



No garnish, no spotlight: How Browns rookie Mason Graham is the ‘electrolyte martini’ of Cleveland’s defense

By Ashley Bastock, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/11/no-garnish-no-spotlight-how-browns-rookie-mason-graham-is-the-electrolyte-martini-of-clevelands-defense.html)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Mason Graham will take that martini shaken, not stirred.

Usually with passionfruit, and a hint of lime. A new flavor, piña colada though, has recently entered the mix.

Dillon Gabriel, the Browns’ starting quarterback, knows Graham’s preferred drink order – electrolyte drink order that is – better than anyone.

The quarterback, the No. 5 overall pick, and No. 33 overall pick Carson Schwesinger are new neighbors after all being drafted by Cleveland in April. Electrolyte martini nights have become a staple among the rookies.

“We’re always going to each other’s houses and playing jokes,” Gabriel said. “We’ll all get together and I’ll shake up the electrolyte. We don’t drink, so we make electrolyte martinis.”

No fancy glassware. No olives. Just a few teammates, electrolyte mix, and a rookie defensive tackle who would rather blend in than stand out — even as a top-five pick.

That’s been the constant refrain about Graham since the Browns traded out of No. 2 overall and selected him three picks later, picking up an extra first-rounder from Jacksonville for the 2026 draft, too.

It was a big story on the night that trade happened. But in many ways Graham has flown under the radar.

Perhaps it’s because he plays defensive tackle, an often-overlooked position. Maybe it’s because he has yet to break out with his sack numbers, with just a half of a sack through Cleveland’s first eight games. Another factor is certainly the never-ending quarterback storylines in Cleveland.

But he’s just fine with that.



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“I don’t really care if the media is on me or not,” Graham told cleveland.com. “I’m out here to play football, and that’s what I want to do.”

In the early stages of his NFL career, Graham has done just that. Through eight games, Graham has 13 pressures, in the top two among rookie linemen. And while he has only that half a sack, he’s shown that there is still room for growth.

Most importantly, he’s shown why the Browns thought he would be a DNA fit for their defense.

“Disruptive, interior penetrator,” GM Andrew Berry said after the draft. “I think he can really affect the pocket from inside. High-motor player, really physical, really tough. We thought he was one of the more dominant trench prospects in this year’s class.”

Even if he doesn’t want attention for it, it’s undeniable given his football IQ and pass-rush traits: Graham is in Cleveland to shake things up.

A pass-rushing ‘savant’

Before Graham’s final season in Michigan in 2024, he headed down to south Florida to do some training with Javon Gopie.

A personal pass-rush coach known as “The Sack Sensei,” Gopie trains NFL players, including Graham’s Browns teammates Alex Wright and Isaiah McGuire, in the offseason, as well as high school and college players.

When Gopie first met Graham, he was immediately impressed.

“He’s a savant,” Gopie said. “And I say that in the sense of he understands. Not only does he have his own intangibles that make him great on the field, like quickness and twitchiness and strength. But he understands how to rush.”

Graham’s upside as a pass-rusher was huge, considering he spent most of his time in Michigan’s read-and-react defense eating up blocks and stopping the run.

It makes the fact that he finished as a two-time All-American and with 6.5 sacks over his final two college seasons all that more impressive – and gave Browns defensive coordinator



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Jim Schwartz a lot to work with when Graham arrived in Cleveland for the offseason program.

“It’ll be a process for him,” Schwartz said at the time. “I do think there’s a lot of meat on the bone as far as his production, and we can see better production from him than even we saw, and he had outstanding production and college.”

So what traits exactly does Graham have?

The most commonly mentioned are his use of leverage, as well as twitchiness. When it comes to comparisons for Gopie, the most accurate one isn’t a defensive tackle – it’s Broncos edge rusher Zach Allen.

“He’s powerful, he’s twitchy, he can strike blocks and then still work a pass rush move and get vertical and break guys down with movement,” Gopie said.

Those skills were on display in the Browns’ Week 3 win over the Packers, when Graham and veteran DT Maliek Collins went in for a combined sack against Jordan Love off of a perfectly-executed twist stunt.

But it’s Graham’s X-factor that makes him such a rabid pass-rusher, Gopie said.

“He’s a dog,” he said. “I’m not on the field with him, so I don’t know what he’s out there saying, but I’d imagine he’s a trash talker. So that’s what excites me about him the most, that he’s very humble, but he definitely has a flip that he switches. He’s gritty.”

One of the greats, one of the boys

Gabriel already knows Graham has that grittiness to him – but that’s because their relationship actually goes back a little further than Cleveland.

There’s a chance, Gabriel says, they could have played their final college season together thanks to the transfer portal – of course, Gabriel ultimately chose Oregon instead of Michigan after spending two years at Oklahoma.

But the two still had a run-in in 2024, when Gabriel and the Ducks bested Graham and the Wolverines 38-14 in an early November showdown. Graham got to Gabriel in that game, though, even as Gabriel threw for 294 yards with one TD.



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“We talk about it to this day,” Gabriel said. “But he hit me after I threw it, helped me up. So he’s a good, good dude. It was funny. He was kind. He could have been a lot worse. But he looked out. He looked out.”

Graham has gotten the best of Gabriel a few times since that game nearly a year ago, including getting his hands on a couple of Gabriel passes during the offseason program and training camp, batting them down at the line of scrimmage.

Unsurprisingly, both welcome the challenge.

But the two have gotten to know each much better in recent months, and that has allowed Gabriel to gain even more of an appreciation for Graham’s skill, his personality as a teammate, and his work ethic.

“I know he wants to be one of the greats, and he works that way,” Gabriel said. “But I also know he wants to be one of the boys, and I think you just understand that from his perspective. It’s like he doesn’t want to be on a whole other level where there’s a disconnect from player to player. He can still be one of the boys and still work to be one of the greats, just like that. So as a teammate, I appreciate that.”

Schwesinger echoed that sentiment, emphasizing how rare it is for a top-five pick to be as grounded as Graham.

“A lot of times those people can have ego or whatever with that,” he said. “And he just comes in and works just like everybody else does. And continues to work, too. He puts in the extra work. And then just hanging out with him is always cool, too. He just, at the end of the day, he just wants to be himself and just hang out. He doesn’t really care who he’s with or anything like that. He’s just always going to have a good time.”

Schwesinger and Gabriel already offer up a good assessment on Graham, even though the trio has only spent about six months together.

It’s almost identical to what Bears tight end and No. 10 overall pick Colston Loveland says about Graham.

The two played together for three years at Michigan, and both enrolled early ahead of the 2022 season and became fast friends. They spent what little free time they had during the



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offseason shooting baskets in the campus IM gym in the summer, or hanging out at The Little Brown Jug restaurant across from their first dorm.

“He was always just super, super friendly when we first met,” Loveland said. “Super welcoming. And then obviously he was a dog out there, like from the jump. Yeah, he was messing up the 1s (first-teamers).”

“... He’s vocal when he needs to be, but like you said, kind of a quieter guy. But as far as what he does out on the field and how he handles himself in the building and every day, he’s a pro.”

A glimpse into Graham being vocal when he needs to be?

That came after Michigan’s 13-10 upset of Ohio State last November. After the win, several Michigan players went to plant a flag at The Horseshoe on Ohio State’s Block O logo. Ohio State players took offense and a fight broke out.

At the time, Graham was doing an interview on the Fox broadcast, but quickly went into action, turning mid-answer as the melee erupted behind him.

In online videos afterwards, Graham made headlines for jawing with Buckeyes defensive end Jack Sawyer, trading a series of expletives.

The two are actually still rivals now, with Graham on the Browns and Sawyer with the Pittsburgh Steelers – but even after a heated moment, Graham’s thinking in those situations and what makes him a good teammate is still on display.

“The rivalry is something that we all take seriously, but it’s all fun and games,” he said.

“When you’re in it, it’s serious. And then even I’ve talked to — when I was at the (NFL) Combine, I talked with Jack Sawyer and all them. It was kind of just cool to talk about. But it’s always just going to those schools, you know what it’s about.”

‘He doesn’t like accolades’

Graham has always been this way. Just ask his dad Allen.

The family’s second-oldest child and the eldest boy, Mason was walking by the time he was 9 months old, Allen said.



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Allen joked that Mason was “driving us up a wall,” and they were desperate to keep him busy, so they signed him up for soccer as soon as he turned 4.

“He was always aggressive,” Allen said. “He was knocking people down. And his coach, about halfway through the season talked to us and said, ‘Hey, have you guys ever thought about football?’”

But Allen is adamant that while he and his wife Kimberly wanted to make sure their kids participated in extracurricular activities, they wouldn’t push them in one direction or towards one sport. It’s an unsurprising attitude for a family that moved from Southern California to the north shore of Oahu, Hawaii, where Allen grew up vacationing, after Mason Graham graduated from high school.

Growing up, Graham never solely focused on football. Along with that and soccer, he tried basketball, began playing rugby at 8 years old, and baseball. In high school, he also wrestled and competed in track and field.

Had he chosen an alternate path, it could have been wrestling. Graham won two heavyweight Trinity League championships and qualified for state. The Cal and Stanford wrestling programs both inquired about him; Colorado Mesa, a Division II school, asked him to play football and wrestle. His wrestling background is still evident now in the way he uses leverage.

Unsurprisingly given Graham’s personality, he didn’t have a natural affinity for the recruiting process.

He was a four-star recruit, but wasn’t big on attending camps. His tape landed in the right guy’s hands, though: The then-general manager of the Fresno State football team, Courtney Morgan, originally recruited Graham.

When he took on the same role at Michigan the following year, he passed along his film to then-head coach Jim Harbaugh.

“Harbaugh said, ‘Yep, offer him immediately,’” Allen said. “But that offer didn’t come till his senior year.”



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It was a fitting end to a recruiting saga for a player who shied away from attention in the first place.

In fact, Allen recalls one Pop Warner league in which the team wanted to give Mason the Most Valuable Player award at the conclusion of the season, but he insisted it go to another teammate.

“He likes when people notice that if he’s doing good or something like that,” Allen Graham said. “But he doesn’t like the accolades. He likes getting them because he knows he’s doing good. But he doesn’t like the personal attention. He’s a humble kid. He’s always been like that.”

Shaking things up in Cleveland

Given Graham’s low-key nature, Cleveland seems the perfect landing spot for him.

On the field? Graham will never draw the most attention along the Browns’ defensive front.

That honor of course goes to Myles Garrett. But it makes it harder for opposing offenses to scheme for all of them. So far, Garrett and the edge rushers have benefitted — Graham is already drawing double teams. But he’s still making it difficult on opposing offenses to choose.

“The system is set up for him to be successful for sure,” Gopie said. “And that’s what excites me. Because at Michigan he played in the two-gap system where he had to read gaps and then go make plays. But now he has the opportunity to get vertical and really get after the quarterback.”

He’s still got plenty of work to do only eight games in. Against the run, Graham has just a 55.5 grade from Pro Football Focus this season.

And at this stage, Schwartz believes Graham could still take “another step” as a pass rusher as well.

“His pass rush has been sort of, I’d say 50-50 so far,” Schwartz said recently. “Has had some good reps in there. I mean, it’s a tough business. You look at guards in the NFL; there’s no weak links.”



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Since he arrived in Cleveland, the No. 5 overall pick has taken a back seat in the attention department to the Browns fifth-round pick Shedeur Sanders, the famous and flashy son of Deion Sanders. While Graham toiled in relative obscurity, the four-way QB training camp battle that featured Gabriel, Sanders, Joe Flacco and Kenny Pickett grabbed most of the headlines.

And through the first half of the season, one of the biggest questions on a national scale about the Browns is when Sanders might start.

“He didn’t know what to expect,” Allen Graham said of the draft process. “Obviously, when Shedeur got drafted, Shedeur took a lot of the airtime, which I think it was a blessing in disguise. It kind of helped (Mason) because he kind of deflects anyways, so he didn’t really have to deflect. He just had to just roll with what was going on.”

And really, that’s the way that Graham has always operated.

It’s never been about the attention or accolades – in fact, he’d actually prefer to go without those things.

There’s no garnish to Mason Graham’s game or personality — just grit, balance and impact.

He’ll keep shaking up the pocket — and maybe an electrolyte martini or two for his teammates along the way.



‘Numbed’ by trade, Tyson Campbell finds new home in Browns’ secondary

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald

<https://www.news-herald.com/2025/10/20/numbed-by-trade-tyson-campbell-finds-new-home-in-browns-secondary/>

If trading Joe Flacco to the Bengals on Oct. 7 can be likened to an earthquake at Browns headquarters in Berea, the aftershock occurred about 36 hours later when they traded popular cornerback Greg Newsome to the Jaguars for cornerback Tyson Campbell.

The Flacco trade can’t possibly pay a dividend until next September, because the Browns got a 2026 fifth-round pick from the Bengals in return. No matter how well Newsome plays for the Jaguars, the Browns already are benefitting with Campbell in the secondary.

The game with the Dolphins on Oct. 19 at Huntington Bank Field was just the second for Campbell in a Browns’ uniform. He had pass coverage on 28 plays was targeted twice, didn’t allow a completion and returned an interception 34 yards late in the third quarter for a 24-6 Cleveland lead. The Browns added another touchdown in the fourth quarter to win, 31-6, and improve to 2-5.

Campbell made two tackles. One prevented a Miami touchdown when he tracked down running back De’Von Achane and shoved him out of bounds with 1:30 left in the first quarter after a 46-yard gain down the left sideline.

“That was legit speed on both sides,” Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski said Oct. 20 on Zoom. “Thank God he’s that fast, because he was flying. Talking about Tyson’s speed, but he plays physical, too. And he’s a bigger corner. Just love how he throws his weight around, how he tackles. He was flying all over the field yesterday.”

Dolphins wide receiver Jaylen Waddle and Tyson Campbell reach for a pass Oct. 19. (Sue Ogrocki - The Associated Press)

Dolphins wide receiver Jaylen Waddle and Tyson Campbell reach for a pass Oct. 19. (Sue Ogrocki - The Associated Press)

Campbell, 6-foot-1, 195 pounds, was rated as the third-best high school cornerback in the country his senior year (fall of 2017) at American Heritage School in Plantation, Fla, according to 247Sports.



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The Jaguars selected Campbell with the first pick in the second round of the 2021 draft. He started 59 of 60 games played and intercepted six passes over four seasons with Jacksonville.

Campbell was entering the final year of his rookie contract when he signed a four-year, \$76.5 million contract extension about a week before the Jaguars opened their 2024 training camp. He started all five games for the 4-1 (at the time) Jaguars and made 34 tackles in 2025. Three days after being in on seven tackles and breaking up a pass to help the Jags upset the Chiefs, 31-28, Campbell was traded to the Browns.

“It was a whole wave of emotions — disbelief, shock — I felt numb at first,” Campbell said at his locker inside Huntington Bank Field on Oct. 19 when asked for his reaction to being traded. “It didn’t really hit me until I was practicing the next day.”

Campbell wasn’t complaining — just giving an honest answer to being uprooted from his home of five years. He said he’s living out of a hotel until he finds a place to live.

“I saw how hard of a fanbase it is here when they sat in the rain today to watch us play,” Campbell said. “It’s a blessing to still be able to play this game I’ve been playing since I was a little boy and have a job in this league.”

Newsome is in the final year of his contract. Campbell is signed through 2028.



Cam Robinson 'appreciative' of 'opportunity to come in and play' with Browns after trade

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/10/09/cam-robinson-browns-trade-texans-week-6/86579922007/>

BEREA — Cam Robinson finds himself in a relatively new locker room for the second time in 2025.

The first time was when he signed with the Houston Texans as a free agent in the offseason. Now, it's after the Texans traded him to the Browns after just four games.

The first time was hardly a surprise, considering he signed the deal. The trade to a new team so soon after signing?

"It wasn't surprising at all," Robinson said Oct. 8

Robinson's Houston tenure was surprisingly short for a player who arrived with the amount of experience the ninth-year pro and former second-round pick of the Jacksonville Jaguars had accumulated. He started one game, played two games on special teams and was inactive for his final one with the Texans.

The Browns traded for Robinson Sept. 29, sending a 2027 sixth-round pick and getting the tackle and a 2027 seventh-round pick in return. The move was made to try to provide another veteran tackle after Dawand Jones went on the injured reserve after a Week 3 knee injury and while right tackle Jack Conklin was dealing with an elbow injury.

"I'm just appreciative," Robinson said. "Appreciative of them giving me an opportunity to come in and play."

Robinson had essentially been a starting-level play through the 2024 season. He started all 91 games over 7½ years with the Jaguars, as well as all 10 to end the 2024 season after being traded to the Minnesota Vikings.

Jacksonville Jaguars offensive tackle Cam Robinson (74) blocks Pittsburgh Steelers defensive end Cameron Heyward on Oct. 8, 2017, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



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The trade happened with enough time for Robinson to make it to Cleveland in time for the Browns' Week 5 trip to London for what resulted in a loss to the Vikings. That extra travel overseas was hardly the adversity for Robinson as it may have been for others.

"I don't think it was as bad as people think it was," Robinson said. "I've been to London a lot, but I was in Jacksonville, so I've been to London countless times. Yeah, so it wasn't as bad as everyone thought it was. I mean, obviously it was a lot, but I can manage it."

Robinson, though, played just seven plays on offense, all in the third series. KT Leveston played the rest of the plays at the position.

Asked if the plan all along was to play just the third series, Robinson said, "Yeah, I prefer to just keep it to myself." After the game, Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said, "We'll get him up to speed."

There remains no clarity yet on how the Browns will handle their left tackle position when they travel to face the Pittsburgh Steelers Oct. 12. Leveston has started the last two games, allowing a combined seven total pressures, including a sack, two hits and four hurries.

Robinson, according to Pro Football Focus, didn't allow a pressure in five pass-blocking snaps against the Vikings. He was called for a false start and had an illegal formation penalty declined by Minnesota.

Stefanski's only comment about the left tackle position going into the Pittsburgh game came the day after the Vikings game, when he said, "Yeah, we'll work through all those types of things the next couple days."

Multiple Browns offensive linemen, as well as Stefanski, said they were unconcerned about Robinson's adjustment into the Browns' system in the time leading into his Cleveland debut. They cited his years in the league and exposure to multiple schemes, whether it was from different coaching staffs in Jacksonville to stops with the Vikings or Texans.

Robinson made a mid-season adjustment when he was traded after seven games in 2024 to Minnesota. He started immediately after the trade.

"Yeah, I mean, football is football," Robinson said. "That's what I always tell people. Football is football. It's just the language. You just got to learn the language. Different



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places use different language, and that's pretty much how it is. But, I mean, it's football. It's only so much you can do, honestly."



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Browns rookie class giving fans reason to expect a brighter future | Jeff Schudel

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald

<https://www.news-herald.com/2025/10/06/browns-rookie-class-giving-fans-reason-to-expect-a-brighter-future-jeff-schudel/>

Looking for bright spots on a team with a 1-4 record takes some sleuthing. But the Browns' 2025 rookie class is giving reason to expect better Sundays than the ones experienced so far this season.

Rookie running back Quinshon Judkins rushed for 110 yards on 23 carries in the 21-17 loss to the Vikings on Oct. 5 at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London.

"He's a tough out," Coach Kevin Stefanski said Oct. 6 on Zoom from team headquarters in Berea. "He's kind of showing us and everybody the type of player he is. He continues to make hard yards when there are hard yards to be made. And then when it's blocked clean, as it was a few times yesterday, you see that he does have the ability to go. So, a young player that will only get better each week."

Judkins, selected in the second round with the 36th overall pick, did not sign his rookie contract until the day before the season opener with Cincinnati. He did not play against the Bengals. He rushed for 61 yards against the Ravens on 10 carries in Week 2, 94 yards on 18 carries when the Browns beat the Packers, 13-10, and 82 yards on 21 carries in the 34-10 loss to the Lions.

Rookie quarterback Dillon Gabriel, in his first NFL start, completed 19 of 33 passes for 190 yards and two touchdowns against the Vikings. Turnovers doomed the Browns in the first four games, but Gabriel, a third-round pick from Oregon, protected the ball like a precious jewel.

The game with the Vikings was the first time a Cleveland quarterback played a turnover-free game since November 17 of last year, when the Saints beat the Browns, 35-14, in the 10th game of the season. That means Gabriel ended a dismal streak of 11 games in which at least one interception was thrown. The culprits in the final seven games last year were Jameis Winston, Dorian Thompson-Robinson and Bailey Zappe. Joe Flacco threw six picks in the first four games this year.

"A lot of positives," Stefanski said on the Zoom call when asked about Gabriel. "Obviously, he can always be better, and certainly we as an offense have to get better and score more to help this football team. But for a young player in that environment versus that defense to



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take care of the ball, make the plays he made, I thought there were a lot of positives with plenty to clean up.

“And that’s what he’ll do. That’s the mentality he has, certainly to be a player that continues to get better week in and week out.”

The Browns might end up selecting their quarterback of the future in the 2026 draft, but if Gabriel continues to play the way he did in his first game, he will make a case to have a role going forward.

Tight end Harold Fannin, a third-round pick from Bowling Green, caught four passes and scored his first touchdown as a pro on a one-yard pass from Gabriel in the first quarter to give the Browns a 7-0 lead over the Vikings. Fannin’s 21 catches for the season lead the Browns. He is tied for 35th in the NFL in receptions.

Linebacker Carson Schwesinger, selected with the first pick in the second round, leads the Browns with 44 tackles. Schwesinger has the green dot on his helmet, meaning defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz calls the defensive play into the radio receiver inside Schwesinger’s helmet. Schwartz trusts him to get everybody lined up before the snap. Schwesinger almost took out Vikings quarterback Carson Wentz with a clean hit on Wentz’ left shoulder late in the second quarter.

Defensive tackle Mason Graham, chosen with the fifth pick in the first round, is a major reason the Browns’ defense is the stingiest against the run, allowing an average of only 3.0 yards a carry. Graham has 13 tackles on the season.

Dylan Sampson, a running back from Tennessee chosen in the fourth round, rushed 12 times for 29 yards and caught eight passes for 64 yards in the season opener before Judkins was ready to play. His workload has dropped dramatically with the emergence of Judkins — seven carries for two yards plus four catches for 19 yards and a touchdown in the last four games.

Quarterback Shedeur Sanders, a fifth-round pick from Colorado, is the only Browns rookie yet to play this season.



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Complementary football pays dividends for the Browns | The Huddle

By Kelsey Russo, clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/complementary-football-pays-dividends-for-the-browns-the-huddle>

Complementary football – the notion that the offense helps the defense, the defense helps the offense, both sides help special teams, and special teams benefits the offense and the defense.

All three sides of the ball are intertwined into the final result of a football game, each playing their own individual role and collective role. It's why head coach Kevin Stefanski reiterated its importance through the first two weeks of the season, as missteps on one side of the ball can place another side in difficult situations; and on the flip side, how a positive play can set up another side of the ball for success.

After emphasizing the need to play complementary football to help the Browns win their first game of the season, they excelled at doing so against the Packers in Week 3.

"Made a point of it this week but that's football 101," Stefanski said. "We know that we have to play that way every single week. But I think you saw there in that fourth quarter, our defense needed to get stops, and they got stops, and that was a huge part of that game."

Even as the offense fought through a stout Packers' defense that kept them scoreless through three quarters, the Browns' defense never gave up their battle. They limited the Packers' run game to 81 net rushing yards, and RB Josh Jacobs to 30 rushing yards on 16 carries. The longest run of the day was for 10 yards by QB Jordan Love. The Browns recorded six tackles for loss, keeping the Packers from gaining positive yardage and moving the sticks.

They also totaled five sacks on Love for a loss of 34 yards, with that pressure coming from across the front seven. DT Maliek Collins led the team with 1.5 sacks, while DE Alex Wright and LB Carson Schwesinger each added a sack of their own. DE Myles Garrett, DT Adin Huntington and DT Mason Graham each recorded half a sack. The Browns had seven quarterback hits alongside the five sacks.

Their secondary played a critical role as the Browns recorded their first takeaway of the season when S Grant Delpit picked off Love late in the fourth quarter and returned the interception for 25 yards. His interception set up the Browns' offense to score their lone touchdown of the day.

That defensive takeaway set up the Browns' offense in the red zone. And the offense used the momentum from the turnover to fuel their production. As the Browns' offense lined up on a first-and-goal with 3:02 left in the game, QB Joe Flacco handed the ball off to RB Quinshon Judkins, who



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ran up the middle and pushed his way through the pile and into the end zone. Not only did Judkins score the Browns' lone touchdown of the game, but he also recorded his first career touchdown.

"Emphasis on getting the ball back to our offense this week, complementary football," Delpit said. "Shoutout to that Browns' defense, flying around, getting to the ball, limiting yards. We are looking great. Shoutout to the offense they got it done, that is a step forward."

A few minutes later, the field goal/PAT defense took the field with 27 seconds left in the game and lined up for a 43-yard field goal attempt by Packers K Brandon McManus. As the ball left McManus' foot and began to sail upward, DT Shelby Harris raised his arm above pile and got his hands on the ball, blocking the field goal. The ball then bounced, and both teams swarmed to try and recover the ball, but CB Greg Newsome II fell on the ball for the recovery.

"Complementary football, we get a stop on defense," Stefanski said in his postgame locker room speech. "We needed one. I looked at him, and he knew it was coming. No. 93, another field goal block."

The offense quickly took the field, and Flacco connect with WR Jamari Thrash for a short pass of three yards. After a deep incomplete pass to WR Jerry Jeudy, Flacco threw a short pass to TE David Njoku, who powered his way forward for a gain of eight yards to give the Browns better field position. They quickly hurried to line up and Flacco spiked the ball to stop the clock with two seconds left. That's when K Andre Szmyt and the field goal unit took the field for a 55-yard field goal attempt to win the game.

Szmyt lined up his kick from 55 yards out. After the ball was snapped and secured by P Corey Bojorquez, Szmyt took his steps forward, planted his left foot and kicked the ball. He watched the ball sail through the uprights as the clock hit 0:00, before he was swarmed by his teammates for winning the game 13-10 with the longest walk-off field goal in Browns history.

The talk of needing to play complementary football turned into a reality in Week 3 and gave this team another building block in their foundation. When all three sides of the ball work in tandem – even as the game ebbs and flows over the full 60 minutes – it allows momentum to build that they can feed off of and use throughout the game. Putting that style of play on tape, with this specific group of players, gives them film to study and use in their preparation for the remainder of the season.

The Browns enjoyed their first win of the season, celebrating the comeback fashion. When Monday rolled around, they reviewed the film to learn from the positive and negative moments of the game, using them as teaching points in their preparation for Week 4 against the Lions and beyond.



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Seeing that complementary football again on film and reflecting on the win reminded Newsome of a word to describe the Browns so far through three games – resiliency.

"No matter what happens, no matter what anyone thinks, we're a resilient group," Newsome said. "We always play for each other. We're never going to back down from any challenge. The sky's the limit for us. We just got to continue to keep our head down, keep working and try to keep stacking wins."



‘Do it for her:’ Browns kicker Andre Szmyt dedicates 55-yard game winner over Packers to his late mom

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/09/i-did-it-for-her-browns-kicker-andre-szmyt-dedicates-55-yard-game-winner-to-late-mom.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — It was a quick gesture, one most fans likely didn’t even clock as Browns first-year kicker Andre Szmyt nailed an improbable 55-yard, game-winning field goal against the Packers on Sunday.

Szmyt lined up with 2 seconds remaining at the Green Bay 37-yard line, the game tied at 10. And just before he raised his left hand to map out his kick, he took his right and made the sign of the cross.

Before each kick now, Szmyt gives that sign specifically for his mom, Lala Szmyt, who died unexpectedly on July 10 — just 10 days before her son reported to Browns training camp with dreams of making an NFL roster.

“You see me cross myself before I kick, and that kind of goes back to my process and staying level in my faith,” Szmyt told cleveland.com after the Browns’ improbable 13-10 win. “I know my talent is here, but I know God has a plan for everybody. And all of us. And for me.

“You can’t even draw up how that game — like, I still don’t even know what was just going on.”

In many ways, Szmyt is still trying to navigate his grief. It’s evident in a moment like this one. The kicker said he’s been going through the last two and a half months in a dream state, through both the highs and the lows.

After Szmyt made the game-winner, the longest walk-off field goal in franchise history, Lala was the first person he wanted to call.

“It’s great to celebrate,” Szmyt said. “My dad’s here, my sister and that’s exciting. But I love my mom. She would be cooking for me already probably back at my apartment and stuff.”

Lala was also the first person Szmyt wanted to call after Week 1, when he missed a 36-yard field goal and an extra-point attempt against the Bengals, plays that had a significant impact in a 17-16 loss for Cleveland.

But even now as Szmyt talks through her sudden death due to a brain aneurysm, he’s honest that he hasn’t fully processed what’s happened.



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It's to be expected given the circumstances. The doctors who cared for her as she remained in a coma for four days were also shocked, given how healthy the 66-year-old mom of three was. "They all said, 'We've never seen this before.' It's hard to even take a second to be like, 'What's going on?'" he said. "I don't think I'll be able to until the season's done, honestly. Because everything's happening. The game-winner, this, that, a bad week, still like thinking about my mom and I'm grieving her. It's like, how is this even real life? Because it's so unexpected."

It may be unexpected, but in many ways Szmyt, 26, has been able to steer through this uncharted territory due to all of the lessons he's learned from his mother.

Lala was a "remarkable woman of intellect, conviction, and adventure," according to her obituary. She spoke three languages, lived across the globe, and had a proud career as a chemist, contributing to innovations at several pharmaceutical companies.

But her main focus in life was her family.

That was evident in how she spent so much time with her son, as he fought to make his way onto an NFL roster after practice-squad stints with the Bears and Browns, and some time in the UFL over recent years.

When Szmyt was still a free agent, waiting for a call from an NFL team in need, his parents' house outside of Chicago was his home base as he trained and stayed ready.

The two hung out every day, with cooking and grocery shopping being regular activities.

"Me and her are like this," he said, crossing his fingers. "I was like free-agenting it up, living at home, training and stuff, waiting for a call."

"Having to go back to football is obviously a lot. But I know her, God are giving me strength because I don't know how else I'd be able to function."

To feel close to her now, Szmyt has leaned into their Russian Orthodox faith to help the grieving process. During training camp, he was attending services on Sunday mornings.

It's also helped to have his dad and two sisters, especially over recent weeks.

Szmyt's parents were married for 29 years. His dad, Eric, has been at every Browns game this season.



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His sister, Elisabeth, was at Sunday's game as well, and last week, the whole family got together before the Browns played the Ravens, since his sister Julia lives in the Baltimore area.

With Szmyt in town, she cooked one of their mom's favorite Russian dishes. It's no coincidence, Szmyt says, that he bounced back and went on to make all of his kicks — two extra points and a field goal — in that Baltimore game last week.

On Sunday against the Packers, he not only made the game-winner, but a 35-yarder in the fourth quarter to get Cleveland on the board, and a key extra point.

"Even my sister says all these things happen, it's like a sign," Szmyt said. "Like I have a bad game in Week 1, but then we're in Baltimore where I have family close by. I needed that little support, to have family dinner, all that stuff, and kind of bring me down to level."

In Szmyt's eyes, there have been signs from his mom throughout his improbable journey to becoming the Browns' kicker — including the fact that he's here and on the roster at all.

The Browns initially turned to Szmyt after parting ways with veteran Dustin Hopkins as they trimmed their roster to 53. But Szmyt, a former Lou Groza Award winner out of Syracuse, was initially brought in as a backup leg for the offseason, and someone who could provide Hopkins some competition after a career-worst 2024 season.

The team has been adamant that Szmyt's entire body of work, going back to when he had a brief stint on their practice squad in December 2024, is what won him the job.

But his performance in the preseason finale against the Rams certainly didn't hurt his cause, as he made a 37-yard game-winner.

"To have that drive where we have the game-winner going into the roster is finalizing," Szmyt said. "Even (Browns special teams coordinator) Bubba (Ventrone) said, 'That was your mom, getting us down there in field goal range and hitting that field goal.'"

"I know she's with me and stuff. And it's hard at times. When I was going through struggles a couple weeks ago, she was my number one person to talk to. So I didn't have that."

In talking about his mom now, Szmyt is very intentional.

He didn't want the outside world to know what he was dealing with after missing those kicks against the Bengals.



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He didn't want anyone to think he was giving excuses.

He was waiting for a moment like Sunday against the Packers.

"This is the time where I would want to say it," he said. "I don't want to make it like it's an excuse that I'm dealing with all this stuff after a bad game, but more I want to dedicate the good games and the game-winners to her. Even though they feel sweet, it'd feel even sweeter if she was here. She would be head over heels, so excited for me."

But the Browns knew what Szmyt was dealing with when he returned for training camp, and now it gives the team satisfaction knowing they stuck with him through a rocky start.

"He's been through a lot in his life, I would tell you," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said after the game. "And the kid's come through."

His teammates have also stuck by his side, from veterans to rookies, all the way down the roster.

"What type of team would we be if we just went and started attacking somebody after a little bit of struggles?" said veteran defensive tackle Shelby Harris. "Dre, he did what he's supposed to do. He went out there, he fixed it, and now no one's talking about that. We won because he just hit that game-winner."

Maybe no one has gotten to know Szmyt on the team as well as punter Corey Bojorquez, who described him as a player committed to his craft, someone who will be the first one in and last one out of the practice facility, no matter what he's going through.

"He's really good at what he does," Bojorquez said. "He's here for a reason and everyone here trusts him. He's a really hard worker, does what he needs to to get the job done. And regardless of what the situation is, he just focuses on what he needs to do and performs when we need him to."

Maybe no one summed up Szmyt's finish and Sunday's improbable victory, in which the Browns at one point looked like they would get shut out, better than rookie edge rusher Adin Huntington.

"God's gonna make everything happen at the right time," he said. "We didn't get the fumble. Then we blocked (a kick) and then Dre goes out there and makes the field goal."

"I mean, you can't tell me that this isn't destined or divine."

In the case of Szmyt, maybe it's both.



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After that 55-yard kick went through the uprights, Szmyt was mobbed by his teammates, who carried him over to the Dawg Pound — a fitting finish as the Browns celebrated the 40th anniversary of their beloved section in this game too.

And as far as Szmyt is concerned, amidst all the hoopla, congrats, celebrations, and dog barks, there was also Lala.

“I want to do well this season for her,” Szmyt said. “She was my No. 1 fan. So I did it for my teammates and I did it for myself, obviously.

“But, a part of me is always going to do it for her. And I know she’s watching over me and she’s out there with me, helping me.”



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Cleveland Browns fans know how to keep the faith

By Dan Moore, ESPN

https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/46168604/cleveland-browns-fans-dedication-nfl-season-opener-2025

THEY START GATHERING four hours before the gates open. It's a muggy Friday morning in late July, with thunder forecast for the afternoon, but the fans lining up outside the back entrance to the Cleveland Browns' training facility in Berea, Ohio, will not be deterred. They're here, on a leafy suburban street six weeks before the regular season, for the Browns' first public day of training camp, which is free each year.

It's an eclectic procession waiting to enter -- some large and serious men wearing jowly rubber dog masks, families in matching orange football helmets, elderly couples with tributes to Paul Brown etched on their forearms like initials carved in wood -- yet in their sense of affiliation and purpose, they're perfectly, intimidatingly aligned.

"You got a knife?" a man named AJ asks me. He adjusts his orange-and-white leather vest, courtesy of the Browns of Columbus, a club of about 400 fans. We're standing behind the bleachers that overlook the Browns' practice field, on a section of grass the Browns have repurposed into a festival ground. There are bounce houses, food trucks and even a dog adoption area called "the Puppy Pound." The vibe is part Midwest county fair, part big-tent revival. AJ has to raise his voice over the music. "Cut it," he says, pointing at his forearm. "You're going to see orange and brown."

Back outside, a defensive-end-sized man named Big D sits behind a fold-out table on the sidewalk, a tub of wares by his feet -- orange-and-brown plastic dog chains with bulky dog-bone pendants and serving-plate-sized tags reading "DAWG." He sells the biggest chains for \$20. He says he has been selling chains outside games and practices for 40 years. And business has been good. "I've raised six kids just doing this," he says. He's telling me that he plans to set up on East 9th Street before the Browns' lone home preseason game next month when, from somewhere down the line, a fan with a foghorn voice calls out, "Here we go, Brownies, here we go!" As one, the entire congregation -- Big D included -- stops what it's doing and starts barking. The noise shakes the leaves.

CLEVELAND IS A historic American sports town, and the Browns are its most important sports institution, a picture of how much more than football a football team can mean to a place. The organization is active in the community; according to a report commissioned by Jimmy and Dee Haslam, who purchased the Browns in 2012, the team has invested more than \$150 million into Northeast Ohio since 2014. Browns fans, meanwhile, remain the most loyal in sports -- a distinction so broadly recognized as to qualify as cliché. "They could put an empty orange helmet on the 50-yard line and 50,000 people would pay 10 or 20 bucks to go stare at it," says Terry Pluto, longtime local sports columnist and author of several books about the Browns.



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But Browns fans are also bone tired. The first night of training camp, I meet Dave Ketterer at the Cleveland Bar and Grill in downtown Cleveland. Ketterer is an IT director at a law firm downtown. He is, like every person I talked to for this story, a lifelong Browns fan. But recently, he had lost the stomach for it. "I can't do it to myself anymore," he tells me over a beer. "Every Sunday is just misery."

If you've been following the Browns even casually over the past few seasons, you can understand why. Cleveland has been pro football's worst team for more than three decades. The Browns are 180-335-1 since 1990, equating to a .350 win percentage, which, according to ESPN Research, is the worst in the league during that time. They've not strung together two consecutive winning seasons since the 1980s. This century, they made the playoffs in 2023, 2020 and 2002, and went 10-6 in 2007, but over an especially cursed stretch between 2016 and 2017, they went 1-31. They've never appeared in a Super Bowl. Most fans chart the team's history on a timeline of heartbreaks -- The Fumble, The Drive, Red Right 88. Last year, the team took Cleveland's relatively high hopes from a brief playoff run the season before, bottled them up, and shook them violently back in the city's face, with a 3-14 record that felt somehow worse for being so familiar.

But it's more than just losing. Over the past 30 years, the Browns have also started 42 quarterbacks. One was Deshaun Watson. In 2022, the Browns traded three future first-round draft picks, a future third-round pick, and two future fourth-round picks for Watson, before signing him to a five-year, \$230 million contract, the largest guaranteed contract in NFL history. Watson finished the 2022 season with a passer rating of 79.1. Last year, with Watson under center, the Browns had the worst offense in the league. He's rehabbing a torn Achilles. CBS Sports has called his acquisition "the single worst transaction in NFL history."

Yet, it isn't the move's on-field failure that rankles fans -- it's the shame that radiates off it. From March 2021 to August 2022, 25 lawsuits were filed against Watson alleging sexual harassment and inappropriate conduct. One of those suits was dropped. He started his tenure with the Browns by serving an 11-game suspension for what the NFL labeled "predatory behavior." "It polarized the town," says Tony Grossi, an analyst for ESPN Cleveland. "I do know fans who did walk away" because of it, says Casey Kinnamon, staff writer for the Orange and Brown Report.

On top of all this, Haslam Sports Group began its push last winter to secure \$1.2 billion from taxpayers in public funds for a dome and adjacent mixed-use development in suburban Brook Park. A political battle over the plan promptly ensued, with the city of Cleveland suing the group to try to stop it, and HSG suing in return. "Haslam Sports has sparked a bit of a civil war in this town," Cuyahoga County Executive Chris Ronayne says. Brent Rossi, the Browns' chief marketing officer, says the move to Brook Park is necessary for the Browns to provide "an unrivaled fan experience."



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The Browns, according to Rossi, have several organizational pillars. The first is "win." The second is "fans." "Every decision that we make as a team has the fans at the center of it," Rossi says. "Every time we talk about an idea, the response is always, 'Will that help elevate the fan experience?' And really, there's no better example than Brook Park."

Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb declined to comment for this story, citing ongoing litigation. City Hall spokesperson Tyler Sinclair has previously stated that the Brook Park move constitutes "a betrayal of the city and residents who have stood by the franchise for generations."

Among fans, the conflict has become a source of division. Some support the move. "I'm pro-dome all day long," says Dustin Kuck, co-host of the "Here We Go Brownies" podcast. Others, however, fear getting priced out, and bemoan what will be lost if the Browns leave downtown, where they've played -- saved three very dark seasons in the late 90s -- since 1946. Others do not think taxpayers should help fund the project. The Haslams are worth \$14 billion, according to Forbes; earlier this summer, they purchased a \$25 million mansion in North Palm Beach, Florida. Cleveland, meanwhile, has the highest rates of childhood poverty of any large city in the nation.

"The premature replacement of perfectly good sports facilities just to appease owners is a tremendously wasteful practice," says Ken Silliman, who was the executive assistant in charge of development for former Mayor Michael White. Silliman helped secure public funds for the construction of Huntington Bank Field, which opened in 1999, but he opposes the Brook Park plan. "What other opportunities for public funding are foregone if you spend \$1.2 billion on the Haslams?"

And so it is that Browns fans have been getting it from all angles. "I'm tired," says Tim Rudnick, president of the North Royalton Browns Backers. "It sucks to suck."

For still others, like Ketterer, the effect has been more spiritual. While we sit at the bar, someone beside us quotes a popular joke about the Browns from local comedian Mike Polk Jr., saying they operate "a factory of sadness." Ketterer laughs. Then, he looks contemplatively into his pint. "It's the constant pain," he says, after a moment of searching. "Every year, it's like getting kicked in the nuts with a golf shoe."

What would seem the operative question surrounding the Browns heading into 2025, then -- as the team continues its pitch for public funds and prepares for a new season that doesn't figure to be more successful than the last -- is how much more of this can Browns fans take? You see the effects chipping away at the edges: Attendance went from 610,295 (19th in the league) in 2023 to 541,808 (28th) in 2024.



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But to doubt the Dawg Pound's endurance -- its resilience and raw nerve, its shared sense of history and community, commitment and good humor -- is to misunderstand where that endurance derives from: what, at root, the most loyal fan base in sports is most loyal to.

