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How Browns center JC Tretter has handled his role as NFLPA's first 'COVID president'

By Nate Ulrich, ohio.com

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2020/12/08/how-cleveland-browns-jc-tretter-handles-nflpa-presidency-pandemic/6483335002/>

For a moment, JC Tretter appeared to have it made as the new president of the NFL Players Association.

The players had narrowly voted — 1,019 to 959 — to ratify a new Collective Bargaining Agreement on March 15, setting up a decade of labor peace. Although Tretter would need to bring the union's membership together, he wouldn't be thrust into battling the league's owners during a lockout.

Five days earlier, the starting center of the 9-3 Browns had been elected president in a vote of the union's board of player representatives.

Left guard Joel Bitonio and other players had joked with Tretter about how smooth his presidency would be.

"He wins the job and then the CBA passes, and we're like, 'Oh, man. You killed it. Now you're on easy street for the next two years,'" Bitonio, Tretter's best friend on the Browns, said last month during a phone interview with the Beacon Journal.

At the time, no one knew how COVID-19 would change everything.

When Tretter decided to run shortly after the 2019 season, he couldn't have fathomed becoming what NFLPA Executive Director DeMaurice Smith has dubbed the union's first "COVID president."

Smith said the unforeseen transformation took place "literally the next day" after the dust had settled from the CBA vote.

"The first call that I had with [Tretter] right after CBA ratification was telling him he was going to be co-chair of our COVID committee that I was forming and the critical question is whether and how the business of football could conduct itself in a mass pandemic," Smith said.

So much for the honeymoon period Bitonio and others had chuckled about.

"I told him, 'Listen, if this CBA thing goes through, trust me, there'll be something else. There's always something,'" said Eric Winston, who spent six years as the NFLPA's president before Tretter's two-year term began.

On top of everything else, Tretter and his wife, Anna, had just gotten married in February, and the couple is expecting the birth of their first child any day now.

"It's been a busy year for sure," Tretter said. "Yeah, no doubt about it."

Bringing it back



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Most Browns fans realize Tretter is one of the team's toughest, most reliable players. Some of them might even know he's ranked fourth among the 36 centers ProFootballFocus.com has graded this season.

Yet the extent to which Tretter is playing at a high level while juggling union duties is largely a mystery to the public.

Smith explained he and Tretter have held weekly Zoom calls and talked daily during the season, except for when the Browns have a game.

And when problems arise, like the COVID-19 outbreaks the Tennessee Titans and Baltimore Ravens have experienced this season, they translate to more phone calls and work for Tretter.

"There's no off button for him," Smith said, "and there really isn't an off button for me."

The commonality has served Smith and Tretter well because there have been plenty of fires to put out.

In a grueling offseason, they talked three or four times a day as they attempted to find a path for the return of football amid the pandemic.

Smith said he saw Tretter "diving in head first into the deepest part of the pool" as the NFLPA began wrestling in mid-March with "the ultra-moral issues" of whether football should be played and, if so, how it could be done safely in the COVID-19 era.

Later, collective bargaining sessions with the league began.

"You go into two highly contentious bargaining sessions [with the NFL], the first of which is, 'What are we going to do with our offseason program?'" Smith said. "That has to be collectively bargained because hundreds of players have bonuses riding on their level of participation in our offseason program and [we needed to change] the offseason program to be safe.

"The second highly contentious negotiation pivoted around it's a multi-billion dollar industry that easily is looking at a \$3-4 billion shortfall this year. How do we do the business of football ... in an economic paradigm where there probably isn't going to be any fans? You have to figure out how some players who may not want to play football are going to be compensated, how practices are going to be run, how the economics are going to work, what the COVID protocols are going to be."

Tretter was involved in every step of the negotiations that led to revamped healthy and safety protocols as well as adjustments to the CBA. The union and league reached an agreement July 24, allowing training camps and the season to start on time, with adjustments being made along the way and ever since. One crucial audible Tretter pushed for publicly in early August was extending daily testing among players and staff, something the league has upheld throughout the season.



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“In no small way, he served an indispensable role bringing back a multi-billion dollar industry,” Smith said.

For much of the offseason, Tretter worked out in Bitonio's garage in Northeast Ohio while teams throughout the league conducted virtual programs until training camp practices started in August.

Bitonio couldn't believe the jam-packed schedule Tretter kept.

“We'd be working out at 8 a.m. and it would be like 10 and we'd finish our workout, and he'd be like, 'I've got a phone call at 11, 12, 1, 2,’” Bitonio said. “And then he'd text me that night at like 9, and he's like, 'I finally got off all the phone calls.’”

“He was on every call that he needed to be on. I was like, 'I don't know how you're still working out and handling everything in your personal life.' He had just been married, he had just found out his wife was pregnant, all these crazy things and then he has this other full-time job.”

Tretter estimates he spent “conservatively, eight hours” a day on the phone with NFLPA members, staff, its executive committee and player reps, plus NFL officials and medical experts in the thick of COVID-19 bargaining.

“It was a pretty regimented day of go work out from 8 to 10, come back, shower and then pretty much be on the phone until you go to bed,” he said. “That was pretty much the back end of the offseason for me.”

'Right man for the job'

Tretter, 29, has said he doesn't have any regrets about becoming the NFLPA's president because he's been passionate about union work since his college days. He is a graduate of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. He initially thought he would go from there to law school.

“I took a lot of classes in labor — labor law, labor organizing. It was interesting to me,” Tretter said. “At that same, I went from a 238-pound tight end to a 300-pound left tackle, which kind of changed what I was going to do when I graduated.”

After the Green Bay Packers drafted Tretter in the fourth round in 2013, he developed a desire to become involved with the NFLPA. He was an alternate player rep the past two years with the Browns, who signed him as an unrestricted free agent in March 2017.

Then last year, Tretter attended the NFLPA's annual meetings in Florida to get a better feel for the inner workings of the union. He went to this year's meetings in early March to campaign for the presidency because he wanted to make a bigger difference. Houston Texans safety Michael Thomas and free-agent linebacker Sam Acho threw their hats in the ring, too.

Virtually all of the attention centered on CBA voting. Tretter purposefully avoided disclosing whether he thought players should favor or oppose the deal.



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“As I was running for president, I made it clear that however the vote turned out, I'm ready for what comes with it,” Tretter said. “If it passes and we head into a decade of labor peace, I'm ready to move forward on other issues that our guys are passionate about, and if the membership decides that this isn't what they want and if the CBA were to be struck down, I would be ready to move forward and get back to the table. I never wanted to tell the people how to vote.

“I just wanted people to know all the issues, all the topics, understand the rules and the laws in the CBA that's going to dictate how we're compensated, what our benefit structure is, what our work rules are and what the next generation of players will play under. The CBA's 10 years long, so that's just such an important decision. I wanted everybody to make that decision on their own.”

Tretter delivered his message in a speech and separate question-and-answer sessions with player reps.

Bitonio traveled to Miami for the meetings and became a quasi-campaign manager for Tretter by vouching for him and introducing him to players who have come through Cleveland but whose tenures there didn't overlap with the center's.

“He's the right man for the job in the sense where everything I've ever done with him, we'd just be playing golf or we could be hanging out, once he dips his toe in, he's all in,” said Bitonio, who became an alternate player rep for the Browns in October partly because of Tretter's influence. “The second he decides, 'Hey, I want to be a part of this,' he's all about it.”

Since Tretter was elected, he has written columns for the NFLPA's website. Although many of them have focused on the pandemic, Tretter has used the platform to tackle other issues. In September, he advocated for the elimination of artificial turf. “NFL clubs should proactively change all field surfaces to natural grass,” he wrote.

The columns are another time commitment, and, for the record, NFLPA president is not a paid position. Tretter isn't going to complain about money (the three-year, \$32.5 million contract extension he signed with the Browns in November includes more than \$23 million guaranteed). Still, Bitonio recalls a player at the NFLPA meetings contending the union's president should be compensated.

“I used to tell people, 'I only get paid in grief.' I think he kind of feels the same way,” said Winston, whose 12-year career as an NFL offensive lineman ended with the 2017 season. “It's not like it's a great job. It's not like it even leads to other jobs afterward. It's something that you do under a short period of time, most likely, and it is what it is.

“I learned a lot from it. I'm better off for doing it, just from a personal standpoint. For me, it was an honor of a lifetime. I'm sure he feels the same way, too. But it's thankless, and I also think that's a little bit why offensive linemen tend to be in the position because being an offensive lineman is somewhat of a thankless job.”



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In that sense, Tretter knew what to expect. Prior to running, he picked the brains of former NFLPA presidents, including Winston and former NFL cornerback Domonique Foxworth.

“I told him that role can be effectively done from a high-level, hands-off, manager-type role where you're really making sure everything's being done the right way, or it can also be a role where you're really in there,” Winston said. “[The pandemic has] really made him get in the muck.

“Knowing JC the way I do now, I think he was going to get in there regardless. That's just his mind frame, the way he operates. I don't see him doing anything sort of from the back. I see him as a guy who was going to roll up his sleeves regardless, and obviously these issues have exacerbated that.”

The NFLPA's goal is to finish the season, and Tretter reiterated Monday on Zoom with Browns beat writers he thinks it'll happen as long as everyone involved follows the COVID-19 protocols. He also said conversations about forming a potential playoff bubble or bubbles really haven't happened between the union and league to this point.

Tretter would continue to be heavily involved in whatever discussions take place. It's what he's been doing behind the scenes for the vast majority of 2020.

“JC probably spent hundreds of hours on calls with players,” Smith said, “just talking through how we're going to have to be nimble and innovative and, to a certain extent, reflexive in the way that we deal with a pandemic that upended routine and normal and habit for everyone.”



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A conversation with Browns' JC Tretter as new union chief in turbulent times

By Tom Reed, The Athletic

<https://theathletic.com/1793774/2020/05/05/browns-center-jc-tretter-on-his-role-as-nflpa-leader-in-turbulent-times/>

JC Tretter went to college in 2009 looking to become the next Jerry Maguire.

“When you go to Cornell (University), the next logical step isn’t the NFL,” Tretter said last week in a phone interview. “Wanting to become an agent was a way to stay involved in sports.”

Tretter has yet to sign his first client, but all those classes in industrial labor relations are being put to use during one of the most turbulent periods for the NFL Players Association.

The 29-year-old Browns center was named the union’s new president March 10. It’s hard to imagine stepping into a more daunting role given the NFLPA’s current climate of unrest and the world’s uncertain and volatile circumstances.

Tretter is tasked with unifying a players association divided by the recent passage of a new collective bargaining agreement — the deal, which runs through 2030, passed by a mere 60 votes — and steering it through the COVID-19 pandemic that’s claimed the lives of nearly 69,000 Americans and left millions unemployed.

The seventh-year pro must keep his membership safe and informed while remaining sensitive to the struggles of a nation grappling with its own divisive issues. Tretter needs to achieve all this while learning a new Browns offense and building relationships with new teammates and coaches through the impersonal environs of Zoom meetings and teleconferences.

Fortunately, he has an understanding wife in Anna — the couple were married in February — who encouraged him to seek the presidency and to take on the additional responsibilities and headaches.

“When I was writing my five- to 10-minute speech for the election, she was my main editor,” said Tretter, who served as the Browns alternate player rep the past two seasons. “She’s been my sounding board and the person who made sure my grammar and spelling was correct. She’s been a big help.”

Instead of preparing for a relaxing summer vacation in Croatia, a trip likely to be delayed because of the virus, Tretter is busy working out in his home gym, writing monthly online letters to NFLPA members and trying to ease hard feelings that developed through the continuous CBA negotiations.

The agreement enables the league to add a 17th regular-season game as early as 2021 and increases the playoff field from 12 teams to 14 for the upcoming season. It also includes higher minimum salaries, improved benefits for current and former players, expanded rosters and practice squads, and changes to the league’s drug and discipline policies. The pact bumps the players’ share of league revenue from 47 percent to 48 percent in 2021 and to at least 48.5 percent in any season in which 17 regular-season games are played.



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Some high-profile members, including Aaron Rodgers, J.J. Watt and Russell Wilson, have been critical of the agreement in part because of the additional games. Meanwhile, Tretter's own teammate Sheldon Richardson has been a vocal proponent of abolishing Thursday night games, which remain on the schedule.

"People have asked, 'You've had guys voice their opinion negatively about the deal and do you have a problem with that?'" Tretter said. "I really don't. In a democratic process, the more you have guys talking about it, the better it is for the union. ... There is a difference between debate and division and I'm fine with open debate. What we can't have is a divided union because that's where you lose your strengths. If you have concerns, come to me and we will work through it. But we have to stand shoulder to shoulder and be ready to be one body in the NFLPA."

Tretter spoke to The Athletic for 40 minutes during a wide-ranging interview about his union background, his hopes for the future and the Browns' offseason moves and activities.

Note: This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

What was your initial interest in being a players agent?

Sports have meant so much to me growing up. It's something you always want to kind of stay involved in. It's something that's always been a passion. ... Before the NFL became a serious option, the (agent route) was a way to stay involved in the sports world.

The Industrial Labor Relations School at Cornell was a path to law (school), but it also had a big thing to do with unions and human resources. That was the school to kind of go into for what I wanted. Then, after the first few years, you can tailor your major to your interests. I stayed down the middle in terms of union and law classes. Looking back on it, it's a big help with this responsibility in this new role — having that background and having the stuff you studied for four years and being able to use it while you're still playing.

What went into your timing of becoming more active in NFLPA matters?

You have to prioritize staying in this league first and making sure you know how to be a pro and what to prepare for and understand the effort it takes just to be a professional football player. Once I got to Cleveland (after signing a free-agent deal in 2017), I decided I was going to run to get more involved in the union as the opportunities came forward. ... I could take on added responsibilities beyond just playing football because I felt comfortable with my process of preparation.

Some would say this is a thankless job so there had to be some cause that made you want to pursue it. What was that for you?

I wanted to make a difference for the guys you go to battle with all across the league — help them receive better benefits, pay and work rules. As well as setting this game up for the future and moving us to the point where this generation is better than the last generation. At the same time, do right by the guys who came before us. It's having the background and understanding of labor



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relations and also being involved in the NFL for several years and having the desire to leave the game in a better place than you found it.

Was there someone who inspired you to pursue the presidency?

Guys have conversations. They talk to each other about our business and the rules we play under. How we get paid. It impacts our lives on a day-to-day basis. Guys have thoughts, ideas and complaints, and I got to the point where if I had these ideas and complaints I shouldn't just sit on the sidelines and yell out to the field on what they should be doing. I needed to get further involved and not just play Monday morning quarterback. ... I think with the CBA (negotiations) going on, a lot more guys got into the union and what's going on with it. I hope that continues because that's how things change and things get done when new ideas come to the surface.

JC Tretter is entering his fourth season with the Browns. (Nick Cammett / Getty Images)

Was there a specific issue that made you want to get more involved?

Player safety. There's no clear path in what you can do and it's something I have looked at. What changes can I make? We have a new committee that was negotiated into this new CBA that's going to look at the working rules (governing) training camp and the offseason that can improve player safety. That's the most important thing.

We as a union can never get complacent. In 2011, we got rid of the two-a-days, and guys talk about how crucial that was for them to play longer in this league and have more years on their careers because they weren't beating themselves down in late July and August. That was an improvement, but we can never stop improving. We have to keep looking for new ideas to make this game safer and keep our guys healthier. I want to really be involved in that with this role.

OK, so what are your thoughts on Thursday night games and adding a 17th regular-season game? Were you in favor of adding the 17th game and what are your long-term thoughts about Thursday night games?

I think it's (a matter of whether we) can we limit the amount of football being played. That goes back to the two-a-days. The two most physical times (of the year) are game days and training camp. Can we make enough changes in training camp that even out the high-impact hits and the load we take on during games and even it out in training camp? (Under terms of the new CBA there will be a limit of 16 padded practices in camp, according to ESPN, and no more than three in a row. The previous limit was 28, and no restrictions on consecutive days except for built-in days off.)

The 17th game was a big hang-up with me during negotiations, but if we can find ways to push back on the amount of trauma your body takes in training camp, we can even that out and make it safer for us with the addition of the 17th game. That's my hope for this committee. That we can let the science dictate the rulings and that we follow the science and make good decisions that will be beneficial to the players.



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The Thursday games are tough. We have examples that we can't let happen. In 2018, the Bears played a late Sunday night game and then had to play the (12:30 p.m.) Thursday game on Thanksgiving. The schedule just can't look like that. It's tough enough to go from Sunday to Thursday. Playing late into Sunday night and early Monday morning, there is no time for the body to recover. When guys get their schedule, they are looking for their bye week and when do they have to play on Thursday. ... Guys know that week with the Thursday night game is going to be tough on their bodies.

You stated you weren't in favor of the 17th game. So did you vote for the contract or against it?

That's something with my position now guys ask about all the time. The way I phrase it is, "It doesn't really matter." The majority has decided. Now, it's a matter of doing things past this moment and not, "What side were you on?" I don't expect people to forget the issues they had. As I mentioned earlier, I want guys to stay involved and push for those issues they were concerned with beforehand. They have not fallen on deaf ears in my mind. I'm not going to be one who throws up his hands and says, "This is the contract for the next 11 seasons." There are things we can do to push for changes. There are things we can do to fight for changes and the more guys who get involved and are passionate about things, the more we can get done.

The president's job always has been a tough one, but in the age of social media, guys can get on Twitter and make their feelings known to everyone. Eric Reid voiced concerns over the changes in the wording of the CBA and wanted an investigation and a revote. Have you spoken to him about it?

When that came out, I reached out to Eric and we have had a phone call about it. I pride myself in trying to keep lines of communication open. I want to hear from players, I want to hear their concerns. I will take what they say to heart. We had a good conversation, but I'm not going to go into what was said.

You have become president during a pandemic. There's going to come a point when the NFL says, "we're ready to play." Have members already expressed concerns about the safety factor and when it's OK to return?

As I've said, my main concern is health and safety. And it's not just football health and safety, it's life health and safety, too. That all plays a part in this. As a union, our main concern is the men's health and safety — and their families' health and safety. These are factors we are laser focused on, especially with the world we are living in. We want to protect our players from everything that's going on. We are trying to keep the guys up to date with what's going on. There are so many sources and so many stories that are out in the public eye. We have to make sure we are providing our guys with accurate information in terms of what's going on with this virus. Giving them the ability to ask questions and get their concerns answered. It's not just about what's happening on the football field.

So have there been questions about what happens when the NFL decides to open camps?

That's the tough part about living in a world of hypotheticals. Everything is changing so rapidly. We are living in a different world than we were two months ago. So now we are asking, "What's it going



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to be like three months from now?" It's tough to live in that world and guess where we are going to be in three months and try to talk through it. We have our virtual offseason rules locked down through June 26. We bargained that and got those settled. Guys know where we stand up until that date. That gives us kind of a long runway to track this virus and track its changes and continue to keep our guys up to date.

Here's a personal question and not a "JC Tretter union president question." Would you be fine with playing a season in empty stadiums if it comes to that?

I still think that's too far out to even talk through. We have places that aren't even opened up yet and we still have social distancing going on. It's not worth going through right now because those are the hypothetical (situations) that are hard to address because we don't know where we're going to be at. You could go down 20 rabbit holes and in two weeks we could find out those were all so far off from what we talking about today. We can't just live in those hypotheticals right now.

How fortunate was it to get the deal done before all the issues surrounding the virus started?

You look at how quickly all the things escalated after the deal passed (March 15). ... There's nothing to say we would have gotten less, but usually, in times of economic downturns, you are not set up in a position of strength in negotiating a CBA with billionaires. Again, that's not saying for sure we definitely wouldn't have gotten back to what we had or even gotten more, but it surely would have been a potential risk of going back to the table and having a "no deal" as this pandemic broke out. The stock market dipped significantly. ... All the other sports leagues are paused. It would have added a huge speed bump into the process of trying to negotiate a CBA while all this is going on and a lot of bad factors are involved.

Do you feel bad for your union brothers in the NBA and NHL? They might have to decide whether they want to complete seasons in the middle of the summer and potentially have to be away from their families if they play in centralized locations.

That's a tough position for them to be in. You hear these leaks, I guess you would call them, and what their plans are. I don't take them too seriously because we just don't know how things are going to look like at that time, and when they decide it's safe to come back. ... It's tough. But it comes back to making sure your players are safe. Just because we are young, fit people doesn't mean we are immune to this. There are guys who have conditions and underlying complications. It's not just a matter of when we feel it's safe we are going to play. There are factors that need to be considered.

It's a weird world which we live in and we have to remember this is not just about pro athletes. There are people who have lost jobs and loved ones. There are people who have been thrown out of their routines, people who can't go out and see other people. With our NFLPA, we're trying to give members mental health checkups and mental health help. It's a tough world we are all living in. None of us have gone through something like this before. We're trying to make sure guys have options in case they are struggling mentally with everything that's going on.

OK, lets shift gears. What are the virtual OTAs like for the Browns?



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Honestly, I've enjoyed it. We are learning a new playbook with coach (Kevin) Stefanski coming in. It gives us time to study the playbook. You have two hours of meetings a day as part of the agreement. ... Every team does it different. You jump on for a Zoom call or a conference call. You can talk through things with your coach and your teammates. I've enjoyed it so far. I think it's going well.

Your team drafted Jedrick Wills and signed Jack Conklin from Tennessee to bolster the tackle positions. Your thoughts on those moves?

I think it will be a big help. Jack is an established player coming from a system where he can slide right into the offense we're going to run. Jedrick is a really talented young player and I think the sky is the limit. I'm looking forward to working with him.

The Browns drafted center Nick Harris. Does that concern you a bit?

Not really. I understand the thought process and it's not a crazy leap to make. I'm extremely confident in my abilities and I'm looking forward to working with Nick, too. As you get older in this league, you've learned a lot from the guys who came before you. I was lucky enough to come into the league and go to Green Bay, where they had a lot of talented guys who passed on a lot of knowledge to me. They helped me grow into the player I am. So when your team drafts a young guy, it's my turn to pass on that information to Nick and any young player.

What are you expecting with the additions of offensive line coach Bill Callahan and his assistant Scott Peters?

Bill has been a coach for a long time and he's seen everything. It's been great working with him and talking through looks and checks. He's got so much experience and has an answer to almost every question. He has so much knowledge. It's been nice working through the playbook with him. And with any coaching change, it's getting to know these guys and developing relationships that are so important in getting a tightknit group in that offensive line room.

Have you played in a wide-zone blocking scheme before?

A little bit. I wouldn't say we majored in it at Green Bay, but we did a little bit. I'd say Joel (Bitonio) through Kyle Shanahan and Jack have more experience in it. I've done it before, but now we are about to major in it instead of just running one or two plays. I've always wanted to get involved in an offense like this because it plays to some of my strengths and it's something I'm excited about.

You mean because of your athleticism?

Just kind of lateral movement and side-to-side quickness. Joel and I always laugh because when someone asks, "What kind of runs do you like," we're always pumping up the outside zone. Now, we'll be able to run a bunch of that. Since we've gotten together, we've always talked about running the outside zone. We're excited about the changes.



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Nick Harris is new to life in NFL but has experience being pressed into action at guard

By Scott Petrak, brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2020/12/22/nick-harris-is-new-to-life-in-nfl-but-has-experience-being-pressed-into-action-at-guard/>

The experience was new for Nick Harris.

The rookie's debut had come almost three months earlier protecting on kicks, but his true introduction to the NFL was on the third offensive snap Sunday night against the Giants.

Harris began the night as the backup at center — his natural position — and at guard because starting right guard Wyatt Teller was inactive with a sprained ankle. When replacement Chris Hubbard's right knee crumpled on the second play, Harris was suddenly in the huddle in prime time for his first professional offensive snap, at right guard. Standing shoulder to shoulder with center JC Tretter and right tackle Jack Conklin, who've made 142 starts, Harris filled in admirably in a 20-6 victory.

"Just to be playing offensive line in the NFL and that being my first game, it was crazy," Harris said Monday.

The experience also felt familiar.

When Harris was a true freshman at the University of Washington, he was moved from center to guard and started four games. He stayed at guard as a sophomore and was honorable mention All-Pac 12, then moved to center and was first-team All-Pac-12 in both seasons.

The Browns, drawn to his quick feet, athleticism and intelligence, drafted him in the fifth round in April.

"I was having this conversation with my mom last night. It is just like the circle of life," Harris said. "Everything just repeats itself, I swear. Everything happens for a reason. I ended up playing earlier than I thought I would in college. Here I am, and I played earlier than I thought I would in my NFL career.

"I just have to go about it how I did in college. Just continue to just keep getting better, keep grinding, just keep my focus on the right path, just build off of what I did in this game and keep stacking the days pretty much."

Browns still have shot at AFC North title after Steelers upset by Bengals

Harris will have the chance to do that in the middle of the action as the Browns pursue their first playoff appearance since 2002. Coach Kevin Stefanski said Teller is unlikely to play Sunday against the Jets, remains "week to week" and Harris will take his spot.



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This week will be the first time he's devoted his attention and preparation primarily to guard. He was the first-team center throughout training camp while Tretter recovered from knee surgery, then spent the season working as the backup center and a scout-team guard.

Harris is undersized at 6-foot-1, 302 pounds and more experienced at center but is confident he can handle the new job.

"At the end of the day, it is football," he said. "I played guard my first two years in college so it is not like it is completely foreign. It is just knocking the rust off.

"When I went in, I had to warm up a little bit. For a couple of plays, I had to get my feet right and get my hands right because it is a different game than playing center. A lot of that goes unnoticed. I just had to get my feet wet a little bit and just play how I play. I felt comfortable, and as the weeks go by and I get more reps and stuff, it will feel even better, just so I can get comfortable."

He took it upon himself to be prepared to play center and guard even though he hadn't been called upon until Week 15. Stefanski said he wasn't surprised Harris handled himself well when he got the chance.

"Did his job," Stefanski said. "Played hard. Assignment sound. Got people on the ground. Really pleased with how he performed."

Browns enjoying winning ways but know there's more work to do to secure playoff berth

Veteran receiver Jarvis Landry took notice and sought out Harris first in the victorious locker room.

"He kicked a-," Landry said. "That is something that does not go unnoticed. I just wanted to let him know that personally, that I was proud of the way he came out and did what he had to do for the team.

"He stepped up, stepped in and did what he had to do. The offense continued to flow as is. That was something that was very special."

Landry told Harris he appreciated him and the way he works.

"It speaks volumes about this kid," Landry said. "It speaks volumes about (general manager) Andrew Berry being able to draft this guy, who is as versatile as he is and can come in and make these plays and do the assignments that we need to have successful plays and win the football game."

Harris appreciated the gesture from Landry.

"It means a lot," he said. "He comes into the facility every day and he works. He works hard. That is one of the dudes I look up to on this team. I try to model how I go about my career like him.



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“For him to say that, it just goes to show you the type of leader he is and the type of leadership we have on the team.”

Harris said he has a lot to clean up after his first game. He has big shoes to fill, as Teller remains Pro Football Focus’ top-graded guard in the NFL.

“I just have to keep preparing like how I have been preparing,” he said. “Not trying to switch anything up. Not trying to do too much. Just go in there and play how I play.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Browns rookie Nick Harris has fan favorite potential: 'He finds a way to put his flavor on stuff'

By Nate Ulrich, ohio.com

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/sports/20200502/browns-rookie-nick-harris-has-fan-favorite-potential-lsquohe-finds-way-to-put-his-flavor-on-stuffrsquo>

Nick Harris took a black permanent marker to a white T-shirt and wrote, "WE DONT LOSE TO COUGS."

Later, Harris rolled up his purple jersey to reveal the message after he and the Washington Huskies defeated the rival Washington State Cougars in November for the program's seventh consecutive victory in the Apple Cup.

Cleveland sports fans would probably erect a statue if a Browns player were to apply the same treatment to the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Well, Harris can dream now.

"He's got some swag," Washington offensive line coach Scott Huff said in a recent phone interview. "He finds a way to put his flavor on stuff."

A peek at the personality of the incoming Browns rookie created a viral moment during his junior season at Washington in 2018. After Arizona State defensive tackle George Lea jumped offside and knocked Harris back, the center regained his balance, slid forward with some fancy footwork and pointed in the direction the penalty would advance his team.

"I was like, 'What the hell's that?' " Huff said. "We definitely never practiced that.

"He's very comfortable with himself. He can laugh at himself."

But Harris is not always in a fun-loving mood.

As a 270-pound, 18-year-old freshman guard in 2016, Harris didn't take kindly to an opponent from Alabama spearing his running back in a College Football Playoff semifinal. Harris immediately got in the defender's face.

It's the moment Pat Harlow, a former NFL offensive tackle and Harris' position coach at JSerra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano, California, knew his pupil had what it takes to play at the next level.

"If you won't handle that business, you're not long for that league," Harlow, who spent five seasons (1991-95) with the New England Patriots and another three (1996-98) with the Oakland Raiders, said by phone. "To see him go do that, he just turned 18, I literally texted him right after that game. I'm like, 'Hey, man. I know it was a rough night. But I could not be more proud of you, especially in that certain instance, how you went to protect your guy and you didn't back down from anybody.' "



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When the Browns drafted Harris in the fifth round (No. 160 overall) on April 25, they invested in a 21-year-old player whose movement skills, technique, football intelligence and instincts, character and leadership are praised by his former coaches.

In many ways, he had to excel in all of those areas to overcome his lack of prototypical height. He measured 6-foot 7/8 and weighed 302 pounds in February at the NFL Scouting Combine.

“That’s like his whole recruitment, right?” Huff said. “It’s why this guy’s got such a chip on his shoulder. He’s not going to be denied.

“I’m sure there were a lot of teams that didn’t even look at him in the draft because of his size. I know that’s going to be motivation for him. He just needs one shot. That’s all he kept saying.”

Drafted by the Patriots 11th overall out of USC in 1991, Harlow grew frustrated — “To be honest, it pisses me off,” he said — while begging college programs to give Harris his one shot. He was a prep tackle but knew his future would be on the interior. Harlow repeatedly made the sales pitch when coaches visited JSerra, where Harris commuted daily with long van rides from Inglewood, to check out now-Washington guard Luke Wattenberg on the recruiting circuit.

“Obviously, you have to have a certain amount of size,” said Harlow, who’s 6-6 and whose son Sean is a 6-4 Atlanta Falcons guard. “But it’s the other things that can take over and make up for some of those things with technique and smarts. And with [Harris], it’s hand placement and understanding how to torque people and use his leverage against them.”

New Hampshire and Cal Poly wanted Harris, but Washington became the only FBS school to offer him a scholarship. He expected to redshirt as a freshman, which would have given him time to gain weight and develop. Instead, he forced his way onto the field, playing 12 games with four starts, two at left guard and two at right guard.

“His freshman year in training camp, his offensive line coach who’s now [the offensive line coach of the Indianapolis] Colts, Chris Strausser, sends me a text with some film on it,” said Harlow, who became JSerra’s head coach in 2016. “He’s like, ‘I think I’ve got to play him.’ From watching the tape, I’m like, ‘I think you’re going to have to.’ So they threw him in at guard.”

He started 13 games at right guard as a sophomore. Then, after now-Los Angeles Rams center Coleman Shelton went to the NFL, Harris started 25 games in the middle of the offensive line as a junior and senior, earning first-team All-Pac 12 honors in each of his final two seasons. Last year, he won the Guy Flaherty Award, which is given to Washington’s most inspirational player.

Huff said he doesn’t know how Washington can replace the leadership of Harris.

“He played for us at a high level, and he works his ass off,” Huff said. “The guys see how he goes about being a pro, just how he handles his stuff, and he gets along great with everyone. He’s a real charismatic guy. He’s just honest. He doesn’t sugarcoat anything. He just says it in a way that needs to be said.”



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Harris will likely begin his Browns career in the background, though.

He might eventually become a successor to JC Tretter, but the veteran is the team's undisputed starting center, a point General Manager Andrew Berry spelled out after the selection of Harris. And although Berry and coach Kevin Stefanski wouldn't rule out the possibility of Harris entering a competition with Wyatt Teller and Drew Forbes for the starting right guard job, Berry and scout Adam Al-Khayyal explained Harris' skill set is geared first and foremost toward center.

Either way, everyone involved is convinced Harris is an ideal fit for the wide zone blocking scheme Stefanski will run.

"Outside zone and play action off of it is just kind of deadly with his athleticism," Harlow said.

"To watch him reach a three-technique at center on a wide zone play, there's very few people that can do that."

Added Huff: "There was a lot of that stuff where we're watching our cutups at the end of the year and going, 'Holy s***! He just pulled that off?'"

In other words, Harris is capable of displaying flair while blocking, too.



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Rookie C Nick Harris taking advantage of being 'thrown into the fire' as 1st-team center

By Anthony Poisal, cleveland.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/rookie-c-nick-harris-taking-advantage-of-being-thrown-into-the-fire-as-1st-team->

For Nick Harris, receiving playing time earlier than expected is nothing new.

Since Harris began his college football career at Washington, the expectation has always been he'll be given time to develop. He was supposed to redshirt his freshman year with the Huskies. Instead, he played in 12 games and made four starts as a guard.

With the Browns, who picked Harris in the fifth-round of the 2020 draft, Harris was expected to be given a year or two to acclimate to the NFL.

Instead, he was taking first-team reps on Day 1 of training camp.

Harris was the first player coach Kevin Stefanski called when veteran center JC Tretter suffered a knee injury that sidelined him for a portion of the first week, and possibly longer, of team practices. He's molded well with the rest of the offensive line starters through three days of full practices and is preparing himself to be ready for the season opener if that's what the Browns need.

The temporary promotion to first-team center didn't come as a shock for Harris.

That's not, however, because he was expecting it. He's simply used to such surprises.

"When I heard it, I was just, 'OK. Well, here we go. I have to go now,'" Harris said Monday in a video call with local reporters. "It's a great opportunity to get thrown in the fire. That is how you learn the best. This whole process is not new. I know how to handle these situations."

Harris was first catapulted into unexpected action as a true freshman at Washington. At 6-foot-1 and 270 pounds, coaches didn't think Harris would be ready to block the beefy linemen of Power 5 conferences, so they expected to give him a redshirt and grow into the position.

Then he wowed them with his quick feet and impressive leverage against any opponent. They inserted him as a backup to open the season, and by the end of the year, he was the starting right guard against Alabama in the Peach Bowl.

"When I got in, I learned the offense pretty fast, and it allowed me to play really fast and violent — like I like playing," Harris said about his freshman year in April after he was drafted. "They gave me a chance and asked me if I wanted to do it. I was like, 'Hell yeah. I want to play as soon as I can because taking a year off from football sounds horrible.'"

Harris became a cornerstone of Washington's offensive line and transitioned to center in his junior year. By the end of his college career, he was one of the top center prospects of the 2020 draft class. The Browns scooped him up in the draft.



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But scouts and analysts still had concerns about his size. He's 6-foot-1, 302 pounds and smaller than the average NFL lineman. Are his feet quick enough? Are his legs strong enough?

Those are all questions Harris has heard before.

Those are all questions Harris loves to answer.

"I have been asked about that numerous times, and I kind of get excited a little bit," Harris said with a smile. "I know in the back of their mind, they're doubting me."

Harris believes his size is actually perfect. Because he's smaller than the average lineman, defensive opponents have to bend their knees lower than normal to generate more power. It also allows Harris to explode more with his lower body, a key step for a lineman to win trench battles.

"On paper, if I was 6-4, it would sound better," Harris said, "but I think functionally, if you really know the intricacies of playing this position, I have the ideal build, and I think other people also would think that."

Harris was ripe for an opportunity after spending the unusual offseason familiarizing himself with the blocking schemes of Stefanski's wide-zone offense. Harris' skills and quick feet are a great fit for the wide-zone scheme, which requires the center to run and quickly block incoming linebackers.

His dedication might be the reason why Stefanski gave him the first crack at first-team reps.

"I get the plays," Harris said. "I get the scheme and everything, so I just have to go out there and execute. It is what it is. It's a part of the game."

Sure, Harris has been thrust into early action with the top linemen to begin training camp, but the expectation for Harris is he'll begin the season ready to help anyway he can as a backup to Tretter.

But that can change in an instant. He knows it better than anyone else.

"I'm just trying to optimize whatever role I have and whatever that may be," Harris said. "I'm just trying to be a role player for this team and whenever my opportunity comes, I'm ready for it."



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Denzel Ward's father passed down a name, and a gift

By Doug Lesmerises, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/06/denzel-wards-father-passed-down-a-name-and-a-gift.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- On Paul Ward Jr.'s sixth birthday, in September 1975, they buried his father. In that loss, a boy found his calling.

What was lacking, he would provide. What was missed, he would become. What was learned, he would pass on.

Growing up, Ward and his two brothers understood what they were without, and they vowed to fill that void for their own children. One day becoming a father would be their greatest challenge, but also their greatest pride, their greatest gift.

"We've always had that conversation," Van Ward said of his older brother. "He always wanted to be there for his kids, provide the best home life for them, the spiritual platform, just really show what a family is supposed to be. That was his ultimate goal."

Paul Ward Sr. was a military man, both Army and Navy, and his wife, Geneva Ward, said her husband died on a base in Michigan. She became both mother and father to three sons, Paul Jr., Van and William, often working two jobs, accepting the hardships, motivated by the love for her children and what they could become.

"I took them wherever they needed to go," she said. "I took them fishing. I didn't like fishing, but I sat there for three or four hours."

She installed faith and kept her sons safe and showered them with love. She valued education, insisted they pass it on and made sure they never took any of their blessings for granted. Aided by her parents, they gathered together for holidays.

Whatever she did, Geneva Ward emphasized family.

"We didn't know we were struggling," Van Ward said. "We had fun."

Paul Jr. possessed a constant energy and honed his fatherhood skills long before he had children. He couldn't bring himself to visit his father's grave for over a decade, well into his 20s, but he became his mother's protector.

"He always made sure I was OK," Geneva Ward said.

He did so as a child, as a teenager while he met his life partner, during his college years and as he became an educator. Once he had children, every Thanksgiving morning Paul Jr. would take his kids to feed the homeless before they'd have their own family meal. He always asked his mother to stay in their home the night before so she could be part of this family tradition.



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Paul Jr. lost his father. Since then, he would only gain family, never lose them.

One lunch period at Cleveland Heights High School, Paul Jr. locked his gaze onto Nicole. She could feel her cheeks burning. Once she looked back, they would never be apart. Paul Jr. graduated from Cleveland Heights in 1987, Nicole in 1988. They both graduated from the University of Cincinnati. They were married on July 22, 1995. Soulmates, she said.

If Paul Jr.'s childhood was marked by an absence, he was fulfilled as a young man by finding a partner who shared his views. They would raise a family together. Nicole had grown up without a younger sibling, so she longed for two children. First came Paul III. Then four years later, Denzel.

Could it be that the rest came easy? Can parents admit to that, when hard work and good fortune coupled with laughter and determination allow you to embrace everything you ever wanted?

"They're just good kids, and I'm not just saying that because they're my kids, but, I mean, raising them was easy," Nicole said. "And I think the reason why it was easy was because they had someone like Paul in their life, you know? They had Paul as their dad, which I think really made a big difference."

PJ and Denzel were so much like their father -- handsome and self-assured -- that everyone could see one generation absorbing the lessons of another. PJ was a little more outgoing, Denzel a little more reserved, but they were Wards. That was clear, and that meant something.

Their father was the friend who asked how you were doing and locked his eyes on yours until you provided a real answer, because he wanted to know. He loved to shoot pool and play chess, he was a member of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and the U.S. Army Reserves, and to meet him once was to believe you'd known him forever.

He was the glue for the Wards, the one who planned yearly July vacations to the Caribbean for the extended family. Now he was the one who took others fishing.

But all Paul really wanted was the time to put something of himself into his children.

Nicole remembers her husband speaking of a 5-year-old's recollections of a father who was gone far too soon. It struck her how tightly he held those brief lessons. But there hadn't been enough time. As a result, Paul cherished every hour and day with his sons.

"I just remember Paul saying, if he was to leave this earth, one of the things that he hoped for is that his boys would just know him, because he felt like he didn't really get to know his dad because he was so young," Nicole said. "He wanted his boys to know him, to be able to remember him and the things that he did."

So Paul reinforced a specific message. It was both internal and external, about who his sons would become and what they would do in the world. It was about fatherhood and family, because Paul understood the necessity of a family working together. Providing daily affirmations. Filling any



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gaps. Overcoming any losses. It was a five-word message related to one of the things his own father had left him in their short time together -- his name.

Make Them Know Your Name.

“To my husband, your name meant everything,” Nicole said. “If you had nothing else to stand on, you had your name. Nobody could take that away from you.”

Make them know your name.

Paul told his sons that every week, if not every day.

“He always preached that,” PJ Ward said. “Whether it was on the field or off the field, it was just about making a presence in the community, and making sure that people can look up to us and have a reason to know our name.”

Paul Ward shouted those essential words to a confused PJ during an elementary school basketball game. They had started as an inside joke between Paul and his brother Van, only to grow in meaning with every utterance. Now this.

“He would come onto the court at halftime,” PJ said, “and he was like, ‘Son, I want you to make them know your name. You’re out here for a reason.’”

As Denzel’s football skills became obvious, the opportunity for others to know the Wards increased. It increased the understanding of what Paul and Nicole had done with their dreams. PJ was a three-sport athlete in high school who played defensive back at Ashland University before a heart issue ended his football career. Denzel was a four-star cornerback recruit who signed with Ohio State’s 2015 recruiting class. Paul saw his youngest son earn that scholarship, but it was after his death that Denzel blossomed into a first-team All-American as a junior in 2017.

“I think the two of them raised a wonderful, humble, polite, courteous young man, who also has an intense competitive fire that is burning,” said Ohio State defensive coordinator Kerry Coombs, who recruited and coached Denzel in Columbus. “That kid, he’s fast because God touched him with certain gifts. But he’s special because his mom and dad raised him. He loved his dad. He loves his mom. His grandma Geneva, all of them are in this thing together, and their imprint on him is clear and powerful.”

