's like, you kind of see the process and you can understand, like, when to push yourself. When to, you know, you need to prepare for a season and how to prepare, where as a rookie, you're just going full-out the whole time."

One doesn't even have to be a rookie to learn those lessons. In fact, you can be a borderline All-Pro or Pro Bowl selection and still take in those pointers.



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That's something Wyatt Teller has learned in the three-plus years since the Browns acquired him from Buffalo. For Teller, who has formed arguably the best guard tandem in the NFL with Bitonio, it's the little things his teammate does to keep himself on the field that sets him apart.

"Not everybody's Joel Bitonio who get better every year going into year nine, 10, and he's an absolute stud and one of the best to play," Teller said during training camp. "I can learn something from him and how he takes care of his body. How he trains, what he's eating, his therapy, all these different things I can kind of note and jot down and kind of see how, he's not old, but someone that's at that year, that year-nine, year-10 mark, can take that next step."

Cleveland Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski talks with offensive lineman Joel Bitonio, left, and Wyatt Teller, right, during training camp on Wednesday, July 27, 2022 in Berea.

It's not, though, done with a pretentiousness. There's nothing diva-like with the 6-foot-4, 320-pound Nevada product.

That's also what endears Bitonio to those around him.

"What you love about Joel is he is himself every day," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "He works very hard. He is a guy who does things right on the field, in the meeting room and takes care of his body. I think he is just someone who, more than anything, the guys see an example of how to be a pro."

Perspective has also given Bitonio an ability to step back a bit and take in things. It's an appreciation that you more often seem to hear not from players who are still in the midst of their careers, but from those who are looking back on a career completed.

Despite still being in the midst of a career as one of the NFL's premier guards, Bitonio is also willing to see the big picture.

"You just realize how lucky you are to play the game," Bitonio said. "You know, you come in as a rookie and barely know how the NFL works and then you've been through it nine times now. Cutdown days, trades, all of those things, so you don't take anything for granted because you never know when someone's going to play their last snap next to you or with you and you know who you're going to line up with the next time you're out."

Cleveland Browns offensive lineman Joel Bitonio works on blocking techniques during training camp on Thursday, July 28, 2022 in Berea.

Bitonio's seen that plenty in his time in Cleveland. He just needs to look at the two individuals whose feet he spent his first practice trying to not step on.

Five games into Bitonio's rookie season, Mack suffered a season-ending injury when he broke his fibula. After the 2015 season, then, Mack departed via free agency to Atlanta.

Seven games into Bitonio's fourth season, in 2017, Thomas suffered a season-ending torn triceps after 10, 363 consecutive snaps. That would prove to be career-ended for the future Hall of Fame left tackle.

Of course, those injuries were part of two seasons which have epitomized much of what the Browns have experienced over Bitonio's nine years. His rookie season saw them start out 7-4, only to bottom



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out with a season-ending five-game losing streak, while Thomas' injury came in the midst of the infamous 0-16 season.

"I think early in my career, you almost get emotional with things," Bitonio said. "Like decisions that are made and the way things go, it's almost like a fan would. It's emotional like, 'Oh my God, how could this happen,' or 'What are we doing,' or 'Oh my gosh, how can that guy do that?'"

Cleveland Browns guard Joel Bitonio chats with Philadelphia Eagles center Jason Kelce prior to the start of their joint practice at the Cleveland Browns training facility in Berea on Thursday.

There were also the highs, such as the chase for the playoffs that just fell short in 2018 and the 2020 season which saw the Browns go 11-5 in the regular season, end an 18-year playoff drought and win their first playoff game since Jan. 1, 1995.

In a twisted bit of fate, the only game Bitonio has missed since 2016, when he missed the final 11 games on injured reserve, was that Wild Card win in Pittsburgh. Although that also has added to the perspective he's gained.

"I think the longer you play you realize, like, you're part of this team, you're part of the organization and you have to do your best individually to make this organization a better place," Bitonio said. "So, for me, it's such an internal focus of like, How can I be the best Joel, on the field, in the meeting rooms, in the locker room leading the team? Hopefully that carries over and then you try not to ride the wave of emotions. I mean, don't get me wrong, there's times I go home to my wife and I'm like, Oh man, you another day or another crazy moment but you try and just be the same guy."