WHEN THE BROWNS played their first season in 1946, Cleveland was a much different city. An abolitionists' hub in the century prior, Cleveland had matured by the end of World War II into America's seventh-largest city. It was a center of steel and oil production, iron processing and metals fabrication, a city of grand architecture and industry -- one of the broad-shouldered Midwestern giants, a place possessed of history and relevance, a symbol of the guts with which a particular America was made.

Midcentury Cleveland was, more than anything else, however, a football town. The NFL was born 60 miles down I-77, in Canton. Some of the nation's fiercest high school rivalries, such as that between Massillon and Canton, originated in the region, and minted many of Northeast Ohio's most important local heroes.

In spite of this, for a time in 1946, Cleveland was left without a professional football team when the Rams, of the NFL, left for Los Angeles. But the Browns were on the way: Businessman Arthur B. McBride formed the team in 1944 as founding members of the All-America Football Conference, and Clevelanders rallied around them like a civic cause when they played their first game in 1946. Even though the Browns played in Cleveland Municipal Stadium -- a cavernous, open-air, steel-and-concrete gladiator pit on the hostile shores of Lake Erie -- every year the AAFC existed, the Browns were at the top or near it in attendance. The Browns transferred to the NFL in 1950, the year after the AAFC folded. They led that league in attendance, too.

They were also great. They won the AAFC league title every year of its existence in the 1940s. They won the NFL championship the first year they joined that league, and additional titles in 1954, 1955 and 1964, the latter behind freight train fullback Jim Brown. But, importantly, the Browns were also of and by Cleveland. When McBride first looked into forming a pro team in town, he tapped Massillon High School's Paul Brown as coach. Brown was beloved by Ohioans -- so much so that when McBride asked residents to vote on a name for the new team, they voted to name it after Brown. "The Browns were born out of the postwar flourishing of the American city," says John Telich, a longtime sports anchor for Fox 8 Cleveland. And because Paul Brown "had his mitts all over getting the team assembled," Telich says, the team "embodied so many things that are Cleveland." Clevelanders saw in the Browns their favorite, most successful version of themselves.

It was perhaps for this reason that Clevelanders held even tighter to the Browns in the unsuccessful decades that followed. By 1980, America's seventh-largest city had lost nearly 40 percent of its population. Unemployment and poverty had spread across the city as its steel and manufacturing industries moved to the suburbs, the Sunbelt, and overseas, leaving large, haunted blocks of closed steel mills and warehouses mournful in their wake. Urban renewal and an exodus to the



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suburbs had splintered the city's sense of community and hindered its capacity to mend it. Racial tensions escalated. In 1978, Cleveland went into default, the first American city since the Great Depression to do so. Reputationally, the symbol of midcentury American muscle had faded into a sketch of abandoned buildings and sadly colored skies, a place that felt left behind. "America has only three cities," goes the apocryphal-yet-poignant quote attributed to Tennessee Williams. "New York, San Francisco and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland."

Sports emerged as the city's sole means of reclamation and rebuttal. The Muni Lot and the aging Cleveland Municipal Stadium provided sources of community amid the fracture and decline. Cleveland's teams functioned as its standard bearers, repositories of hope, ways it reminded itself and the rest of the world what the city had been and what it once again could be. "Cleveland is a city that is overwhelmed by a desire to believe in something beyond what people outside of the place have ascribed to it," Hanif Abdurraqib writes in "There's Always This Year." Cleveland's teams facilitated this self-belief. Especially the Browns. When, in the 1980s, the Browns experienced a resurgence, Clevelanders rallied around them once again as if there was something far more critical than football at stake.

Clevelanders created the Dawg Pound during this time. Histories of the formation of the Dawg Pound differ, depending on the source. But it is broadly agreed that fans formally started it after witnessing Browns defensive backs Hanford Dixon and Frank Minnifield barking at their teammates on the practice field in 1985. Fans, for obvious reasons, barked back. Then, fans began wearing dog masks and dog chains and femur-sized dog-bone hats to games at old Municipal Stadium -- most concentratedly, and with the most flagrancy and verve, in the bleachers behind the east end zone. Those bleachers became a caldron. Browns fans snuck costumes and contraband and beer into the bleachers -- and also dog biscuits and batteries, which they threw at opposing players -- and out of it clawed a new collective identity. The new identity gave expression to the true and unkillable traits for which Cleveland thought it could still be known. It was a mascot and a microcosm and an instrument. The city embraced it. "The Dawg Pound, the thing about it was, it was not a marketing tool," local radio host and veteran Cavaliers broadcaster Mike Snyder says. "That's what I always loved about it. It just kind of happened."

Through the Dawg Pound, Cleveland minted its reputation as one of America's most devout sports towns. Even better proof, however, would come 10 years later, when then-Browns owner Art Modell announced that he was relocating the Browns to Baltimore.

The motive, as always, was money. City-owned Cleveland Municipal opened in 1931. The Browns had been sharing it with the Indians since 1946. By 1995, the place was in dire need of either replacement or repair; it became known as "the Mistake by the Lake." Modell, a silver-haired former advertising executive who purchased the Browns in 1961 -- and who nursed certain nagging insecurities about his standing in town -- was seeking public funds for renovations. He had been financing the stadium's operating and capital improvement expenses since 1973. He was also a



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philanthropist and an involved member of the community. His team's stadium was deteriorating. He thought those renovations were his due.

At a news conference in 1989, Modell proposed a publicly funded renovation plan that would have cost Cleveland \$85 million. The news conference was well-attended by the media but snubbed by city leadership. That same year, as part of what would become known as the Gateway Project, that same leadership proposed creating a county-wide sin tax to raise \$203 million for new stadiums for the Indians and the Cavaliers. Modell didn't participate in Gateway, preferring his renovation plan. But that plan materialized slowly, and ultimately with less public funding than Modell wanted. By the time Cleveland announced its only partially funded renovation plan for the Browns, Modell was neither in the mood nor in the position to accept. The cost of upkeep at Cleveland Municipal had increased coterminously as the revenues it generated dropped. In 1995, Modell asked his wife to take out a loan to sign wide receiver Andre Rison.

By 1995, Modell was deep in debt. He was feeling unappreciated by Cleveland. Most importantly, he fielded a much more lucrative offer -- from Baltimore. It consisted of a \$50 million signing bonus, a \$200 million publicly funded stadium, and the chance to play in that stadium rent-free for 30 years, in return for moving the Browns. In a letter sent to Mayor White in June 1995, Modell requested a moratorium on discussions with Cleveland about the renovations until after the football season. White's office thought this was so Modell could focus on football, but really it was so he could focus on finalizing terms for the move to Baltimore. "We knew we were at risk," Silliman says, but they thought that when they sat down with Modell by the end of the year that they would have a chance to respond to Baltimore's offer. "What we did not know is that the Browns, over the late summer and early fall, were in secret negotiations with the governor and the Maryland State Authority."

Modell made the surprise announcement that he decided to move the Browns in a news conference on a Monday afternoon in November, outside of Camden Yards. He stood at the lectern flanked by Baltimore and Maryland state officials. Gov. Parris N. Glendening waved a copy of Modell's freshly signed lease in the air. "The Browns are now the Baltimore Browns, and we're proud of it!" Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke said.

The words registered on Clevelanders' TV screens like a gash in the Western sky. "That was something I could have never, ever dreamt," says Snyder, who interviewed Modell shortly before Modell's announcement. "It was like moving the terminal tower out of Cleveland. You were taking a cornerstone of our community. It was a gut punch. It made you feel sick."

"I felt like I was losing family members," said Rebecca Browand, a lifelong Browns fan from Strongsville, Ohio.



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The gut punch, however, galvanized Cleveland. At once, business leaders pulled their ads from Browns games. Local TV and radio stations cancelled their Browns-related programs. City prosecutors brought cases against Modell in court, while state lawmakers passed what has become known as "the Modell law," which sought to prevent professional sports teams from leaving Cleveland again. Mayor White, meanwhile, transformed himself into the city's William Wallace. He held news conferences during Browns away games, instructed fans to petition the NFL to reject Modell's move, and regularly visited the NFL's corporate offices to do the same. "There may not be peace afterward, if we don't keep the Browns," he promised ominously to Sports Illustrated's Steve Rushin.

Cleveland made clear it would make good on the promise. Across the city's busiest intersections, residents strung banners and programmed digital message boards, reading variations of STOP ART MODELL. Fans organized demonstrations, including the Drew Carey-emceed Save our Browns rally at Huntington Park before the Steelers played the Browns in Cleveland. Two weeks before, a caravan of buses and cars traveled from Cleveland to Pittsburgh for a rally outside a Browns-Steelers game. One fan, John "Big Dawg" Thompson, testified tearfully before Congress. Fans organized letter- and fax-writing campaigns. They flooded the NFL's corporate headquarters with faxes. "I set my alarm to every two hours," says Dan Fuline, a former youth football coach in Manchester, Ohio. At the Browns' final home game of 1995, emotions boiled over. Fans ripped apart the stadium with wrenches and hacksaws. They dumped the disarticulated pieces of wood onto the field.

At least partly because of fans' outcry -- and thanks in large part to the pressure applied by White -- then-NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue convinced Modell to leave the Browns' history and likeness in Cleveland, where they could be adopted by a future expansion team. Tagliabue delivered Cleveland that new expansion franchise in 1999. The team was received rapturously. At the team's first practice in its new stadium, 30,000 people showed up.

Fans haven't stopped showing up. After the Browns went 1-31, and on the heels of an 0-16 season, fans responded by organizing them a parade. In 2023, sportswriters for USA Today ranked Browns fans the best fans in all of football, still.

BY 2023, HOWEVER, fissures within the fan base were already formed. Fans were divided over the Watson move. They were exhausted from the losing; whatever exciting seasons the Browns mustered were followed by returns to inconsequence. In that USA Today ranking, the entry for Browns fans read: "Being a Browns fan is what it must feel like getting a grand jury subpoena, except every week."

Over the summer, I connected with Rossi and Renee Harvey, the Browns' vice president of community impact. In separate conversations, they described to me an organization operationally and philosophically committed to the caretaking of its relationship with fans. Harvey shared that



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through its community foundation, the Browns have worked over the past several years with school districts and nonprofits across Northeast Ohio to do things such as reduce chronic absenteeism in school, provide formerly incarcerated Ohioans with job training, and increase participation in youth football. Though in 2024, the city council criticized the team for its \$30,000 contribution to the Cleveland Muny Football League, compared with the council's \$160,000.

In April, the Browns organized a free concert in Huntington Bank Field for season-ticket holders. They got Journey to headline. A watch party for the draft on the big screen followed. "We certainly don't take our amazing fan base for granted," Harvey says.

The Browns are cognizant, as well, of how hard their fans have had it over the years. "They've been loyal, they've been passionate. They've been dedicated through the ups and downs," Rossi says. This is one reason, according to Rossi, the Browns take so seriously their first "organizational pillar," which is winning. "It was disappointing last season, but that is 100% always the motivation. Our ownership group wants to win so badly for the fans because they deserve it."

But the stress of the Dawg Pound is varied. And the Browns have, in recent years, exacerbated it in ways that go beyond losing, including most recently the Brook Park project, which, to some, has felt like insult to injury.

The most salient issue with the Brook Park project is money. When we spoke, Rossi cited as among the Browns' foremost inspirations for wanting to build a dome in Brook Park the potential for the Browns to throw more non-football-related events, such as concerts, and to create other revenue streams inside and outside the stadium, which the Browns believe will lift all boats. Often in pitches for publicly funded stadium projects, teams will trumpet the potential wide-ranging economic benefit of new development as the reason taxpayers should support it. The Browns are pitching Brook Park in much the same way. "When you've got a hundred, 150 events and you have 50,000 people coming from out of town, where do you think those people are going to stay?" Rossi said. "Some might stay in Brook Park, but the vast majority are probably going to stay in Cleveland. So, we see this as this massive economic driver for all of Northeast Ohio." On the team's website, the Browns have suggested a domed stadium in Brook Park can attract "up to an additional 1.5 million visitors" per year. According to Rossi, the tax revenues generated from all of this increased economic activity will pay back "the entire public sector contribution" for the project.

The Browns have already secured \$600 million for the project from the state. This is from the state's pool of unclaimed funds, which are money and assets not used for a while, such as bank accounts, rent deposits, uncashed checks, or undelivered stock certificates, according to the state of Ohio's website. And when the Brook Park project starts collecting tax revenue, the money will not go back into the unclaimed funds reserve -- where they can be claimed again by residents -- but rather into the state's general fund, where they can be used for anything, including more stadiums.



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The rest of the public contribution will need to come from tax increases -- including a sin tax, which will have to be approved by voters -- as well as new bonds, which the Browns want the county to not only issue but also back, meaning the county will be on the hook for them if revenues fall short. "We've said no," says Ronayne, the county executive. "We're going to continue to hold the line under the premise that this is a bad idea." Earlier this year, nonpartisan budget analysts with the state reviewed the Browns' revenue projections for Brook Park -- the amount of money the Browns believe the project will generate each year from events and tourism. The analysts found the numbers "may be overly optimistic"; the projections forecast more visitors than other nearby domes in Detroit, Minneapolis and Indianapolis annually receive. And there are only so many Taylor Swift concerts a 70,000-seat stadium reasonably can hold.

"Gross. I feel slimy. I feel complicit," says Jim Sammon, a local lawyer and third-generation Browns season-ticket holder, when I asked him how this has made him feel. "The way they moved, the way that they're moving again ... Deshaun Watson, they literally destroyed the future of the team. ... It's just gross." His grandfather, Marty, was one of the first people in Cleveland to buy season tickets for the Browns in 1946; he literally died supporting the team, of a heart attack in his seats. According to his obituary, a priest seated nearby administered the last rites. If the Browns move to Brook Park, Jim said, he's not likely to renew his season tickets at the new stadium, especially if the Browns charge more for personal seat licenses, which is standard practice. "Not a snowball's chance in hell," he says.

Some fans are dismissive of such criticism. Before training camp, I spoke with Ray Prisby, famous in Cleveland for the Browns' memorabilia he has collected over the years. We met inside a kind of mobile museum he set up outside. Framed, game-worn Jim Brown jerseys hang beside signed and worn Lou Groza cleats. "Since we've been back, we've been perpetual losers," he says. "We've gotten used to losing and complaining. It's a knee-jerk reaction. So, fans selling their season tickets? Dah, dah, dah. It's all part of the losing."

Everybody, however, admits to being at least annoyed by all this. "I love the owner," Kuck told me. "But I think last year Browns fans were kind of like, 'OK, it's time to get this right.'"

FOUR OR SO hours before the Browns' final preseason matchup against the Rams in August, I walk the five blocks from my hotel to the Muni Lot. A long slab of asphalt situated gruffly between train tracks and a freeway, the Muni Lot has been the favored tailgating destination of Browns fans going back generations, long before the Dawg Pound.

On the far western side of the lot, closest to the stadium, outside of an old school bus that has been refurbished to resemble a snarling brown dog in an orange football helmet, I meet Scott Nunnari, president of the Muni Lot Browns Backers and the "Godfather of the Muni Lot." Congenial, loquacious, in his mid-60s, Nunnari has a scruffy grey beard and a sea-captain's face. In his floppy



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old Browns hat and faded Scott Player jersey, he looks a bit like how you might imagine Hemingway would have if he had chosen football over fishing.

We meet at the back entrance of the bus, which Scott owns. He gives me a tour; inside is a stove, a fridge, two bars and seats from the old Cleveland Municipal Stadium. Fans cycle in and out, some to secure drinks from Scott's bar, others to give Scott a drink or a smoke, others just to say hi. Scott gives many hugs and takes several shots.

Outside, he props an elbow against the driver-side door. "I grew up with a family who's always been Browns fans above everything else," he says. "My mother had the parties before I had the parties. I was going to games when I was too young to know what a first down was." I ask him if that's why he remains a Browns fan -- because it's an ancestral thing. He shakes his head, gestures with his drink at the sweep of asphalt before us -- the line of RVs stretching into the distance like a herd of elephants; the plumes of smoke rising from the many portable grills set up outside them; the kids in oversized Browns jerseys playing cornhole between the RVs and the grills. It's overcast, but slowly, the sun is coming out, and the music, smoke and sun make the air feel electric and swimmy. I recognize several fans I had met weeks earlier, at training camp. Everyone seems to know each other. It feels like a family reunion. The stadium controversy, Deshaun Watson, last season's 3-14 record, the seasons that had been even worse before it -- it all feels very far away.

To our right, the hard grey towers of downtown loom; from our left, a breeze lifts off Lake Erie.

"The reason I'm a Browns fan is because I'm a fan of my town," Scott says. "I was born and raised here. I'm a Cleveland fan, and most of the people here, they're a fan of their town."

This, he suggests, is where the Dawg Pound's endurance stems from. It isn't loyalty to the Browns; it's loyalty to -- and genuine love for -- the community the Browns helped create and represent. "I really believe this," Scott says. "The Browns sucking made us better as a group. You got people you know are loyal because if they're following this team, they're doing it because they're enjoying their time here."

"The Browns are one of the most important things in my life," says Giovanni Castelli, who goes by "Pappy." He's with a fan named Alfredo, a firefighter with the city, who goes by "Scumbag." The lot is filling up now, not like it will be for the home opener, but enough to fill the air with interesting smells and the feel of community and colorful marching band sounds. "And I'll tell you," Castelli says after taking a drink, "it's not because they're good. ... The Browns are the vehicle to get us here. We've created everything else."



OF COURSE, THERE'S still football to be played. I spoke with many, many Browns fans this summer. All regard highly the Browns' civic and communal values. But so, too, did most profess to keep lit in their mind a cradled flame of an idea: What if the Browns were good?

This point, turns out, is one thing the Dawg Pound is really in sync about: winning would change everything.

Especially one day winning a Super Bowl.

"It would be the greatest thing I would ever witness," Becca Browand said.

Jerome Baker, a Browns linebacker and Cleveland native, remembers when the Cavaliers won their title in 2016. "The excitement ... the energy. Times that by, let's just say, a hundred," he says during training camp. "That's what it's going to feel like when we go out there and win games."

"There will be no bigger parade in any city," Rossi says, "than when the Browns win the Super Bowl."

"A Browns Super Bowl," Nunnari starts, but then he trails off, looking dreamily into the distance. "I hope I'm alive to see it."

Then he goes off, retrieved by the party. The lot is filling up. More old friends are asking to see the bus.

How Myles Garrett got out to a strong start in his bid to win the sack title and NFL Defensive Player of the Year: Mary Kay Cabot

By Mary Kay Cabot, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/09/how-myles-garrett-got-out-to-a-strong-start-in-his-bid-to-win-the-sack-title-and-nfl-defensive-player-of-the-year-mary-kay-cabot.html)

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/09/how-myles-garrett-got-out-to-a-strong-start-in-his-bid-to-win-the-sack-title-and-nfl-defensive-player-of-the-year-mary-kay-cabot.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Myles Garrett kicked off the opener against Cincinnati by posting a Superman hype video on his social media accounts before the game. Then he went out and played like him against his AFC North nemesis Joe Burrow.

When you set the bar at Super Bowl, sack title and NFL Defensive Player of the Year before the season, you have no choice but to play like your alter-ego in the opener and set the tone.

Unfortunately for Garrett, it came in a 17-16 loss because of missed kicks and interceptions, but he did what he set out to do: be the best player on the field and try to carry his team to victory.



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In notching five tackles, four for a loss and two sacks — including back-to-back takedowns on an all-sack three-and-out in the fourth quarter — Garrett outplayed his Bengals counterpart, Trey Hendrickson, who recorded one sack, one tackle for a loss and three quarterback hits.

It gave him a total of 11 career sacks on Burrow, his most against any quarterback. He also helped hold Burrow to just 113 passing yards, the third-lowest total of his six-year career. The lowest was two years ago here, when the Browns held Burrow to just 82 yards passing coming off his serious calf injury. On Sunday, he completed just 14 of 23 attempts, with one touchdown and no interceptions for an 87.8 rating, and pinned much of the pedestrian outing on Garrett.

“It’s tough to find anybody better than that guy,” Burrow said afterwards.

On Friday, Garrett was asked if the mobile Burrow would be able to get away from him.

“No,” he said.

Then he backed it up.

In the second quarter, he chased Burrow down from behind and tackled him after a 2-yard gain on third down to blow up a drive. It wasn’t a sack, but it was the precursor to the two he notched on back-to-back plays midway through the fourth quarter with the Bengals up 17-16, one for 6 yards and one for 5. Isaiah McGuire finished off the trifecta with a 7-yard loss back to the Bengals’ 2.

“It all works together there,” Burrow said. “The corners are two of the best in the league. I don’t think any other team has a better tandem than they do. They do a good job figuring out ways to get their guy 95 in one-on-one situations. Playing man coverage and being sticky so you have to hold onto the ball a little longer trying to get guys open, and by the time that happens, usually 95 is there. Their whole scheme works together and I have a lot of respect for them.”

Garrett wrecked another fourth-quarter possession when he crushed Burrow after a third-quarter throw, and Greg Newsome II finished the job by breaking up the hurried pass to Ja’Marr Chase (2 of 5 targets, 26 yards).

“You kind of get into this zone,” Garrett said. “I feel like I kind of started a domino effect and everybody else wanted to get in on the party. Zay (Isaiah McGuire), Mason (Graham), those guys started collapsing the pocket and getting busy themselves. So I’m happy to see them get rolling. We just have to do it a little bit sooner. They had a good plan. We didn’t appreciate how they were getting after our quarterback in our house. We knew we had to step up and, like I said, we just have to do it quicker.”



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Kevin Stefanski was pleased with Garrett's performance even though it came in the heartwrenching loss, one marred by a missed extra point and missed 36-yard potential gamewinning field goal by first-year kicker Andre Szmyt, and two Joe Flacco interceptions that went off receivers' hands.

"Most of the time he was getting double-teamed, getting slides, getting shifts and still finding a way to impact the game," Stefanski said.

The Bengals neutralized Garrett on their opening drive by handing off to running back Chase Brown on seven of the 12 plays for 29 yards, including his 5 yard TD. It was a smart strategy by the Bengals, but it didn't last. After giving up 68 yards on that opening salvo, they surrendered only 74 the rest of the game, including 7 in the second half.

In the fourth quarter, the Browns held Cincy to minus-18 yards, their worst mark since 1991, largely because of Garrett.

"They have a chip plan, they have a plan for me and we've just got to figure it out and find a way to crack it open and then get me rolling," Garrett said. "I feel like if I can start to get my rhythm and find what works, it's really a snowball effect. I was really inspired by the play of the other guys making plays, all across the field. There was the front, there was the 'backers and the DBs. It was a little bit of everybody. I'm just happy to be able to step up in those moments, but we've got to have more and it's got to be quicker."

But Garrett took no solace in his own strong start, the second-half defensive dominance, or the fine rookie debuts of defensive tackle Mason Graham and linebacker Carson Schwesinger.

"Losing is losing," Garrett said. "It's not encouraging at all. Anytime you step on this field, you're old enough to win. No one's going to make any adjustments just because you're a younger player, you're rookie, you're a sophomore. So those guys who came in and made plays for us, we're going to continue to lean on them no matter the age and just continue to lift each other up. This is one game. We're very close. Learn from it."

The one thing the defense failed to do was take the ball away to help make up for Flacco's two interceptions off dropped passes by Jerry Jeudy and Cedric Tillman. But it didn't have many chances. The Bengals possessed the ball for only 24:11, and managed only one first down in the second half, going three-and-out on six of their seven second-half drives.

"Win the turnover battle," Garrett said. "We've got to get some turnovers of our own to match them and I think that swings the game right there."



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Garrett believes it's gut-check time for the Browns after the crushing loss, especially in the division. They know they outplayed the Bengals, and must dig deep to come back next week and beat the Ravens on the road after their own soul-crushing loss Sunday night to the Bills, who came back from a 15-point fourth-quarter deficit to win 41-40.

"These next few days will impact the culture, being able to get back in after a loss," he said. "No one wants to lose, but how you choose to wake up and attack the week upcoming is really showing who you are as a man, as a person, as a player. So continue to work your behind off and elevate the people around you. There's no one great leader on the team who's going to pull us forward. We have to do it together."

A loss in Baltimore would not only drop them to 0-2 in the division, but severely crimp their chances of making the playoffs. Garrett's message to the team?

"Keep your head up. We don't lose two in a row," he said. "You've got to look at the film and get up off the canvas quick. It's another division opponent, a good team who we're facing. It's going to be very different styles, so we have to be able to prepare and look ourselves in the mirror very quickly, see what adjustments we need to make and get right back at. Those guys aren't slowing down and neither can we."

It might take a superhuman effort, but Garrett knows just the man for the job.



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Why this new Browns edge rusher thinks we haven't seen the best of his game yet

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/03/why-this-new-browns-edge-rusher-thinks-we-havent-seen-the-best-of-his-game-yet.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — New Browns pass rusher Joe Tryon-Shoyinka doesn't believe we've seen nearly the player he can be in the NFL.

"There's so much more, and this is just the beginning for me," he said on Thursday during a Zoom call with reporters. "I feel like I'm not even in the peak of my career, this is where things can get going in the right direction, where I'm allowed to just be free and be the player where I'm going a hundred miles an hour."

The Browns added Tryon-Shoyinka to their pass rush group this week on a one-year, \$4.5 million deal. He spent the first four years of his career in Tampa Bay, which selected him with the final pick in the first round of the 2021 NFL Draft after he had eight sacks in his final season with Washington.

Tryon-Shoyinka appeared in 45 games for the Buccaneers but never delivered for them at the level they expected. He had 15 sacks in four seasons, topping out at five in 2023 and recording only two in 15 games last season.

"I think Joe did everything right for us except get to the quarterback on a consistent basis," Bucs head coach Todd Bowles said at the NFL Combine. "I thought from a run standpoint he was fine, from a drop standpoint he was fine, from a toughness standpoint, he was fine. He did everything (we asked of him). Obviously, when you think edge rushers, you want to think get to the quarterback first. And that didn't show up from a double-digit standpoint."

The Browns hope to get the best out the 25-year-old Tryon-Shoyinka, likely banking on the idea he can thrive away from the Bucs' 3-4 scheme, allowing him to work primarily as a defensive end in Jim Schwartz's four-man front.

"In a 4-3, you're allowed to just simplify it, see what you see and go attack, Tryon-Shoyinka said. "You're on your line, you're on your track, and you're just ready to wreck s---."

The Browns' interest in him isn't surprising. His measurables from the 2021 draft process match what the Browns look for in edge rushers. He ran a 4.68 40-yard dash with a 1.64 10-yard split and a 35-inch vertical. His 34-inch arms are in line with the length the Browns love on the ends of their defensive line.

He joins a pass rush group led by Myles Garrett, who just agreed to a record-breaking four-year, \$160 million contract extension, making him the highest-paid non-quarterback in NFL history.

Tryon-Shoyinka said he met Garrett on Thursday and got his contact info and he's ready to see what the two can do together.



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“I’m expecting just wreaking havoc, have a lot of fun, playing with swag, a lot of effort,” he said, “running to the ball. Just, expectations are high.”

Along with Garrett, the Browns' current pass rush group includes fourth-year pro Alex Wright, who played well in 2023 but suffered a season-ending injury last season, and Isaiah McGuire, who finished his second season with a flourish. The Browns also have Ogbo Okoronkwo, who struggled last season but contributed 4.5 sacks two seasons ago.

The Browns also added Maliek Collins, an interior pressure creator, to potentially pair with their top pick from last year’s draft, Mike Hall Jr.

They currently hold 10 picks in the 2025 NFL Draft, including five of the top 104 picks in a class that is strong at both edge rusher and defensive tackle.

Tryon-Shoyinka is part of the formula for the Browns to get back to harassing quarterbacks in Schwartz’s scheme that emphasizes rushing the quarterback.

“Super attractive spot to come into,” Tryon-Shoyinka said. “And Schwartz’s defense, man, just sitting down with him, just getting me super amped up, ready to get on the field. I just can’t wait to get going, man. He’s got a great philosophy, great mind, great mind for the game, so just super blessed to be in this position.”

Tryon-Shoyinka didn’t have anything disparaging to say about his time with the Bucs — he said, in fact, he wouldn’t trade it for anything — but it’s behind him now and he feels like he’s found the right spot.

“Things happen for a reason and I ended up in a great organization like Cleveland and I’m sure that with this scheme and everything that we have set in place, I’m supposed to be here,” he said, “and I know this is the place where I want to be.”

Why is that?

“Great opportunity to come out and hunt, just pin my ears back, play with some amazing players alongside the D-line and just pin my ears back and hunt,” he said. “Go be a crazy dog on the field.”



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Joe Tryon-Shoyinka excited to 'wreck s**' alongside Myles Garrett in Browns' defense**

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/03/13/joe-tryon-shoyinka-browns-myles-garrett-2025-nfl-free-agency/82364877007/>

Joe Tryon-Shoyinka claimed he wasn't aware of the new extension Myles Garrett agreed to Sunday that ended his contentious stalemate with the Browns over a trade demand made at the beginning of February. All that matters is he crossed paths with him in the team's facility Thursday as the outside linebacker/defensive was getting acclimated to his new home.

"I just met him today for the first time," Tryon-Shoyinka said during his introductory Zoom call Thursday. "Got his contact. Amazing dude."

That's just a chance off-the-field meeting between the Browns' free-agent signing and their star defensive end. There are going to be chances for the two to meet up on the field, preferably in the backfield around the opposing quarterback.

Tryon-Shoyinka is just as excited about those meetings as he is the one he had Thursday. He's got a pretty good idea in his mind about what they could be like if everything goes well.

"I'm expecting just wreaking havoc, have a lot of fun, playing with swag, a lot of effort, running to the ball," Tryon-Shoyinka said. "Just expectations are high."

The expectations were high for Tryon-Shoyinka when the Buccaneers made him the No. 32 overall and last pick in the first round of the 2021 draft. That was even after he had opted out of the University of Washington's COVID-altered 2020 season.

However, it didn't quite play out as both sides hoped, as Tryon-Shoyinka finished with 15 sacks over four seasons and 66 regular-season games. The Buccaneers declined to pick up his fifth-year option last May, signaling their desire to move on after last season.

Tryon-Shoyinka has moved on physically to Cleveland, where he signed a one-year, \$4.75 million deal this week. He's not quite letting the way it turned out in Tampa Bay move on from his mind, however.

"I'll carry a chip on my shoulder for anything," Tryon-Shoyinka said. "That's the name of the game. You got to find the edge. So I would say I had a great experience in Tampa. I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's just things happen for a reason and I ended up in a great organization like Cleveland, and I'm sure that with this scheme and everything that we have set in place, I'm supposed to be here and I know this is the place where I want to be. So I'm definitely blessed."

There's going to be a bit of an adjustment — more of a re-adjustment, really — for Tryon-Shoyinka as he comes to the Browns. He played an outside linebacker position in Tampa Bay's 3-4 scheme, as opposed to playing with his hand more in the dirt as he will as a defensive end in the defensive scheme of Browns coordinator Jim Schwartz.



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The position adjustment isn't that big of a deal for Tryon-Shoyinka, who said he played it previously in his career before he got to the NFL.

"Scheme-wise, in a 4-3, you're allowed to just simplify it, see what you see and go attack," Tryon-Shoyinka said. "You're on your line, you're on your track, and you're just ready to wreck s***, excuse my language. And then as the outside linebacker, you got a little more responsibility in coverage. You might be off the ball, you might be lined up on a receiver out wide, so just different responsibilities."

The beauty of the Browns scheme, said Tryon-Shoyinka, is in the simplicity. It's not about exotic blitzes or stunts. Instead, it's "see ball, hit ball."

It was an enticing pitch to Tryon-Shoyinka.

"Just based off of scheme-wise, just where you're able to pin your ears back," Tryon-Shoyinka said. "I can't emphasize that enough, how attractive that is as a free agent. Being able to just do that and go out and game after game go be the dog that you want to be, is definitely super attractive and I couldn't say I picture myself anywhere else now."



Myles Garrett wants to finish his career with the Browns and plans to win the fans back with his play

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/03/myles-garrett-wants-to-finish-his-career-with-the-browns-and-plans-to-win-the-fans-back-with-his-play.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Myles Garrett plans to sack and slam his way back into the hearts of Browns fans who turned on him after his trade request and hardline stance on wanting to go elsewhere to win a Super Bowl.

“From day one I’ve always said that I’ve wanted to bring a championship to Northeast Ohio, so that doesn’t change my stance and I’m just going to continue to turn those opinions around or reinforce those opinions by going out and doing what I’ve always done, going out and make plays,” Garrett, clad in an all-brown suit and shirt, said during his press conference Friday at CrossCountry Mortgage Campus to address his blockbuster contract extension. “Being a great teammate, great leader, and being the best person I could be on this field and off the field for the Cleveland Browns.”

He said he “didn’t particularly look at the backlash. I really don’t care to look at the news or social media like that, so I didn’t see much of the opinions. But if there were any change or any people that are disheartened by the news, well [I] look to change their minds.”

Does he regret the fact he went public with his trade request on Feb. 3 and put it on blast during his national media tour on radio row at the Super Bowl, where he said time and again the Browns aren’t poised to win this season?

“No, I think I had some frustration and I feel like that helped us grow and have conversations that were difficult but needed to be had and that created a little bit more discourse, helped build some relationships and reaffirmed them and now I feel like we’re in a better place and now we can move on and grow from there,” he said.

So what does he say to fans who heard him state time and again that it’s not about the money and that he just wanted out for a chance to win?

“I don’t tell fans anything, I go out there and prove it,” he said. “If it’s about the money, then I can just pack it in and not go out there and give my best effort. But I plan to be the best person possible in this locker room, be the best leader possible and as well as dominating on Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays. So that kind of mindset, giving everything for those kinds of wins and what I’ve done year in and year out, that really proves it to the fans. No amount of words will.”

He even believes that his radio row tour on Feb. 5, in which more and more Browns fans jumped ship with every interview, will be forgiven.

“That media row run, that created more discourse between myself and management that created conversation between myself and AB, Jimmy and up and down the chain and that kind of stuff became a main variable for this deal getting done,” Garrett said. “So I think the fans will see that my



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heart's in the right place. It's never been about money, it's always been about winning and that's where my frustration lies."

He defended landing the historic contract, which made it seem like perhaps it was about the money after all.

"That's what (Nicole Lynn) is supposed to do as an agent," he said. "She's supposed to give me the best deal possible and that's what she did. So I don't regret it. I mean I feel like I went out and earned it by playing the best brand of ball that I know possible and she went on in and asked, and they delivered and I plan to deliver week in and week out during the season, and that's just how that kind of give and take goes."

He acknowledged that Browns owner Jimmy Haslam declining recently to meet with Garrett helped drive the extension, a four-year deal worth \$160 million that makes Garrett the highest-paid non-quarterback in the NFL at \$40 million a year. Haslam did reach out once the deal was done.

"The conversation opened up for me and AB to talk more and Jimmy took a bit of a backseat leaning on AB and our relationship and I think that's for the better," he said. "You want to have a good relationship with your owner but as well as your GM, and him and I have had many discussions and conversations over the years and he helped me see what the future can really hold for us."

Berry sat in the last row of the press conference, with Kevin Stefanski standing a few feet away. Browns executive vice president JW Johnson, a partner in Haslam Sports Group, also stood in the back, while Garrett's parents, Audrey and Lawrence, were off to the side of the podium, as well as Lynn of Klutch Sports.

The Browns communications team lined up small toy dinosaurs all across the podium, and served dinosaur-themed cupcakes in honor of Garrett's dino-philia.

It was clear that there were no lingering hard feelings in the organization towards the Browns' future Hall of Famer and 2023 NFL Defensive Player of the Year, despite the initial angst his trade request and media blitz caused. In fact, Garrett doesn't think the new blockbuster deal brings with it increased responsibility or expectations inside the building.

"Not in my mind," he said. "Continue to be the person that I have been. And I think just being that constant leader, I don't think you can put a dollar sign on that at any time. Leaders come from guys who are undrafted to guys who are the highest paid. It doesn't take a playmaker to be a leader, nor does it take, like I said, a dollar sign. So continue to learn to be more and more a leader every year and every day."

He noted that the turnaround resulted from "constant communication with the team ... (on) how we can turn this around and turn Cleveland into a winner as soon as possible ... A lot of dominoes just started to fall and things just started to fall in place."

Just like he was recently willing to do "whatever it takes" to get the Browns to trade him, he's now that committed to the turnaround here.



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“It’s going to take everything, and whatever it takes, I’m willing to give,” he said. “I want to be a winner. I want to bring a championship back to Cleveland, so whether that’s going out and recruiting, whether that’s staying late, that’s mentoring the young guys, just whatever it takes, I’m going to do it all because I don’t want to come back here the same way we did after last season. I don’t want that feeling ever again. I want to feel like we’re taking more and more strides to that promise land.”

At various turning points in his career — such as after the helmet incident with Mason Rudolph and the car flip in 2022 — he’s elevated his game and his leadership skills. Will it be the same after this brush with leaving?

“That’s my expectation every year,” he said. “So I don’t think the turning points have as much to do about it as continuing to meet with more people who have helped me along with my journey, my growth physically and mentally and this is an exceptional part of the journey. I’m glad to still be here but I plan to make a jump because that’s just what I do.”

Was he concerned that he turned free agents away by his statements that the Browns aren’t poised to win this season?

“Well, I’m here, so I don’t plan on going anywhere anytime soon and I’m willing to help however I can to get the right pieces here to make the changes we need to win games and to go deep in the playoffs and win a championship,” he said.

He put his money where his mouth was on Thursday, helping to recruit quarterback Russell Wilson when he made a free agent visit to the Browns. Garrett said the meeting went well and he believes Wilson can be “a valuable asset.”

As for remaining in Cleveland, “it wasn’t like I had to be roped into it. This is my home. We’re going to continue to make it more and more clear how this could open up sooner rather than later.”

He revealed that he did consult with Browns Hall of Famer Joe Thomas, who told cleveland.com he felt Garrett would be happier here than anywhere else.

“I believe I texted Joe just a bit early on just getting his opinion on things and he’s always been a shoulder to lean on for just good advice,” he said. “Knowing exactly where I am in this phase of my career and my life and he’s been in this position before, so he was just a good leader for myself at a young age, so I wanted to hear what he had to say.”

With a contract that goes through 2030, he acknowledged that he probably will, in fact, go from Cleveland to Canton, when he’s immortalized in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

“I’ve always wanted to end my career, the team I started with, I wanted to end with, and with the contract now, that’ll likely be how things go for as long as they’ll have me,” he said. “I’m glad to be here and I’m glad to have the support of Cleveland, and for those who may have taken a step back, I’ll continue to change their opinions with my play and what I continue to do day in and day out.”



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First and foremost however, he wants to bring that Super Bowl here that he tried to chase elsewhere.

“That’s something that’s meant a lot to me even when I was coming in from high school to college, being that one team guy and having a place that feels like home that you ingrained yourself in the community,” he said. “And the Canton part sounds great. Players want to be in the Hall of Fame, that’s a tremendous individual reward. But cities remember championships, and that’s what I want to do.”

He reiterated that the trade request “came heavy heartedly because this is a place that I love and an organization that feels like family. I don’t regret what I said, but it did hurt because this has felt like a community. They’ve received me with open arms from day one, and I’ve given everything, so wanted to make my voice heard loud and clear, and fortunately enough, it was. And just like family, sometimes you fight and you have to go through things, you have to build through adversity. We’ll get through this, and we’ll come out right on the other side.”

A short while after the 25-minute press conference, Garrett left the Browns practice facility and walked across the street specifically to sign a No. 95 jersey for a young boy who had waited patiently. It was a good first step toward mending the fences with a fan base that felt blindsided by his desire to leave.



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Myles Garrett explains change of heart, says he's always wanted to bring championship to Cleveland

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2025/03/14/myles-garrett-explains-change-of-heart-says-hes-always-wanted-to-bring-championship-to-cleveland/>

BEREA — Time and trust.

As Myles Garrett explained his stunning reversal from trade request to record contract extension, he talked often about needing time to let the frustration from the 3-14 season fade and allow him to trust general manager Andrew Berry's plan for the Browns to rebound and become the Super Bowl contender Garrett demands.

"Just having constant communication with the team, AB or just management in general," he said Friday, comparing it to a family that has a fight. "Talking about the plans and the future of this team and how we can turn this around and turn Cleveland into a winner as soon as possible."

Kenny Pickett views himself as starter, not worrying about who's brought in, just glad to have chance to compete

Garrett doesn't regret his trade request, but said it came "heavy-heartedly" and believes it helped strengthen his relationship with the organization and improved the communication that led to a four-year, \$160 million contract extension after the Browns were adamant they wouldn't trade him. The deal made him the highest-paid non-quarterback in NFL history and will keep him with the Browns through 2030. He said he didn't hear or see much backlash from fans upset by his overt desire to leave but knows how to win them back.

"From Day 1 I've always said I wanted to bring a championship to Northeast Ohio," he said. "I'm just going to continue to turn those opinions around or reinforce those opinions by going out and doing what I've always done, going out and make plays, being a great teammate, great leader and being the best person I can be on this field and off the field for the Cleveland Browns."

The 20-minute news conference was loaded with themes.

Garrett, 29, loves dinosaurs, and they were everywhere, with mini plastic ones lining the podium and cupcakes and plates to match. He was dressed in all brown, including a sport jacket. Watching in the media room were his parents, agent Nicole Lynn, Berry and executive vice president/partner JW Johnson.

Garrett's answers also had themes, as he talked repeatedly about winning a title for Cleveland, being the driving force behind that and having faith in Berry to surround him with the pieces necessary after doubting that when he went public with the trade request Feb. 3.

"It's going to take everything and whatever it takes I'm willing to give," he said. "I want to be a winner. I want to bring a championship back to Cleveland, so whether that's going out and recruiting, whether that's staying late, that's mentoring the young guys, just whatever it takes, I'm going to do it



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all because I don't want to come back here the same way we did after last season. I don't want that feeling ever again. I want to feel like we're taking more and more strides to that promised land."

The extension came on the eve of free agency, allowing free agents to see Garrett's commitment and hear his sales pitch. He talked to quarterback Russell Wilson on Thursday during his visit to team headquarters. Wilson left without a contract but remains a possibility.