Soon after he was taken by the Browns with the No. 4 pick in the 2018 NFL Draft, taking his place as a primary piece for a franchise placing its hopes on young talent, Denzel knew he would form a foundation and what he would name it, one decision as obvious as the other. It’s what any Ward with this platform would do, and what any Ward would call it.

The Make Them Know Your Name Foundation.

“I feel he raised me to be the man I am today,” Denzel said, “and instilled in me a lot of the things I try to share out into the world.”



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Last June, a year ago, at a free football camp at Denzel's alma mater, Nordon High School, children filled the field and Wards filled the edges. The extended family staffed an information table to share the foundation's goals.

Beyond the camp, the MTKYN Foundation has raised awareness about heart health and the need for defibrillators in public spaces; provided CPR kits and defibrillator training to Northeast Ohio schools; and in April covered the mortgage, rent or grocery bills of 21 Clevelanders who lost their jobs because of coronavirus. In the community and in the NFL, a father's message lives on. When a Browns fan walks into FirstEnergy Stadium in a No. 21 jersey; when Denzel knocks down a pass or makes a tackle; when Geneva Ward calls or texts her grandson before each game he plays and shares a prayer, Paul Ward's dreams are realized.

The Ward name is strong, and it is known. When that name takes the field for the Browns, stitched above that 21, it represents every family member who put something of themselves into Denzel -- mother, father, brother, grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins.

"We've always been this way," Geneva Ward said. "We're all together."

For a boy who ended his sixth year on this earth by saying goodbye to his father, it's all Paul Ward Jr. could have asked for.

Paul Ward Jr. died on May 2, 2016. Viewed as maybe the healthiest member of the family, he had a heart attack at spin class. He was 46.

"I don't think we'll ever get over it," Van Ward said. "It was truly devastating. For Nicole to lose her husband, for me to lose my brother and my best friend, my mom to lose a son, PJ and Denzel to lose their father, it truly was devastating. And it still hurts. It's hard even talking about it now."

Geneva Ward had lost one Paul, and now another.

"I still grieve for my son," she said, her voice wavering.

But 40 years after burying his father, Paul Ward Jr. had left no doubt what he had accomplished. His absence was a gaping hole in the hearts of those he loved. But the life he lived produced a legacy which fortified a family that drew even closer in its grief and in its faith.

Paul was going to spin class to get into peak shape for PJ's wedding that summer, and the Costa Rica honeymoon that all the Wards were going to take part in. PJ and his bride kept their wedding date three months later, and the Wards kept the family trip.

On Paul's birthday, Sept. 17, the Wards still get a cake and celebrate -- they wished him a happy 50th last year. The rituals for his favorite holiday, Thanksgiving, remain in place -- community and family.



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Then there is the family beyond the Wards. Paul was the Carylwood Intermediate School's principal in the Bedford City School District. There is a plaque in his honor, a street named for him and a scholarship established by the family.

He affected lives in ways big and small -- one scholarship winner, through tears, told Geneva that Paul taught him how to shake hands while looking a person in the eye.

"I just want people to realize that they named a street after him, and he wasn't the president of something or on some prestigious board," Nicole Ward said, "or an NFL player or an NBA star or anything like that. He was just simply Paul G. Ward Jr."

He was a husband, son, brother, friend, leader, educator and mentor. But more than anything, he was a father. What he put into his sons, they will now put into the world.

"He definitely accomplished that, he definitely left an impression in their lives," Nicole Ward said. "They will, we will, never forget him and the things that he did for us. There's definitely a piece of him in the boys. When I look at PJ and Denzel, I see him. I definitely see him."

"This is our job to continue it on," said PJ, a businessman and entrepreneur. "That's what I'm gonna do, that's what my brother's gonna do, and I know that's what my mother's gonna do."

There is a name to spread, as well as a set of values. When the Browns play again, and a Ward takes the field, understand what it took for you to know that name.

"I think that Denzel feels that, I think he has a really grounded soul because of it," Coombs said. "His dad was just really, really important to him, and his dad is going to continue to be important to him. He still hears that voice. And I assure you that the lessons he was taught are gonna carry him through the next 10 years of his NFL career and beyond."

"I think the loss of my husband has motivated him to make even more of a difference," Nicole said, "because my husband was so amazing."

"I think about him every day," Denzel said. "The things he taught me, the times we hung out together, our talks we had. There's not a day goes by that I don't think about him."

This Father's Day weekend, say a prayer for the Wards, and think of the boy who became the father he always wanted to be. Paul Ward's time was cut short, but he took advantage of every moment he was given.

He made them know his name.

Then Paul and Nicole delivered to the Browns their son who would do the same.

Consider that a gift from Paul Ward Jr. to Cleveland.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Denzel Ward has big individual goals for 2020, but wins come first

By Andrew Gribble, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/denzel-ward-has-big-individual-goals-for-2020-but-wins-come-first>

Denzel Ward wants to go back to the Pro Bowl. The third-year cornerback just has bigger goals than one, specific individual honor.

Ward wants to win like he did as a star at Ohio State and, more recently, the way the team did during the second half of his rookie season, which ended with a trip to the Pro Bowl.

"That is definitely a goal of mine," Ward said before Thursday's practice. "I got a lot more than just the Pro Bowl. Just go in and try to win every game that I can.

"I believe every time I have the opportunity to go out there and show what I can do is a big opportunity to show that I am an elite corner in this league and do what I can do to help my team win."

Ward didn't necessarily take a step back in 2019. It just wasn't the season he envisioned for himself or the team.

The former No. 4 overall pick was similarly tough against opposing receivers, but a hamstring injury kept him off the field for four weeks during the first half of the season. He was healthy, available and productive for the second half of the year, but the defense as a whole struggled during that period, particularly after injuries and other issues hampered the defensive line and secondary.

It was a step back for the entire team, Ward included. That's why his individual goals go hand in hand with what the Browns accomplish on Sundays throughout the fall.

Ward has done everything within his power to ensure he'll be a contributing factor toward an improved win total. That's included arriving for camp in great shape, embracing new techniques and opening himself up to his new coaches' critiques.

Ward's efforts have been noticed and appreciated.

"That growth mindset is something that I can really see in Denzel," pass game coordinator/defensive backs coach Jeff Howard said. "Every time he comes out on the field, he is really trying to get better, he is really trying to compete and he does not like to lose. That is really what you like to see in a corner."

Ward has been the rock in a Browns secondary that has dealt with a hearty dose of adversity throughout training camp. Rookie S Grant Delpit has been lost for the season while CBs Kevin Johnson, M.J. Stewart and Greedy Williams have all missed significant time because of injuries.



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Ward, though, has been impressed by the play of those who have stepped up around him during those players' absences. It's given him even more confidence he's in the best position to achieve all of his goals — personal and team.

"It was a good test," Ward said. "You do not want guys to go out or be injured but it was a good test for guys to step in and play a little bit more than they would have and to see those reps that they may not have seen because guys would have been in that position before."

*Asked who has caught his attention throughout training camp, Ward singled out undrafted free agent A.J. Green.

The former Oklahoma State standout was one of the league's most coveted free agents after the draft. He's received plenty of looks while the Browns have dealt with injuries all across the defense.

"I feel like he has been having a great camp and making plays when he has been in there," Ward said. "Making plays on ones or whoever he has been out there with."

Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said he likes Green's size (6-foot-2, 198 pounds) at the position.

"He is taking to the techniques that (defensive coordinator Joe Woods) and coach Howard and (assistant DBs) coach (Brandon) Lynch are teaching him," Stefanski said. "He has been very eager to learn. I have been pleased with what he has been doing."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Denzel Ward pledges to take on biggest monthly expense for 21 people out of work because of COVID-19 crisis

By Andrew Gribble, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/denzel-ward-pledges-to-take-on-biggest-monthly-expense-for-21-people-out-of-work>

Denzel Ward is looking to help those who have been hit hardest by the economic ramifications of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Browns cornerback Wednesday, through an announcement from his Make Them Know Your Name foundation, said he would cover the biggest monthly expense for 21 people who are out of work because of the ongoing coronavirus crisis. The campaign is targeting those in the service industry and small businesses who have been hit hardest by the economic shutdown.

"It's unique for me because the community I'm fortunate enough to play for is the community that helped raise me my entire life," Ward said. "So to help your neighbors in a time when they might be struggling is just a no-brainer.

"Whether that's rent or mortgage, or just groceries for your family, I want someone to breathe a little easier knowing that's taken care of this month."

Those affected hardest by the crisis are encouraged to apply at MTKYN.org. Ward and other members of the foundation will review the applications and stories before notifying those who are selected.

Ward is just the latest Browns player to give back in a big way during the COVID-19 outbreak. Baker Mayfield and Larry Ogunjobi made big donations to the Cleveland Food Bank, and Myles Garrett donated 24,000 pounds of food and other resources to the Clark-Fulton neighborhood in Cleveland. Last week, Ward and Garrett played video games to help raise money through the Twitch Stream Aid fundraiser. Dee and Jimmy Haslam donated \$1.5 million to COVID-19 relief funds.



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Callie Brownson was told she couldn't play H.S. football. Now she's an NFL coach on the rise.

By Jake Russell, Washington Post

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/02/01/alexandria-native-callie-brownson-named-chief-staff-browns-head-coach/>

Callie Brownson was denied the opportunity to play high school football. Now the Alexandria native is rising through the NFL coaching ranks.

Her latest opportunity came to fruition this week when the Cleveland Browns hired her as the first female chief of staff in NFL history. The position resembles the role first-year Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski played while working as an assistant for then-Minnesota Vikings coach Brad Childress from 2006 to 2008.

Stefanski, now looking to make his mark as a rookie head coach, wanted to bring a woman onto his staff and chose Brownson based on her work ethic and experience with the New York Jets (2017 college/professional personnel scouting intern) and Buffalo Bills (2019 coaching intern).

"I made an emphasis on the fact that I work hard and I've had a rocky road to get to this point and it's made me who I am," Brownson said Friday in a phone interview with The Washington Post. "... I'm here to bring value and I'm here to do what I can to help him continue to put the pieces together of what's going to be a great program, a great staff and a great team."

Brownson said she will be working with every department in the building in order to bring Stefanski's vision to light.

"It's very involved in every aspect of a football operation," Stefanski said in a story on the Browns' team site. "Callie is uniquely situated where she can go interact with football ops or PR or the locker room or the equipment room. She's really the liaison to the rest of the building for me. I'm going to lean on her heavily and already have."

"I think she's a go-getter. She's self-motivated," Stefanski said. "She's going to put all of her energy into this gig. What's exciting for me is ultimately I want to develop young coaches. She's someone that has worked on the offensive side of the ball, worked on special teams, has a great knowledge of the game and I want to let her expand that knowledge and develop her as a head coach."

Brownson is still getting used to her spot as an NFL coach.

"If you had asked me five years ago if I'd be coaching in the NFL, I wouldn't have believed you," Brownson said. "I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know how it's going to happen. I just know that I would love to continue to be a coach in the NFL. That's the goal. But I'm also open to where the journey takes me."

Brownson's path to the NFL began in Alexandria, where she grew up a diehard football fan. In elementary school, she played for the Alexandria Bucknell Tigers youth team. At Mount Vernon High School, she inquired about playing football for the Majors but was told that girls playing football at the school was not an option.



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"I remember being upset because I would've been playing with the guys I grew up with, the guys I played little league baseball with, the guys that I played youth football with," Brownson said. "The guys that I grew up with were all going to be on the same team, and none of us really understood what the problem was. I had grown up not seeing that barrier."

She pivoted from football to softball, returning to Mount Vernon years later as a softball coach and then as an assistant football coach from 2015 to 2017. In between her stints with the Jets and Bills, Brownson became the first female Division I college football assistant coach when she joined the staff at Dartmouth.

Shortly after attending George Mason University, she caught on with the D.C. Divas of the professional Women's Football Alliance, where she would play eight seasons (2010-2017) as a slot receiver, safety and running back. She went on to win gold medals for Team USA at the International Federation of American Football Women's World Championships in 2013 and 2017.

"I see nothing but continual ascent in the sport," D.C. Divas owner and team president Rich Daniel said of Brownson's future. "Whether it be as a head coach at the highest level, whether it be a head coach at high school or college, I see her continuing to take the steps that she wants to take."

"When I really think about it, I grew up through the Divas," Brownson said. "... It's a family. ... I really came through my adulthood through that experience and learned a lot about myself."

"It was the best experience of my life and helped me fall in love with football all over again," she added.

Brownson is among a growing contingent of women working on NFL sidelines, including San Francisco 49ers offensive assistant Katie Sowers (her roommate with Team USA), Tampa Bay Buccaneers assistant strength and conditioning coach Maral Javadifar and Bucs assistant defensive line coach Lori Locust. That doesn't mean she feels compelled to blaze a trail for other women hoping to follow in her footsteps.

"I don't see it as pressure," Brownson said. "I see it as a phenomenal opportunity to change the way people talk about this stuff."

"I'm excited because the women that we have involved right now in football are so phenomenal and are changing people's minds," Brownson said, "and in five, 10 years down the road you're going to be looking at completely different sidelines."



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How Callie Brownson found the door to the NFL and Kevin Stefanski's Browns coaching staff By Scott Patsko, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/05/how-callie-brownson-ran-to-daylight-right-into-the-nfl-and-onto-kevin-stefanskis-browns-coaching-staff.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio – The NFL combine is all about the future. It's what the draft prospects represent and what coaches and GMs spend the week talking about. Each year, the Indianapolis Convention Center and nearby Lucas Oil Stadium become part of the pipeline for that future.

But on the first day of the 2020 event, you could walk two blocks down from the convention center, over to the JW Marriott hotel, take an elevator to the third floor and enter Grand Ballroom 4 to see a different kind of NFL pipeline.

This one isn't that big and it's not flowing so fast. You could argue that it's more like a steady drip. But it is working, and the NFL knows it. That's why the backdrop for the ballroom stage included a huge blue banner featuring the NFL shield logo and big white lettering that read "The Future Of Football."

Yet there weren't draft prospects seated below the banner, but four women. In front of them, an audience of more women. They were all there for a panel titled "How To Break In," which wrapped up the opening day at the fourth annual Women's Careers in Football Forum.

That's where Callie Brownson was on Feb. 25, less than a month after becoming Kevin Stefanski's chief of staff, making her one of just a handful of women with full-time NFL coaching jobs.

For Brownson, the moment was surreal, a milestone in a five-year journey that felt much longer. It wasn't her first time at the forum, but instead of sitting in the audience, she was on the stage. She knew the longing in the audience, because she'd been there, looking at the base of a mountain and wondering how to climb it.

"My piece of advice," Brownson told the audience, "is I always try to leave an impression on every single person I meet, whether they're the person who's going to give me a job or whatever. ... Treat everybody in that regard, because you never really know who that one person is who's going to be talking about you in that room.

"What kind of impression did you leave on that person?"

Callie Brownson has never really gone unnoticed.

At 10, she told her father, Bruce, that she wanted to play youth football. She had spent many Saturdays in Alexandria, Va., rooting for the Miami Hurricanes with her father. Now she wanted to try the game on for size.

"We ended up going to a football program here in Groveton (Va.), which is an old neighborhood here in the area," he said. "We showed up for sign-up and, you know, we got a few eyebrows."



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The guy who ran the league agreed to let Brownson watch three practices, and then, if she was still interested, she could give it a try. She was, and did, playing tight end and defensive end, and at the end of the season won a rookie MVP award.

For Bruce, it was fun to watch his daughter be able to compete in a physical sport against boys. Then, at the end of the game, when everybody took their helmets off and shook hands, he'd notice the double takes.

"It was great," he said. "And I think that empowered her, the idea that it's not something, traditionally, that a girl would do. But it was something that she wanted to do and she just went for it."

Brownson also played baseball with boys and made her league's all-star team. But roadblocks arrived in high school. Mount Vernon High wouldn't allow her to play football, which Bruce indicated was a decision made by someone other than the football coaches.

It was her first real introduction to gender norms. She had played sports with boys her whole life. Football. Baseball. Ice hockey.

"So this was my first brush with like, 'Wait a second, girls can't do what?' This is my first time society kind of tried to tell me what a girl could or couldn't do," she said. "I remember that being the hardest part because I wasn't used to that. ... I'd never had to process those kinds of thoughts. So that was, I think, the struggle for me. I was just very frustrated as to why it was like that."

Brownson remembers being offered an opportunity to be a kicker at Mount Vernon.

"No offense to kickers at all. Kickers matter, too," she said. "But I wanted to play. That wasn't an option for me."

Bruce decided not to fight it. It was one thing to play football against boys in a youth league with weight or age restrictions. It was another to play in high school against boys morphing into men.

"Football is violent, and Callie's not a big girl," Bruce said. "She's 5-4, weighs 140."

Bruce had fought for his daughter before. He made sure a Little League summer camp in Williamsport, Pa., made accommodations even after the camp tried to pull her enrollment when it realized she would be the only girl. She ended up with a dorm all to herself. She had a ball turning on all the water and running around her own personal communal shower.

High school baseball wasn't welcoming. She made the team, but was told it wasn't likely that she'd get a chance to play. So she switched to softball.

At the end of her junior year, Brownson decided to take one more swing at football. Her friends had encouraged her to go out for the team her senior year. There was a new head coach by then, so she found him on the last day of classes and explained her intentions.



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“He just laughed at me, like, ‘No way. Not gonna happen,’” she said. “So that was my second failed attempt. That’s when I was like, ‘I’m done trying.’”

But football wasn’t done with her. Even before graduation, she learned there was a place for her in the game. It wasn’t in high school, or Virginia. But it was close.

The D.C. Divas had competed in national women’s leagues since 2001. A family friend had been encouraging her to check it out. After a night of watching YouTube highlights, Brownson decided she wasn’t done trying to play after all.

At 19, she became one of the youngest players in the Women’s Football Alliance. She did a little of everything -- receiver, running back, defensive back, kick returner. The team referred to her as the Swiss Army Knife.

In 2013, her success with the Divas led to a spot on USA Football’s women’s national team. Brownson was a defensive back on the 2013 world champions after a 64-0 romp over Canada. (Another defensive back on that team was current 49ers assistant coach Katie Sowers.)

By 2015, Brownson had graduated from George Mason University with a sports management degree. She was working at a local gym and helping coach softball at Mount Vernon.

Barry Wells had recently been hired as Mount Vernon’s football coach. Brownson ran into him in the hallway at the school and decided to introduce herself. Wells had heard she played women’s football and was interested in hearing about it.

That led to a question that would’ve seemed silly to think about when she was in high school.

“Have you ever really thought about coaching football?” Wells asked. “Is that ever something that’s crossed your mind?”

It hadn’t. Certainly not high school football. Definitely not boys. She wasn’t sure what to say. Wells explained that the team was holding spring practices and that she should check it out.

“I did and I clicked with the players pretty quickly,” Brownson remembers. “It was a lot of (Wells) extending the branch ... for him to see no barriers and me being part of the staff was really cool.”

She coached receivers and defensive backs for three years. The girl who couldn’t play for the team became the woman who could coach the team.

Go figure.

“It was an opportunity to come full circle on an experience that was kind of bad for me,” she said. “Being told no and not being able to follow that dream of mine, but then coming back to coach, it was ... I didn’t have any bad feelings. There wasn’t any resentment towards the whole thing for me.



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“It was just a cool way to change the norm in the same place it had gone negatively for me. I was able to create a positive experience out of it.”

While Brownson was breaking down walls, Samantha Rapoport was thinking bigger.

The NFL’s director of football development, Rapoport was helping launch a women’s forum in 2017 to open doors to NFL jobs. They had met years earlier through USA Football, and Rapoport knew Brownson was a high school coach.

Rapoport told her the program was right up her alley.

“It kind of got my wheels spinning,” Brownson said. “I was very curious as to what I was going to gain from it, who I was going to meet.”

She knew the Cardinals had hired the NFL’s first female coaching intern in 2015, but wasn’t sure what kind of opportunities might be available. At worst, the experience could be useful to pursuing a future as a high school coach.

But seeing NFL coaches and general managers at the forum created optimism about the possibilities. She followed up with the connections she had made and eventually landed a scouting and personnel internship with the Jets.

“There’s no better way [than an internship] to figure out if it’s for you,” she said. “Working in professional football, working in college football, it’s not for everybody. But an internship is a great way to figure that out, and that’s really what that Jets internship did for me.”

The taste of what she wanted was great. Then the internship ended, which wasn’t. She found herself back in Virginia, working for her father’s company, KnowWho, which provides political contacts and information for lobbyist and advocacy groups.

“It’s kind of a boring lifestyle,” Bruce Brownson admits.

At one point, daughter went into father’s office, laid on the couch and in a defeated voice, said, “Yep, I’m just going to have to work for KnowWho the rest of my life.”

She was still able to coach at Mount Vernon, and her connections through USA Football provided a chance to attend the annual Manning Passing Academy as a coach in 2018. The camp was including girls for the first time, and Brownson was brought in specifically to help coach them.

That’s where Brownson caught the eye of Dartmouth head coach Buddy Teevens, who was impressed with her energy and confidence. She didn’t arrive thinking it was a networking opportunity. She was simply there to coach -- but still found herself asking Teevens for career advice.



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A week after the camp, Teevens offered a preseason coaching internship at Dartmouth. It turned into a full-time spot as offensive quality control coach for the 2018 season, making Brownson the first full-time female coach in Division I football.

Media began showing up on Dartmouth's campus in Hanover, New Hampshire. The Washington Post, ESPN, Huffington Post, NPR. It made clear that this was more than coaching football, it was a pioneering role. She told people she didn't want to be the first Division I female coach. She wanted to be the first of many.

"You want to set a good example so that the people you work with every day, or the people who get curious about this, are getting a positive example of how women can add value ... to a program, whether it be a high school program, a college program or up into the NFL," she said. "You know, everything that we do every day is setting a reputation, not just for ourselves but for every woman who wants to be involved in it. That's just the nature of the game."

Brownson was back at the women's forum in early 2019, this time as an employed college football coach. She wasn't necessarily looking for job opportunities, but Teevens had been talking her up. Among those who had heard about her was Bills head coach Sean McDermott, who was impressed enough that he offered her an opportunity to shadow coaches for a couple days during Bills training camp.

That turned into a training camp internship, which turned into a full-time internship for the season.

"I went into that training camp for those few weeks thinking I was going back to Dartmouth, and I'm going to leave here better than I started, and I was going to be a sponge," she said. "When I was given the opportunity to stay on through the season I remember stopping myself and saying, 'This is an incredible opportunity and I need to take advantage of every single day, every single conversation, every single person I meet.'"

Her next opportunity turned out to be pretty incredible, too.

Kevin Stefanski was asked about the importance of having diversity on a coaching staff during his introductory press conference in January.

"I am glad you asked that because it is important, and I am going to do everything in my power and my role to affect change there," said Stefanski, who by the end of the month had hired Callie as his chief of staff. It was the position that gave Stefanski his NFL start in 2006.

"It's very involved in every aspect of a football operation," Stefanski said. "Callie is uniquely situated where she can go interact with football ops or PR or the locker room or the equipment room. She's really the liaison to the rest of the building for me. I'm going to lean on her heavily and already have."

Two weeks after Brownson was hired, the Redskins hired Jennifer King as the NFL's first full-time African-American female coach.



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While 89 women have been hired to NFL jobs through connections made at the women's football forums, only eight have been hired to full-time coaching positions. Even the league's annual report on diversity and inclusion has yet to examine women's careers. But it does suggest future research is needed on how to create more opportunities for women, noting the rise of Sowers, King and the Buccaneers' Lori Locust.

Brownson can be included on that list, too. Her rise has been impressive. Five years after being invited to check out a spring football practice at her old high school, she is coaching in the NFL.

"It seems fast, and then it also seems like it's been 10 years because there's a lot of work," she said. "It's definitely a grind."

So many of her opportunities came with little time to prepare, requiring her to relocate within a week. But being prepared for your moment was part of the theme at the forum earlier this year, as Brownson explained her NFL path.

"If this is really something that you want to do," she said, "and you understand that maybe it's going to be a hard road and an uphill battle, when you come to terms with the fact that you won't settle for anything else, you'll find those little avenues, those little relationships, those little connections that help accelerate you another step forward."

"Ultimately, when you continue that drive and you continue to find the little victories -- and maybe a massive defeat inches up -- all of a sudden this door opens up and you meet that person who's willing to give you the opportunity, you're ready for it and you sprint through it."



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Browns' Joe Jackson seeks his NFL home after childhood challenges of 16-person household **By Marla Ridenour, ohio.com**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2020/09/29/browns-joe-jackson-overcomes-childhood-struggles-seeks-place-nfl/3547228001/>

Browns defensive end Joe Jackson doesn't believe his story is all that unique.

Raised in Homestead, Florida, by his grandmother Dorothy Holt, who also cared for his six siblings and eight cousins, Jackson said they lived without electricity for several months.

"Those are situations that happen often to a lot of people in my situation growing up," Jackson said. "It's something you learn to live with and accept."

Jackson was the youngest of the seven. Several children slept together in one room, although Jackson said Holt "was always able to find good houses for us to stay so we weren't normally sleeping on top of each other."

Technically they were in foster care, but Jackson said that was merely how they were regarded legally.

"My grandmother took care of us because she didn't want any of us to be split up or broken up," Jackson said in a Sept. 22 phone interview. "It wasn't really foster care because it's still our family.

"Until her dying breath, she made sure everything went as best it could."

Holt passed away in 2008 and Jackson's aunt Tranika Ellis took over the clan. Jackson said by then some of the kids were old enough to move out. Jackson, 23, said he's been on his own since he was a freshman at the University of Miami in 2016.

Claimed off waivers from the Dallas Cowboys on Sept. 6, Jackson is fighting for his place in the NFL. He got off to a good start with the Browns, recovering the fumble after a Myles Garrett strip sack, the key play in a 35-30 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals on Sept. 17.

With defensive end Olivier Vernon sidelined by an abdominal injury for the second consecutive game and Adrian Clayborn coming off a hip injury against the Bengals, Jackson got another look Sunday at home against the Washington Football Team.

One assisted tackle in 19 snaps in the Browns' 34-20 victory may not assure a future in Cleveland. But if he does achieve a level of professional success, Jackson plans on helping the kids in the Miami area overcome what he has.

"There's a lot of things I plan on doing ... not that I can't do them right now, but they won't be as big as when I'm doing them in the future," Jackson said.

When it comes to football, that is not Jackson's motivation, he said.



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“When I play football, I drive myself. When we’re talking about helping people outside of football, it’s something I want to do because I can empathize with them. ... I’ve been in their shoes,” Jackson said. “I do that out of compassion because I want to.

“Other people’s tragic stories, I can’t use that to motivate myself. Just like a lot of dudes in this league, most of us come from unfortunate backgrounds. The best I can do is give back or talk to somebody, talk to these kids because ultimately that’s really what they need, that’s really what they’re missing.”

Craig Kuligowski, now assistant head coach/co-defensive coordinator at Toledo, was Miami’s defensive line coach for Jackson’s first two seasons. Jackson had already committed, bypassing offers from Ohio State, Clemson, Alabama and Florida State, but Kuligowski continued to recruit him.

Kuligowski said he tried to talk to Jackson about his home life, but Jackson didn’t offer much.

“It was a little bit of a tough situation, they lived with his aunt and uncle. His aunt’s a wonderful person,” Kuligowski said in a Sept. 22 phone interview. “His cousin played at TCU, we looked at him. He didn’t want me to come over for a home visit or any of that stuff.

“There’s a lot of situations in South Florida, like he’s saying maybe it’s not that different than other people, but it is. There are rough stories everywhere. A lot of kids are going through some tough times down there and football is really their way out of all of it. They’re so dedicated to being good football players, it’s amazing. They really view it as a life-changing event, especially a guy like him who’s got the talent to play in the NFL. He was 220 or 225 when he came out of high school. But you knew he had the build that he was going to keep growing.” Jackson now stands 6-foot-4 and 278 pounds.

Jackson said he wanted to play organized football as a kid, but the family couldn’t afford it, so he went to the park. He started Pop Warner when he was living with his aunt, but his stocky build forced him to sit out for two years, playing basketball instead. He also threw the discus in middle school and high school, when he returned to football.

With his father deceased and his mother never a part of his life, Jackson found a mentor in his oldest brother, Borris Marshall. Marshall now lives in Houston and the two keep in touch.

“Growing up obviously you need it. That’s my family, but at this point I don’t look for a mentor,” Jackson said. “I’m pretty much handling that situation. I’m making sure I’m kept up with everything. I’m always trying to learn something. I don’t just run to people for every little need.”

Asked if he was forced to grow up fast, Jackson said, “Yes and no. Some things you just can’t do and some things you grasp the concept of real quick even though you’re young. I didn’t have much control over anything, so I was able to a certain extent to just be a kid.”

Kuligowski is very familiar with several Browns. He recruited Sheldon Richardson at Missouri, coached Mack Wilson at Alabama and Sheldrick Redwine and Jackson at Miami. Kuligowski said



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he's not sure Jackson fits every scheme, but believes he can find a role in the Browns' 4-3. From Kuligowski's description, Jackson sounds like the type of high-character player they seek.

"Joe's really kind of a down-to-business kind of kid," Kuligowski said. "He can tell you about any movie that's on Netflix or any movie that's ever played. In Miami there's plenty of opportunity to go do stuff and he would stay home and stay out of trouble. He would work extra on football in his time off.

"He's the kind of guy that you would trust to (say), 'Here's the keys to my house. Can you make sure everything's safe?' or 'Would you babysit my kids?' I really like the kid. I thought a lot of him."

Jackson described himself as "a homebody."

"I don't do much. I do my job, I go home, that's the day for me. I'm a pretty simple guy," he said.

Defensive line coach Chris Kiffin said Friday that the Browns are looking at a few players to see if they can be quality backups, which fits the precarious position of Jackson.

"Right away you can see that Joe had some very good attributes in his body," Kiffin said via Zoom. "He has some violent hands rushing the passer and he has a good get off. We just have to continue to push him. He's still young as can be. My job is to get him coached up and see what we can get from Joe. He is a guy who just wants to go to work and get better at his craft. I like what I see in Joe so far."

Kuligowski knows Jackson's potential, also praising Jackson's hand strength and speed off the edge.

"He's the kind of kid who you could really challenge and he would respond, once he knows you care about him," Kuligowski said. "But it's one of the toughest jobs in the world to get and keep. I've seen guys with less talent make it for 10, 12 years and guys with more talent bounce out of there already."

If Jackson finds a team that can launch his career, whether it be the Browns or someone else, Kuligowski doesn't doubt Jackson's vow to use his platform to help kids in South Florida.

"That's the kind of guy he is," Kuligowski said. "When he says that, I believe it. I'm sure it's from the heart."



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Myles Garrett earns Browns' Walter Payton Man of the Year Award after becoming his best self following helmet incident

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/12/myles-garrett-earns-browns-walter-payton-man-of-the-year-award-after-becoming-his-best-self-following-helmet-incident.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Myles Garrett believes that everything happens for a reason, and knows on some level that being named the Browns 2020 Walter Payton of the Year on Thursday has everything to do with him becoming the best version of himself on and off the field in the wake of the Mason Rudolph helmet swinging incident.

The Browns' representative for the national Walter Payton Man of the Year Award announced during Super Bowl week, Garrett did a lot of soul-searching during his six-game suspension at the end of last season, and even contemplated quitting football as he revealed to cleveland.com in September. Instead, with the help of his family and close friends, he decided to turn one ugly incident into something beautiful in the world and on the football field, which is what the Walter Payton award is all about.

"It was never going to deter me or shake my spirit or take me off the path I've been on and I was going to go," said Garrett about snapping in the waning seconds of that 21-7 victory over the Steelers on Nov. 14 of last season. "I've always wanted to do these kinds of things and nothing is going to change that."

How Garrett pondered quitting football, became a better man & would love to clear the air with Rudolph

His small inner circle, which he keeps even closer now, helped him to realize that the helmet incident wouldn't define him and that it could work toward the greater good, and it has. Garrett has become a better man, a more passionate humanitarian, a more vocal leader and a more ferocious pass-rusher in the aftermath of the incident that would have probably caused many to crumble.

"I was talking and just asking questions on how to move on, how to do better and how to come back from something you do," Garrett said. "There was nothing wrong with the man I was before. You've just got to continue to be that. Don't let it shake your faith or the plan that God has for you. I was set on a good path, starting out with my Gran, and my parents have kept that going with me as a person.

"I've been blessed with great coaches and great teammates who have kind of shared those ideals and have been willing to put up with me and sometimes a little bit of my silence and I've been trying to speak up more and be better, take on that leadership role on and off the field and just do what I can, be where I can, be where my feet are. When I have the chance to branch out and help people and be a positive influence, I'll do it anytime I can."

Off the field, Garrett poured his heart and soul into his role as NFL Captain of Waterboys, the non-profit organization started by former NFL Walter Payton Man of the Year Chris Long to bring clean drinking water to the poor in East Africa and elsewhere. A day after being reinstated from his



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indefinite suspension by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, Garrett boarded a plane for Tanzania and experienced firsthand what it was like to be poor. He played ball with the children and was struck by their smiles and laughter. It helped him put the helmet incident in perspective.

“There’s famine, there’s disease and they’re making the best they can out of it,” he told cleveland.com in September. “It’s amazing to think how joyful they are with how little they have.”

The goal of bringing clean drinking water to a million people worldwide and installing wells in indigent areas burns in Garrett’s soul. He also launched the “Tackle Thirst” campaign, pledging \$5,000 per sack this season to Waterboys, and invited Browns fans to join in. His goal is \$95,000 for his No. 95, and 9,500 individuals with clean water. So far, he’s tied for third in the NFL with 10.5 sacks.

When social injustice took center stage in America this spring and summer, Garrett — who signed a 5-year extension worth \$125 million in offseason — used some of his newfound riches to pay for the funeral of David McAtee of Louisville, Ky., and others. He also paid tribute to John Saunders on his helmet decal during games. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, he teamed up with Cleveland Hope Exchange and local businesses to provide more than 24,000 pounds of food and additional resources to those in need.

And although he’s honored to be mentioned in the same breath as Payton, whom he refers to as his nickname “Sweetness” and with others who have won the award nationally such as Long and Houston’s J.J. Watt, he’d just as soon do it all under the cloak of anonymity.

“You have a lot of people who have done great things for their communities and for their teams and their hometowns that don’t get the recognition,” he said. “But it’s not about that. It’s not about being honored and recognized and praised for what you’re doing. It’s just about doing it. You don’t have to have your name called, you don’t have to have your name on a banner hung up or anything, it’s how you live your life.

“It’s just the love and the actual kindness that you have in your heart that you can’t really show. This isn’t a homework assignment, this isn’t a test, you’re not trying to show that I’m holier than thou. You’re doing it because this is who I am, this is who I was raised to be and this is the kind of world that I envision for others. I’m just trying to do better.”

Garrett also became a much better teammate in the wake of the incident. He used to keep himself a lot, but now he can be seen engaging with his teammates in ways that he never did before — laughing, mentoring, motivating. He’s even gotten much closer to Baker Mayfield, who admonished Garrett immediately after the incident on the Fox on-field interview. But that was before Mayfield knew the whole story, that Garrett heard Rudolph utter what he said was the “N” word, a charge that Rudolph vehemently denies. It was also before Sheldon Richardson helped set Mayfield straight.

“Myles is obviously very quiet,” Mayfield said Thursday. “He’s a different type of leader, but he’s stepped up in so many ways vocally this year. He has a great heart, and I think that has been something that if people questioned it because of one action last year, then shame on them because



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you can learn from mistakes, as I personally know very well. Myles is a great guy. He has been doing things for a lot of people around the world for a while. That just shows his character and his heart. He is obviously a great representation of this franchise.”

Garrett, the No. 1 overall pick in 2017 out of Texas A&M, admits that piping up doesn’t come naturally to him.

“I just heard it enough where it was like ‘I’ve got to make a change,’” he said. “Even since high school, college, ‘you’ve got to be more of a vocal leader.’ I’ve always been more of a ‘I’ll let my play speak for itself’ [person]. I couldn’t really understand what more they needed out of me, that excitement, that vocality, if you will. I didn’t understand how important it was until I was around a guy like Kirko [Christian Kirksey] and DeMario [Davis], leaders like that that really got guys going, willing to go out there and lay it all on the line.

“I’m never going to be as good at leading and speaking as they are because some are really born with it, for some it just comes naturally. But I’m just being willing to say what I have to say at any time, willing to lead my guys through thick and thin.”

On the field, the beast has been unleashed. He admits that he owed the Browns after letting them down last season, and he’s repaying them with interest this year. In only 10 starts this season because of two absences with COVID-19, Garrett is tied for third in the NFL with 10.5 sacks and leads all edge rushers with four strips.

He’s one of only five NFL players to record at least 41.0 sacks since he entered the league in 2017, and he’s the first Browns player to post at least 10 sacks in three straight seasons since it became an official stat in 1982. The Browns are 7-1 this year in games where Garrett has registered at least a half-sack, and each of his four forced fumbles occurred on strip-sacks that led to Browns scores in victories.

The best Myles ever on the field?

“Well, Myles in high school had like 22 sacks if that counts for anything,” he said with a laugh. “It sets up for you all’s interpretation. I can only go out there and put my best foot forward each Sunday and the season’s not over yet. So I’ve got a lot of time to keep on improving, keep on making those game-breaking plays and being a difference-maker out there. But I can’t do it without the guys in the facility, coaches putting me in the position to make those plays.”

When the playoff-bound 9-3 Browns look back on this season, they’ll be grateful that Garrett used his adversity to make the Browns a better football team and the world a better place.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Myles Garrett is the Browns' next Joe Thomas or Ozzie Newsome

By Doug Lesmerises, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/07/myles-garrett-is-the-cleveland-browns-next-joe-thomas-or-ozzie-newsome.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- A newborn can wear a Myles Garrett jersey to first grade. You there, clinging to the back edge of your early 30s -- Browns tickets for your 40th birthday will include the chance to watch Garrett live. Anyone looking for future hope in the midst of this pandemic present? The Browns' best player attached himself to Cleveland through the 2026 season.

That's seven more years of Garrett. That's so long, if you go backward seven Browns years, the head coach was Rob Chudzinski and the starting quarterback was Jason Campbell.

Of course, this means that Garrett reaches the end of his new extension, a five-year deal that will begin after his rookie contract runs out after 2021. But that's what we'll assume, that Garrett will turn 31 here on Dec. 29, 2026, late in his 10th year with the Browns, as the next Joe Thomas, Ozzie Newsome or Clay Matthews. He'll be the kind of player Browns fans live with and grow with -- and maybe even win with.

He's now the highest-paid defensive player in the league, but this contract doesn't mean he must be the best defensive player in the league. Free agency in Cleveland is a "love the one you're with" proposition, and if Garrett is, let's say, the NFL's seventh-best defensive player for the next three or four years, is anyone really going to complain about the money? He's here, keep him here. But he is also Myles Garrett. Have you seen that guy? He's ripped. And good.

Garrett can't get the Browns to a Super Bowl by himself. It's fun on a day like this to imagine him leading a championship parade (will he be a shirt on or shirt off guy?), but even if that never happens, Garrett is giving Cleveland something right now.

Done right, this is a major piece of something big. Done wrong, it should be a major piece of something small, as Thomas was. Players matter to winning, but they also matter for who they are.

Garrett is giving a fan currently in diapers a plan for first grade jersey day. Along with the lack of winning, the Browns haven't done that much lately.

According to the database at pro-football-reference.com, 34 players have spent at least 10 seasons with the Browns. Seven became Hall of Famers -- Newsome, Otto Graham, Lou Groza, Gene Hickerson, Frank Gatski, Dante Lavelli and Leroy Kelly. (Jim Brown's Hall of Fame career stretched nine years). Thomas will be the eighth decade-long Browns Hall of Famer. Matthews may someday be the ninth.

Maybe Matthews (16 years as a Brown) was your favorite player. Or maybe it was Newsome (13), or Thomas (11), or Jim Brown or Bernie Kosar (nine each). A team must try to win. But it also needs to put people in your life. Life-long attachments are to uniforms, but they start, typically, with a special person in that uniform.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Right now, shout out the name of your all-time favorite Browns player. Did you hesitate? Or did you just know? I hope that player gave you a good run of several years, that he grew with you as you grew with him.

Matthews took fans from kindergarten into college. Sixteen years -- that's a lot to ask of Garrett in Cleveland. But let's at least anticipate a strong decade. Again, that hasn't happened with Cleveland football. The move eliminated continuity. Then the losing led to unfamiliarity. There weren't many wins, so there weren't many players with whom to get attached.

Garrett can't guarantee the wins. But he signed the contract Tuesday, so go ahead -- get attached.

Since the Browns returned 21 seasons ago, only two players have put in more than a decade here -- Thomas and Phil Dawson. Both beloved, both retired. Garrett played a single season with Thomas in 2017, and it turns out the torch was passed.

When the 2019 NFL season ended, according to a combing through the pro-football-reference.com records, there were 44 active players who had spent at least 10 years with their current team. Twenty-three of the 32 franchises had at least one of those players -- the Browns were one of the nine that did not.

Since the Browns returned in 1999, there have been 198 NFL players who spent at least a decade with a team. That's an average of six per team. The Steelers had 16, the Bengals and Ravens 10 each. The Browns, again, had two. Only Denver, with one, had fewer long-term football relationships.

There are a lot of quarterbacks in there, of course, like Tom Brady in New England, Drew Brees in New Orleans, Ben Roethlisberger in Pittsburgh, Aaron Rodgers in Green Bay, Matt Ryan in Atlanta, Eli Manning with the Giants and Philip Rivers with the Chargers. We can revisit that if and when Baker Mayfield is settling in for a contract extension.