That goes for dealing with the business side of things as well. Bitonio's watched close friends such as Mack, John Greco, Mitchell Schwartz and, most recently, JC Tretter depart for one reason or the other, be it free agency or just being let go by the team.

Every time a move like that happens, there's the obvious personal impact it has on him. However, Bitonio learned very early that, like Michael Corleone says in *The Godfather*, "It's not personal, it's strictly business."

Cleveland Browns offensive tackle Joel Bitonio (75) and center JC Tretter (64) look to make a block during training camp Sunday, Aug. 12, 2018, in Berea.

In fact, Bitonio received that lesson before he even got to his first regular-season game. He was the lone drafted offensive linemen in his rookie class with the Browns, but there were a handful of other undrafted linemen among the 15 or so in training camp.

According to Bitonio, when cutdown day came and went, all that remained from that original group were basically the five starters – Thomas, himself, Mack, Greco and Schwartz – and Paul McQuiston. A few more would eventually come back either on the practice squad or, eventually, the active roster, but the impression was made on the rookie.

"I think from that moment on, I realized like, Hey, this is a business," Bitonio said. "We're going to try and put our best guys out there, and it's not always the decision you want made. I think there's times like when John Greco got released and I thought he still had a year or two left in his body. That one hurt a lot because he was such a good mentor with me. Guys can choose to leave, like Alex Mack chose



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to leave in free agency, Joe Thomas retired. So those things hurt. JC, that one hurt, too. You realize this sucks, but hopefully you have those friendships ... and those things can last a lifetime."



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Browns guard Wyatt Teller FaceTimes with fan stationed overseas following practice

By Dan Labbe, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2022/08/browns-guard-wyatt-teller-facetimes-with-fan-stationed-overseas-following-practice.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- Browns guard Wyatt Teller grew up just outside of Washington D.C. in Manassas, Va. In an interview with cleveland.com last week, Teller called himself a military brat, the son of retired Army Reserve Maj. Rick Teller. It's one of the things he loves about Northeast Ohio, the strong military ties.

It showed during the early days of training camp when the Browns had members of the military and their families out to practice and brought them on the field to collect autographs and photos from players. Teller was among the first players to greet them and signed for everyone.

"I made sure I signed everything," Teller said. "If they asked for a picture. Yes, of course, anything they wanted, because, sometimes we we take our job pretty serious. We act like it's life or death. What they do is life or death. And we have the freedom (for) you (to sit here) asking me questions on a beautiful day like this, and we're not worried about war. We're thankful for people like that."

Teller was once again able to pay it back to a military member on Tuesday, the last day practice was open to fans. Dailanna Harber was in attendance but her husband, Brian, a 35-year member of the US Army, couldn't attend because he is currently stationed in Saudi Arabia.

Cleveland Browns training camp day 14, August 16, 2022

Cleveland Browns guard Wyatt Teller FaceTime chats with Northfield resident Brian Harber, a 35-year member of the U.S. Army, who is currently stationed in Saudi Arabia, as he signs autographs after Day 14 of Cleveland Browns training camp. Joshua Gunter, cleveland.com

Teller is Brian's favorite player, so getting an autograph from him was important for Dailanna. As he was heading down the line to sign, she dialed up Brian on FaceTime and he answered.

Teller, while he signed, took time to talk to Brian, making smalltalk about the time difference and a few other things.

It made Dailanna's day.

"I'm shaking I'm so excited for my husband," she said.



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Browns' Myles Garrett relishing new community science ambassador role with Cleveland Museum of Natural History

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2022/08/browns-myles-garrett-relishing-new-community-science-ambassador-role-with-cleveland-museum-of-natural-history.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- Browns second-year linebacker Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah hasn't been on a true museum visit with Myles Garrett yet.

"He's taken me to his home museum," Owusu-Koramoah quipped after the Browns' Thursday practice. "He has a museum at his house, if everybody didn't know."