"I think it went well. Him and I had a little bit conversation at the Pro Bowl, as well as here," Garrett said. "I definitely think he'd be a valuable asset as a leader, as a mentor to those young guys. Veteran leadership can't be overstated and I think he definitely has some juice left at the position. He has plenty of arm left, he's very smart and he knows what he's capable of."

Joe Tryon-Shoyinka excited to pair with Myles Garrett, attack as DE in 4-3 scheme

Garrett wasn't overly ebullient Friday, but his demeanor was dramatically different than at the end of last season, when his frustration was obvious as the Browns were unable to duplicate the 11 wins and playoff appearance of 2023. In December, for the first time, he acknowledged the possibility of finishing his career with a team other than the one that drafted him No. 1 in 2017.

Then came the trade request.

"Maybe at the end of the season I wasn't as level-headed as I wanted it to be, right after with the emotions of the season still going on," Garrett said. "And as I continue to take more time and have conversations with (Berry), Nicole, and many other parts of the organization as well as my teammates, helped me kind of rest with this decision where I am now."

The four-time All-Pro, six-time Pro Bowler and 2023 NFL Defensive Player of the Year met with Berry after the season and wasn't convinced of the plan to contend in 2025. He viewed it differently as time elapsed and said he's put his trust in Berry.

"It became more reinforced and developed as time went on," Garrett said. "Just the more time from the season, seeing how things developed and progressed with each team making moves and the combine and the draft coming up. A lot of dominos just started to fall and things just started to fall in place."

Berry, in his sixth year as GM, faces immense pressure as he tries to bolster an aging roster without going through a painful teardown. The awful Deshaun Watson contract has restricted his ability to acquire veterans, including at quarterback, and he must hit a home run with 10 picks in April's draft for the Browns to come anywhere close to Garrett's Super Bowl desires.

Berry's early work in the offseason, which includes signing defensive tackle Maliek Collins and defensive end Joe Tryon-Shoyinka, has encouraged Garrett, who expects more upgrades throughout the offseason.

"We'll continue to see that the days go by, continue to make moves and changes with the picks we have in the draft and you continue to see us add more and more weapons to this team and see how



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we continue to mesh and grow,” he said. “Leaning on the expertise of AB to put the right pieces in place, but I do understand what he’s building. We’ve had multiple conversations about that, and I just know that I’m going to do my part to get everyone online and on board with that goal and that message.”

Many of Garrett’s teammates pleaded publicly for him to return after the trade request, and he wanted to make sure they knew they played an important role.

“I had conversations with my teammates and some of the leaders on the team, as well as my position room,” he said. “They understand that it’s part of the business. They want to be successful, as well. It’s always difficult at the end of the season when you underachieve and things don’t go your way.

“I don’t want it to go understated, how much they had an impact on this decision to come back with the things they had to say and the appeal they had towards coming back and doing things over again.”

Garrett knew it was possible the Browns wouldn’t trade him — he had two years left on the contract before the extension — and said he didn’t have to be “roped into” returning. He has a house here, is a minority stakeholder in the Cavaliers and has built deep ties to the community.

“This is my home,” he said.

His goal had been to spend his whole career with the team that drafted him and he’s back to feeling that way. So it could be Cleveland to Canton, after all.

“The Canton part sounds great,” he said. “Players want to be in the Hall of Fame, that’s a tremendous individual reward. But communities and cities remember championships, and that’s what I want to do.”



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Myles Garrett holds on to dream of playing entire career in Cleveland

By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/myles-garrett-holds-on-to-dream-of-playing-entire-career-in-cleveland>

DE Myles Garrett had always planned on playing his entire NFL career for the team that drafted him.

He has played the first eight years of his NFL career with the Browns after they selected him as the No. 1 overall pick in the 2017 NFL Draft. He'll play the next five seasons in Cleveland following his contract extension that runs through the 2030 season.

"I've always wanted to end my career here," Garrett said. "The team I started with, I wanted to end with. And with the contract now, that'll likely be how things go for as long as they'll have me. I'm glad to be here, and I'm glad to have supported Cleveland."

As Garrett sat behind the podium on March 14 to speak on the historic contract extension, Garrett also addressed the trade request he made on Feb. 3, and how over the following month, his mindset shifted to come to the agreement on the 4-year contract extension.

"Just having constant communication with the team, with (Executive Vice President of Football Operations and General Manager Andrew Berry) and just management in general," Garrett said. "Talking about the plans and the future of this team, and how we can turn this around and turn Cleveland into a winner as soon as possible."

Following the end of a disappointing 2024 season in which the Browns went 3-14, Garrett completed the standard exit interviews with the front office. Berry had said at the 2025 NFL Scouting Combine the organization was aware of the possibility of the request following the season because of conversations they had with Garrett and his camp.

Even after the trade request and the offseason continued, both sides continued to have discussions. Through those conversations, Garrett said they talked about the plans for the future of the Browns; over time, those plans were developed and reinforced as different moves happened around the league and the outlook on the draft has taken shape.

But Garrett didn't just have discussions with the front office. He reached out to Pro Football Hall of Famer Joe Thomas for his opinion on the situation with the understanding of where Garrett was at in his career. He talked with current teammates, including some of the leaders among the locker room as well as his position room. Garrett said the remarks from his teammates about the appeal of coming back and the minor tweaks they could make to improve played an important part in his decision.

He also had conversations with defensive line coach Jacques Cesaire about how they can get the most out of their defensive line. Whether that's through certain plays they could run or elements to tweak in order to unleash the talent of all their players, those discussions made Garrett hopeful with Cesaire's optimism about their unit and the outlook on the development of the position group. As Garrett reflected on his decision to make his trade request public, he didn't regret the decision because it helped lead to those more thorough conversations – which eventually shifted Garrett's



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desire to stay with Cleveland. That communication allowed Garrett to understand clearer what Berry is building and how he can play a part in having his teammates on board with the goals and the message.

"I had some frustration, and I feel like that helped us grow and have conversations that were difficult, but needed to be had," Garrett said. "It created a little more discourse. It helped build some relationships and reaffirm them. And now I feel like we are in a better place, and now we can move on and grow from there."

Garrett said following the season, he took some time away to consider all the aspects of his future. Because of the frustrations he felt from the outcome of the 2024 season, he wanted to decompress in order to come back in a clearer headspace. While that originally led to the decision to request the trade, it also later provided him the clarity to understand the vision and to buy in long term.

With that understanding, Garrett is fully committed to doing his part in helping take the Browns to the next level and reach the goal he's always dreamed of – bringing a Super Bowl to Cleveland.

"It's going to take everything and whatever it takes, I'm willing to give," Garrett said. "I want to be a winner. I want to bring a championship back to Cleveland. So, whether that's going out and recruiting, whether that's staying late, that's mentoring the young guys, just whatever it takes, I'm going to do it all. Because I don't want to come back here the same way we did after last season. I don't want that feeling ever again. I want to feel like we're taking more and more strides to that promised land."



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Deshaun Watson provides a glimpse of how hard he's working to come back from his re-ruptured Achilles

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/03/deshaun-watson-provides-a-glimpse-of-how-hard-hes-working-to-come-back-from-his-re-ruptured-achilles.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — While the Browns are in the hunt for a more experienced veteran bridge quarterback, Deshaun Watson posted a video Tuesday showing how hard he's working to come back from his re-ruptured right Achilles.

He'll miss "significant time" this season, according to Browns general manager Andrew Berry, but Watson, a three-time Pro Bowler, made it clear he's determined play football again. It might not be for the Browns, who gave him a fully-guaranteed five-year deal worth \$230 million, but he's not giving up.

In the video, posted on Instagram, Watson — wearing his walking boot — is working out at the Browns facility, where he's been rehabbing since shortly after undergoing the Achilles revision on Jan. 10th.

He rides the stationery bike, waves the battle ropes and performed twists with a medicine ball. He also does sit ups and stretches the Achilles with an elastic band.

Interviewed between sets, he says, "At the end of the day, I've got to understand too like my name, my presence are actually bigger than what people see."

He also alludes to the criticism he's received in recent years, without specifying whether he meant for his play or his accusations by more than two dozen massage therapists of sexual misconduct during appointments, or both.

"In a sense, you can't take it personally," he said. "I kind of learned that, but I think naturally we kind of do that as humans, trying to take other people's opinions personally. It goes back to people don't understand me, they don't know. So when they don't understand and know something, they kind of try to speak on it."

The video was posted two days after Watson proposed to his longtime girlfriend Jilly Anais, the pop singer, social media influencer and chef.

It also came less than two weeks after the Browns restructured his contract again, clearing \$36 million in cap space, and cutting the original 2025 cap charge in half. They did so with a restructure bonus and more void years to spread out the charges.

At the NFL Combine last month, Browns GM Andrew Berry stressed that Watson wasn't doing anything wrong when he re-tore the Achilles.

"Unfortunately, he turned his foot (or) ankle that caused the re-tear during the normal stages of the recovery process," Berry said. "I know there's been a lot of speculation and everything out there, but



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there's nothing nefarious. It's just an unfortunate accident. So our focus is on making sure that he gets healthy and can be back to normal."

Berry couldn't pin it down when Watson will be back, but the Browns don't seem to be counting on him for this season.

"How far that spans into 2025, I can't give you a specific right now," Berry said. "He's shown to be a fast healer and we're going to try and be as thoughtful and aggressive with the recovery process, but that's not something that I could predict currently."

The Browns have the No. 2 overall pick in the draft, and are strongly considering Cam Ward and Shedeur Sanders there. They also acquired former Steelers first-round pick Kenny Pickett in a trade with the Eagles, and hosted Russell Wilson on a free agent visit last week. They'll likely sign a more experience bridge quarterback, and have contemplated re-signing Joe Flacco.

Kevin Stefanski noted at the Combine that Watson will continue to rehab at the Browns facility throughout the season. In fact, he was there on Thursday when Wilson visited.

"He's there every day right now," Stefanski said. "I get to see him, so he's working very hard. Obviously the No. 1 thing for him is to get healthy."

The video proved he's determined to do just that.



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Maliek Collins brings experience in attack-style defensive scheme to the Browns

By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/maliek-collins-brings-experience-in-attack-style-defensive-scheme-to-the-browns>

Maliek Collins knows he is built for an attack-style defense. It's the only style he has ever played in during his NFL career.

So, when he learned that he would become a free agent when the new league year began on March 12, he searched for a sense of familiarity. As he looked for his next NFL team, not only did he see an opportunity with the Browns to play in an attack-style defense, but he also had the chance to play for defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz and reunite with a former coach – defensive line coach Jacques Cesaire, who he spent two seasons with at the Texans.

"Just being familiar with this scheme, being familiar with Schwartz, I thought that this would be the best fit for me at this stage," Collins said.

Collins signed a two-year deal with the Browns and joins a defensive line that features former Defensive Player of the Year Myles Garrett and DE Ogbo Okoronkwo on the edges, as well as veteran DT Shelby Harris, and younger players in DT Mike Hall Jr. and DT Jowon Briggs on the interior.

Yet, the defensive line is filled with familiar faces as well, as Collins knows Harris and played with Okoronkwo during the 2022 season with the Texans. Hall and Collins both have the same trainer and were introduced to one another on Collins' first day at CrossCountry Mortgage Campus.

"Hearing people and seeing people that I'm familiar with and I study D-line play, so I'm super excited to actually get to play with some of these guys and I'm ready to get at it," Collins said.

Drafted in the third round of the 2016 NFL Draft by the Cowboys, Collins spent the first four years of his NFL career in Dallas. He then spent the 2020 season with the Raiders before he signed with the Texans in 2021 and played three seasons in Houston. Over his nine-year career, Collins has recorded 239 tackles, 51 tackles for loss, 88 quarterback hits, and 30.5 sacks. He has also added one interception, four passes defensed, one forced fumble and eight fumble recoveries over his 136-game career.

At each stop throughout his NFL career, Collins said he has played in a 4-3 attack-style defense. Playing in a similar scheme over nine years – even with four different teams – allowed him to hone his skillset to that style of defense. While the scheme stayed mostly similar, Collins also used each stop to learn from different coaching staffs and styles.

"I think it's just made me more well-rounded in how to receive coaching, how to give feedback and just knowing what is expected of me," Collins said. "It's helped me become a more polished rusher, when to use certain rushes and when to not use certain rushes. It's stuff like that I hope I can pass along to the younger guys that maybe haven't been at as many stops as me."



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His veteran experience on the interior will bring necessary depth to the Browns defensive line as they look to return to their defensive dominance in both stopping the run and rushing the passer. That's where Collins views his skillset fitting in with the defensive line. Over the course of his career, he's established himself as a rusher and interior pass rusher, as well as someone who can get off the ball.

"I like to hit the person in front of me, put my hat under their chin. It's just my style of play," Collins said. "I got a pass rush bag and I'm ready to display it."

Defensively, the Browns are working to return to their level of dominance they had in 2023 when they led the league in numerous categories, including total defense allowed with 270.2 yards per game. They also had the best passing defense in the league – allowing 164.7 yards per game – and led the NFL in third down percentage, with teams only converting 29.1 percent of third-down attempts

Yet, in 2024, they did not play to the same caliber. The Browns gave up an average of 342.1 total yards per game, ranked 19th in the league, with 53 touchdowns allowed. They allowed an average of 212.4 passing yards per game – 12th in the league – and 129.7 rushing yards per game – 21st in the league.

Collins has lived through that experience – most recently in Houston – and believes the Browns can do so once again starting with the 2025

"I've been in places where you had a down year before and you come back and you're a playoff team – just recently in Houston," Collins said. "I think that's exciting just to see the excitement that it brings to the city. That does everything to the culture of a team and to the city. I'm excited to see that type of transition here, even though it's been done in recent history, I'm excited to see that be done and hopefully continue to be done."



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Joe Flacco says he can play a full season and wants to complete unfinished business with the Browns

By Tony Grossi, The Land On Demand

<https://thelandondemand.com/news/2025/apr/16/joe-flacco-says-he-can-play-a-full-season-and-wants-to-complete-unfinished-business-with-the-browns/>

The fan adulation was unique and special to Joe Flacco.

The Kevin Stefanski offense fits him like a glove.

But a motivator, also, in Flacco returning to the Browns two years after he set the town ablaze with a five-game run to the playoffs, was the unfinished business left behind. His two Pick 6's in his last game, a 45-14 wild-card playoff loss to Houston, has stayed with him.

"Yeah, listen, part of the excitement about coming back is the opportunity to kind of, hopefully, put a stamp on what happened a couple years ago and finish what we started," Flacco said on The Really Big Show on 850 ESPN Cleveland Wednesday in his first comments since re-signing with the Browns.

"It was an exciting time period, and I think that's probably what you think of first. But when you lose playoff games, those are things that stick in your mind, and they're things that you want to get another opportunity to kind of come back and get a redo of. You're not promised that, and very often you don't get that opportunity, but it'll be nice to kind of play for the chance."

Flacco signed a one-year contract on April 11 for \$3 million guaranteed. He can earn another \$5 million in incentives if the Browns make the playoffs with him as the starting quarterback.

Flacco will compete with Kenny Pickett for the Browns' starting quarterback job as the team turns the page on the Deshaun Watson era.

Watson likely will begin the season on the PUP (physically unable to perform) list after two surgeries to repair a torn, and re-torn, right Achilles tendon. A rookie QB will be added, but will not be rushed to play immediately.

At the age of 40 and embarking on his 18th NFL campaign, Flacco is not conceding anything to Pickett, who is 26 and entering his fourth NFL season, first with the Browns after being acquired in trade from the Eagles.

"I don't think there's any expectation of exactly who's going to be the starting quarterback," Flacco said. "I'm excited to get in that room and go show that I have, you know, a lot of football ahead of me and kind of become part of the team and do my best to prove all those things, just like you always would when you kind of come into a new situation and want to be the guy."

Flacco was not invited back to the Browns in 2024 because they didn't want to polarize the locker room and fan base in what they thought would be Watson's break-out year with the team. Flacco



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signed with Indianapolis and went 2-4 as a starter as the Colts sought to augment the development of 2023 first-round pick Anthony Richardson with him.

In the later stages of his career, Flacco has found himself in the unwitting “mentor” role next to Lamar Jackson in Baltimore, Zach Wilson in New York, and Richardson in Indianapolis. It will happen again when the Browns select a quarterback in this year’s draft who may be, or may not be, the team’s next great hope.

Flacco addressed the balance of competing for a starting job while serving as a mentor to a rookie QB.

“If you want to be a good mentor, or even if you don't, I think just competing and doing your best and doing it the way that you know to be the right way ... even if it’s your secondary goal, I think that’s the best way for people to learn,” he said.

“I'm going into my 18th year and I still have things to learn, whether it's about myself or how the game is being played. So I don't think being a mentor has ever been like my main goal, but I do think that competition and that quarterback room in general kind of breeds the environment to learn and to become the best version of yourself.”

Flacco started six games for the Browns in 2023 after joining the team in late November. He started six for the Colts in 2024 after relieving Richardson in one and producing a win over the Steelers. He believes that even at the age of 40 he can play at a high level over a full, 17-game schedule.

“I feel as good as I ever have,” he said. “I mean, I probably have a skewed version of what the reality is at this point. But, yeah, I can. I mean, I do all I can to keep myself in great shape, and ... listen, football is a demanding sport. You never know what's going to happen. But as far as just going the long haul, like, besides a knee injury here and a couple things there, I think I've been able to prove throughout the course of my career that I can stay healthy and deal with some things along the way. But I'm going to be out there and be a reliable guy to show up every Sunday for you.”

Flacco said he is very comfortable with the Stefanski offense that he executed in 2023 and is excited about being reunited with the Browns’ veteran-laden offensive line and tight end David Njoku. Njoku averaged 6 receptions for 80.5 yards and had 4 touchdowns in six games with Flacco flinging the ball.

Flacco is also very excited about the prospect of the Browns adding Heisman Trophy winner Travis Hunter in the draft. If they take him with the No. 2 overall pick, as expected, the Browns would play Hunter primarily at wide receiver but also give him reps at cornerback.

“I don't pay too much attention to college football anymore, but it was hard not to notice him,” Flacco said. “You've got to give him credit. I mean, obviously he's super explosive and is a game changer. Whether he's actually going to play both ways at the next level, whatever, you like the fact that he has the ability to do that.



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"It just shows you that he's more than just like an athlete. He's more than just athletic. He's more than just a guy that can run fast and jump high. He actually has a feel for how to play the game and he has the capability of doing multiple things. It just leads you to believe that he can probably pick things up pretty quickly, and he can be somebody that you can rely on to kind of have a really good feel for the game."

Joe Flacco motivated by his love for the game in his return to the Browns

By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/joe-flacco-motivated-by-his-love-for-the-game-in-his-return-to-the-browns>

At one point during the offseason, Joe Flacco drove up to a golf course in North Jersey to play a round of golf with some friends.

When he started the day, the possibility of signing with the Browns wasn't even on his radar. After a full day of golf and no phone on his person, when Flacco checked his phone that night, the potential for a return to Cleveland had changed.

Now, Flacco is a member of the Browns once again. He agreed to terms with the Browns on April 11, returning to Cleveland after spending the latter portion of the 2023 season with the Browns.

"To see familiar faces and a lot of guys that we did some cool things with is always refreshing," Flacco said. "You look at the past and there's something that makes you feel good about it, but it mostly just comes down to the people. Not necessarily like the results that we had last time, but the guys in the locker room, having some familiarity with them is a big, big part of it."

He first joined the Browns in Week 12 of the 2023 season and started five consecutive games beginning in Week 13. During that stretch, the Browns went 4-1 with Flacco at quarterback. His tenure was highlighted by the Week 17 win over the Jets on Thursday Night Football that officially clinched their playoff berth – their first playoff appearance since 2020.

While in Cleveland, Flacco completed 123 of 204 passing attempts for 1,616 passing yards and 13 touchdowns during the regular season. That season he became the first player in NFL history to record at least 250 passing yards and two touchdown passes in each of his first five games with a team. The Browns ended the 2023 season with an 11-6 record and earned a trip to the Wild Card round of the playoffs.

Flacco then spent the 2024 season with the Colts, appearing in eight games with six starts. He completed 162 of 248 passing attempts for 1,761 passing yards and 12 touchdowns.

This time around, Flacco is in the building from the beginning of offseason workouts, having the opportunity to spend the entire offseason with his teammates and further build relationships with his teammates. And his teammates were just as excited to see him back in building.



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"I love Flacco," CB Denzel Ward said. "Flacco is a great guy. When he was here, he led us far in the season and a bunch of wins. I'm glad to have that veteran presence in the room."

One of the biggest questions of the 2025 offseason for the Browns centered around the quarterback room. With QB Deshaun Watson set to miss significant time of the 2025 season as he recovers from a re-ruptured Achilles tendon, Cleveland had to add depth to the room.

The Browns quarterback room currently consists of Flacco and Kenny Pickett, who Cleveland acquired in a trade with the Eagles at the beginning of the new league year on March 12. The Browns could also add a rookie in the 2025 NFL Draft, set to begin on April 24.

No matter how the room takes shape, Flacco said he doesn't hold any expectations for the 2025 season. In brief conversations with head coach Kevin Stefanski, Flacco said the Browns do not have preconceived notions about who is going to be the starting quarterback for the 2025 season.

"I don't really have any expectations besides to go out there, be myself and kind of put my head down, work hard, and of just do things the way I know how to," Flacco said. "I'm just excited to be here, the possibility and the opportunity."

And Stefanski reiterated that sentiment about the quarterback competition in his press conference. He said part of that competition process comes in divvying up reps and getting extra work for certain players in order to get the maximum exposure to scenarios and situations.

"Competition brings out the best in everybody," Stefanski said. "I look at competition as a really good thing. I think it's a really good thing especially when you like the guys that are competing for the job like we do. I think it only elevates everyone's play."

Flacco is entering his 18th NFL season and has held a variety of roles over the course of his storied career. In 17 seasons he's played 196 regular-season games with 191 starts. He's played for five teams over the course of his career.

Flacco has worked with the same trainer for 15 years to prepare him for the NFL season to stay strong and fresh. At this stage of his career, Flacco said one of the hurdles is the mental side of the game and not getting worn out, which he combats through developed relationships with his teammates and coaching staff.

Through it all, he continues to rely on his love of the game, which has led him to this place in his career and a second stop with the Browns.

"Players ask a lot, 'Why are you still doing this?'" Flacco recalled. "And what eventually came to me is, I want to. I want to play. I think it's easy to. It'd be easy to say, 'All right, I've done enough,' but I made a decision that I'm going to do this. And I feel like once I made that decision, in my mind, then I didn't give myself an out. And I want to play, and I'm going to play until I can't."



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Shedeur Sanders ready to 'handle my business' as focus for Browns QB turns on the field
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/04/27/shedeur-sanders-cleveland-browns-rookie-qb/83312557007/>

BEREA — In a draft full of enigmas and questions, there was none bigger than Browns fifth-round pick Shedeur Sanders.

There was, of course, the outsized discourse that surrounded quarterback son of the Pro Football Hall of Famer and Colorado coach Deion Sanders from the very beginning. How much was self-inflicted by Sanders and his camp, and how much was the result of the perceptions of those engaged in the discourse is irrelevant at this point, although it absolutely added to the reason why Cleveland was able to trade up to get him at pick No. 144.

Sanders, in a conference call after he was selected by the Browns with the Cleveland-area media, seemed to acknowledge learning his own lessons from the pre-draft experience. At least, he acknowledged it in his own way.

"Do I have any regrets? I feel like in life it's always a way I can improve," Sanders said. "So it's always in different areas I'm able to improve and some things that I could have done at the time that seemed right at the time, I could have went about it a different way, and that was more during the season and stuff like that. Um, yeah."

More than that, however, was an actual on-field discussion of the quarterback himself. It's the part of Sanders that likely will end up being the difference between him becoming some level of successful as an NFL quarterback or just another fifth-round pick who ends up cast to the side, albeit one with a very famous surname.

There was always the go-tos on either side of the equation, pros or cons, with Sanders' game. Talk about his record-setting accuracy (better than 70% completion rate in college) or low turnover rate and the arm strength is brought up, while discussions about his pocket presence is always countered by saying how he's not the athlete that a Lamar Jackson or Josh Allen are at the position.

The on-field part was what initiated Sanders' fall from where many pre-draft projections and rankings had him. What was misguided about those evaluations, Browns general manager Andrew Berry refused to speculate on when asked.

"I can't really speak on what other people think," Berry said. "I can describe how we view him. We view him as a highly accurate pocket passer. He does a really good job of protecting the ball. He has enough of the physical characteristics, whether it's arm strength or mobility. Like all young players, there are things to improve. I think probably much has been said about the number of sacks he's taken. Some of that is environment and some of that is improvement on his end, for sure. But he has probably a little bit more of a, call it retro or classic style of play."

Shedeur Sanders throws the ball at the University of Colorado NFL Showcase as Browns coach Kevin Stefanski (far right in background) watches on April 4, 2025, in Boulder.



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That style may actually work well within the Browns' offense, assuming Sanders is able to polish the rough edges. The best quarterbacks in coach Kevin Stefanski's offenses have been the ones who could stand in the pocket and deliver accurate passes, especially off the play-action game.

The Browns addressed the need to improve the running game by taking a pair of backs before they took Sanders: Ohio State's Quinshon Judkins and Tennessee's Dylan Sampson. The hope that those two can, in some way, become a next-generation version of Nick Chubb and Kareem Hunt would certainly help take pressure off Sanders, assuming he actually is the quarterback.

The expectations outside of the building and inside of it are two different things. Sanders himself understands how that

"I'm a Sanders, so of course there's going to be expectations regardless of what pick I am," he said.

Sanders comes into the offseason program as one of five quarterbacks now on the Browns roster, although one — Deshaun Watson — is uncertain for much of the season after having a second surgery to fix a re-torn Achilles. He's not even the higher-drafted rookie quarterback on the roster, as the Browns took Oregon's Dillon Gabriel with pick No. 94 in the third round.

Sanders and Gabriel will be together in Berea for rookie minicamp on May 9-11. After that, they'll join veterans Joe Flacco and Kenny Pickett — whom Sanders said reached out to him after being drafted — in what Stefanski has insisted will be an "open competition" for the job.

All of that, ultimately, will be the place where Sanders gets to settle any questions that come with him as a quarterback. That's all he's focused on at this point.

"Get there and handle my business, do what I have to do," Sanders said. "Whatever role that is, I'm just thankful for opportunity so that's all I can ask for. The rest is on me."



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Browns QB Shedeur Sanders surprises students at Cleveland's John Marshall High with an inspirational message

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/04/browns-qb-shedeur-sanders-surprises-students-at-clevelands-john-marshall-high-with-an-inspirational-message.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns quarterback Shedeur Sanders vowed on draft day to give back to the youth in Cleveland, and he's wasted no time in jumping in.

On Wednesday, Sanders, in town to get acclimated to his new city, made a surprise visit to the John Marshall High School Campus, delivering an inspirational message to scholar-athletes and answering questions for about 15 minutes.

"I'm trying to bring Cleveland a Super Bowl!" Sanders told the students, via a release from the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. "Not just on the field, but off the field as well. I want to bring more hope and positivity to the city, and connecting with young people is one of the best ways to do that."

Drafted by the Browns at No. 144 in the fifth round after they traded up to get him, Sanders shared that he arrived in Cleveland on Tuesday and wanted to dive right into community involvement. The visit came just four days after he suffered the worst freefall for a quarterback in NFL history, but part of his message was about overcoming challenges.

"I have a lot of people watching me, and I know I'm a positive influence for the youth," he said. "That motivates me every day."

On draft day, after enduring the public and painful slide, Sanders vowed to give back to kids in the area.

"I'm definitely going to be able to show up with actions," he said. "And you'll understand I'll be more involved in, you know, the community and really leading the kids in the right direction. That's the main thing. Whatever situation they're in, that's really where I feel like I have the most impact on, is really the kids and giving them a different perspective of respecting parents, respect their elders and respect those people that are in position to give you advice. So that's where you'll see the most impact there."

Following his Q&A, Sanders headed to the John Marshall football field for a closed training session with some members of his traveling party. The two-day trip to Cleveland has included a visit to the Brown Fit gym in downtown Cleveland, and some running up a hill somewhere in the city.

While Sanders, one of four quarterbacks competing for the starting job, was getting used to his new digs, the NFL fined the Falcons \$250,000 and their defensive coordinator Jeff Ulbrich \$100,000 for Ulbrich's 21-year-old son Jax's involvement in the nasty prank call made to Sanders on Friday while he was tumbling down the draft. The call, a friend of Jax, posed as Saints GM Micky Loomis and told Sanders they'd be drafting him at No. 40. They took Louisville quarterback Tyler Shough instead, and Sanders had to wait another day, three more rounds, and 104 more picks.



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But Sanders, who lost more than \$40 million in the slide from the potential top of the first round to the fifth, might get the last laugh.

His jersey is the top-seller among all rookies in the 2025 class, according to Darren Rovell of [cflct.com](https://www.cbssports.com/cflct/), and that's with the first round picks getting a two-day head start. Sanders doesn't have his official number yet, but wore No. 2 in college.



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Shedeur Sanders' start in Cleveland includes visit to high school, talk to students

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2025/05/01/shedeur-sanders-start-in-cleveland-includes-visit-to-high-school-talk-to-students/>

Shedeur Sanders' arrival in the NFL, and to Cleveland, was delayed by his well-chronicled slide in the NFL Draft.

He quickly set out to make up for lost time.

Sanders flew into Cleveland this week, more than a week before the start of rookie minicamp. He worked out at a gym — Browns Fit in Cleveland — and on a local hill Tuesday. He made a surprise visit Wednesday to John Marshall High School on Cleveland's west side.

"I just wanted to come out and see y'all," he told the crowd of students. "I have a lot of people watching me, knowing that I'm a positive influence for the youth."

Sanders was the Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year in 2024 as Colorado's quarterback. Initially predicted to be a high first-round pick, he wasn't taken until No. 144 in the fifth round when the Browns traded up Saturday.

Minutes later he spoke to members of the local media and described the "real me" he wants to show the Browns and Northeast Ohio.

"I'm definitely going to be able to show it with actions and you'll understand I'll be more involved in the community and really leading the kids in the right direction," he said. "That's the main thing. Whatever situation they're in, that's really where I feel like I have the most impact on is really the kids and giving them a different perspective of respect parents, respect their elders and respect those people that are in position to give you advice." Sanders is the son of Pro Football Hall of Famer Deion, who coached him in high school and at Jackson State and Colorado. Sanders reportedly turned off certain NFL teams during the draft process with poor interviews. He was labeled arrogant and brash by anonymous NFL executives and coaches, and a concern is he brings a sense of entitlement to the Browns given his famous father and huge presence on social media — 2.4 million followers on Instagram.

His jersey is the top seller among all NFL draft picks, according to Darren Rovell of cllct.com, despite him being selected two days after the first-rounders.

The visit to John Marshall showed another side of Sanders, who took questions and signed autographs.

"We've got a purpose, we've got something we're trying to accomplish and I'm trying to bring Cleveland, of course, a Super Bowl!" Sanders said in a video from the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. "Not just on the field, but off the field as well. I want to bring more hope and positivity to the city, and connecting with young people is one of the best ways to do that."



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Sanders will practice for the first time with the Browns from May 9-11 at rookie minicamp in Berea. He will join Oregon quarterback Dillon Gabriel, who was selected 50 picks before him in the third round, the five other draft picks and several undrafted free agents.

In Sanders' lone interview since the draft, he handled himself well and chose to stay positive despite the frustrating weekend that saw him be the sixth quarterback taken, behind Cam Ward, Jaxson Dart, Tyler Shough, Jalen Milroe and Gabriel.

"I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity throughout everything," Sanders said. "I don't ever focus on the negative or even think about the negative, because the positive happened so fast and it's a change of emotions. That's my personality is, I would say, level through adversity and level through everything, any situation I'm faced with, because I know what it's going to require for me to come out on top."

The long weekend included an infamous prank call in which he was told he was being taken in the second round by the Saints. Jax Ulbrich, the 21-year-old son of Falcons defensive coordinator Jeff, got the number off his father's open iPad, according to the Falcons, and watched as a friend called Sanders. The call was recorded and posted on social media, and Jeff Ulbrich was fined \$100,000 by the NFL and the Falcons \$250,000 for failing to prevent the disclosure of confidential information.

The Ulbrichs apologized to Sanders, and Jax said Sanders took his call. Sanders took it in stride when asked Saturday about the call.

"It didn't really have no impact on me because it was just like, OK. I don't feed into negativity or I don't feed into that stuff," he said. "I think, of course, it's childish, of course, I feel like it was a childish act, but everybody do childish things here and there."



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Dillon Gabriel 'built for' QB battles like one with Shedeur Sanders at rookie minicamp

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/05/09/cleveland-browns-quarterbacks-dillon-gabriel-shedeur-sanders-rookie-minicamp/83511191007/>

The quarterback the Browns prioritized in last month's draft will finally get his chance to begin to prove any of the doubters wrong. It starts with this weekend's rookie minicamp, the first step in a months-long process to determine how that position will ultimately stack up on the depth chart.

Dillon Gabriel, however, is ready for the opportunity.

"I'm built for it," Gabriel said on a conference call on April 25, the night the Browns selected him No. 94 overall in the third round. "You know, I've done this all my life. I've been playing quarterback from a young age and have stepped into, you know, top tier programs that demand success so I'm built for this. I'm ready for it. It's the new challenge.

"Although there's unknown, and this may be a first time for me in terms of being in the NFL, you know, I think just my ability to adapt in college and be around a team and different teams in that way allows you to be able to adapt quickly and know naturally when you walk into a building, you have to be prepared, you have to earn daily influence from your teammates, and then that allows you to continue to challenge. So for me, pressure is a lot of fun. That's what you look forward to as a competitor and you run towards it."

There's going to be a lot of attention focused on the Browns' rookie minicamp, which starts Friday, May 9, and runs over three days. Almost all of it will be focused on the quarterback position.

How much of that is on Gabriel, who concluded a six-year, three-stop college career at Oregon in 2024, is not likely to be a majority of the focus. That's because, one day and 50 picks later in the same draft, the Browns traded up to pick No. 144 in the fifth round to select Colorado quarterback Shedeur Sanders.

Sanders, the son of Pro Football Hall of Famer and Colorado coach Deion Sanders, was the center of attention going into the draft. His wait to finally get picked on the third day of the draft became the storyline of the event.

Since the draft, Sanders has been the central figure in any conversation about the Browns. However, he was also the second quarterback taken behind Gabriel, who clearly was the apple of the eye for both general manager Andrew Berry and coach Kevin Stefanski going into the draft.

"We really felt strongly about Dillon throughout this process," Berry said on the night Gabriel was picked. "You know, I think he's a really strong, really, really good prospect. You know, that's not to say that we didn't meet with other quarterbacks that we thought were really talented players and good people. But, we felt strongly about Dillon. We think he's an excellent player and felt like he was the most appropriate player to pick for both."



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There are similarities to both Gabriel and Sanders that are hard to ignore. The biggest of those is the accuracy with which both deliver the football, which is something any team would want to have from its quarterback.

Sanders (74%) and Gabriel (72.9%) were first and third among FBS Division I college quarterbacks in 2024 in completion percentage. The previous year, Sanders' first at Colorado and Gabriel's second at Oklahoma, they were tied for eighth at 69.3%

Gabriel, over his six seasons, has completed 65.2% of his 2,111 pass attempts. Sanders, who spent two seasons at FCS Division I Jackson State before going to Colorado, has a 70.1 career completion percentage, including 71.8% at the FBS Division I level.

"I think, you know, what do we talk about all pre-draft?" Stefanski said on April 26 after Sanders was selected. "Accuracy, decision making. So, I think that's the strength of both of those young men."

There's a very real world in which neither Gabriel nor Sanders starts for the Browns, not in Week 1 or the entire season. The other two entrants in the Browns' quarterback competition — Joe Flacco and Kenny Pickett — will also have something to say about who ends up at the top of the depth chart by the season's beginning.

For now, it's just the two rookies together on the field, one the high-profile center of attention and the other the one who was taken higher in the draft.

"I think for me I'm at peace knowing that each situation is different and everyone's got their own journey," Gabriel said. "And for me, I had trust in my journey. I've been living this journey as a player for myself and there's consistent talk about who I am as a player and it'll translate in that sense.

"But I've continued to prove it, and for me it's a production-based business, and producing and getting results is my way of life. So I'm excited to continue to prove it, and whatever was going to happen and obviously we're here now, I was at peace with it."



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'My ceiling is high': Harold Fannin Jr. wants to be next MAC-to-NFL standout with Browns **By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/05/12/harold-fannin-jr-browns-rookie-mac-nfl/83568992007/>

BEREA — The litany of Mid-American Conference football players who have gone on to have success in the NFL is not a short one. Some of the Browns' biggest tormentors — and a couple of their biggest stars — over the years have come from the Ohio/Michigan-centric league.

Harold Fannin Jr., the Bowling Green State University tight end and Canton native, would love to become the next big Browns stars to come out of the league.

"I think my ceiling is high," Fannin said during Browns rookie minicamp. "I mean, I'm going to keep obviously being coachable. Just keep learning. That's really it. Just keep taking everything in and just keep wanting to grow really. So I think I got a high ceiling."

Fannin was one of eight players out of the 47 the Browns had in for rookie minicamp who came from MAC schools. That includes Akron punter Avery Book and Kent State wide receiver Luke Floriea.

Book and Floriea were among six MAC products who were tryout players. Defensive tackle Ralph Holley, a Western Michigan product, was signed to a reserve/futures contract in January.

"Oh, yeah, I definitely talked to them," Fannin said. "Us MAC guys, we stay kind of close. Yeah, we got a guy from Western Michigan. He was talking about the game."

Fannin, though, was the only one in the rookie minicamp who the Browns drafted, taking him with pick No. 67 in the third round last month. That puts significantly more weight on him to ultimately live up to the draft status.

What it doesn't do is change the degree of difficulty in going from the MAC to the NFL. Fannin understands that jump is universal.

"I mean, right now it's going pretty smooth," Fannin said. "But obviously I'm guessing it's going to be a big jump. I'm not really thinking too much ahead, just taking it day by day."

Fannin enters the league off the kind of season a college tight end dreams of having. He led all of FBS Division I in both receptions (117) and receiving yards (1,555), while having his two biggest performances come against Bowling Green's two biggest opponents, Penn State and Texas A&M. That came in just his third season playing tight end full-time. Although Fannin was an offensive playmaker in high school at Canton McKinley, he was an All-Ohioan as a safety as a senior.

"Yeah, I mean, I always played a little bit of offense in high school," Fannin said. "So then my clips or whatever from high school, my coach really liked them, thought I can put on a few more pounds, and it definitely helped me translate because playing safety and tight end, I pretty much end up playing against a lot of safeties. So I kind of got a good feel of what to do whenever I'm playing against them."



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That leaves, as Fannin himself said, a ceiling that is high. Can he reach that ceiling is the question he only started the very long journey toward trying to answer during the three-day rookie minicamp.

Fannin, like the rest of the draft picks, has said he will jump into the voluntary offseason program this week. That will finally give him an opportunity to meet David Njoku, the Browns Pro Bowl tight end whom Fannin said he hadn't met yet.

"I haven't talked to him yet," Fannin said, "but obviously I've been watching tape on him and stuff. Just trying to take little bits and pieces of his game and kind of use it to my advantage."



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Rookie QB Dillon Gabriel isn't afraid of challenge

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2025/05/22/rookie-qb-dillon-gabriel-isnt-afraid-of-challenge/>

Dillon Gabriel started 63 games in a six-year college career, the most for a quarterback in FBS history. Yet he insists the Browns' four-man competition for the No. 1 job is nothing new for him.

The 5-foot-11, 205-pounder has spent his life proving himself time and again.

"I've done it at every stop, and I've done it at every level," Gabriel, a third-round pick, said recently at rookie minicamp. "So thank goodness for that and great preparation in that."

Hawaii's all-time high school passing leader picked the University of Central Florida and spent three years in Orlando. He transferred and spent two years at Oklahoma before finishing with a terrific season at Oregon. He started 25-of-26 games for the Knights, 24-of-24 with the Sooners and 14-of-14 with the Ducks.

Gabriel said the wide-open battle with Kenny Pickett, Joe Flacco and fellow rookie Shedeur Sanders he walked into with Cleveland doesn't feel any different. They'll be on the field again next week for the start of organized team activities.

"With competition, how I approach it, I'm trying to beat yesterday, myself yesterday," Gabriel said. "Just any chance I can be 1 percent better than that. That's how I look at it."

"And naturally, you play the quarterback position, only one guy can play. So you're naturally going to have competition at all levels and that's why we're in this game. We love it. And if you're a competitor, you love it and you run towards it."

Gabriel noted on the day he was drafted he's always been a starter. Can he continue that as a rookie in the NFL?

"I think it's so early for me," he said. "I said that in the sense that I only know one way to prepare. I only know one way to work and that is as the starter. I've played a bunch of ball and have a lot of experience, so I'm going to use that to my advantage. But for the most part, I can't say that right now. I got to continue to dominate the moment and have great practices."

"I think that'll be a question down the road, but every day I'm going to go get that rep and I live it like that."



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Gabriel is second in FBS history with 18,722 passing yards and 155 passing touchdowns and No. 1 with 189 total touchdowns. Despite the gaudy stats, he wasn't an early draft pick because of his undersized frame. The Browns took him at No. 94 in the third round.

He was quickly overshadowed by the selection of Sanders at No. 144 in the fifth round.

"I love it. I love it because of who it is," Gabriel said of the selection of Sanders. "Just for us both, you can learn from one another."

Sanders comes from a famous family — his dad is Hall of Famer Deion — is a recording artist and has a huge presence on social media. Gabriel struck a contrast.

"For me, life of simplicity is a life full of focus," he said. "Life of complexity comes with life with distractions. I'm focused. I'm simple. I know what I want to accomplish."

Gabriel carries himself with confidence and carried that into his first days with the Browns. That and his talent really began to be tested last week when he and Sanders joined the veterans in the voluntary offseason program.

He can fall back on the way the ball comes out of his left hand. As was on display during rookie camp, he throws a tight spiral with plenty of revolutions.

"With pace, touch and accuracy, spin naturally helps that," he said. "Also velocity has a little bit to do with it. But then just getting the ball from point A to point B in as efficient way as possible, spiral naturally helps that."