But there were memorable decade-plus defenders, too. Ray Lewis in Baltimore and Thomas Davis in Carolina, Brian Urlacher in Chicago and Troy Polamalu and James Harrison in Pittsburgh, Dwight Freeney in Indianapolis and Geno Atkins in Cincinnati.

That's what the Browns have signed up for. Thomas, a tackle, and Dawson, a kicker, were a little more difficult to get excited about during their decades. Field goals can create memories in rare, specific moments, but there's not a lot of cheering for great pass protection. The excellence of Thomas was obvious, but subtle.

Now, it's time to scream for sacks. Many sacks. For many years. That's something.

Looking back, it's amusing to read what Thomas and those around him told Mary Kay Cabot when he signed the extension in 2011 that set up his long-term Cleveland stay. On one point he was right. Thomas said he wanted to finish his career in Cleveland, and his agent said, "When you walk into the facility and see the Hall of Famers on the wall, hopefully Joe will be thought of in the same way someday."



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Nailed it.

Then there was what Thomas said about the winning, expressing faith in Mike Holmgren, Tom Heckert, Pat Shurmur and Colt McCoy.

“I see the direction this thing is headed and I want to be part of the championship,” Thomas said.

Did not nail it.

But that wasn't his fault. That wasn't the only thing that extension was about, nor the only thing Garrett's extension is about. Do long-time commitments from stars lead to winning, or does winning encourage long-term commitments from stars? The Browns and Garrett are starting with the commitment.

Do the Browns need Garrett playing at an All-Pro level to win their first Super Bowl? Probably.

But they also want him playing like an All-Pro for a long time because fans need attachments. Garrett at his best will help create and nurture the next generation of fans. Maybe he'll eventually move into a broadcasting role for the team. Maybe he'll have fans rally around his Hall of Fame candidacy. Or maybe he'll just bring a smile to a fan who years from now shouts out “Myles Garrett” when asked for her all-time favorite Brown.

Lead the Browns to a Super Bowl? Great plan. Cross your fingers for the future.

Create a life-long attachment for those who love this team? That's a win right now.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Myles Garrett calls his first trip to Tanzania with Waterboys 'an absolute blessing'

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/02/myles-garrett-calls-his-first-trip-to-tanzania-with-waterboys-an-absolute-blessing.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Fresh off one of the most challenging periods in his life, Myles Garrett is now in the midst of one of the most rewarding.

Reinstated by the NFL from his indefinite suspension on Feb. 12, the Browns defensive end is on his first humanitarian trip to Tanzania as NFL captain of Waterboys, the cornerstone of the Chris Long foundation which provides clean drinking water to impoverished communities in East Africa.

"First Tanzania trip with my @Waterboys.org team has been an absolute blessing," Garrett tweeted. "I finally got a glimpse of the impact our organization has made on the communities of this region, and I can't wait to show you guys how much of a difference we can make."

Garrett was named by Long upon his retirement as NFL captain of the organization in September, and Garrett vowed to continue Long's mission to provide water for more than 1 million people.

"That was Chris' vision," Garrett told cleveland.com then. "He saw that in me when he handed it over. He felt like, 'This guy can take this to somewhere I probably couldn't' at this stage of his career, so I'm going to try to complete that dream that he's had in mind since the beginning."

When Garrett was suspended indefinitely by the NFL in November for striking Steelers quarterback Mason Rudolph over the head with the QB's helmet, Long made it clear it wouldn't impact his status with Waterboys.

"Plain and simple, what Myles Garrett did last night was wrong," Long said in a statement posted to his Twitter account then. "He knows it, he's shown contrition and he's obviously been dealt a stiff punishment. He has a long road ahead to restore his good name that will include and already includes many obstacles. Those obstacles will not include removal from our Waterboys team."

Garrett told cleveland.com that he had a dream back in middle school of providing clean drinking water to communities, long before he ever heard of Waterboys.

"He's already positively impacted the lives of tens of thousands of people through bringing the gift of clean water to communities," Long wrote. "When I recruited Myles to Waterboys, I recruited him because of his thoughtfulness, intelligence and a strong desire to help others. Even after last night's ugly scene, I still believe in Myles. He is a good person who absolutely lost his cool and will deservedly reap the consequences. But those consequences will not include taking away a vehicle for him to continue to do good."

The trip, which began last week, included a safari in the Serengeti and a stop in the village of Simanjiro to check on of the Waterboys' wells.



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In the video clip above, Garrett is seen with dozens of Tanzanian kids having a blast trying to wrestle a football away from him.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Myles Garrett offers to 'take care of anything' for the family of chef David McAtee, killed by police during a protest

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/06/myles-garrett-offers-to-take-care-of-anything-for-the-family-of-chef-david-mcatee-killed-by-police-during-a-protest.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Myles Garrett has offered to help the family of slain BBQ chef David McAtee, who was shot and killed by law enforcement officers early Monday morning during a protest in Louisville, Ky. over the death of George Floyd.

McAtee, the owner of YaYa's BBQ, died after police and the Kentucky National Guard were called in to disperse a large crowd during the protest. Officers said they were shot at and returned fire, which resulted in McAtee's death.

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer admitted that the police did not have their body cameras on, which prompted him to fire police Chief Steve Conrad. He described McAtee as a wonderful citizen whom many knew as "the BBQ man."

Family members and friends were also outraged that McAtee's body remained on the street for 12 hours after his death, until about noon on Monday.

"If anyone can get me in contact with the family, I'll take care of anything they need," Garrett posted Tuesday afternoon on his Twitter account. "No body cams??? Not one? Then left his corpse on the street? FOR 12 HOURS? Nah, man, this is despicable. He deserved better.#DavidMcAtee."

FBI Louisville, Kentucky State Police and the U.S. Attorney's Office are investigating McAtee's death.

Riots have erupted all over the country during protests over the death of Floyd, who suffocated when Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for more than eight minutes. Chauvin has been charged with third-degree murder and manslaughter.

Many Browns players, including Garrett, have spoken out against racism and called for positive action since Floyd's death.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Record contract in hand, Cleveland Browns DE Myles Garrett says, 'I have to assert myself as the top dog'

By Nate Ulrich, ohio.com

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nfl/browns/2020/07/16/cleveland-browns-myles-garrett-record-deal-top-dog/5453236002/>

Myles Garrett realizes his historic contract extension only raises the enormous expectations Cleveland Browns fans have had for his career since he became the first overall NFL draft pick in 2017.

The star defensive end acknowledged Thursday there is a greater degree of pressure being heaped on him because he signed a five-year, \$125 million deal Wednesday, thereby becoming the highest-paid non-quarterback in NFL history with an average annual salary of \$25 million in new money. Chicago Bears edge rusher Khalil Mack held the previous record at \$23.5 million per year.

“Now I have to assert myself as the top dog, and I feel like I’m confident and ready to do that,” Garrett said during a Zoom video conference, speaking with Browns beat writers for the first time since he received a season-ending suspension from the league Nov. 15. Cleveland Browns DE Myles Garrett (95) is ready to step up his game after earning a record contract haul.

New general manager Andrew Berry bet on Garrett bouncing back after the latter became known as one of the most controversial figures in sports. The league forced Garrett to sit out the final six games last season because he hit Mason Rudolph over the head with the Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback’s helmet on Nov. 14 in the final seconds of a “Thursday Night Football” game at FirstEnergy Stadium.

The mega-extension is the Browns’ most significant show of support for Garrett since he became embroiled in drama.

A day after the league reinstated Garrett on Feb. 12, he told ESPN’s Mina Kimes that Rudolph called him a “stupid N-word” in the buildup to the helmet swing, an accusation Rudolph has denied.

Garrett had 10 sacks through 10 games when the league doled out its punishment, but no one truly knows whether he will be the same player in the aftermath of the ugly incident.

“I don’t want to be the same player I was last year,” Garrett said. “I want to be better in all aspects. I mean, even on that trajectory, I was in the defensive player of the year conversation. So I don’t want to make it a conversation anymore. This next year, I want to ball out, win that award, but I want to take my team to the playoffs and even higher than that.”

Garrett, 24, is as comfortable with his goal to lead the Browns to their first Super Bowl as he is with a long-term commitment to a franchise whose identity since 1999 is best defined by losing and dysfunction. He had two years remaining on his rookie deal so, with the extension, he’s under contract for the next seven seasons – through 2026.



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“There was no reservation for me because I kind of like that the history is what it is because later it’ll only make it so much sweeter when we turn this thing around and actually start winning big games, winning playoff games and finally get to that last one,” Garrett said. “So I’d like to be a part of that. I’d like to lead the pack for that. So whenever we do that, whether it starts next year or however many years it takes, I want to lead Cleveland to that promised land.”

Garrett acknowledged challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic will make it difficult for the Browns to hit the ground running under the guidance of first-year head coach Kevin Stefanski and his staff. The entire offseason program was conducted virtually. Garrett and other team veterans are scheduled to report to training camp July 28 in Berea, Ohio, but the start of camp could be delayed because the NFL Players Association and league have yet to agree on returning to work.

The NFLPA's website revealed 72 players in the league were known to have tested positive for COVID-19 as of July 10.

Garrett is hopeful football will be played this year partly because he ended his 2019 season with unfinished business. The Browns lost four of their six games without him, finished 6-10, blew up the John Dorsey-Freddie Kitchens regime and hired Berry and Stefanski.

“We had a chance to make a run at the playoffs, and I had a chance to solidify myself as a top-two defensive player in the league and hopefully not be considered No. 2,” Garrett said. “I have that to prove next year, and we have to show that this talent can come together, win some games and win big games.”

Garrett knows the pass rush and defense as a whole struggled mightily during his suspension. The Browns had 30 sacks in their 10 games with Garrett and eight sacks in their six games without him.

“I make plays all over the field, and I feel like I have been effective at changing the game plans of some of the offenses that attacked us and kept them from opening too much of their playbook,” he said. “That hurts you before you even get on the field.”

In Garrett’s three seasons, he has played 37 games and has 104 tackles, including 30½ sacks and eight tackles for loss, to go along with six forced fumbles, four passes defended and a fumble recovery. He posted a career-high 44 tackles, including 13½ sacks, three forced fumbles and three passes defended in 2018, when he made his lone Pro Bowl.

His extension contains \$100 million in guarantees, \$50 million fully guaranteed at signing and a \$21 million signing bonus, per NFL Network.

Yet Garrett and the Browns believe he hasn’t peaked as a player. He also insisted the team is talented enough to be good for a long time.

“I feel like I can only get better, and you will see that this year,” Garrett said. “Cannot talk it into existence. Just got to do it ourselves. Who we have on the D-line, who we have acquired and the guys we have now, the meeting room will feel like the sky is the limit, not only for me, but for everybody.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Garrett revealed he plans to reward himself for his big payday with a new car. The Texas A&M product wants to buy his family a new home in Texas, too.

He also intends to convince everyone the Browns made a wise investment.

“I’m just going to do my best to make it worth it for them,” he said.

“They have faith in me, and now I have to give them a reason to have that faith.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Myles Garrett using platform to make a difference in social justice arena

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/myles-garrett-using-platform-to-make-a-difference-in-social-justice-arena>

Myles Garrett has always wanted to make the most of his NFL platform when it comes to making a difference in society.

He understands how much impact he can make as an NFL player and how his actions can inspire others in a positive way. Since the May 25 death of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody, protests and social reform movements have taken place across the country, and Garrett has been active to promote the good causes of those movements on social media.

That was also how he found out about David McAtee, a BBQ chef in Louisville, Kentucky, who died June 1 after police and the Kentucky National Guard were called to dissipate a large crowd during a protest outside his restaurant. McAtee was shot after officers were shot at and returned fire, according to a report from the Courier-Journal.

Garrett was able to get in contact with the McAtee family and arranged to cover the funeral costs.

"I was very taken aback by something like that," Garrett said. "I really wanted to reach out and help where I could. It was kind of about those stories that reached me personally and touched me on a deeper level."

Garrett also said he reached out to the family of St. Louis police chief David Dorn, who was fatally shot June 2 when responding to an alarm at a pawnshop being looted by a man. Dorn, a 77-year-old retired police captain, was remembered as a role model police officer who wanted to help guide young men and women interested in a career in law enforcement.

Garrett spoke with the family and wanted to cover funeral costs as well but could not find a way to pay for it through official channels.

"I have family who have been in the force," Garrett said. "I have friends and family that have been in the force. I have friends and family that have been in the military. I do not have anything against people who serve or know what they are doing. I just believe there needs to be a better regulation on those who are put in that position of authority and who are told to enforce the law but also protect us as citizens. David Dorn was a great representation of that for many years."

Garrett advocated for more NFL players and personnel to use their platform and voice to create change in social justice. He wants to continue doing what he can to help others, and he plans to stay in touch with the families he's helped to show his ongoing support and care.

"I know that this is something that will be part of their family forever," Garrett said. "I just wanted to make sure they are good and that they are taken care of, and that it is not just a one-off thing. I want to see them prosper and their families around them do the same."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Myles Garrett stresses 'standing in solidarity' as Browns hold post-practice meeting to discuss social justice issues

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/myles-garrett-stresses-standing-in-solidarity-as-browns-hold-post-practice-meeti>

Myles Garrett took a deep breath and began his opening remarks with local reporters Thursday in Berea with a poignant demand.

Garrett was preparing to speak from the heart after the Browns held a meeting to discuss what to do with team practice following recent boycotts across professional sports, and he wanted his personal message to be clear.

"I'd like to ask for justice for Breonna Taylor, and I'd like to ask that the officers that shot ... " Garrett said before pausing and taking another breath. " ... Jacob Blake in the back seven times and paralyzed him, that they be held accountable for their actions.

"We won't stop until there is reform and justice is served."

Garrett was referencing the police shootings of Taylor of Blake — two Black Americans whose cases have sparked protests across the country — and is one of 11 members on the Browns leadership council. The group helped guide the team to a decision Thursday to shorten team practices to one hour and spend the remainder of practice time indoors for a discussion about what all players, coaches and team personnel can do to bring positive change to social justice issues in Northeast Ohio.

"We stand in solidarity with everyone who has chosen not to go today, but we elected to shorten our practice," he said. "We are going to cut it down in half, and then we are going to go in indoor and brainstorm on how we can make change happen in our community and how we can move forward locally and as a state and how us as teams in Cleveland, whether it is the Indians, Cavs or it is just the Browns, can move this thing forward, move the needle just a little bit and be a start of something great."

The Browns have conducted several meetings since the beginning of the virtual offseason program to hold similar discussions. The conversations have encouraged team members to participate in peaceful protests, donate to social activism initiatives and use their platform to inspire change.

Garrett, who said he wishes to get in contact with the family of Blake in the future, shared some of his ideas in his interview. He wants to promote a petition that will criminalize hate speech, and he tweeted a link of the petition minutes after his interview ended.

"I don't believe (hate speech) should be said on forums, whether it's social media, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or openly in the streets where it's marched or paraded," he said. "It shouldn't be like that. It shouldn't be allowed, and it shouldn't be accepted."



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Garrett has been one of many professional athletes to take a stand against racism in the United States. NBA players opted to boycott all of their postseason games Wednesday evening to bring attention and dialogue to social justice issues, and players in MLB, MLS and other NFL teams have done similar actions.

Athletes and prominent sports figures across the country have attempted to bring positive change in different ways, and Garrett believes unity is one of the most effective stances the sports world can take to ensure action happens.

"The best way to make that happen is to be unified," Garrett said. "I feel like most of the time when this has happened, it has been individuals being affected. Each person on each team is feeling some type of way, but the whole team is kind of on edge about what direction to go, what they want to do and how they feel. It is different this time. It has been a movement and not just a (Black Lives Matter) movement; a lot of people are feeling this way of all colors and all walks of life.

"I feel like with so many leagues and so many people standing in solidarity in every sport and every profession, I feel like it can't be ignored and it can no longer be looked down upon."

Garrett was the voice of how many players on the Browns felt Thursday before practice. They want change, and they want to keep sports secondary if it means making a difference.

That's why the Browns shortened their training camp practice and planned a meeting for another deep discussion.

That's also why Garrett was direct and blunt in his statements.

He doesn't want his frustrations — or the grievances felt by other Black Americans — to be ignored. He's taking a stand, and he hopes others will, too.

"We all want to have a united voice so that we can't be drowned out," he said. "We want to be heard, we want to promote change and we want to get the ball rolling. We want to make change happen."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Impressive and inspirational: Larry Ogunjobi off to great start, determined to take game to next level in pivotal year

By Scott Petrak, brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2020/09/25/impressive-and-inspirational-larry-ogunjobi-off-to-great-start-determined-to-take-game-to-next-level-in-pivotal-year/>

BEREA — Larry Ogunjobi is relentless.

The defensive tackle started a new training program in the offseason and worked it from January until two days before he reported to training camp in July, undeterred by obstacles presented by the coronavirus pandemic.

He posts inspirational messages on Instagram daily in case one of his followers is having a difficult time.

He refuses to dwell on the negative, even with bad news seemingly running on a loop at the bottom of the TV screen.

“Outlook determines outcome,” Ogunjobi told The Chronicle-Telegram in a phone interview Thursday. “A lot of people got it way worse. I’m praying for them. That’s why I can’t take my position and what I have for granted. That’s my respect to them, taking each and every day as another opportunity to be great at what I do, because there’s somebody else in this world that would kill for the position I’m in.”

Ogunjobi, 26, is off to a tremendous start in what he acknowledges is a huge season in his career. He’s in the fourth and final year of his \$3.9 million rookie contract, so millions of dollars are riding on his performance. He has four tackles, a tackle for loss and a forced fumble in two games for a run defense ranked sixth in the league, earning an 86.7 grade from Pro Football Focus. He trails only Pittsburgh’s Tyson Alualu among NFL interior lineman.

“I don’t try to get caught up in all that,” Ogunjobi said. “But I’ve got parents and friends that send it to me.”

Plenty of players get distracted, resentful or put too much pressure on themselves in a contract year. That’s not Ogunjobi. Anyone who went from an obese 350-pound 16-year-old to a sculpted 6-foot-3, 305-pound fitness fanatic is too disciplined to betray his motto of “control the controllables.”

The Transformer: Ogunjobi used football to change his body and life

STAY OR GO

Ogunjobi wants a long-term deal with the Browns. He lived through 0-16 as a rookie and would like to be around when the going gets good.



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“Of course. This is where I got drafted to,” said the third-round pick out of the University of Charlotte. “You build a relationship with your teammates and your fans and just the people of Cleveland. You walk places, people recognize you and you have a conversation. It’s cool.

“When you start something, you want to be there for it. That’s how I am.”

Ogunjobi was thrilled when defensive end and close friend Myles Garrett — the No. 1 pick in 2017, 64 picks before Ogunjobi — signed a five-year, \$125 million extension in July. Ogunjobi said Garrett is a “generational-type” player and deserved every penny.

Ogunjobi is still waiting for his money. He’s leaving negotiations to his agent but said he hasn’t talked with the Browns about an extension. Agent Brian Ayrault told The Chronicle on Friday he doesn’t talk about his clients’ contract situations in the media.

It’s worth noting teams usually don’t wait until the final year of a deal to come to terms on an extension, and Ogunjobi is less than six months from hitting the open market.

“My main focus is just to be the best I can be,” he said. “I know everything is going to take care of itself. I’ve been blessed, I’m extremely grateful to be in the position I’m in.”

He’s the type of player and person general manger Andrew Berry and coach Kevin Stefanski say they want to keep. Their requirements of smart, tough and accountable could be in his Instagram profile, and he was Stefanski’s pick to be the Week 2 game captain.

“He means a lot. He is like maybe the soul of the defensive line,” coordinator Joe Woods said. “Just when you hear him talk, he is always talking about something meaningful.”

“Larry plays really hard,” Stefanski said. “He practices hard. He plays hard. It is important to him.

“He has a great combination of power and quickness. He is somebody that we rely on. He is one of the leaders of the football team.”

Ogunjobi is usually soft-spoken but asked to address the team last year as it failed to meet the great expectations. He stressed being accountable and concentrating on the details in practice. He picks his spots to use his voice.

“I’ve always learned that sometimes you don’t have to talk first, you have to listen to really understand,” he said. “And I’ve done a good job of that, just getting a better understanding of everything and being mindful and understanding that when I do talk people listen. So I make sure what I’m saying is the right thing and the real thing.”

Despite Ogunjobi starting 31 games the last two years — he was suspended for one for his role in the brawl with the Steelers last season — and getting 5.5 sacks each year from the interior, the front office hasn’t secured him for the future. And in the offseason Berry added a pair of tackles — free agent Andrew Billings (he opted out of the season due to coronavirus concerns) and rookie Jordan Elliott, drafted No. 88 in the third round.



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Ogunjobi said he didn't view the moves as the Browns bringing in his replacements.

"Because I can't control that. All I can control is what Larry Ogunjobi does on the football field every time we play. And I'm going to handle that," he said. "I'm here to do a job, I'm here to be the best, I'm here to take care of my family, make my dreams reality."

"When you have too many things off the field pulling away from you, it's hard to focus. I don't have time for that. I've put too much work in, I've worked too hard. I don't have time to get caught up in all that. I'm in too good of a space. I'm in too good of a mentality. I'm here to be special."

POSITIVE IMPACT

Being in a good headspace is something Ogunjobi mentioned often during the 27-minute interview. Just like in the weight room and on the practice field, he works hard to have success there.

He started posting inspirational messages in college but got serious when he joined the Browns, citing the "amazing platform." He reads a lot and has compiled a "whole archive" to share with his nearly 65,000 Instagram followers.

He went with Progress over Perfection on Friday and has a couple of favorites: Growth without change is impossible and The world is changed by your example, not by your opinion.

"I've always been a motivational type of person," Ogunjobi said. "It's always good to hear that kind of stuff to push somebody in the right direction. You just never know what somebody may be going through."

"I always wanted to be able to help. I watched my parents, they've always been givers in some kind of capacity. So for me, every morning I wake up I want somebody to know that there's somebody that cares about their well-being and them having a positive impact in the world."

He's heard from people appreciative and affected by the posts and believes attitude is something people can control, returning to "outlook determines outcome."

"So if you're always looking at life negatively, life's going to give you negative things to look at," he said. "But if you always look at the positive things in life, a lot of times life rewards you with positive things."

That's a big ask in a country with a pandemic that's killed more than 200,000 people and constant reminders of racial injustice, including the lack of indictments for the police in the death of Breonna Taylor.

"Yeah, it sucks," Ogunjobi said. "It's hard to hear the verdict, to hear the things that are going on. But at the same time, you never know who's watching you. So if I look defeated, if I show that I'm down, that energy somebody else is going to pick up and they might carry that. And I don't want to be that example."



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“I can’t be on the front lines right now protesting and doing all those kind of things. Do I want to? Of course. There’s so many negatives going on in the world and I hate it. It’s a difficult time. But all I can do is continue to bring awareness, to be proactive, to have the conversations, to talk about legislation, to do whatever I can to make a change.”

Odell Beckham Jr., Jarvis Landry crushed by decision in Breonna Taylor case, vow to keep fighting for racial justice

He’s part of the team’s 11-player social justice committee and remains confident its work can make a difference.

“I feel like the guys on the social justice committee we have are very, very, very, very passionate about bringing about change,” he said. “Change isn’t something that just happens overnight. It does take time. But you still have to be proactive. Because doing something is better than doing nothing.”

He said the players have discussed following the lead of the NBA and sitting out a game to shine the spotlight on systemic racism.

“But it’s one of those things where it’s not just one voice,” he said. “We’re majority rules, so you have to respect everybody’s opinion, respect everybody’s understanding.”

READY FOR TAKEOFF

Ogunjobi was already in incredible shape, looking as lean and muscular as 305 pounds can. Then he changed offseason training sites and partners and focused on balance, mobility and core strength. The video of him kneeling on a ball and working the ropes with his arms is beyond impressive.

While many struggled to keep up a normal routine with pandemic restrictions, Ogunjobi found a way.

“I just wanted to be great and just really wanted to handle my business,” he said. “There’s always going to be an excuse, but there’s always an answer, too. Everything that’s happened is just hard work and constant effort.”

Veteran tackle Sheldon Richardson noticed the difference.

“Stronger. Faster for some reason. More shifty,” Richardson said. “The guy, he is going to be all right.”

Ogunjobi has 138 tackles, 12 sacks, 25 tackles for loss and two forced fumbles in his career. With that experience and in Woods’ scheme that lets him attack, he’s ready to take a big jump, earn a Pro Bowl spot and be considered among the league’s best interior linemen.

“I feel like there’s been flashes,” he said of playing like a Pro Bowler. “But knowing what I know now, there just needs to be more.”



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"I have the ultimate confidence in myself to go out there and do what I've been called to do. I know my work ethic and my drive is going to take me where I need to go."



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Larry Ogunjobi donating 100,000 meals to the Greater Cleveland Food Bank

By Scott Patsko, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/03/larry-ogunjobi-donating-100000-meals-to-the-greater-cleveland-food-bank.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- A day after Baker Mayfield donated \$50,000 to the Greater Cleveland Food Bank and helped supplement staff wages for a meal-delivery program, Browns teammate Larry Ogunjobi announced he, too, will be helping the food bank.

Ogunjobi posted on Twitter that he intends to donate 100,000 meals to the food bank to help battle the impact of coronavirus. He also asked that people support Feeding America, a national hunger-relief charity.

You can see Ogunjobi's tweet at the top of this post, along with a video in which he encourages people to take precautions against coronavirus.

"In light of the current circumstances, many people across the world need our help, especially children," Ogunjobi wrote on Twitter. "I am supporting my local community in Cleveland by donating 100,000 meals with @CleFoodBank. Please join me in lending a helping hand and support @FeedingAmerica."



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Beers up: Andy Janovich excited about new start with Browns

By Zac Jackson, The Athletic

<https://theathletic.com/1684742/2020/03/18/beers-up-andy-janovich-excited-about-new-start-with-browns/>

If you're a Browns fan stuck at home dreaming of brighter, wilder days in the Muni Lot with cold beers and lots of barking, new Browns fullback Andy Janovich wants you to know he's heard about you.

He's ready to toast to you.

"I'm excited," Janovich told The Athletic on Wednesday. "I have a good buddy here in Denver, Ryan Miller. He was drafted by the Browns years ago (the sixth round in 2012). Ryan called me last night and told me I'll absolutely love Cleveland. He told me it's my kind of place. I said, 'Hey is there Busch Light there?'"

"He said, 'Oh, gosh, they buy it by the pallet.' And I said that sounds perfect."

Janovich once told an interviewer that he spent a good portion of his football money on Busch Light, chewing tobacco and hunting gear. He was joking — mostly, anyway — but he says he's always been a simple kind of guy who loves football and feels blessed to play it for a living. The eighth of nine children and a former Nebraska walk-on, Janovich drove the same 2000 Dodge Ram from college until last year, when the Broncos signed him to an extension and he allowed himself to splurge.

"She was a good truck," Janovich said. "It finally came to a point where I was gonna have to dump a bunch of money into it, so I had to move on. I bought a new F-150. It's the first new vehicle I've had in my life."

Now, he has a new football start. The Browns acquired Janovich in a trade completed with the Broncos on Tuesday night in a move that caught Janovich off guard, at least at first, but one that he knows is best for his career. The Broncos hired old friend Pat Shurmur as offensive coordinator, and his offense doesn't rely on a fullback. The Browns have been looking for a fullback for Kevin Stefanski's offense and were glad to acquire Janovich for a 2021 seventh-round pick.

"I signed that extension (in October) for three years and obviously thought I'd be here at least one or two of those years," Janovich said. "So when I got the call from John Elway, I needed a minute to process it. But I wasn't too terribly upset, you know? As long as I'm still playing in the NFL and getting to do what I love to do, I'm OK with it. This is the business. This is just the first time this has happened to me."

"The way it was going (with the Broncos), they don't use a fullback. But Elway I think had my best interest in mind. He knew the Browns wanted a fullback and that I have experience in that Gary Kubiak system. I think it's all positive for me."



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When the Broncos signed Janovich to the extension six months ago, Elway said Janovich had “developed into one of the best fullbacks in the league” and was “exactly what you look for in fullback — tough, reliable and a versatile part of not only the offensive but also our special teams.” It’s too early to know exactly how the Browns offense will look in 2020, but this week’s additions of Austin Hooper and Janovich provide strong hints that it will look a lot like the Vikings’ offenses did with Stefanski calling the shots over the last two seasons.

Janovich got \$3.2 million in guarantees and a \$1.35 million signing bonus on that extension, which he signed a few weeks before a dislocated elbow ended his 2019 season in mid-November. He said he’s healthy now and excited for a new start whenever NFL teams are permitted to gather. Like the rest of us, Janovich is pretty much confined to his home because of COVID-19 precautions.

“Shit, I’ve pretty much been doing prison workouts,” Janovich said. “Just pushups, situps, anything I can do. I don’t have a home gym so I’m just trying to stay in the best shape I can right now. I don’t have any idea when I’ll be able to go to Cleveland. No one does. It’s not in my control, so I just know I’ll be ready whenever I get that call.

“I’ve told my wife plenty of times we’ve been pretty lucky. I didn’t even really play a lot in college until my senior year. I’ve said many times I could get traded or cut anytime. So this is different, but it’s good. We’re excited. I can’t wait to get to Cleveland.”



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'He's being the hammer, not the nail': How Wyatt Teller has elevated his game for a big start to his 2020 season

By Anthony Poisal, clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/he-s-being-the-hammer-not-the-nail-how-wyatt-teller-has-elevated-his-game-for-a->

Wyatt Teller loves to end a play with a pancake.

He's not talking about the kind that comes from "IHOP," his nickname as an offensive lineman at Virginia Tech, or the kind that's made with baking mix, which one college fan brought for him at each Hokies home game. Teller, the Browns' 315-pound starting right guard, enjoys a big breakfast, but he's hungry for a different kind of meal when he squats at the line of scrimmage for his next snap.

Teller is talking about the only way to make pancakes in football: by trucking through a defender so they land on their back. Sometimes, Teller will fall on them — just to make sure the pancake is cooked all the way through. He especially loves it when his block leads to an open rushing lane for a running back.

So far this season, Teller has done lots of baking. He's made plenty of pancakes that have led to big runs from running backs Nick Chubb and Kareem Hunt, and he's been one of the biggest reasons why the Browns' offensive line has become one of the best in the NFL.

Teller's appetite isn't decreasing anytime soon.

"The biggest thing of pancaking is forcefully putting someone against their will on the ground," Teller said. "You kind of feel it. As soon as it hits and you see that running back running right past you, there's that split second of 'Thank God. I did my job.' And then you run down the field and give him a high-five, and hopefully they scored a touchdown."

Teller's blocks have paved the way for many Browns touchdowns. In Week 2, he earned heavy praise from Browns coaches for making several plays that led to the Browns rushing for 215 yards and three touchdowns. He bullied the Bengals all night and helped Chubb score the Browns' first touchdown after blocking a Bengals defender to the ground, giving Chubb just enough time to sneak around him and generate speed to bulldoze through a few more defenders for an 11-yard touchdown.

A few drives later, Teller whipped around the line of scrimmage to make a pull block on a linebacker that was standing in the way of a 22-yard Chubb run stopped short of the goal-line. He scored on the next play.

Coach Kevin Stefanski rarely singles out players when he discusses game tape, but after the Browns secured his first win, he couldn't help himself.

"I would tell you," Stefanski said just a few seconds into his opening statement in his next-day interview, "Wyatt Teller really was playing a very physical football game."



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The highlights extend far beyond just Week 2. In Week 1, Teller made several key blocks against the big bodies on the Baltimore Ravens' defensive line. On one play, he tussled with a Ravens defender for 6 yards to keep a rushing lane open on a 22-yard run from Hunt, and guess how the play ended?

With a pancake.

In Week 3, Teller delivered more punishing plays to the Washington Football Team. When the Browns needed a spark to make a fourth-quarter comeback from a 20-17 deficit, Teller made a pull block on a defensive back to help Chubb make a 25-yard gain and bring the Browns inside Washington territory. Cleveland was in the end zone five plays later.

On the next offensive drive, Teller made the same block — this one resulted in a pancake — on another opposing DB, and Chubb ran inside him before making a 20-yard sprint for a touchdown.

After three weeks of the season, Teller is ranked as the third-best guard in the league and has an overall player grade of 87.5, according to Pro Football Focus. He's a third-year player, but he's playing like an eighth-year veteran. Sure, the season is still young and the Browns will need him to deliver those blocks for another 13 weeks, but he's certainly met the expectations the Browns had for him through the first three games.

"He's a hard-working kid," Browns offensive line coach Bill Callahan said. "He is really tuned into the game. He loves it. He loves the detail, the minutiae and all the finer aspects of offensive line play that you can't give him enough techniques. We're still working on a lot of things with him, but we are really proud of his progress so far."

So how has Teller done it? How has he locked down a position considered in the offseason as one of the biggest holes on the Browns offense in a matter of three weeks?

The answer begins with where his NFL career started: Buffalo. The Bills drafted him in the fifth round of 2018 and started him at left guard for seven games as a rookie. Then, just before his second season was about to begin, the Bills traded him and a 2021 seventh round pick to the Browns for fifth- and sixth-round picks in 2020.

Cleveland was acquiring offensive line depth, and it didn't use Teller until Week 6. He spent those first few weeks undergoing the often tricky transition to right guard, a change Teller embraced but admitted was difficult to accomplish. He had played only at left guard in college and Buffalo, and now his NFL future was dependent on how quickly he could master a new position on a new team with a new playbook.

"Try to imagine the hardest thing in the world that you're good at doing with your right hand and then doing it with your left hand," he said. "It's difficult, especially at this level. I was slow coming to it. It was sloppy."

The Browns were looking for any solutions to help their inconsistent offensive line, and Teller was part of the plan. But even though he was given his first start in Week 9 and started the rest of



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season, he was far from guaranteed to have the same role again when the Browns returned for 2020.

A training camp position battle was ahead. Then, the pandemic hit.

As the NFL attempted to safely navigate through an offseason mired by COVID-19, players were given the choice to opt out and not participate in the 2020 season. Three linemen — Drew Forbes, Colby Gossett and Malcolm Pridegon — made that choice. All of them were expected to compete for the right guard spot, but their absences left Teller and Joel Bitonio as the lone returning guards from the Browns 2019 roster.

Cleveland, though, liked what it saw from Teller as soon as team practices began. He was one of the most engaged players and always had extra questions for coaches in the virtual offseason program, too. When camp started, the Browns had little concern about whom their Week 1 starter would be.

"Wyatt showed me that this was extremely important to him," assistant offensive line coach Scott Peters said. "He kept in touch with me, and he would always be asking questions on FaceTime calls just to try to cover some things. We felt like we covered some ground that we thought we otherwise lost given the circumstances."

Peters has been key in Teller's development. He was a fourth-round draft pick by the Philadelphia Eagles in 2002 and played in the NFL for nine years. When he retired, he opened an MMA gym, won multiple Brazilian Jiu Jitsu world championships and became a master of learning how to use hand and feet positioning to maximize body strength. Now, he's looking to carve a coaching career in the NFL by using that knowledge to coach offensive linemen.

When Peters coaches, he prefers to line up against guys himself as if he's a defensive lineman. He'll attempt to rush through them and place his hands on their shoulders and arms to see where their strengths and weaknesses are in the play progression. Then, he'll tell them what he felt.

With Teller, Peters has been able to patch his posture together. He's worked closely with Teller on keeping his feet and hips square to the defender, which makes it easier for him to keep his hands in a position of control.

"When you're looking at your body, you only have one surface that you can draw energy from, and that's the ground," Peters said. "So how do we develop that relationship between our body and the ground and all the postures and sequencing of the movements? And not just on every single play, but over the course and progression of the play, so if you freeze-frame your body at any moment during that play, are you in the optimal position to deliver force and balance with unbelievable power?"

The tape has shown that the answers from Teller have been "yes" more times than "no." And Peters is thrilled.

"He's being the hammer, not the nail," Peters said. "He's putting it on these guys, and I love to see his game improve."



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That's how the Browns have discovered a dominant version of Teller. His best blocks have come from an ability to control his opponent from the time of the snap to the final tackle. He's still focusing on improving his measurements on every play, but the Browns have reaped the benefits when his step-by-step calculations are spot on.

"He has improved so much from last year," Chubb said. "It's very noticeable just to see him play. He has so much more energy and so much more swag. He's fun to run behind."

Cleveland believes it's found a winning formula that revolves around its running game. Chubb and Hunt are the only two backs on the same team to have more than 200 rushing yards this season, and their ability to keep a defense guessing up front has created extra passing space for quarterback Baker Mayfield, who has only been sacked four times — tied for fifth-lowest in the league.

The real brunt of the work, however, has come from the offensive line, which appears to be one of the most complete units in football. Teller has been a big reason why, but he's hungry for more success.

And he plans to keep setting his table with a fork, knife and bottle of syrup.

"It's a long season," he said. "If I'm doing well by Week 16, then that's the plan. That's what we want. I think there's important things with playing at a high level, but I'm still having fun and still being able to do what offensive lineman do for fun — and that's pancaking."



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Wyatt Teller goes from perceived weak link to dominant force on O-line leading way for NFL's best rushing attack

By Anthony Poisal, clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2020/10/08/wyatt-teller-goes-from-perceived-weak-link-to-dominant-force-on-o-line-leading-way-for-nfls-best-rushing-attack/>

BEREA — Wyatt Teller was a distant fifth among the five starting offensive linemen. The right guard was either an afterthought or a major concern for the line-obsessed fans in Northeast Ohio.

Then the season started.

Teller has been the most pleasant of surprises in the Browns' unexpected 3-1 start. For four weeks, No. 77 has routinely pulled in front of Nick Chubb and Kareem Hunt to lead the way for long runs, driven defensive linemen and linebackers into the ground and helped create a clean pocket for Baker Mayfield.

He's earned consistent praise from coaches and teammates, as well as top marks from Pro Football Focus, which rates him the NFL's best guard with a 94.1 grade.

Teller, 25, seems to have a new confidence about him but was adamant the early success hasn't gone to his head.

"That is one thing that a lot of people have been patting me on the back, telling me 'Oh, you are amazing. You are amazing. Your stuff don't stink,'" he said Wednesday. "I am like, 'Hey, let me tell you, there is always something you can improve on. There is always something you can get better at.'

"I can see it in almost every play. Even if it is plus-plus and Pro Football Focus puts it as a crazy play, I am still like, 'Wow, I could have fit my backside hand underneath and gotten more lift and even more push.' That is always the mindset. You are always trying to get better."

When the Browns opened the virtual offseason in April, Teller (6-foot-4, 315 pounds) was competing with Drew Forbes, Colby Gossett and Malcolm Pridgeon to keep the starting right guard spot he held for the final nine games of 2019 after replacing Eric Kush. At the end of the 2019 preseason, former general manager John Dorsey had traded fifth- and sixth-round draft picks in 2020 to the Bills for Teller and a seventh-rounder in 2021.

By the time training camp finally opened in August, Forbes, Gossett and Pridgeon had opted out of the season due to coronavirus concerns, yet the coaching staff insisted Teller had to compete for the job.

It was the only undecided position on the line. Left guard Joel Bitonio has been to two straight Pro Bowls, right tackle Jack Conklin signed a three-year, \$42 million contract as a free agent in March, center JC Tretter is a stalwart and left tackle Jedrick Wills was the No. 10 pick in April and handed the job.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Kareem Hunt says he's ready to take on extra workload, keep running game rolling while Nick Chubb's out

Teller spent the offseason reshaping his body — he gained 16 pounds of lean muscle and lost 3 pounds of fat — and working with Bitonio and Tretter to improve chemistry. He was ready to show rookie coach Kevin Stefanski and veteran line coach Bill Callahan he was the only man for the job.

"I knew that I could play, but I did not expect to be handed a job and I did not expect to be handed anything," Teller said. "I knew that I was going to work. I have been working the past three years that I have been in the league. I knew that it would be beneficial for the whole team to have a competition and not 'an unproven guy, he is our guy.' I kind of understood that I knew that I had to take lots of steps, but in my mind, it was mine, it was my job, I wanted it and I was going to do whatever it took to get it."

The competition never really materialized, either due to the opt-outs or Teller's improvement. He took every snap with the first-team offense in camp and bulldozed his way into the regular season.

He's a major reason the Browns lead the league in rushing at 204.5 yards a game, but Callahan continues to drive him to master the details.

"He is getting better. He is a hard-working kid," Callahan said. "He is really tuned into the game. He loves it. He loves the detail, the minutiae and all the finer aspects of offensive line play that you can't give him enough techniques.

"We are still working on a lot of things with him, but we are really proud of his progress so far. He has not come close to where he can be. We have some great hopes for him to improve even more so."

Teller appreciates the support and the constant push.

"I know my finish and my effort has been good and I know that I can even improve on that," he said. "I just know that I can play at such a high level with my feet, with my hands and with my hat placement where sometimes I am behind the block, and luckily my strength gets the job done. That does not always work when you are going against people like (Colts defensive tackle DeForest) Buckner and guys like that. You have to be perfect because they are perfect, they play hard and they have the same effort you have, but now they are just as strong if not faster, if not stronger."

Buckner will present a huge challenge for the interior of the Browns line on Sunday at FirstEnergy Stadium. The Colts have the top-ranked scoring and yardage defense and are fourth against the run, and Buckner has 1.5 sacks, eight quarterback hits, 18 tackles, two tackles for loss and a pass defended.

"He is 6-7, 300 pounds and very fast," Teller said. "He is good with his hands. He is fast. He is smart. He sees tells. He sees stuff."

Even with the new attention he's received, Teller still aspires to be like his linemates.