Garrett, who has a well-documented love for all things related to dinosaurs, paleontology and natural history, will have to take his teammates on a real museum tour sooner rather than later, though.

In a new role, Garrett gets to combine two of his off-field passions in community outreach and paleontology. The Pro Bowler was named the Cleveland Museum of Natural History's first community science ambassador on Thursday.

The official announcement came down while the Browns were practicing, preparing for their final preseason game against the Chicago Bears on Saturday. So during a media scrum, Garrett actually got to break the news to Owusu-Koramoah himself.

"I'm now the science ambassador of the Cleveland Natural History Museum so now I've got to take him," Garrett said.

Owusu-Koramoah, offered up an excited, 'Ohhh!' and congratulations when he heard the news.

"You'll see me there a bunch of times, whether it's learning or I may even get more into the information and I'll teach it if Myles allows me to," he said.

This collaboration with the museum will allow Garrett to promote "the importance of science and STEM careers, especially for those underrepresented in the field, while supporting the Museum's mission to foster science literacy," according to a press release from museum officials.

In the role, Garrett will help raise awareness for collections, events, and educational programming. It should be fun work considering Garrett has frequented the museum throughout his time in Cleveland.

The opportunity comes at the perfect time as the museum broke ground on its \$150 million transformation project, which includes an expansion and reimagined exhibits, last June.

"It means a lot," Garrett said. "I've always prided myself on trying to study the arts and being more in tune with science and, not only human history, but paleontology and pre-history. For them to select me when they have so many others that could be an ambassador, it really means a lot, just keep on trying to make sure that I'm the person for that spot and that role."

Garrett has spent a lot of time giving back to the community in various ways since he was drafted No. 1 overall by the Browns in 2017.



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This offseason alone, the two-time All-Pro invited local children to a special screening of “Jurassic World: Dominion,” where guests were treated to a complimentary movie, snacks, and giveaways in a collaboration with the museum, United Way, and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Ohio. He’s a big fan of the Jurassic Park and Jurassic World franchise, and credits the first movie, released in 1993, for his love of dinosaurs.

Most recently, as United Way Ambassador, he hosted the Myles Garrett Back-to-School Kickoff to help prepare 200 children from the Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Ohio for the new school year.

Through this opportunity, it’s a new way to engage with the community regarding a topic he’s been passionate about for most of his life.

“I’ve always been this curious about science and really interstellar science as well,” Garrett said. “It’s always been a big curiosity of mine and passion of mine and I’m sure (Owusu-Koramoah), too, because he’s a very deep thinker like I am, so he’s probably wrapped his head around many different concepts that we usually don’t think about.”



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'We've got to have a couple of screws missing': Browns' Tony Fields II savors special teams

By Chris Easterling, Brownszone.com

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2022/08/26/tony-fields-savors-role-cleveland-browns-special-teams-linebacker-nfl-preseason/65419761007/>

BEREA – Some football players grow up loving to throw the ball. Some love catching it, or running with it. Some even love blocking the guy in front of them.

Tony Fields II gets a thrill covering kickoffs.

"In college, I loved kickoff," Fields, a second-year Browns linebacker, told the Beacon Journal this week. "They didn't let me do anything else, neither one of my schools [Arizona and West Virginia], but I love kickoff. I want to do other things, and they're like, 'No. No. No.'"

A 2021 fifth-round pick out of West Virginia, Fields has found a place more than willing to grant him his wish. In fact, it's a big reason why Fields has been able to find a niche with the Browns.

Need someone to cover kicks? Fields will do it. Need someone to block someone else covering kicks? He'll do that, too.

There's pretty much nothing on special teams Fields won't, and hasn't, done for the Browns. The only special team he hasn't lined up on has been the field-goal team.

"Special teams, to me, it's very key to the game," Fields said. "You can win games on special teams. I feel like a player on special teams has to have a couple screws missing. To want to run down on kickoff, to want to block somebody running full speed down the field, we've got to have a couple of screws missing. But it's honestly very fun. It's the tempo-setter of the game."