Cleveland's choice of Gabriel surprised many — he wasn't expected to be picked until Day 3 — but not the drafter or the draftee. The Browns liked a lot about Gabriel and they developed a strong relationship throughout the draft process.

"We felt like we had a really strong feeling of what we believe to be his strengths and weaknesses throughout the process and got to know him really well like a lot of the other quarterbacks in this class," general manager Andrew Berry said during the draft.

Gabriel said the bond was "mutual."

"The similar way of thinking about the game and offensively schematically, the whole 9, I just appreciate that," he said. "And I think naturally if you connect with a person, it just happens. And naturally it's our thing about football, but also as people, very easy people to learn from and be coached by."



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A video on social media featuring Gabriel suggested the Browns told him they planned to take him at No. 94. He wouldn't confirm.

"We'll leave that up to mystery," he said.

As he gets deeper into the quarterback competition, people will continue to question whether he can overcome the lack of ideal size.

"I have nothing to say to the critics," Gabriel said. "Everyone has an opinion and can speak in how they feel. But I'm simple. I'm focused. I got goals I want to accomplish.

"I would not be here if I listened to other people. So for me, it's listening to the right people, coaches, getting better every single day and controlling what you can. When you get in between those white lines, dominating the moment, maximizing the moment, being present."



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Shedeur Sanders, fellow Browns rookie QB Dillon Gabriel making most of unexpected situation: 'We're truly cool'

By Grant Gordon, NFL.com

<https://www.nfl.com/news/shedeur-sanders-fellow-browns-rookie-qb-dillon-gabriel-making-most-of-unexpected-situation-we-re-truly-cool>

Through three days and five rounds of Shedeur Sanders' stunning fall in the 2025 NFL Draft, there was no shortage of unpredictable developments.

Not the least of which was when the Cleveland Browns, long viewed as a potential Sanders landing spot, selected Oregon's Dillon Gabriel in the third round with the Colorado quarterback still on the board.

Perhaps even more shocking was when Sanders became the second quarterback taken by the Browns, picked in the fifth round at No. 144 overall -- 50 selections after they took Gabriel.

With Sanders and Gabriel now unexpected teammates, they are making the best of the unforeseen union and are "truly cool" with each other, the former Buffaloes star said.

"Everything's been cool," Sanders told SportsCasting's DJ Siddiqui recently. "He's a cool person. I like how he handles situations, especially just the negative media that's coming his way. I'm just happy he's positive, he's able to handle everything. We're truly cool."

Gabriel, seen by some as Day 3 selection taken early by the Browns, embraced the situation when talking to reporters at rookie minicamp, happy that the two could "learn from one another."

Sanders concurred, stating that they're "for sure" learning from each other.

Gabriel, 24, and Sanders, 23, have some similarities in their roads to a most unconventional Browns QB room.

Gabriel played for three colleges -- Central Florida, Oklahoma and Oregon -- in six seasons. His final year saw him throw for 3,857 yards and 30 touchdowns as a senior for the Ducks, earning Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year.

Sanders played for two colleges -- Jackson State and Colorado -- in four seasons, all of them with his father and Pro Football Hall of Famer Deion Sanders as his head coach. His final year saw him throw for 4,134 yards and 37 touchdowns as a senior for the Buffaloes, earning Big 12 Offensive Player of the Year.



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Now they've converged in Cleveland, part of a QB room that includes veteran Joe Flacco and Kenny Pickett, not that long ago seen as hopeful franchise QB of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

While navigating the earliest stages of his NFL career alongside new teammate Gabriel, Sanders has also kept in touch with his former Colorado teammate, Travis Hunter, who was taken second overall in the draft by the Jacksonville Jaguars.

"Just stay focused is the main thing," Sanders said of what he and Hunter talk about. "But we both know that, so we just check in to make sure we're both progressing."

Making progress is priority No. 1 for Sanders, whose tumble from prospective first-rounder to landing in Cleveland as a fifth-rounder was very much the top story of the draft.

He finds himself in a QB room -- a united one, according to Sanders -- that could or could not eventually include an injured Deshaun Watson. Without Watson, it's still quite an assortment.

There's a 40-year-old -- Flacco -- with a Super Bowl MVP on his resume.

There's a 2022 first-round pick -- Pickett -- on his third NFL roster.

There's a pair of rookies taken in the third and fifth rounds of the 2025 NFL Draft.

The fifth-rounder is looking to build chemistry in Cleveland, doing his best to focus on his future with the Browns and making the most of being in a QB room no one could have foreseen.

"I've mainly just been focusing on the team, everybody that's currently around me, the coaches on the team," Sanders said. "I haven't really been on my phone much or talking to many people. I really don't even talk to my family. It's one of those situations where I just have to lock in, stay focused on what's present now."



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Browns RB Quinshon Judkins hopes to help 'change the organization': 'I know what it takes to win'

By Bobby Kownack, NFL.com

<https://www.nfl.com/news/browns-rb-quinshon-judkins-hopes-to-help-change-the-organization-i-know-what-it-takes-to-win>

Running back Quinshon Judkins, just over four months beyond capturing a national championship with Ohio State, now starts over from the bottom with a three-win Browns team.

Cleveland's 2025 draft class sparked widespread curiosity -- largely in part to how the team went about shoring up its quarterback position in the middle rounds -- but Judkins is of the mind that he and his fellow rookies joining the Browns can serve as an inflection point for the franchise.

"As a whole, we had a great draft class," Judkins told Sports Illustrated's Gilberto Manzano. "I think everyone brought attention because of our talent, and our work ethic. Really everybody who came in with that mentality of being ready to work. I feel like for myself, as a competitor and as a player, that was one of my goals.

"When I come to be a Cleveland Brown, I'm coming in to change the organization, contribute, do the best I can. I know what it takes to win, so I'm going to bring that mentality here to Cleveland and do the same thing."

Judkins was indeed a winner at the previous level. He eclipsed 1,000 rushing yards in all three of his collegiate seasons and amassed 50 total touchdowns. He played a key role in the Buckeyes going out on top, amassing six scores across the team's four College Football Playoff games.

But there's a huge hill to climb for the Browns, who after scratching their way to 11 wins and a playoff berth in 2023 careened back to earth last season, tying for the league's worst record. There's a QB conundrum to untangle, with Deshaun Watson likely out for the season and Joe Flacco and Kenny Pickett joined in the room by rookies Dillon Gabriel and Shedeur Sanders.

At running back, too, there are sizable shoes to fill after the Nick Chubb era appears to have come to an end. It didn't garner as much attention, overshadowed by Cleveland selecting Gabriel in the third round before ending Sanders' draft slide a day later, but the team also double-dipped at RB. Cleveland took Judkins at No. 36 overall, and two rounds later added Tennessee's Dylan Sampson.

Those two figure to lead the charge in the new-look backfield alongside Jerome Ford.

It's a familiar situation for Judkins, who formed one of college's most dangerous duos sharing the rock with TreVeyon Henderson last season. He was considered more of a bruiser in that pairing, an aggressive runner who lacked top-end speed.



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He's not one to give much credence to outside voices and analysis, though, opting instead to let his past play do the talking as he gears up to add more to his résumé.

"I really don't listen to the good or bad," Judkins said. "That's just how I was raised, that's part of my upbringing, just dialed in and focused as an athlete. The people who know me, who recruited me, they know I have a lot of accomplishments. Freshman of the Year SEC, everything. Turn on the tape. It shows. I do everything as a player. Complete running back, every-down running back, catch, block, run 80 yards, 90 yards, whatever you want me to do, I'll do it. I'm just excited to do it at the next level."

However the backfield carries ultimately shake out in Cleveland, Judkins' figures to feature prominently given his talent and second-round status.

Feeling confident following rookie minicamp, his next step in helping to build the Browns back into a winner takes place at organized team activities on May 27.



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Browns guard Joel Bitonio is back and ready to pave the way for a return to a powerful run game

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/06/browns-guard-joel-bitonio-is-back-and-ready-to-pave-the-way-for-a-return-to-a-powerful-run-game.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski joked on Monday morning that it was the team's golf simulator that brought veteran left guard Joel Bitonio back for another season after contemplating retirement.

Bitonio didn't entirely disagree.

"Early in the offseason I was in (the team facility) and I was kind of working out and playing golf and Kevin would walk by and (general manager Andrew Berry), and I was like, at this point if I told them I wasn't playing, it might get a little weird, you know what I mean?" Bitonio said at the Browns 25th Annual Cleveland Browns Foundation Golf Tournament at Westwood Country Club. "I've been using the golf simulator every day."

If the golf simulator wasn't enough to coax Bitonio back for a 12th season on its own, a return to a more familiar scheme probably didn't hurt in his decision-making.

"For me it feels like a 2020, 2021 install of the outside zone with power schemes mixed in," Bitonio said, "which I think is a strength of what our O-line does."

Bitonio said whether to come back or not was a real decision -- and something that will be offseason to offseason at this point -- but along with deciding he still wanted to play football and could still play at a high level, the discussions he had with the team included the offensive system Stefanski and offensive coordinator Tommy Rees will put in place was part of what brought him back.

"After the discussions with Coach Stefanski and Andrew Berry, and they don't tell you who they're drafting or anything, but just the style of offense we were going to run, who we're going to try to bring in at quarterback, offensive line coach, Coach (Mike Bloomgren) was a big part of it."

The Browns have traditionally been a strong run team under Stefanski. They ranked fifth in rushing yards per play in 2020, first in 2021 and 11th in 2022. Last season was the first under Stefanski in which they ranked outside of the Top 10 in rushing attempts and just the second outside of the Top 5.

In the actions speak louder than words world of the NFL, the Browns fired offensive coordinator Ken Dorsey after one season, hired Rees while Stefanski took back the play-calling duties, drafted two



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running backs and a tight end and built a stable of quarterbacks who should be able to thrive in this scheme, including Joe Flacco, who came off the couch and immediately started throwing for 300 yards running a similar system here in 2023.

More than anything, this scheme is about the offensive line and it's not a coincidence that Bitonio, who along with right tackle Jack Conklin discussed a return to what has been Stefanski's bread and butter on locker cleanout day in January, seemed refreshed talking about the offense on Monday.

"We're a little bit older, but Jack comes from that outside zone. (Right guard) Wyatt (Teller) is one of the better pullers, power blockers in the league. (Center Ethan Pocic) can kind of do it all, but I think it fits us so much better."

It comes in a year that could be the last dance for this Core Four of the offensive line. They're all in the final years of their contracts and there are potential replacements on the roster if the Browns want to hand things over to recent draft picks, like center Luke Wypler or guard Zak Zinter.

Together, and especially in tandem with Nick Chubb and Kareem Hunt, they formed the backbone of one of the NFL's most formidable rushing attacks and Bitonio is excited to get back to the offense imposing its will on opponents -- and believes it will help the defense return to the dominant unit it was two seasons ago.

"You still have to pass the ball to win in this league, but if you can have a brand of like, we're going to take care of the football," Bitonio said, "and I think the way we won in the past is our defense was fresh. The games that they played great, they played 50 or 60 snaps, not the 70 or 80 snaps a game. And so if we can control the ball and handle those things, I think it's a big step."

Bitonio even seems excited to get back to a more competitive training camp after seasons where many of the starting jobs seemed set and the goal was clearly to get to the first Sunday of the season in one piece.

"We've got to be tough upfront. We've got to turn two-, three-yard runs into four- and five-yard runs. Our defense has to be tough. It's all toughness," Bitonio said. "It starts at training camp and just having that ability to go to battle."

It's easy to sound refreshed and ready in June on a golf course -- Bitonio was noticeably dealing with the physical and mental toll of a 3-14 season by the time December rolled around last year, a season he called "kind of a snowball" as it spiraled to the bottom -- but for what it's worth, he didn't sound like someone who will turn 34 this season and has taken on the wear-and-tear of over a decade in the trenches.



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The thought of getting some more chances to pave the way for a powerful run game probably helps. Getting a few more months on that golf simulator isn't so bad, either



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'I want to play more and I want to play in Cleveland': Joel Bitonio talks about 12th year
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/02/joel-bitonio-browns-return-12th-season/83947015007/>

ROCKY RIVER — There were a number of reasons why Kevin Stefanski said he believes Pro Bowl guard Joel Bitonio returned for his 12th season. The Cleveland Browns coach joked Monday, June 2, one of those may have even included a recent addition to the team's Berea headquarters.

"I think it was no small thing when we put that golf simulator in in Berea," Stefanski said at the Cleveland Browns Foundation Golf Tournament at Westwood Country Club. "I think that's certainly maybe tipped the scales in our favor."

It certainly didn't hurt the argument for Bitonio, the Browns' longest-tenured player, to come back.

"It might've been, it might've worked," Bitonio said at the golf outing. "Early in the offseason I was in and I was kind of working out and playing golf and Kevin would walk by and AB [general manager Andrew Berry] and I was like, at this point if I told them I wasn't playing, it might get a little weird, you know what I mean? I've been using the golf simulator every day but, no, that's funny. That's a good part of it."

Bitonio's return was far from a sure thing. It was a steady topic of conversation as the Browns' 2024 season spiraled toward its 3-14 conclusion, exacerbated by a litany of nagging injuries that left him wondering about his future.

However, when push came to shove, the player who has built a borderline Hall of Fame career by shoving defenders around decided there was another season still in his 33-year-old body.

"It was truly a decision this offseason," Bitonio said. "At the end of the year I was truly deciding if I wanted to play anymore, and I kind of sat at home for a month or two and was in and around and talked to my wife and we just went through the process and I was like 'I can still play football at a high level. I still want to play football.' ... But at the end of the day I was like 'I'm not ready to be done. I want to play more and I want to play in Cleveland.' And that was kind of my mindset."

Bitonio's announced his decision to return on March 5. That came after discussions with not only his wife, Courtney, but also Stefanski, Berry and new offensive line coach Mike Bloomgren.

Bloomgren was hired in January to replace Andy Dickerson, who was fired along with offensive coordinator Ken Dorsey the day after the season ended. Although much of his experience was in the college ranks, most recently as Rice University's head coach, he came with the stamp of approval from Bitonio's former Browns offensive line coach Bill Callahan.



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"We had dinner," Bitonio said. "He just kind of talked about his philosophies and his family, my family, what we expect, and he's like, 'Oh, you could play for four more years.' And I was like, 'All right, we're talking a little crazy now.'"

It may not be too crazy, however. At least, it may not be too crazy to get another year or two out of Bitonio, a six-time Pro Bowler and two-time first-team All-Pro selection.

The Browns would certainly like to see that come to fruition. As it stands now, Bitonio, right guard Wyatt Teller, center Ethan Pocic and right tackle Jack Conklin are all free agents at the end of this season.

Bitonio wasn't about to commit to anything beyond the upcoming season. But he also made it clear he wasn't looking for a retirement tour just yet.

"I think it's going to be every offseason," Bitonio said. "I definitely am not going to take a retirement tour. I think we're filling this out one year at a time. If I go into the next offseason, I'm feeling good, we'll see what we got left if we want to still play. But right now I'm just focused on this season and playing for this Browns team."



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Why Browns DC Jim Schwartz sees ‘meat on the bone’ in rookie Mason Graham’s game

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/06/why-browns-dc-jim-schwartz-sees-meat-on-the-bone-in-rookie-mason-grahams-game.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns DC Jim Schwartz has coached a lot of top-tier interior linemen throughout his three-decade-long NFL career.

There was Ndamukong Suh with the Detroit Lions, Albert Haynesworth with the Tennessee Titans, Fletcher Cox with the Eagles, and Marcell Dareus with the Bills, just to name a few.

So as the Browns add Mason Graham, their No. 5 overall pick in this year’s draft out of Michigan, to Schwartz’s current D-line, do any of those past names come to mind as a comparison for the rookie DT?

“I’ve had a lot of good defensive tackles over the years and this game has featured a lot of those guys,” Schwartz said this week. “It allows them to penetrate, play without handcuffs and make some impacts. I think he can fall into that category. We’ll leave who he reminds us of when he starts playing and starts making plays.”

Graham has yet to draw comparisons in the eyes of his D-coordinator, but that brings us to the larger point Schwartz was trying to make: The Browns believe there’s a lot more to Graham’s game than what we got to see from him in college, and that’s saying something.

In 39 games over three seasons at Michigan, Graham collected nine sacks and 17 tackles for loss, including 6.5 sacks and 14.5 tackles for loss over the last two seasons.

He did all that in a defensive scheme that was markedly different from the “see quarterback, get quarterback” scheme Schwartz has implemented in Cleveland.

With the Wolverines, Graham still had to do a lot of the more traditional D-line work — specifically, eating up blocks, and cleaning things up so the Wolverine linebackers could work. Because of that, it’s impressive he was able to put up the pressure numbers he did over the last two years.

“I do think there’s a lot of meat on the bone as far as his production, and we can see better production from him than even we saw, and he had outstanding production and college,” Schwartz said. “But I think there’s some meat on the bone that he can even have a chance to make more plays here.”

That’s been a sentiment repeatedly expressed by the Browns and Graham.



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“I feel like maybe in the scheme I was playing in before, I might’ve had handcuffs on, moving more laterally,” Graham said during rookie minicamp. “But I feel like this attacking front will help me and unleash some new things in my game and I feel like I can be a great player in the scheme.”

Right after drafting him, GM Andrew Berry called Graham a “DNA match” for the Cleveland defense.

“Disruptive, interior penetrator,” Berry said. “I think he can really affect the pocket from inside, high motor player, really physical, really tough. We thought he was one of the more dominant trench prospects in this year’s class.”

There’s only so much to glean about linemen in OTA practices, which are unpadded and have no contact.

But over the last few weeks and in rookie minicamp, Graham has looked the part. Going through individual drills, you can easily see the leverage he was lauded for throughout the draft process. And even though there’s no real contact, in 11-on-11 team drills he still passes the initial eyeball test getting first-team reps.

And even though Graham is a top-five pick, the team is aware this is going to be a process for him as he prepares for his NFL debut in a new system.

“Yeah, it’s been an adjustment for him just because the style of play (at Michigan), reading blocks and like you said, protecting linebackers and things like that,” Schwartz said. “You know, that’s not what we do. We’re a penetrating team that makes a big emphasis on defensive linemen being able to make the plays.

“So there has been some growing pains. He’s pretty far ahead right now. When we get pads on, that’ll be the next step. And then when you go live contact, that’ll be a next step. So it’ll be a process for him.”

There’s plenty of meat on the bone Graham and the Browns still have to work their way through, and that’s a good thing



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Dawand Jones embracing 'challenge' of move to left tackle to help fill massive Browns hole **By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/08/dawand-jones-browns-left-tackle-move/84092217007/>

BEREA — Dawand Jones would be the first to tell you left tackle isn't the position he's liked playing the most in his football career. The Browns third-year tackle, though, would also tell you that what he likes and what the team needs from him are two different things.

That's why the 2023 fourth-round draft pick out of Ohio State has jumped into a relatively new role this offseason. It's not about his personal feelings as much as about being able to fill a giant hole on the Cleveland offensive line.

Besides, the 6-foot-8, 372-pound Jones acknowledges he's not the first to be asked to make the change. Nor does the move, based on his skill set, not make sense in the long run.

"My main thing is just to take the challenge on," Jones said on June 4. "I kept it as real as possible with AB [general manager Andrew Berry]. I personally don't like playing left tackle like that, but I don't care. I'm athletic. It comes with the nature of the game and I think if [Tampa Bay All-Pro left tackle Tristan] Wirfs can do it and he went from right to left, he struggled too and if he can do it, I know I can because he's athletic enough, he's big enough just like me."

This isn't Jones' first foray over to left tackle. Although he only started one game at left tackle in college for the Buckeyes, he started three games in 2024 for the Browns at the position after injuries sidelined Jedrick Wills Jr.

The Jones left tackle experiment was cut short in Week 11 when he suffered a season-ending broken right fibula in the second quarter of a loss at the New Orleans Saints. However, over the span of 176 left-tackle snaps, there was evidence of him getting much more comfortable in the role.

"It's just different just because of the angles," Jones said of the move. "That's the main thing for me. I'm still trying to figure that out, just the way to shave or something and it just comes to you more naturally. You're right handed. It's like doing everything with your left, writing with your left. I feel like I'm going to start doing that stuff in life, just start doing everything with my left, and I'm already trying to do that so I feel like it's working for me."

Pro Football Focus grades are far from the end-all, be-all. Jones' overall blocking grade over the course of those three weeks from PFF showed there was at least steady improvement happening, as he went from a season-low 38.8 (out of 100) overall and 54 pass-blocking grade in the first start against the Baltimore Ravens to a 64.5 overall and 75.8 pass-blocking grade against the Saints.



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The growth has continued since the Browns started OTAs on May 27. That growth, according to offensive coordinator Tommy Rees, stems from Jones' willingness to embrace the move.

"Dawand's been really intentional in what he's doing and accountable to what we're asking him to do," Rees said June 4. "Coach Bloom [offensive line coach Mike Bloomgren], [assistant line] coach Ben Wilkerson, [offensive assistant] Sanders [Davis], those guys have all done a really nice job of continuing to work on him fundamentally. And, look, playing both sides of the line takes some time and development, but he's bought in and doing things we're asking him to do."

Jones, who came into the offseason program down at least 20 pounds and with significantly less body fat, has had help with the full-time transition among his peers as well. Specifically, Pro Bowl left guard Joel Bitonio has been a key individual he's leaned upon.

Bitonio has experienced the trials at left tackle as well. He finished out the Browns' Week 3 loss to the New York Giants in 2024 after injuries to Wills and Jones, and he also made a spot start there in 2021 against the Las Vegas Raiders because of a COVID outbreak.

"I think he's focused and I think he knows, all right, you're going to play left tackle this year," Bitonio said June 2. "So he can just work at it, focus at it. But he's ready to take a step, and I know you get close to those contract years and stuff and I think he wants to put a healthy season together, and if he stays healthy and can pass pro and do the things that he can do, it'll be good for him."

Jones has also taken to studying some of the best left tackles in the game as well. Ravens All-Pro Ronnie Stanley is one, partly because they're AFC North rivals and also because he faces Myles Garrett, Jones' All-Pro defensive end teammate, twice a year.

Another one for Jones was the New England Patriots' Trent Brown. Brown, as with Jones, has plenty of right tackle experience, but was asked to shift to the left side to fill a hole.

"He had a real good year when he went right to left from the Patriots when he was on their team, and I think he did a real good job," Jones said. "And they kind of played similar opponents we did because they're in the AFC, and so I really liked that about him. And he went against Myles and had something for Myles. I just take that and try to put into my game."



Why Browns QB Shedeur Sanders slept with his flashlight on, and where he's grown the most since the draft

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/06/why-browns-qb-shedeur-sanders-slept-with-his-flashlight-on-and-where-hes-grown-the-most-since-the-draft.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Shedeur Sanders didn't hesitate to answer where he's grown the most since he tumbled to the Browns in the fifth round of the NFL Draft.

"I would say spiritually," he said. "That's where I would say I've grown the most. After the draft, getting closer to God and definitely talking to him consistently, having a real relationship with him. That's where I say I grown the most at."

Projected initially to go as high as No. 2 to the Browns, Sanders has relied on his faith and his family to cope with a precipitous fall that may have broken a weaker player. A spiritual man like his famous dad and coach, Deion, Sanders turned to his faith to stay grounded pre-draft, and to keep that ever-present smile on his face after the worst freefall for a quarterback in the NFL draft history.

He felt the need for more spiritual renewal on the eve of mandatory minicamp on Monday, with so much on his mind, and so much outside noise swirling around, including sky-high expectations from so many in the national media for Sanders to come from fourth-string quarterback to win the starting job on opening day.

If the setup to fall from the first round to the fifth wasn't enough to rattle him, the QB4 to QB1 pressure might get to a 23-year-old rookie. Yes, the Sanders are built tough, but they also bleed and cry just like everyone else.

"I always know when God's talking to me," Sanders said during his podium press conference after Day 1 of mandatory minicamp on Tuesday. "Like (Monday night), if any of y'all see I tweeted, I tweeted something because when you sleep you're most vulnerable. So then that's when I got real bad. I got God talking to me in that time. And I'm able to recognize that because before pro day was the same thing. So that's how I know I'm on track. That's how I know I'm living in my purpose and I understand everything happened for a reason."

On Monday night he tweeted "it's a spiritual war going on. Trust in GOD."

Later, in the dark of night, alone with his thoughts, Sanders had a spiritual experience.

"I just got a message that night and I had to sleep with my flashlight on (Monday) night," he said. "I ain't ... I slept with my flashlight on last night because I was too scared."

He graciously elaborated on the very personal, very powerful event.



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“I was in my hotel room,” he said. “I was talking to a couple pastors yesterday just about my purpose and everything here. It’s a lot going on I’ll say in my mind and I understand what peace is. I know I’m going home (over break) so I can just focus on the little things in life, just feeling the wind, hearing the birds, all that different type of stuff. It’s something that you value now. It’s something I value. So that was the main thing, hearing what he was saying and understanding the message of what it is he was telling me yesterday.”

On top of everything else, of dealing with his very public slide in the draft and the weighty expectations to rise from the ashes and prove everyone wrong, Sanders is also coping with this beloved dad being sick. Coached by Deion since he first gripped a football as a kid, Sanders is extremely close to his dad and has spent almost every day with him since he was born, being coached by him his entire career, even through his school and college.

But while Sanders is here trying to learn a new playbook, how to call plays in a huddle, getting to know his teammates and being away from his family, his dad is at home in Texas grappling with an unspecified illness that’s caused him to lose 14 pounds, as he told Asante Samuel last week on a podcast, and being away from the Colorado Buffaloes for the time being. During the podcast, Deion revealed that what he’s dealing with “right now is at a whole other level.”

It’s not the first time Deion has dealt with a serious health challenge in recent years. In 2021, he had two toes amputated on his left foot due to blood clots from a previous surgery. In 2023, he underwent surgery to remove blood clots in both of his legs.

On Sunday from their home in Texas, Deion’s eldest son, Deion Jr., said on a YouTube livestream that his dad is “feeling well” but doesn’t know when he’ll rejoin the Buffaloes.

“When we get back in Boulder, I don’t know,” Deion Jr. said. “I’m waiting until my dad leaves. When he leaves, then I’ll go. Until then, I’m going to sit here with him.”

Shedeur, who’s laser-focused on becoming the best quarterback he can be, declined to comment on how his dad’s health might be impacting him while he’s engaged here in this four-way quarterback competition with Kenny Pickett, Dillon Gabriel and Joe Flacco.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Sanders said. “So I’m here not to talk about Pops. I’m here to be the quarterback of the Cleveland Browns. I’m focused on learning this playbook and everything I got to do to be the most successful quarterback and best teammate I could be. Outside of that, I don’t really have no thoughts or really opinions on anything outside this game.”

In rookie minicamp last month, Sanders was asked how he’s remained so upbeat after his draft-day slide, and how he’s kept the smile on his face. At that point, he alluded to his dad’s health issues, but didn’t elaborate.



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“You’ve just got to step back and look at life, like, you’re in a great situation overall that you’re able to be healthy,” he said then. “That’s one thing even with my brother going through an injury (arm surgery in 2024) and with my pops and everybody in the family, you value life and you value opportunity and just waking up every day a different way. So that’s kind of why it’s nothing for me to really, no matter what in any situation, I can’t really be phased by it.

“It’s like playing quarterback. You go down there, you may have not scored the whole game or whatever, but then when it gets to that final two minutes and it’s time to lock in extra, you can’t be in your feelings. You can’t be down about anything. You’ve still got another chance.”

Sanders was in such a great headspace on Tuesday that he put in perfect perspective why it’s easy for him to go from much-heralded Colorado starting quarterback to Browns fourth-teamer.

“I’m managing it real well,” he said. “Overall it’s a mentality. It’s mental. It’s a lot of people in certain situations in their own life that may not be at the forefront that maybe they had that at one point in time, but you’ve got to know it’s going to be bright days eventually, whenever the time comes. You’ve just always got to be prepared and you’ve got to mentally take it as just experience.”

The events of the past few months have also given him an even greater appreciation for everything he has.

“Anything in life, you’ve got to go through different things so you can understand the message that God’s trying to give you,” he said. “I’m way more grateful just to come out here, to be able to throw the ball around and just be able to get on the field. Everything off the field, it is what it is. But everybody knows when it’s time to get on that grass, then you know who I am.”

On Tuesday, Sanders served once again as the fourth-team quarterback, launching a deep touchdown pass to undrafted rookie Gage Larvadain in modified 7-on-7s. It was one of many fine passes by Sanders, who’s making tremendous progress with what the Browns have asked him to do so far. He’s not getting work with the starters yet like the other three, but he did get the second set of 11-of-11s on Tuesday after Gabriel, closing it out with a 12-yard out to rookie Luke Floreia. If he continues to progress, those reps with Jerry Jeudy and David Njoku will come.

“I know every day there’s room for improvement in a lot of different areas in my game,” he said. “So I never feel, I would say, full. I would say I’m always hungry, and it’s a lot of aspects in football that you could get better at. You could always get precise on more things. So I feel like I put in my day’s work, but I know I’m far from where I want to be.”



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Over the past few weeks, Sanders has developed a fun rapport with Flacco, who's almost old enough to be his dad at 40, and just missed playing with Deion in Baltimore by a few years. Sanders has a way of getting the sometimes buttoned up Flacco to laugh, including when he demonstrated a dance move and asked Flacco if he could hit it. A mic'd up Flacco responded that he's never hit a public dance move in his life.

"Joe's the old guy in the room, so I joke with Joe all the time every day I see him," Sanders said. "I can't tell you all my jokes, but whenever you see them or they're mic'd up or anything, all that stuff is real. It's spur of the moment and then after that, it's time to lock back in. Our minds are always consistently and constantly moving."

He's asked Flacco to help get through reads quicker so as not to take as many sacks as he did at Colorado - an FBS-high 94 in his two seasons. It's the No. 1 thing he must correct to get on the field here.

"He's seen it, he's played it and he's a pro," Sanders said. "I'd be dumb, I'll be a fool to not get insight from somebody that's had the success over all the years that he has."

Day-by-day, he's releasing the ball a little more quickly.

"It's extremely important," he said. "I took a lot of sacks in college so I know how that feels on your body. When you know the ins and outs and everything, then it's a whole different type of confidence you go out there with. I'm definitely getting to that point. I'd say by the time training camp comes, then I'll be there."

As for sometimes working alone on the opposite field to get up to speed or not working yet with the ones, Sanders is taking it in stride.

"It's just a mindset, just an adjustment," he said. "You've got to understand the situation that you're in and be able to get the best out of it. Life is just based on how you view different things. So you can view things as you're not getting reps in a negative way or you could view it as, 'OK, when it's my time to get out there, let's be proactive and let's get warm, let's get going so there's no excuses.' Because when you get out there, nobody cares how many reps you got. Everybody cares about production."

Sanders also has an excellent attitude about the pace at which the Browns are bringing him along. He knows must walk in the this system before he can run, and he's cool with that.

"My goal is to be the best teammate and to be as positive as I can be," he said. "In every aspect, I view things as I've got time. I've got time to be able to grow and mature and be able to understand



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the ins and outs of the defenses and be able to get the good insight from the vets in the room. So I look at it as a plus.

“But I’m not looking too far in the future about all that. I’m looking about every day in practice. I had some misses out there today that we’ve got to go in there and correct about reads, getting in and out drops a little bit faster from under center. So that’s the main thing. I’m focused on the small things and over time the big things will happen.”

The beautiful thing for Sanders is that he’s back playing football, and it’s all he’s ever known.

“I just feel like I’m back in my element,” he said. “It’s grass, it’s fresh grass, you hear the birds outside, you understand what peace is at this point in life. So I’m back in my element. I’m excited to be here.”

The lights are certainly coming on, even if they sometimes have to stay on at night.



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Shedeur Sanders, Dillon Gabriel find it 'real fun' to ask questions of Browns' older QBs

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/10/shedeur-sanders-dillon-gabriel-browns-joe-flacco-kenny-pickett-mini-camp/84120865007/>

BEREA — Shedeur Sanders' face lit up as he listened to the question.

It was a simple one, really. What have Sanders' conversations been like with fellow Browns quarterbacks Joe Flacco, Kenny Pickett and Dillon Gabriel, be it on the field, in the meeting rooms or in the locker room?

"It's real fun having those guys in the room, though, because we all, or quarterbacks, we all feel similar ways, but nobody always talks about it," Sanders said after the first day of minicamp June 10. "So Joe's the old guy in the room. So I joke with Joe all the time every day I see him. And Kenny, he had his experiences throughout his career overall, so then we just share a lot of the same things. And Dillon, of course, we're the same age group. Those guys are older, so me and Dillon we're the same age group. So we just talk about our experiences just in college and everything so far."

Sanders and Gabriel have undergone a crash course since being drafted by the Browns in late April until the first day of mandatory minicamp on June 10. There's been meetings and film study and on-the-field work, the latter ramping up over the last two-and-a-half weeks.

They've had plenty of voice in their heads. Head coach Kevin Stefanski's, offensive coordinator Tommy Rees', quarterbacks coach Bill Musgrave's and even some others whose opinions may or may not have been sought out by the young quarterbacks.

That's why the conversations they've held with Flacco and Pickett have meant so much to them. They're voices, as Sanders said, that "all feel similar ways, but nobody always talks about it."

"I think just a diverse room," Gabriel said. "Diversity in experience and you just appreciate those guys. I think what we've done as a room really well is the inability to dwell on the past. We're just extremely present."

Gabriel, though, couldn't help but bring up the past when talking about the value of Flacco in particular. The 40-year-old is going into his 18th NFL season, one which includes a Super Bowl win.

Browns quarterbacks Shedeur Sanders (12), Kenny Pickett (8) and Joe Flacco (15) talk during minicamp, Tuesday, June 10, 2025, in Berea.

It wasn't the one Super Bowl Most Valuable Player award that was the stat about his new teammate that impressed Gabriel the most as much as the amount of playoff snaps he's accumulated over 16



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career playoff games. It's also the reason why both Browns rookie quarterbacks gravitate to Flacco as much as they can.

Sanders, for instance, was seen in a lengthy conversation with Flacco as the two were heading to watch the video of a practice play. After practice, the fifth-round pick out of Colorado stressed what kind of malpractice it would be on his part to not capitalize on the resource they have on the roster.

"Just how to get through the reads quicker and those type of things," Sanders said. "And I asked him, 'Hey, let me know what you think. What do I need to do?' So it's like he's seen it, he played it and he's a pro. So it's like I'll be dumb, I'll be a fool to not get insight (from) somebody that had success over all the years that he has."

The first day of minicamp was a day for Flacco to serve as quarterback shaman while he mostly stood behind the play over the course of about 75 minutes on the field. The majority of the reps in either 7-on-7s or 11-on-11s were given to the two rookies, with Pickett getting one series in both a modified 7-on-7 session early on and the first red-zone 7-on-7 series of the practice.

Gabriel had the challenge of dealing with All-Pro defensive end Myles Garrett in his face in 11-on-11 drills, while Pro Bowl cornerback Denzel Ward was in coverage in both 11-on-11 and some of the 7-on-7 reps as well. Sanders didn't receive any snaps against the Browns' top defensive unit in either format, but he did get reps against many of their top backups on that side of the ball.

"Yeah, I think you'd like to say that you don't change the circumstances," said Gabriel, who was also hampered by a couple of bad drops, particularly during the red-zone 7-on-7 period. "I try to approach every single day like that and control what you can. And that's just being ultimately your best in that moment. And the best competitors I've been around have been the best at being present."

Sanders connected on some impressive passes, including a perfectly-placed go route to fellow rookie Gage Larvadain. The wide receiver out of South Carolina also was on the receiving end of a nifty in route on the final play of practice where Sanders layered the ball over a linebacker and in front of a defensive back for the score.

All of the quarterbacks are ultimately going to be judged off more than just a dozen or so throws on June 10, even when it comes to fully assessing just their performance at minicamp, which continues for two more days. The two rookies, though, gained a major seal of approval at the end of Day 1 of minicamp from a pretty big voice in the locker room.

"All of them look pretty calm," Garrett said, "just going through their checks, going through their calls, making the plays they need to make, not doing too much right now and they'll have time to



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continue to display their talents and it's just one day at a time. Continue to earn the trust of your coaches and your teammates and I think they'll be able to open up the game."



Why Browns WR DeAndre Carter picked No. 2 and how it has helped him bond with Shedeur Sanders

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/06/why-browns-wr-deandre-carter-picked-no-2-and-how-it-has-helped-him-bond-with-shedeur-sanders.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Browns wide receiver DeAndre Carter was just happy he would finally get to wear the number he wore his entire football life until he reached the NFL.

“I wore No. 2 all of high school, all of college,” Carter said. “I actually got the No. 2 tattooed on my leg.”

That’s the life of a player who has had to fight his whole career, starting as an undrafted free agent from Sacramento State in Baltimore — they were the first team to cut him from any sport. He has had stops with 11 different teams since he came in the league in 2015.

The number you want isn’t always available.

According to his Pro Football Reference page, Carter wore No. 16 in Philadelphia; 14 in Houston; 19 during his first stint in Chicago; 1 in Washington and with the Chargers; (He also wore 82 with the Chargers.) 3 with the Raiders; and 11 with the Bears.

Never No. 2. Until he got to Cleveland.

“I was excited because this is the first time I’ve gotten to an organization and No. 2 was open. So it was the first time I was actually able to pick No. 2 in my NFL career.”

Then, a little over a month after he signed with the Browns and weeks after he picked the number, the Browns traded two sixth-round picks to move up and select Shedeur Sanders at No. 144 overall.

About a week after that, the Browns sent out a social media graphic with rookie jersey numbers and suddenly Carter found himself in the crosshairs when it was revealed that Sanders would wear No. 12 because his familiar No. 2 was already taken.

“I’m not a big social media guy at all, by any means, but people started sending me, like, different things from social media,” Carter said, “so I went on to my social media and looked and I had a bunch of comments and all these things coming from fans.”

The Browns’ release of veteran jersey numbers at the same time contributed to people immediately jumping to the wrong conclusion that he took the number from Sanders, maybe to cash in on the young rookie’s fame.



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“I picked my number before we even drafted Shedeur, before I even knew Shedeur was going to be here,” Carter said. “I don’t know, whatever the narrative is that I’m trying to take his number or whatever it was, it definitely wasn’t the case. But, I mean, I’ve been a fan of Shedeur since he started playing at Jackson State, so I want to do everything I can to possibly help him be the best player that he could possibly be.”

In fact, the whole thing has only helped the 32-year-old Carter connect with one of the quarterbacks throwing him the ball this spring.

“To his credit, I think a lot of people give him a bad rap, he’s focused on football,” Carter said. “I approached him because it blew up on social media, and I was like, you know, just man to man, there wasn’t no hate or nothing like that. He was like, ‘Bro, I’m not even worried about that.’ I gained a lot of respect for him with the way he handled and approached that situation.”

During rookie minicamp, Sanders was asked if he might try to buy No. 2 from Carter, but he shot that idea down.

“No, I’m not trying to buy anything. My signing bonus ain’t that high right now,” he said.

Carter hopes his wealth of NFL experience, having been in so many organizations and offenses, can help Sanders reach his goals.

“He’s a great kid, man. He’s a sponge, trying to learn everything that he can,” Carter said. “I think he’s going to have a really, really great, successful career in this league when he gets the opportunity.”

It sounds like Carter doesn’t mind Sanders reaching out to him with any questions as he navigates the start of his NFL career. He’s got his number.



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Diontae Johnson hoping to move past 'one bad year' through opportunity with Browns

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/11/diontae-johnson-browns-mini-camp-steelers-ravens-panthers-texans/84147885007/>

BEREA — There were a lot of adjectives that were connected to Diontae Johnson during and after the 2024 season.

Disgruntled. Malcontent. Enigmatic. Difficult.

All of them were, at times, attributed to the 28-year-old wide receiver as he bounced from the team that originally drafted him, the Pittsburgh Steelers, to the Carolina Panthers in a March 2024 trade. Then, nearly halfway through the season, Johnson was sent from there to the Baltimore Ravens, who eventually grew tired of him — including a suspension for not entering a game — and let him go to the Houston Texans.

That one year, in Johnson's eyes, has clouded outside opinions of him. It's those opinions, even as he pushes back on the narratives, that have followed him into the opportunity he has found himself in this offseason with the Browns.

"One bad year; it's one year," Johnson said after the second day of minicamp on June 11. "I had five great seasons in Pittsburgh. I had one year, that don't define me as a player, none of that. My character or none of that. So like I said, everybody going to say what they want to say about me, but I know who I am as a person deep down and that's all that matters to me."

It may be all that matters to Johnson, but it clearly mattered to 31 other teams in the NFL. Between the Panthers (seven games), Ravens (four games) and Texans (one game), he caught 33 passes on 67 targets for 375 yards and three touchdowns, with 30 catches, 58 targets, 357 yards and all three touchdowns coming in those seven games in Carolina.

The death knell came during Johnson's short time in Baltimore. He refused to enter a Week 13 game against the Philadelphia Eagles, which led to him being suspended for the next game, in Week 15, against the New York Giants.

The Ravens cut Johnson after that game. Asked Wednesday if there was any misunderstandings from his past, he acknowledged there was, but refused to go into the past.

"Sure," Johnson said. "I don't like to speak on a lot of stuff so I just, everybody going to have their opinions, you know what I'm saying? So at the end of the day I'm the only one in that room and really know what be going on so I can only. Everybody are entitled to their own opinion so I can only go off of what I know and then try to go off what I'm saying can put out there in my best effort. But



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like I said last year, last year, I'm trying to turn and change that narrative and move the right way and just keep going."

The Browns signed him to a non-guaranteed one-year, veteran-minimum \$1.17 million contract on April 29. Johnson, who's caught 424 passes for 4,738 yards and 28 touchdowns on 706 targets over 89 career games, said that Cleveland was only team to really reach out to him during free agency.

Johnson, the Steelers' 2019 third-round pick out of the University of Toledo, may have been surprised to find only one suitor. That one suitor was all he needed at that moment, and the one wide receiver was all that suitor needed as well.