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“Whenever I see them, I am like, “That is what I want to do and I want to be,” he said. “It is kind of cool, you have Jack and Joel are the smart ones and I am the mauler, so they tell me what to do and I go maul them. It is a pretty good deal.”

Teller embraces the attitude needed to play in the trenches.

“Sometimes — it is a bad word — being a pr— is a good thing,” he said. “I have to be smarter with my hands and no personal fouls or holding calls, but I think that that helps in the long run is having that little bit of edge, that chip on your shoulder to where guys are not just thinking about the block, they are thinking about the guy trying to take their head off. I think that that helps the whole offensive line and we see it and it is working and it is good.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Andrew Berry bringing thoughtful approach to Browns' GM job

By Jim Trotter, NFL.com

<https://www.nfl.com/news/andrew-berry-bringing-thoughtful-approach-to-browns-gm-job-0ap3000001103602>

INDIANAPOLIS -- This was not the type of rebuild Andrew Berry was thinking about after being hired as vice president of football operations and general manager of the struggling Cleveland Browns last month. Only two weeks into the job, the slender 32-year-old realized his body was going through a transformation. Clothes that used to fit snugly suddenly had some give to them.

A wiseguy could speculate that the loss of 10 pounds was tied to the stress of trying to turn around a franchise that has not made the playoffs in nearly two decades. The truth was much simpler: Berry simply hadn't had time to work out.

"You're dealing with so many elements and things involved with the transition that you're in the office from sun up to sun down," he said this week during a break at the annual NFL Scouting Combine. "I wasn't eating well and I wasn't exercising. I was just trying to get organized with a new football operation and a new football staff on the front end. When things finally got settled, it was like, Man, I've got to go find a gym to work out or I'm going to go crazy."

The weight has begun to return, thanks to 5:15 a.m. CrossFit sessions. The question now is whether the rebuild of the Browns will be as quick or easy. History says it won't: The franchise has had only two winning seasons since returning to the league in 1999, is currently breaking in its eighth head coach and eighth general manager in the last 12 years and has not appeared in the playoffs since 2002.

Berry, the league's youngest general manager and one of only two African American general managers, knows the history well after witnessing it from the inside, serving as vice president of player personnel in Cleveland from 2016 through '18, when the Browns went 8-39-1. If there is scar tissue, it's not visible. Instead, there is genuine excitement on his face when he talks about trying to reward one of pro sport's best fan bases for its loyalty and support.

"I'm really not focused on the past or trying to differentiate myself from the past," Berry said. "I'm more focused on what we can control moving forward. My focus is daily, weekly, on the things in my job that we can execute at the highest level. History is history, and I don't think it's a fruitful use of my time to talk about things that are not in my control."

Berry, a former cornerback at Harvard who has a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's in computer science, is thoughtful and measured in his words and his actions. He speaks evenly and with conviction, preferring to rely on data and science over emotion and intuition.

His maturity and character caught the eyes of Tom Telesco a little over a decade ago, when Telesco, then a scout with the Indianapolis Colts, attended a Harvard-Holy Cross game and read a story about Berry in the program. Telesco was so impressed, he thought Berry would be a good fit with the Colts and wrote Berry's name as someone to track into the spring for a potential entry-level job, which came to fruition.



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"The rest is history," said Telesco, now general manager of the Los Angeles Chargers. "None of us are surprised by his ascension."

Berry has used his first four weeks to create a culture that he believes will be conducive to success. The Browns seemingly have been searching for an identity on the personnel side and the football side since the Haslam family purchased the team in 2012. They've tried experienced and inexperienced, old-school and new-school. The result has been six head coaches and five general managers (or someone with that level of authority) during that time.

Berry has made it a priority to have everyone reading from the same page, and he believes this can only be achieved with open communication and synergy among what he calls the senior leadership: chief strategy officer Paul DePodesta, new coach Kevin Stefanski and himself. To that end, he starts each morning with a half-hour meeting with Stefanski, to discuss the things that might occur during the day.

"You want to work through everything from a football philosophy standpoint and an organizational philosophy standpoint so you don't go off-script and there's confusion," Berry said. "You want to remove all the gray, which sets a foundation in terms of how we want to build the team, how we want to play, and how we want our staffs across football operations to interact and function on a daily basis. If we don't set a firm direction and an aligned direction, then we're going to go off and not be on the same page. So building the relationships, the philosophies and the vision were early priorities before we started doing anything tactical. Once that foundation is set, it makes it easier to operate, because you now have a common framework and a common vision for any decision or any discussion that you will have."

He and Stefanski got to know each other after the 2018 season, when Berry was part of the search staff for a new Browns coach to replace Hue Jackson. Stefanski was interviewed by Cleveland then, though Freddie Kitchens was ultimately hired. Berry and Stefanski hit it off and remained in contact throughout the 2019 season, when Berry was an executive with the Eagles and Stefanski was the offensive coordinator with the Vikings. After a hyped Browns roster floundered to a 6-10 finish, Kitchens and GM John Dorsey were both let go. Stefanski was hired in January, and Berry followed not long after.

If Berry, Stefanski and DePodesta -- who also was bullish on Stefanski from those earlier interviews -- share a common trait, it's their willingness to listen and learn from each other.

"The best piece of advice I got after taking the job was from Paul, who said: 'Now you're in a position where almost every conversation you have is the other person's most important conversation of the day,'" Berry said. "I had not heard that before, but it's something that has proven to be true over the first four weeks, because if it gets to my desk, it's of importance to that person."

Lessons such as that have helped facilitate a smooth transition. Another factor working in Berry's favor is his patience. He did not seek to make dramatic changes, such as with scouts. Members of that department have been working for nearly a year using a specific type of system, so it would be



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foolish to make significant changes so close to this April's draft. That doesn't mean you compromise on your non-negotiables, such as how you build your draft board or conduct your meetings, but you want to limit uncertainty and confusion.

"It's easier for one person to adjust than for 25 people to adjust," Berry said.

If changes are to come in that area, they will be after the draft. It's part of the plan Berry laid out for himself, to take things one step at a time.

"You think through what to prioritize on the front end before taking the job," he said. "That doesn't make it any easier to execute, because you have a hundred things that are thrown at you that initial week. But you just try to prioritize things, whether it's the first 10 days or first 90 days -- what is the actual important stuff? You're not going to be able to do everything, and you're not going to be able to get everything up and running exactly as you want it in the first week, the first month and, certainly, the first 90 days. So it's building the relationship with coach and staff, focusing on the draft and free agency, and helping Kevin in rounding out the assistants for his coaching staff. And then when you get to post-draft, you can deal with some of the larger football operations initiatives."

By then, Berry is sure to have regained all his weight -- and more. Because he's carrying the hopes of an entire city on his shoulders.



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Andrew Berry Is Ready To 'Aggressively' Build A Winner With Cleveland Browns

By Jimmy Watkins, Forbes.com

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jimmywatkins/2020/02/06/browns-general-manager-andrew-berry-/#366835c1609c>

When Andrew Berry first joined the Browns front office in 2016, the mission was ugly: tear the roster apart, and use the resulting assets to build a long-term winner.

That mission resulted in one win over two seasons. Neither Browns fans nor the Haslams could stomach it longer than that.

On Thursday, Berry was introduced as the Browns' new general manager, the man in charge of dictating the Browns' new mission. The Browns roster he inherits is talented, partially because of the the tear-down he helped orchestrate during his first tenure.

But the asset accumulation phase is over. Berry's new charge: turn this talented roster into a winner.

"Winning is always important," Berry said. "Winning was important then; it is important now. There is no secret that the strategy at the time was to accumulate assets, whether it was cap space, picks and players, that would lead to a foundation of long-term success. But I can assure you that winning is at the forefront of everyone's minds in the organization. We are looking forward to pursuing that over the next several months."

The Browns' contention window is now. If Baker Mayfield is the quarterback they think he is, he'll become expensive soon. They've missed the playoffs during the first two years of Mayfield's rookie deal, which means they have three left to maximize their roster with the cap space that accompanies a bargain deal at the sport's most expensive position.

Berry seems to understand that after spending the last year under Eagles general manager Howie Roseman, who Berry called "the best general manager in this sport" on Thursday. Roseman positioned the Eagles to win the Super Bowl in 2018 by building an elite roster before had to pay Carson Wentz. They did such good job that they won with Wentz's backup.

Now Berry is tasked with building a similar roster around Mayfield. And during his introductory press conference, he set an urgent tone for doing so.

"If there is anything that I want to be defined by, it is aggression," Berry said. "We want to aggressively acquire talent because that is the name of the game from an NFL front office perspective, and we are going to explore every avenue that enables us to do that."

Berry used variations of the word "aggressive" five times during his introductory press conference. It's a good word to be associated with in the NFL. The Eagles were aggressive in building around Carson Wentz. The Super-Bowl champion Chiefs run an aggressive offense. The Ravens won more games than any team in the league with an aggressive philosophy.



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But that aggression needs to be channeled properly. For the Berry's quest to acquire talent, that means marrying the old school with the new. Berry said he took issue with the notion that the Browns didn't value their scouts during his first stint in Berea. He assured the media that scouts will carry "very, very," heavy weight in personnel decisions.

So will Chief Strategy Officer Paul DePodesta, whose power has grown significantly since Berry first joined the Browns. DePodesta and Browns coach Kevin Stefanski believe in supplementing hours of tape with advanced statistics.

Berry welcomes the diversity of thought in the decision-making process. One thing he learned in Philadelphia is to push on any avenue to give the team a competitive advantage.

It doesn't matter whose voice is loudest as long as the Browns win.

"Every big decision is going to be collaborative," Berry said. "Everywhere that I have been that has been successful has incorporated perspectives across football operations. Final authority is less important. All of those are really collaborative decisions, and I intend for them to be that way here."



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Browns GM Andrew Berry challenges team, fans on social justice after George Floyd killing
By Jake Trotter, ESPN.com

https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/29291871/browns-gm-andrew-berry-challenges-team-fans-social-justice-george-floyd-killing

They laid flowers to mourn and to remember.

On the same day the world paid its final respects to George Floyd, more than a dozen members of the Cleveland Browns' front office gathered to reflect on another life tragically cut short by police.

ADVERTISEMENT

The life of Tamir Rice.

The group -- which included head coach Kevin Stefanski, general manager Andrew Berry and executive vice president JW Johnson -- spent almost an hour on June 9 visiting the Cleveland park where Rice, 12, was gunned down in November 2014. And as they stood together that Tuesday morning, they recalled where they were the moment they heard that a young Black boy, who had been throwing snowballs and playing with a toy pellet gun, was fatally shot by police within seconds of a squad car arriving on scene.

Five and a half years later, the same types of killings are occurring across America.

And in the wake of the recent killing of Floyd by Minneapolis police, Berry issued a challenge to the Browns organization.

Berry, the NFL's youngest GM at 33, sat in front of his computer on the evening of June 4, typing out his thoughts as best he could. He contemplated everything he had seen taking place around the world.

Images of death. Feelings of despair. The destruction of property. The loss of innocence.

But the more Berry wrote, the more he erased. The words had to be just right. The message had to be clear.

Within a few hours, Berry had woven together nearly 800 words of heartfelt emotion, unfiltered insight into being a father of two young Black sons. A challenge, too.

He pledged to donate \$8,460 to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund -- in honor of Floyd and other recent victims of racial violence, including Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and David McAtee -- if at least 50 Browns employees would do one of three things:

- Spend at least 8 minutes and 46 seconds (the initially reported amount of time a Minneapolis police officer had his knee on Floyd's neck) on one of the educational tools (such as movies, documentaries, podcasts) listed at the bottom of the email, and submit a short written or video reflection on what they learned or will do moving forward.



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- Sign up for a social activism initiative.
- Donate to a social activism cause.

It was Berry's call to action. But he made it clear to members of the organization that the moment wasn't about him. It was an opportunity to learn, to grow and to be agents of change in the community and the world at large.

At the bottom, he signed the memo: "Yours in Empathy, AB."

The following morning, he sent it to every employee who wasn't a player. The response was immediate.

"We got more than 50 on the first day," Berry, one of only two Black general managers in the NFL, said in a recent phone interview with ESPN. "That's what was most touching: just how quickly and aggressively the people that we work with on a daily basis engaged on this matter."

Within a few days, an estimated 70 participants had collectively raised over \$160,000 and counting, a figure that included donations from Browns owners Dee and Jimmy Haslam, who pledged to match all employee contributions. As of Monday of this week, the organization had raised \$185,522.74 for 14 different charities. Berry has issued the same challenge to fans, players past and present, media and sponsors through the Browns' #BeTheSolution campaign.

His hope is that 8,460 people will visit the Browns' website to access the same educational resources and charity information included in the email Berry sent to team employees, then share a video reflection about what they learned from the subject matter and how they'll be more involved in social activism.

Although this is Berry's first year as Browns general manager, the organization is no stranger to charitable work. In recent years, players and members of the organization took part in a six-hour Listen & Learn tour of the Ohio criminal justice system, sitting in on bail hearings and visiting with inmates at the Cuyahoga County Jail. The Cleveland Browns Foundation launched a statewide initiative to improve school attendance. The organization donated \$75,000 to the Edwins

Although the organization has done plenty, it's determined to do more.

Players were given the day off on June 9, but Stefanski instructed them to do something good in the community to honor Floyd, whose private funeral was held the same day in Houston. Meanwhile, Stefanski, Berry and other front-office staffers visited the site where Rice was killed.

Nearly six years ago, former Browns receiver Andrew Hawkins wore a "Justice for Tamir Rice" T-shirt during warm-ups before Cleveland's December 2014 game against the Bengals. At the time, he explained to reporters: "My wearing of the T-shirt wasn't a stance against every police officer or every police department. My wearing of the T-shirt was a stance against wrong individuals doing the wrong thing for the wrong reason to innocent people."



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Now, more NFL players than ever are speaking out about police brutality, systemic racism and social injustice after Floyd's killing by Minneapolis police ignited worldwide protests.

Berry said he couldn't stomach watching the clip showing the final minutes of Floyd's life.

"Honestly ... I-I couldn't. I can't watch the whole thing," he said. "When I see the video, I think about my two Black sons. I think about my brother. I think about my college roommates. People like that, who could be him. ... It just resonates a little too personally."

Fear. Helplessness. Anger.

"Probably, any Black man in America can see himself in that situation," Berry said. "But I think it's more the thought of the people that you love and you can't necessarily control where they are at all times. You can't protect them. I'm not going to be able to protect my two little boys for life. And I'm sure that's the same feelings my dad had for me and my brother."

As one of the only two Black GMs in the NFL, Berry understands the power and importance of his platform. But his status within the league isn't what prompted him to craft the email to Browns employees, he said.

"It's more that I want to see tangible, meaningful action around this cause because I think it's the right thing to do," he said. "The thing that struck me is, we've had a number of these types of incidents over our history, and certainly within recent history."

"And I think the emotion, the passion, the things that people are feeling now -- at some point, the emotion is going to wane some. At least nationally. And the important part is being able to channel that energy into something that's productive and actionable so that all of these tragedies don't happen in vain."

"... the things that people are feeling now -- at some point, the emotion is going to wane some. ... And the important part is being able to channel that energy into something that's productive and actionable so that all of these tragedies don't happen in vain."

Browns GM Andrew Berry

Berry credited Stefanski and veteran players with partaking in and encouraging dialogue about recent events during team meetings. But Berry didn't see the same level of collective engagement on the business side of the building.

So he started thinking about it. Then he shared his idea for the email challenge with ownership, Stefanski, chief strategy officer Paul DePodesta, senior vice president of communications Peter John-Baptiste and several trusted colleagues. On the morning of June 5, Berry's email went out.

The GM recorded his video message to the Browns community. He said he's not worried about receiving criticism from fans who are frustrated about social justice issues seeping into the sports domain.



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"There are some things that are bigger than football. And I think this is one of those things," Berry said. "To me, this isn't a political issue. This is a human issue. Eradicating racial injustice is something that everyone should be behind."



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How an email to Browns staff from Andrew Berry turned into something much bigger

By Andrew Gribble, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/how-an-email-to-browns-staff-from-andrew-berry-turned-into-something-much-bigger>

The moment was bigger than football — so much bigger — and Andrew Berry felt it.

As the days unfolded following the tragic death of George Floyd, and protests spread from coast to coast and across the globe, the Browns EVP of Football Operations and GM couldn't shake it. He knew, too, that those closest to him — his "Browns family" — likely were harboring similar feelings.

So, on the morning of June 5, Berry reached out to all Browns employees with a lengthy email. Ultimately, it would serve as the inspiration for a call to action that now includes all Browns fans through the team's #BeTheSolution campaign, which launched Wednesday.

"It's been a very encouraging response," Berry said. "It's something that, if scaled appropriately, I think we could actually make real change in our society."

Berry's email started with a message of empathy and sympathy to those who have struggled to focus on the day-to-day not only because of what was transpiring in the wake of Floyd's death, but also the recent tragedies involving Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery — two young African-Americans whose lives were unnecessarily taken in unfathomable fashion.

"On a personal level, I've cycled through feelings of frustration, anger, despondency and — yes — even hope throughout the week," Berry wrote. "I'm the father of two black boys and I'm most thankful that they are young enough to maintain their innocence."

"Whether you are empathetic or sympathetic, let's take some time to not ignore the obvious ... this is not 'business as usual.'"

Berry's hope only grew from what happened next.

Berry closed his email with a challenge. He would donate \$8,460 in honor of George Floyd and other recent victims to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund if at least 50 employees did one of the following:

1. Spend at least 8 minutes and 46 seconds (in honor of Floyd) on one of a number of educational or dialogue items provided in the email and submit a short written or video reflection on what they learned or will do moving forward.
2. Sign up for any social activism initiative
3. Donate anything to a social activism cause

Within 24 hours, more than 50 employees had taken the challenge. Shortly thereafter, the Haslam family pledged to match every dollar raised and contributed to the organizations of the employees' choice. As of Monday, Browns staff has raised \$185,522.74 for 14 different charities.



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Now, those resources are being made available outside of the Browns' organization to anyone that would like to do their part to Be The Solution.

"We are a family. We're in this for one reason," Berry said. "We realize what's right, and there are some things that are more important than football. I think too many times organizations can be tone deaf to those dynamics. This is one of those moments where our focus can't be only or solely what goes on between those white lines. There are just bigger societal issues at play.

"NFL teams, in general, have such an influence on their communities that if we can't be at the front of the pack on some of these issues that impact all of us, then shame on us."

Browns players and coaches have taken Berry's message to heart and put words into action.

During a virtual team meeting, Browns coach Kevin Stefanski urged his players to "get in the arena" and use their unique platform to help bring real change to the fight against racial injustice. When Floyd was memorialized at a funeral in his native Houston, Stefanski gave the team the day off so they could pay their respects. Stefanski and a number of coaches and executives used that time to visit the memorial of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old, African-American boy who was shot and killed by two Cleveland police officers in Nov. 2014.

"I think what Andrew did was outstanding," said Stefanski, who also attended a protest in Avon with his sons and mother. "It's a message we've constantly been harping on is being about action and Andrew very specifically was about things we can do, things we can educate ourselves with. It was really a challenge to all of us. This has been a stark reminder of how we can affect positive change and anything I can do to help our players do that, I'm going to do."

From Bill Wills and Marion Motley — who helped break football's color barrier in 1946 — to Hall of Famer Jim Brown — who has devoted his post-playing years to fighting racial injustice — to Andrew Hawkins — who wore a shirt that sought justice for Rice and John Crawford III over top of his jersey before a 2014 game — the Browns have entered "the arena" on plenty of occasions throughout their storied history.

"It's been great that people in the public have been able to see there is a problem with race in our country. It's been good to see that people are expressing outrage, anger, condemnation," Berry said. "I also think it's important that this moment in history and this moment in time, that emotion is channeled into action that can advance the ball."

In recent years, social justice initiatives have become a major off-field priority for the franchise, which has seen players participate in ride-alongs with police officers, engage in summits that brought citizens and city officials together for important dialogue and donate their time and money to local causes. Dee and Jimmy Haslam and a core group of Browns executives regularly meet with players to discuss and coordinate community engagement opportunities with organizations and in areas supporting social justice where players wish to make an impact. Through those discussions, Browns players identified wanting to support police-community relations, including through local Neighborhood Equality & Unity Summit discussions and collaborative visits to Cleveland Recreation



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Centers; addressing recidivism and creating job opportunities; and providing educational resources to students in need.

In Dec. 2019, Browns players celebrated the start of Breaking New Ground's first home renovation with Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry (LMM), the recent beneficiary of a \$100,000 team contribution as a reflection of the NFL's Inspire Change movement. In May 2019, seven Browns players visited a local courthouse and jail as part of a Listen and Learn tour to get a closer look at how the justice system operates. The team also donated \$75,000 apiece to EDWINS Leadership & Restaurant Institute, which gives formerly incarcerated adults a foundation in the culinary/hospitality industry while providing a support network necessary to their long-term success, and Bloom Bakery, which supplies training and resources and assists in securing jobs for individuals who have been incarcerated. The Browns and Browns players have also made additional contributions to City of Cleveland recreation centers to help create more opportunities for youth to learn and play in their own community. Since 2016, the Haslams have funded the installation of synthetic turf fields at nine locations across Northeast Ohio.

Dee Haslam is also a member of the NFL's player-owner social justice committee, which was established in December 2017 with the focus of supporting programs and initiatives that reduce barriers to opportunity with a priority on supporting improvements in education and economic development, community and police relations and the criminal justice system.

Progress has been made, but it hasn't been nearly enough. That's why Berry hit "send" on an email that quickly became something much, much bigger.



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'Pressure? Go get a dog': Kevin Stefanski can handle the challenge as new Browns coach, longtime NBA executive father says

By Marla Ridenour, ohio.com

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/sports/20200118/pressure-go-get-dogs-kevin-stefanski-can-handle-challenge-as-new-browns-coach-longtime-nba-executive-father-says>

When Ed Stefanski was working his way up to general manager of the New Jersey Nets, Jason Kidd was the favorite player of Stefanski's three oldest boys.

A comment the Hall of Fame-bound guard made to the elder Stefanski became a family mantra, one that might be revived after Minnesota Vikings offensive coordinator Kevin Stefanski was named Browns coach on Jan. 12.

"They loved Jason Kidd, how good he was," Ed Stefanski said. "I would always tease him about pressure and Jason Kidd said one time, 'Pressure? If you have pressure, go get a dog.' We used to always say, 'Pressure? What's pressure? Get a dog if you have pressure.'"

That was not the reason behind Kevin Stefanski's admission at his introductory press conference Tuesday that he had promised his three children he would get them a dog and take them to Disney World. That was part of the bargain for moving them and his wife Michelle from Minnesota, where Stefanski had worked for 14 seasons.

But a new puppy might come in handy, especially for a 37-year-old first-time head coach of a team that has been to the playoffs just once in 20 seasons. He is the fifth coach hired by owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam since they took over in October 2012.

Now senior adviser to Detroit Pistons owner Tom Gores, Ed Stefanski does not know the Browns players and the big egos his son will have to manage, most notably quarterback Baker Mayfield and receiver Odell Beckham Jr. But Stefanski, whose career as an NBA executive spans over 20 years, believes his son can handle them.

Ed Stefanski has served as general manager of the Nets and Philadelphia 76ers and executive vice president of the Toronto Raptors and Memphis Grizzlies, and even he was impressed with Kevin's "Personality is welcome, your production is required" line on Tuesday.

"I think every team has unique individuals, unique personalities. We have them in Detroit; I've had them at every stop I've been in the NBA," Ed said in a telephone interview Friday from his Birmingham, Michigan condominium. "I think Kevin made it clear that personalities are welcome, but production is mandatory. I think that's a great line ... I don't know if that's exactly what he said. Everybody has to have a personality, everybody has to show different emotions, but the bottom line is winning and getting it done.

"It's a challenge. Believe me, every team has issues and you work through them. Cleveland doesn't have a monopoly on things that go on."



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There has been no response on social media from high profile Browns over Stefanski's hiring, but Ed Stefanski thinks his son can win the team over.

"Right now they're going to be apprehensive, that's only natural," Stefanski said. "I really believe that once they see the effort, when he shows them he can help them get better ... They want to get better, that's the bottom line, they don't want to be embarrassed. If they can go out there on Sunday and put a good performance on, there are not going to be any issues.

"Players want to be coached. I've been around enough of 'em, and even the great ones want to be coached."

Karen and Ed Stefanski had four boys — although Ed counts himself and said Karen raised five — Eddie, Kevin, Matt and David (oldest to youngest). Ed saw leadership skills in Kevin as a youngster growing up in Philadelphia.

"Kevin was always a leader type kid at a young age," Ed said. "His brothers and all the friends, Kevin kind of organized a lot. He was an organizational guy early in his career — real early, like 4 or 5 years old.

"He's very level-headed. When things were getting a little goofy around the house with his mother and all the school stuff, he would tell his mom, 'Relax, everything will be fine.' Maybe my wife got flustered sometimes with four boys and she's raising them while I'm running around the country, he would always say, 'Relax, we'll get it done.'"

Ed Stefanski doesn't know where Kevin got his even-keeled personality.

"It's always been his thing, he doesn't get too wired on things, he doesn't get too low," Ed said. "What I like about him is when there's crises or problems he's thinking of solutions as opposed to showing his emotions right away. I think that's an important trait in any line of work."

Thinking back to the "Minneapolis Miracle" when the Vikings stunned the Saints in a divisional round playoff game in January 2018 on Stefon Diggs' 61-yard touchdown as time expired, Ed Stefanski said Kevin wasn't among those going crazy on the sideline.

"Kevin wasn't celebrating, he was thinking about the next possible thing they have to do. That's who he is," Ed said as the Vikings advanced to the NFC Championship that season. "He had this as a young kid. He would celebrate, but he was always thinking a play ahead as a quarterback in high school. He was always organizing and always thinking."

After playing safety at Penn, Kevin Stefanski got a summer internship with the Eagles through Penn director of football operations James Urban, now quarterbacks coach of the Baltimore Ravens. Eagles assistant coach Brad Childress took a liking to Stefanski and took Stefanski, then 23, with him when he was hired as Vikings coach in 2006.

Ed Stefanski still remembers the phone call that launched his son's NFL career.



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“It was in February and Brad Childress called the house. I said, ‘I don’t know why Brad’s calling me.’ I congratulated him getting the job,” Ed recalled. “He said, ‘Can I talk to Kevin? This is my first call, my first hire. I want him to come with me.’ I said, ‘Wow. That’s fantastic.’ He said, ‘What do you think?’ I said, ‘He’s crazy if he doesn’t take it.’”

Kevin Stefanski served as Childress’ personal assistant through the 2008 season before being promoted. Even though he was handling menial tasks like getting coffee, his desk was right outside the door of Childress’ office.

“We all have egos, but some of us have less ego than others. Kevin knows when to keep his ego in check. He’s about the players and he’s a grinder,” Ed said. “Everything that went through the head coach’s office, Kevin had to be part of it. What a great way, planning practices or planning for the offseason, Kevin has been involved in that stuff already, which is more the managerial part of it.”

Ed Stefanski believes Kevin could have gone into many professions. His brothers live in Philadelphia; Matt sells apartment complexes, Eddie and David work in the health care field.

“Kevin can do a lot of things if he wanted to do it. But how he gets along with people and how he’s thinking, yeah, he could be a coach ...,” Ed said. “To this level? Everyone dreams about something like this. I don’t think anyone is born thinking they’re going to be a head football coach. It’s quite a task ahead of him, but I have confidence he’ll be able to pull it off.”

There will be plenty of pressure on Kevin Stefanski, stress that has contributed to the failures of many before him. But as his brothers will remind him, a dog is on the way.



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Kevin Stefanski on Browns players: 'I've got their back' on social justice & 'we'll make a decision together' on kneeling during the national anthem

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/06/kevin-stefanski-wants-browns-players-to-know-ive-got-your-back-on-social-justice-and-well-make-a-decision-together-on-whether-or-not-to-kneel-during-the-national-anthem.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns coach Kevin Stefanski is standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his players on the issue of social justice, and if they decide to kneel for the national anthem, he'll kneel beside them.

"I am just so keen on dialogue with our players and listening," he said on a Zoom call with reporters Wednesday. "My big note to our players is that I have their back, and that's not just lip service. I'm standing right there beside them. They have my support, and I promise you one thing, we will just continue to listen to each other from a place of mutual respect."

In the wake of George Floyd's death at the knee of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and the killing of other African Americans such as Breonna Taylor by police officers, Stefanski knows that NFL players will likely want to pick up where Colin Kaepernick left off by kneeling during the national anthem, and he will talk to his players about that.

"My position is I want to make sure I support our players," he said. "First things first, I want to make sure I sit down with them and talk. We have started the process in that dialogue, but I can't speak necessarily to the future in that regard. I can just promise you this, we'll spend as much time as needed to make sure that we're all on the same page and we're a united front from a player, staff, you name it [standpoint]."

"We want to make sure that we're constantly staying in the dialogue on these issues because it's not something that's just going to go away. We want to make sure that that we're constantly, constantly looking at this in ways that we can do better. I really would love to first sit down with our social justice committee, sit down with our captains and sit down with the leaders of this football team before we talk about things in the future."

He admitted he's not sure how the controversial issue will play out on game day, but he hopes they will be united on the issue.

"The honest answer is I don't know," he said. "I want to make sure when we get together, that's one of many issues we need to talk about in this movement, if you will. That's something that I promise you we will spend as much time as necessary as an organization listening to each other, understanding each other and then we'll make a decision together. I hesitate to say because I want to make sure that I am sitting with our guys on things like that."

Stefanski took to heart the words of NFL receiver Anquan Boldin, who encourage everyone to "attach your name" to the cause.



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“That’s something that I take seriously,” he said. “While I’m attaching my name and I’m leading a football team, I want these guys to know the impact that they can have.”

He said he talks to his players in the immediate wake of Floyd’s death, providing concrete things on their Zoom calls of things they can do to make a difference. They’ve addressed it every day since.

“We’ve been spending a lot of time talking about social justice,” he said. “Certainly, my big message to our guys has been to get in the arena. We’re all about action. I think we have some amazing people, both on the team and in this building, that have really provided some great resources to our players so they can become part of the action.”

He acknowledged he’s been proud of players such as Myles Garrett, Odell Beckham Jr., Jarvis Landry, JC Tretter and others who have already taken action to make a difference.

“We’ve pointed those guys out in our meetings throughout this time,” he said. “The Browns are an important part of this community. I’ve seen it firsthand. The impact our guys can have in the Cleveland community and really around the country is something that I know they are taking very seriously, and I commend them for their efforts.”

Therefore, it hasn’t been hard to encourage his players to ‘get in the arena.’

“There has been some frustration among all of our guys, but I promise you this, there’s been a very unified message from all of our guys that they want to be part of this change,” he said. “Simple things like donating, a lot of us are in the position to donate so we gave them some resources and some places to go educate themselves on which charities maybe they should donate to.

“We gave them some reading materials and some listening material podcast-wise in terms of educating because we talk so much about listening. We gave them some things that they can listen to.”

Stefanski also encouraged them to attend a peaceful protest or rally, and set an example by attending one himself with his two young sons and his mom.

“That was the first time I’ve ever been to one,” he said. “It was empowering. You saw the passion. You saw the frustration. You saw the love. It was just a really enlightening moment for me, and I was able to share that with my boys at a young age. I think that is part of this, is making sure that we are doing everything in our power to educate each other and especially the next generation.”

In addition, Stefanski has lined up speakers to address racial injustice on the team Zoom calls. On Wednesday, they were hosting former New York State Chief Deputy Attorney General) Alvin Bragg, who went to Harvard with Browns Chief Strategy Officer Paul DePodesta.

“He’s running for district attorney in Manhattan currently,” Stefanski said. “He’s in the social justice arena from a legal standpoint, so he’s going to share some things with the players today. Again, I say all that to say we’re trying like crazy to educate our players, educate ourselves and do everything that we can – remotely for now – to give our guys some tools to make a positive change.”



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Stefanski acknowledged that he's struck up a friendship with Cavs coach J.B. Bickerstaff and that the clubs will team up to fight racial injustice.

"Our team and our players, we're going to work towards some action items to make sure that we leave a positive impact out of all of this," he said.

Stefanski will also work closely with Browns GM Andrew Berry on social justice initiatives.

"He's not afraid to lead from out front," he said. "He's not afraid to put others in the spotlight and get behind others. He has my full support. In moments like this, you get to see guys like Andrew step up, and he's certainly stepped up in this regard. I'm really proud of him. He's done a great job. There's more to be done and I think you'll continue to hear from Andrew on this topic."

Floyd's death literally hit close to home for Stefanski, who spent 14 years in Minneapolis before taking the Browns head coaching job in January.

"I spent a lot of time there and had three kids born there so that state and that city is in my heart, and it was sad," he said. "It was heartbreaking. It was frustrating. It was maddening. It was all of those things. My reaction was just like the rest of the country. I know this, there are some special people there and there are some special people in this city, and I think we're all going to work together and unite to make sure that that we're in a better place through all this."

Stefanski is so sensitive to the topic that he canceled all Browns meetings and workouts on Tuesday, the day of George Floyd's funeral, so they could give it "its proper due. It was a solemn day. We really can never lose sight of that."

Stefanski also signed the NFL Players Coalition petition to end qualified immunity for police and other government official in instances police brutality

"Credit to the Players Coalition, which is doing some amazing work in terms of educating our players and giving them resources," he said. "That was something that they brought to our attention last week. I did my homework. I did my research. Again, I go back to 'attach your name.' That's part of this, is knowing that we have to do better, knowing that I would say most of us realize that there have to be reforms of some sort. I just felt like that this was something that was important to support moving forward."

Stefanski said he'll form his leadership committee when the players get back in the building, most likely for training camp in late July.

"The good news is we have some guys who are leaders already right now, guys that I can pick up the phone – and I have – to call and get some feedback," Stefanski said. "It's something when we get back together that we will certainly have committees that the rest of the team, should they need something, can go to those type of guys."



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He noted that a few Zoom meetings might not seem like much, but “unified action over the course of time can make a positive impact. We’re trying so hard to give our players resources to get in the arena and act because dialogue is great and listening is outstanding – that is part of the healing process – but now is the time to make sure that we’re making positive change in our communities.”



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Browns LB B.J. Goodson: 'I'm able to perform as well as any LB in the league'; hopes to be here long-term

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/05/browns-lb-bj-goodson-im-able-to-perform-as-well-as-any-lb-in-the-league-hopes-to-be-here-long-term.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns new linebacker B.J. Goodson wouldn't come right out and say it, but he seems confident he can win the starting middle linebacker job.

"I take things a day at a time, just laying one brick as perfectly as possible as I can, and whatever happens, happens," Goodson said. "I have tremendous, tremendous, tremendous – not to sound arrogant or anything – faith in my game. That's not a knock on anyone, as well. They're all great people. We have a great room."

Signed to a one-year contract worth \$2.4 million in March, Goodson will compete for Mike 'backer job with the likes of second-year pros Mack Wilson and Sione Takitaki and 2020 third-round pick Jacob Phillips out of LSU.

"As far as competition, I compete with myself," he said. "That's my biggest opponent. I compete with myself every single day. I know that sounds kind of cliché and guys use that and say that a lot. The way that I visualize the game mentally and the way that I prepare for the game mentally, I go at myself a lot and dig into myself a lot."

Likewise, he's not concerned about filling the shoes of Pro Bowl middle linebacker Joe Schobert, who signed with the Jaguars in free agency for \$10.5 million a year.

"Like I said earlier, I feel very confident in my game," he said. "If you ask me, I will just tell you that I prepare and I'm able to perform as well as any other linebacker in the league, not just to point out one guy. I feel very confident in that with the opportunity given."

Originally a fourth-round pick of the Giants out of Clemson, Goodson, 26, bet on himself with the one-year deal with the Browns.

"You can sort of say that," he said. "It was just a great opportunity here in Cleveland. I definitely wanted to be here."

And if all goes as planned, he sees that one year evolving into more.

"For sure, I definitely do," he said.

The elder statesman on a young corps, he plans to lead the charge in the room and on the field.

"[My mindset is] to get these guys better, including myself, for us to be the best linebacker corps across the league," he said. "That's my job, and that's why they brought me here. I'm looking forward to that. I'm up for the challenge."



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Despite opportunities at all three linebacker spots in defensive coordinator Joe Woods' 4-3 base, Goodson sees himself as the man in the middle.

"I love the middle linebacker spot," he said. "To be able to call it and to be able to be on both sides on multiple plays, I love playing in the middle."

What's more, it gives him a chance to direct traffic on the field, which he loves.

"As a middle linebacker and especially as long as I've been playing, that leadership role is something that you just inherit," he said. "It's something that I'm definitely looking forward to being an addition there for those guys."

Goodson emulated longtime Steelers linebacker Levon Kirkland, now the Cardinals outside linebackers coach, in part because they hail from the same hometown of Lamar, South Carolina.

"He was the first football player that I could comprehend or nourish mentally," Goodson said. "Him and everything that he stood for, he stood for a lot of the right things and still does. He's a great guy and a great mentor. The way that he played the game, hard-nosed and just a hard-nosed guy that can fly around. It is definitely one of my first visuals of just a linebacker of this period."

Traded from the Giants to the Packers on Sept. 2 for a seventh-round pick, the 6-1, 242-pound Goodson started nine of his 15 games for the Packers in 2019, recording 37 tackles.

He also started a career-high 13 games for the Giants in 2018, totaling 61 tackles.

In his four seasons, he's totaled 160 tackles and two interceptions. He's played for two former Browns head coaches in former Giants head coach Pat Shurmur and Mike Pettine, the Packers' defensive coordinator. The fifth-year pro traded teams this offseason with former Browns linebacker Christian Kirksey, who signed a two-year deal with the Packers on Monday worth \$16 million.

In terms of pff.com rankings, Goodson was higher than Schobert in 2019. He was the No. 50 linebacker among those with at least 20% of the snaps and Schobert was 58th. Goodson was also 17th in tackling compared to 44th for Schobert.

But he wants to be known for more than just wrapping up.

"I kind of wanted to say something about that, as well, but not to really dig into it," he said. "Yes, I am great at [tackling], but as far as the defense that we're in now, I feel like it shows the upside of my game a little bit more. As far as covering and stuff, I feel very confident in fulfilling those roles, as well."

He felt right away he'd be a perfect fit in Woods' attack-minded, strip-minded defense.



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“I know him from winning the Super Bowl in Denver and him in San Francisco,” Goodson said. “As far as the scheme goes, I feel like I fit in perfectly, which was another big reason why I decided to come here and chose here. Being able to be aggressive, play aggressive and fly around, I just love it.”

He’s been impressed with the of the coaching staff in general during the Virtual Period of the offseason program, which includes a lot of Zoom meetings.

“We meet every single day and Joe and (Head) Coach (Kevin Stefanski), those guys, they do an awesome job of prepping us and quizzing us and doing everything in their power and will that they can do,” he said. “We’re doing a lot of other things that a lot of other teams are not doing. I commend those guys on setting that standard.”

The Zoom calls have also given him a chance to bond with his new teammates.

“It’s hard to explain the camaraderie that comes with the locker room, so we’re trying to fill that void of us not being around each other,” he said. “When we’re on those calls and things of that nature, guys are trying to let loose, but not be disrespectful, and show their personality. It’s important that we all have a feel for each other. Mack is pretty funny. He is a funny guy, as well as Taki.

“We always have a brief moment to just share and talk about how things are going outside of football and outside of learning the scheme. I feel like we are doing a great job as far as that goes. The camaraderie in the linebacker room is great.”

If Goodson has his way, it will carry over to the field.



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Jason Tarver likes 'high energy' from Jacob Phillips, eager to see how rookie LB fits in Browns defense

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/jason-tarver-likes-high-energy-from-jacob-phillips-eager-to-see-how-rookie-lb-fi>

Jacob Phillips doesn't need to become a top player in his first season in the NFL.

Phillips, selected in the third round of the 2020 draft, is the youngest player in a linebackers room full of youth. The group lacks experience, but it has players who should be able to hold their own in a starting position. A rookie third-round pick isn't commonly given that task, and that's OK.

But just because Phillips isn't expected to latch on to a big role in his first season with the Browns doesn't mean he can't.

Jason Tarver, tasked with sorting the linebackers competition in his first year as the Browns' linebackers coach, won't rule anyone out for a starting position until depth charts are finalized, and so far, he's liked what he's seen from Phillips.

All of their work together has been through Zoom meetings and individual video review, but Tarver can already see the potential Phillips brings to Cleveland.

"Jacob is a very smart, productive young man with high energy," Tarver said. "He's a winner, and he has good length and top speed and power, which has improved throughout the offseason. It's different because you're not on the field with everybody. What Zoom allows you to do is spend time in different little groups so everyone can know everybody and have a feel for who they are. JP has done a good job of it."

Tarver is right — Phillips is a winner. He was the leading tackler last season for LSU, the 2019 National Champions, and gave opposing running backs a difficult time if they managed to burst through the interior and into his grasp.

Phillips rarely had a missed tackle last season, and he could develop sooner rather than later into a formidable middle linebacker with the Browns, who need to replace veteran linebackers Joe Schobert and Christian Kirksey at the position.

The Browns will select their replacements from a pool of eight other linebackers competing with Phillips. The competition is truly wide open, and Phillips has boosted his stock by taking time to learn both outside linebacker positions and expanding on his knowledge of the middle spot.

"He's a good box player who has gotten more and more productive as he went through the year on a championship team," Tarver said. "Jacob has the skill set for all (linebacker positions), and that was what we wanted. We wanted football intelligence. We wanted length and speed, and he has those. His skillset really fits for any of those spots."



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Phillips has been eager to seize one of those positions since the Browns called his name during the draft. He vowed to do everything he could to help bring the same success he had in college over to Cleveland, and while it's tough to show progress in the virtual parameters of the offseason, Phillips has stayed true to his word.