Cleveland Browns linebacker Tony Fields II runs a route during the second half of an NFL football game against the Denver Broncos, Thursday, Oct. 21, 2021, in Cleveland. (AP Photo/David Richard)

A year ago, Fields played 127 total special teams snaps, per Pro Football Focus. Those snaps were spread out fairly even across punt return (44 snaps), kick coverage (42) and kickoff return (39), with two punt coverage snaps.

Fields' attitude toward playing special teams is something that fits like a glove with the attitude Browns special teams coordinator Mike Priefer is looking for in players on those units.

"We have good, young players who love the game of football," Priefer said earlier in camp. "I tell them all of the time, 'There is something wrong with you in a good way if you are going to cover a kickoff in the NFL.' ... At the end of the day, I think we have the right guys in the right spots."

Fields found that spot despite seeing his NFL career get off to a tough start. A foot injury took away all of his rookie minicamp, then within 24 hours of getting on the field for training camp, he suffered an injury on the other foot.

The first game Fields played in as a rookie came in Week 3 against the Chicago Bears. A year later, he's once again preparing to see the Bears, only this time, it's in Saturday's preseason finale.



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The fact Fields has even had a preseason has been huge to him.

"Camp's been real fun," Fields said. "I've been healthy. This is my first camp healthy, as you know. So it's been real fun to finally get out there and actually run the plays without just doing the plays in the film room or walk-through. Just actually being able to get out there and run it."

Cleveland Browns linebacker Tony Fields II, center, is congratulated by teammates after picking off a pass during the NFL football team's football training camp in Berea on Wednesday.

The injuries which plagued the start of Fields' career could've been deflating. This wasn't a first-round – or even first two days of the draft – pick.

Instead, it was a guy taken 153 overall. Not only that, but it was a guy who was undersized in some regards at 6-foot, 220 pounds.

Fields wasn't going to allow the tough start to deter him from trying to achieve a dream.

"I have a saying that my grandfather gave me a long time ago," Fields said. "'So what, now what?' So that's how I live. I mean, stuff happens. You just got to move on. You got to take the cards that's dealt with you and play that card and wait until the next hand. So that's what I've been doing. Well, that's what I did last year. I take the cards I was dealt to me, understood that I had had some injuries to take over and take care of. I took care of them as much as I could in the offseason. I rehabbed and got myself as strong as I could as fast as I could, and as soon as I got here, the work showed."

A year later, Fields isn't just finding his way onto the field on special teams. The first two preseason games, with multiple key players being held out for at least one of them, has opened the door for him to get back to doing another thing he loves, playing linebacker.

Fields played outside linebacker at Arizona, but shifted to more of a safety when he transferred to West Virginia in 2020. His missed preseason prevented him from getting work there a year ago.

The top four linebacker spots on the Browns are taken by Anthony Walker Jr., Sione Takitaki, Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah and Jacob Phillips. Fields, though, has at least had a chance to grab the No. 5 linebacker spot, and not just as a special-teams contributor.

"I haven't played linebacker and lined up at linebacker in the game like for two years until this year," Fields said. "So that really helped me a lot. Just being able to get my flow back, getting back, getting ready to pat my feet and flow with the linemen and everything that like. So that helps out a lot." Jacksonville Jaguars guard Wes Martin (67) holds off Cleveland Browns linebacker Tony Fields II (42) to create a hole room for running back Snoop Conner (24) during a late second quarter pass play for 5 yards. The Jacksonville Jaguars hosted the Cleveland Browns at TIAA Bank Field in Jacksonville, Florida Friday, August 12, 2022 for the first home preseason game of the season. [Bob Self/Florida Times-Union]

Through the first two preseason games, Fields has played 88 total snaps at linebacker. He played 38 snaps, 51% of all the Browns' defensive snaps, in the opener at Jacksonville, then played 50 snaps (68%) last Sunday against the Philadelphia Eagles.