"Just another weapon to the receiver room, offense, make plays," Johnson said of what he can do for the Browns. "Could be a help to the young guys and stuff like that. Really just trying to be myself, get back to where I left at and just like I say, made the most of my opportunities whenever they come put it on film. That's really my main focus."

Johnson, at his best in the NFL, has been a Pro Bowl. That came in 2021, when his quarterback was Ben Roethlisberger, who targeted him 169 times, with 107 receptions for 1,161 yards and eight touchdowns.

That was the second of a three-year stretch of at least 144 targets, 86 receptions and 882 yards for Johnson. The final of those three seasons was 2022, when he caught 86 passes for 882 yards on 147 targets.

Johnson's quarterback that season was Kenny Pickett, who was in the first of two seasons as the Steelers' starter. Now, as both quarterback and wide receiver try to jump-start their careers, they're reunited in Cleveland.

"Yeah, just help him any way I can," Pickett said after the second day of minicamp. "I was talking to him a lot today in the field in the two minute period, going through the play calls with him where he would be if he was at Z or X or F and kind of talking him through each play. So he's working really hard at it. It's great to have him here and I know that he's going to continue to do that."

Pickett is part of a four-man quarterback competition with the Browns, one which includes Joe Flacco and rookies Dillon Gabriel and Shadeur Sanders. Johnson, meanwhile, is part of a wide receiving corps that is, essentially, Jerry Jeudy and a number of relatively unproven ones.

Then, there's Johnson. The career statistics and the one Pro Bowl season would put him on par with Jeudy as the most accomplished NFL wide receiver on the entire roster.



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Except for that one bad year. That one bad year, though, was also the last one Johnson had, which is hanging over what he hopes is a redemption season in Cleveland.

"Just play, instead of just thinking about all the other stuff," Johnson said. "Just play. Make the most of my opportunities when I get in, cheer my teammates on, be a great teammate, stuff like that."



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'He's all the way bought in': Browns DL coach Jacques Cesaire sees motivated Myles Garrett
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/13/myles-garrett-browns-jacques-cesaire-mini-camp-contract/84148846007/>

BEREA — There was a month or so when a pall of sort hung over the Cleveland Browns like a London fog. This wasn't the pall of a 3-14 season, but of a potential seismic change to their roster.

Then, in early March, All-Pro defensive end Myles Garrett exchanged his very public trade demand for a four-year, \$160 million contract extension. Suddenly, the fog lifted and all was much better.

Certainly it was for defensive line coach Jacques Cesaire.

"Yeah, I don't even remember that, OK?" Cesaire said on the final day of minicamp on June 12. "All right. That's the first thing. The second thing, every player is entitled to their own opinion. If that's how he felt at the time, that's how he felt. People can change their minds."

Garrett was present and extremely active over the course of the Browns' recently concluded three-day minicamp. Although its format limited how much he could really showcase himself, he managed to make at least one play a day on one of three Browns quarterbacks — Kenny Pickett, Joe Flacco or Dillon Gabriel — who got reps against the No. 1 defensive line.

That was all Cesaire needed to see to give himself selective amnesia about that time from Super Bowl week until the Sunday before the start of free agency when his star pass rusher's future in Cleveland was in doubt.

"Obviously he's here now," Cesaire said. "He's happy, he's engaged with the guys. He was working his butt off yesterday, so Myles is here. He's all the way bought in. He loves what we've done with the defensive line, and I know he can't wait to get the season started."

That season Cesaire can't wait to get started could end up being Garrett's best yet. That's exactly where defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz set it on June 4 when he came out and said he was "going to have the best season of his career and has to, right?"

That wasn't an issue for Garrett when he was asked after the first day of minicamp about the comment. Of course, he acknowledged he agreed with Schwartz's "with great power comes great responsibility" line he cribbed from Spiderman.

Cesaire, though, said he doesn't believe the motivation comes from the offseason drama surrounding the contract. Instead, he said he sees a player motivated by a season in which the



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team bottomed out and he himself didn't quite end up with the individual season he or his position coach believed he could have had.

"Yeah, obviously after going through the season that we had last year, and Myles had a really good season, but he left a lot of meat on the bone and he himself said that I can do better," Cesaire said. "So I know Myles is a prideful man and he works extremely hard, and I know he's going to go out here and put his best foot forward and go out and dominate like he usually does."

Garrett finished as a finalist for the NFL Defensive Player of the Year award last season after having won it the year before. He also finished second in the league in sacks with 14, although he entered the final week tied with eventual sack leader Trey Hendrickson of the Cincinnati Bengals, who finished with 17.5.

It was also the year when Garrett etched his name among the all-time sack leaders, at least dating back to it becoming an official statistic in 1982. He became the youngest to reach 100 career sacks and the only player to have four consecutive seasons of at least 14.

That's the kind of season Cesaire said he feels confident Garrett can surpass.

"Do I expect our best players to play their best for us? Absolutely," Cesaire said. "And if he happens to have the best year of his life, the best season of his life, then next year I'm going to want even more. So it is about him coming out every day, working to get better, working with the guys every day and helping them get better and I think we'll be fine."



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Dillon Gabriel not allowing 'microwave mentality' or 'Amazon lifestyle' to change approach
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/16/dillon-gabriel-browns-mini-camp-amazon-lifestyle/84189786007/>

BEREA — Life has come at Browns rookie quarterback Dillon Gabriel fast in the last 50 days or so.

Gabriel was drafted by Cleveland in the third round (No. 94 overall) on April 25. Since then, there's been rookie minicamp, the voluntary offseason program, OTAs, a contract to sign and, most recently, a three-day minicamp.

While the 24-year-old was going through all of that, there was also a new playbook for him to learn. He also had to meet new teammates, specifically new wide receivers and tight ends, while also being judged in a four-way quarterback competition that included fellow rookie draft pick Shedeur Sanders, former first-round draft pick Kenny Pickett and a 40-year-old, 18-year NFL veteran with a Super Bowl Most Valuable Player award to his name in Joe Flacco.

That's a lot put on Gabriel's — and Sanders', as well — plate in a very short period of time. That is, in and of itself, the biggest challenge over that span.

"I think just being able to adapt as quick as possible," Gabriel said during minicamp on June 10. "I think that's a challenge for anyone. There's a time within that that you have to work through, but I just go back to being present and not being able to dwell on a regression or get too high with a progression and being just even keel throughout that. So I've been trying to just stay balanced in that way, but every single day there's something to get better at. So just approaching it that way for sure."

The last three weeks have been seen as much put on both rookie quarterbacks' plates as any time since they were drafted. That's because the last three weeks have taken what was learned from their playbooks and meetings and forced them to execute those plays on the field.

During the recently-concluded minicamp, Gabriel received as much work as he likely has at any stretch of his still-infantile NFL career. Between seven-on-seven, modified seven-on-seven drills and 11-on-11, only Pickett may have received as many reps as Gabriel.

"That's the challenge, but as a competitor you walk into the challenge and face it head on," Gabriel said. "That's what you appreciate about the game too. I think everyone in this game sees themselves as starters and that belief of self is why a lot of guys are in the NFL. So you just continue to improve, continue to challenge yourself, and not a lot of people love it, but failure creates growth, yet we live in a production based business, so it's hard for people to understand that balance."



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That's where Gabriel said the balance has to come in for him. He understands that it seems to always be about the now when it comes about what people want to see out of a quarterback — or really anyone else — so that requires him to take a certain approach to it all.

"You love to stay process driven," Gabriel said. "I think for a lot of people, it's a results-based business, so let's not get that wrong, but you have to have a process behind it to be able to create consistent results. And I think whether it's a microwave mentality or that Amazon lifestyle of wanting it right away, sometimes it's just not the case. So being able to have a process, stick to it, continue to listen to your coaches and try to get better that way. That's what I want to do. I want to build a solid foundation so that you're banking on the process and then allowing that to have consistent results."

That includes what happened during minicamp. Gabriel was given reps in 11-on-11 not only with the Browns' No. 1 offensive group — including the entire top offensive line, wide receiver Jerry Jeudy and tight end David Njoku — but also against the No. 1 defensive group.

For Gabriel, that meant also have to stare down All-Pro defensive end Myles Garrett coming right for him. It also meant throwing into windows closing fast because of cornerback Denzel Ward.

Sticking to his approach, though, means maximizing each rep regardless of who else is on the field with him.

"Yeah, I think you'd like to say that you don't change the circumstances," Gabriel said. "I try to approach every single day like that and control what you can. And that's just being ultimately your best in that moment. And the best competitors I've been around have been the best at being present."



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Why Denzel Ward is a true leader on the Browns

By Tony Grossi, The Land On Demand

<https://thelandondemand.com/news/2025/jun/16/why-denzel-ward-is-a-true-leader-on-the-browns/>

If there was an offseason player-of-the-year award on the Browns, it would go to Denzel Ward.

Not that the Macedonia native and Nordonia HS product needs some cockamamie, made-up award to place in his trophy room.

I mean, Ward has achieved far more meaningful honors in his seven seasons with the Browns – four Pro Bowls, a \$100 million contract, defensive co-captain (which he treasures), and the club's Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year nomination last year.

But that's just it. Ward's accomplishments should earn him a pass on participating in the drudgery of the famously voluntary portion of the offseason program. Yet there was Ward again, for the second year in a row, scoring perfect attendance in the program that began in mid-April and concluded in last week's mandatory minicamp.

"It's just setting an example," Ward said last week of the importance of participating in each phase of the offseason program, not just in the OTA practices. "That's part of being a great leader and setting an example for these guys.

"I mean, we're trying to build something special. A lot of people count us out, but this is where it starts -- right here. So we've got to believe in ourselves first and just continue to come out here and work and be with the guys and the coaches and everything, and just get better each day."

Some players have bonuses written in their contracts as extra incentive to attend the voluntary workouts.

Myles Garrett's record-shattering, \$160 million contract included a \$1 million workout bonus for participating in an undisclosed percentage of voluntary days in each spring through 2030. Nevertheless, Garrett hardly participated in the voluntary portion this year. When you've been guaranteed \$123 million, as Garrett was, one million is pocket change, I guess.

Conversely, Ward earned the same \$315 per diem prescribed in the collective bargaining agreement as any undrafted free agent for attending the voluntary sessions.

And he was there. Every day of the program.

"I take a lot of pride in it," Ward said.



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Turning PBUs into INTs

On the field, Ward's spring season picked up from where he left off in 2024, which he considered his finest season with the Browns. Now, that's both a good thing and bad thing.

In the five practices open to media – two OTAs and three in minicamp – Ward bedeviled Browns QBs with pass breakups (PBUs), but he failed to secure at least four would-be interceptions.

This became an annoying and regrettable earmark of Ward's game last season, and over his entire career.

Since entering the NFL from Ohio State in 2018, Ward leads all defensive backs with 95 pass breakups. He has 17 interceptions in that time, never getting more than three in a season.

Last year, Ward led the NFL with 19 PBUs. But I counted about six dropped or mishandled interceptions. Ward had two interceptions, but the missed opportunities were the difference, said defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz, in Pro Bowl berth v. All-Pro honors.

"Denzel got his hands on a lot of passes last year, and we need to convert more of those to interceptions," Schwartz said. "And that's the difference between Pro Bowl and All-Pro. The game-changing plays. The PBU is big for us, but we need to get more of the INTs and he's made a big push to convert those to INTs and we need that to the show on the field."

Let's look how Ward fared among the best DBs in the NFL last year.

For this exercise, let's award one point for a PBU and two points for an INT.

Ward's 19 PBUs led the NFL. Houston's Derek Stingley Jr. had 18 and Carolina's Mike Jackson and Tampa Bay's Zyion McCullom were next with 17.

But if you follow our scoring system and give two points for an interception, the rankings among DBs, including safeties, change.

Ward's 19 PBUs + two interceptions (two times two) give him a total of 23 points.

Detroit safety Brian Branch had 16 PBU + four interceptions for 24 points.

Baltimore cornerback Marlon Humphrey had 16 PBU + five interceptions (one TD) for 26 points.

Minnesota cornerback Byron Murphy had 14 PBU + six interceptions for 26 points.



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Stingley had 18 PBUs + five interceptions for 28 points.

And the leader in this exercise was Detroit's other safety, Kerby Joseph, who had 12 PBUs + nine interceptions (one TD) for 30 points.

Stingley and Joseph were named first-team All-Pros by the Associated Press 50-person panel.

(Inexplicably, Denver cornerback Patrick Surtain, who had 11 PBUs + four interceptions for 19 points, not only was named first-team All-Pro but also defensive player-of-the-year. Surtain was on the field, of course, when Jerry Jeudy riddled his former team for nine receptions, 235 yards and one touchdown.)

The next step

Despite his well-earned accolades, I don't think Ward has received the love he deserves locally and nationally.

Browns fans constantly complain about his missed games, particularly due to concussions – reportedly, six in his career.

In truth, Ward has missed 20 games out of 115 in his career due to injuries. So that 82.6 percent availability rate is pretty high. Last year, he started 16 of 17 games.

His dropped interceptions have become more of an irritant than his availability.

Cornerbacks coach Brandon Lynch said Browns DBs are intent on holding each other accountable for making more takeaways. The Browns had four interceptions as a team last season.

Lynch said that the “eight to 10” DBs who followed Ward's example and attended the bulk of the offseason program averaged 50 reps a day catching balls from the automatic dispensing JUGS machine.

“A lot of [last year's interception drops] were contested,” Ward said. “But, you know, I feel I'm good enough where I could come and take those balls away. I just have to find a way to get two hands on the ball and finish the play.

“You know, that's the biggest thing, and that's going to be my focus this year. And I'm going to take it away. I'm going to take it away this year.”



This undrafted Browns safety has the perfect motto that explains his rise to potential starter
By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/06/this-undrafted-browns-safety-has-the-perfect-motto-that-explains-his-rise-to-potential-starter.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Two years ago, when safety Ronnie Hickman made the Browns' 53-man roster, the undrafted Ohio State product was asked if he breathed a sigh of relief.

“Nah, man, the rent’s due every day.”

It’s a saying he still lives by — especially this offseason, as Hickman and the Browns look to rebound after a disappointing 3-14 2024 season.

For Hickman, that will include taking on a much larger role as a likely starter alongside Grant Delpit in the safety room.

“As a player, you want that,” Hickman told cleveland.com when asked about stepping into that larger role. “You got to kind of have that mindset that it’s OK if it’s on you. We all want those roles.”

And Hickman embraces that responsibility, still carrying the chip on his shoulder from going undrafted in 2023.

“Going undrafted, that feeling, it’s not a feeling that you’ll ever really forget,” he said. “With (safeties coach Ephraim) Banda, we talked when I first came here, whenever you feel like you’re missing something, just open up that feeling you had when you didn’t get a phone call.

“So I remind myself every time I step on the field, every time I step in this building that the rent is due every day.”

Why has that motto stuck with him so much?

One reason is it’s a phrase defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz reminds players of almost daily.

“Coach Schwartz does a good job of implying that in all of our meetings because it’s true,” Hickman said. “You got to earn it, you got to pay your dues every day in this business.”

The other, and more all-encompassing reason, is Hickman’s road to this point.

After initially signing as a UDFA in Cleveland, the former Buckeye had to play his way onto the Browns roster as a rookie in 2023, recording three preseason interceptions.



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He didn't get regular defensive snaps until veteran safety Rodney McLeod suffered a season-ending torn biceps in a Week 11 win over the Steelers that year. Suddenly, Hickman was playing crucial reps for a team that doesn't shy away from three safety packages in the middle of a playoff hunt.

The highlight play of his rookie year came in Week 17, when he nabbed a key pick-six against the New York Jets as the Browns clinched a playoff spot.

In year two, Hickman earned a more regular spot in Jim Schwartz's rotation, playing 463 snaps in 2024 compared to 312 as a rookie.

However, Hickman struggled with a high ankle sprain that caused him to miss three games in the middle of the 2024 season. He finished with 45 tackles and had a fumble recovery in Week 3 against the Giants, but going forward the Browns will need more of his ball hawk tendencies — especially considering the defense only forced 12 total takeaways last year.

"He's always been a ball hawk," Schwartz said. "Last year there was some injuries, things that kept him from being on the field. This is a really big season. He's in his third year. He should really hit a stride for us, we're surrounding him with some veteran players."

"We need Ronnie to really bring it all together. Showed really good flashes as a rookie and he played well when he was on the field last year, but we just need him on the field a little bit more."

Around Hickman, the safety room looks vastly different.

Juan Thornhill and the Browns parted ways, after two middling seasons here for the former Kansas City Chief. McLeod also opted to retire, and D'Anthony Bell, who like Hickman is a former undrafted player who has played key snaps in Cleveland over the last few seasons, left for Seattle in free agency.

The Browns brought in two nine-year vets in Rayshawn Jenkins and Damontae Kazee, while Delpit remains the top dog in the room.

"G.D.'s a versatile guy," Hickman said when asked how his game complement's Delpit's. "I'm a versatile guy. We talk a lot and I think that allows us to play off each other. He can do things, I can do things, but it just overall works well for the defense, knowing that he can be here and I can be there and it'll play out the same."

With increased responsibility awaiting him, Hickman knows this year has the potential to be huge, Banda said.



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He's put on some extra weight in the offseason, and entering year three of this system, the game has seemingly slowed down for him.

His teammates have the utmost confidence in what he can do if given the chance.

"Ronnie, he's a Buckeye, so you know he's going to come in ready," said fellow former Buckeye and Pro Bowl cornerback Denzel Ward. "Rocket, he's been good since he came on. Just coming in, learning the playbook fast, being out there making plays. I always think about his interception he had against the Jets for the playoffs and everything. But man, he's going to be a good player for us and he's going to be good."

In a little over a month's time, Hickman and the rest of the team will be back in the building for the beginning of training camp.

While increased responsibility is his for the taking, his mindset will remain largely unchanged once he returns to CrossCountry Mortgage Campus.

"I feel more comfortable in this role than other (roles)," Hickman said. "So I don't shy away from that or anything of that nature. But like I said, whatever my role is, if that is my role, at the end of the day, what I owe to the guys next to me is going out there with my best foot forward and giving 'em my all."

The rent is due, and Hickman won't be late with his check.



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Browns right tackle Jack Conklin happy for an offseason 'not rehabbing something'

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/20/jack-conklin-browns-offseason-injury/84193751007/>

BEREA — There was a smile on Jack Conklin's face as he came off the Browns' practice field during minicamp.

Part of that smile no doubt had to do with the Browns right tackle being happy about the on-field work being done for the moment. Another, likely bigger, part of it no doubt had to do with Conklin being happy about just being able to go through minicamp.

"It feels great," Conklin told the Beacon Journal on June 11. "Anytime you're not having to rehab something in the offseason, it's good. It feels great to be just focused on getting stronger and not rehabbing something."

For Conklin, that's been his reality way too often since signing in 2020 as a free agent with the Browns. The 2022 and 2024 offseason programs were impacted because of he was rehabbing from season-ending knee injuries sustained the previous season.

This time, Conklin's coming off a season that started late for him because of, first, his recovery from the 2023 knee injury and, second, a hamstring injury that cropped up in Week 3. Once he got back on the field, in Week 6 at the Philadelphia Eagles, he almost never came off again.

Conklin played 100% of the offensive snaps in 11 of the 12 games in which he played, with only a second-half injury in Week 7 against the Cincinnati Bengals limiting him to 68% of the offensive snaps in that game. He still played every offensive snap over the final 10 games, the first time he was able to finish a season on the field since his first season in Cleveland.

The two-time All-Pro said the day after the Browns' 2024 season that he played "honestly one of my best years in the NFL. ... Coming back from a third knee injury and ... play at a high level still, it was a huge accomplishment."

The offseason program, at least the on-field portion, ended for Conklin with the end of minicamp on June 12. Much like his fellow multi-time All-Pro offensive line teammate Joel Bitonio, while he was in the building for much of the offseason, he was not necessarily on the field for things such as OTAs.

The way Conklin has approached the offseason has evolved since the Tennessee Titans made him the No. 8 overall pick in the 2016 draft. Of course, there are a lot of factors that play into that, including the fact he's closing in on his 31st birthday on Aug. 17 and his 10th NFL season.



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What Conklin has gone through injury-wise over the last five seasons also is a factor. All of it comes together in an ever-evolving approach to the time between the end of one season and the start of another.

"I think every year it just gets to be more stuff," Conklin said during minicamp. "Just more stuff you got to work on more stuff just to, you figure out your body more every year. It just lets you home in on different exercises that you need and to keep you healthy and different things that you to get stronger."

This offseason, the Browns have talked about getting stronger mentally as much as they are physically. There's a belief among both coaches and many of the veteran players, including Conklin, that one of the causes of the disastrous 3-14 season in 2024 was the way the team didn't fight through adversity well enough.

There were times where, when the going got tough, there was a general letting go of the figurative rope. That led to losing streaks of five and six games, which are the two longest skids in Kevin Stefanski's tenure as Browns coach.

Conklin's approach to handling that, much like his approach to the offseason, has also evolved. It's been about being more than just seen.

"I think it's being more vocal, especially with the younger guys," he said. "I think I was always, a lot of time before, just show by example, work hard. Your guys will work hard around you. I think now it's bringing young guys along, giving them tips and telling them to keep going and not only showing them on the field physically, but also talking them through stuff so you can make it easier on them.

"And, frankly, it helps me a lot, too. If you're able to coach something, you can do it a lot better, too. I believe in that."



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David Njoku on 2025 Browns: ‘If we work hard, we’ll be in a good spot’

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald

<https://www.news-herald.com/2025/06/19/david-njoku-on-2025-browns-if-we-work-hard-well-be-in-a-good-spot/>

Rain fell most of the day on June 19, but after a delay of about an hour, the skies cleared in time for the annual David Njoku Celebrity Softball Game at Classic Park.

And though some of the stars expected to play were no-shows, the event was a success.

Money raised goes to back to organizations Njoku has connected with since the Browns selected him with the 29th pick in the first round of the 2017 draft. Njoku has become part of the community during his years in the Cleveland area.

“It comes from the love I have for this city,” Njoku said in a pregame news conference. “I’ve been through a lot here. I’ve grown up here. I just love to give back here.”

Njoku did not meet with reporters during the three-day minicamp earlier this month, but he is upbeat about the season ahead with the start of training camp about five weeks ago. Part of that optimism comes from being reunited with quarterback Joe Flacco.

“I think we’re in a good spot,” Njoku said. “We’re going to camp in about a month. A lot of work needs to be done. The secret is working hard. As long as we keep working hard, we’ll be in a good spot.”

Like just about everybody back from the 3-14 team last season, Njoku would like to flush last season and get back to the way the Browns played in 2023.

Injuries limited the 6-foot-4, 246-pound tight end to 11 games last season, but despite that he still caught 64 passes. That was the highest total of his career excluding 2023 when he grabbed 81 passes for 882 yards and six touchdowns. Njoku caught 30 passes for 390 yards and four touchdowns in the five games Flacco started.

“Just like anything else, you have to acknowledge what happened (last season) and work harder to be better than you were,” Njoku said. “It feels awesome to have Joe back.

“We have to see how it plays out. Like I said, first and foremost, the work must be done. Once we go from there, we’ll see how it goes.”



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Flacco is back – though he hasn’t been declared the starter – and so is the offensive philosophy that made the Browns successful two years ago. The Browns scored 396 points in 2023. Last year, the 258 points they scored were the fewest in the NFL.

Tommy Rees, in his first year as Browns offensive coordinator, coached the tight ends last year. That means Njoku has fist-hand knowledge of what Rees adds to the coaching staff.

“It’s all very exciting, for sure,” Njoku said. “Words are words. We have to put in the work and get after it.

“Tommy is a great guy and he’s very, very smart. He’s putting us in the right places to be successful. That’s all you can ask from a coach.”

His own celebrity softball game ended well for Njoku. Wally Richardson, who goes by “Gator,” hit a solo home run in the bottom of the sixth inning to hand Team Njoku a dramatic 14-13 victory over Team Haden. Richardson also won the home run derby staged before the softball game.



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Browns rookie Carson Schwesinger, position coach Jason Tarver bond over UCLA, biochemistry

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/22/carson-schwesinger-browns-jason-tarver-ucla-biochemistry/84193799007/>

BEREA — There's another world where Browns linebacker coach Jason Tarver and rookie second-round pick Carson Schwesinger would have crossed paths. It would've had absolutely nothing to do with football.

Tarver graduated from UCLA in 1997 with a degree in biochemistry, then spent 1998-2000 pursuing his master's degree in biochemistry and molecular biology. Twice, in 1998 and 2000, he was awarded the UCLA chemistry department Prize for Distinguished Teaching in biochemistry.

That was two decades before Schwesinger arrived at UCLA as a student and walk-on football player in 2021. His major? Bioengineering.

"There was a chance when I was at UCLA that I would've taught some of his classes when I was in graduate school, which is really crazy," Tarver said during Browns minicamp June 12.

Instead, the two paths crossed, not in a classroom on UCLA's Westwood campus, but in the Browns' Berea training facility. While they may share a similar academic interest, their athletic interests are very much aligned as well.

Tarver's initial introduction to Schwesinger, at least from a distance, came courtesy of another connection to his own UCLA days.

"My [college] roommate is a UCLA season ticket holder," Tarver said. "He was like, 'You got to watch this kid, you got to watch this kid.' Right away, when he started playing his first couple games, when he made a tackle to save the game against Hawaii to get the ball out, and so I'm like, 'OK, cool.' And then I start watching him. I'm like, 'Oh, he's pretty good.' And then I look up, I'm like, 'Oh my gosh.'"

Despite Schwesinger not becoming a full-time starter at linebacker for the Bruins until his senior season, the Browns made him the first pick of the second round (No. 33 overall) in April's draft. That came after a season in which he earned All-America honors and led the Big Ten in tackles.



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Cleveland Browns linebacker Carson Schwesinger (49) chats with linebacker Easton Mescall during rookie minicamp May 9, 2025, in Berea, Ohio.

One of the first connections Schwesinger made with the Browns, even before they selected him, was his new linebackers coach.

"Yeah, talking with coach has been amazing," Schwesinger said on draft night April 25.

"Even just the talks throughout the whole process. We're both UCLA guys, so we're bringing some of that over, California guys. Just the level of detail he has in his coaching and all the answers he has is something that I know is going to be super beneficial and super exciting to be able to get to work with him and hopefully I'd assume it's vice versa, but I'm just really excited."

That mutual admiration society has only grown since Schwesinger has arrived in Northeast Ohio and gotten to work. He made some early impressions in May's rookie minicamp, and has continued to build off that into the offseason program and minicamp as the Browns look for him to progress fast with Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah sidelined for at least the entire 2025 season while he continues to recover from a neck injury.

Part of that progression has been Schwesinger's refusal to dwell on what's happened before. Not surprising for a player who's garnered praise from both his college and NFL coaches for his intelligence is the fact that each rep has become a lesson to learn from for the next one.

"Carson really does a really good job of being able to focus on each play and making the next play his best play," Tarver said. "It's one of the things that I've said before, but that's usually where a rookie will struggle, where he is worried about what he just did or hangs onto it. He figures it out, ask great questions, runs to the ball."

Cleveland Browns linebackers coach Jason Tarver, left, works the sideline during practice at Browns minicamp June 10, 2025, in Berea, Ohio.

There's something else that Schwesinger shares in common with Tarver — an incredibly high motor.

Anyone who's ever met Tarver comes away impressed with how much energy he brings at all times. That kind of energy is what Tarver has also found in Schwesinger based on what he's doing on the field.



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"He's led us in running to the ball, led us in scoops in the spring, which is good," Tarver said. "We need to do that. We need to set the tempo, but the rookies should, they're younger. And really impressed with how he goes to the next play and how conscious he is within the play."

"So, having said that, that's the learning curve that can really help a young man play fast in this league."



After a lost 2024 season, ‘bigger, faster’ Alex Wright knows the time is now to show Browns what he can do

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/06/alex-wright-returns-from-injury-aims-to-win-browns-edge-rusher-battle-in-2025.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns defensive line coach Jacques Cesaire delivered an offseason message to his core of young edge rushers heading into 2025.

“The spot is open. May the best man win.”

Alex Wright heard it loud and clear.

The former third-round pick enters his fourth year in the league — a contract year — in the midst of a heated position battle for the second starting edge rusher spot opposite 2023 NFL Defensive Player of the Year Myles Garrett.

It’s an opportunity he’s relishing.

“It’s not an elephant in the room,” Wright told cleveland.com. “Everybody knows and Jacques, he set it out.

“You take it on the chin; you acknowledge it and you pretty much soul search. That’s what I do. I mean obviously they’re looking for the person that’s next to Myles who’s going to be on the other side. And if you don’t come in and do what you got to do, it won’t be you.

“You either accept the challenge or you shy away from it. And I don’t plan on shying away from anything. I haven’t shied away from a thing in my life.”

In recent years, the Browns have desperately searched for consistent double-digit sack production outside of Garrett but haven’t been able to find it.

They’ve tried short-term veteran options like Jadeveon Clowney and Za’Darius Smith. They’ve also scooped up edges in the draft, including Wright in 2022 and Isaiah McGuire in 2023.

Those latter two now seem to be the front-runners for the second starting edge job in defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz’s scheme.



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Wright has a penchant for being disruptive at the line of scrimmage. As a rookie, he batted five passes, the third-best mark in the league among all edge rushers, according to Pro Football Focus tracking data.

While he had no sacks that first season, he had five in 2023 (third on the team), helping the Browns make a push to the playoffs in a key spot in the rotation.

He was off to a great start in 2024, including recording a sack/safety against Trevor Lawrence and the Jaguars, playing a key role in Cleveland getting its first win of the year in an 18-13 victory.

But after four games, Wright's season was cut short due a torn triceps muscle that he initially suffered in training camp while at joint practices against the Minnesota Vikings. After attempting to play through it initially, Wright opted for surgery last October after a string of endless doctor appointments and treatments to try and manage the injury.

"I fought my agent many times," Wright said. "Nobody wants to stop playing after you're playing good and when you make certain plays like that (against Jacksonville)."

"I thought about it sitting on the surgery bed, just, 'How can I get back? How can I get better?'"

The procedure may have been the best thing for Wright in more ways than just the obvious of repairing his muscle.

The downtime allowed him to drop body fat and come back stronger than ever by focusing more on his protein intake, getting in the kitchen, and working with the Browns' revamped nutrition staff.

A DEXA scan, which the team uses to measure players' body composition, showed all the work Wright did in his down time. He's up over 8 pounds of muscle.

"It was the best scan I've had since I've been around," Wright said. "That was a good stress reliever. And I feel like that just adds on to being out here. One thing about it, when I was on the left side and I tried to use my right arm again, it was a lot easier. I feel like my power was a lot better than it was last year before I got hurt. So I feel good."



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If there's one thing Wright wants everyone to know, it's how good he feels overall and that his arm is no longer a concern.

He leaves the offseason program completely reinvigorated after a handful of solid performances — that includes on the final day of mandatory minicamp, when he disrupted two red zone 11-on-11 snaps for would-be sacks in an actual game.

“Physically I’ve been stronger than ever,” Wright said. “I feel like I haven’t lost a step. ... It was about eight months since I took a team rep. So just for that, to get that under my belt, I mean, I feel happy to be out here.

“I feel better than what I was before. I came back bigger, stronger, faster than I was. So I mean, I feel the arm is not an issue. My tricep(s) is not an issue no more. I’m saying that right now. Other than that, I just plan on finishing what I started.”

While Wright has put in the physical work, he’s also had to put in the mental work over the last eight months.

He’s honest about how difficult it was to sit out the majority of last season, watching his team limp to a 3-14 finish.

The main emotion he experienced wasn’t relief that he took care of his arm while watching the season slip away.

It was guilt.

“We didn’t play our best,” Wright said. “I felt like I had something to do with that because I wasn’t there. So now that I’m back, I wouldn’t say I’m the missing key, because we got a whole lot of people that can rush and crush and attack and stuff like that.

“But I feel like I’m versatile. I can run stop, rush the passer, I can go inside, go outside. So now it’s my chance to really put not only the coaches on notice, but everybody.”

Along with Wright, also in the mix for that spot is McGuire, who proved to be a bit of a ballhawk last season as he forced three fumbles and recorded 2.5 sacks.



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While McGuire began the year struggling to get in the rotation, even being a healthy scratch in the opener against the Cowboys, he stepped up after Wright was injured and was a key piece of the rotation down the stretch of the regular season.

The Browns also return Ogbo Okoronkwo, who has 7.5 sacks over the last two years. They also acquired Joe Tryon-Shoyinka in free agency this spring. The former first-rounder had 7.0 sacks with the Buccaneers over the last two seasons.

Regardless of who wins the starting job opposite of Garrett, all four are likely to play, as Schwartz usually rotates about nine linemen in his scheme to keep everyone fresh.

And where Wright has an edge is in the way Cleveland can use him.

“He’s just a tough physical defensive end that knows how to rush the passer with physicality, and I just like how he sets the edge,” Cesaire said. “He has some position flex where he can play inside and give us a good rush, play outside and give us a good rush. And the guy’s just a hard worker, just another hungry, fast, physical guy that we need on this defensive line.”

On top of bringing the physicality, Wright is also ready to bring something bigger.

It’s felt like “time traveling” from his rookie year up until this point of his career, he said.

But now the game and NFL life itself have all slowed down for Wright. Because of that, he’s ready to do more in terms of intangibles, especially after working his way back from a season-ending injury.

“You’re going to come back with a discipline,” Wright said. “You’re going to come back with a different approach and a mindset that’s not only going to bleed out to the room, but it is going to bleed out to the defense in general. And when you have good energy like that, it is real contagious.

“It’s my job going into my fourth year. I’ve become more of a leader, want to be more vocal about it. So just bringing that energy, and even if I gotta soul search, everybody else gotta soul search too. That’s just what it is. That’s my job. I took on that.”

If the best man is going to win, Wright is going to do everything to make sure it’s him.



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Mike Bloomgren brings head-coaching perspective into job leading Browns offensive line
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/06/24/browns-mike-bloomgren-offensive-line-rice-joel-bitonio/84193813007/>

BEREA — Browns right tackle Jack Conklin isn't afraid to say that new offensive line coach Mike Bloomgren has been a breath of fresh air for the position group. However, it's not necessarily for the reason why one might think that's the case.

"Everybody knows he is a decorated coach," Conklin told the Beacon Journal on June 11. "It's also kind of cool to have a guy who's a head coach come in. You kind of get that perspective on top of the O-line stuff, but also his viewpoint of every position. Being an older guy now, I know usually what I have to do almost every time, so now I'm able to open my brain up a little more to more stuff going on."

Bloomgren, 48, spent the previous seven-plus years as the head coach at Rice University. He was let go from that position in October 2024, despite being one of only three coaches to lead the Owls to a bowl game since 1961, and one of only two to lead them to multiple bowls in that span.

Although Conklin appreciated the head-coaching experience, it was the ability to get back to his position-coach roots that appealed to Bloomgren. That's especially true in the era of college sports with the transfer portal and name, image and likeness.

"As a head coach, of course, you have a lot of balls in the air," Bloomgren said during minicamp June 12. "I think the big thing I'd tell you is I am so fortunate and so happy to be back in the National Football League and to be part of this organization. It's an outstanding organization to be part of, and I get to worry about football all the time. I get to worry about the offensive line all the time instead of kissing babies and raising money and some of the things you do as a head coach in college football in this day and age."

Bloomgren's history in the NFL before the Browns extends to four seasons from 2007-10 with the New York Jets. It was during his time there that he crossed paths with Bill Callahan, the highly regarded offensive line coach who was with the Browns from 2020-23 before going to the Tennessee Titans in 2024.

That was the connection that help earn Bloomgren the stamp of approval inside the Browns offensive line room. However, the long-time college coach still had to hit the recruiting trail one more time even after leaving those ranks.

Two-time All-Pro Joel Bitonio came out of the 2024 season debating his future and whether to play a 12th season or retire after 11. Before he made that decision, he sat down with Bloomgren.



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Rice coach Mike Bloomgren watches from the sideline during a game against Connecticut on Oct. 26, 2024, in East Hartford, Connecticut.

"We had dinner," Bitonio recalled on June 2. "He just kind of talked about his philosophies and his family, my family, what we expect. He's like, 'Oh, you could play for four more years.' And I was like, 'All right, we're talking a little crazy now.'"

Four years? That may be a little much to ask Bitonio to play.

One more year, though? Turns out, Bloomgren's going to at least get that from the seven-time Pro Bowler.

"Yeah, I'd say it's one of my best recruiting efforts lately," Bloomgren joked.

Bloomgren insists it wasn't just his best recruiting pitch when he talked about four more years. Bitonio will turn 34 on Oct. 11.

The comparison Bloomgren looks to comes from his time with the Jets. His second season in New York coincided with future Hall of Famer Alan Faneca signing with the team after a 10-year run playing for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Faneca played two seasons with the Jets before his final NFL season was spent with the Arizona Cardinals in 2010. He was 34 at the time.

"Look, I'm the eternal optimist and I'm praying to get every moment I can with Joel Bitonio," Bloomgren said. "From that first dinner that we had, I just think it's been such a blessing to be around him. I really comp it to when we brought in Alan Faneca with the Jets in 2008, and whenever Joel talks about something he sees through the face mask, I can't wait to write it down, right? Because there's so much wisdom in there, and it really was the same as Faneca. I got books full of his vantage point that I still use today to teach."



CLEVELAND BROWNS

NEWS CLIPS

Could Browns cornerback Denzel Ward win Defensive Player of the Year? Why he believes he's capable

By Dan Labbe, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/07/could-browns-cornerback-denzel-ward-win-defensive-player-of-the-year-why-he-believes-hes-capable.html)

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/07/could-browns-cornerback-denzel-ward-win-defensive-player-of-the-year-why-he-believes-hes-capable.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — It's not easy for defensive backs to win Defensive Player of the Year, but it just happened last season and Browns cornerback Denzel Ward thinks it can happen for him.

"I think I'm capable," Ward said on Wednesday before the Browns took the practice field for the first time during training camp. "I'm definitely a Defensive Player of the Year caliber player."

Broncos cornerback Patrick Surtain II won the award last season, the first time someone other than a pass rusher or defensive lineman won since Patriots cornerback Stephon Gilmore in 2019.

Prior to that, Steelers safety Troy Polamalu was the last defensive back to win in 2010.

Generally, the Defensive Player of the Year award goes to someone at or near the top of the league's sacks list. When it hasn't, it's usually followed a more narrative path. Aaron Donald, for example, was long thought the most impactful player in football during his run of awards.

The 2019 Patriots defense was the best in the league and Gilmore, who led the league in interceptions, was the best player on it.

Polamalu had seven interceptions and was the personality of a Steelers defense that was second in the NFL in yards per game and first in yards per play.

Last season's lack of a dominant sack season opened the door for Surtain. Cincinnati's Trey Hendrickson led the league with 17.5, the lowest league-leading total since T.J. Watt had 15 in 2020 — Donald won it that year — and Chandler Jones had 17 in 2017, another year Donald won the award.

All of this is a long way of saying Ward doesn't have history on his side, even if the most recent winner of the award begs to differ. It's worth noting, too, he has a teammate in Myles Garrett who just signed one of the richest non-quarterback deals in the history of the league, is still in his prime and is a previous winner of the award in 2023.

Garrett isn't ready to give up his campaign for the award just yet.



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“I expect to get to the Super Bowl. That’s our expectation every year. I expect to run it back to Defensive Player of the Year,” Garrett said Wednesday when he spoke shortly after Ward, “so keeping both those things in mind, I have to be the very best player I can be every single day, whether we’re practicing or playing.”

This has a chance to be a fun competition between the two this season.

Ward, for his part, has momentum. In 16 games last season, he led the league with 19 passes defended and added two interceptions — a number he believes could have been higher.

When he went the first nine games of the season without an interception, he couldn’t figure out what the problem was, other than a few egregious drops.

“That’s a good question,” Ward said last November. “I should have had some (interceptions) for sure. I should have had some. I got to find a way to come away with them, so I don’t know the exact number, but I got to find a way to get them, though.”

He turned around and collected his first interception a few days later against the Saints in New Orleans and then, a few weeks later on Monday Night Football, he had what defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz called “one of my top two interceptions in 32 years in the NFL” in a loss to the Broncos.

It was evident that Ward was having the best season of his young career, regardless of his interception count. Even Ward admitted it on Wednesday.

“I do feel last year was probably my personal best year,” he said. “I’m just trying to do the best I can to help this team win and put them in the best position as I can. But like I said, this is a team game.

We need everybody playing their best ball. But I can only control myself, and so I’m going to try to put my best foot forward to help this team.”

Ward, the No. 4 overall pick in the 2018 draft, turned 28 in April and has made four Pro Bowls during his first seven seasons, including last season. Recently, just about the only thing that has been able to slow him down is concussions. He has had at least six of them during his career.

He suffered one during training camp last Aug. 12 and didn’t come out of the concussion protocol until Aug. 29. He suffered another concussion during the Browns’ Week 8 win over Baltimore but played the following week. Ward has expressed little concern about the long-term effects and only missed a game last season in Week 18 against the Ravens due to a shoulder injury.



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If Ward stays healthy, the Browns defense plays closer to its 2023 form and he catches a few of those interceptions he left on the table last season, he could put himself in the discussion for joining Garrett as a Defensive Player of the Year winner.

The team's success this season might play a role in it, too — the Broncos, last season, made a surprising run to the postseason driven in large part by a defense that forced 26 turnovers.

The reality is it's harder to win when you're 3-14.

Ward and Garrett will certainly do their parts to help the Browns surprise people this season. If they do, one of them could come away with one of the league's top awards.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

This Cleveland-native Browns linebacker still has his Johnny Manziel jersey

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/07/this-cleveland-native-browns-linebacker-still-has-his-johnny-manziel-jersey.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The first Browns jersey Jerome Baker received wasn't his own No. 17 when Cleveland signed him in free agency in the spring.

As a Cleveland native, it's unsurprising that the linebacker's first jersey is actually one of the 40 quarterbacks that has started for the team since its return in 1999.

Also unsurprisingly, it was one of the most-talked-about guys out of the 40.

"When Johnny Manziel was here, he was probably the first jersey I ever bought and I had," Baker said with a smile as the Browns prepared for their third day of training camp. "So shout out to him."

Baker was born and raised in Cleveland, and the 28-year-old won a state championship with Benedictine High in 2014 before standing out at Ohio State.