His willingness to learn more about playing as an outside linebacker has proven that, and it might pay off in his first season. Aside from B.J. Goodson, the oldest linebacker on the Browns at 27, Mack Wilson, Sione Takitaki and Tae Davis, no other linebacker has received a steady week-to-week flow of snaps at any point in their professional careers.

If Phillips shows he can play all three positions, there will be plenty of opportunities to see the field.

"I feel as though I will be given an opportunity in Cleveland," Phillips said after he was drafted. "I'm ready to work. I'm ready to put in every ounce that I can to succeed and help the team win. I just want to make sure that I bring that winning tradition I had in college to Cleveland."

Tarver won't know how close Phillips is to a potential starting role until training camp. It could be by Week 1 of 2020 ... or 2021. There's no rush.

The least Phillips can do now, however, is make a strong first impression, no matter what he's been asked from his coaches.

Tarver checked that box a long time ago.

"He's very smart, and he wants to know all the positions," Tarver said. "He does a heck of a job of knowing what's about to happen."



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Sione Takitaki preparing to 'fly around' in 2nd year on Browns defense

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/sione-takitaki-preparing-to-fly-around-in-2nd-year-on-browns-defense>

Sione Takitaki won't have to worry about being comfortable when he returns to Cleveland for the first practices of his second year as a Browns linebacker.

Takitaki, a 2019 third-round draft pick, will know exactly what to expect when training camp — and a thick competition for a starting linebacker role — starts in two months. He'll know where to line up, who to cover and where to run.

In other words, he'll no longer feel like a rookie.

"I feel more prepared," Takitaki said in a recent interview. "Not that I wasn't prepared last year, but I can go into this year with X's and O's and little things that I need to work on. I feel like this year, I can definitely tune into those things."

Last spring, Takitaki's focus was on the scouting combine and improving his draft stock between his final college football game and the first day of the draft. As a mid-to-late-round draft projection, Takitaki needed to push his body to ensure his odds of not only getting drafted, but sticking around after training camp, were high. He didn't have a playbook to study, coaches to meet or players to mesh with. His focus was on himself.

In Year 2, Takitaki's offseason mentality hasn't changed. He's still focused on himself, but it's a bit different. He doesn't need to prepare for a 40-yard dash or see how many reps he knock out on a bench press. He also knows he has the aggressiveness and raw power to make tackles against NFL players.

Now, his offseason priorities are more intricate. The Browns have a new defensive coordinator in Joe Woods, who was a defensive backs coach for the San Francisco 49ers last season, so Takitaki has a new playbook to learn and, well, that's about it.

"Last year, I was preparing for Combine stuff. This year, it's just specifically football," Takitaki said. "Last year, I was learning where I should line up, and I was playing slow. Now, with all these new coaches, I can come in and play fast."

That's not to say that Takitaki is taking it easy this offseason. His daily workload still includes two hours of early-morning weight lifting and a few more hours of studying and meetings with coaches and players.

But that's what an offseason should be for non-rookies. Takitaki has enjoyed it, even though each player has needed to adapt to the virtual offseason program the NFL has deployed amid the COVID-19 pandemic.



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Takitaki has enjoyed the remoteness of the offseason and has split time in California and Utah to see family. Sure, he'd rather be in Cleveland, but he's found it a tad easier to zone into film when he's alone in his own space.

"Even though I had a year to learn all this, I feel like this way of learning has benefitted me," he said. "I'm able to pick it up quicker because I'm 1-on-1 in a room where it's nice and quiet. You can kind of lock yourself out and jot down all the notes."

It also helps that Takitaki is at the end of his acclimation from the college level to the pros. He played in 15 games and made 21 tackles last season, and now he's preparing for a bigger role in the field in his second year.

Takitaki opened eyes from the start of training camp last season with a big-hit ability. He never shied away from a tackle, but he needed more development in pass protection. There's more to the linebacker position than stopping the run, so Takitaki has honed in on never missing an assignment and keeping his footwork in check against tight ends.

"I didn't want to say I struggled at it, but I definitely wasn't out there as one of those (coverage) guys," Takitaki said. "This offseason, I emphasized drops and one-on-one coverage. I know that come Year 2, those things are going to improve by a lot."

The Browns have one of the youngest linebacker rooms in the league but are hoping to see big leaps from Takitaki, Mack Wilson and a batch of other young talent. They signed B.J. Goodson, a five-year veteran, to compensate for the departures of Joe Schobert and Christian Kirksey, but they believe their current depth is strong enough to make the defense work.

Takitaki will have a chance to show he can start in Week 1. He's a strong candidate to fill in the "Will" linebacker position, or the weakside linebacker, and provide depth from the "Mike" position, which lines up left of the "Will." Takitaki said he's been told to focus on the "Will" position ahead of training camp, but he has college experience at both positions.

"They want me to play 'Will', so I'm excited to do that," he said. "It's a fast defense. You can fly around, and it's definitely my style. I feel comfortable at the 'Will' or the 'Mike.'"

There's that word again: "comfortable." Even though he's playing under a new coach and the pressure of plugging into a starting role, he feels at ease. That's how the second-year transition for an NFL player should be.

For Takitaki, it might be what elevates his game to the next level.

"It's going to be a good time," he said. "I know people are sleeping on us, but it's all right. We're gonna make it happen."



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Alex Van Pelt sees 'great opportunity' as Browns offensive coordinator

By Andrew Gribble, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/alex-van-pelt-sees-great-opportunity-as-browns-offensive-coordinator>

The early meetings have already stirred the excitement inside new Browns offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt. Watching film of the key players who will play the biggest roles in 2020 and beyond elevate it even more.

Van Pelt is already hard at work with head coach Kevin Stefanski and the experienced coaches who surround them in all directions as the Browns look to bring the best out of the talent they have at a number of offensive positions.

"To have the opportunity to come in and help build an offense from the ground up is exciting," Van Pelt said. "There are starting points, but to get to work with those guys and have Kevin in there just kind of make it our offense from Day 1 is pretty cool. The most important thing now is to get this system in place and make it as easy and friendly for the players so we can get off the ground and start rolling.

"You understand the passion of the Browns fans and the toughness of the city and the grittiness of the city. That's obviously appealing. Having the opportunity to come here and work for the Haslams and to have the talent that's here right now on board with the offense is a great opportunity."

Van Pelt, after two seasons as quarterbacks coach in Cincinnati, knows the personnel well after squaring off with the Browns four times in the last two years. And with 15 years of experience coaching quarterbacks, running backs and wide receivers -- on top of the decade he logged as an NFL player -- Van Pelt brings the kind of diverse skill set to the position Stefanski -- a versatile, experienced offensive coach himself -- knew he wanted when he took the reins as head coach of the Browns.

"We were looking for a guy that could come in here and really work together with the offensive staff that's in place, work with me as we all talk about our vision for what we want our offense to look like," Stefanski said. "Just be able to bring this all together, be able to take the great ideas from the offensive staff and mold this thing into the Browns offense, Browns system."

Van Pelt broke a number of Dan Marino's records during his playing days at the University of Pittsburgh and became only the fifth collegiate player to throw for 2,000 yards in four consecutive seasons. It was there where Van Pelt got his first taste of West Coast offense principles under coach Paul Hackett, a former Browns offensive coordinator (1981-82) who later worked under legendary 49ers coach Bill Walsh.

An eighth-round pick by his hometown Steelers in the 1993 NFL Draft, Van Pelt later signed with the Buffalo Bills and found a home as both a player and coach. Van Pelt backed up Hall of Famer Jim Kelly at the start of his career and did the same for a number of others from 1995-2003. He appeared in 31 games and made 11 starts, eight of which came during the 2001 season.



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"I think so highly of Alex from that regard because he played the position at a high level collegiately and in the pros," Stefanski said. "When you're a backup quarterback, there's so much that goes into that from a preparation standpoint. It's no surprise then that a lot of those guys become great coaches because they understand what it takes to prepare for an NFL game from that position when you're not getting any reps oftentimes. I just think that's made him a better coach."

Van Pelt spent two years in Buffalo after his playing career as a radio analyst before heading overseas in 2005 to coach the quarterbacks and call plays for the Frankfurt Galaxy (NFL Europe). He returned to Buffalo one year later to join the Bills' staff in 2006 as a volunteer assistant. He quickly rose the ranks from there, going from a quality control coach to quarterbacks coach (2008) before taking over as offensive coordinator in 2009.

After two years as the quarterbacks coach in Tampa Bay, Van Pelt got the opportunity to diversify his coaching resume as the running backs coach in Green Bay. Working under Mike McCarthy, who was a graduate assistant at Pitt during Van Pelt's playing days, Van Pelt got to know the intricacies of a new position for two seasons before shifting to quarterbacks coach in 2014.

"It's definitely helped. There's no question," Van Pelt said. "That was a great opportunity for me to learn more about offensive football and how the running back mind thinks. That was huge and beneficial. Also, he allowed me to coach receivers for a year when I was coaching the quarterbacks. To have that group in the room, it broadens your perspective of offensive football."

Van Pelt, of course, worked closely with Aaron Rodgers as quarterbacks coach from 2014-17, a stretch in which Rodgers completed 64 percent of his passes for 14,305 yards, 125 touchdowns and just 26 interceptions. In 2016, Rodgers led the NFL with 40 touchdown passes and became just the second QB in NFL history (Tom Brady, 2015) to post 600-plus attempts and seven or fewer INTs in a season. Rodgers was named NFL MVP in 2014 after totaling 4,381 passing yards, 38 touchdowns, five interceptions and a 112.2 rating.

"As much as we worked together, I probably learned just as much from him as I was able to teach him," Van Pelt said. "Just having those experiences with an elite player and being able to work side by side with him every day has helped me so much as a coach."

Van Pelt's two seasons in Cincinnati tasked him to work with a veteran (Andy Dalton) and multiple players at the early stages of their respective careers (Jeff Driskel, Ryan Finley). He embraced both sides of the challenge and is chomping at the bit to work with Baker Mayfield, who will enter his third NFL season in 2020.

"I evaluated him as a QBs coach for the draft and I was obviously impressed," Van Pelt said. "Playing against him for the last two years, you see the type of competitor he is, the type of player he is on the field, loves the game, plays it with passion, those are all the things you're looking for in a great player."

The players around Mayfield draw a similar response from Van Pelt, who inherits an offense that produced two 1,000-yard wide receivers (Jarvis Landry and Odell Beckham Jr.) and an 1,000-yard running back (Nick Chubb) in the same season for the first time in franchise history. Van Pelt sees



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those players' respective skill sets meshing well with what the Browns want to do on offense under his watch.

"It all starts with the run game and the play-action off it and the keepers that come off from the action," Van Pelt said. "Obviously having Nick is huge and Kareem (Hunt), those two are two of the best in the league. The outside receivers are tremendous players. To be able to come in and put an offense together with two 1,000 yard receivers and a 1,400 yard rusher is pretty exciting as a coach."

Months remain before those players will have a shot at compiling yards in 2020. The work is just beginning, and Van Pelt will be a main figure in the collective effort to rejuvenate the Browns' offensive attack.

"I think his work with the different guys he's had over his career is very impressive," Stefanski said. "Just like me, he's been in a ton of different systems. There's a really fun discussion when we put up a play and say, 'what'd you call this or how'd you teach this?'"

"I think we're really trying to get to the bottom of how we want to run the Browns system next year."



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Jamie Gillan adjusts to life in pandemic, aims for consistency, confidence in Year 2

By Scott Petrak, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2020/11/11/jamie-gillan-adjusts-to-life-in-pandemic-aims-for-consistency-confidence-in-year-2/>

As the coronavirus pandemic ambushed the world and shut down Ohio in the spring, punter Jamie Gillan had time on his hands and a desire to help.

He's friends with restaurant owners and chefs in the Tremont area of Cleveland in which he lives and volunteered to hand out, and even deliver, meals. So some Clevelanders got a surprise when they pulled up to the restaurant or opened their door and found a long-haired Scotsman with a rugby background, bulging muscles and a huge left leg providing their dinner.

"It was funny, sometimes I would hand out food, 'Oh, you're the Browns punter,'" Gillan, who also pulled a couple of shifts in the kitchen, told The Chronicle-Telegram by phone recently. "Yeah, have a great meal."

Gillan tried to make the best of the pandemic but, like far too many others, his life has been repeatedly disrupted.

He bounced around in search of places to kick, eventually returning to his family in Maryland when Northeast Ohio closed its football fields. He and his girlfriend got the disease — he never figured out how — then he lost taste and smell. Now he's reining in his outgoing personality and spending more time at home to follow the team's protocols and keep his teammates safe.

"Let's say I wanted to go in somewhere that had way more people than there should be, and then bring COVID in (to Browns headquarters), I'd feel awful for that," Gillan said.

The pandemic also canceled the preseason, which hurt Gillan, who's in his second NFL season and only began punting a handful of years ago after coming over from Scotland. After an inconsistent start and a left groin injury, he's settled in.

He ranks 24th in the NFL with a 44.8-yard average — down from 46.2 as a rookie — but he averaged 53 yards on the three punts over the last two games before the bye.

"It's all just keep grinding through it," he said. "There's always going to be ups and downs. When you feel personally like you're in a small down, you just work harder to get out of it. That's the only way I know how to do it.

"When you see one or a couple really fly off your foot, you're back in your zone and your elements. It's nice to feel that way and you just keep building off that."

MAN ABOUT TOWN

Gillan became a fan favorite as soon as he opened his mouth in Berea. The Scottish accent was endearing enough, but Gillan also told his long shot NFL story that included stumbling into football,



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attending historically Black college Arkansas Pine-Bluff sight unseen and making the most out of a couple of NFL tryouts.

His zest for life and everyman persona were on display when he learned he'd made the team as a rookie while drinking at The Flying Monkey. His dad, a member of the Royal Air Force, was with him, and the neighborhood bar erupted when it heard the good news.

Gillan became a fixture in Tremont, easily recognizable and fitting in seamlessly. So when chef and restaurant owner Dante Boccuzzi asked him to lend a hand during the shutdown to feed people in the community, Gillan didn't hesitate.

"Because they're my pals, they're my buds," he said. "If I had asked Dante or one of my buds to come and help me out with something, I know they would find time. It's just what friends do.

"Especially with having a bunch of time on my hands because of COVID and stuff in my little apartment, my day was about a little bit of lifting, stretching, punting, walking Bear (a German shepherd) and then I've got a whole day of nothing."

His days are fuller during the season, but in normal times he'd stop at a pub, connect with friends and have a pint. That's much tougher to do given Ohio's laws and the NFL's protocols.

Ohio set a record Tuesday with 6,508 cases over a 24-hour period, and the NFL sees more teams affected by the virus every day. Quarterback Baker Mayfield was placed on the COVID-19 list Sunday and forced to miss practice Monday after a Browns staff member tested positive.

"Yeah, it's been just a little different," Gillan said. "People you want to go catch up with and stuff and realize you can't really do that. But whatever is best for the team. So I'm for the safety of everybody else, I don't want to go in and not do what the protocol says.

"So just kinda staying at home. And then just spending time with my dog and my girlfriend."

He laughed when it was suggested The Flying Monkey might go out of business without his patronage.

"I will not let that happen," he said.

TASTE DUDS

Gillan's drink of choice is a pint of Guinness. When the virus wiped out his taste buds, the dark Irish stout wasn't strong enough to be an exception.

"It didn't taste anything like it," he said. "It was so weird. It was just the texture that allowed you to almost know what it tastes like."

No taste? Like a domestic light beer?



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“Oh, no. Never,” Gillan said.

He felt like he had a “bad cold” for the first couple of days after contracting the virus.

“Went away and then I was doing my quarantine for a couple weeks, and I was just going to the fridge and then, boom, my smell went and then my taste went,” he said. “I didn’t get my smell and taste back for about a month, fully.”

He spent the offseason in Cleveland and Maryland, kicking with Bear and working out. He built a makeshift gym in his parents’ garage and posted pictures on social media looking like a power lifter with giant muscles rippling.

“The Scottish Hammer” isn’t a typical punter.

A NEW YEAR

Veteran special teams coordinator Mike Priefer was in Gillan’s corner from the start a year ago as he made the team instead of reliable veteran Britton Colquitt. Priefer wants Gillan to reduce his inconsistency and gain confidence in Year 2.

“He has a great personality, I think that is part of his deal,” Priefer said. “When he is bubbly, having fun and feeling good about himself, he is a really good performer. When he is thinking too much and he is worried about certain things, he is not quite as consistent.

“It is my job to actually keep him loose, believe it or not. I love Jamie’s personality. I think it adheres to him being a successful specialist in this league. The more experience he gets, the more confidence he gets and the better he is going to be.”

In a year of change, Gillan had another major adjustment to make when kicker Austin Seibert was cut. They entered the league together and figured to be a tandem for years, but Seibert missed two kicks in the opener and was gone. Gillan doubles as the holder for place-kicks.

“It was really tough to see him go because that’s my guy,” Gillan said. “And regardless of his couple misses, he’s a phenomenal kicker and a great guy.”

Cody Parkey took over and has made 32 of 34 kicks. While Seibert preferred the ball more vertical, Parkey wants Gillan to lean it forward.

Gillan worked tirelessly on the snapping machine to perfect the change. He wants to succeed for Priefer in every way.

“I’d catch a bullet for him,” he said. “He put his trust in me last year, he gave me the shot to even have an opportunity in the NFL.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Jamie Gillan practicing with rugby-playing father, catching up on family time in offseason away from Cleveland

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/jamie-gillan-practicing-with-rugby-playing-father-catching-up-on-family-time-in->

A year ago, Jamie Gillan wasn't sure where his future would take him next.

He had just signed a contract as an undrafted free agent punter with the Cleveland Browns, but he faced stiff competition to make the roster in the fall. Britton Colquitt, a nine-year NFL veteran preparing to spend his fourth season in Cleveland, was in front of him.

Gillan, who was only 22, was going to receive plenty of reps in training camp, but he needed to shine if he wanted to remain with the Browns.

Now, Gillan is known by most Browns fans as "The Scottish Hammer" and is one of the most popular — and fun — special teams players in recent Browns memory.

"This might sound silly, but I don't take myself too seriously," Gillan said. "I try to stay pretty relaxed, and I think that helps my mindset a lot. I don't get too worried about having a bad practice during the week because every day is a new day. You're going to have bad days, and I know that I got to go out on a Sunday with a clear head."

That was the mindset Gillan used last season in training camp, when he wowed just about everyone on the practice fields with booming punts that might've soared higher than planes taking off from the nearby Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. In the preseason, Gillan put his leg strength on display with multiple 60-yard moonshots, including a season-long 74-yard blast.

Gillan had done enough for special teams coordinator Mike Priefer. He made the cut and is now set to be the Browns' punter for the foreseeable future.

"I think it would have been very difficult to let a guy like Jamie out of the building," Priefer said at the end of preseason. "He is so talented and has such a big leg swing. The sky is the limit for him."

Priefer is right — the sky might literally be the limit for Gillan, who's continued to stay in shape and practice his skills from his Southern Maryland home as Browns players await a safe return from the COVID-19 pandemic and report back to Cleveland.

As a punter, however, Gillan can afford to live a more relaxing lifestyle. Aside from weightlifting and punting sessions at a local field with his dad, a former rugby player, there's not much more Gillan can do to make up for his time away from Berea. He doesn't have an endless playbook to study, and he's already developed a close relationship with long snapper Charley Hughlett and kicker Austin Seibert.

So, after the workouts, Gillan has embraced his extra time with his mom, dad and sister. He didn't see them much when he spent his youth in boarding school at Merchiston Castle School in



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Edinburgh, Scotland, and he certainly won't have as much time with them when football activities resume. He's watched Netflix and television with his mom and sister, and he built a squat rack with his dad, who uses a rugby-style toss to "snap" the ball to Gillan in his punting practices.

"I'm very blessed that my family is healthy right now," Gillan says as he playfully knocked a beam on the wooden deck behind him to squash the jinx. "We do a lot of chilling out on the porch. I'm really enjoying my family's company, and we try to solve all of the world's problems at this table right here outside. That's about it. In the morning, we work out and do it all over again."

For Gillan, it's a lifestyle that suits him best. His easygoing nature helped him win the Browns job last season, so he doesn't need to change much before he settles into his second year in the league.

When games begin, Gillan hopes he's not needed at all — that means the Browns are scoring touchdowns. But he'll always be ready.

"No punting. We're gonna score," he said with a laugh. "I just got to stay humble and keep working really hard. I can't take it for granted. I got to keep climbing the ladder."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Baker Mayfield has no regrets about saying he'll 'absolutely' kneel for the national anthem: 'Right is right and wrong is wrong'

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/08/baker-mayfield-has-no-regrets-about-vowing-to-knee-for-the-national-anthem-right-is-right-and-wrong-is-wrong-its-a-human-rights-issue.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield doubled down Friday on his statement that he "absolutely" will kneel for the national anthem this season to support racial equality.

"I do not have any regrets," Mayfield said on a Zoom call before the first full practice. "Being in my position, which is a blessing, being out on a platform to where I can speak on issues that are just wrong. Right is right, and wrong is wrong. There is a human rights issue that has been going on for a long time, and I believe in that."

He stressed that taking a knee is not a sign of disrespect to those who have fought for our freedom.

"It's nothing against military or anybody who served," he said. "Anybody that knows my history knows that I completely support military and the people that serve our country for the right reasons and do it for justice. The people that don't know that, that's OK – just take your time and take a second to get to know me. It is a human rights issue. There is right, and there is wrong."

In response to a fan on Instagram last month asking him if he'd kneel, he responded "absolutely."

He took a lot of heat for it on social media, but he's fine with that. Teammates such as Jarvis Landry appreciated it.

"Obviously, everybody hopefully recognizes the problem and understands that there is a problem that is going on," Landry said. "From a professional athlete standpoint, we understand our platform, and being able to use that on the biggest stage is something that can continue to keep conversations going, continue to raise awareness and continue to call things out. Much respect to him for that. Like I told him, I texted him and I told him much respect for that."

Kevin Stefanski, who earlier said the Browns will decide together whether or not to deal, has urged his players to 'get in the arena' to fight racism and respects Mayfield's decision.

"I'm proud of all of our guys that have done the research, have educated themselves and have been very thoughtful about their actions and about their words, and Baker certainly fits into that category – someone who is passionate – but he has listened before doing," Stefanski said on a Zoom call Aug. 7th. "I just think that's so important."

"Social justice is something that we're going to constantly as a team talk about. We're going to make sure that we're all talking and listening to each other and then ultimately doing. Baker is a great example of that."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Home cooking, team-bonding trips and no interviews: Inside Baker Mayfield's low-key offseason

By Jake Trotter, ESPN.com

https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/29745264/all-ball-baker-mayfield-enters-year-3-no-excuses

BEREA, Ohio -- Before knowing that the coronavirus pandemic would sweep the country, Kevin Stefanski knew he needed to go meet his quarterback. The new Cleveland Browns head coach phoned his father, a front-office executive with the Detroit Pistons, to inform him he was headed to Austin, Texas, the following morning to see Baker Mayfield.

As fate would have it, Ed Stefanski was actually flying to Austin the same February day on a scouting mission for the Pistons. The Stefanskis had even booked reservations at the same hotel.

The next day, Kevin Stefanski introduced himself to Mayfield's family, including his wife, Emily, parents and brother. Then that night, as Stefanski and Mayfield went to dinner together, Ed Stefanski dropped by the restaurant to say hello.

"Tremendously valuable," Mayfield says now of that day. "For us to establish that relationship ... getting to meet his dad ... talk about things off the field and just for him to see what I'm about and for me to see what he was about. You hear all these things, but until you can sit down and have a conversation with somebody, that's when you truly get to know someone. A big value that looking back on I think we'll appreciate."

Weeks later, the magnitude of COVID-19 became a reality in the United States. That soon transformed the Browns' offseason into a virtual one. Mayfield and Kevin Stefanski did not see each other in person again until late last month when Mayfield reported for training camp. But that meeting in February set the foundation for what the Browns are hoping will be a bounce-back campaign for Mayfield heading into his pivotal third season in the NFL.

"From that moment until now, I've been very impressed with Baker," Stefanski said. "He's all ball."

From that moment in 2018 when they picked Mayfield No. 1 overall in the draft, the Browns have been all Mayfield.

Since then, Browns owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam have fired a general manager, three head coaches and two playcallers in an attempt to find the right combination for Mayfield, even if all the turnover hampered his development along the way.

This offseason, new general manager Andrew Berry doubled down on the franchise's belief in Mayfield and broke the bank to upgrade the offense around him. Berry committed a franchise-record \$63 million in guaranteed money to sign Pro Bowl tight end Austin Hooper, right tackle Jack Conklin and backup quarterback Case Keenum -- the latter primarily to serve as a sounding board for Mayfield. Berry also used the 10th overall pick in the draft on Alabama tackle Jedrick Wills Jr., selected to be Mayfield's blindside protector.



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Prior to that, the Haslams, with chief strategy officer Paul DePodesta leading the search, handpicked Stefanski, who once coached Mayfield's childhood football hero, Brett Favre, in Minnesota. Stefanski will try to help Mayfield fully realize the potential he flashed as a rookie, which then dissipated in a dismal and dysfunctional season in Cleveland last year.

Now, despite Mayfield being just the fourth quarterback in NFL history to endure four different head coaches in his first three seasons with one team, the pressure has shifted squarely on him to deliver.

The supporting cast, featuring Hooper, wideouts Odell Beckham Jr. and Jarvis Landry, and running backs Nick Chubb and Kareem Hunt -- all Pro Bowl players -- might be the envy of any quarterback. The offensive line, behind Conklin and Wills, could be the most improved in the league. The Stefanski scheme, heavy on play-action, seems better suited to Mayfield's skill set.

With all of that in place, the excuses of the past are gone. The onus is on Mayfield to prove he is indeed Cleveland's franchise quarterback and capable of turning the Browns into a winner.

"I think it's an unbelievable opportunity, with the moves we've made, the pieces we brought in," Mayfield said. "I'm extremely excited about that.

"All that matters is this year. A new team, a new staff -- and we are ready to roll."

Mayfield, known for his flag-planting swagger, acknowledges that he lost his way last year. After tossing 21 interceptions on a 6-10 team, he even confessed to doubting himself -- a rare admission from the former two-time college walk-on so defined by self-confidence no matter the doubters.

"Not having that success, not finding out what was working, I think I tried different ways of trying to have that success, and I didn't find it," he said. "I lost myself in that, and I wasn't able to be who I [needed to be] for these guys."

The virtual offseason away, Mayfield says, provided him with time alone to rediscover himself mentally and recommit physically. Time he didn't always have last summer.

Coming off a season in which he broke an NFL rookie record with 27 touchdown passes, Mayfield became an even bigger star than he was at Oklahoma, where he won the Heisman Trophy. He spent time socializing in California. He got married there, as well. He filmed commercials and appeared on magazine covers, including ESPN The Magazine's.

This offseason, Mayfield turned down numerous media opportunities and agreed to only one interview -- a Zoom call in late May with Cleveland media arranged by the team. "Moving in silence," he called it then. "That's how I used to do it before getting on a bigger stage."

Instead of gallivanting on the coast, he and Emily stayed with Mayfield's parents while the house the couple bought on Lake Travis on the edge of Austin, Texas, was being renovated.



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Following their meeting, Mayfield poured his energy into consuming Stefanski's playbook. With offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt, who tutored Aaron Rodgers in Green Bay, Mayfield revamped his footwork, which cratered at times last year.

Mayfield led a players-only Zoom meeting every Thursday to foster locker room chemistry. He crashed other position group Zoom meetings to study what they were doing. He invited several of his offensive teammates to Austin in mid-May so they could finally work out together.

Before that, he helped recruit Hooper to join Cleveland, and in two phone calls over a 24-hour span, convinced No. 3 wide receiver Rashard Higgins to re-sign with the Browns, even though Higgins was being offered more money to play elsewhere.

Perhaps most impressively, though, Mayfield reshaped his body.

With so much happening last summer, including his wedding, Mayfield wasn't able to put as much time into his conditioning. By design, he also added weight to help him withstand the punishment of an NFL season, and to his credit, Mayfield has now started more consecutive games than any Browns quarterback since 1999.

But that extra weight also sapped his quickness and his ability to evade tacklers and scramble outside the pocket last season. Mayfield was sacked more often per passing attempt than any quarterback in the AFC. On top of that, Mayfield was fighting nagging injuries, which prevented him from working out as much he hoped.

"I was heavier than I was ever playing before," he said. "I needed to be able to have the scrambling ability and to be able to move in the pocket." Mobility is a requisite in Stefanski's offense, which relies on a quarterback's ability to roll out off play-action.

"As the quarterback of this team, you are the standard and you are what people follow, and I think he understands that now. We are ready to help him push that standard." Joel Bitonio on Mayfield

After the season, Mayfield altered his diet to rely on his wife's healthy home cooking, dishes they often post on Instagram. He committed to working with a nutritionist and a trainer. And when he arrived to camp, he had added four pounds of lean mass and cut his body fat. Beckham proclaimed this week that Mayfield even "has like four-pack" abs now.

"Physically, he did a hell of a job in the offseason of getting ready," Van Pelt said. "A lot of that is leaning down, losing a little bit of weight, and that is going to help him as far as his movement skills go. All the work that he has put in the offseason is definitely showing up on the field now in training camp."

The talent surrounding Mayfield on offense is undeniable. ESPN recently ranked Cleveland's running back unit No. 1 in the league, its wide receivers fifth, its offensive line sixth and its tight ends seventh.



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The biggest looming question is whether Mayfield can make it all work in Stefanski's system, which figures to begin with making it work with Beckham.

After then-general manager John Dorsey traded for Beckham last spring, the Browns became one of the heaviest bet-on teams to win the Super Bowl in Las Vegas. But together, the pairing failed to sniff its own expectations. And while Mayfield and Beckham always had each other's back in the media, the two struggled to find a rapport on the field. Beckham's sports hernia injury, suffered in training camp, prevented them from developing their chemistry in practice.

Playing through the injury, Beckham ranked 15th in the NFL with 132 targets, but just 131st in receptions per target, with a catch rate of only 56%. The duo's failure to get on the same page culminated in a loss at Denver in November. On a game-deciding fourth-and-4, Mayfield was criticized for not throwing to Beckham, who had dashed open along the sideline. Although neither Mayfield nor Beckham has commented on it, Mayfield had been expecting Beckham to run a mesh route across the middle of the field and cross paths with Landry, according to multiple sources from last year's team. Mayfield still tried to squeeze the ball to Landry, but the pass fell incomplete, dropping the Browns to 2-6 while turning their playoff aspirations into a long shot.

This week, Mayfield told NFL Network that his chemistry with Beckham is "sure as hell going to be a lot better than last year." Beckham, healthy again and thriving in training camp after undergoing surgery in January, agreed, then praised Mayfield's physical and mental state this camp.

"Of course, I'm going to say it's going to be better than last year," Beckham said. "As far as him, he looks great -- mentally, physically. He's doing great. He's just in a good place. As a teammate and as a guy who has always been a fan of Baker and as a brother, it's great to see him in this place."

Adding Hooper should only help in creating more favorable matchups for Beckham out wide. More crucially, Hooper should improve Mayfield's efficiency by giving him a reliable target over the middle and underneath the coverage that he desperately lacked in 2019.

Even though the Browns didn't have a tight end finish with more than 15 receptions last season, Mayfield was still more effective when two or more were on the field. According to ESPN Stats & Information research, Mayfield averaged 8.3 yards per passing attempt with nine touchdowns to just three interceptions and a QBR of 62 with multiple tight ends. With one or none, those numbers plummeted to 6.9 yards per attempt and a QBR of 49; Mayfield also threw 18 interceptions with just 13 touchdowns with one or no tight ends (Stefanski utilized multiple tight ends on the field 57% of the time as offensive coordinator in Minnesota last season, the highest rate in the NFL).

Before Hooper signed with them, the Browns pitched him on being the type of tight end that Baltimore Ravens Pro Bowler Mark Andrews was for Mayfield at Oklahoma, according to a league source. In 2017, the year Mayfield won the Heisman and the Sooners topped the nation in offense, Andrews led the team with 62 receptions, even as OU boasted a pair of future first-round wide receivers, Marquise Brown and CeeDee Lamb.

So far in camp, Mayfield and Hooper have been connecting as though they've played together for years.



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"I got in contact with him early on in the process so when I did sign, I already had an idea of where am I going, who is my quarterback and what is he all about," said Hooper, who had 75 catches, 787 yards and six touchdowns -- all career highs -- playing with quarterback Matt Ryan in Atlanta last year. "Baker, obviously talented, a strong arm. He has a real competitive fire. That really made me want to sign here."

Hooper immediately went to work out with Mayfield in Austin after signing, then returned in May with the other Browns players.

"Banked a few hundred reps with him, had a good time with him on and off the field and just kind of got a feel for him, his personality, his wife, his family and his friends and just kind of really see Baker the person," Hooper said. "I definitely think that was the initial spark that really helped our chemistry."

Mayfield addressed his teammates the first week of training camp. He told them that he didn't do enough last year to help them. He asked them to hold him accountable. And he vowed to be better in 2020.

"He let us know it was not enough last year, and he felt bad about it," Pro Bowl guard Joel Bitonio said. "From a leadership perspective this year, he has done everything right. He is trying to lead by example."

"Just looking at him when he showed up, he looked a lot better. His body looked better. He looked like he was moving really well. He looked strong. All the things you want to see in a quarterback. As the quarterback of this team, you are the standard and you are what people follow, and I think he understands that now. We are ready to help him push that standard."

That has translated to the practice field.

A flashpoint manifested last training camp when Mayfield cursed and screamed at his receivers, including Beckham, for not running back to him on a scramble drill. This year, Mayfield has remained vocal, but shown a softer touch. This week, he pulled Donovan Peoples-Jones aside and put his hand on the rookie wide receiver's helmet as he spoke to him.

"Baker is a really good teammate," Stefanski said. "I think he really understands his teammates. I think his teammates play hard for him. That just goes back to that thing he has that nobody can put a finger on and that the quarterback position has to have. You have to have 'it.' You have to make sure you bring your guys along."

Then, channeling his father, Stefanski utilized a hoops analogy.

"The No. 1 job of a quarterback is to make the guys around you play better. There are a bunch of ways to do that. It is like the point guard on a basketball team."



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Stefanski wasn't the only candidate for Cleveland's head-coaching job to fly to Austin to visit Mayfield. The week of the 2018 draft, New England offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels made the trip to Texas to tell Mayfield in person that the Patriots would be interested in drafting him, should he slide at all.

Before hiring Stefanski in January, the Browns interviewed McDaniels at their practice facility for eight hours. Given the previous relationship, Mayfield was intrigued by the possibility of playing for McDaniels this time. But so far, Mayfield couldn't be more impressed with Stefanski, dating back to their time together in February.

"That's the most important relationship on a team, between the head coach and the quarterback," said Browns backup quarterback Garrett Gilbert, who grew up with Mayfield in Austin. "And I think you can see the beginnings there of a very solid relationship. And I'd say you'd probably have to take that back to Coach Stefanski flying down to Austin. That shows a lot about him, but also, if you know Baker and understand Baker, a couple things that are most important to him are loyalty and, obviously, his family."

As one of the NFL's youngest head coaches, Stefanski, 37, is all ball, too. And together, he and Mayfield will attempt to achieve the NFL version of mission impossible: end the second-longest playoff drought in all of professional sports, now up to 18 years.

"I see a very committed football player who is ready to lead and who is excited to play," Stefanski said. "Baker has embraced all of that -- since the moment he and I got to know each other."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Baker Mayfield and his wife Emily donate \$50,000 to the Greater Cleveland Food Bank amid coronavirus pandemic

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/03/baker-mayfield-and-his-wife-emily-donate-50000-to-the-greater-cleveland-food-bank-and-will-match-donations.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Baker Mayfield and his wife are doing their part to help out and give back during the coronavirus pandemic.

They announced Thursday on Mayfield's Instagram account that they're donating \$50,000 to the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, at which they've volunteered. They're also urging others to donate to the match fund, which increased to \$150,000 with their donation.

"First off, our thoughts and prayers go out to everyone affected by this COVID-19 crisis," Emily said in a video posted on Mayfield's Instagram. "This is an unprecedented time for our country and for so many families and individuals alike. But what makes our country so great is how we come together and rally in times of crisis. Cleveland has always been the underdog, but we're also known for our hustle and our true grit. So it's time for us to all rally together and show everyone how we can come together for our fellow Clevelanders."

Mayfield urged others to donate even a small amount if they can.

"There's so many great people in Cleveland, so many great organizations," he said. "One that we're familiar with is the Greater Cleveland Food Bank and they continue to work around the clock and change in this climate of crisis right now and help everybody out that they can. That being said, Emily and I are going to donate \$50,000 into the match pool donation, so you know what, it's a point for us that we want to give back."

"We want to help out in any way we can and even if you guys can't help out, a dollar or ten dollars goes a long way. Whatever you do, we will match that, so please help out. Wherever you're at, whatever community you're in, anything matters, anything helps. We're all affected by this, so please click the link in our bio for the donation page. Love, thoughts and prayers out to everybody else, so prayers out."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Browns' QB Case Keenum: If Baker Mayfield's 'shoelace comes untied, I'm going to be ready to go'

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/03/browns-qb-case-keenum-if-baker-mayfields-shoelace-comes-untied-im-going-to-be-ready-to-go.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Case Keenum, who took the Vikings to the brink of the Super Bowl in 2017, is poised to step in and win games for the Browns if Baker Mayfield gets hurt or benched.

"If Baker's shoelace comes untied and he needs to maybe go get a drink of Gatorade at the water station, I'm going to be ready to go," Keenum said on a conference call Wednesday. "If I need to take a few snaps, I'm going to handle myself well and I know that I can."

Keenum, 32, knows he was brought in to be Mayfield's backup and mentor, but knows he'll sling it if his number is called.

"Coming in, obviously my role, one is to be ready to play," he said. "I know the situation with Baker, how he's played, and the investment the team has in him. I'm excited to help bring that room together, help bring an offense together and be the best team player I can be."

But Keenum, 32, is confident he can hold down the fort if needed. In eight seasons for five franchises, he's thrown 75 touchdowns against 47 interceptions and has a career rating of 85.3. He's gone 27-35 in his 62 starts, but hit his stride in 2017, highlighted by the Minnesota Miracle -- the walk-off game-winning 61-yard touchdown pass to Stephon Diggs against the Saints that catapulted Minnesota into the NFC Championship Game, where they lost to the eventual Super Bowl champion Eagles.

"I feel like I can play at a high level," he said. "I feel like I've played at a high level over the last few years. It may have not have shown in some of the wins and losses, but this league is tough. I feel like my trend has gone up in the way I've handled games."

Keenum, 32, stressed that he's not here to try to take Mayfield's job. He acknowledged, however, that this backup job was more desirable to him than others.

"I've come into situations where there's a competition, and I know this isn't one," he said. "This is one I talked about long before free agency even started with my agent and that there was quite a bit of quarterback musical chairs this year. When Tom Brady's a free agent, there's kind of an unspoken thing where you kind of wait to see where Tom Brady goes and you go somewhere else, type of situation. We knew how it was going to work with Brady, (Colts QB) Philip Rivers and a lot of other free agents who were available.

"We knew finding a situation where there was an attractive backup job was going to be kind of our priority, and we did that with the Browns. It worked out perfectly that the Browns were looking at me, and we had the Browns highlighted, as well."

Keenum realized Browns fans' passion are when Myles Garrett tried to sack him



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The lack of a QB controversy and unity in the QB room was of utmost importance, and part of the reason the Browns signed him to a three-year free agent deal worth \$18 million, including \$10 million guaranteed.

"I know coming in what my role is and that's nice," he said. "There's no uncertainty in the quarterback room. That's a place where we're solidified. We're one voice. We're not talking about different things to different people. I'm not going to go to the receivers and tell them to run this type of route and Baker is not going to tell them another route.

"Having a quarterback room, no matter how many guys are in there, be on the same page is crucial."

By the same token, Keenum is confident he can win games, and believes he's even better than during that magical 2017 season when he went 11-3 and 1-1 in the playoffs with new Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski as his position coach.

"There have been parts of my game that I've worked on and I've gotten better at each year," he said, "specifically, the drop-back game last year and different parts of my game each year before that. I'm constantly working on my craft. I'm constantly working on improving different areas of my game. Each year I've done something I haven't done before."

Keenum, who went 1-7 on a challenged Redskins team last year and 6-10 for the Broncos the year before, has seen it all, which makes him the perfect mentor for Mayfield, who's coming off a bad 2019 season. Among other things, Mayfield finished second-to-last in the NFL with a 78.8 rating and second in interceptions with 21.

"I've played a 17-, 18-game season and gone to the NFC Championship," Keenum said. "I've come in as a backup and helped lead teams in the middle of games and in the middle of seasons, as well. I've kind of been the Week 1 starter. I've been competing for a third-string job in training camp. I have been kind of all over the place so I know a lot of different situations, and nothing really surprises me. I don't get fazed by a whole lot.

"I'm going to keep plugging and keep moving along. I know this league needs quarterbacks who can play, and that's what I can do."

When Keenum agreed to terms last week, Mayfield was one of the first players to reach out.

"He shot me a text really as soon as the news broke. He was one of the first of many, which was really cool. It meant a lot to me," he said. "This league is an evolving door in a lot of ways. He's had it tough. He's gone through two or three offensive coordinators by now and two or three offenses in as many years. It's not that easy. He's finding that out. I've been in about eight or nine offenses in eight or nine years. I understand."

It's why Keenum is eager to "give my two cents wherever it might be needed. ... He was excited that I was on board. I think we already had the same goals in mind as far as bringing the team together and getting this ship headed in the right direction."