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"Tony has done a nice job," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "He played a lot of football for us last season on special teams and that will continue to be an area where he can make a big impact on Sundays. He has gotten a ton of reps at linebacker, and we may be counting on him at certain points this season. He is trying to put it all together, but it is just a matter of stacking reps for Tony."

Fields' name may come up for some as they discuss potential bubble candidates for the final 53-man roster. The Browns have to get down to that number by 4 p.m. Tuesday, although there will still be moves and roster shuffling between then and the Sept. 11 season opener.

But the special-teams work Fields has done makes him feel like a player who will find a way to stay with the Browns on into the regular season. If nothing else, the preseason snaps at linebacker provide more film for him should things not work out with the Browns.

"The start of the roster is over 85 people, and then at the end of it, it's 53," Fields said. "So guys need to get film in. The starters are the guys who obviously are going to keep on a 53-man already. So the other guys, we all get a chance to showcase our ability, showcase ourselves to make this team or another team in the NFL."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Denmark's Hjalte Froholdt has been all over America, looking to stick in Cleveland -

BrownsZone with Scott Petrak

By Scott Petrak, Brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2022/08/27/denmarks-hjalte-froholdt-has-been-all-over-america-looking-to-stick-in-cleveland/>

Hjalte Froholdt's football dream has taken him on an interesting tour of America.

He attended Warren G. Harding High School near Youngstown and spent a year at the IMG Academy in Bradenton, Florida. He played for the Razorbacks in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and was drafted in the fourth round in 2019 by the Patriots in Foxborough, Massachusetts. He's been with the Browns in Berea for the last 11 months.

Jacoby Brissett, most of starters will play Saturday in preseason finale

Each stop a new adventure, a different culture and a world away from his home in Svenborg, Denmark, which he described as a "small harbor town."

"Svenborg's beautiful. It is," Froholdt said Tuesday in an interview with The Chronicle-Telegram.

Before his story can continue, a pronunciation guide is necessary. Pro Bowl guards Joel Bitonio and Wyatt Teller, who are ahead of Froholdt on the depth chart, were quick with the lesson.

"YELL-duh," Bitonio said.

"It's pretty easy to screw up," said Froholdt (FROH-holt) of the first name that doesn't contain a y or a d.

Zone Coverage podcast

Froholdt, who turned 26 on Aug. 20, misses his family, speaking Danish, his mom's cooking and his native cuisine — he singled out liver paste and red beets on hard rye bread, saying "that slaps" — but is grateful for his journey across America. His wife is from Los Angeles and they live in Phoenix during the offseason, so he's pretty much covered the country.

"Once you kind of drive pretty much all the way across the country, you kind of realize how stupid big the country is," he said. "You're like, wow, there's so many people here."

"You just see the same thing all across. Just really nice people, always welcoming, especially both in Ohio and in the South, where it's all like, 'Hey, y'all come on in,' and love and all that. Just met nothing but hospitality and nice people."

LOVE OF THE GAME

Morten Andersen is the only other Dane to play in the NFL. Andersen kicked for 25 seasons, so Froholdt has some catching up to do with 14 games and 61 offensive snaps.

He's already come a long way.



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Froholdt wanted to play rugby as a kid because his mom grew up in New Zealand and her cousin played for the All Blacks. But the only team in Denmark was 40 minutes away.

“Football was like the next-closest thing. So I tried it out and kind of stuck to it,” he said.

Notes: Joe Thomas, Darrel ‘Pete’ Brewster picked as Browns Legends

He was 12 years old, wasn’t great at tennis or basketball, went to a couple of football camps in the U.S. and a few years later signed up to be an exchange student. He wrote on the form how much he loved football and was placed with a family in Warren.

“Just tried to play really hard and they took me in, was really nice to me,” he said. “It was really easy to fall in, assimilate to the culture.”

He did have to deal with some ignorant questions: Do you celebrate Christmas in Denmark? Are there phones? Do you live in trees?

The answers: yes, yes and no.

“Guys, we are a developed country. We do normal things,” he said.

He returned to Europe, moved to Sweden and played football in Denmark, traveling across the bridge every day. Then he went to IMG for his senior year.