So does having the jersey of one of the Browns' failed quarterbacks really confirm his credentials as a true Cleveland fan and city native?

"I wouldn't say 'failed,'" he quipped. "I would just say it just didn't work out."

Manziel is unsurprisingly not too fond of his time in Cleveland, his only two years on an NFL roster in 2014-15.

A slew of assorted misbehaviors and partying (including an infamous trip to Vegas in which he wore a disguise), as well as self-admitted mental health struggles all played a role in the young QB failing to reach his full potential. He only made eight starts with 14 total appearances.

In a recent appearance on the "Impulsive" podcast with Westlake native Logan Paul and his co-host Mike Maljak on July 15, Manziel revealed that he hated being in Cleveland.

"I hated Cleveland so much, and I know that's going to be tough to hear," Manziel said with a smile on the show. "That place aided to my (expletive) depression for sure."

But as far as Baker's concerned, there's no hard feelings about the Manziel era with the Browns. And there's definitely no hard feelings that he took out on his "Johnny Football" jersey. "I definitely still got that jersey."



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Here's more of what the newest Browns linebacker said:

Day 3 of Cleveland Browns training camp in Berea, July 25, 2025

Cleveland homecoming is a 'dream come true'

Baker expressed how meaningful it is to play for his hometown team, describing it as "truly a dream come true."

Baker shared that his entire family still lives in the area, including his parents, siblings, and close friends from Benedictine High School.

"Coming back home, it's truly home," he said. "I love the fact that pretty much any day I can go to somebody else's house and eat their food and enjoy their time. So it's all good."

Baker spent his first six seasons with the Dolphins before signing with the Seahawks before last season. He was traded to the Titans in October.

On Friday, he also recalled attending Browns training camp as a child, mentioning that his aunt sent him a picture from when he was about 11 years old at training camp after he signed with the team.

"She sent me a picture when I first signed and was like, 'now you gotta recreate it,'" he said. "But for me, I'm gonna take every advantage of it. I'm gonna enjoy it."

Linebacker room undergoing significant changes

With Jordan Hicks announcing his retirement Friday and Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah out for the year after suffering a scary neck injury in 2024, the Browns' linebacker room has been substantially remade.

Baker discussed how he's embracing his role as the oldest player in the group following Hicks' retirement.

"We're really just pushing each other," Baker said. "Me just being the older guy, I'm trying to bring the young guys along as far as experience, and the younger guys, they got something to prove and they want to make a name for themselves. So it's that perfect balance that we're all just pushing."

Baker appreciates the Browns' defensive scheme

Baker revealed that the Browns' defensive scheme was a key factor in his decision to sign with the team, describing it as something "every linebacker dreams of."



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“You just go out and just play,” he continued. “Just run, hit guys, you don’t really have to think as much. Just go out there and play ball and have fun and the plays come to you.”

In his seven seasons — all as a starter — Baker has totaled 24.5 sacks, 25 passes defensed, five interceptions and seven forced fumbles. He’s made 648 tackles, included 33 for a loss.

While Baker mentioned he had played in similar schemes before, he emphasized that this particular system is special because linebackers can “just shoot my gap, just go have fun and make plays.” He also praised defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz’s coaching style, noting how Schwartz’s approach forces players to be engaged and understand the broader context of the defensive scheme.

Baker believes Browns success would transform Cleveland

When asked what the Browns mean to Cleveland, especially when successful, Baker drew a powerful comparison to the city’s reaction when the Cleveland Cavaliers won their championship in 2016 and ended a 52-year title drought.

“The excitement they brought and the energy that they brought, just times that by, let’s just say 100,” Baker said. “That’s what it is going to feel like when we go out there and win games and we do the things we’re supposed to do. So I’m happy for it.”



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Jerry Jeudy wants to be 'helping hand' for Browns' youthful wide receiver group

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/07/26/jerry-jeudy-browns-wide-receivers-training-camp/85385660007/>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Jerry Jeudy is only 26 years old. Even for an NFL wide receiver, that's far from being old.

For a Browns' wide receiver, though, it's practically worth of getting an AARP card.

Jeudy, the sixth-year pro, is one of only three wide receivers on the Browns' roster who have played at least five years in the league. DeAndre Carter in entering his eighth season, while Diontae Johnson's going into his seventh.

The rest of the group all are either entering their third year or less. That includes five rookies and a 26-year-old (Kaden Davis) who had one game of NFL experience.

"I do the best I can to respond and answer the questions that the young guys need help with," Jeudy said after the Browns' fourth training camp practice July 26. "I'm always a helping hand to all the younger guys, to the guys that, even the old vets that come and ask me questions about how I run certain routes and how I do this. I'm always doing whatever to help the team grow and get better."

There may be worse players for the younger Browns wide receivers to look up to than Jeudy, the former [Denver Broncos](#) 2020 first-round pick out of the University of Alabama. His own journey was not the cleanest path, for a variety of reasons, before he was acquired by Cleveland in March, 2024.

After four up-and-down seasons in Denver, he was traded to the Browns and immediately given a three-year extension. He rewarded that show of faith with a single-season team record 91 receptions that led to his first 1,000-yard receiving season (1,229 yards) and his first Pro Bowl berth.

The next step, though, may be the biggest one for Jeudy. It's about showing consistency in performance and, in the case of his standing in the wide receiver room, leadership.

"Jerry's done a great job, obviously, on the heels of a really successful first season, but he's had a very good offseason," coach Kevin Stefanski said Saturday. "He was healthy, practicing, and has a very good understanding now of our system, our scheme, how he fits in. I've mentioned this before, Jerry's very intelligent, so there's no shortage of where you can line him up, what you can move him around to do."



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"So, I've been really pleased with all the things that Jerry's doing. I think to the earlier question, I think he's taking on a leadership role as well now that he's in whatever year this is for him. And it's a younger receiving room, so I think he can provide leadership to those guys as well."

There's always the questions about how much a veteran has to be an active mentor to the younger ones. It's one that has been thrown at quarterback Joe Flacco repeatedly over the last couple of seasons, both in Cleveland and with the Indianapolis Colts in 2024, one which he views as a "no-win" question regardless of how the veteran answers it.

Jeudy's never quite been in this spot since he came into the NFL. Amari Cooper was still with the Browns when he arrived in 2024, and he was one of the younger wide receivers while he was in Denver.

So does Jeudy have any issues with taking on a mentorship role now?

"Nah, I just like to help guys," Jeudy said. "If you feel like they could add a little niche to their game to get better, I'm happy to be that guy to just to inform them, do this a little bit better, do this, you cause a little bit more separation. I'm just here to help any way possible to make the team better."



Middle child to Browns middle LB: How Carson Schwesinger made himself the center of attention

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/07/browns-rookie-has-spent-a-lifetime-in-the-middle-trying-to-get-noticed-now-all-eyes-are-on-him.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Dennis Schwesinger looked up, his eyes meeting a sudden gush of water coming from the ceiling of his Southern California home.

At the same time, one of his five kids noticed it too.

“Oh my gosh!”

Up jumped his son Carson. Post-football practice, he had prepared an ice bath in his parents’ master bathroom upstairs.

The only problem? He forgot to shut the water off.

When the father-son duo got upstairs, they realized not only was the bathroom flooded, but also nearly the entire second floor with 2 to 3 inches of water.

“We just had to spend a few hours with the ShopVac getting it all cleaned up,” Dennis told cleveland.com. “He was always kind of the instigator. ... He would be the one that you always catch cheating in Monopoly, or trying to push the envelope.”

Long before Carson Schwesinger was drafted No. 33 overall by the Cleveland Browns in April, the Schwesingers came to expect these kinds of scenes from their middle child.

Pushing the envelope has long been the name of the game for the linebacker.

He’s gone from zero-star high school recruit, to walk-on at UCLA, to scholarship recipient and highly touted draft prospect, and now, to a second-round pick and a player the Browns expect to contribute early on his NFL career, smack dab in the middle of their defense.

For most of his life, Schwesinger’s comfort zone has been the middle. It’s where he’s learned how to operate effectively, how to garner just enough attention so he wouldn’t get lost among his four siblings — and more recently, on the field.

“They were just used to things happening on accident, so I don’t get forgotten,” Schwesinger said.



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Schwesinger has often been positioned in the middle, but in both life and in football, he's learned to separate himself.

Spreadsheet organization

An Excel spreadsheet ruled the Schwesinger family for more than a decade.

It was the only way for Diana Schwesinger to stay organized as all five of her children played sports, mainly basketball and football, and her husband coached their various youth teams.

"She was just a master of making sure everything was done and all the travel was set up," Dennis said. "All five kids and all their games, and then who was going to be at each game. Even if I was coaching, a lot of times I had it set up where I could leave the game 10 minutes early and be able to get to my daughter."

Every other Schwesinger child — oldest son Ethan, Carson, youngest daughter Jordan, and baby of the family Weston — all played basketball and football as well. That included Jordan, who was a defensive end and also one of her team's leading scorers as a running back.

Carson Schwesinger started playing sports as soon as he could walk, following Payton's and Ethan's lead.

He began playing flag football at 5 years old in a league for 6-year-olds, so that Dennis could coach both Carson and Ethan on the same team.

"I don't know if it was a big deal or not, but we didn't fudge his birth certificate to make him younger than he was — we fudged it to make him older so he could play on the same team as his brother," Dennis said. "He was good enough to be able to always compete with those guys, but I think it helped him out."

On those youth teams, Schwesinger played all over the field in every phase of the game. It was hard for Dennis to get his son off the field at all, even when games or practices ended.

"He loves practice," Dennis said. "The fact that you like everything, it makes the whole thing worth doing. If you just love the game, it's really hard to motivate yourself outside of that because there's so little time that you're doing the thing you love. But he loves all of it."

When it came time for high school, Schwesinger initially attended Santa Clarita Christian, like his two older siblings. Dennis doubled as head coach of the Santa Clarita Christian girls basketball team and an offensive assistant for the football program.



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Schwesinger made an immediate impact as a freshman playing both ways on varsity, posting 83 tackles, 3.5 sacks and two interceptions as a linebacker. He also caught 44 passes for 604 yards as a receiver.

After his 2018 sophomore season, Santa Clarita Christian transitioned from 11-man to eight-man football, but that wasn't about to be the end to his high school career.

'Coach, can I run it back?'

Dennis Schwesinger heard about the offseason skills camps run at Oaks Christian High School, led by coach Charlie Collins.

Located in Westlake Village, California, the school is the alma mater of several current NFL players, including Giants edge rusher Kayvon Thibodeaux, Colts receiver Michael Pittman Jr. and Seahawks running back Zach Charbonnet.

Collins, known as "Coach C" to his players, was an All-America wide receiver at Cal State Northridge before playing professionally in Canada. He had NFL stints as a wide receivers coach for the San Francisco 49ers and Cincinnati Bengals after notably working with wide receivers Chad "Ochocinco" Johnson and Steve Smith at Santa Monica City College.

Schwesinger's work ethic caught Collins' eye almost immediately.

"He was always a kid that was very dialed into ball," Collins said. "Most kids, they're doing a drill or doing a particular technique, and if they don't get the drill right, then they'll just go to the back of the line or they'll just wait for the next rep."

"Carson, the very first thing I noticed about him is his attention to detail. He wanted to do every drill at every station with precision. I don't care if it was slightly off. He would always say, 'Coach, can I run it back?'

"Right then I knew that he had that 'care' factor. He cared about the detail of it, but he cared about understanding the why to it."

So ahead of his junior year, Carson enrolled at Oaks Christian to play out his final two seasons of high school football (including a spring, pandemic-shortened 2020-21 year). Dennis took a job on Collins' staff as an offensive assistant, too.

But instead of playing linebacker, Schwesinger excelled at safety and receiver under Collins.



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In 2019 he posted 80 tackles, forced three fumbles and grabbed one interception. In his abbreviated, five-game senior year, he finished with 36 tackles and six interceptions. He also combined for 24 catches for 442 yards and four touchdowns over his two seasons at Oaks Christian.

But Collins, thanks to his own receiver background, knew that Schwesinger's football future would lie elsewhere on the field.

A phone call

Collins liked Schwesinger's production and tenacity in the secondary.

There was just one problem.

"He just outgrew his position," Collins said.

Schwesinger was listed at 6-foot-2, 215 pounds as a junior in high school.

And despite some good production at Oaks, Schwesinger was a no-star recruit coming out of high school. He didn't receive his first scholarship offer until midway through his senior year, a partial offer from Bucknell, a Pennsylvania program competing in the second-tier Football Championship Subdivision.

"My philosophy with them was if you're good enough to play, they're going to find you, just keep working hard," Dennis Schwesinger said. "And we didn't go to camps. We didn't go to anything to just try and build a name.

"And so when he came out, he was a really good football player, but he didn't have any significant offers that he came out of high school with."

But Collins had a well-established relationship with then-UCLA coach Chip Kelly, and was already in communication with him about another one of his players, four-star linebacker Ethan Calvert, who later went to Utah.

As the two talked Calvert, Collins thought it was also the time for the sales pitch he had regarding Schwesinger.

"I may have a linebacker, that is possibly a poor man's version of Ethan — he's probably going to be better, coach. But you wouldn't know him because he's under the radar."

Kelly hadn't heard of Schwesinger, so he had to start with the most basic of questions.



“Are you sure this guy can play?”

That was one of the easiest questions for Collins to answer.

“You’ll thank me later.”

Collins’ vouching led to Schwesinger walking on at UCLA. But what may have started as Kelly doing a favor for another coach really wound up being the exact opposite.

“Carson was a no-star leaving Oaks, but he was a five-star in want-to,” Collins said. “And that’s all it took. When the opportunity presented itself, Carson took it and ran with it.”

But his chance in college still required patience.

Outworking, outthinking, outperforming

When Schwesinger first arrived at UCLA, Kelly and the coaching staff largely ignored him. He didn’t play at all in 2021.

That didn’t stop the player who had to work his whole life on and off the field just to get noticed.

He turned to his early love: practice. He became one of the team’s most-improved players, never missing a spring session in early 2022. He totaled the most tackles and interceptions during those workouts. His work turned into a scholarship ahead of the 2022 season.

But that was only the first step.

“He was really motivated,” Dennis said. “Came back in fall and he went from No. 2 on the depth chart, getting equal reps at No. 2, and all of a sudden he’s like No. 6 or 7. Guys that weren’t even there were in front of him.”

Frustration set in, but Dennis reiterated the same message he gave to all of his kids throughout their athletic endeavors.

“You keep working, outworking them, outthinking them and outperforming ‘em until they look ridiculous for not having you in,” he said.

Over the next two seasons, Schwesinger appeared as a reserve linebacker and on special teams in 26 games for UCLA.



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He also excelled in an extremely demanding major: bioengineering.

Without a football scholarship initially, Schwesinger chose a major that would be worth his while. He went on to become an eight-time honor roll member.

“Engineering, whether or not I want to go into it, it’ll be a good degree to have,” Schwesinger said. “I always was a big bio fan and so I went into bioengineering. And when I was actually taking classes, I kind of learned how wide a range it was, things as small as gene mutation to electronics, bioelectronics and how it works with the body.”

His chance to start wouldn’t come until 2024, when he took over the starting middle linebacker job in UCLA’s 3-3-5 defensive scheme of three linemen, three linebackers and five defensive backs.

Appearing in 12 games with 10 starts, he was a consistent finisher and led the nation with 90 solo tackles and 7.5 solo tackles per game.

He also led the Big Ten in total tackles (136) and showed off stellar instincts and lightning-fast reaction. He was named an AP first-team All-American, and was one of five finalists for the Butkus Award, an accolade given annually to college football’s top linebacker.

While Schwesinger seemingly came out of nowhere on a national scale, it wasn’t a surprise for those who had been a part of his journey all along.

“He’s always had to fight and prove himself,” Collins said. “Being around that high-level talent (at Oaks Christian) I think helped him in so many ways in terms of his confidence, that he realized then that he is definitely capable and on that level.”

Why Cleveland?

Browns linebacker coach Jason Tarver was well aware of Schwesinger as he began studying this year’s draft class.

Tarver spent three years as a graduate assistant at UCLA while he got his start in coaching and worked on a master’s degree in biochemistry and molecular biology.

“My (college) roommate is a UCLA season ticket holder,” Tarver said. “He was like, ‘You’ve got to watch this kid, you’ve got to watch this kid right away.’”

Tarver was impressed after watching UCLA’s 16-13 win over Hawaii, in which Schwesinger forced the game-preserving fumble as time ran out.



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But drafting Schwesinger where the Browns did was still a bit of a surprise, especially considering his college production came in a small sample size.

Browns GM Andrew Berry's reasoning was straightforward: The Browns hadn't really made a big investment in a linebacker since drafting Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah in the second round in 2021. With Owusu-Koramoah out for the season with his neck injury, the Browns needed a replacement.

They also liked one of Schwesinger's traits in particular.

"His profile is maybe a little bit different in the fact that he's shown himself to be a really strong coverage player," Berry said. "Whether man or zone, he very much, like Jeremiah, he's very good in the run game, very instinctive, a surefire tackler. But when we look at that position and if we're going to invest significant resources, it's, 'Hey, can this player contribute above and beyond on third down?'"

During rookie minicamp in the spring, Schwesinger showed off that ability when he picked off Dillon Gabriel in a 7-on-7 period.

"Sometimes plays like that come along if you put yourself in the right positions," Schwesinger said. "And they're definitely fun when you're on the field, and you love to see the other guys make it too."

He continued to get prime reps as veterans arrived, and Schwesinger seemingly won't have to wait as long for an opportunity in the NFL as he did in college. Along with Owusu-Koramoah being unavailable, Cleveland will also be without veteran Jordan Hicks, who announced his retirement on Friday

In early training camp practices, Schwesinger has even spent some time wearing the green dot as the defense's signal caller.

"Carson really does a really good job of being able to focus on each play and making the next play his best play," Tarver said, "which is one of the things that I've said before, that's usually where a rookie will struggle."

Collins is plenty familiar with AFC North style football considering his coaching stint in the division and thinks Schwesinger and the Browns fit each other.

"That's a team that's always having to prove themselves in the AFC, and that's been Carson's style," Collins said. "Kind of under the radar, but overachieving. And I think it fits. It's a perfect match."



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“Because he’s not a flashy guy. I think Myles Garrett’s gonna appreciate a player like him that has so much attention to detail and plays with a high-level IQ, but I think that it matches his personality, the team itself.”

Middle man busting out

The days of spreadsheets keeping track of sporting events are over in the Schwesinger household.

Dennis and Diana will still need to account for their youngest son Weston’s Saturday games at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tenn. But they can now count on Carson playing most Sunday afternoons.

“It’ll still be busy enough,” Dennis said. “Not as busy as before, but a different type of busy we’re looking forward to.”

For Schwesinger, too, the NFL is a different kind of busy. A different kind of pressure. But it’s a pressure he’s worked on handling for his entire life.

Whether it was fighting to get on the field at UCLA after changing positions, fighting for a scholarship, fighting among top-tier talent in a new high school, or fighting with his siblings in the backyard, Schwesinger has never backed away from a challenge on the field.

And that’s because it’s all he’s ever known.

The middle-child mindset is ingrained in him at this point.

“People usually say the middle child gets forgotten,” Schwesinger said. “I say that’s only if you let yourself get forgotten.”

Schwesinger is determined to make sure that doesn’t happen, no matter how patient he must be, what practice drills he needs to run, or ice baths he has to overflow.



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Martin Emerson Jr.'s injury 'bigger than football' for teammates like Greg Newsome II

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/07/30/martin-emerson-jr-browns-greg-newsome-injury-training-camp/85435540007/>

BEREA — Jack Conklin understands exactly what Martin Emerson Jr. is going through right now.

The Browns right tackle's six years in Cleveland has been marred by various injuries. Not little ones either, but significant ones that don't just end one season, but eat into the next one as well.

Emerson, the fourth-year cornerback, will have season-ending surgery to repair the Achilles tendon in his left leg he tore July 29. As difficult as the physical recovery can be, there's also a mental piece of the process, one exacerbated by a level of separation anxiety that comes with being away from teammates.

"It's tough, it's tough," Conklin said. "Anytime going through an injury like that, especially a long-term one, it is a lot on you mentally and just having the guys ... I'm lucky offensive line, especially, such a close-knit unit. The guys were always checking on me when I was going through stuff and I try to stay a part of it and watch the games and be on top of when I can help them with little things. Try to let them know, just to keep my mind in the game.

"But, yeah, it's really just a day-by-day thing. You've got to take it with incremental steps and just look at the overall, how much you're recovering and how much mentally you're staying steady."

Cornerback Greg Newsome II will be the player who likely gains the most on the field from Emerson's injury. He'll be the one certainly starting on the outside opposite Pro Bowler Denzel Ward, both in the base defense and in the nickel.

Newsome understands well the "business" part of it all; the questions about increased snaps and "next man up" and all of those things. However, he also knows very well the person whose season just ended on a freak non-contact play.

It's the conundrum that is life in the NFL.

"Yeah, football obviously is football," Newsome said. "He's a huge piece of our defense, but just as being a brother to me it's bigger than the game of football. A guy that I've seen since the offseason started, been putting in a lot of work, been one of the last guys to leave the building every single day. CLEVELAND, OHIO - NOVEMBER 19: Ronnie Hickman #33, Martin Emerson Jr. #23, and Greg Newsome II #0 of the Cleveland Browns celebrate with fans after beating the Pittsburgh Steelers



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13-10 at Cleveland Browns Stadium on November 19, 2023 in Cleveland, Ohio. (Photo by Jason Miller/Getty Images)

"A guy that just brings passion, energy, I'm going to definitely miss him out there as a brother. I'm going to miss him every single snap. I definitely feel for him, but I know he'll get through this and he'll be back to his form."

Newsome has had to deal with the loss of a couple of teammates to injuries this year. The former 2021 first-round pick learned in May that his fellow 2021 draft class member Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah would be out for the season while he continues to recover from his 2024 neck injury.

Emerson adds a member of the same position group to the list. There's also a reversal of roles for the two cornerbacks from a year ago, when Newsome was sidelined for all of training camp due to hamstring surgery.

"I mean speaking of Martin first," Newsome said. "When I wasn't here all training camp, when I had to get surgery, he was one of the guys that texted me every single day to keep me a part of the team and things like that. And like I said, it's bigger than football with me and him."

"We're brothers, we talk almost every week during the off season. We're always FaceTiming, not even about football, just about life. So he knows how we are. I'll be calling him every single week. He'll be back here and I'll definitely keep his spirits up. Like I said, it's bigger than football with me and him, so I'll definitely be talking to him all the time."

The toughest part can often be in the initial stages of the recovery process. That's when the player can be the most isolated from the team, especially before a surgery.

Coach Kevin Stefanski believes it's incumbent upon the organization to be there for the player's mental and emotional well-being.

"Oftentimes when you get injured, you have to go get surgery somewhere else and then you come back and whether you're rehabbing here or elsewhere, you're training room and it's hard," Stefanski said. "It depends on where you are in your rehab, whether you can get back and join meetings and even that can be hard mentally for some. Some guys really need that and want that to stay in some guys it hurts that they're not a part of it. So, you try to just work with the player circumstantially where they are and what they need."

The Browns have yet to play a preseason game, but since May, they've lost three key defenders for the season, and some longer. There was Owusu-Koramoah in May, then linebacker Jordan Hicks wasn't lost to an injury, but elected to retire after an 10-year career on July 25.



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Emerson now adds another one to the list. That addition, though, doesn't subtract from Newsome's belief in what the Browns' defense can be this season.

"Yeah, we could be as good as we want to be," Newsome said. "We got some young guys. Carson is amazing. He's been playing great since day one, so I'm super excited for him to get an opportunity. In my room at least we got corners all around the board. We got a lot of young guys that have been primed for this moment.

"Like you said, obviously, Martin is a guy, you can't replace. Everything that he does on the field, it is very, very, very tough to replace. But we got guys that are going to step up and make some plays for us this season."



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Cleveland WNBA expansion team already has a fan in Browns' Greg Newsome II

By Ashley Bastock, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/07/cleveland-wnba-expansion-team-already-has-a-fan-in-browns-greg-newsome-ii.html)

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/07/cleveland-wnba-expansion-team-already-has-a-fan-in-browns-greg-newsome-ii.html>

BEREA, Ohio — As the WNBA prepares to return to The Land in 2028 with a WNBA expansion team, they can already count one Browns player as one of their biggest fans.

Cornerback Greg Newsome II has a lengthy history of supporting women's sports, particularly women's basketball, and was thrilled to hear the news this summer that the league is awarding Cleveland the league's 16th franchise.

The team will begin playing in the 2028 season, nearly 25 years after the last game was played by the Cleveland Rockers.

"I'm super excited," Newsome said after the Browns' seventh training camp practice on Wednesday morning. "I will be at every single game. I will be there supporting. Shoutout to the WNBA. I'm super excited that they got a team back here and I know the fan base will travel. We'll all be there and it'll be amazing."

Supporting women's basketball isn't an act for Newsome, who was only three years old when the Rockers left Cleveland in 2003.

When the Browns selected him in the first round of the 2021 NFL Draft, he wore a black suit with messages emblazoned on it in red letters, including "Women Can Ball Too."

In the Browns locker room, he's sported WNBA jerseys as well as a sweatshirt with the league's logo. He's offered up thoughts on Indiana Fever star Caitlin Clark and Dallas Wings star Paige Bueckers, both on social media and in the locker room.

He's also been actively volunteering with the Browns' recent successful effort to get girls flag football sanctioned as an official OHSA high school sport, attending local girls flag football tournaments over the years.

A big reason for his interest in women's basketball specifically? His older sister Zakiya, who played and was a guard at Division III North Park University in their hometown of Chicago.



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While it's no question Newsome would provide some front-row support for Cleveland's WNBA team (which still needs to unveil its new branding, and hopes to do so in the coming year with "Rockers" still on the table), it remains to be seen whether he will still be a Cleveland Brown come 2028.

The corner is currently playing on his fifth-year option at the fully guaranteed amount of \$13.37 million. Last year, he struggled with injuries, including missing all of training camp after undergoing surgery on an injured hamstring. This season the Browns will need him more than ever with cornerback Martin Emerson Jr. tearing his Achilles on Tuesday, ending his season.

"I've said it since the day I was drafted, I want to be a Brown for life," Newsome said. "And in order to do that, I gotta hold my end of the bargain. So I gotta go back to being that player that I know can be."

While the future may be uncertain, his support of women's basketball is sure to be a constant.



You might have forgotten about this Browns free agent addition, but he's already making his mark

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/08/you-might-have-forgotten-about-this-browns-free-agent-signing-but-hes-already-making-his-mark.html>

BEREA, Ohio — The Browns' most under-the-radar signing this offseason is already making an impact on Jim Schwartz's defense.

If you want to find him, just look next to rookie defensive tackle Mason Graham. That's where Maliek Collins has been lining up along the first defensive line unit.

The Browns signed Collins one day into the new league year on a two-year deal worth up to \$20 million. The 49ers released Collins after acquiring him in a trade from Houston in 2024.

He had five sacks in 17 games with the 49ers, a year after he had five sacks with the Texans in 16 games. Pro Football Focus credits him with 45 pressures last season, tied for 15th among defensive tackles, and 45 in 2023, tied for 19th.

That sort of pressure matters to a Browns team that has re-invested in the defensive tackle position, spending the 54th pick in the 2024 NFL Draft on Ohio State's Mike Hall Jr. and using the fifth overall pick this year on Mason Graham from Michigan.

Collins saw a snug fit in Cleveland after the 49ers let him go, beginning with the defensive line coach he had in Houston.

"Having (defensive line coach) Jacques (Cesaire) here was a big help," Collins said. "Having Schwartz and this type of defense, I think it fits me perfectly. I was happy that they wanted me as well."

Collins, a third-round pick of the Cowboys in 2016, spent four years in Dallas, a year in Las Vegas and three in Houston before last season in San Francisco.

Schwartz likes to refer to this defensive line as the engine of his defense and the emphasis on interior pressure will only help the Browns' edge defenders, specifically Myles Garrett.



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“It just comes down to winning your one-on-ones,” Collins said. “If you’re winning your one-on-ones and having production out of it, that’s obviously going to draw a guy from Myles or draw a guy from Mason or whoever else it might be. I think also schematically, Schwartz is an aggressive guy, aggressive play-caller. He’ll dial up things and it creates one-on-ones for all of us across the board.”

It’s not just Collins’ impact on the field. It’s also what he brings off the field, starting with Graham. He worked with the rookie this offseason in Houston.

“(Graham) really suggested it,” Collins said. “He was just like, ‘Hey bro, I’m pulling up.’ So I was surprised, but I was happy to have him there.”

The goal for Collins is to figure out how to make his partnership with Graham an impactful one.

“He asks a lot of things, but we go in there, we have fun. We really just vibe off each other and just create our vibe how we want to rush together, how we want to play together, what type of swag we want to play with.”

Having a veteran like the 30-year-old Collins in the defensive line room isn’t just benefitting Graham. It’s comforting for Cesaire.

“I love Maliek, and I always sleep good at night when Maliek Collins is on my defensive line just because he knows who I am, he knows how I work,” Cesaire said. “He’s a technician, he’s a professional runner to the other side as a rusher. So, I’m just excited to see what Maliek can bring to the table.”

Collins might have flown under the radar this offseason, but he’s here to make an impact and help the Browns win some games with the defensive line setting the tone.

“I’m really open to doing whatever it takes to win,” he said. “I played for guys that were kind of understudies of Schwartz in this system, whether it was in Houston with (DeMeco Ryans) or in San Fran last year out there with Kris (Kocurek). They all came from Schwartz’s scheme, so seeing that.”

At some point this season, you might not be able to forget about Collins.



David Njoku, Joe Flacco reunite: Can Browns duo recapture 2023 magic?

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/08/david-njoku-joe-flacco-reunite-can-browns-duo-recapture-2023-magic.html>

BEREA, Ohio — After Browns practice on Wednesday, David Njoku took to Instagram.

The tight end posted a video on his story with quarterback Joe Flacco, the two parked in a tricked-out ATV, listening to the Jimi Hendrix song “Hey Joe.”

Njoku boisterously sang along to the lyrics, adding a little twist of his own.

“Hey Joe JOE FLACCO!”

The camera then panned to Flacco, who couldn’t help but smile and nod along to the song, amused with being caught up in the shenanigans of the Browns tight end.

The two already have a well-established relationship thanks to the chemistry they developed in 2023 as Flacco led Cleveland on an unexpected run to the playoffs, thanks in large part to some career-best production by Njoku.

“I think it’s a mutual respect,” Browns tight ends coach Christian Jones said. “I think it’s something where Dave really respects Joe and he leans on him for a lot of things and I think that’s something that has been good to see. He has a role model that he respects and trusts and that’s always something you’d like to see.

“And even for an eight-year vet, somebody who’s been in league that long, he still looks for guidance, looks for guys to bounce ideas off of, talk to and he’s a very sociable person. So him getting Joe Flacco out there, hanging out with him is always great to see. That means you got a close team.”

The respect comes on the heels of production.

In that 2023 Pro Bowl year, Njoku put up career highs in catches (81), yards (882) and touchdowns (6). During the five-game regular season stretch with Flacco as the Browns starting QB, he had 30 catches for 390 yards, including games of 134, 104 and 91 receiving yards.



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“Yeah, Joe’s my guy,” Njoku said last week. “I mean, obviously I just seen two years ago. There’s not really much to say. I think the film speaks more.”

Njoku needs that film this year to speak loud and clear after a disappointing 2024 marred by injuries.

It started in Week 1 when he left the team’s loss to the Cowboys with an ankle injury and exited the stadium in a walking boot. He missed three games and was limited to one catch for 14 yards during his return in Washington in Week 5.

He was back on the injury report the following week with an ankle and a knee injury. In December, it was a hamstring and he was inactive in Weeks 15, 17 and 18 due to the knee and hamstring.

When all was said and done, he had one of his more disappointing seasons, catching 64 passes for 505 yards and five touchdowns — a fine year, but nowhere near his 2023 output.

Flacco, meanwhile, is back in Cleveland after spending last season with the Colts. He’s battling it out for the starting QB job alongside Kenny Pickett (who had been sidelined this week with a hamstring injury but returned to practice on Friday), and rookies Dillon Gabriel and Shedeur Sanders.

Finding that 2023 production again could be key for both as Flacco looks to win that starting job and Njoku faces what could be the most important season of his career.

The 29-year-old tight end is suddenly about to enter year nine of his NFL career, and is in a position to receive perhaps the last sizable extension of his career. He signed a four-year, \$56 million contract in 2022.

In the midst of the dog days of training camp though, it seems like Njoku isn’t overly concerning himself with those cold, hard facts of NFL life.

If anything, even as a vet, he’s still able to offer a breath of fresh air to the room — the Flacco video being just a glimpse.

“He breaks the monotony,” Jones said. “You walk in that room, you never know what’s going to happen, the energy he’s going to bring, what he’s going to say, what he’s going to do. And it benefits everybody.”



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“Because you get used to hearing me talk, it starts to sound like Charlie Brown’s teacher. It’s just a bunch of murmurs and you’re like, I can’t do this anymore. You start to doze off and then your eyes start closing and he’ll pop in with some energy.

“He’ll turn on a rock song and he’ll start dancing around and getting other guys up. He helps break the monotony. I can do what I can, but players have to find their own way out of it and he does it for them and that’s super helpful.”

More rock song parodies from Njoku will certainly be welcome, especially if production follows.



Browns defensive tackle Shelby Harris is feeling young again thanks to his teammates
By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/08/browns-defensive-tackle-shelby-harris-teammates-are-helping-him-feel-young-again.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Don't tell Browns defensive tackle Shelby Harris he's old.

"Man, I'm young, too," Harris said. "You got to think about it, at the end of the day in life, being 33, about to turn 34, that's young. So this football stuff ages us."

Harris is old by football standards. He also has an 18-year-old daughter and this is where we'll note that one of the players Harris could be lining up next to this season, Mason Graham, is 21. Mike Hall Jr., another player he could line up next to, just turned 22.

"I just think it's cool because you got to think, I got a daughter about to go to college and these dudes just got out of college," Harris said. "It's a full circle moment. But I embrace it, though. They keep me young."

The Browns defense is in a youth movement of sorts, picking Graham at No. 5 overall and linebacker Carson Schwegler at No. 33. They added Mike Hall Jr. in the second round last year and are giving young, former draft picks like Alex Wright and Isaiah McGuire a chance on the edge.

"I just think it's cool, because we always talk about it, me and my wife will, but like, half these kids are closer to my daughter's age than they are to my age," he said. "And so I just think this is a cool moment where I can go up there and still kind of be one of the guys, even though I'm older, and then I gotta go home and be dad to pretty much the same age."

Harris' kids range from ages 4 to 18.

"(Teammates) call me Unc, OG, Big Shell, I embrace it all," Harris said. "But yeah, I've heard Unc and I just think it's cool because it's more of like a sign of respect, you know what I mean? It's like, alright, you've been here, you've been around, 'Hey, go ahead Unc, do your thing. And so I appreciate it.'"

He's learning things, too.



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“The coolest part about it is, especially with my music tastes, I don’t really listen to anything new,” he said. “But then when (my kids) show it to me, I’m like, OK, I can rock with this a little bit. And then I’ll come in here and I’ll hear it in here and I’m like, see, I heard that before.”

Harris originally signed with the Browns prior to the 2023 season, right as they were hoping to benefit from their massive trade for Deshaun Watson and make a Super Bowl run. Last offseason, he signed a two-year, \$9 million contract coming off a playoff season.

It’s very different now. The Browns are running a four-man quarterback competition and have gone young in a number of key areas, but one thing still stands: they’re going to count on their defense, which includes an intriguing mix of veterans like Harris and Maliek Collins and young guys like Graham and Hall at defensive tackle.

“Everybody brings something different and I think that’s the best part about it,” Harris said. “Like you have guys like Maliek who, proven pass rusher but underrated run stopper in this league and then you got a guy like Mason who has a lot to prove in this league coming in, obviously has a lot behind him, No. 5 overall, you got to come in there and prove it.”

Originally a seventh-round pick by the Broncos, Harris, in his 11th season, isn’t just here to learn about new music or guide the young guys. He’s here to prove he can still play, too. He’s been working a lot with the second team but has received first-team reps next to Graham, too. He’s also batted down a number of passes.

“Back to my Denver days, they’ve always put an emphasis on, at least if you can see the quarterback’s eyes, get your hands up, if you’re not going to get the sack, at least make something happen,” he said. “... That’s just something I’ve always done. I’ve led the league a couple times in batted balls, and so it’s just something that the more you can do. That’s the way I look at it.”

Depth on the defensive line matters in Jim Schwartz’s scheme. The Browns run linemen through in waves, sometimes changing the front four mid-drive. Harris still has the ability to be a piece along the front who can create some pressure.

It’s part of why Harris is still here. It helps him feel young, too. And getting to experience this at a time when his kids can watch him means something to Harris.



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“For them to be able to live this life with me, to grow up through this with me and, and to be around this, I just think it’s nothing I’d rather have because eventually it’s all going to end,” he said. “And so you just hope that you were able to do enough to leave an impact on their life and to really set your family up and put your best foot forward. And that’s all I try to do every day.”



The unexpected Browns player helping Harold Fannin Jr.'s development

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/08/the-unexpected-browns-player-helping-harold-fannin-jrs-development.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Browns rookie tight end Harold Fannin Jr. is getting help from a somewhat unexpected place in his very first NFL training camp.

Sure, he can lean on his position coach Christian Jones and veteran tight end David Njoku, but blocking Cleveland's best defensive player — one of the best in the league in Myles Garrett — has been a learning opportunity through the first nine practices.

And it's provided a "welcome to the NFL" moment for the third-rounder.

"Definitely different from college, you know?" Fannin quipped on Saturday. "Obviously y'all know about Myles Garrett and what he can do, so, if I keep blocking, keep trying to block him, I think it's definitely gonna better me when the time comes in the game, slow everything down.

"Like, you see him on tape, like, ah. But then in the game, when he hikes it, and he gets up on you, it happens quick. Very quick on his feet."

It's especially different for Fannin considering he attended Bowling Green and not a Power Four school.

While Fannin (6-foot-4, 241 pounds) gained recognition during the draft process for his big-time catches while at BGSU and his creation ability after the catch, he was often dinged by draft analysts for his blocking ability.

It was a narrative GM Andrew Berry pushed back on immediately after Cleveland selected him, however.

"I think people just look at his weight and assume he can't block," Berry said at the time.

"And because he's such a good pass catcher. But I just think that's totally incorrect. He shows plenty of that on film. Certainly how we use him as a blocker may be different than how we would use David just because of their body types. But honestly, I think that's a bit of a lazy narrative."



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Throughout nine days of training camp, Fannin has created after the catch, showing off the ability that netted him 117 receptions, 1,555 receiving yards, and 10 receiving touchdowns during his three years in college.

But he's also gotten physical blocking Garrett and others as the pads came on this week, and Cleveland began tackling to the ground.

He's performed, and is where the Browns want him to be at this stage, head coach Kevin Stefanski said on Saturday. He's shown off the versatility that prompted Berry to refer to him as a "queen on the chessboard" after the draft.

He's also had a willingness.

"Harold offers you something, somebody who can be in the backfield, run routes out of the backfield, block out of the backfield, line up at No. 1, run a route there versus a corner," Jones said. "So you just got a lot of versatility from those guys and you have a willingness from them to do those things and I think that's what helps an offense.

"If a guy says, 'I'm not doing this,' then that takes catches or touches away from themselves. 'I don't want to block on this play,' well, we can't use you on this play-action."

The Browns love tight ends who love blocking, and it's something they've worked on extensively with Njoku throughout his eight-year career.

As the offense moves away from spread concepts and into more wide-zone looks, that blocking will become even more paramount.

And even though Fannin has been dinged for it in the past, he hasn't been discouraged in that part of the game.

"I love everything about football," Fannin said. "You know, I'm kind of just a guy whatever it takes to win, I just like winning."

He may not get many wins in the short term against Garrett, but maybe it will help him get some wins in the future.



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Browns have the perfect leader for one of their most uncertain position groups — Jimmy Watkins

By Jimmy Watkins, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/08/browns-have-the-perfect-leader-for-one-of-their-most-uncertain-position-groups-jimmy-watkins.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns running back Dylan Sampson should choose his words carefully. Because the boss is watching his mouth.

Literally, last weekend at training camp, running backs coach Duce Staley leaned over a fence and listened into Sampson's press scrum. The question concerned physicality. And like a moth to a neon-helmeted middle linebacker, Staley had to interject.

"Is he telling the truth?" Staley shouted over Sampson's shoulder. "... I'ma find out." Staley coaches now with the same force that spawned his 5,785 rushing yards with the Eagles (1997-2003) and Steelers (2004-2006). At every Browns practice, the second-year Cleveland assistant's deep voice booms above the camp chatter: "FINISH! FINISH! FINISH!" he yells. Fumbles are punishable by post-practice sled pushes.

Staley has no stomach for silly mistakes because, as he told his position group during Monday's practice, his running backs are the leaders of this offense.

He's right. And that's what scares Browns fans.

After two years of bending (then breaking) their offense around former starting quarterback Deshaun Watson, the Browns are rebuilding it in coach/play-caller Kevin Stefanski's image. During Stefanski's first four seasons, Cleveland ranked no lower than eighth in rushing attempts per game. During three of those four years, the Browns ranked top 10 in yards per carry.

Last year, the offense (30th in rushing attempts, 23rd in yards per carry) lost its direction. Then it lost its standard bearer in four-time Pro Bowler Nick Chubb. And left in Chubb's shadow are a slew of backs with plenty to prove.

Third year running back Jerome Ford is better than you think, but he's more gamebreaker than every-down bruiser. Second-round pick Quinshon Judkins was supposed to fill the latter role, but an offseason arrest has clouded his future. By Week 1, somebody, be it Sampson (zero career starts), special teams ace Pierre Strong (99 carries in 46 games), or undrafted rookie Ahmani Marshall (fourth on a preseason depth chart that does not include Judkins), might be playing an outsized role.

In that scenario, it'll help to have a strong presence like Staley's.