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Despite his familiarity with Stefanski and other coaches, including offensive line coach Bill Callahan who was with him in Washington last year, Keenum vowed to stay in his lane.

“[Mayfield’s] a good player,” Keenum said. “He could do just fine without me, and he has. I’m not saying that I’m going to be a coach. I’m not a coach. There are some great coaches in that room that are going to coach him up. I’m excited. I feel like the quarterback room is kind of a committee.”

Keenum has talked things over with Stefanski and offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt since coming on board and has a better lay of the land.

“The role, I know a little bit [more] about it now than first coming in,” he said. “It will change and evolve, and then we’ll see what it turns into during the season.”

Keenum, who’s on his fifth team in as many seasons, is also excited by the idea of staying put for awhile.

“It will be nice not to get used to moving again,” he said. “That was one of the things we looked at with our agent. We said, ‘Hey, where can we put down some roots and make this thing a little more permanent? I have been a captain on the past four teams I have been on. The leadership and the relationships you build, those will never go away ...’[But] to be in one place and be a part of something that they are building for more than one year, I’m truly excited. My wife is really excited. I can’t wait.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Browns notebook: Running back D'Ernest Johnson's 'Slow Grind' picking up speed

By Marla Ridenour, ohio.com

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2020/10/05/browns-dernest-johnsons-slow-grind-rewarded-after-nick-chubb-hurt/3622868001/>

D'Ernest Johnson's "Slow Grind" has started to pick up speed.

Signed as an undrafted free agent in May 2019, the Browns running back has been a core special teams player, notching just one carry for 5 yards in the first three games.

But on Sunday, when Nick Chubb went down with an injury to the medial collateral ligament in his right knee that will keep him out several weeks, the Browns called on Johnson to spell Kareem Hunt. As the Browns rolled up 307 rushing yards, Johnson led the way with 95 yards on 13 carries, both career-highs, in a 49-38 victory over the Dallas Cowboys at AT&T Stadium.

In 2018, University of South Florida product Johnson spent two months on a fishing boat trolling off the coast of Key West, Florida, for mahi mahi. He also worked as a personal trainer and spent eight weeks with the Orlando Apollos of the Alliance of American Football before it folded.

Now the player who founded a clothing line branded "Slow Grind," even wearing a face mask bearing the slogan he's lived by, may be about to see his tough journey take a dramatic turn. Browns running back D'Ernest Johnson (30) attempts to break the grasp of Dallas Cowboys linebacker Jaylon Smith (54) after running the ball for a first down in the second half Sunday in Arlington, Texas. The Cowboys' Antwaun Woods (99) and the Browns' JC Tretter (64) look on during the play.

"Coming out of high school, I always had to get it the hard way," Johnson said in a Zoom call Monday. "I always had to earn everything I did. I had to stay patient no matter what. Something could be right in front of me, and I had to just wait to go get it.

" 'Slow Grind' stands for staying focused on the ultimate goal. Sometimes the process does not come fast. It takes time. Right now, I am really in a slow grind process because of what happened and I got my opportunity. I have worked hard for it. It has been a long journey. I have just been trying to make sure I seize every moment of it."

Johnson said he spent the offseason working with Olympic gold medalist Tim Montgomery, whom Johnson also trained with before the 2019 season.

"I worked a lot on my speed and stuff like my balance and my footwork," Johnson said. "I feel like I am a better player than I was last year."

Browns coach Kevin Stefanski credited Johnson's work ethic and the way run game coordinator/running backs coach Stump Mitchell prepares his players for the success the Browns had against the Cowboys.



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“From the moment I got here and watching how he prepares and how he goes about his business, he grinds on this thing,” Stefanski said of Johnson. “Stump does a great job with that running back room and really holds all those guys accountable. He makes sure they’re ready to play and you saw that. D’Ernest was standing at the ready.”

Hunt, the 2017 NFL rushing champion with the Kansas City Chiefs, will now shoulder the load. But when Chubb left the game at the end of the first quarter, Hunt said he told Johnson the team needed him and said, “I need you, too, man.”

“Kareem is like a big brother,” Johnson said. “Kareem stays on top of me. He makes sure my mind is mentally ready. When it was my time to get in the game, he said, ‘Go out there and do your thing Slow Grind. Don’t think about anything. When your opportunity comes, make the best of it.’

“It definitely inspired me.... For him saying that, it made me want to go harder.”

Gift for mom

Denzel Ward said he gave his game-saving interception ball to his mother Nicole after he picked off a Dak Prescott pass intended for Amari Cooper at the Cleveland 4 with 1:36 remaining.

“For him to fight through the injuries he’s been fighting through, to answer the bell and play the way he’s playing and make that play at the end to seal the game I thought was outstanding,” Stefanski said.

Ward has been dealing with a groin injury, but has not missed a game. He downplayed its effect, saying, “If I’m out there on that field, I’m 100 percent. I feel great. If I’m out there ... I’m able to still run, cut, do everything I need to do.”

The fourth overall pick in the 2018 draft from Nordon High School and Ohio State said the interception — the Browns third takeaway of the day — “definitely meant a lot.”

“I try to do everything I can to help my team. I try to be that playmaker that they need and I know that I am,” Ward said on Zoom. “Glad that we finished it that way.”

‘Special’ team

With the Browns 3-1 for the first time since the 2001 season, there is a sense the long-suffering franchise might be on the cusp of success.

“This team can be special. We could be as special as we want to be,” Ward said. “It’s a total different team compared to last year or years past that I’ve been here. The coaching staff, the players, everything.”

Ward loves that defensive end Myles Garrett has taken his game to another level, recording strip sacks in three consecutive games.



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"Myles can keep this up as long as he wants to," Ward said. "Myles is in control of what he does. He's obviously a great player and the sky's the limit for him."

"It's exciting. I'm glad he's on my team for sure. You see him out there, it's not just about the tackle, he's going for the ball as well and trying to change the game."

Njoku returning

Stefanski said the Browns should have tight end David Njoku back from injured reserve this week after he suffered a sprained MCL in the Sept. 13 season opener at Baltimore.

Drafted in the first round in 2017, Njoku showed his value in the tight-end friendly offense against the Ravens, with three receptions for 50 yards and a 1-yard touchdown. His day included an acrobatic catch over defensive back Tavon Young for a 28-yard gain.

On Aug. 1, Njoku rescinded his mid-July trade request and declared, "I'm all in Cleveland," after meetings with some in the organization, including General Manager Andrew Berry. In 2019, Njoku suffered a broken wrist and a concussion in Week 2, then clashed with former coach Freddie Kitchens.

Injury update

Stefanski said defensive tackle Larry Ogunjobi suffered an oblique injury at Dallas and they will "see how that goes throughout this week." No. 3 receiver KhaDarel Hodge is "week to week" after injuring his hamstring in pregame warmups.

Defensive tackle Sheldon Richardson limped off with 5:29 remaining, but Stefanski said Richardson is OK.

Risky business

Wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. was nearly tackled by Cowboys' pass rusher Aldon Smith for a 14-yard loss on the game-clinching end around for a 50-yard touchdown with 3:25 remaining. With the Browns leading 41-38, Stefanski was well aware of the risk involved in the call.

"Yeah, the risk in thinking about the result of these plays, I try to think about the process of what got us there. If he gets tackled it's a dumb call, 'What am I thinking?' " Stefanski said. "At the end of the day I trust our guys, I trust the players and that's really where my focus goes."

Stefanski said the Cowboys electing to squib the kickoff and give the Browns the ball at midfield played a part in his decision.

"A little bit. Probably wouldn't have done that very far backed up," he said.

Rookie mistake



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Rookie receiver Donovan Peoples-Jones handled punt and kickoff return duties, averaging 13.0 and 24.3 yards, respectively, after JoJo Natson was lost for the season with a torn ACL suffered against Washington. But with Peoples-Jones active for his first game this season, he had one moment that caused Stefanski some angst.

That came after the Cowboys cut the Browns lead to 41-30 with 6:31 remaining. Peoples-Jones nearly touched a short kickoff as it got past him. He failed to retrieve the live ball as it slowly bounced and rolled into the end zone. Dontrell Hilliard was sent in for the next kickoff return.

Asked what Peoples-Jones was thinking, Stefanski said, "I don't know. I was running down the sideline. He needs to make sure he makes great decisions there. He did a nice job yesterday for us and he's going to continue to do a nice job for us, but that is one I would like him to make sure is going in the end zone for him to be like that."



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Kareem Hunt 'lucky & blessed' for 3rd chance from Browns; would love to sign extension & take his hometown team to a Super Bowl

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/06/kareem-hunt-feels-lucky-and-blessed-the-browns-are-giving-him-another-chance-after-events-of-traffic-stop.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Running back Kareem Hunt is grateful to the Browns for not only giving him a second chance to continue his football career, but a third.

“I’m blessed that the Browns gave me another opportunity,” he said on a Zoom call “So yes, I am lucky to have another opportunity to play football. You never know. Honestly, I’m just blessed to play the game, so I always feel lucky to play football. I know any second it can be gone. I guess so.”

Former Browns general manager John Dorsey signed Hunt to play for his hometown team after Hunt had been released with five games remaining in the 2018 season by Kansas City for a video showing him kicking and shoving a woman in the hallway of his downtown Cleveland apartment building. The new regime stuck with him after he was stopped for speeding in Rocky River in January, and found to have a small amount of marijuana and an unsealed bottle of alcohol in his backpack.

Hunt, 24, wasn’t charged with possession or open container, but Browns owner Jimmy Haslam made it clear on the day of new GM Andrew Berry’s introductory press conference Feb. 5 that Hunt was skating on thin ice.

“It’s not good,” Haslam said then. “Kareem knows he’s got to do better. Kevin and Andrew have talked to him about it and I’ll just leave it at that. What he did is not acceptable; he’s got to do better.”

Since that time, Hunt has been without incident, and was asked if he considers the traffic stop a wakeup call.

“If you say so, yeah,” he said. “I guess so. I have to do better. I shouldn’t have done it. I’d say that was out of character. I learned from it. I’ve been working to become a better person each and every day. Definitely not looking for anything like that to happen again.”

Hunt, who’s been working out a lot with running back teammate Nick Chubb, said he’s tried to show the Browns that he won’t stumble again. It’s hard for him in Cleveland, where he’s surrounded by family and friends who haven’t always been the best influences.

“I’ve been pretty much hanging with the family, just staying low key,” he said. “Talking to my close people, going out there working, doing stuff in the community, helping people out. It has been a crazy time in the world. Everybody has to try to be the best person they can be right now.”

During the traffic stop, Hunt told the Rocky River police officer that “it hurts my soul” that he wasn’t going to the Super Bowl with the Chiefs, who beat the 49ers 31-20.



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"I've been fighting a lot of sh—t lately, man," he said on the dash cam video in January. "It still hurts me to this day. I love Cleveland. I love the Browns, but you don't understand. ..."

On the Zoom call Monday, he said he's moved on from that.

"I love those guys," he said of the Chiefs. "I got brothers on that team. I came in with a lot of those players. Love the coaches there. All good people and they deserved it, and I am happy for them. I talk to a lot of them and I am very happy for them. They are champs — they deserve it. I know how hard that team works and how hard they stress to be great."

Besides, he said, it would be all the more sweet if he could bring the Lombardi Trophy to Cleveland.

"No question," he said. "I think we can do something special here. I want to get that Super Bowl feeling and I believe we can do it here in my hometown. That would be bigger than anything, for me. That would [be to] bring a championship to Cleveland, especially — I have been a fan my whole life. I've been with Cleveland my whole life."

Having signed his one-year, second-round tender worth \$3.259 million in April, Hunt is hoping to prove to the Browns that he belongs here long term.

"I'd definitely like to be a part of something like this," he said. "Everybody is here that I care about. I know everybody in the whole town. I would not mind playing for the Browns for a long time."

He acknowledged he's had stern conversations with both Berry and coach Kevin Stefanski about what they expect from him, both on and off the field.

"Just pretty much [they've said] 'I can't have that. It's not acceptable,'" he said. "I've got to be smarter and cannot be doing stuff like that. We had a good talk. They see me on the field as a guy who is going to make some plays this year and help the team win. That's what I have been looking forward to. We have been talking. I keep in touch with Coach all the time about what he wants to see and stuff like that."

Hunt, who was suspended the first eight games of last season for two separate altercations including one involving the woman, is eager to help in any way he can. An excellent receiver out of the backfield, he knows he'll be used in multiple ways, and offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt plans to feature both Hunt and Chubb at the same time.

"Whatever they ask me to do, I'm willing to go out there and make something happen," he said. "They're telling me I'm going to run the football, too, so we will see. If it's the passing game or running the football. Whenever my number is called — I will be ready. I am looking forward to that."

A player who helped blast open holes for Chubb last season, Hunt recognizes there might be more than talent than touches available this season. The NFL rushing title leader as a rookie with 1,327 yards, Hunt rushed for 179 yards on 43 carries in eight games with the Browns last season, and 37 passes for 285 yards.



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“We have to know there’s only one football, so every game — everyone will not have a big game,” he said. “As long as we win, that’s the only thing that matters and that’s the biggest thing. We have to understand that. If we’re winning, I’m not mad. I’m going to do whatever. If that’s block to help win — whatever — touchdowns, block, whatever.”

“Some games, WR Odell (Beckham Jr.) might have 200 yards. Some games, Nick might have 400 yards, or whatever, and Jarvis [Landry] might have 10 or something like that. But we won, so that is the only thing that matters.”

He’s already talked to Chubb about how they’ll flourish together.

“I definitely talk to Nick,” he said. “We talk a lot. We definitely feel like we can thrive, because we saw how [Vikings RB] Dalvin Cook was doing last year in Stefanski’s offense and he did not disappoint. They had another running back who did not disappoint, either. We definitely think we can take advantage of his zone run scheme.”

He said he’s feeling so much better than at this time last year, when he was a few months out undergoing sports hernia surgery.

“Body is feeling great,” he said. “That was definitely something that slowed me down last year in training camp and coming back, because I was rehabbing through my whole situation. ... My body, I feel like it can be great. I’m feeling good. I want to see how I feel fully healthy.”

He said he was planning to attend the next group workout organized by Baker Mayfield, but the NFLPA has advised against such sessions because of the coronavirus. A 49ers player tested positive after some group workouts in Nashville, and others are awaiting test results, including Jimmy Garoppolo.

“Baker is doing a great job,” said Hunt. “He’s a leader. He’s leading all of the meetings. He’s in and out of everybody’s meetings. I am supposed to, actually, go throw with Baker coming up soon. Just to get some routes in and with some other guys, too. We’re going to try to be on the same page—everybody—with what is going on, so we can come back [firing] on all cylinders.”

He admitted he’s not to comfortable returning to the field with Covid-19 spiking in some areas.

“I’m around close family,” he said. “I just don’t want to get any of them sick or anything like that. Other than that, whenever it is time to play football, I am ready to play with fans or without fans. I am just ready to get back on the field, so whatever it takes.”

For now, he’s focused on getting ready for the season and coming back strong.

“We all just have to buy in and play for the man next to us,” he said. “We have to make sure we’re all detailed and on the same page, communicate. We have to know what the offense wants to get done and the defense needs to know what they need to get done. If we are all playing together as a team, for that man next to you, I feel like that is what we need to do. Give it all.”



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Browns Star Rises: Nick Chubb's Batman fandom has origin story centered on inspiration **By Nate Ulrich, ohio.com**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2020/12/23/nick-chubb-batman-cleveland-browns-nfl/3944106001/>

About a week after Nick Chubb's left knee had been blown out on Oct. 10, 2015, he watched scenes from "The Dark Knight Rises" on his smartphone during a break from rehabilitating at the University of Georgia.

The star running back typed "Batman gets his back broken by Bane" into the search field on YouTube.

Chubb felt a connection to the 2012 movie when supervillain Bane tells Batman, "Victory has defeated you," in the early stages of their first battle.

"I remember I was like on top of the world, coming off a good [freshman] season, feeling myself, doing good in everything, and he said that, and I feel like he was talking to me," Chubb said.

The encounter ends with Bane lifting a beaten Batman and breaking the superhero's back over his right leg.

"I felt like my knee was broken in every piece, too," Chubb said.

Cleveland Browns: Nick Chubb hopes he and Kareem Hunt can be another Browns dynamic duo

Then Bruce Wayne finds himself in Bane's prison known as "The Pit." Wayne spends months recovering and training, and after several failed escape attempts, he completes a treacherous climb, rising from the "The Pit," so he can return to Gotham City and his life as Batman.

"I felt like that wall was what I went through getting out of rehab," Chubb said. "I had to get up the wall and get free and get back to myself. All that just was so relatable to me during that time.

"I kind of used that as motivation to keep me up and keep me going because of how he came back from that. That's how I attacked my rehab and my recovery from my injury."

Chubb had seen the film before, but the iconic fight between Tom Hardy's Bane and Christian Bale's Batman and Wayne's subsequent ascent didn't become an obsession until the player embarked on a comeback from the gruesome injury he suffered as a sophomore against the University of Tennessee.

"The next time I watched it after that," Chubb said, "I was hanging on every word, really into it, listening to everything."



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In the final film of Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, an aging Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) is brought out of retirement to face Bane (Tom Hardy) and save Gotham yet again. Nolan assembled an all-star cast, featuring Michael Caine, Gary Oldman, Anne Hathaway, Morgan Freeman, and more.

With Batman inspiring Chubb, he rebounded from three of the four ligaments in his left knee shredding, all but the anterior cruciate ligament, and the surgery he needed as a result. He returned to action in time for the 2016 opener, flourished in his final collegiate season in 2017 and became a second-round draft pick (No. 35 overall) of the Browns in 2018.

Nick Chubb takes on Gotham

In the buildup to the Browns playing consecutive games against the New York Giants and New York Jets in Gotham — OK, East Rutherford, New Jersey, but play along here — Chubb spoke to the Beacon Journal by phone for 15 minutes on Dec. 17 about his Batman fandom.

Chubb rushed 15 times for 50 yards and a touchdown, his 10th of the season, in Sunday night's 20-6 win over the Giants. The Browns (10-4) will be knocking on the door to the playoffs when they return to MetLife Stadium and face the Jets (1-13) on Sunday, Chubb's 25th birthday.

Cleveland Browns football: Baker Mayfield stays hot, Browns defeat Giants 20-6

You can bet Chubb's gifts will include some Batman items from his family.

When Browns communications coordinator Mike Annarella informed Chubb of a Batman-centric interview request and relayed a message about the Gotham angle, Chubb realized Annarella didn't know Gotham is a fictitious version of New York in the Batman universe. Waiting on deck for a Zoom session with local media, Chubb whispered an explanation to Annarella while quarterback Baker Mayfield fielded questions from reporters nearby.

Yes, Chubb is a man of few words, but he enjoys talking about Batman.

Right tackle Jack Conklin revealed a few weeks ago he occasionally chats with Chubb about Batman in an attempt to lure the two-time Pro Bowl selection out of his shell. Chubb has also bonded with offensive lineman Chris Hubbard and practice-squad fullback Johnny Stanton over their affinity for the Caped Crusader.

Chubb considers Stanton the locker room's top Batman expert because he is well-versed in comic books. Stanton has given Chubb plenty of reading recommendations.

"He gets excited," Stanton said by phone. "He's very curious about it."

Batman vs. Superman

Chubb took a liking to DC Comics superheroes in high school when he and friends played the Injustice video games on PlayStation 4.



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At first, Batman wasn't actually Chubb's favorite character.

"I was a Superman fan because honestly I didn't know any better," he said. "I just know what I saw. He was flashy. He could fly. He had super strength and all that stuff. My friends were into it, too. Growing up, we'd always argue Superman versus Batman, and I'd always have Superman's side. But they brought to my attention why Batman was better, and I kind of flipped sides, joining them."

So why is Batman the best superhero?

"He's human just like us, and if you were indestructible like Superman, would you fear anything? No, you wouldn't. If you know you can't die, you wouldn't fear anything," Chubb said. "But Batman, we can die, we're mortal, and he still stands up and faces any challenge. He's just a man, but he has courage."

Chubb explained his allegiance to Batman "really took off" shortly after he suffered the devastating knee injury five years ago in Knoxville, Tennessee.

"A lot of players have to deal with injuries, but the fact that Nick was able to come back from something so hard and to be able to use that as inspiration is pretty cool," Stanton said. "I'm sure movie creators would love to be able to hear something like that."

Chubb hasn't dabbled much in Batman movies and TV shows predating this century. "The Dark Knight Trilogy" directed by Christopher Nolan and starring Bale as Batman is Chubb's bread and butter, though he also watches animated films made in the past decade.

As far as Batman memorabilia goes, Chubb doesn't own countless comic books and action figures. However, the contents of his wardrobe and garage aren't coincidences. He wears a silver Batman symbol on a chain necklace, a Christmas gift he received during his rookie season from his mother, Lavelle. He said he dons black clothing on a regular basis and has matte black cars — a Mercedes-AMG and a Dodge Charger — with tinted windows because of Batman.

Chubb has even thought about buying a Batmobile one day.

"It would be either when I'm done with football or sometime in the offseason when I'm just feeling spontaneous," he said.

'It would only be Batman'

Chubb doesn't have any tattoos, but if he gets one, you can guess what the theme would be.

"If I ever got a tattoo," he said, "it would only be Batman — 100%. I've thought about it, but I don't know if it would be cool or corny. It would probably be in-between, so I don't know if I'll get it."

Hubbard has a Batman tattoo on one of his legs, and Chubb thinks it turned out well.



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“But if I’m getting it,” Chubb said, “I’m getting it right on my chest, like him gliding down, big — everybody can see it.”

All of this raises the following question: Has Chubb ever dressed as Batman?

“Yeah, I have. Yeah, of course,” he said with a laugh. “My junior year of college, I was Batman for a Halloween party.”

The Browns have had fun with this, too, mostly by following Chubb’s lead on social media.

After Chubb suffered a sprained medial collateral ligament in his right knee on Oct. 4 against the Dallas Cowboys, he wrote on Instagram, “Thanks for all the prayers and wishes. I’ll be back soon enough. To the bat cave until then.” Don’t worry — he included a bat emoji at the end of the message.

When the Browns designated Chubb to return from injured reserve on Nov. 9, the team tweeted an animated GIF of a football player standing atop FirstEnergy Stadium as a Bat-Signal of sorts featuring Chubb’s face shone in the night sky.

Chubb’s favorite Batman quote is, “I’m whatever Gotham needs me to be.” Last year, he tweaked the famous line from “The Dark Knight” and wrote on Instagram, “I’m whatever Cleveland needs me to be.” The caption accompanied a photograph of Chubb in his Browns uniform.

If Batman were to play football, Chubb said he would be a running back with a hell of a stiff-arm.

“He would have everything,” Chubb said. “Full-balanced running back.”

He probably would even resist the temptation to score a touchdown and instead run out of bounds at the 1-yard line if it ensured he would save Gotham.

“Yeah,” Chubb said without hesitation, “Batman doesn’t kill.”

Inside the Batcave with Nick Chubb

Favorite Batman: Christian Bale

Favorite movie: “Probably ‘The Dark Knight Rises.’”

Favorite villain: “The Joker. He’s always one step ahead. He’s super smart, intelligent, and I just like him. He’s tricky.”

Thoughts on Robert Pattinson in “The Batman” (2022): “Pattinson is skinny, and Batman’s more on the bulky side. He might have to gain weight or something, but I feel like it’ll be good.”



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Nick Chubb didn't know what to expect when Kareem Hunt was signed, now "would not want it any other way"

By Scott Petrak, brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2020/12/12/nick-chubb-didnt-know-what-to-expect-when-kareem-hunt-was-signed-now-would-not-want-it-any-other-way/>

BEREA — Nick Chubb was apprehensive when Kareem Hunt was signed in February 2019.

He's only appreciative now.

Not only have they become close friends, they're the lethal 1-2 punch for the NFL's second-ranked rushing attack that has propelled the Browns to a 9-3 record and the doorstep of the playoffs.

Chubb couldn't have envisioned that when then-general manager John Dorsey added Hunt, the former league rushing champion who played his position. Chubb was coming off a strong rookie season — 998 yards, 5.2 average, eight touchdowns — but wasn't sure what the move meant for him.

"Kareem is an awesome back," Chubb said this week. "He is incredible. He can do a lot of things that I probably can't do, to be honest. I was not sure what was going to happen and how it was going to be when he came in. I knew I had eight games on him to prove that I could do something, too.

"I am glad how things are now. I am glad that we are working together, and I am glad that he is on the team. I would not want it any other way."

The eight-game head start came with Hunt's NFL suspension for a pair of off-field altercations. Chubb solidified his spot as the No. 1 back and team's best offensive player by piling up 1,494 yards and finishing runner-up for the league rushing title.

When Hunt returned from the suspension, he took a secondary role, even being used as a lead blocker for Chubb. This year Hunt's a co-star, with them spelling each other and wearing down defenses, and the hope is it works again Monday night against the Ravens.

Hunt said it took them playing together to realize the tandem would work. Their selfless attitudes make it work.

"Our mindset is pretty similar," Hunt said. "We both love the game of football and we both want to do whatever it takes to help the team win. I like guys like that on my team."

He's not alone.

"To watch what they can do and how they cheer for each other and mutually respect each other, it is something that you want as a teammate, and that is something that you want to see from your team," receiver Jarvis Landry said. "It is definitely an uplifting sight.



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"These guys, they embody who we are as a team. Nick Chubb, a standup guy. I do not know if there is a bad bone in his body. He is one of the nicest people that I have ever met, and then on Sunday, he turns into a whole different person."

Browns have evolved in so many ways since opening blowout, readying for rematch with Ravens

The stats show the balance and effectiveness of the combo.

Chubb has 799 rushing yards, a 6.0 average and seven touchdowns. Hunt has 739, 4.3 and four, adding 25 catches for 175 yards and four TDs.

They have a good chance to be the sixth running back duo in NFL history to each rush for 1,000 yards in the same season. Chubb needs to average 50.25 yards over the final four games, and Hunt 65.25.

"I know the coaches will put us in the right place at the right time to make sure that we figure out a way to get there," Chubb said. "I am not really worrying about it either way."

The pairing has been better than even Hunt anticipated.

"Most definitely," he said. "It is nice being able to have another guy in there who can do everything. He is a talented back, and I believe the same for myself. When we both take the field, you never know."

Two recent honors for Chubb illustrate the admiration and appreciation of his teammates. He's the team's Ed Block Courage and Art Rooney Sportsmanship awards recipient.

"He is the ultimate team player," coach Kevin Stefanski said.

And the ultimate silent assassin. Chubb doesn't talk much.

"I think I had him smile the other day. He had his mask on, and I wasn't sure," coordinator Alex Van Pelt said.

Hunt has a much higher success rate of getting Chubb to come out of his shell.

"I can say probably Kareem is the one that gets me talking more and laughing more in the locker room than everybody, just because of his personality," Chubb said. "I do enjoy that, hanging out and laughing and cutting up a little bit."

"I am going to keep talking to him until he answers me," Hunt said. "I kind of get Nick a little bit. We see eye to eye on a lot of things, both playing football our whole life and running back and stuff."

Van Pelt loves the dynamics of the running back room that includes fullback Andy Janovich.



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“It is two different personalities. One is really outgoing and one is really businesslike,” he said. “It is kind of the odd couple, and then you have Jano, the meathead in there that just loves to run into people.”

Hunt earned a postgame locker room shout-out from Stefanski on Sunday for chasing down Titans safety Kenny Vaccaro after a Baker Mayfield fumble late in the fourth quarter of the 41-35 victory. Stefanski called it a “who loves football drill.”

“Kareem was not going to let him score,” Stefanski said.

“I didn’t really know what happened, but I don’t like to see a defender running with the ball the other way,” Hunt said. “I practice that in practice and everything. Even if the defense gets a turnover in practice, I might be on the sideline and I come chasing after you, even if I am not in the play.”

He’s got plenty of reason to be energized this season. He was born in Elyria, went to high school at Willoughby South and knows how much Northeast Ohio was desperate to see the Browns win.

“Everybody is happy. I have never seen it growing up,” Hunt said. “To be a part of it means so much to me. I definitely want to just keep rolling and keep winning. It is fun winning. That is the biggest thing.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Nick Chubb ready to deliver messages on game day, keep stoic demeanor in 3rd season

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/nick-chubb-ready-to-deliver-messages-on-game-day-keep-stoic-demeanor-in-3rd-seas>

Nick Chubb's stage for statements has never been in a postgame interview or press conference.

He's never offered lofty predictions for what kind of production he wants to have before a new season. He's rarely given himself high praise after a big game. He's not the type of player to yell in the middle of a huddle and fire up his teammates.

Chubb has never felt the need to say much about his own game. That's just who he is.

"He's a man of few words," coach Kevin Stefanski said with a smile in a video call Thursday with local reporters. "Even less than me."

Chubb, however, doesn't need to talk himself up. His spotlight has always shined brightest on the field, where he's built a reputation as one of the best running backs in the league after two dominant seasons in Cleveland.

The field has always been Chubb's stage for showing people who he is since he became the fourth back to be selected in the 2018 draft. With 2,490 career rushing yards and 18 touchdowns, Chubb has been a consistent force from Cleveland's backfield and hasn't slowed down, no matter the opponent. His robot-like robustness has catapulted him to stardom, and he's preparing for an even bigger year after rushing for 1,494 yards last season, which was fourth all-time for a single season in franchise history.

Chubb, of course, won't say that himself. He doesn't need to.

"He sets the example," rookie wide receiver Donovan Peoples-Jones said. "He's a humble guy, a very hard worker on the field. You can just tell how much he loves football by the way he practices."

Chubb finished 47 yards shy of Derrick Henry for the league rushing title last season. Despite having a 124-yard lead on Henry for the top spot in Week 17, Henry ascended to No. 1 in the final hours of the regular season with a massive 211-yard performance.

Not many people remember who the No. 2 rusher was each season, and Chubb knows it. If he had found a few more big plays — or, rather, if Henry found a few less big plays — he would've cemented his name in NFL history.

Instead, he was No. 2. Chubb did have something to say about that, though.

"[It did] not really bother me," he said during training camp. "Just more motivation. Trying to do it this year. I believe everything happens for a reason, and you just keep working and striving and things will fall into place for you. That is my mindset."



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As long as Chubb is on his favorite stage, he'll continue to make statements about winning a rushing title.

That may not seem as realistic with Kareem Hunt, another top 10 NFL running back, in the room with him. Hunt won the title himself in 2017 and is slated to play his first full season in a Browns uniform, but even after he returned from an eight-game suspension in 2019, Chubb was just as productive from the backfield.

With Hunt back on the field, Chubb averaged 92.9 yards per game, a small dropoff from his 100-yard per game average. Both running backs should see an increased workload, though, in Stefanski's run-heavy playbook schemes. Add in a revamped offensive line, and the rushing holes for Chubb should be even wider.

Chubb doesn't need to say that himself, though. Anyone who's watched Chubb wiggle his way to a first down or burst through the line for a big gain knows it, and Stefanski has seen plenty of that in practice so far.

"I love how Nick Chubb works," Stefanski said. "You see him on the grass, you see him in the classroom — he's all ball all the time. He's a good person and a solid citizen. He's a great teammate, so I'm pleased with what Nick means to this team."

Chubb's primary setting for making statements about his performance won't change anytime soon. He speaks loudest on the field, where a 100-yard rushing performance or multi-touchdown game will let everyone know how Chubb feels about his game, his teammates or his season.

That's always been Chubb's favorite way to send a message, and in 2020, Chubb's stage appears to be bigger than ever.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Andrew Sendejo excited to mentor Grant Delpit, lead Browns secondary

By Nathan Zegura, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/andrew-sendejo-excited-to-mentor-grant-delpit-lead-browns-secondary>

Few players on the Browns have spent more time in the NFL than Andrew Sendejo, a 10-year veteran safety.

Now, teammate Adrian Clayborn is also a 10-year veteran, but where and with whom they spent that decade in the league is what truly makes Sendejo unique among all of his teammates. Sendejo was a part of the Minnesota Vikings organization for nine of his 10 NFL seasons and is more familiar with members of the Browns coaching staff — including head coach Kevin Stefanski, defensive coordinator Joe Woods and special teams coordinator Mike Priefer — than any other Browns player by a wide margin.

That's something that is not lost on Sendejo, who noted during a Thursday appearance on Cleveland Browns Daily, "it's kind of crazy how things have come full circle."

He went on to add, "it was good to reunite with a bunch of coaches I'm familiar with and to be back with those guys."

In fact, for Sendejo, that familiarity was the biggest factor in his decision to join the Browns.

"When you're late in your career, you're looking for a scheme that fits, for a place that feels right, and there's a lot that goes into that when it comes to free agency," Sendejo said. When it came to Cleveland, he added, "there were just so many boxes that were checked off and it just felt right."

Stefanski was in various roles on the Vikings offensive staff as he worked his way from assistant, to position coach, to the team's offensive coordinator. Stefanski's ascension in Minnesota did not surprise Sendejo at all, nor did it surprise him to see Stefanski get a job as a head coach in the NFL.

"I got to watch coach Stefanski coach basically every position on offense in Minnesota," he said. "You see him work his way up like a player works their way up. Before I even knew that I was going to be here, I was extremely happy for him to see that he got the job."

The 2020 offseason has been unique and historic for a variety of reasons and it even has been a new experience for a veteran like Sendejo, but he knows the playing field is the same for every team and the Browns need to focus on making the best of it.

"It's definitely a unique year and it will be challenging for everyone, but everybody has to go through it, so it's one of those things you're just going to have to deal with," Sendejo said.

As for the Browns, he said, "We've got our nose down, we're here and everyone is excited just to be back and happy to get back to work."



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Woods was Sendejo's defensive backs coach for his first three years in the league. Knowing the techniques he likes to teach will be very helpful to Sendejo in light of the limited offseason work.

"The memories I have with Joe are great," said Sendejo, who stayed in touch with his coach even after he left Minnesota because, "he was the coach who when I got in the league, taught a lot of the NFL fundamental things you need to know as a DB."

With Woods as the defensive coordinator, "the schemes are relatively the same and some of the things (he) has done in the past ... it's kind of why I chose to come here. I'm familiar with the way they coach and what they're looking for. It's kind of an easy transition," Sendejo said.

With his familiarity of Woods' scheme, Sendejo knows that this year, more than any other, he is going to really have to help the younger players in the secondary, especially second-round pick Grant Delpit, get up to speed quickly with the season just around the corner.

When asked if he could imagine being a rookie this offseason, Sendejo bluntly replied, "absolutely not." That's why Sendejo takes his role as a veteran mentor to Delpit very seriously, noting, "it's kind of part of your responsibility as a veteran guy when you get someone that comes in with that much talent to try and get them up to speed. I'll try to teach him the best I can and with his God-given ability, he'll be able to take over from there."

As for what Browns fans can expect from Sendejo, there are two things that definitely stick out. The first is versatility, as Sendejo can play both safety positions and even come down and cover the slot in various dime and big nickel formations. That versatility has been one of the keys to his long career in the league.

"One of the first things you learn when you come into the league is the more you can do, the better," he said. Especially this year, Sendejo said "you have to be ready for anything at any time, and being a veteran, I'm familiar with this defense so wherever they tell me to go, I'll go."

The second, and probably the core ethos for Sendejo, in his own words is that, "I will play my (butt) off for this organization, for this team, for this city, so that's what you're gonna get out of me every time I step on the field."

That attitude and play style will no doubt make Sendejo a fast favorite of the Dawg Pound in 2020.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Ronnie Harrison emerging as an every-down playmaker for Browns defense

By Anthony Poisal, clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/ronnie-harrison-emerging-as-an-every-down-playmaker-for-browns-defense>

Ronnie Harrison Jr. knew what kind of news to expect when he received a tap on the shoulder and a call to Jacksonville Jaguars' general manager David Caldwell's office on a hot September afternoon at TIAA Bank Stadium.

Harrison, a 2018 third-round draft pick from Alabama, was preparing to participate in a defensive meeting when the call came. Player visits to the GM's office are normally reserved for big news, so Harrison, who had two interceptions as a safety for the Jags in 2019, mentally prepared for whatever was ahead.

"We're trading you to the Cleveland Browns," Caldwell told him.

And that was it. Harrison's time in Jacksonville was done, and he had two hours until he needed to catch a flight to Cleveland. As he walked out of the office, Harrison's head flooded with questions.

"What did I do wrong?"

"Why didn't they like me here?"

"Why do they want me in Cleveland?"

That last question was answered for Harrison once he met his new coaches and familiarized himself with the Browns' schemes. Cleveland needed Harrison on its roster to bolster a safety group that lost 2020 second-round pick Grant Delpit to a season-ending injury in training camp. Other players in the secondary grinded through injuries, too, so the Browns needed additional depth.

Harrison, 23, was young, talented and versatile. He was exactly what the Browns needed, and they only traded a 2021 fifth-round pick to acquire him.

"It was really scary at first," he said. "The season was about to start, and you just finished training camp, and then you get traded. You don't know what to think. You're going to a new team, and you know you don't have a lot of time to pick up on a defense."

After eight games, however, Harrison feels right at home.

He's recorded one interception, six passes defended — which have all come in his last five games — and 30 tackles. He was on the field for every defensive snap Week 10 against the Houston Texans and has been deployed as both a free safety and strong safety.

The Browns are making the most out of the talents from Harrison, who currently ranks fifth among all qualified safeties with a 79.1 defensive grade, according to Pro Football Focus.



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"He is playing at a high level," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "He is another player that is all about the ball. He is very active around the ball, a physical tackler. I put Ronnie in that category of making plays and a guy that we can count on and we're going to continue to count on."

As soon as Harrison arrived in Cleveland, he was tasked with analyzing a new playbook and familiarizing himself with all of the nuances and play calls of the defense. The Browns had 10 days until their Week 1 game, however, and Harrison was expected to have a slow transition to the defense before he could become a starter.

Learning the playbook only took him a few days. Many of the plays and schemes were identical to what Harrison operated with in Jacksonville and Alabama, and the hardest part of joining a new team was familiarizing himself with new play terminology.

The Browns were going to give Harrison plenty of time to feel comfortable. In his first week in Cleveland, defensive backs coach Jeff Howard arranged a few extra meetings with Harrison to give an opportunity to ask questions about the defense. He always had questions to ask, and he still does in each meeting.

"I really enjoy working with Ronnie," Howard said in a recent interview. "The reason why is because I think Ronnie loves football. He does not really talk about that, but you can see it in his play. When we go out to a walkthrough and when we go out to practice, he just enjoys playing ball, and you can see that with his effort, his focus and his questions."

The Browns used Harrison sparingly in the first few games of the season as he acclimated with the roster. He was used in only 25 snaps in the first four weeks of the season, but that's because Cleveland was prepping Harrison to play a variety of roles at safety.

He was used mostly as a strong safety, which normally requires lining up closer to the line of scrimmage rather than the backfield, in his first two NFL seasons. But the Browns wanted him to also occasionally play as a free safety, a position that has more freedom to roam the field and make plays based on initial reads from the offense.

Harrison carried bigger roles at both positions in Week 5 when his snap count went up to 37. In that game, he made arguably his biggest play of his career.

Colts quarterback Philip Rivers was in the shotgun on third-and-4 and went through his initial progressions. The Browns had all of his first options covered, and his last read was a short pass to wide receiver T.Y. Hilton near the first-down marker on the left sideline.

Harrison knew the throw was coming. He stepped in front of the pass, made the catch and had an unimpeded path to the end zone for six points — his first NFL pick-six.

"That play felt like it was in slow motion," Harrison said. "I knew the route concept from the formation they lined up in. I knew I was going to get T.Y. coming my way, and just from watching the film, I knew Philip's progressions on that route. I knew he was going to look front side first and then come back to T.Y. Sure enough, he did."



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"It felt like I was at Alabama again, like we were in the national championship. I haven't done that since college, so I felt like I was a little kid again."

Harrison unfortunately suffered a concussion later in the game, but he returned in Week 7 and logged 63 snaps. He's been named a starter every week since Week 5 and has emerged as one of the most reliable players in the secondary.

The Browns appear to have made a steal by acquiring Harrison, who's helped the defense piece together their two lowest-scoring games of the season in Weeks 8 and 10. At 6-foot-3 and 213 pounds, Harrison has given the Browns a big, range-y safety that can make tackles from the box, perform well in pass coverage and stabilize a defense that allowed 350 or more total yards in four of the first seven games.

In their last two games, the Browns have allowed a much-improved 309 and 223 total yards, respectively. Harrison has been on the field for nearly every snap.

"Ronnie has meshed very well," cornerback Denzel Ward said. "He is out there making plays all over the field. He is a great addition to defense and in our secondary."

The transition for Harrison is complete. Now, the Browns are planning to use him as an anchor in the defense for their push toward the playoffs.

Harrison feels as though he's in a perfect spot. That was what he had hoped once the shock of being traded faded away, and now that he's fully a part of the Browns' defensive game plans each week, his performances are starting to shine.

He's asking questions. He's making plays. And, most importantly, he feels as though he belongs.

"I feel like, just from all the reps and snaps, I just got a little bit of confidence building up," he said. "I feel more comfortable and confident in what I'm doing."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Sheldrick Redwine brings valuable voice to discussions on social injustice, systemic racism

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/sheldrick-redwine-brings-valuable-voice-to-discussions-on-social-injustice-syste>

Sheldrick Redwine knows first-hand how differently Black Americans are sometimes treated in society.

Redwine, a second-year safety, is passionate about voicing his feelings, frustrations and experiences with others about the hardships he's felt as a normal citizen. That's why he was one of 11 players selected on the Browns' social justice committee, which helped organize a team meeting after a shortened practice Thursday for a discussion on social justice issues in the country.

"Being Black in America is tough," Redwine said Friday in a Zoom conference with local reporters. "I go to the store – I've got dreads and tattoos – I get followed around stores. I've had run-ins with the police where I felt like I've been treated unfairly. This is something that I've been passionate about my whole life because I've dealt with it my whole life."