He was a strong and talented defensive lineman who became a big-time recruit. Ohio State, Michigan and Michigan State were interested, and his father joined him on the circuit of visits that included a sit-down with then-Buckeyes coach Urban Meyer.

“It was a crazy experience and my parents didn’t have a clue,” Froholdt said of the recruiting process.

Arkansas was the first school to offer a scholarship, and he liked the campus.

“Fayetteville was just a little bubble. It’s completely different from the rest of Arkansas,” he said. “It just felt right.”

He was switched to offensive line as a sophomore, became a three-year starter mostly at guard, earned All-SEC and all-academic honors and was the first player from Denmark invited to the scouting combine.

LOOKING TO STICK

The 6-foot-5, 310-pound redhead gets recognized by some when he returns to Denmark — which didn’t happen for 2½ years because of pandemic travel rules — but he’s not a national hero.

“No, not at all,” he said. “(My teammates) joke with me, too. They’re like, ‘When Hjalte goes home, he is more famous than the queen.’”



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"Maybe sometimes people notice, but it's nothing crazy."

Maybe that will change if he becomes an NFL starter for the first time. He played in eight games for the Patriots in 2020, mostly on special teams, then in six games for the Browns last year, exclusively on special teams.

He's in a battle to earn a roster spot as a backup on the interior. Michael Dunn appears to have one locked up, with Froholdt, Drew Forbes and Blake Hance competing for a spot or two.

"I just focus every day on getting better," Froholdt said. "Once you get too caught up in that stuff, it's hard to focus on what really matters, which is being a better football player every day and trying to learn from all the guys around and having a good time."

"Of course, it's a little stressful in these times in camp, but just focus on getting better, then you can kind of just lock it in."

In a group of huge men, Froholdt stands out.

"He's super strong," Bitonio said. "If you look at his quads, we always joke around how big his legs are and how powerful he is, but he's a smart guy. He could really play all three positions inside. He can move people. He can move pretty well, too."

"We have a lot of guys on the inside I think that can be valuable to this team and he's definitely one of them."

Teller focused on Froholdt's intelligence.

"Amazing guy, sits next to me in meetings, extremely smart," Teller said. "His attention to detail is amazing. He works hard, he trains hard and he's a good player, he plays hard."

"There was a play the other day in the game and he was finishing 15, 20 yards down the field and it shows up all the time, it's the kind of guy he is."

The start to Froholdt's career hasn't been as smooth as hoped but he's still young and forging ahead.

"It's definitely been hard, but I couldn't be in a better place right now," he said. "Have a great coach, have some great players around me, have a really good offensive line room can learn a lot from, also just super good dudes. So definitely liking it here."

HOME AT LAST

Froholdt hopes to play for many years, but at some point will have to decide whether to settle down in Denmark or America with his wife, Ashley, who was a star softball player at Arkansas.

"We'll see what happens, but it's kind of hard," he said. "We've talked about it a little bit, but just kind of trying to get through this football journey and then worry about all that stuff maybe later."



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He has a brother and sister, and his family came over around Christmas last year. He was finally able to get back to Denmark in the spring after 2½ years.

“It was great,” he said.

He misses the routines of home, including the kabobs.

“I know I miss talking Danish on a daily basis. My Danish has gotten a little rusty lately,” he said. “Just being around Danish people and eating Danish food. Like the Danish, the way you interact is a little bit different.

“I probably think mostly about Denmark because my family’s there, because I have a really, really tight-knit relationship with my brother and my sister and my parents. They’re my biggest supporters and network.”

He also really appreciates the backing he’s received in America.

“Everybody gets really excited for other people’s success in a way,” he said. “Not that I don’t get it in Denmark, but there’s so much push for greatness in a way.

“There’s a lot of push and ‘come on, we can do this.’ I do like that aspect of U.S. in a way, there’s always more, you can always do better.”



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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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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."



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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.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

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

By Anthony Poisal, [clevelandbrowns.com](https://www.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



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

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)

<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."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

'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)

<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)

<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 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 to 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."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

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://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-4½ 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.”

Remember this... 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.