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“... He coaches from what he knows, what works (and) with a lot of passion,” Sampson said of Staley last week. “So I love that. He’s hard on us because he wants to be the best. And I take that with a grain of salt every day.”

Grains of salt? Try 35 pounds of sand, which Staley forces backs to carry during practice.

“O-linemen have been doing that for a long time,” Staley says.

Then try carrying a 20-pound football with a resistance band pulling it from your grip.

“They hate it, I love it,” Staley says. “... When you see them done, they start crying a little bit because their arms are hurting.”

Try being Sampson, who took a big hit from rookie linebacker Carson Schwesinger last week, only to hear the following message during Staley’s press conference.

“He needed to get his pads down,” Staley said. “Good job (by Schwesinger).”

Later, when Staley left the podium and spotted Sampson walking toward it, the coach doubled down: “Tell (Sampson) what I said.”

Tough crowd. Staley admits he wouldn’t want to play for a coach like himself. The self-proclaimed “average player with a cool name” says he couldn’t match modern players’ athleticism. And he says Coach Duce would put Prime Duce in positions to “show me up” against better players.

“And it wouldn’t be good,” Staley added.

But in Cleveland’s running back room, Staley’s could-play-tomorrow coaching style creates a healthy symbiotic relationship. Players learn from a teacher who understands their perspective. Staley scratches the competitive itch that never stopped.

Before Chiefs coach Andy Reid nudged Staley into coaching last decade, the former running back never saw himself holding a whistle. Now?

“I get a chance every day to live vicariously through these players,” Staley said. “... I told those guys that today. Every time you make a move, I make it too. Every time you make a tackle or score a touchdown, I just made it too.”



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I just put on my shoulder pads. To hear a Staley speech is to believe you can throw a stiff arm. Now, eventually, reality sets in. Garrett crushes mere mortals. Chubb is gone. Judkins' future is in limbo. None of Cleveland's remaining running backs look like a between-the-tackles work horse. But Staley sees a flaw in that scouting report.

"... No matter if you're 202 (pounds), 230 (pounds), it's all about mentality," he said last week. "It's all about what you've got in your chest. And every guy out there that's in the running back room has that."

Or at least, they will when Staley is done with them.



How Pilates and Myles Garrett are helping Browns tackle Dawand Jones transition to the left side

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/08/how-pilates-and-myles-garrett-are-helping-browns-tackle-dawand-jones-transition-to-the-left-side.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Dawand Jones stands in the middle of the photo, his arms draped around the shoulders of his Browns teammates, edge rusher Joe Tryon-Shoyinka and offensive tackle Lorenzo Thompson.

The 6-8, 374-pound Browns left tackle beams at the camera, wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt that's visibly soaked with sweat.

This scene wasn't captured after one of the Browns' training camp practices over the last two weeks.

It was taken after a May Pilates class.

"I started in the spring," Jones told cleveland.com "So we've got OTAs. My body was cramping up while I was trying to stretch, and so I think I needed to find a balance with the offseason."

Jones and a handful of his teammates began frequenting Studio ONE Pilates in Bay Village for classes amid their offseason training.

It's one of the two key X-factors — the other being blocking former NFL defensive player of the year Myles Garrett in practice — that Jones hopes will help ease the final stages of his transition from right tackle to left tackle, a marquee position of need in the Cleveland offense.

The Browns hope Jones will be their left tackle of the future, after producing at the spot in a small, three-game sample size last year. If he does, he will finally be the answer to the question Cleveland has struggled to answer since Joe Thomas retired following the 2017 season.

In order to accomplish that feat, however, Jones will have to remain healthy (something he's been unable to do in the first two years of his NFL career) and will need to learn how to effectively play with the finesse required on the left side of the line.

It's a big job. And the Cleveland's big man will try and find inspiration in anything he can in order to make the switch a successful one.

Pilates adjustments

Getting reacquainted with Pilates has been one piece of his plan.



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It's a workout that focuses on core strength, flexibility, strength and stability, with controlled movements.

Jones first began doing Pilates during the pre-draft process coming out of Ohio State in 2023. He liked it at the time, feeling like it really improved his hip flexibility and mobility (maybe the most important kind for a tackle), but as he began his NFL journey, got away from it.

This offseason, he was back all the way in, going twice a week, and even influencing teammates like Tryon-Shoyinka, Thompson, long snapper Rex Sunahara, and guard/center Luke Wypler to join him.

"It is really a treat to see him on a reformer," Wypler said. "Some of those springs are yelling for their lives. But he's out there, he's got his feet in those loops and it really impresses you, a big man being able to move like that. It's great for all of us. "

The reformer is the specialized machine used in the classes. It consists of a sliding carriage that moves back and forth on a frame, with springs providing adjustable resistance.

Studio ONE instructor Annabella Lavisky worked with the 6-8 Jones and the other Browns players above average height in order to modify the machines to get the most out of their workouts.

Blocks would be added along the carriage rails to allow Jones more of a range of motion due to his height. The straps on the reformers for arm and leg work were adjusted longer for the same reason, as was the spring tension bar.

Already in camp, Jones is moving better and is the leanest he's looked since entering the NFL. Changing his body composition has been such a large offseason focus considering the way his first two seasons ended.

In 2024, he suffered a broken left fibula on Nov. 17 against the Saints, causing him to miss the final seven games. As a rookie, he needed surgery to repair his torn MCL midway through the 2023 season, and missed the final nine games after an encouraging campaign as the starting right tackle.

In February of this year, he needed another arthroscopic procedure to clean up the same knee. Currently, Jones is listed at 374 pounds on the Browns roster. He said earlier this summer that he'd lost roughly 20 pounds of body fat.

"(Pilates) definitely helped," Jones said. "Just helping my muscles and just making sure my hips are open, how much turning I have to do and how much just going backwards. It all helps out at the end of the day."



‘Embrace the suck’

In the spring, Jones was honest about the hesitancy that crept up knowing he was making a big switch to the opposite side of the line with the departure of Jedrick Wills Jr., who was the Browns starting left tackle from 2020-24.

Of his 1,223 total offensive snaps in his first two years, 1,044 have come at right tackle for the Browns. Most of his college snaps at Ohio State came at right tackle too.

“It was something that you play your whole life,” Jones said of moving at the time. “I think it’s hard to adapt to something else. I have a big, strong, right-hand punch. I’m right handed so it’s easier punch to the right, but left side I feel like it’s more finesse. The game, it comes through you a little bit slower and sometimes faster at times, just depends.”

In training camp, the game has been coming to him faster going up against Garrett.

The 2023 NFL Defensive Player of the Year, Garrett is coming off of his seventh straight double-digit sack season after amassing 14 last year.

As the pads have come on over the last week in training camp, Jones has been getting the bulk of the reps against him with the first team offense by design.

“Going against Myles every day, that will only make you better,” Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski said. “There’s going to be ups and downs. ... it’s hard to block Myles, period. And it’s hard to block him in a practice setting, game setting, you name it. So, when you battle, you have your wins, you have your losses, I think it only makes you better.”

Jones has had to adjust his thinking on this a bit, accepting that he won’t win every matchup against No. 95.

“You got to embrace the suck of it,” Jones said. “It definitely sucks that he’s good, but it can only make me better. That’s the only thing I can do about it.”

‘Nobody’s like Myles’

At times, those matchups have still gotten to Jones.

During a practice last week, frustration crept in after going against Garrett in team drills and getting beat.



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Jones tossed his helmet on the ground, visibly frustrated. After that, he spent some time on the field speaking with former guard and current NFL Network analyst Brian Baldinger, who was in town covering practice.

“I’m a perfectionist,” Jones said. “Perfection isn’t always good in the head. And so I think what really helped me was after I got done, I talked to Baldy.

“He was just telling me ‘nobody’s like Myles,’ which they’re not. I’m blocking the best of the best. There’s nobody like Myles, that’s only gonna make it better. I can only get better and not go backwards.”

In many ways, Garrett has tried to make himself like another coach while going up against Jones. After all, who better to help with the fundamentals of pass blocking than one of the best edge rushers in the game?

“I know it can be difficult sometimes if I make a play or if I beat him, but just trying to coach him through some things that I see or what I’m doing and continue to improve his technique and his fundamentals,” Garrett told reporters in Charlotte after the team’s joint practice against the Panthers on Wednesday.

“I think the main thing for him is confidence in being on the left side, making sure that he knows he’s capable of winning on that side and dominating on that side. It’s just a matter of switching those fundamentals a little bit and sticking with it. Sometimes he gets in his head a little bit, but I know he has the ability to go out there and dominate on the left side or the right side, whatever he’s called to do.”

The Blind Side

It’s a small sample size, but Jones can also help build up his confidence by remembering that he’s already had some success on the left side.

In 176 snaps at left tackle over the three games he started last season, Jones gave up no sacks and allowed only six total pressures, according to Pro Football Focus tracking data.

He’s also put in the time studying the position off the field to try and gain any mental edge he can.

He’s focused on Tampa Bay Buccaneers left tackle Tristan Wirfs, who is a similar size at 6-5, 320 and who primarily played right tackle while in college at Iowa. He’s also watched Texans tackle Trent Brown, who transitioned from right to left tackle in 2022 while with the New England Patriots. He’s also spent even more time watching two of his favorites at the position, future Hall of Famers in former Eagles tackle Jason Peters, and former Cowboys tackle Tyron Smith.



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Film inspiration has come from unexpected — and more literal — places too.

Jones has drawn some from the 2009 film “The Blind Side,” which stars Sandra Bullock and chronicles the story of former Ravens tackle Michael Oher.

“You’re protecting the quarterback’s blind side,” he said. “It’s a different type of weight.”

Jones will do whatever it takes to try and bear it.



CLEVELAND BROWNS NEWS CLIPS

'It's just a dream': Gage Larvadain making most of chance as undrafted rookie with Browns **By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/08/11/gage-larvadain-browns-rookie-joe-flacco-shedeur-sanders-preseason-roster-moves/85566469007/>

BEREA — Gage Larvadain arrived in Cleveland catching passes from fellow rookies Dillon Gabriel and Shedeur Sanders. He's worked his way up to where he's found himself catching passes from a player he's been watching since he was 5 years old.

And not just catching passes, but catching touchdown passes. For the undrafted rookie free agent, it was like an out-of-body experience, so much so that he had to let everyone know on social media.

"I caught a touchdown from MrJoe Flacco... (two grinning face with sweat emojis)," Larvadain posted on X on Aug. 2. "Life is complete."

That moment happened nine days ago. It came at the end of a red-zone 11-on-11 period when Flacco lofted a perfect pass into the back right corner of the end zone that Larvadain pulled in for a score.

Since then, Larvadain made his NFL game debut in the Browns' preseason opener against the Carolina Panthers. Not only that, but he scored a touchdown on a 4-yard run on fourth down.

Still, it's hard for Larvadain to forget that moment with one of the quarterbacks he watched with regularity as a kid. He had just turned 10 when Flacco was the Most Valuable Player for the Baltimore Ravens after they won Super Bowl 47 in February 2013.

"I don't know, man, it's just one of those things," Larvadain said Aug. 9. "Big Joe, Mr. Joe Flacco. Just being a kid, just watching him on TV and then you're like, Dang, Joe. You got to look up, he's so tall, like, 'Dang, Joe Flacco.' So it's just one of those things where it's like, dang, you grow up watching him and then you get to be his teammate and then you get to catch a touchdown from him in training camp. It's just a dream."

Larvadain's college path took him from FCS Division I Southeastern Louisiana to Mid-American Conference member Miami to SEC member South Carolina. Each one of those was a step up the ladder in terms of the level of competition.

Browns wide receiver Gage Larvadain (84) celebrates a touchdown against the Carolina Panthers during the third quarter, Aug. 8, 2025, in Charlotte.

The next step up the ladder has taken him to within a few weeks of finding out whether or not the 5-foot-8, 171-pound wide receiver will be able to fulfill a much-larger dream. Larvadain's performance in training camp has put him in position to take one of the roster spots available in a young wide receiver group looking for players to emerge.

"That's not my decision at the end of the day," Larvadain said. "It'd be a dream come true but, like I said, I have to go to Philly and just be the same guy and then after on and on and on from there. That's not my decision. It would be a blessing."



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It's a blessing Larvadain has earned through his performance. What started out with him just catching everything thrown to him by Sanders as both players worked with the Nos. 3 and 4 groups early in camp has turned into him working with basically every quarterback in some kind of group or team setting.

That was before Larvadain got to Charlotte, N.C., for the Browns' preseason opener against Panthers. Larvadain had the 4-yard score on a jet sweep, caught two of the three passes targeted to him for 23 yards, and averaged 19 yards on two punt returns.

"I thought Gage has done a really nice job again going back to rookie minicamp," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said. "He's a kid that you can really depend on. He knows what to do. And then he's fast. He's made plays with the ball in his hand, and it's good for that to show up in games. And quarterbacks love throwing to guys they can trust."

Even those guys who were 5 when their NFL careers began.



How Shedeur Sanders got some advice — and a ride — from Super Bowl MVP Jalen Hurts

By Mary Kay Cabot, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/08/how-shedeur-sanders-got-some-advice-and-a-ride-from-super-bowl-mvp-jalen-hurts.html)

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/08/how-shedeur-sanders-got-some-advice-and-a-ride-from-super-bowl-mvp-jalen-hurts.html>

PHILADELPHIA — At least Shedeur Sanders got something out of his first joint practice against the Super Bowl champion Eagles.

He wasn't able to practice against them and their No. 1 defense from 2024 because he suffered an oblique strain in early individual drills and was shut down for the rest of the day. He's day to day and will sit out Thursday too, as well as probably the second preseason game here on Saturday afternoon.

But all was not lost.

Sanders had a long talk with Super Bowl MVP Jalen Hurts after practice, and also got a ride back to the locker room area from him on a golf cart.

"I'll keep the conversation intimate," Hurts said after practice. "We had a very lengthy conversation. He came to me and just wanted to talk. I'm always there. I gave him my perspective on what I see, how I go about things. Ultimately, it takes a great deal of patience and hard work, and resilience ... I'm supporting him from where I am, and I'm wishing him the best in his opportunities."

Sanders, who might have to rest for a couple of weeks, brought joy and energy to Browns Town on Friday night with his encouraging start in the preseason opener against the Panthers, going 14 of 23 for 138 yards, with two graduate-level touchdown passes to first-year receiver Kaden Davis. He put three TDs on the board in his nine drives, earning a 106.8 rating along the way.

Sanders has sought the advice of veterans such as Joe Flacco and Myles Garrett throughout camp, and seized the moment to pick the brains of the reigning Super Bowl MVP, the Eagles' second-round pick in 2020 out of Alabama. Hurts was only too happy to oblige.

"There's a sense of obligation to be yourself, and that's who I am, to be honest and genuine in expressing how I got to where I am today," Hurts said. "It wasn't an easy journey. It's always going to present some challenges, but I'll continue to be who I am, continue to carry myself in a humble way, and I'm always putting the work first. I'm aware of that. I know that's still a torch that I hold. It's something I respect and embrace and accept it for what it is. At the same time, I always put my focus on how I can be the best I can be and hopefully my actions can speak louder than anything."

On a day that Sanders could've hung his head and lamented a costly injury coming off his big debut, he turned the day into a win by learning all he could from Hurts.



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Eagles find Browns' 'freak,' 'alien' Myles Garrett hard to keep away from QB in practices

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/08/15/myles-garrett-freak-browns-joint-practices-eagles/85566994007/>

PHILADELPHIA — Philadelphia Eagles rookie linebacker Jihaad Campbell and Browns All-Pro defensive end Myles Garrett share an agent. They also shared a moment during the team's second joint practice Aug. 14.

Campbell made a point to go up to Garrett and have a conversation. The former University of Alabama standout, who was taken No. 31 overall in April's draft, just wanted to pick the brain of one of the NFL's best defensive players as he's just getting started in his own career.

"Really just two freaks talking to each other," Campbell said after practice. "He's a great guy. We're in the same agency together [represented by Klutch Sports' Nicole Lynn], so it was a little mojo just catching up with each other. Just talking about habits, finding a routine, especially me, coming in as a rookie and honing in who I am as a person. Being who I am, always staying that way, and just working hard."

Campbell chose quite the time to pick Garrett's brain. There was no one over the course of the two joint practices between the teams in South Philadelphia who stood out more than the Browns' All-Pro pass rusher.

Garrett seemed to be in the Eagles' backfield as much as Philadelphia's own players were. If sack stats were truly kept for practices, which doesn't happen because of the format that allows the play to continue, there's a real chance he could have closed in on at least a half-dozen over the two days.

A half-dozen would accurately account for the number of Eagles players who couldn't help themselves but rave about Garrett after the practices ended. That included some of their best linemen.

"There's no one like Myles," left tackle Jordan Mailata said. "You can't apply what Myles does to anyone else. He's just a freak."

Mailata was one of the Eagles who had to deal with Garrett directly. That included a play on the second day on which Garrett was late getting on the field after being called away from a discussion he was having off the field, yet still forced the big tackle to false start.



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Still, Mailata's one of the Eagles who's had to deal with Garrett a lot, lately. There have been joint practices in 2022, 2023 and this preseason, as well as a 2024 regular-season game.

It's not a surprise that those reps, most of which came in a setting conducive to competitive growth, have helped Mailata become a second-team All-Pro himself. The eight-year pro only became a Philadelphia regular in 2020, with the arrow trending upward each year since then.

"Anytime you get an opportunity to go up against the best — he truly is the best at that position — you've got to take advantage of those opportunities, especially if it's a training rep," Mailata said. "I think it's gotten me better. I've got a lot of film to go off now and watch and see how I can refine and sharpen and learn from yesterday and today. Good for me."

It wasn't just Mailata who had to deal with Garrett over the two days. On the first day, the Browns had him lined up several times at left defensive end, which would've put him over the right tackle.

That right tackle just happens to be Lane Johnson, one of the best in the game as well. Even Johnson, who has previously called Garrett the "best defensive player in the game," had some difficulty keeping the former NFL Defensive Player of the Year from getting to quarterback Jalen Hurts.

"He's an alien out there," Eagles center Cam Jurgens said about Garrett. "Just watching him move, it reminds me of a predator with some ice skates running through the grass."

Philadelphia may have been missing All-Pro Landon Dickerson and Kenyon Green, two key guards. It also may have rested Johnson on the second day.

That didn't diminish the statement Garrett made over the two days against the most recent winner of the Vince Lombardi Trophy. It called back to the statement his own defensive coordinator, Jim Schwartz, made in the offseason.

Schwartz, speaking after an OTA practice in May, said he thought, "Myles is going to have the best season of his career, and has to, right?" With a new four-year, \$160 million extension, the defensive coordinator added, "With great power comes great responsibility."

Garrett's showing against the world champion Eagles shows he's taken those words to heart. Which is why one of the young Eagles was seeking out words of wisdom from the Browns star.

"Everybody sees his game," Campbell said. "He's a freak, like I said. He's one of the best to do it, and he's still doing it."



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Opportunity Knocks Again Here for Dillon Gabriel

By Jon Marks, Honolulu Star-Advertiser

PHILADELPHIA, PA—So much has transpired since Dillon Gabriel was first here six years ago lighting it up as Central Florida's freshman quarterback.

Even he admits how far he's come since the night he threw for 218 yards and three touchdowns to lead UCF's 63-21 romp past Temple at Lincoln Financial Field. That's the same Linc where the kid from Mililani High is expected to make his NFL debut tomorrow afternoon for his Cleveland Browns vs. the reigning Super Bowl champion Philadelphia Eagles.

"I mean it's surreal," said Gabriel following Wednesday's joint practice between the teams just down the road from the stadium. "When you're in the moment, like I want to be in the present, you don't necessarily think about it.

"But when you do take a second to reflect you think about the growth you've made, the process and all the work put in. Instead of looking at growth in a two-week window, you've seen this six year time period

"For me it's all building up to this point, but you only want to take a second to reflect so you can focus on where you're at."

Where he's at is open to interpretation after the Browns selected him in the third round, two rounds before they doubled back to snatch controversial Shedeur Sanders. Last week Sanders made a smash debut, throwing for 138 yards and two touchdowns in the Browns' win over Carolina.

Gabriel sat out that game with a hamstring injury he said occurred from trying to log a few extra miles in his workout routine. But it's been steadily improving ever since, which makes it likely he'll get the nod tomorrow. Meanwhile Sanders suffered an oblique injury during Wednesday's practice, didn't work out yesterday and isn't expected to play tomorrow.

"Every day it's getting better," said Gabriel, who actually did return here with UCF during the 2021 season, but didn't play due to an injury. "I was getting a little extra reps in while running and just tweaked it.

"This is my third time here. There's a lot of familiarity with the locker room, the area and the hotels. So it's funny how you can reminisce and remember. 'I was here so many years ago.'"

That was when he was just getting started, following native Islander Mackenzie Milton to Orlando, taking over the reins after Milton was sidelined with a 2018 leg injury. After two-plus seasons Dillon eventually left UCF for a bigger football name, Oklahoma, guiding the Sooners to a combined 18-8 mark while throwing for 55 touchdowns over two seasons.

From there it was onto Oregon, where the Ducks held the nation's No. 1 ranking most of the season, before falling in the playoffs to eventual champ Ohio State. That was in large part thanks to Gabriel throwing for a career high 3,857 yards and 30 scores while rushing for seven more.



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Despite his combined college numbers: 18,722 yards, 155 touchdowns passing, 33 rushing and 65.2 percent completions, being a 5-11 quarterback undoubtedly knocked him down a few pegs in the Draft. But Browns veteran QB Joe Flacco says that shouldn't deter him.

"I think he's used to that," said the 40-year-old Flacco, who ran the first team offense here and is expected to get the nod to open the season. "He's kind of been that way since he's been playing football, so I think he's adapted to that.

"The biggest thing is just calming yourself, getting yourself to the point where you're so well prepared to be as confident as you as you want to be. Then you can go out do some of the things you don't have to think about.

"But Dillon's a great kid. He's eager to learn and coming out here doing a good job everyday, working hard."

And looking at this whole situation as a great opportunity. "I think an emotionally healthy mind to me looks at everything as an opportunity," explained Gabriel, whose father, Garrett, was a standout playing for the Hawaii Rainbows in the 1980s. "I think many people view situations as a threat.

"I view everything as opportunity. In this lifestyle we live it'll eat you alive if you don't have an emotional healthy mind.

That's how I approach it."

In terms of Browns' crowded quarterback room, he welcomes the competition. After all, he's used to it. "I had it at UCF my freshman year," recalled Gabriel, who doesn't believe being lefthanded makes much of a difference. "At Oklahoma my first and second year, then at Oregon this past year.

"Competition is part of the game we play and it's a competitive sport.

"We're all professional about the way we go about our business. We respect one another and know we've got to go out and perform every single day. That in turn pushes one another to be at their best."

As for any kind of rivalry with Shedeur... "I don't see it as that," he countered. "I see it as two guys chasing their dream.

"It just so happens we both were drafted by the Cleveland Browns."

Another example of that emotional healthy mind he talks about, which comes about from the path he's taken. "I think it just started at a young age," said Gabriel, who hopes he'll be able to get home more often due to the NFL's longer off-season. "I had to grow up quick."

"I've been far from home. Been a starter as a freshman in highschool and college. In life you experience a lot of things. Wins. Losses. Everything in between.



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And you learn from those experiences. Two people can take the same experience and go in a completely different way.”

So what should he and the folks back home expect if No. 5 takes his first NFL snaps here tomorrow. “In this world I expect the unexpected,” said Gabriel, who’s become quite the philosopher at 24. “That’s been my focus.

“I’m an unfinished product and I hope to always be that, because you’re never a finished product.”

Around your breakfast time tomorrow unfinished product Dillon Gabriel will take his next step back at the same site where he took some of his earliest. No matter what happens, good or bad, you can be sure of one thing.

It won’t keep him from looking forward to the next opportunity even more.



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Cedric Tillman's 'tired of talking about last year,' eyes consistent impact for Browns
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/08/18/cedric-tillman-browns-injuries-preseason-eagles-wide-receiver/85701594007/>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The last time Cedric Tillman had played in a football game, snow was flying through the November Cleveland air.

That was in Week 12 of the 2024 season, and the Browns wide receiver was in the midst of the best stretch of his young career. That is, until he was knocked out of Cleveland's snow-covered win over the Pittsburgh Steelers after a 4-yard catch on the final play of the third quarter.

The next time Tillman was on the field in a game, heat and humidity was filling the August Philadelphia air. But the third-year pro wasn't worried about cooling down, not when he was happy to be back on the field, even if just in a preseason game against the Eagles.

"I was excited about getting an opportunity to compete against Philly earlier in the week (in two joint practice)," Tillman said in the locker room after the Browns' 22-13 preseason win. "Then for the game, came out the time I was in, just try to execute and do my job."

Tillman was in for a grand total of 16 plays against Philadelphia. That accounted for 24% of the offensive snaps the Browns had in their second preseason game.

It was also 16 more plays than Tillman had played since that snowy night against a completely different Keystone State team. The concussion that knocked him out of that win over the Steelers ended his season — even though he returned to practice, he couldn't clear the final hurdle to return to the field.

Months removed from that disappointing end to his second season, Tillman acknowledged exactly what that final month was like for him. What he also doesn't want to do is live in the past.

"Nah, it was frustrating," Tillman said. "S***, I'm ain't going to lie. I just obviously had to keep my head up, realized there was really not much I can do and just try to get my body right. I'm good now. I'm tired of talking about last year. I'm ready to go."

Tillman was held out of the Browns' preseason opener at the Carolina Panthers. He did participate in the one joint practice in Charlotte, and then came back to participate in both joint practices with the Eagles.

As one Philadelphia icon once famously said, "We're talking about practice." For Tillman, it was about getting into a game.



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Tillman was targeted once in his abbreviated time in his game return. However, he made that one count, pulling in an 18-yard catch after he gained separation from safety Andrew Mukuba three plays before the end of the first quarter.

Mukuba gained a measure of revenge — if not against Tillman, then against the Browns — with a 75-yard interception return for a touchdown on the first play of the third quarter. Tillman, though, was much more concerned overall by the way his first game back turned out.

"I felt good," Tillman said. "First preseason action, so I felt good. Just want to go out there and do my job and compete."

That's what the Browns need Tillman to do this season. They're desperate for someone to emerge in the wide receiver group behind Pro Bowler Jerry Jeudy, and Tillman has been seen as the No. 1 option.

Tillman's path to becoming that is to get back to the form he was showing over the final five games he played in 2024. Starting with the Browns' Week 8 win over the Baltimore Ravens — when Tillman had the go-ahead 38-yard touchdown catch with 59 seconds remaining — the former third-round pick had 26 catches on 44 targets for 330 yards and three touchdowns up until that moment against the Pittsburgh.

"I think to take the next step, it's just consistency," wide receivers coach/pass game coordinator Chad O'Shea said July 28. "Cedric has proven that he can do it at a high level. He had some real good production prior to his injury last year. We're really excited about his development, still are. Time on task is what's critical. He needs to be out here, available."



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Joe Flacco takes 'business as usual' approach to being 40-year-old Browns starting QB **By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/08/19/joe-flacco-browns-40-year-old-starting-quarterback/85721612007/>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Joe Flacco woke up Aug. 19 officially the starting quarterback for the Cleveland Browns.

Not that the day felt any different to the 40-year-old.

"No, listen, it's just business as usual," Flacco said prior to practice Aug. 19. "Go out there and get another good practice in, get some rest with the guys and kind of continue to work towards what we've been doing all training camp."

You can't quite call it a "ho-hum" from Flacco. It certainly has a sense of "been there, done that" to it, however.

Except for the fact that, it's been a while since the 18-year veteran has "been there" and "done that." When Flacco runs out with the Browns' starting offense against the Cincinnati Bengals Sept. 7, it will be the first time since 2022 that he's been a team's opening-day starter.

Flacco, famously, wasn't with a team in 2023 at the start of the season. He backed up Anthony Richardson to open the 2024 season in Indianapolis.

"I don't know if I was very emotional about it," Flacco said. "But listen, you don't take for granted opportunities in this league, especially to get one at this point in my career is definitely special. But like I said, it's pretty much business as usual."

The thing is, 40-year-olds starting at quarterback isn't necessarily "business as usual." That's even though half of the AFC North's opening-day quarterbacks — Flacco and the Pittsburgh Steelers' Aaron Rodgers — fit that bill.

Flacco will become the 18th 40-year-old to start an NFL game at quarterback when he does. He credits one of his chief rivals from his younger days — Tom Brady, who played until he was 45 — as the one who set the bar for the current crop of quarterbacks.

"It's always one of those things that I think as a football player you just want to play, but I think you've got to give a lot of credit to obviously Tom, for anybody even thinking about doing it," Flacco said. "Obviously there was guys before you have Warren Moon and I talked about it a couple weeks ago, Vinny Testaverde and other guys that have done it. But I mean he pushed the boundaries like he did in absolutely everything."



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"No surprise that he did it in that way as well. But I don't think it's necessarily something that I actively think about until people kind of remind me with texts and things like that and you guys ask me about it. I don't think it's a huge deal right now, but I'm sure when I look back on it, it'll be pretty cool."

The huge deal for Flacco right now is to get the offense up to a place where it can compete with a Bengals team that boasts one of the best offenses in the league. He has to do so with a wide receiving corps that remains a question mark behind Jerry Jeudy, a running game that is still a working in progress while behind an offensive line that, while decorated, is also anchored by four players in their 30s.

The confidence Flacco has in that happening is the time he believes the Browns still have before the season kicks off. The Browns have just under three weeks to get ready for the opener.

"I think we all feel pretty good now," Flacco said. "It's like, listen, you only get a certain amount of reps out there and I think we've made the most of it and I think that's every team in the league to a certain extent. I think the good thing about this week is we kind of get to put ourselves through a little bit of a game plan and kind of simulate what we would be doing during the year and I think that's going to give everybody that extra confidence to take that next step."

The ironic thing about the 40-year-old winning the job is that he was the one who avoided the injury bug. He joked after a joint practice with the Carolina Panthers that "part of me that wishes were doing three-hour practices because I could show that I could last through those too."

Kenny Pickett only returned to 11-on-11 reps on Aug. 19 after injuring his hamstring July 26, while Dillon Gabriel spent the first week of August limited by a hamstring issue. Shedeur Sanders has been sidelined since Aug. 13 with an oblique strain.

"He earned it," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "And I understand with the injuries, how that may look, that's really not the case here. Joe performed really well, both in practice, in the joint practices, in the meeting room, you name it ... in the walkthrough. What he's able to bring to the football team, he's earned that role."

Dylan Sampson determined to keep proving his size doesn't matter
By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram



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<https://www.brownszone.com/2025/09/01/dylan-sampson-determined-to-keep-proving-his-size-doesnt-matter/>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Dylan Sampson carries something with him even when he isn't running with the ball.

The doubts of others about his size — 5-foot-8, 200 pounds — never leave the rookie running back's mind.

"It was something I grew up hearing from extended family. A lot of people," he told The Chronicle-Telegram. "I had to prove it every time. Once you prove it to them, they expect it out of you, but you always got to prove it and that's my mentality."

Sampson, a fourth-round pick out of the University of Tennessee, brought up his stature three times during the interview. He takes gratification from past success and the opportunity provided by the Browns.

After coming off the bench for two years with the Volunteers, Sampson stepped into the workhorse role in 2024. He led the Southeastern Conference with 258 carries, 1,491 rushing yards and 22 rushing touchdowns. He averaged 5.8 yards a carry.

"I wanted to prove that I could be a stable running back. I'm not just a spell guy," said Sampson, who turns 21 Sept. 14. "I could do this at the highest level of college competition against dominant defenses day in and day out and I was able to show that."

"Especially not being the biggest running back, I could carry the load."

The Browns didn't plan to ask that of Sampson. They drafted Quinshon Judkins (5-11, 221) out of Ohio State with the No. 36 pick with the intention of using him as the lead back and Sampson as a change of pace and potential slot receiver. But Judkins remains unsigned, so it will likely be Sampson and holdover Jerome Ford splitting time to open the season, starting Sunday against the Bengals at Huntington Bank Field.

Sampson may even get the start and the majority of the carries.

"Runs with a really tough and physical style despite being a little bit undersized," general manager Andrew Berry said during the draft. "He's a player who has A-plus makeup and a player that we think has untapped potential in the passing game."

Sampson spent plenty of time with the first-team offense during training camp, which led to a couple of memorable moments against the starting defense that had him defending his strength.

Rookie linebacker Carson Schwesinger knocked him off his feet on an inside run, and All-Pro defensive end Myles Garrett got him by the waist and flung him to the ground like he was throwing a bag of garbage to the tree lawn.

Sampson and the coaches blamed poor pad level for the Schwesinger play.



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"Y'all ain't had to post that on there (X), man," Sampson said of the Garrett play while laughing. "That's Myles Garrett. I mean, look at him. I'm pretty sure he could do that to a lot of people."

Sampson's best attributes are his feel and vision, which should make him a great fit for the wide zone scheme coach Kevin Stefanski has returned to this season.

"He has a really good feel no matter what the run scheme is," Tennessee running backs coach De'Rail Sims told The Chronicle. "His vision is really good. His eyes and his feet are always on the same page. And then for him to be his size, he runs so freaking hard and breaks so many tackles that he's really good in that area."

Several of Sampson's touchdowns last year were near the goal line as he ran through defenders in the middle of the field.

"Does he knock the pile back if he's going in there? A lot of times if he's in a heavy pile, no. But he breaks the one-on-one tackles," Sims said. "He does a really good job from that standpoint, and it does take more than one guy to bring him down when he's in that pile."

Sampson takes "a lot" of pride in that ability.

"Obviously not being the biggest back, so it's almost like it's a surprise or I have to earn their respect every time I get on the field," he said. "Because I'm not the guy you look at and it'd be like eye test for a running back, so I'm proving that I pass the real test. I got to prove that every time I step in the building, every time I'm on practice field, or the game field."

Sampson credits his feel to watching his brothers and all the future NFL players who played at Dutchtown High School in Louisiana, including Eddie Lacy, Landon Collins, Eric Reid and Justin Reid. His patience and vision can be traced, at least in part, to watching runners Reggie Bush and Alvin Kamara as he grew up.

"They had success just letting the game come to them," Sampson said. "So I think that's my play style. I think I'm able to set up defenses and allow my offensive linemen to do what they do best." He needed patience mentally as he waited for the depth chart to clear at Tennessee. He stayed because he loved it and wound up learning a lot.

"I understand that nothing is given, not for me," he said. "Some people might be different, some things you probably have to take from other people, but nothing was ever given to me."

"It was a blessing to get drafted obviously when I just finally heard my name called, but I got to prove myself every time and I'm used to that."

His new teammates are learning what Sims already knew.

"He's phenomenal," Sims said of Sampson as a person. "He's a guy that you don't have to worry about. He's a hard worker. He's always going to be one of the first guys in the building, always going to do a really good job taking notes. He going to be a good teammate. He wants to pour into his



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teammates and help them out and do a really good job from that standpoint. He's a guy that's going to be beloved by everybody."

Ford called Sampson a "character."

"Dylan is probably one of the funniest guys you'll meet," he said. "He probably don't act like it, but him and his Louisiana accent is hilarious.

"Him as a player, he's a great player. He got speed to him. He can make you miss. And in pass pro, he'll stun you. He's not just a little guy that you're going to be able to run through. He's a guy who will put it on you."



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Rookie tight end Harold Fannin Jr. is living his dream with the Browns, and it all started with HGTV

By Irie Harris, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/09/rookie-tight-end-harold-fannin-jr-is-living-his-dream-with-the-browns-and-it-all-started-with-hgtv.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — HGTV, short for Home & Garden Television, features shows that bring dream homes to life for families.

As an 11-year-old, Harold Fannin Jr. regularly watched the channel with his mother, Lakeesha Wise, in their Canton home.

Together, they dreamed.

Of a spacious home with the design and amenities of their choice, where life is peachy; one that the whole family would love, and especially his mother.

“Growing up with a big family, my mom did the best that we could have,” Fannin said. “Sometimes you click on and be like, ‘Man, I want to live there when I get old.’ ”

Every night, Fannin laid in bed with these dreams in mind. In April, they became reality when the Bowling Green tight end was drafted No. 67 overall by the Browns.

And on Sunday against the Bengals at Huntington Bank Field, Fannin will play his first NFL game, and not just in a small role. The Browns want Fannin’s ability to catch passes and then turn them into big plays to be an important feature of their offense in 2025.

Fannin is just getting started, but he’s already made a huge impact for his family and his hometown. “He’s sort of breaking generational curses,” Wise said. “I wish I had other words to say about it, but he has definitely changed the dynamics in our family and our community.”

Good kid, mad city

Canton and other communities facing challenges often have elements that can negatively influence young potential leaders before they realize it: Drugs, crime, fast money.

“It’s an OK place,” Fannin said. “It’s just really who you hang around. You know, I surrounded myself by good people.”

Canton is no different. And in these communities, there’s two paths to choose from. The left way.



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“You’re looking down one road, and you have all of these different things because the crime and stuff is super high sometimes in Stark County,” Wise said.

And the right way.

“You look down the right path, it seems a little lonely and quiet. There’s no one really cheering for you on that side until you make it to the NFL.” Wise said.

The son of Wise and Harold Fannin Sr. turned to the right, staying close to his three older siblings and younger sister: Tajae, Haria, Christiana, and Sky. Wise especially credits his brother Tajae for helping keep Fannin on the straight and narrow.

“He was a no-nonsense kind of guy. Even to this day, he’s so analytical,” Wise said. “Having a big brother like that who kind of paints pictures, and gives you ideas of what could come in certain directions. ... (Fannin) never had to stray into a different direction because he had his siblings.”

Football was always in the family, especially on Sundays when the Browns were playing. Fannin’s interest in the sport sparked when he watched Tajae play.

“I used to go to my older brother’s games...after going I was like, ‘Why not try it out?’ So my mom got me into football,” Fannin said.

There was also NFL running back Le’Veon Bell. He went from Groveport Madison High in central Ohio to a standout career at Michigan State. As a pro, Bell was one of the NFL’s best running backs, earning three All-Pro and three Pro Bowl nods from 2013-21.

Bell’s best years were with the Pittsburgh Steelers, Cleveland’s fiercest rival. But it didn’t matter to a young Fannin.

Every Sunday, Fannin studied Bell as much as possible, from his style of running, to his explosiveness and tight cuts, even studying his demeanor.

“Just how (Bell) looked, he just looks so calm, I kind of want to be that same way,” Fannin said. “Just look calm under pressure...I want to be able to shoot off at the same time.”

Fannin applied Bell’s calm demeanor and explosive style to his game during his youth football days. Wise and company watched and realized he had talent.

“As soon as he was playing for them, I was saying, ‘He’s gonna make some NFL. You guys should come to the games.’ I did that his entire life,” Wise said.



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And while Bell was Fannin's role model for football, his No. 1 sports role model was Akron native and NBA legend LeBron James. Geographically, Akron is next to Canton, and James' philanthropy has stretched to both areas.

That included donating bikes to the area's youth. A young Fannin attended one of James' events, received a bike and was inspired.

"That really hit the city in the heart," Fannin said. "It just really inspired me that I want to be like him when I get older. I want to be able to kind of have as much money as him, just to get back to my community."

Fannin was just a kid from Canton who dreamed big. Even translating these thoughts into illustrations on paper.

"He would tell me, 'When I go to the NFL, I'm gonna buy you a brand new washer and dryer.' Wise said. "Most kids were drawing pictures of shoes and things like that. He was drawing pictures of houses."

Growing pains

Canton McKinley High School's football legacy runs deep.

Currently ninth nationally in all-time high school football wins with 889, the Bulldogs also have won 12 state titles and three national titles.

The program is a breeding ground for future pros, including Hall of Famer and Browns legend Marion Motley.

"For Canton kids, we didn't imitate or emulate Ohio State players or the Cleveland Browns," said Antonio Hall, Fannin's senior year coach at McKinley. "We grew up imitating the guys we saw on Friday nights. Canton McKinley, that's your world. And as a kid growing up playing football, that's who you wanted to be."

Fannin was ready to etch his name into McKinley's legacy.

But there was only one problem: He wasn't a running back anymore.

Then-varsity head coach Marcus Wattley saw a defensive back in Fannin -- specifically, a safety. Fannin was a team player and followed along, but knew what he could do.

"Every day I practiced, I felt I could play any offensive position. But the team at the time, they needed me to play safety, so I just stuck to that," Fannin said.



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As a sophomore in 2019, Fannin logged 42 tackles and two interceptions. In 2020, he broke up eight passes during a season limited by COVID.

Three years in, and Fannin was still under-recruited, but not because he wasn't good on the field. It was the classroom.

During the pandemic, schools had to transition to online schooling. With so much happening in the world, school was the last thing on the minds of many students.

Fannin was part of the trend, and the effects led not only to underwhelming grades, but also his light recruitment.

"I'm a kid in high school, I'm playing the (video) game," Fannin said. "I'm not really thinking about my future and stuff like that."

Between battling limitations in the classroom and on the field, it was a tough time for him. But dreaming? He never gave up on that.

Last chance

Ahead of Fannin's senior season, Wattley was out as McKinley head coach.

Enter Hall, McKinley's new head coach.

Hall is a McKinley alum and was part of the 1997 squad that won both an OHSA state championship and the USA Today national title.

He had played for Kentucky, then spent a brief time with the Indianapolis Colts and some years in the Canadian Football League.

Hall knew of Fannin from around the way, and of his play at safety, but also made him a wide receiver.

Why? Because as he puts it, your best guys don't leave the field.

"The caliber of football player that Harold is, you definitely don't want to take him off the field, because he's very cerebral," Hall said.

Fannin took what he had learned defensively and applied it on offense, developing a football IQ that future coaches would notice.



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“His football intelligence is off the charts,” Hall said. “He understands concepts quickly...he’s very perceptive, he’s really good at creating spacing and has amazing hands. He has the best hands out of any guy that I’ve seen live.”

It worked.

Offensively, Fannin put in work with 36 receptions for 601 yards and six touchdowns.

But it was the defensive side where Fannin made his mark.

Eighty-two of his 106 tackles were solo, along with two interceptions and six forced fumbles, four of which were recoveries and two defensive touchdowns.

While leading the Bulldogs to an 8-5 season and a playoff appearance, Fannin swept the local accolades.