Redwine kept those experiences in mind for Thursday's team meeting, which was scheduled after several professional sports teams and leagues postponed games and practices to reflect on racial injustice and systemic racism issues in the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake by police officers Sunday in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

"I'm just waiting for a plan to go into action," Redwine said. "I'm just trying to find change. To be honest, it's a frustrating topic for a black man, living how we're living. It's something that has gone on for so long. There have been repetitive attempts (in the country) to try and stop this and bring change. It seems like the way everything is structured is like resistance toward change. It's just about a consistent push on trying to make that change happen."

Redwine has become a leader with Browns for his eagerness to voice feelings and create positive actions around the community. At 23 years old, he's the youngest player in the Browns' social justice committee and has already started his own foundation — the Gloria Redwine Foundation — to help at-risk and disadvantaged youth in Miami, Florida, his hometown.

The foundation is named after his great-grandmother, who inspired Redwine to help inner-city youth with financial literacy education and skill building.

"I put it in her name just to help kids understand that there is another way outside of football," he said. "I was one of those kids growing up when the teacher asked me, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I said 'football.' They said, 'Well, if football does not work, what do you want to be?' 'I don't know.' Now, I feel like I have learned other techniques outside of football, like investing. I want to take the knowledge that I know and put it towards this foundation and give it to other kids so they can grow."

Redwine said he was asked by Stefanski to be on the social justice committee after showing an influential and spirited voice in social justice discussions in the virtual offseason program. The



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Browns have held several meetings to discuss racial justice issues, and Redwine has been a leader in the conversations.

He wants others to feel his passion, too, and he believes that by speaking up in meetings and sharing his stories, he'll encourage others to do the same.

"If you live this," he said, "I feel like you have a voice that needs to be heard. I feel like everybody should be able to have a voice in these types of situations because we are the ones that are living it. I just want to bring knowledge to the situation. Whatever I can do to make a change, it just has to be done. I feel like it is more than just talking. It is time for action. The people who are in the position to make changes, we have to hold those people accountable to be able to make those changes."

Redwine has been a perfect example of what Stefanski has encouraged players to do all summer — use their platform, speak out and take action.

So when the Browns called for another discussion Thursday, Redwine was eager to participate. After experiencing the hardships of being a Black American himself, he's passionate to take a stand and demand a change.

"Over time, it just resonates with you," he said. "It's just something that I feel like change has to be done. I feel like I have a voice that I should use to try to bring change about."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Mike Priefer has 'unfinished business' entering 2nd season as Browns special teams coordinator

By Andrew Gribble, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/mike-priefer-has-unfinished-business-entering-2nd-season-as-browns-special-teams>

Mike Priefer got the Browns special teams units collectively headed in the right direction in a much-improved 2019 campaign.

It just didn't meet the standard he expects as a longtime special teams coordinator.

"We have some work to do, some unfinished business," Priefer said. "That's what the opportunity to come back is going to provide for us to do, to finish that business."

Priefer and assistant special teams coach Doug Colman are back for a second season in Cleveland, joining run game coordinator/running backs coach Stump Mitchell as the three retained coaches from the 2019 staff. Priefer, who grew up in Cleveland, wanted to return no matter who was hired as head coach. That the Browns went with Kevin Stefanski, whom he coached alongside from 2011-18 in Minnesota, made coming back even more rewarding for Priefer, who is entering his 15th consecutive season as an NFL special teams coordinator.

"I've seen him grow as a coach from being a quality control coach to being a running backs, tight ends, quarterbacks and then offensive coordinator. I've seen his growth," Priefer said. "I knew from the get-go he was going to be a very good coach as he kind of gained experience. Obviously he had that head coaching mentality about him. He's got that charisma about him, he's got leadership and he's going to do a great job for us here."

Cleveland's special teams made significant improvements in nearly every facet of the game under Priefer's watch in 2019.

The Browns were among the best in the league at covering kicks, ranking fifth in the NFL in average yards allowed per kickoff and sixth overall in kickoff return yards. On punts, the Browns went from 30th in the league to 17th. Cleveland was among the best in the league in tackles inside the 20-yard line and average starting field position after kickoffs.

The improvements stemmed from the strong directional kicking of rookie Austin Seibert, better tackling from core players such as KhaDarel Hodge, Tavierre Thomas and Tae Davis and a significant decrease in penalties. The Browns went from one of the most penalized special teams units in 2018 to middle of the pack in 2019.

"There's a lot of improvements in a lot of different areas if we continue to bring young men in here that love the game of football and like playing special teams," Priefer said. "There's unique people who play that. You have to have something wrong with you if you're going to go cover a kickoff or punt and people say you have to have something wrong with you if you're going to coach special teams, so it goes hand in hand. I'm excited about our future."



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Priefer had both the present and future in mind when he entered the 2019 season with rookies at both punter and kicker. Both Seibert and Jamie Gillan proved worthy of their selections to the 53-man roster and finished the season on the Pro Football Writers of America All-Rookie Team.

Gillan, an undrafted free agent who hails from Scotland, was named the AFC's Special Teams Player of the Month in September and set the Browns' single-season record for net punting (41.6 average). He finished tied for fifth in team history with 28 punts placed inside the 20-yard line and had just five of his 63 punts go for touchbacks.

Seibert, a fifth-round pick out of Oklahoma, made 25-of-29 field goals, set a Browns rookie scoring record with 105 points and opened his career with 16 consecutive makes, a streak that ranked fourth in NFL history.

"They will get better," Priefer said. "The thing I've told them is they've made a big mistake. You have proved you can do it and now we're going to expect you to do it more often and be more consistent and be more productive. We left some points on the field with Austin and we left some big plays on the field with our punter.

"The good thing is they've made enough plays to encourage you to say, you know what, they can do it. It's there. It's in them. Now we've got to continue to improve our technique, be more consistent and be a more productive unit across the board."

Priefer expects to see improvements on kick return and punt return in 2020. The Browns ranked 16th in the NFL on punt returns and 20th on kickoffs. Cleveland used four different returners on both punts and kicks.

"At the end of the day, I think we need to hold up better, hold up on punt return better, protect with our drops better on kickoff return," Priefer said. "We have to have more production from our returners. We left some yards on the table, whether it was not hitting the seam right or going down too easy on an arm tackle. Those are the areas we want to improve on."

Stefanski knows from experience to expect Priefer to meet his goals in 2020 and beyond.

While they coached together in Minnesota, Priefer's unit led the NFL with 14 special teams touchdowns. The team scored on seven kickoff returns, five punt returns and two touchdowns off blocked punts. The Vikings led the NFL in kickoff return average in 2015 (28.3) and 2016 (27.3) and finished second in 2011 (27.2). His units also led the league in punt return average in 2013 (15.2) and finished second in the league in total kick return yards in 2014 (1,981) and 2015 (1,540).

"It's been awesome to be back with Coach Prief," Stefanski said. "He's somebody on a personal level I have a great deal of respect for. Great family man. I couldn't be more thrilled to be back in the fray with him. I've seen him coach. I've seen his units play really well. It's exciting to be back around Coach Prief."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

On Jack Conklin's to-do list with Browns: Help Nick Chubb win rushing title, likely mentor rookie left tackle

By Nate Ulrich, ohio.com

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/sports/20200324/on-jack-conklins-to-do-list-with-browns-help-nick-chubb-win-rushing-title-likely-mentor-rookie-left-tackle>

Jack Conklin is here to help.

The new big-money right tackle of the Browns emphasized Tuesday he wants to do his part as an offensive lineman and leader to ensure the team reaches its potential.

The Browns are banking on Conklin delivering — to the tune of the three-year, \$42 million contract he signed Friday.

In Conklin's fourth and final season with the Tennessee Titans, he started all 19 games, including three in the playoffs. The Titans lost 35-24 to the eventual Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs in the AFC Championship.

"I want to be a leader," Conklin said during his introductory conference call with Browns beat writers. "I want to be a guy that guys can look to, especially having a taste of that playoff experience.

"[The key is] taking as much as you can from the losses and not dwelling on them but learning from them and transferring that over to the wins. Then it's [about] building confidence and momentum throughout the year."

Conklin and the Titans schooled the Browns 43-13 in the 2019 season opener. The Browns self-destructed by committing 18 penalties for 182 yards, but who could forget Titans running back Derrick Henry providing the turning point at FirstEnergy Stadium with a 75-yard touchdown on a screen pass late in the third quarter?

Henry went on to win the NFL rushing title, edging Browns running back Nick Chubb.

Of course, Chubb led the race entering the regular-season finale but produced just 41 yards on 13 carries in a 33-23 road loss to the Cincinnati Bengals, dropping the Browns to 6-10.

Fighting for a wild-card berth later the same day, the Titans rolled to a 35-14 road victory over the Houston Texans, with Henry rushing 32 times for 212 yards and three touchdowns.

Henry finished 46 yards ahead of Chubb for the rushing crown — 1,540 to 1,494 — and bought the Titans' offensive linemen Rolex watches.

Conklin would like to receive a similar reward from Chubb next season.

"To be able to switch teams and have a guy who's just as good [as Henry] and be able to have an opportunity to go win that record again next year, that's my goal," Conklin said. "I want to help us get there and help Chubb reach that goal and win that."



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Chubb will have a new starting left tackle blocking for him, too. If new General Manager Andrew Berry follows the most likely and logical strategy for addressing the glaring need, the Browns will draft a left tackle 10th overall on April 23.

Conklin, 25, is familiar with the pressures top picks encounter. The Titans selected him eighth overall in 2016 out of Michigan State University after the Browns surrendered the pick in a trade down to No. 15, which they unwisely spent on wide receiver Corey Coleman.

“If [the Browns drafting a left tackle in the first round] is what happens, I would relish that opportunity to help him, being able to help him and hopefully teach him the things that I learned going through the same process,” Conklin said. “It would be awesome.

“To be able to take in another guy who’s younger and help with his progress, I think that’s what really comes down to being an offensive lineman. I think that whole group you find throughout the NFL is a bunch of good guys who are just going to try to help younger guys along. We understand that for a team to get good, we have to really be working together as a group of five. When we can do that, who knows what the team can do?

“In that case, yes, I would try to step up, be a leader, help be a mentor to him and do everything I can to help him get along and get through all the pieces of the NFL, whether it’s playing or just the mental state of everything.”

Conklin repeatedly sent a team-first message throughout his media availability. At one point, he said “I’m just a right tackle” while praising his new teammates in the same breath.

“I believe this team has a roster that’s up there with the best,” he said. “It was an easy choice. You look at the team, and you can see the guys and you can see the playmakers.”

Conklin also can see Baker Mayfield, the quarterback who’ll rely on him as a bodyguard.

“I’m a big fan of Baker,” Conklin said. “That definitely was an easy choice for me. Having him back there, there was no question about what I think he can do and whether I want to be a part of an offense with him at the helm.

“I have a great opportunity to fit in on the right side over there and really help create some sparks, help protect Baker and hopefully get the run game rolling like it has been and be a part of something special.”

It’s sensible to identify the \$30 million guaranteed in Conklin’s contract as the primary reason he agreed to terms with the Browns when the free-agency negotiating period opened March 16, though the Plainwell, Michigan, native cited a return to the Midwest and the wide zone blocking scheme first-year head coach Kevin Stefanski will install as other selling points.

Conklin sounded like a Stefanski clone when he described the zone scheme as “the marriage of the pass and run.” The Titans used a similar system the past two seasons, with Henry surpassing 1,000



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rushing yards both years. In two postseason victories this past January, he rushed for 182 yards and a TD on 34 carries against the New England Patriots and 195 yards on 30 carries against the Baltimore Ravens.

“I love running the ball,” Conklin said. “That’s my favorite thing to do — put it to the defense. I think that’s really by running it. That’s when you break their back. There’s not a better feeling than when you’re putting defenders on their back and you can see the quit in them by the time the fourth quarter comes around.

“The great thing with the zone offense is that you can still get those aspects of the run with the pass. Once you start getting that run going, your play action is going to look exactly the same as the runs. That’s when you start getting those bombs. That’s when you start getting those 70-yard downfield passes, and you get these wide-open receivers.”

ProFootballFocus.com gave Conklin the third-best grade in the NFL the past two seasons on wide zone run blocking.

The catch is 2018 proved to be an injury-riddled year for Conklin, listed as 6-foot-6 and 308 pounds.

He suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament on Jan. 13, 2018, in a playoff loss to the Patriots. Then he missed seven games during the 2018 season: three while on the comeback trail from the ACL, one with a concussion and three more with another knee injury. The Titans declined to exercise the fifth-year option in his rookie contract.

The injuries also gave rise to questions about whether Conklin would ever return to the first-team All-Pro status he earned as a rookie.

He believes he knows the answer.

“Being down as low as I could after tearing my ACL and not having quite the season I wanted coming back from that and then realizing I could get stronger, I could get faster and having an injury is not something that’s going to be something that defines me, it’s going to be something that I can grow from and be better from,” Conklin said.

“I think having the injury has really helped me become a better pro. Before that, I was a kid coming from college. I didn’t understand the professionalism of all of the stretching and taking all of the smaller things as seriously as I probably should have before, but it’s something I have learned to do now.

“Just learning about how my body works, I think that has helped me become a much better football player. It has really helped me with recovery after games, understanding the different approaches I can take to get my body back and get my body feeling as good as possible for the next week. Hopefully all of these steps will help prolong my career and make me a better player.”

The Browns wouldn’t complain if those were the returns on their investment.



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How new regime's biggest free-agent investment Jack Conklin is fitting with Browns

By Nate Ulrich, ohio.com

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/sports/20200904/how-new-regimes-biggest-free-agent-investment-jack-conklin-is-fitting-with-browns>

Jack Conklin and Myles Garrett stood together off to the side and had a lengthy conversation during a field goal drill late in the penultimate training camp practice.

When injuries or pitch counts didn't interfere, Conklin, at right offensive tackle, and Garrett, at left defensive end, faced each other a decent amount in Browns training camp, which ended last weekend.

So Conklin has been picking Garrett's brain about pass-blocking techniques and other areas of his game he hopes to improve.

Although Conklin joined the Browns in March by signing a three-year, \$42 million contract as one of the hottest free agents in the NFL, the former Tennessee Titans All-Pro offensive lineman considers himself far from a finished product.

"I'm still a young player," Conklin, who turned 26 on Aug. 17, told the Beacon Journal in a recent phone interview. "Obviously, I still have a lot to learn and a lot I can get better at."

At the same time, Conklin is confident he can immediately reward the Browns' new regime for giving him \$30 million guaranteed, its most substantial free-agent investment. He spent the past two seasons blocking in a wide-zone scheme employed by the Titans, and he's eager to power a similar system used by new Browns coach Kevin Stefanski.

"I pride myself huge on my run blocking, and I love doing it," Conklin said. "It's my favorite thing to do. I definitely think just with my experience of doing it the last two years that I can help drive the team and help them figure out how to get this run game going. I definitely take huge pride in the team running behind me and leading the way."

If camp is any indication, quarterback Baker Mayfield and his receivers will likely need time to establish adequate rhythm and chemistry when the season arrives, beginning Sept. 13 in Baltimore. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the cancellation of organized team activity and minicamp practices in the spring and preseason games in the summer. The passing attack has often appeared to be behind, at least partially, as a result.

The hope is the running game will provide the offense with a backbone it can depend on early and often.

"It's something to lean on when you have those two running backs that we have back there, when you've got [Nick] Chubb and Kareem [Hunt]. Those guys are some freak playmakers," said Conklin, who blocked for last season's NFL rushing champion, Derrick Henry. "So if we get this run game going, the way this wide-zone offense works, that's going to be awesome, and it's going to have



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teams worrying so much about that, that it's going to end up opening up our pass game in a huge way.”

Conklin took a day of rest during camp, and his repetitions in team drills have been limited since then. He insisted he's good to go, though.

“Just a load management thing, being safe about stuff and working on not overloading my body and hurting anything,” Conklin said.

In May, offensive line coach Bill Callahan said in terms of fitting a system, the Browns could not have signed “a more perfect tackle in free agency than Jack.” Stefanski said last weekend Conklin has meshed with the Browns as well as the club had expected, and it turns out the compatibility doesn't apply solely to the football field.

Conklin is from Plainwell, Michigan, where he played high school football for his father, Darren. Conklin's wife, Caitlyn, grew up on the East Side of Cleveland in Gates Mills and has family living in Strongsville.

The ties to Northeast Ohio made the move from Tennessee easier, especially amid a global health crisis and with the couple expecting their second child and first son in November. Talks with Browns medical personnel and the NFL and NFL Players Association's implementation of frequent COVID-19 testing helped alleviate concerns about Jack playing during a pandemic and coming home to a pregnant wife and 3-year-old daughter Riley.

Jack and Caitlyn met at Michigan State University, where he walked on after no Division I scholarship offers came his way and where she played soccer. They were married early in his NFL career by the Titans team minister at Nissan Stadium in Nashville.

They plan on eventually adopting a child on their way to having a big family. Caitlyn has been passionate about adoption for a long time. She and Jack became licensed foster parents in Tennessee and hope to repeat the process in Ohio. They once provided emergency care for sisters, ages 7 and 3, for a night and part of the next day.

“It really opened my eyes to just how big of an impact we could make just by helping a child or two, just giving them another chance at life,” Conklin said, “and we're in such a great spot with how football is going and our life is going that it would definitely be a great thing for us to do to be able to help a child.”

Stefanski said the 6-foot-6, 308-pound Conklin “fits what we want to be and what we stand for” off the field.

“Playing style, he's a smart, tough football player,” Stefanski added. “He can grind in the run game. He fights his tail off in the pass game. He has great length and size. Really excited about Jack.”

The Browns would be even more excited if Conklin and rookie first-round draft pick Jedrick Wills solidify their right and left tackle spots, respectively, for years to come. The Browns haven't had a



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long-term starting tackle since future Hall of Famer Joe Thomas suffered a ruptured triceps tendon on Oct. 22, 2017, and retired after the season. The Titans were the opponent at FirstEnergy Stadium when the legendary consecutive snap streak of Thomas ended at 10,363.

“It was a crazy moment to be there when he got hurt,” Conklin said. “Growing up, my two favorite players were Joe Thomas and Jake Long. Just being from Michigan and Big Ten country, those are the two guys that I always looked up to and wanted to be like, and to be there, it was a bummer to see it go down like that.”

Since Conklin joined the Browns, he has struck up a relationship with Thomas. They’re both committed to mentoring Wills, who said he often turns to Conklin for advice.

“He’s definitely a guy that’ll listen and try to learn more,” Conklin said of Wills, the 10th overall selection from the University of Alabama. “I’ve been trying to do more and more every day just try to help bring him along, give him a little edge on certain things. There’s so much to learn, especially for him moving from right [tackle in high school and college] to left [tackle in the NFL]. I went through the same process moving from left to right coming in as a rookie.”

Conklin’s transition proved to be successful. He became a first-team All-Pro selection in 2016, the same year the Titans drafted him eighth overall with a pick the Browns traded in a move down to No. 15, where they took wide receiver Corey Coleman.

Conklin started every game with the Titans until he suffered a torn anterior cruciate ligament on Jan. 13, 2018, in a playoff loss to the New England Patriots. Then he missed seven games during the 2018 season — three while on the comeback trail from the ACL, one with a concussion and three more with another knee injury. The Titans declined to exercise the fifth-year option in his rookie contract.

Walking on in college shaped Conklin – “It’s always in the back of your mind that it wasn’t that long ago that nobody wanted you,” he said – and the Titans’ decision to let him hit free agency fueled him.

“It’s walk-on mode again,” Conklin said. “It’s you’ve got to make a name for yourself again. Everything that happened before is done. It’s you’re starting from scratch, and you’ve got a chance to put on for the whole NFL. You’ve got a chance to make a name for yourself again.

“I took that every day as a motivating factor and as something to look to. Definitely, you want to get your fifth-year option picked up, but it wasn’t the way things went. But I think it was definitely something that helped build another chip on my shoulder.”

Conklin bounced back last season and started all 19 games, including three in the playoffs. The Titans lost 35-24 to the eventual Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs in the AFC Championship.

Now Conklin hopes such meaningful games will be part of the experience in his new NFL home.



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Joe Thomas explains why Browns made a 'home run' selection with Jedrick Wills Jr.

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/joe-thomas-explains-why-browns-made-a-home-run-selection-with-jedrick-wills-jr>

Joe Thomas didn't hold back his feelings for Jedrick Wills Jr.

The Browns selected Wills with the 10th overall pick in the 2020 NFL Draft to bolster the left side of their offensive line, and Thomas, an 11-year Browns veteran and 10-time Pro Bowler, gave Wills his highest praise.

"There will not be any sleeping for me tonight because I'm so excited by this pick," Thomas emphatically said in a radio interview with the Cleveland Browns Radio Network. "When I watch him on film, there is nothing he can't do. All these other guys who were the top tackles had big question marks, in my opinion. This guy? No question marks. Browns home run."

Thomas, who is one of the top left tackles in NFL history, isn't just saying that to rile up Browns supporters, either. He said Browns fans have been messaging him on Twitter about the offensive tackles in the draft for the last couple weeks, and Thomas wanted to give them an informed response about who he'd have at the top of his list.

So, he watched game film on the top four tackle prospects. Andrew Thomas, Tristan Wirfs, Mekhi Becton and Wills were all likely to be pegged early in the first round and highlight one of the best offensive tackle classes in recent memory. When Joe Thomas finished his work, however, Wills stood out.

"There is nothing that when you watch him on tape makes you go, 'Well, I don't know. He's going to have to get better at this,'" Thomas said. "Does this man move like an All-Pro in the NFL? Will the footwork skills, technique, quickness, balance, change of direction and recovery skills that he possesses in his body be able to hold up to the Von Millers and JJ Watts? I went back, and there was only one guy that stood out. He just popped off your screen. The technique he was using. The dominance. The finish. The change in direction. The explosion that he had. The way he could bend his ankles, knees and hips and create force and power. When guys tried to bull rush him, he was firm and stout.

"There was only one guy that looked like that, and that was Jedrick Wills."

Wills' biggest question mark with the Browns will be how well he can move those skills over to left tackle. Wills started at right tackle for two seasons at Alabama and protected the blindside of Tua Tagovailoa, the left-handed quarterback whom the Miami Dolphins selected Thursday with the No. 5 pick.

Now, he'll be tasked with blocking the blindside of Baker Mayfield as a left tackle. Coach Kevin Stefanski confirmed Thursday that the Browns intend to switch Wills to the left side, which can be a tougher transition than it might appear.



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Thomas, however, has no doubt that Wills can do it. He compared Wills' raw skills to Mitchell Schwartz, who endured a transition from left to right tackle when he was drafted to Cleveland in 2012 and hasn't missed a start in eight seasons split between the Browns and Kansas City Chiefs.

"I've seen it so many times where guys come out of college and they were on the left side or guard and they were going to tackle or they were a right tackle going to left tackle," Thomas said. "You don't have enough muscle memory from what you did in college to be untrainable. This man will come in — and I don't want to make any guarantees — but he is ready to go to the Pro Bowl this year."

Thomas believes Wills won't have much trouble in the transition with Bill Callahan as his offensive line coach. Callahan, who was hired by the Browns in January, has a high pedigree as an offensive line coach and has spent time coaching Pro Bowl linemen in Nick Mangold, Alan Faneca, D'Brickashaw Ferguson, Tyron Smith and Trent Williams.

Callahan is regarded as one of the top offensive line coaches in the NFL, and Thomas believes Wills will flourish under Callahan's direction.

"Offensive line coaches, more than any other coach, have an ability to take a player from where they are and increase their production," Thomas said. "There's no other position on the field that requires smarts and technique so much more than it requires power and strength. It's technique that wins, and coaches teach technique. Bill Callahan is going to have Jedrick Wills turn into an All-Pro tackle. Mark my words."

Thomas is willing to help Wills with the transition, too.

He already reached out to Wills on Twitter before the draft began to let him know that Browns EVP of Football Operations and GM Andrew Berry had heavy interest in drafting him. Thomas messaged Wills again as soon as Berry made the pick with his phone number and offered to help Wills with his new team.

Wills, of course, plans to take him up on it.

"As soon as I can start that position as fast as possible and kind of send him some videos, get some pointers and clips from his direction, I feel like I will be in good hands," Wills said. "He's a Hall of Fame player, so why not?"



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Following Browns rookie LT Jedrick Wills Jr.'s every move during a camp practice

By Zac Jackson, The Athletic

<https://theathletic.com/2021393/2020/09/01/following-browns-rookie-lt-jedrick-wills-jr-s-every-move-during-a-camp-practice/>

BEREA, Ohio — During a jog-through period in Sunday's practice at FirstEnergy Stadium, the Browns' first offense lined up at midfield for a simulated Hail Mary situation. As Baker Mayfield barked out signals and tried to get a read on how much pressure the defense might be sending, rookie left tackle Jedrick Wills Jr. came out of his stance and started his backpedal. The ball had not yet been snapped.

In this case, the penalty for a false start was a one-play expulsion for Wills. Veteran backup tackle Kendall Lamm was summoned from the sideline, and Wills jogged — with his head up — over to offensive line coach Bill Callahan. There was no long lecture. Callahan spoke with Wills briefly, patted him on the shoulder and one play later the 21-year-old was back.

The Browns have never wavered on their commitment to making Wills their immediate starter at left tackle, a position Wills never played until football activities started in August. The false-start penalty was not the first (or even the fourth) Wills has committed in training camp, but no one involved has expected perfection. Callahan and the other coaches have tried to push Wills without overloading him; they've stressed resilience nearly as much as they've worked on technique.

"Sometimes, (young players) have the tendency to dwell because they want to do so well that it kind of feeds into that cycle of overthinking, paralysis by analysis and things of that nature," Callahan said. "We have worked really hard at trying to get a mindset for Jedrick and all of our players of getting on and getting forward with the next play."

The one-play benching was necessary, but the Browns couldn't afford for it to linger. Wills has lots of work to do.

Last Saturday, I watched Wills for an entire practice. Though I sometimes caught myself watching the ball and still tried to gauge the overall flow of practice, I mostly watched Wills.

Tracking a left tackle is not like tracking a quarterback or even a cornerback. There are no easily recordable stats for an offensive lineman, and there are few times that a left tackle is in the open. It was a not a full-pads, full-contact practice either, which means it probably wasn't the ideal day for this exercise. But after losing 25-ish practices over two months and four preseason games to a global pandemic, it's not the ideal time for the Browns to be bringing along a rookie left tackle. Every practice matters; Wills and the Browns have admitted as much.

When the stretching period ended Saturday and the offensive linemen jogged to the south end of the practice fields, Callahan was only an arm's length from Wills' left hip. The veteran coach stood just behind his rookie pupil as the offensive line went through its early reps. Later in practice, Callahan worked with the guards and centers when the offensive line worked on its own. Assistant offensive-line coach Scott Peters twice went hands-on with Wills, stressing hand placement as Wills pushed through fellow rookie tackle Alex Taylor, who was holding a blocking pad.



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As he has throughout camp, Wills took every rep at left tackle with the first offense. On this day, he mostly was matched up with Olivier Vernon, and on every pass set, Wills more than held his own. Myles Garrett was flipped to Wills' side for one play late in the first-team drill, but Wills blocked down and sought out a linebacker as the Browns faked a run to the right before throwing a quick screen pass back to the left.

"I think his progress has been positive, but you just do not know until you go up against live competition," Callahan said. "Having the looks that we are getting in practice from No. 54 (Vernon) and No. 95 (Garrett) certainly helps that. Jed has obviously lost a share and he has won a share of his reps, but that experience of getting out against quality and premier pass rushers is invaluable. Every day it is a learning experience for him, and we are trying to bring him up to speed as fast as we can."

Wills sometimes stood alone on the sideline between reps. At one point later in practice, he took a knee alongside left guard Joel Bitonio, who as a rookie in 2014 benefited from playing between Joe Thomas and Alex Mack on the best Cleveland offensive line in recent memory.

"Jed looks smooth out there," Bitonio said earlier in camp. "If you told me he had played left tackle in college, I wouldn't have questioned it. From his stance, kick-step and firing off the ball, it looks pretty natural for him."

Standing on the sideline, Wills almost always held his water bottle in his left hand. That's likely just a habit; he's a right-hander who grew up in hoops-crazed Lexington, Ky., thinking he'd one day play college basketball. Wills played right tackle at Lafayette High School and for two seasons as a starter at Alabama. He said earlier in the offseason that he'd spent much of his pre-draft training time prepping to play left tackle. Wills said only two teams he met with during the pre-draft process planned to keep him at right tackle if they drafted him.

"The biggest thing is really just seeing different things every day from the guys on the other side of the ball," Wills said Sunday. "It's really mastering your technique and being ready for all the kinds of moves. I think I have made a lot of progress, especially the past few weeks. (I'm) moving along very quickly and just trying to get better."

About midway through Saturday's practice, this observer caught the observee with his pants down. Literally.

At the end of a drill, Wills summoned head athletic trainer Joe Sheehan to the sideline for a new tape job. Wills dropped his shorts and Sheehan applied layers of new tape around Wills' upper right thigh. Wills has not shown up on any practice injury report and has not missed a snap in any open practice session, so we're left to assume this was a maintenance issue.

The Browns conducted a scoop-and-score drill during Saturday's practice, with coaches rolling footballs to simulate fumbles and every player picking up the ball and advancing it. Some of the offensive linemen were a tad awkward (to say the least), but not Wills. He scooped his fumble cleanly and kept on moving.



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There are no questions about his athleticism. At 312 pounds, he ran the 40-yard dash in 5.05 seconds at the NFL Scouting Combine and recorded a vertical jump of 34.5 inches. The other thing that jumped out from two hours of observation is Wills' long arms: His wingspan was officially measured at 83.5 inches.

In 12 days, Wills will make his first NFL start. The Browns have been prepping him for this since they drafted him 10th overall in April and since Callahan first started quizzing him in Zoom meetings a few weeks later. Though Wills has only moved from the left tackle spot for his reps with the field goal team, the Browns have intentionally mixed in a number of defenders across from Wills to give the rookie different looks. Each day, Callahan goes over the film and talks with Wills about the good, the bad and the in-between. They talk a lot, too, about Wills staying positive when the bad shows up.

"Of course I've been (frustrated at times) because (I) come from a place in college where I just dominated everybody I went against," Wills said. "It was easy and it was a walk in the park, and now you are going against these guys who are Pro Bowlers and some of the best pass rushers in the league. It gets frustrating at times, but you just have to learn from your losses."

The Browns are acknowledging that Wills has had some difficult days while trying to focus more on gradual growth and habits that will help Wills improve with more full-speed NFL experience. The real evaluations are just around the corner.

"I think I have gauged his rate of improvement," Callahan said. "You would love to have it much higher, like a veteran level. But let's be realistic, that is just not going to happen in this day and age because of the tardiness of techniques (from) not having the offseason and things of that nature. I do think that the players learn more once they get into the games. They are really more in tune to what is going to occur and what they can expect. That rate of improvement is key."

"Week in and week out as we move through the schedule and during the season, I just want to see constant improvement. I want to see his technique get better and I want to see him graduate to a level where he can handle just about anything. Now, he is not going to be proficient at everything, but I want him to have good exposure and a good understanding of the things that are going to be facing him."



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Rookie Jedrick Wills stays quiet, locks in, quickly earns trust of teammates

By Scott Petrak, brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2020/10/16/rookie-jedrick-wills-stays-quiet-locks-in-quickly-earns-trust-of-teammates/>

The quiet is unsettling for left guard Joel Bitonio. And not because Bitonio is one of the team's best conversationalists.

As the offensive line meets to install the game plan and scrutinize the opposition, rookie left tackle Jedrick Wills remains silent. That leaves Bitonio to wonder if the man counted on to protect Baker Mayfield's blindside grasps the instruction.

"He is such a quiet guy that I talk to him a lot and I hope he understands," Bitonio said. "He is just like a quiet dude, and then we get out there and he does not make mistakes. He does not make simple assignment errors.

"He comes out there and he is doing the right assignment, which is a huge step that you put yourself in the right position."

Wills is used to his personality leaving people perplexed. He had to explain himself throughout the draft process.

"That was a lot of the teams' biggest questions because all of my coaches said they could never get a read on me," Wills told The Chronicle-Telegram by phone Thursday. "But in reality, I'm just trying to lock in. Just minding my business."

Business has been good for the 21-year-old who was the No. 10 pick in April.

He's part of a line that's allowed only seven sacks in five games. And of the five tackles taken in the first round, he's earned the highest grade (77.9) from Pro Football Focus.

His coaches and teammates also sing his praises.

"He has done a really good job," center JC Tretter said. "You continue to see growth every week. I think you will continue to see that throughout the entire season."

Odell Beckham Jr. sent home with illness

"To be honest, I just try to play," Wills said. "I don't really pay attention to the grades or anything like that. I don't ever ask my coach, 'How did I do? What was my grade?' I just play to win."

The Browns won their fourth straight Sunday against the Colts. Wills thought he played well overall but was kicking himself for allowing a sack and a pressure. He called the sack by Al-Quadin Muhammad "bogus."



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"I just took a bad angle. He dipped the corner on me," Wills said. "There's guys that are good across the league on every single team no matter if they're big names or not. If anything like that happens, they're getting paid for a reason, so they're not just going to brush it off. They're going to finish the play."

Steelers outside linebacker Bud Dupree might not be a superstar, but he was the No. 22 pick in 2015, broke through last year with 11.5 sacks and has three in Pittsburgh's 4-0 start. The Steelers don't move him around much, so Wills will see him for about 60 snaps on Sunday at Heinz Field.

"He's got a high motor," said Wills, who's already faced veteran pass rushers DeMarcus Lawrence of the Cowboys and Justin Houston of the Colts. "He's a veteran guy that's been in the league for a while, so he has a lot of things in his toolbox."

"He just plays with a lot of aggression. You don't see that from a lot of people. You see a lot of pass rushers who wait till third down to kind of amp it up a little bit. He pretty much brings it on every play."

Offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt called Dupree a great challenge.

"Jed has been playing really well and at a high level from the start of the season," he said. "That is just a different type of pass rusher now, a guy with tremendous speed and speed to power off that edge."

The Steelers, as usual, are stacked across the defensive front. T.J. Watt is the outside linebacker opposite Dupree — right tackle Jack Conklin draws the difficult assignment — with Cameron Heyward, Stephon Tuitt and Tyson Alualu inside. They lead the league with five sacks a game and rank third overall defensively, presenting another stern test for Cleveland's fortified line.

"I do not think they have a weak spot in the front seven," Bitonio said.

Pittsburgh's zone blitzes and 3-4 scheme are different than the Browns see from most teams. The adjustment requires extreme attention to detail, which doesn't sound like a problem for Wills.

"It's slightly different, but in reality, when you do training camp, you review all those looks," he said. "You go through the whole playbook so you review all your rules."

Studying in silence works.

"He is a quiet guy, but he is always in there, he is focused, he is taking notes and he is ready to work in practice," Bitonio said.

The worry when Wills was drafted was that he'd never played left tackle. He was a right tackle in high school and at the University of Alabama, but the Browns were confident he could make the switch.

Wills has made it look easy.



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“He is conscientious,” coach Kevin Stefanski said. “He does a great job.”

As a son, too.

Wills, who reveals parts of his personality on social media, bought his mom, Sivi, a 2019 Lexus SUV last week and surprised her with it during her trip to Cleveland to watch the game. The special gift was always part of his NFL dream, then the timing made sense when her old Trailblazer broke down.

“She had been driving the same car since I’ve been growing up,” Wills said. “I have a younger brother and sister at home who she still travels around with, gets them to and from. It was just time.”

Sivi, got a ride to town with Wills’ dad — they’re not together — but drove back to Lexington, Ky., in style.

“She loved it,” Wills said. “She’s been talking about it for the past couple days. So do my younger brother and sister. It’s good for them having a set of wheels to get around in.

“She’s just done everything for you for so long. It’s like the least we can do for her.”



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How 2 former Browns TEs sold Austin Hooper on Cleveland, and why it spoke volumes

By Andrew Gribble, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/how-2-former-browns-tes-sold-austin-hooper-on-cleveland-and-why-it-spoke-volumes>

Austin Hooper was thinking about the Browns before the Browns could even introduce themselves.

As he awaited free agency, Hooper joined a number of current and former NFL players on a trip to Budapest, Hungary, for the eighth annual American Football Without Barriers Football Camp. There, he worked closely with former Browns tight ends Jordan Cameron and Gary Barnidge, the latter of whom is the co-founder of the initiative.

Hooper, the two-time Pro Bowl tight end, already had an idea of the kind of teams and cities that interested him most. Cameron and Barnidge, though, only encouraged him about one of those potential landing spots.

"One of the teams they both were talking about in a very positive way was Cleveland, just speaking about the fan base and the city itself," Hooper said on a Tuesday conference call with reporters. "They sold the idea to me before legal tampering even occurred. By the time the Browns and I were actually able to speak for the first time ... it was kind of already playing into my mind as a potential spot I really wanted to go and I am really excited."

That excitement is mutual.

The Browns rewarded Hooper, who is entering the prime of his career after his best season to date, with a four-year contract. And in turn, Hooper is expected to be another weapon in an offense full of them at the skill positions. He immediately becomes the most accomplished at tight end, a position coach Kevin Stefanski likes to feature prominently in his offense.

"More tight ends are on the field, baby," Hooper said. "That is all you need to know." Atlanta Falcons tight end Austin Hooper (81) runs a pass route defended by Baltimore Ravens linebacker Matthew Judon (99) during an NFL Pro Bowl football game, Sunday, Jan. 26, 2020, in

The more Hooper got on the field during his four seasons with the Falcons, the more he produced.

After catching 19 passes for 271 yards and three touchdowns as a rookie, Hooper took on a bigger role in Atlanta's offense in his second season and continually increased his production. In 2018, Hooper appeared in all 16 games and caught 71 passes for 660 yards and four touchdowns to earn his first Pro Bowl honor.

Hooper, of course, is coming off a season full of career-bests, one in which he caught 75 passes for 787 yards and six touchdowns to land his second consecutive Pro Bowl invitation.

"Being a mid-round draft pick, being a guy who didn't really become a full-time starter until his second year and then every year in the league, I'm just trying to get better," Hooper said.



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"I feel like that's just my whole goal overall. Sophomore season in Atlanta was like 500 yards. Third year was under 700. This past year with less than three games left, I was under 800. My goal always is just to improve. I pride myself on being pretty consistent so I just want to keep grinding throughout the offseason and come back next year and just continue to get better. That is my mentality."

As he approached free agency, Hooper had a mentality that went beyond what he could do on the field. Off-the-field aspects were important to him, too, which is why the stories and anecdotes Cameron and Barnidge passed along meant so much to him.

No matter how long it takes Hooper to actually get to Cleveland, he knows what he's walking into thanks to the two former Browns tight ends.

"The fan base and the culture: That was what they preached the most," Hooper said. "They said how much they enjoyed their time playing there. Obviously, they would have liked to win a couple more games throughout their time there, but they said that the fan base and the city is just so fully immersed in the Cleveland Browns and they are so tied into the Cleveland Browns. From what they said to me, it is just a unique experience."

"Both of them without me even trying to sway them one way or another, both of them were like, 'Yeah, that was by far the best football experience from a fan and a community perspective.' That was something that really stood out to me because I feel like a lot of time the fans forget that the players are people. It sounds kind of weird, but from what those two guys have told me, there is actually less of a disconnect than other places. It is something that may seem trivial to some, but to a player like that, that speaks volumes."



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Austin Hooper doing the 'dirty work' to lift surging Browns offense

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/austin-hooper-doing-the-dirty-work-to-lift-surging-browns-offense>

Austin Hooper has carried one of the heaviest workloads of all Browns players in each of his five games with Cleveland.

Hooper, whom the Browns signed to a four-year deal over the offseason, has rarely left the field no matter the play call. He's fifth on the Browns with 288 total snaps thus far and is the only skill position player outside of quarterback Baker Mayfield to log over 280 snaps. His versatility in both the run and pass game has made him a mainstay in coach Kevin Stefanski's offense, and that's required him to embrace every detail of the playbook.

"I feel like I am fitting in pretty well here in terms of just understanding my role and accepting my responsibilities," he said. "At first, there was a lot of information I had to review with new terminology. It just forced me to really become a student of the offense and understand the language within the offense. Since I have had such a better grasp of it now, it allows me to play in different spots and do some different things."

Hooper has recorded 17 receptions for 153 yards and a touchdown, which came on a goal-line play in the Browns' wild, 49-38 Week 4 win over the Dallas Cowboys. Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield has mostly targeted wide receivers Odell Beckham Jr. and Jarvis Landry when the Browns need big plays, but Hooper has provided Mayfield with a reliable security blanket for short, efficient throws that typically go for a quick first down.

His receiving production might not look the same as other top tight ends around the league, but he carries the same level of importance in the Browns' schemes. Cleveland's coaches, however, don't need to see the stats to put a value on Hooper's significance to the Browns' early offensive success.

"The things that we ask him to do are sometimes the dirty work," offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt said. "He accepts that. He's valuable, and we use him in a lot of different ways in protection and the pass game, and obviously run blocking. He's done a hell of a job."

That last category is what has made Hooper such a treasured acquisition. Cleveland has the top rushing offense in the league and is averaging 188 yards on the ground per game, and much of the credit has gone to RBs Kareem Hunt and Nick Chubb, who has been sidelined since Week 4 with a knee injury.

The offensive line has received a heavy amount of praise for keeping the Browns' rushers at the top of league leaderboards, too, and Hooper deserves some of the kudos. He's been on the field almost as much as the Browns' starting offensive linemen. He's picked up key blocks and has been a reliable cog in opening holes for the running backs.

So when Hooper sees the Browns at the top of the majority of the league's rushing categories, he knows that he's doing his job well.



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"I take a tremendous amount of pride in it," Hooper said. "Being in an offense that has been doing very well thus far on the ground, if you want to run to the tight end side, you have to have some tight ends who can create a stretch, create movements and handle their one-on-one matchups. That is a responsibility I definitely do not take lightly because I understand if we want to run an outside zone scheme and pull plays behind me at the point of attack specifically, it has to work with me."

Hooper's assistance in the run game this year has met the vision Browns coaches saw in him when they signed him in March. Even though his talents as a receiver are well known, his efficiency in run blocking has meant that defenses won't receive any help in predicting the play call when Hooper is on the field.

"It really allows us as an offense to be very dynamic," tight ends coach Drew Petzing said. "When you cannot dial in when a certain guy is in the game or in a certain position in terms of 'Hey, there are just going to try to throw him the ball,' or, 'He is just going to be the run blocking tight end,' it really creates some indecision in terms of how you defend that. I think he gives us that, and he is doing it at such a high level that I think you see that in our success in the run game and pass game."

Hooper's workload won't get any lighter as the Browns attempt to continue throttling opposing defenses with an unpredictable mix of big passing plays and steady pickups from their running backs.

But that's just what he wants. His variety of roles have kept him on the field for every play, and the numbers have proven that when he's in the game, good things can happen no matter the play call.

"I'm feeling good about it," he said. "You're trying to get that perfect effort, and if everyone has that perfect effort, the scoreboard tends to take care of itself."



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How Browns tight end Harrison Bryant went from small-school lineman to the country's best tight end

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/06/how-browns-tight-end-harrison-bryant-went-from-small-school-lineman-to-the-countrys-best-tight-end.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Charlie Weis Jr., the offensive coordinator at Florida Atlantic in 2018 and 2019, knew he had something special in tight end Harrison Bryant. Still, it felt far-fetched for Bryant to get recognized as the player Weis believed he was.

“We always joked about getting him the (John) Mackey Award because we thought he was the best tight end in the country,” Weis said. Joked because no tight end from a Group of 5 school had ever won the award given to the best tight end in college football.

Bryant was coming off a junior year in which he caught 45 passes for 662 yards in a run-heavy offense featuring current Bills running back Devin Singletary and Steelers running back Kerrith Whyte. Chris Robison, the team's quarterback, was a freshman. Jovon Durante, currently in the CFL, led the team with 65 catches and 873 yards.

Going into 2019 and Bryant's senior season, Weis called him far and away the best returning player on offense.

It showed. Bryant led FAU in receptions, receiving yards, receiving touchdowns and scrimmage yards and finished tied for second in total touchdowns. He was an unanimous NCAA All-American and almost any national publication who wrote about college football handed him All-America and All-Conference-USA honors. Pro Football Focus named him the C-USA Player of the Year.

And, yes, he became the first player from a Group of 5 school to win the Mackey.

In April the Browns made Bryant their first pick on Day 3 of the draft, the ninth pick of the fourth round.

“It got to the point where we were staring at the board and you kind of couldn't ignore the fact that he was still up there,” said Glenn Cook after the pick. Cook was recently promoted from Assistant Director of Scouting to Vice President of Player Personnel.

It's sort of how Bryant ended up at FAU, too. After his 2015 season, which capped a brief playing career at a K-through-12 school in Georgia, he was on his way to playing defensive end at Samford, an FCS program -- until a coach at FAU couldn't ignore the fact he was too good at another position to let go.

John Milledge Academy is a private college prep school in Milledgeville, Georgia. Bryant estimated his graduating class at about 23 students. The football team ranges from between 40 to 50 players.



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Travis Trickett, the coach who got Bryant to FAU, described it as “sma-a-all,” and, yes, he emphasized every one of those a’s. We’ll get to Trickett later.

J.T. Wall graduated from John Milledge Academy in 1998 and went on to play fullback at Southwest Baptist University before transferring to Georgia as a walk-on, where he eventually earned a scholarship. He was drafted by the Steelers in the seventh round of the 2003 NFL Draft. He came back to John Milledge Academy as an assistant in 2009 and became the head football coach in 2011.

He was sitting in his office one day when he got a call from admissions about a parent of a prospective student who wanted to meet with him. It was a busy day, so Wall said to take a name and number and he would get back to them.

“Coach,” the person on the other side of the line said, “you may want to come down here. She says her son’s 6-5, 240.”

Wall stopped and went right to the office and met Bryant’s mother, Alyson. He was still cynical -- “Sometimes when they tell you he’s 6-5, 240, he comes in and he’s 5-6, 120” -- but once he laid eyes on Bryant, he knew he was the real deal.

Bryant was a junior transferring in, in part, because of John Milledge Academy’s high academic standards, and he immediately started at tackle and defensive end. He was named All-State in Class AAA of the Georgia Independent School Association.

But it was a second-round playoff game that set the course for Bryant’s future. Trailing by as many as 20 points, John Milledge rallied to beat Valwood thanks, in part, to two tackle eligible touchdown catches by Bryant.

Bryant said he was lobbying Wall pretty hard to get a chance to get some opportunities to catch the ball and Wall said he could see, watching Bryant after practices, he was pretty athletic. But he was too good a tackle to move.

“We had been going back and forth and, as athletic as he was, we looked at it and he had been on me a little bit about it,” Wall remembered, “so we toyed with the idea and it was a pretty good move for all parties involved.”

Except, for his senior season, it wasn’t as simple as just moving to tight end. First, Bryant had to find a tackle to replace him and Wall told him to recruit his cousin, Chandler, also a student at John Milledge, to come out for football. He did and the floodgates opened.

Wall unleashed Bryant in 2015, playing him at tight end, running back, receiver -- even some quarterback. On defense, he played along the defensive line and linebacker. He played around 100 snaps a game, often cramping up in the Georgia humidity. He earned Baldwin County Defensive Player of the Year.



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When it came to college, Bryant wasn't getting many bites. He had trimmed down to around 225 for his senior season and it looked like he was on his way to Samford to play defensive end. Maybe tight end would be an option, but they took him as a defensive player.

Here's where Trickett comes in.

Trickett, now the tight ends/inside receivers coach at West Virginia, was at Samford in 2015, but made the move to Florida Atlantic to work under then-head coach Charlie Partridge as offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach.

FAU needed a tight end and, even though the talent pool available in recruiting to an FBS school like FAU is deeper than what Trickett had at Samford, Bryant's tight end tape was just better than anyone else he watched. He would show the tape to other staffers alongside three- and four-star recruits and the consensus was the same in response to Bryant's film: "I think that guy's the best player."

Florida Atlantic ended up as Bryant's only FBS offer, in part because of his ability to put on and take off weight. Bryant had dropped weight even more as signing day approached, reaching 210 pounds for basketball, but Trickett had seen him play at 230 and Partridge was confident Bryant could carry extra weight. Bryant came in with a more-heralded three-star recruit, John Raine, who became one of his best friends and roommates at FAU, but Trickett knew they had found a steal in the unheralded Bryant.

Bryant showed up in the summer and Trickett immediately started hearing about what Bryant was doing in drills. The coaches couldn't watch, but players would tell Trickett about Bryant "Moss-ing" defenders, winning one-on-ones.

"This kid's going to be really good," they would tell him.

When fall camp rolled around, Bryant lived up to the hype and then some. His toughness stood out, delivering hits without fear. If he got knocked down, he'd get up and laugh, jawing back. Bryant recalls Trickett playing a pass protection rep against one of the Owls' best defensive linemen in team meetings and raving about it.

Trickett left FAU after the 2016 season when Partridge was replaced by Lane Kiffin. His brother, Clint, was Bryant's position coach for his final three FAU seasons. Travis said Clint, who remains on staff at FAU after Kiffin left for Ole Miss, would text him whenever Bryant had a good game, thanking him for getting Bryant to the Owls.

(Clint Trickett was not made available for an interview, per FAU policy.)

Weis was Bryant's position coach for about a month before Clint Trickett. He came in with Kiffin, but an opportunity to work for Steve Sarkisian with the Atlanta Falcons pulled him away. During his short, first stint with the Owls, Bryant and Raine, who graduate-transferred to Northwestern this



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season, would hit him up daily to watch tape. The staff was working to combine Kiffin's offense with the Baylor system offensive coordinator Kendal Briles brought, but Weis couldn't help but make time for his young tight ends.

Weis was impressed with how much film Bryant watched on his own, studying tight ends like George Kittle and Zach Ertz.

"That's what he does for fun," Weis said.

Weis came back to FAU in 2018 to take over as offensive coordinator after Briles left. He had stayed in contact with Kiffin and kept up-to-date on the program, and when he watched cut-ups of Bryant's 2017 season, he knew the junior would be a big contributor in 2018.

Then came Bryant's senior season. It was just different. He added about 10 to 15 pounds and did more speed-based training with the strength staff. (Bryant measured 6-5, 243 at the combine.)

Weis said you could find Bryant running routes at night at the Oxley Center, usually with Robison, as he worked to develop chemistry with his young quarterback.

He even paid some visits to Weis' office to make suggestions, including the formation they called Flex, which put him as a single receiver in 12 personnel with Raine as the off-the-ball tight end. It's a formation they used plenty in the season opener of Bryant's senior year in Columbus against Ohio State.

The first offensive play of Bryant's best season was a drop. It was in Flex. He was lined up wide to the right and ran a slant. Robison put it on his hands. Harrison put it on the ground.

Harrison said Bryant wouldn't have rebounded well early in his career, but on this day, he caught six passes for 79 yards against the best defense he would face. Late in the game, he caught a pass matched up one-on-one with Jeff Okudah, the third pick in the 2020 draft.

Bryant pointed to his game against Ohio State and his week at the Senior Bowl as key moments in the draft process.

"It's the first thing scouts and GMs turn on to watch your tape," Bryant said. "Those are the first two games, the first (Senior Bowl) practices they're going to watch and then they'll watch the Middle Tennessee and FIU games, so I knew that I wanted to jump out as soon as they turned the tape on."

Cook said a performance against Ohio State can play a factor, but they try not to look at the level of competition too much when evaluating a player like Bryant.

"You really just have to hone in on the skillset," he said. "I think that is one of the things that we really liked about Harrison is from our coaching staff and our scouts, they both really appreciated his ability to get open in a multitude of ways."



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As for Bryant's production, it hit its peak against UTSA when he caught 10 passes for 182 yards and a score, which is when it hit Bryant, Weis and the rest of the FAU staff -- he really might win the Mackey.

Now, in Cleveland, he'll have a chance to contribute in head coach Kevin Stefanski's tight-end heavy offense.

Stefanski, on the final night of the draft, boiled down the decision to take Bryant and add him to a crowded tight end room pretty simply.

"We think this kid is a pretty good football player," he said.

No joke.



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Harrison Bryant earns training camp honor after staying strong, keeping quiet

By Anthony Poisal, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/harrison-bryant-earns-training-camp-honor-after-staying-strong-keeping-quiet>

Harrison Bryant hasn't said much since he arrived in Berea for his first day of training camp.

With the exception of questions and conversations in team meetings and video calls, Bryant has kept quiet to teammates and coaches. Rookies aren't normally expected to speak up much in their first training camp in the NFL. Bryant has followed that unwritten rule.

"That's one of my foundational things," he said Tuesday in a video call with local reporters. "I just go in, put my head down and go to work."

Bryant, however, didn't need to talk to stand out in training camp.

He let his play do the talking since his first day in Berea. He's made leaping grabs, absorbed big hits and caught just about everything thrown his way since his first rep in a Browns practice jersey. First team, second team, rain or shine — Bryant made highlight-reel plays.

That's why Bryant, a fourth-round rookie, was awarded the team's Maurice Bassett Award, which is voted by local reporters and is given annually to the Browns' top-performing rookie at training camp.

"It's nice for your work and stuff to be noticed," he said. "It's practice, and that was my goal — to just come out and show what I can do and do whatever I can to make the team and help the team win. I feel like I've done that so far."

Bryant was arguably one of the most impressive Browns players of training camp, period. He received several targets in each practice and seemed to build a quick rapport with quarterbacks Baker Mayfield and Case Keenum. Whether it was a pass between the hash marks, by the sideline or in the red zone, Bryant caught the football.

He was always expected to receive some significant opportunities after he was drafted. Coach Kevin Stefanski has made the tight end position an integral part of the offensive playbook, and if Bryant could carry over his consistency from his college days at Florida Atlantic — where he became the first non-Power 5 conference player in history to win the John Mackey Award for best tight end in the nation — he could quickly expand his rookie role in the offense.

Within days of camp, Bryant was seeing more reps, making more receptions and turning more heads in his direction.

"He's a mature guy," guard Joel Bitonio said. "He comes in and handles his business, and from my perspective, every time the ball comes his way, he's making a play on it. He's just doing all the right things you want to see in a rookie."



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Bryant, of course, won't change his work ethic even though the grueling, hot days of training camp are over. His catching abilities have made quite the first impression, but he said he's still improving his blocking abilities. At 6-foot-5 and 243 pounds, Bryant is a tad smaller than most starting NFL tight ends capable of making plays both with and without the football.

Tight ends typically carry just as much responsibility as a blocker as they do a receiver, and Bryant wants to continue to improve that aspect of his game against Cleveland's top defensive ends and linebackers.

"It's challenging every day," Bryant said. "The biggest aspect is being willing because a lot of time, you're outmanned with the defensive ends in this league. The biggest thing is just will and picking up techniques that will help you stay in there and fight."

Bryant will play in his first professional game in less than two weeks when the Browns play the Baltimore Ravens. He's still competing with veterans Austin Hooper and David Njoku for regular season snaps, but Bryant has proven so far that he can make the most of any role he's given with the Browns.

No matter what's expected of him in Week 1, Bryant's head will be down and his mouth will be shut.

"I've just came in, worked and kept to myself," he said. "Whenever I get my opportunities, I'm just going to go out and produce."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Jarvis Landry honored to be in select company of players with 600 catches in their first seven seasons

By Scott Petrak, brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2020/11/19/jarvis-landry-honored-to-be-in-select-company-of-players-with-600-catches-in-their-first-seven-seasons/>

BEREA — Jarvis Landry didn't know he had reached 600 career catches with a 2-yard grab Sunday in the win over the Texans.

The moment passed without acknowledgement, but not the milestone.

"There are a lot of guys who have played this game," Landry, a five-time Pro Bowl receiver, said Thursday. "Just to be recognized that way and accomplish what I have accomplished is definitely something that I will look back at the end of the season and maybe have a drink."

He became the seventh player in NFL history to catch 600 passes within their first seven seasons, joining Marvin Harrison, Antonio Brown, DeAndre Hopkins, Torry Holt, Larry Fitzgerald, and Brandon Marshall.

"It definitely means a lot to be in that category surrounded by those names that I am surrounded by," Landry said. "I am looking forward to continuing to make plays for this team and for my individual goals, as well."

Even after Landry found out he hit the big 6-0-0, he was confused about when it happened and upset he didn't keep the souvenir. Landry thought it came in the second quarter, followed by a taunting penalty for spiking the ball at the feet of safety and former Browns teammate Eric Murray.

"I guess that 600th came with a taunting penalty so I will always remember that being the catch instead of having a ball to show for it," Landry said.

Does he want the taunting penalty back?

"Yeah, the penalty and the ball," he said.

He was informed later in the Zoom interview that No. 600 was the 2-yarder in the third quarter, the last of his three receptions for 29 yards in game where gusting winds made throwing a risky adventure.

"Actually, I had that ball in my hand," he said. "I had that ball in my hand and I went to the sideline because I came out of the game that play. If I would have known, I would have kept it."

Nick Chubb-Kareem Hunt tandem driven by fresh legs and unselfishness, has great shot at another special milestone



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Landry's resume gets more impressive by the game. He has been to five straight Pro Bowls, has played in 105 straight games to open his career and set NFL records with 400 catches in his first four seasons, 481 in his first five and 528 in his first six.

"They all coexist," he said. "I think the games played allows me to make the catches, and the games played on top of the catches allows me to make Pro Bowls and being a playmaker.

"They all are very special to me. I love catching the ball. I love playing this game. The Pro Bowl outside of a Super Bowl is the next-best thing that a player can get. It definitely all coexists."

Coordinator Alex Van Pelt said Landry's driven by passion.

"You see a guy that loves football," he said. "You see the way he practices. You see the way he competes on gameday. He loves to play the game.

"It is special for him to get that 600th reception. That was big. There is a guy who comes into work every day with the lunch bucket and the hard hat. He just goes to work and does his job."

Landry's foundation partnered with the Greater Cleveland Food Bank on Tuesday for a Thanksgiving food drive that distributed approximately 300 meals to area families in need. He didn't attend because of the team's strict protocols during the pandemic and thanked the volunteers.

"I am just so pleased with the turnout, minus the circumstances, that we still were able to make it work and that we still were able to make people's day and make people's holiday," he said. "That is something that is very special."

Left guard Joel Bitonio entered the league with Landry in the second round in 2014, Bitonio at No. 35 to the Browns and Landry No. 63 to the Dolphins. They've been teammates for three years since the Browns traded for Landry.

"He is not the most vocal guy at practice of all time, but he is always there, he is always willing to work and you know when it comes to Sunday he has his game face on," Bitonio said. "It is like anything you need him to do, he is going to step into that role. That is really all you can ask."

The dedication to, and success of, the run game coupled with nasty weather the last two games have robbed the receivers of their normal number of chances. Landry leads the team with 36 catches for 448 yards but is looking for his first touchdown.

He can't wait to get in the end zone.

"That is just the way the ball has bounced for him this year, but he will get in there soon," Van Pelt said.



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Jarvis Landry 'ahead of schedule' in his rehab from hip surgery and Odell Beckham Jr.'s process 'has motivated me'

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/05/jarvis-landry-ahead-of-schedule-in-his-rehab-from-hip-surgery-and-odell-beckhams-process-has-motivated-me.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Browns receiver Jarvis Landry has had to serve as his own doctor at times during Covid-19, but he deserves a five-star rating for the progress he's made in his rehab from hip surgery in February.

"Right now, I'm a little bit ahead of schedule," Landry said on Zoom call with Browns media on Wednesday. "But the most important thing right now is just taking it day by day, you know I can't predict when exactly I'll be on the field whether that's July, August or September, but obviously my return day is sometime in August."

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, Landry has had to take medical matters into his own hands, literally.

"As far as on a modality side, I've learned how to cup myself," he said, referring to suction therapy. "I've learned how to [dry] needle myself and those are just things that over time that I've picked up, obviously consulting with them first about what I'm feeling and where I'm feeling these things at, and what are the best modalities that I can do outside of jumping in the pool or riding a bike or something like that."

Despite his initial decision not have the procedure, he's glad he did.

"Absolutely. Absolutely," he said. "It's something I knew I needed, and I was going to try to put off and play tough guy for one more year. Just understanding where I was and the things my injury was not allowing me to do, I didn't want to be part of the reason for the team not having success or myself not having success. Unselfishly, I decided just to go ahead and have the surgery."

Except for having to stick and cup himself, Landry hasn't been limited as much one might think by the stay-at-home orders during his rehab. He's been training at Barwis Performance Center in Deerfield Beach, Fla., and hearing regularly from Browns physical therapist Anthony Trem.

"[He's] doing an amazing job checking in with me every morning and every afternoon to make sure I'm OK, sending me things to do, if I have any problems or soreness or tightness," he said. "I've also been working with my one of my primary doctors, Dr. Chad [Teague]. We have processes and it's going great."

Landry hadn't seen his best friend Odell Beckham Jr. in person during the rehab process, but they've pushed other daily to come back from their procedures, Beckham from core muscle surgery in January. In fact, Beckham vowed recently to come back bigger, stronger, faster, and predicts one of his best career seasons.



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"We've been FaceTiming," Landry said. "We've been kind of documenting our whole process of recovery and sending it back and forth to each other. Obviously right now is, like I said, it's a crucial time in our recovery stages of getting our strength back. The healing process is kind of done. Now it's time to make sure that everything's working together."

"And then being able to go in the right phases and the right stages to be able to translate that all back to the field. Seeing his process has been motivating me obviously from afar, which he does automatically. The player he is, his work ethic motivates me. And going back and forth with our videos about just where we are in our rehab process is something that has been encouraging us to get even better than we were before."

Unfortunately for both, they've had to miss out on "Camp Mayfield," the workout sessions Baker Mayfield hosted last week in Austin, Texas, for teammates such as Austin Hooper, David Njoku, Rashard Higgins, Damion Ratley and others.

"Yeah, I mean, I thought about going, but at the end of the day I'm in a crucial part of my rehab process," Landry said. "You know, going out there for a couple of days and I would have to figure out all the logistics of trying to get, you know, a doctor out there, make sure I had a weight room and things like that. I didn't think it would be worth it."

"But those guys made the most of it, made the best of it, got better for that for that week that went out there. We still did Zoom calls and Zoom meetings throughout the week, so I was able to be a part of their learning process."

He applauded Mayfield for taking the initiative to host the sessions.

"Baker's done a great job making sure that everybody's on the same page and staying together, even getting guys together," Landry said. "It's really forefronted by Coach [Kevin] Stefanski. He's encouraging us to continue to look at our playbook. Obviously, this is optional encouraging us to be on these Zoom calls, Zoom meetings, to make sure that we can get on the same page and not lose days because of what we're going through."

He admitted he misses his longtime receivers coach Adam Henry, who dated all the way back to LSU, but is excited about his position coach Chad O'Shea, who won two Super Bowls with the Patriots.

"Obviously given our history it was tough," he said. "But Chad is also a guy that has proven history, has been on Super Bowl teams, coached Super Bowl teams, won a Super Bowls, lost a Super Bowl or two and has a history of coaching a lot of receivers that play in the slot, that play on the outside."

"We talk a lot about just the option route. He's had guys like Julian Edelman, who is arguably one of the best guys in the NFL to be able to run an option route and make the right decision all the time. We've just kind of been talking and critiquing my game and finding ways to allow me to do what I do best, and our relationship is obviously building and growing."



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He acknowledged that he worried about his wife and two young kids while rehabbing the injury amid Covid-19.

“I took about a month where it was kind of just me going back and forth on FaceTime and using Zoom calls to be able to go through my workout with doctors and things like that to make that I was staying the course,” he said, adding that Barwis goes to extreme lengths to keep athletes healthy.

The Browns’ NFLPA rep, Landry echoed the sentiments of his teammates JC Tretter, the new NFLPA president, that the players’ safety is paramount.

“This is a time right now where, obviously, the world needs something,” he said. “The world needs sports. The fans need sports. Everybody is looking forward to football season, being that’s the only season that seems to be on schedule right now. For me just looking at it, [number] one, is just to make sure that everybody’s safe, from the players to the fans to everybody in the whole entire world because this is affecting a lot of people right now.”

When football does resume, Landry — who hasn’t missed a game in his six NFL seasons — plans to be on the field.

“Obviously that’s one of the biggest things for me, that’s one of the goals that I would set out for myself since I was a kid watching Monday Night Football,” he said. “And it’s still something that’s in the back of mind. Obviously I want to make sure that I’m going through this process the right way, too, and making sure that I’m healthy enough to be able to go out there and help the team win games and not hurt the team. Yeah, that is in my mind, but I’m really focused on this rehab to make sure that I can be ready for the season.”



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Browns wide receiver Jarvis Landry launches Jarvis Landry Building Winners Foundation By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/07/browns-wide-receiver-jarvis-landry-launches-jarvis-landry-building-winners-foundation.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Browns wide receiver Jarvis Landry has been one of the NFL's outspoken stars this offseason. He spoke during a team meeting following nationwide protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd while in police custody. He also appeared in a video from players calling on the NFL to take a stronger stance against racial injustice.

Now Landry is launching the Jarvis Landry Building Winners Foundation dedicated to positively impacting the lives of children and families facing socioeconomic disparities and/or chronic health conditions.

Landry announced the foundation's launch on his Instagram and wrote the mission of the foundation is to "empower, engage and excite our communities through a variety of life-changing programs, special events and charitable initiatives held in the greater Cleveland, Miami and New Orleans areas."

"I've spent a lot of time self-reflecting these past few months," Landry wrote. "How do we fix this? How do we fight for a better future? Reevaluating my role in the communities that made me and continue to shape me. No longer where can I help -- but how can I lead?"

Landry, 27, grew up in Louisiana and attended LSU before the Dolphins drafted him in the second round in 2014. The Browns acquired Landry in a trade with Miami in 2018 and signed him to a 5-year, \$75 million contract extension.

In two seasons with the Browns, he has caught 164 passes for 2,150 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Following Floyd's murder, Landry was outspoken on Twitter railing against police brutality and systemic racism in a series of tweets.

"We need (an) end goal!!" he tweeted. "We have stories that go on for thousands of years about the police brutality, racism, death!!! The protesters that's out now are putting themselves in further danger and not without reason but what are we trying to accomplish??"

He also tweeted a call to action, writing, "You playing the backseat in this generation, that your kids will have to face in theirs!!! IF THAT DONT MATTER TO YOU THAN WHO ARE YOU?"

He was one of a group of players who pushed back at the NFL, demanding the league acknowledge trying to quash peaceful protests in 2016 and 2017 and use the phrase, "Black Lives Matter," in its statement.

"I'm trying to [bear] the weight of it all, too," Landry wrote in his foundation announcement.

"Figuring out how to process the complexities of a global pandemic, racism, racial injustice and an economic crisis all at once is tough."



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He wrote the COVID-19 pandemic will postpone any annual events his foundation had planned this summer, but ended his post by saying, "I am energized, inspired and hopeful thanks to you. Let's Work!"



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Browns WR Jarvis Landry donates \$15,000 of hygiene products to East Cleveland families By Ben Axelrod, WKYC 3

<https://www.wkyc.com/article/sports/nfl/browns/browns-wr-jarvis-landry-donates-15000-of-hygiene-products-to-east-cleveland-families/95-8e1325a5-c6af-4bfd-b335-08bcec8100c>

As many in Northeast Ohio find themselves facing the hardships that have come as the result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, one of the Cleveland Browns star players is giving back.

On Thursday, wide receiver Jarvis Landry personally donated \$15,000 to provide hygiene products to East Cleveland City School District students and families. The 5-time Pro Bowl selection partnered with local retailer Meijer to secure the supply of products for East Cleveland Schools, which was selected as the recipient through the Cleveland Browns Foundation's "Get 2 School, Stay in the Game!" Network.

The items were packaged and shipped on Monday, March 30 and will be available to the receiving families on Monday, April 6. Families with students enrolled in East Cleveland Schools (K-12) may pick up the items -- which include soap, shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste and other personal care products -- from 11 a.m.-1 p.m. at Shaw High School, Superior Elementary School and Caledonia Elementary School.

More than 1,300 families will receive the much-needed personal hygiene products thanks to the efforts of Landry and Meijer.

"Although we are facing unprecedented challenges right now, it is important to remember that we are all in this together," Landry said in a press release. "I love the City of Cleveland, and I want to make sure our communities have the support that they need to stay safe and healthy. We hope these items will help ease burdens and protect the well-being of the families and students of East Cleveland."

"Now more than ever, every member of our community should have what they need to stay healthy," said Cathy Cooper, Senior Director of Community Partnerships and Giving for Meijer. "We were glad to help Jarvis make his idea for supporting the health of East Cleveland families a reality."



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Browns' Rashard Higgins hoping to go from 0-16 to postseason

By Zac Jackson, The Athletic

<https://theathletic.com/2255627/2020/12/14/browns-rashard-higgins-week-14/>

There are seven players still on the Cleveland Browns' active roster who were on the franchise's 0-16 team in 2017.

The most unlikely survivor of the seven actually was told at first that he wasn't good enough for that 0-16 team. Just before the 2017 season started, the Browns cut wide receiver Rashard Higgins.

Higgins went unclaimed on waivers and was signed back to the practice squad, where he spent just over a week. The day before the Week 2 game in Baltimore, Higgins was signed back to the active roster. The next day, Higgins had seven catches for 95 yards.

The 26-year-old's career has been full of spikes and unexpected turns, not to mention four different systems and five different offensive coordinators in five NFL seasons. It's been a wild ride for Higgins, who eight months ago went unsigned in free agency and two months ago was a healthy scratch for two games. Higgins reached 10 career touchdowns and 100 career receptions in the big win at Tennessee last week, when he led the team with six receptions for 95 yards and a touchdown. That got the Browns to 9-3 and to the doorstep of the playoffs.

Higgins is a survivor in another area, too. The Browns tied an NFL record by making 14 draft selections in 2016. Higgins, the third of the team's four picks in the fifth round, is the only one of the 14 still around.

"(All that) makes everything (this year) much sweeter, much sweeter, knowing that I have been patient and that my time has come now," Higgins said. "So what (if) it took longer than I expected? It still came, and I worked my ass off to get here. And I am not going to stop working."

Even this year, his path to the starting lineup and becoming a key piece of a passing offense that has come alive in the last two games included 21 total snaps in the first four weeks and just four catches in the first six games, though two were for touchdowns. His chemistry with quarterback Baker Mayfield dates back to training camp of 2018, when then-coach Hue Jackson decided the No. 1 pick in the draft should be on the second-team offense. So Higgins and Mayfield logged dozens of live reps that summer, building a trust and synergy that has carried through despite the numerous delays.

After Odell Beckham Jr. suffered a torn ACL on Cleveland's first offensive play in Cincinnati in Week 7, Higgins stepped in and caught six passes for 110 yards. Had he not rolled out of bounds after extending to make a catch on the final drive, the Browns likely would have run out of time instead of winning that game in the final seconds.

Higgins has been up, he's been down, he's been out of the rotation, then, suddenly, he's back. He has repeatedly said he's not the biggest or fastest wide receiver, but he keeps getting open and keeps producing. With four games left, he's averaging 16 yards per reception and has 13 catches during the Browns' current four-game win streak.



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“I just want to win at the end of the day and go to the playoffs,” he said. “I have been saying 0-16, that hurts my stomach knowing that we actually went through that. It made us tough. It made me tough. It made me resilient. Whatever I can do, I want to do it. I worked hard in the offseason, so when the time comes and presents itself, you have to make it. That is all I want to do.”

In a 2018 win over the Ravens, Higgins scored the game’s only touchdown but suffered an injury that kept him out for three games. In a win over the Falcons five weeks later that started the Browns’ late-season push, his only catch went for a 28-yard touchdown. He had 10 catches over the final two games that season to finish with 39, four for touchdowns.

He fell out of favor with the coaching staff last season. Higgins missed four games with a knee injury, then played a total of 28 snaps over the first three games after his return. Higgins had four catches all of last season, which he played on a restricted free agent tender. Two of those four, including a touchdown, came in the season opener. Another was a game-winning touchdown versus Buffalo last November.

Last March, Higgins hit free agency. He went unsigned until after the draft, when the Browns brought him back for the veteran minimum. It was a low-cost, low-risk move for a team that knew Higgins and, despite all the change, had seen him deliver before in strange and uneven circumstances. Higgins had to learn a new offense — again. He had to wait his turn — again.

“Virtual (installation) was kind of hard in the offseason, just trying to pick up on all of the plays,” Higgins said. “The Browns had not signed me yet, so I was still three weeks (behind) and not knowing the playbook, trying to catch up. I was kind of behind. Once we started getting out here to the field, the coaches held us responsible because it was like, ‘You guys had time. You guys are professionals. You guys should know what to do when you come out here. Of course, you are going to make some mistakes, but you should know what to do when you come out here.’ The coaches trust us.”

Higgins has earned that trust. On his rapport with Mayfield, he says they’re just “playing football, that is all I can really tell you. We are playing football. He knows me, and I know him. There is nothing to say about that. It is wine poured in a cup. Smooth.”

At 9-3, the wine tastes better. The toilet paper is thicker. Higgins is a better quote than ever before and a better player, too.

“Rashard has been an important part of what we have done offensively,” Browns wide receivers coach Chad O’Shea said. “He has done a really good job, as he has done all season, of working extremely hard. That is where it starts with Rashard. Both on-field and in the classroom, he just works so hard, and our group collectively has done the same. He has put himself in position in his preparation to have success, and he continues to work hard and be an important part of what we are doing.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Rashard Higgins enjoying personal and team success after rough years

By Scott Petrak, brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2020/12/12/rashard-higgins-enjoying-personal-and-team-success-after-rough-years/>

Rashard Higgins is sick of experiencing the playoffs vicariously.

He's ready to live the dream, and is doing his part to get the Browns to the postseason for the first time since 2002.

"Yeah, I want to get to them playoffs," the receiver said this week. "I want to see what it feels like. I have always asked friends that were before my time and guys that have been here. When Taylor Gabriel went to the Atlanta Falcons and then he went to the Super Bowl, I just asked him, 'What does it feel like?'"

"I always want to be in that moment. Whatever I can do to help this team get there, I am all for it. I want to win games and I want to see this team prevail and overcome the 0-16. I have been here, and to hell with losing. It is not fun at all. To see the other side of losing, it is amazing. It is a helluva feeling having nine wins right now."

Higgins' perseverance is one of the reasons he's a fan favorite. His journey with the Browns has been filled with potholes, yet he chose to return this season for the veteran minimum of \$910,000. He's been repaid with a significant role for a team 9-3 and holding a wild card spot.

He arrived in 2016 as a fifth-round draft pick out of Colorado State, was cut before his second season, returned on the practice squad, developed a connection with Baker Mayfield and had a strong 2018 season, then spent most of 2019 in Freddie Kitchens' doghouse. He was even a healthy inactive twice early this season.

Oh, yeah, he's one of seven players still on the team who lived through 0-16 in 2017.

"It makes everything much sweeter, way much sweeter, knowing that I have been patient and that my time has come now," Higgins said. "So what it took longer than I expected, it still came and I worked my ass off to get here, and I am not going to stop working."

Nick Chubb didn't know what to expect when Kareem Hunt was signed, now "would not want it any other way"

Higgins has filled in admirably since Odell Beckham Jr. was lost for the season Oct. 25 in Cincinnati. Higgins has 25 catches for 400 yards (second on the team), a 16.0 average and three touchdowns in 10 games. In six games since Beckham's torn anterior cruciate ligament, Higgins has 20 catches for 347 yards, a 17.4 average and a touchdown.

He had six catches for 95 yards, including a 17-yard touchdown, last week in the 41-35 win over the Titans.



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“He has been an important part of what we have done offensively, especially in the pass game,” pass game coordinator/receivers coach Chad O’Shea said Saturday. “He has done a really good job, as he has done all season, of working extremely hard. That is where it starts with Rashard is that he really both on field and in the classroom just works so hard.”

He reached 100 catches and 10 touchdowns for his career in Tennessee and has further established himself as a trusted target for Mayfield and coach/play caller Kevin Stefanski.

“I might not be the fastest and I might not be the best route runner, but at the end of the day, I try to catch the ball and I try to catch everything that comes to me,” Higgins said. “I see coaches see that if we can count on him to catch the ball, then we can throw him out there and have the utmost faith in him in catching the ball and do it at a high level.”

He described his chemistry and relationship with Mayfield as “special” and credited Stefanski with putting them in position to succeed.

“There are routes that he knows that I am good at, and we have those plays in,” Higgins said. “He knows my strengths and he plays to my strengths. As I evolve and I start doing good in the offense, it is because Coach knows me now. Baker puts it on the money. I make him look good, and he makes me look good.”

Stefanski was impressed that Higgins didn’t sulk or waver when he wasn’t playing much early.

“I am happy that he is getting his opportunities, and he is making the most of them,” Stefanski said. “He is versatile. We can line him up in different places. He is in the right spot at the right time and makes the catch. We are going to be counting on him here in this game and the next one, and he understands that.”

The Browns host the Ravens (7-5) on Monday night looking to extend their winning streak to five games, further enhance their playoff probability and severely weaken their rival’s chances. The Ravens have a formidable set of cornerbacks with Marlon Humphrey, Marcus Peters and Jimmy Smith, who’s questionable to return this week after a groin injury. Higgins, Jarvis Landry and Donovan Peoples-Jones are going to have to beat press man coverage.

“Big, physical guys on the outside and some Pro Bowlers there,” coordinator Alex Van Pelt said of the Ravens. “We are going to have to run great routes and be very disciplined.”

NFL reporter Josina Anderson tweeted this week the Browns have had preliminary discussions with Higgins’ agent about a contract extension.

“I have not heard anything from my agent about any contracts yet,” he said. “I am just going to continue to work, put my head down and do what I have to do to help this team win. I would love to be here.”

He’s grateful for the opportunity.



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“I just try to always keep that mindset and know that people would die to be in my shoes,” he said.
“I know I would do anything to be in my shoes. Try not to be complacent.”

The same holds true for the Browns, despite their surprising record.

“There is still this feeling in the locker room of like, ‘You know what? Yeah, we won, but we still have not accomplished anything yet,’” he said.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

Browns WR Rashard Higgins: 'I've seen the rain and now it's time for the sunshine'

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2020/04/browns-wr-rashard-higgins-ive-seen-the-rain-and-now-its-time-for-the-sunshine.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Rashard Higgins has clawed his way out of Freddie Kitchens' doghouse and back to the Dawg Pound, where he's always been a huge fan favorite.

"I've been through hell and back in Cleveland and I've seen the rain and now it's time for the sunshine," Higgins told cleveland.com by phone on Thursday.

Higgins, who got on Kitchens' bad side last season and was targeted only 10 times all year, agreed to terms Wednesday on a one-year free-agent deal worth the veteran minimum of \$910,000, turning down more money from multiple teams to come back and finish what he started.

He officially signed the contract on May 8th.

"I want to see us prevail," he said. "I want to see us win, so I couldn't give it up that easy. I'm not in it for the money, I'm in it for the glory. I'd rather just win with a team that I've been with."

Higgins, who caught only four passes for 55 yards and a TD last season, acknowledged it was difficult knowing he could end up with another team.

"But it will be all worth it," he said. "I promise it will be. I was never worried, to be honest."

Higgins, the Browns' fifth-round pick in 2016 out of Colorado State who was cut in 2017 before being re-signed to the practice squad, always believed the door would be open for him here.

"I kind of felt like, 'I know what I'm capable of, they know what I'm capable of, [GM] Andrew Berry knows what I'm capable of,'" he said. "The film doesn't lie. I'm a good receiver, and I feel like me and Baker [Mayfield] having a good chemistry that can go a long way. ... I know people look at that kind of stuff."

He believes Mayfield may have put in a good work for him to return.

"I'm sure he had some type of say-so in it. He was the one I talked to. He's excited. We're ready to get back to work."

He acknowledged that the two have something special from their time as second-teamers together in Mayfield's rookie training camp. He used to joke back then that he was the son of Baker and Mayfield's then-girlfriend Emily because he spent so much time at their apartment. The friendship they developed carried over to the field.

"It's a trust factor," Higgins said. "I trust him, he trusts me. I believe in him, he believes in me."



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He's confident the chemistry will still be there even though they didn't have much in-game time together last season.

"That's something you can't take away from us," he said.

Higgins, who caught 39 passes for 572 yards and four TDs in 2018, prefers not to dwell on his challenging 2019. He got on Kitchens' bad side for stating publicly that he should've been active for the Niners game on Oct. 7 after missing four games with a sprained knee. It deteriorated from there. The ball came his way only eight more times in the next nine games, and he was a healthy scratch for the season finale.

"Everything didn't pan out like we wanted it to last year, but there's a lot of stuff that we can't control and we're just going to go control what we can and move forward," he said. "We're just going to do us and not look back."

He hasn't talked to tight end David Njoku, who was also in Kitchens' doghouse last year but is back in good standing with the new regime. Berry was the Browns' Vice President of Player Personnel when both Higgins and Njoku were drafted, and has breathed new life into both careers.

It wasn't just Higgins and Njoku who suffered last season. Mayfield had a down year, and a frustrated Jarvis Landry yelled at Kitchens and quarterbacks coach Ryan Lindley on the sidelines a few times. He often said Kitchens didn't rely enough on him and Odell Beckham Jr., and that the players felt there was no plan after the first 15 scripted plays.

"It was very tough," Higgins said. "We've just got to get back to having fun, that's all. I told Jarvis that. We've got to get back to having fun. The year we were winning [in 2018], we were having fun with it, so getting that feeling back, that's what we're looking for."

Higgins said coach Kevin Stefanski has reached out to him.

"He told me congratulations and I told him thanks for believing in me," Higgins said. "I'm just excited to get in that building."

Higgins has also been in contact with new receivers coach Chad O'Shea, who's coached Wes Welker, Julian Edelman and Danny Amendola.

"He's somebody that believes in — believes a lot in me, actually," Higgins said. "We've been talking a lot and we just can't wait to work together. He's been around a lot of great receivers and just the way he's seen guys routes, that's the way I mimic my game because I'm a very good route runner. I can't wait to be coached by him and it'll be a fun season."

He said the 6-10 season of 2019 "definitely humbled us. ... We know what we're capable of and I know what I'm capable of and we'll try not to let anything stop us. Me and Jarvis have already had that conversation, just us getting back to that winning feeling."



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He said the offensive players have already discussed working out together — possibly in Los Angeles — as soon as they can, like they’ve done each of the past few years.

“It’s up in the air,” he said. “We plan do it, we just don’t know when or where yet.”

Higgins said the coronavirus has put his situation in perspective, and he never felt sorry for himself. Instead, he kept busy by helping raise money to feed families through a Dallas church.

“It’s just a hard time right now and if we can all get together and do it all for a great cause, which is feeding families, we can let them know that tough times don’t last but tough people do,” he said.

During his time away, he’s been overwhelmed by the support of Browns fans, who have always embraced him.

“It’s amazing,” he said. “I’ve never felt more love than what the fans do and say, how they reach out to me. I try to reach back out to everybody that DMs me. You give respect and you get respect.

“They love me and I love them too.”

Fortunately for Browns fans, they can still love him here.