He Stark County Player of the Year, and Player of the Year in the Federal League and Northeast Inland District. The cherry on top was a Division I All-Ohio First-Team Defense selection as a defensive back.

The hard work had paid off.

Taking flight as a Falcon

Recruitment wasn’t heavy for Fannin, but Bowling Green was there.

Then-head coach Scot Loeffler saw Fannin, and visualized him as their guy, making him integral part of their offense at the tight end position.

“All I’m hearing is ‘offense, offense.’ You know I’m an offense type of guy. I was ready to go as soon as they said that,” Fannin said.

And when Loeffler explained how he viewed Fannin in his Falcons offense, Hall was on board.

“(Loeffler) had that forward thought as to is the quintessential tight end ‘A-position.’ That’s what it’s called, the tight end A-position for his offense,” Hall said. “And like I said, it was a perfect marriage.”

Fannin was on board with the plan, and as a bonus, majored in construction to continue his intriguing interest in homes.

Fannin had a rapid progression on the field.



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Freshman year ended with 19 catches for 218 yards, and Fannin was sixth on the team in receiving yards. His sophomore season of 2023 ended with 44 catches for 623 yards and six scores, and he led the team in both receiving yards and touchdowns.

However, Fannin would endure tragedy again during this time.

His older sister, Haria Wise, was diagnosed with leukemia in early 2021. Originally given three months to live unless she began immediate treatment, Wise fought until her passing on Oct. 23, 2023.

Confused, angry, Fannin turned to understanding. Something his mother notes as a strength of his. "If he doesn't understand something, he will just ask," Wise said.

"I think that most of us, if we did that, our lives could be a little bit easier. If Harold wants to know something or he doesn't understand something, he just asks."

On game days, Fannin has honored both his late grandfather Benjamin and Haria by writing the dates of their deaths in black marker, 7/26 and 10/23, on his wrist tapes.

A historic season

Fannin's third season at BG was one for the ages.

His experience, work ethic, and intelligence cultivate a season that put the country on notice.

Fannin also had a couple chances to show off against the big-name schools.

And did he produce.

Week 2 against No. 8 Penn State: 11 receptions for 137 yards (12.5 per reception) and one touchdown.

Week 5 against No. 25 Texas A&M: 8 receptions for 145 yards (18.1 per reception) and one score. Though he remained humble, Fannin knew what was at stake in those games.

"I never said I was NFL-ready, but I was definitely thinking, 'Just got to prove it... got to show what's all the hype about,'" Fannin said.

Fannin's junior season at BG in 2024 was arguably the best single season by a tight end in the history of college football. He led the country in receptions (117) and receiving yards (1,555), and caught 10 touchdown passes.



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He ended the year with a bang, posting career highs in receptions (17) and receiving yards (213) in a 68 Ventures Bowl loss to Arkansas State.

Fannin led the Falcons to a 7-6 record, helping the program record consecutive winning seasons for the first time since 2012-2015.

The kid from Canton who had little to no offers, dominating at a Mid-American Conference school, was suddenly set to get drafted into the NFL.

Draft day

Fannin was projected to go between the second and third rounds.

He didn't know where he was going, but a cousin by the name of Benji Wise already knew.

"On the day of the draft, he had Browns hats already," his mother said. "When he got drafted, (Benji) passed out all of these hats and it was like, 'Who do you know? How did you know that?'"

In the third round of the draft, with the 67th overall pick, Fannin was selected by the Browns.

"It's one thing to see it on TV, but to actually be here," Fannin said. "People from my city see me and they be like, 'Man, I can't believe it'. It's like another thing to actually show them I'm living proof."

Putting on for the City

Life is different now. Fannin's feat gives the family a step forward in life that seemed unattainable at first, such as going to a Browns game.

Canton is an hour drive from Huntington Bank Field, money for Browns tickets was something out of reach for Fannin's family.

They finally saw a Browns game in person when the family attended Cleveland's preseason finale win over the Los Angeles Rams. They even watched Fannin catch a touchdown pass.

Wise happily recalls going to their local park the next day and people speaking to her about her son's highlight move that got him into the end zone, and even reenacting the play herself.

"I went down there yesterday and I kept like, everybody's like, congratulations on Harold. And I'm like, 'You mean when he did this?' And I'm like, doing the move," Wise said.

Hall, who stepped down as McKinley's coach after last season, says Fannin's story is one that Canton's youth can use as motivation.



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“To have little kids in Canton reading through the local newspaper and reading about their hometown hero having success for their hometown team, as a kid, what more do you need to motivate you?” Hall said.

Those same kids get to watch their hometown hero playing in the orange and brown, sporting his No. 44, and honoring his loved ones on his wrist tapes.

And as for that home Fannin has in mind from his days watching HGTV, he plans to bring that dream to life, too. Someday.

“I wouldn’t say soon,” Fannin said, “but yeah, it’s definitely in the back of my mind.”



How Joe Flacco has defeated Father Time: His secrets to aging backwards in a kid's game

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/09/how-joe-flacco-has-defeated-father-time-his-secrets-to-aging-backwards-in-a-kids-game.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Joe Flacco and David Njoku sat on the end of the bench late in the Browns' preseason finale over the Rams, kicking their legs up and down like two 4-year-olds at recess instead of the Super Bowl MVP quarterback and Pro Bowl tight end that they are.

Earlier in the game, with the veterans done for the night and the backups in, Flacco tried on Njoku's color-changing smart glasses, and marveled at how it made the Rams' blue even more vibrant. He looked like Joe Cool in his shades, and not the 40-year-old, Kohl's cash dad from New Jersey that he is.

They're an unlikely pair, the 29-year-old wild child with the two-toned braids, and the buttoned-down, neatly-coiffed father of five. But there they were a few weeks ago, cruising around in a decked-out ATV while singing along to ear-splitting classic rock.

"JOE FLACCO!" Njoku belted out mid-song, drawing a hearty laugh from his salt-and-pepper bearded friend.

Heading into his 18th season when he opens Sunday at home against the Bengals, Flacco is fitting right in with these Cleveland Browns, even in the midst of a youth movement. He's laughed in the face of Father Time, and is gearing up to become the 18th NFL quarterback to start a game after his 40th birthday. He's also the eighth 40-something to start on opening day.

"You want to be a kid, hang around with kids," Flacco's dad, Steve, said. "Do what the kids do."

As Flacco likes to say, he's old enough to be some of these guys' father. In fact, Shedeur Sanders was born the same year Flacco was throwing 90 mph fastballs on the Audubon High baseball team in New Jersey as a senior.

But the 17-year age gap didn't stop Sanders from attaching himself to the hip of Flacco in training camp, making him crack up between drills, and trying to get him to do the "schmoney" dance. Flacco refused to "hit" the arm-flapping, knee-bending moves, and won't be dancing on social media anytime soon.

But the clock isn't TikToking on Flacco the way it has most of his contemporaries, and that's no accident.



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Tom Brady's famous avocado ice cream? OK, that's cool, but did he actually grow his own avocados like Flacco will be able to do soon when the huge garden being built in the backyard of his new home is done?

And Aaron Rodgers' darkness retreat? Flacco will raise you one Ojibwe sweat lodge ceremony, with huge benefits in a fraction of the time.

Flacco the Fitness Freak

While Brady, who played until he was 45, and Rodgers, who's starting for the Steelers this weekend at the age of 41, have made plenty of headlines for their woo-woo age-defying methods, Flacco comes off as a meat-and-potatoes, boy-next-door type who must have been blessed with great genes.

Truth is, he's as much of a wellness freak as the other two.

During the NFL lockout year of 2011, Flacco and his brothers started training at a facility in Barrington, New Jersey, where Brian Kane, a certified athletic trainer, worked. With plans to start his own wellness business in the works, Kane offered to personally train Flacco, but the young QB, drafted by the Ravens at No. 18 overall in 2008 out of Delaware, wasn't interested at first. About a week later, Kane and his wife attended an Alzheimer's fundraiser in Philadelphia, and were seated right in front of Flacco and his now wife, Dana.

"I turned around and I said, 'Hey, Joe,' and he was like, 'Yeah, you're the guy from the gym,'" Kane said.

The conversation quickly turned to training, and Flacco asked Kane what his certifications were and if he thought he could handle the job.

"I said absolutely," Kane said. "He gave me his number and we started training the very next day," Kane said.

So began a transformation of 25-year-old Flacco into the now Ageless Wonder who can still hurl the football like it was shot out of a Jugs machine set on high, and run circles around his younger counterparts in camp.

On one 90-degree day last month, while some teammates wilted in the heat, Flacco showed up for his podium interview looking cool as one of the cucumbers in his green smoothie.

"There's part of me that wishes we were doing three-hour practices because I could show that I could last through those, too," he said. "It's not that much of an accomplishment to kind of come



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out here and make it through a training camp, but I do feel like if I were grinding three hours, two and a half hours every day, I could still go through that. I wish I could show that a little bit.

“A lot of it is taking care of your body and learning how to do that. You gain knowledge as you’re in the league. Throughout my football career I’ve had a couple injuries, but most of all I’ve been pretty fortunate on just what I’ve been given and the situations I’ve been given.”

During camp, Flacco was the only one of the four quarterbacks involved in the battle for the starting job not to get injured, despite the other three being 14 to 17 years younger. Kenny Pickett suffered a hamstring injury on Day 4 that cost him his big opportunity here (he was traded to the Raiders for a fifth-round pick), and rookie Dillon Gabriel suffered one about a week later that set him back.

Sanders sustained an oblique injury (side abdominal muscle) that robbed him of a chance to participate in pivotal practices against the Eagles.

Flacco? He breezed through camp with nary a sore pinkie, and never missed a snap.

“I knew he wasn’t going to get hurt,” Kane said. “We movement screen him on a regular basis. I’m always checking his mobility, stability and symmetry. We know when something’s not feeling right, how to backtrack to the source and identify where that issue is coming from and then immediately attack the problem rather than chasing pain. I’ve been working with him for 15 years now, so I know his body inside and out.”

A bio-specific nutrition plan

Kane, who owns Evolution Fitness in Barrington, New Jersey, began by overhauling Flacco’s diet, transitioning him from processed foods to whole foods.

“Basically, nothing in a box, bag or can,” Kane explained.

He tailored Flacco’s food plan to his blood chemistry and body type, with clean, whole food delivered to his house from an Amish food co-op in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

“We had people grocery shopping for him and really just providing everything that he really needed to simplify the plan for him,” Kane said. “Because getting into a bio-specific nutrition plan can be a little challenging, we made it as simple as possible. And he’s been pretty much dedicated to that plan. Once he really grasped the concepts and understood what he was doing, he’s been pretty much working that plan on his own for the past three or four years.”

The plan includes natural supplements to support his recovery, and plenty of raw foods, including sauerkraut and apple cider vinegar drinks. The plan became a family affair, with his wife, kids and



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the extended Flacco Flock joining in. Kane is also building a large garden in the backyard of the Flacco's new Haddonfield, New Jersey, home, similar to his own.

"We really built up his microbiome so we could keep him healthy and make sure his body was recovering fully," Kane said. "It includes the appropriate types of proteins because we really had to put some weight on him so he could have the protection that he needed from taking the big hits." He recalled watching Flacco walk out of a Ravens game one day early on, all hunched over and in pain.

"I called him and I was like, 'You look like a question mark, man,'" Kane said. "His posture was really out of shape. It really opened my eyes to building his structural foundation from the inside out so he could sustain his career. He had really good protection in those days and was surviving off talent, but he needed a stronger foundation for longevity."

Now, Flacco walks out of the game the same way he walks in, at his full 6-foot-6 height, having withstood the multiple "car accidents" that take place during a game from violent collisions with the likes of edge rushers such as Cincinnati's Trey Hendrickson and Green Bay's Micah Parsons.

Taking the plunge and walking barefoot in the snow

Kane's nutritional overhaul for Flacco coincided with a multi-faceted holistic body care program that has kept him operating more like his Super MVP-self of 2012 than a typical, achy 40-year-old contemplating knee surgery and reaching for the cholesterol meds.

It's led to Flacco transforming his new home into a mini-health retreat, complete with a cold-plunge tub, sauna in the backyard, infrared bed and red light therapy, all designed for recovery and extreme wellness.

"He has mini health spa upstairs, and then his gym is downstairs," said Kane, who trains Flacco four-to-five days a week in the offseason, and occasionally during the season. "We're taking advantage of the morning cold plunge and evening saunas. Now we're going to start to experiment a little bit more with the red light therapy."

Kane also has Flacco walking barefoot — grounding — to connect to the Earth's natural electrical field for healing, and not just on the warm, summer grass.

"When you introduce your body to walking in the snow barefoot, it stimulates an entirely new type of metabolism," Kane said. "It activates ancient chemistry that we don't even know too much about yet, but we know that it's really beneficial for our health. So we've incorporated things like that into his training program."



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The extremes of cold and heat strengthen the body's ability to adapt to stress, and have helped prepare Flacco for the demands of football.

"We kind of build his foundation and then every year we reset him and make sure his body's moving really well," Kane said. "I built him an offseason plan that's shifts from basic training into weightlifting and building his arm back up, and then building in his mobility and getting more sports specific and explosive right before the preseason starts."

A late bloomer who didn't stop growing until college, Flacco's body was still relatively young, developmentally, when Kane began working with him, and "we were able to build just a really great foundation of strength and stability."

Flacco is the only NFL player Kane trains, but he works with numerous doctors and people from all walks of life. He recently trained Josh Rivera, who played late Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez in the FX series "American Sports Story," and all of the football players for that 10-part series. Last year, he trained actor Glenn Powell and a bunch of NFL players and other football players for the new Hulu comedy series "Chad Powers."

The Ojibwe sweat lodge and sound healing

While Rodgers, 41, has his darkness retreats and ayahuasca plant-based psychedelic mind-expanding experiences, Flacco has his Ojibwe sweat lodge ceremony and soon-to-come sound healing therapies.

An adventuresome Flacco has joined Kane in a powerful, healing grizzly-bear sweat lodge ceremony, introduced to him by Kane's good friend in the Native American Ojibwe tribe.

"It's a cleansing process that they do," Kane said. "They usually put anywhere from 36 to 42 hot stones in a hole in the ground and you're enclosed in a chamber and they do rounds of songs and prayers. It's like an extreme sauna. You sweat and sweat and sweat and then they'll open that up. They usually do about four rounds for all the primary cardinal directions, north, south, east and west.

"Expanding the knowledge of nature has been really been a benefit to me and my clients."

Kane also plans to incorporate more sound healing into his work with Flacco and others. He plays the didgeridoo, flute, fujara and hand pan.

"We're trying to hit all of the bases and close the loop of health for people here," he said.

Absence made the heart grow younger



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Flacco's absence from the game for the first 10 weeks of 2023 before the Browns signed him off the couch has also contributed to his renewed vitality.

For the first time since he was a young multi-sport kid growing up in Jersey, he didn't have a team or the camaraderie of the locker room. Now, when Njoku belts out, "I love you, man," during a game, or Sanders demonstrates a dance, Flacco savors the moment. He knows it's fleeting and can end at any time.

"It's impressive because I feel old at times and it's like 'Oh, this guy's six years older than me in football years,' and so it is very cool to see him go," Bitonio said. "And anytime he makes one of those throws I'm like, 'The arm has not left him.' He still has that arm and he still has that ability to move around or run. There were a couple times at practice where he was one of the faster guys out there in the mids position and it's like, 'Ah.' He still loves playing the game and still has that passion, so we're happy to have him."

The often serious Flacco has a newfound flair and a spring in his step. He's often seen laughing with his teammates, and enjoying his back nine.

"I think he's showing (his personality) more and more every single day," Njoku said. "I wouldn't even say coming out of his shell because he's a 20-year vet, but you see what I'm saying. Age is only a number, baby."

The Comeback Player of the Year in 2023 with the Browns, Flacco acknowledged that returning to the game after having it taken away has brought back the fun.

"The biggest part of what keeps you feeling young, looking young and all that stuff is the mental side," he said. "It's being excited to be out here and doing it. And I think not playing for a little bit definitely kind of refocused that and brought those important things back into the perspective that I needed it to be."

Bouncing around from Denver to the Jets to Philly and back to the Jets after his 11 seasons in Baltimore, Flacco recalled driving down the turnpike when he was with New York but not playing, and thinking, 'What am I doing?' If you're not excited about things, you can get in a rut and it can age you."

But even those four lean years from 2019 to 2022 before all of Browns Town went Whacko for Flacco in 2023 have been part of his rejuvenation. His combined record during those years was 3-14, including 0-4 in 2020 with the Jets — a far cry from his 96-67 mark in Baltimore and his Super Bowl victory.



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“Going through those hard times made me better,” he said. “Even though there were a couple weeks here and there where the questions creep into your head, I stayed the course and got through it. I proved something to myself.”

It also gave him some new teaching points for his kids, ages 7 to 13, including three who are playing football this fall in Stephen, 13, Daniel, 11, and Frank, 10.

“They’re getting little pieces of good life lessons on how to stick things out, even if you’re not exactly where you want to be right now and stuff like that,” Flacco said.

What’s more, it’s a chance for Flacco to change the narrative for his kids, who never got to see him win big in Baltimore and earn Super Bowl MVP.

“Only the last couple of years have they really been old enough to understand, and that’s why they think he stinks,” Flacco’s dad, Steve, said. “They’ve only seen him play on bad teams. There’s an opportunity here to change that.”

It’s also why Flacco can straddle the dual worlds of “do your homework” and cruising in an ATV with Njoku.

“Those guys are closer in age to his kids than to him,” Steve said. “That’s what makes it funny. But it’s a young team and there’s an energy there.”

Besides, Steve doesn’t see his eldest son as old.

“I don’t care if he’s 60. He’s big, he’s strong, and he can play,” Steve said. “He has the ability to throw the ball. To me, it doesn’t really matter what age he is.”

The old guy narrative will follow Flacco in his return to Baltimore next week, and to Pittsburgh in Week 6 when he opposes Rodgers.

But Flacco has discovered the Fountain of Youth, and age be damned.

“Is it cool that he’s 40? Yes,” his dad said. “But it will be cooler when he’s 45.”

Now those are some powerful rose-colored glasses.



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From Travis Kelce tips to Taylor Swift songs: Browns' Blake Whiteheart reflects on Tight End U
By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/09/from-travis-kelce-tips-to-taylor-swift-songs-browns-blake-whiteheart-reflects-on-tight-end-u.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns tight end Blake Whiteheart is still shaking off the excitement of attending Tight End University.

For the past five summers, the best tight ends from around the NFL have gathered in Nashville, Tennessee, for the three-day event hosted by Kansas City Chiefs star Travis Kelce, the San Francisco 49ers' George Kittle and retired Pro Bowl tight end Greg Olsen.

For a player like Whiteheart, a former undrafted prospect who's in just his third NFL season and second with Cleveland, it's a dream come true to get a chance to learn from some of the game's best in that setting.

"Travis, (Denver Broncos TE) Evan Engram, they all gave a little presentation when we were at Vanderbilt," Whiteheart said. "I wrote down everything they said. They have some good insights about route running and releases and blocking and just mentality stuff.

"All stuff that we know, but just a different way of wording it. So it kind of hits your brain better. They're the best at what they do, so if you can replicate what they can do, it's gonna help your game out."

This was Whiteheart's first time attending the event, but teammate David Njoku has been a regular attendee in the past.

This summer, Whiteheart messaged the Tight End University Instagram account expressing his interest in going.

"You pay for your travel there and back, but everything else is paid by sponsors," he said. "So when I found out I could go, I was super excited."

The event is billed as half vacation, half work, thanks to some of those presentations and some workouts.

The vacation portion this year had a bit of a twist.

This was all thanks to Kelce's highly publicized relationship with pop mega-star Taylor Swift. The two have been together since the summer of 2023. On the opening night of TE-U in June, the duo made their red carpet debut, posing for a picture with Olsen, Kittle and their wives.



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But the bigger surprise came later in the week when Swift gave an impromptu performance for guests.

She took the stage at Brooklyn Bowl with country music singer Kane Brown and performed her hit song “Shake It Off.” It was her first live performance in six months since her record-breaking Eras Tour ended.

She dedicated the song to “our favorite players who are going to play and these are the tight ends.” “It wasn’t planned, it was kind of a closed off thing and she was not expecting to sing, and no one even expected that,” Whiteheart said. “And then you see her walking down the steps, like is she about to play something? She just grabs a guitar and just rips ‘Shake It Off.’ It was pretty cool. “It was just cool to be a part of with all these big-name guys, you know, feel special for a little bit. And seeing Taylor Swift and all these celebrities. It’s just a cool experience. You’re just grateful to be around stuff like that, a lot of people don’t get this opportunity.”

Whiteheart said whether Swift would attend any of the family and friends events was a question of the week.

While even players were starstruck, though, it was still a relatively normal experience, he added. “It was definitely shocking to see her there,” he said. “But weird too, because she was acting just like she was with her boyfriend, you know? So it was like very casual. It was kind of funny, like she wasn’t on stage or anything, just talking to people. It was cool, for sure.”

Whiteheart also couldn’t help but be excited when he saw Kelce and Swift announce their engagement on Aug. 26 via an Instagram post that has since garnered 36.3 million likes.

“I remember it was posted and within like four minutes it already had like 800,000 likes or something,” Whiteheart said. “I was like, I don’t even know how that’s possible. Good for them. I guess I could say it was coming.”

Now, Whiteheart will try and take all the on-field memories he can from Tight End U into his own game, when the Browns officially open the season on Sunday against the rival Cincinnati Bengals. Last year, he appeared in 11 games with one start for the Browns, recording six receptions for 51 yards and one touchdown, the first of his career.

While he’ll be behind Njoku and rookie draft pick Harold Fannin Jr. on the depth chart, Whiteheart should still get looks this year as the Browns go back to looks with more tight ends.

He’ll have opportunities, and he’s hopeful that his time at Tight End U this summer will help him make the most of them when they come.



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As Swift herself once said, the “players gonna play.”



How Grant Delpit is helping Martin Emerson Jr. stay motivated to come back strong from his ruptured Achilles

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/09/how-grant-delpit-is-helping-martin-emerson-jr-stay-motivated-to-come-back-strong-from-his-ruptured-achilles.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns cornerback Martin Emerson Jr. hobbled out of the Browns locker room with a walking boot on his left foot, an orange and brown cane in his left hand, and Grant Delpit right by his side.

It's been that way since Emerson suffered the season-ending ruptured Achilles on July 29 in training camp, with Delpit lifting him up and walking this rehab journey with him.

Two days after Emerson crumpled to the ground, Delpit, who ruptured his Achilles during his rookie training camp in 2020, sent Emerson his entire training regimen and protocol, the one that got him back on the field by Week 2 of the 2021 season.

"As soon as I got injured, Grant, he sent me, probably like two days post, he sent me everything," Emerson said while sitting at his locker and accepting well-wishes from teammates such as linebacker Jerome Baker. "His whole rehab, it's probably like 20 slides, when he tore it, when he started running, actually just the whole process, his surgery, when he started back running, then when he was like fully back, so just seeing that process and seeing D4 (Deshaun Watson) every day. "I'm just seeing people that have bounced back, like Kobe Bryant, even though that was a decade ago, but people that are like me bounce back from this injury, so it will be simple. Just one day at a time. Just going through the process and not trying to skip through to the end where I'll be all good again. Just being where my feet is, one day at a time."

When Delpit sent the slides, he also sent a message of encouragement.

"He said, 'You'll be able to get through it,'" Emerson said. "He was like, 'Step or get stepped on.' He was basically saying get to work and don't feel sorry for yourself."

He talks all the time to Delpit, who helps him keep his head up. A season-ending injury can be isolating, and players often go through periods of depression. Delpit is helping to see to it that it doesn't happen with his close friend.

"He says it's just a test to yourself honestly, to your faith and to God and just staying true, that's it," Emerson said. "It just sucks just not physically being able to do what I want to do, play with the fellas and do what I love, but other than that, it's cool."

Like Delpit, Emerson never asked himself "why me" after he crashed to the ground in excruciating pain, clutching the back of his left leg. He's already been through so much in his life, with his dad



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serving time in prison and then his mom going in when his dad got out. He's learned to love, to forgive and to persevere.

"I don't feel sorry for myself," Emerson said. "Dark moments don't last. I know I will come back stronger and better from this."

Emerson, who hopes to be back practicing by organized team activities in May, is excited about the progress he's already made.

"It's one day at a time and I'm just seeing my rehab coming along and I'm getting better," he said. "I actually gained muscle my first month out of surgery and they said that was the first time in Cleveland Browns history that somebody did that, so I'm working. I just wish I was out there with the fellas. That's the tough part, and just not being able to interact with the fans. Other than that I'm good mentally."

A couple of times a week, Emerson will drop into a cornerback meeting so he can feel like he's a part of things.

"That's like therapy for me, just to go in, being with the guys, see football, talk ball and let them know I'm still with them even though I'm not out there with them," Emerson said.

Emerson has spent his free time working on his mind and soul as much as his body.

"Just reading for real," he said. "I'm reading more because during the season I really don't get to read. I'm getting closer to God, working on my communication skills with my family, just trying to be there more. Just trying to be a better person for real and just focus on this little leg I got."

One book Emerson read since his surgery is "Why the Best are the Best: 25 Powerful Words That Impact, Inspire, And Define Champions," by former Celtics assistant Kevin Eastman.

"It's a great book," Emerson said. "He worked with a lot of NBA legends like Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, he worked with Doc Rivers, the Hall of Fame coach. He talks about work ethic and he's got 25 words that he uses in his daily life. If he's going through something, he might look up a word like 'trust' and he'll read that definition and it will help him throughout the day. It's good for an athlete just to like refocus and kind of re-center on what's important."

He also re-read "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu.

"I already read that book like three times, but I re-read it whenever I'm going through something," he said.



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The first one he read after the surgery was “The 48 Laws of Power” by Robert Greene.

“If you read that book, you’ll understand every aspect of life in a sense,” Emerson said. “You would just understand why people think the way they think. It’s kind of thick, but worth it. Great book.”

In October, Emerson will head to South Florida to rehab with “Dr. Reef,” or Dr. Sharif Tabbah, who’s worked with many NFL players including Browns running back Quinshon Judkins while he was working through his legal process over the past three months, Alvin Kamara, Kenny Pickett, Stefon Diggs, and more.

“He’s legit, man,” Emerson said. “He’s got a lot of credibility.”

Emerson’s injury bumped Greg Newsome II back into a starting role outside opposite Denzel Ward, and he’s played well. Young cornerbacks Cam Mitchell and Myles Harden need to keep improving, with Mitchell coming off a rough outing in Baltimore.

In the final year of his rookie contract, Emerson hopes to re-sign with the Browns, but he’ll leave it up to his agent. The Browns think so highly of their 2022 third-round pick out of Mississippi State, they’ll undoubtedly bring him back. He worked overtime in the offseason to rebound from his disappointing 2024, and he’s sorely missed on the field.

The comeback has been delayed a year, but Emerson is more determined than ever to become the Pro Bowl cornerback he knows he can be.

Delpit will help see to it that he does.

'Dark moments don't last': Browns CB Martin Emerson Jr. finds positivity within recovery
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/09/18/martin-emerson-jr-browns-cornerback-injury-achilles/86186618007/>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — It was hard to say which was more obvious about injured Browns cornerback Martin Emerson Jr. as he sat in his locker.

Was it the cane adorned with an orange and brown distinct tape job? Or the giant smile that crossed his face?

Ask Emerson, and he'd rather point to the smile than the cane.

"Dark moments don't last, I feel like," Emerson told the Beacon Journal Sept. 18. "I know God won't give me anything that I couldn't bounce back from. Truthfully, this is my first surgery, first injury, and



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I've been playing a sport since I was four. So you got to be thankful for that. Anytime you play a sport, you could be injured.

"I basically played 20 years without having a serious injury. It's hurt before and having little things I have to deal with, but I'm blessed because of that. So it depends on how you look at things."

Emerson's perspective could've changed July 29. That's when the fourth-year pro's whole world got turned upside down when he suffered a torn Achilles during a 7-on-7 drill in training camp.

It only took a day before Emerson let the positivity show through again. The day after the injury, he took to both Instagram and YouTube to provide messages of hope to the public.

The 24-year-old's mindset to that is simple, really. If he's staying upbeat what should be a time of feeling sorry for himself, then there's no reason for others to feel sorry for him.

"I don't like to burden people," Emerson said. "I'm really good. I hate when people kind of feel sad for me or show, you know what I'm saying, that sympathy or whatever. I'm good. Just something I got to get through."

As Emerson spoke he leaned forward almost sage-like onto the cane he uses to support him while he's walking. The cane obviously holds a practical use in helping him get from point A to point B.

However, it's also symbolic in a sense of the progress Emerson's already made in a little more than a month since he underwent surgery to repair the torn tendon. It's progress that has him ahead of where those involved with his rehab thought he would be this soon in what it a months-long recovery and rehab process.

"I've been walking at home before I was supposed to," Emerson admitted. "... He could tell that the first day I was supposed to walk, he could tell that I've been walking and he was just like, man, you a couple weeks ahead. So we just going to move to the cane instead of just using the crutches. So yeah, it's just a part of the process. Strengthening my Achilles. That's all."

Emerson was hoping this would be the year he would be strengthening his bid for a contract extension with the Browns, who selected him in the third round of the 2022 draft out of Mississippi State. The new contract is something Emerson's not outwardly expressing concern over, saying he's trusting his agent Tory Dandy with most of those details.

The 2023 season for Emerson was a breakthrough with four interceptions, while he posted 29 combined pass breakups between his first two seasons. The 2024 season, however, saw him held without an interception and only five pass defended as more and more quarterbacks picked on him.



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Emerson hoped the 2025 season would be one of redemption and growth on the field. Instead, he's trying to use the year in a different way.

"I feel like this year I can really just relax and kind of better my mind," Emerson said. "I can get closer to the game, watching film. It's just mentally just stimulate myself mentally and everything, in every way, obviously physically too, with the things I can do."

That's not to say the mental part is easy. In fact, it's probably the toughest part of the recovery.

Emerson, though, hasn't even allowed that to overwhelm him more than any other challenge.

"I mean, physical is easy, because just the will and the want-to," Emerson said. "So it's like the process, just going through the process. But mental is, that's the battle within. You know what I'm saying. The faith and all that.

"I don't know, depending on certain walks, certain people, they walk with Jesus Christ and whatnot. But I just pray, you know what I'm saying, when those emotions and stuff kind of overbearing, it's just a lot. I kind of just pray and I feel better."

Garrett sees himself, Parsons among 'very best in this generation' - ESPN

By Daniel Oyefusi, ESPN

https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/46315350/garrett-sees-parsons-very-best-generation

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns defensive end Myles Garrett and Green Bay Packers star Micah Parsons are two of the highest-paid players at their position, and Garrett made it clear how he thinks they measure up in the pantheon of edge rushers.

"I think we're two of the very best," Garrett said. "I think we're two of the very best in this generation, so just got to continue to lead the way. There are definitely some other names in that conversation, but I think saying that he's in it and that I'm in it is not out of the norm."

Garrett's comments come two days before Cleveland's Week 3 matchup against Green Bay and the second head-to-head matchup between a pair of pass rushers who reset the market for their position in the past seven months.



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In March, Garrett signed a four-year, \$160 million extension with the Browns that, at the time, made him the highest-paid non-quarterback in NFL history. It also ended a stalemate between him and the organization after he requested a trade the month prior.

Last month, Parsons was traded to the Packers amid a contract dispute with the Dallas Cowboys and signed a four-year, \$188 million contract with Green Bay that not only surpassed Garrett but eclipsed Pittsburgh Steelers pass rusher T.J. Watt and Cincinnati Bengals receiver Ja'Marr Chase as the highest for a non-quarterback.

Garrett, who trained with Parsons in Dallas during the offseason, said the two kept in contact and he offered advice during Parsons' contract dispute and trade request with the Cowboys.

"Holy s---, he did it," Garrett said of his reaction when Parsons was traded and received a record-setting extension. "Now I remember him talking about ... [we] were sitting in the sauna during the offseason. He's like, 'If I get a deal, I'm going to beat the blank out of your deal.' And he went out there and got it."

Parsons, a four-time Pro Bowler, has recorded 54 career sacks since entering the NFL in 2021. He and Hall of Famer Reggie White are the only players in NFL history to record at least 12 sacks in each of their first four seasons, and he appreciates the growing bond he has with Garrett.

"Competing and understanding what he's done for the game of football and how he's came in and dominated, but then also offering fellowship and mentorship, I think that's what separates the good and the great. Like just being a big brother, a big friend outside of football," Parsons said of Garrett earlier this week. "And you see his work ethic, and you see his process and you say, OK, this is why this guy is this good and this great."

Garrett, the 2023 Defensive Player of the Year, is the first player to record 100 career sacks before his 29th birthday since sacks became an official stat in 1982.

Through two games, Garrett is tied for the league lead with 3.5 sacks. Parsons has 1.5 sacks and is tied for third with nine pressures.

Browns offensive coordinator Tommy Rees said the offensive line would have to be "hyper aware" of Parsons, and coach Kevin Stefanski called him "elite."

"If you're up and coming, you want to learn how to rush, as a high schooler, college player. He's one of the guys you have to watch," Garrett said.



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Parsons, who has been on a snap count (30 in Week 1, 47 in Week 2) since the trade as he dealt with a back issue, no longer appears on the team's injury report, but he is unsure if he'll still be limited by the team.

"Who knows? We've got two more games and the bye, so we'll see how they feel," Parsons said. "They'll probably let me know tomorrow what's going on, but hopefully it just keeps wearing down to a full game."

When asked if there was any reason for him to be a snap count, Parsons replied, "I mean training camp's four weeks for a reason. It takes a while, but the training staff, we've been working out before and after every day, so we're slowly getting there."

Head rush: Superstar ends Myles Garrett, Micah Parsons form tight off-field bond, wreak havoc on it

By Tom Withers, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2025/09/19/head-rush-superstar-ends-myles-garrett-micah-parsons-form-tight-off-field-bond-wreak-havoc-on-it/>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Myles Garrett kept any communication with fellow quarterback crusher, game wrecker and Green Bay superstar Micah Parsons to a minimum.

After all, it's game week. Even the tightest friendships get put on hold.

The All-Pro edge rushers, though, did have one quick exchange as Parsons asked Garrett if he could secure tickets to Sunday's game in Cleveland for two family members.

"I got you," Garrett said he texted Parsons.



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The small, polite gesture was nothing compared to what Garrett did for Parsons this summer. Garrett inadvertently had a hand in making him the NFL's highest-paid defensive player after Parsons forced Dallas to trade him to end an often-ugly holdout before signing a four-year, \$187 million contract with the Packers.

Months earlier, Garrett had created his own firestorm in Cleveland by demanding the Browns trade him to a Super Bowl contender before he and the team resolved their differences with a four-year, \$160 million extension.

Garrett set a high bar. Parsons jumped it.

After advising Parsons while his messy ordeal dragged on, Garrett recalled his reaction when news broke days before the season opener that the Cowboys had caved.

"Holy (crap), he did it," Garrett said, flashing a bright smile. "I think that was the same thing that went through most people's minds. The \$47 million (average salary), I remember him talking about. We were sitting in the sauna during the offseason. He was like, 'If I get a deal, I'm going to beat the (crap) out of your deal.' And he went out there and got it.

"So I'm just glad to see him get what he's earned and he's worth every dollar."

Fat contracts and public standoffs aren't all Garrett and Parsons have in common.

In a league of alphas, they stand out. Both will almost certainly be enshrined as Hall of Famers, with Garrett's stats (105 career sacks) already Canton-worthy and Parsons (54 sacks in five seasons) tracking toward football immortality.

So, who's better?

"I guess we'll have to see by the end of the season," Garrett said.

While arguable, they rank as Nos. 1 and 1a among defensive players.

Garrett is almost certain of it.

"We're two of the very best," he said. "We're two of the very best of this generation. We just got to continue to lead the way. There are definitely some other names in that conversation, but I think saying that he's in it and that I am in it is not out of the norm."



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What's abnormal is their uncanny abilities to burst off the line of scrimmage, race around or power through multiple blockers to either pressure or bring down a QB.

It's why despite them being on opposite sidelines the spotlight will be on Garrett and Parsons when the Browns (0-2) host the Packers (2-0), whose status as NFC title contenders rose exponentially when they sent two first-round picks and defensive tackle Kenny Clark to the Cowboys.

At 26, Parsons is a younger version of Garrett, who had admired him from afar before getting to know him better during offseason workouts together in Dallas.

"The kid's special, man," said Garrett, who turns 30 in December. "I watched film really since he got in the league. His change of direction. His explosion of the ball. His get-off. His suddenness. He's a little bit shorter as a rusher and that gives him leverage angles that some guys just don't have naturally and he's able to use that to his advantage.

"He's just ferocious and relentless when he is out there. He's a fun rusher to watch. If you're up and coming, you want to learn how to rush as a high schooler, college player, he's one of the guys you have to watch."

Garrett has been a sight to behold so far in 2025.

He heads into this week tied for the league lead in sacks (3.5) and first in tackles for loss (six). The only player with at least 10 sacks in each of the past seven seasons, Garrett paused when asked if he's ever played better.

"The sample size is too small, probably by the end of the season I will say that," he said. "But right now there's a couple stretches I can remember that were better than this."

Parsons appreciated Garrett's assistance throughout his strange summer. The Browns star was there for him as a part-time confidante, part-time mentor and full-time friend.

"Competing and understanding what he's done for the game of football and how he's came in and dominated but then also offering fellowship and mentorship, I think that's what separates the good and the great," Parsons told reporters in Green Bay. "Just being a big brother, a big friend outside of football, that just offers an unbelievable amount of respect when you do that."

The respect between them is mutual. Like Garrett, Parsons feels the list of top defensive players should begin with either of their names. And their names only.

Parsons won't listen to anyone argue that there's anyone better than him — except if it's Garrett. "Just him," he said. "Just him."



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How Packers' Micah Parsons, Browns' Myles Garrett forged an elite edge rusher bond

By Zac Jackson & Matt Schneidman, The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/6645470/2025/09/20/micah-parsons-myles-garrett-packers-browns/>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Micah Parsons and Myles Garrett might be the two best defensive players of this generation.

The newest Packers star keeps a short list — one name in fact — of edge rushers who he would concede are better than him.

“Just him,” Parsons said of Garrett. “Just him.”

While Parsons and Garrett won’t directly face off when the Packers (2-0) visit the Browns (0-2) on Sunday, the two share a mutual admiration for one another and have cultivated a relationship strong enough that Parsons texted Garrett for tickets to Sunday’s game.



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“Competing and understanding what he’s done for the game of football and how he’s come in and dominated, but then also offering fellowship and mentorship, I think that’s what separates the good and the great,” Parsons said Friday. “Just being a big brother, a big friend outside of football, you offering that, I think that just offers just an unbelievable amount of respect when you do that. And you see his work ethic and you see his process and you say, ‘OK, this is why this guy is this good and this great.’”

The feeling is mutual for Garrett.

“The kid’s special, man,” Garrett said. “I got to see it in person this offseason. I mean, watch the film: change of directions, the explosion on the ball, get off, his suddenness. I mean, he’s a little bit shorter as a rusher and that gives him the leverage angles that some guys just don’t have naturally, and he’s able to use that to his advantage. And he’s just ferocious and relentless when he’s out there. He’s a fun rusher to watch. If you’re up and coming, you want to learn how to rush, as a high schooler, college player, he’s one of the guys you have to watch.”

Garrett said he and Parsons have run into each other at various events, such as the Pro Bowl, and previously discussed offseason workouts together. They finally made that happen in early 2025 when Garrett returned to his hometown of Arlington, Texas. Parsons said that group also included Texans edge rusher Will Anderson Jr. and Lions edge rusher Aidan Hutchinson.

“Oh man, they’re heated,” Parsons said. “They’re heated ... you couldn’t have a bad day. There was a lot of s— talking and nonsense going on between me, Will, Aidan and a couple of other guys from Cleveland, but I mean, you couldn’t have a bad day. The stakes were high every day. They tell you don’t look into the future, but I can’t wait to get back into that room and see how these guys complete the season and see how everyone performed. But I think everyone was off to a really good start.”

Parsons and Garrett, in particular, had plenty to talk about.

Garrett spent the end of the 2024 season making clear that he wasn’t happy with the state of the Browns and teasing that he might ask for a trade. He finally did in early February, following up a formal statement with a Super Bowl-week media tour, making clear that he was done in Cleveland and wanted to be traded to a Super Bowl contender.

On the day before the player movement period began, though, Garrett got what he’d really been seeking: a new contract that, at the time, was the richest ever for a non-quarterback with \$123 million in guaranteed money. Garrett’s representation knew that the Browns had repeatedly told suitors that Garrett was not available, and in early March, the tenor of the conversations changed from severing the relationship to saving it.



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Parsons, meanwhile, was waiting on his new deal. That wait continued through training camp amid a standoff with Cowboys owner and general manager Jerry Jones.

“We talked about it some,” Garrett said. “We’d had conversations. I wouldn’t say he was constantly asking for advice. He’s wise enough at his young age, and he’s got all kinds of people around him to help guide him through his decision-making, and he knows business pretty well by himself. But, whenever he wanted my ear or some words, advice, I don’t have a problem letting him know either.”

Parsons said Garrett acted as his big brother during the process and offered moral support. Friday, Garrett was asked his reaction when he heard Parsons, the Cowboys and the Packers had reached their agreements.

“Holy s—, he did it,” Garrett said. “I think that was the same thing that went through people’s minds — that and the \$47 (million per year) ... we’re sitting in the sauna during the offseason, he’s like, ‘If I get a deal, I’m going to beat the blank out of your deal.’ And he went out there and got it. So that was part of, I guess, the humorous part of the deal, and then him texting me, talking about, ‘Did I do right?’ I’m like, ‘It’s perfect.’ So I’m glad to see (him) get what he’s earned, and he’s worth every dollar.

“I’m proud. I’m glad he went out there and got the deal he earned ... I think him and I went in two very different ways, and this wasn’t a relationship I wanted to ruin. There was always a potential of me being back in the same spot, which I am now. And now I don’t think that’s what he wanted after discussions with Jerry and some of the other people, especially without his agent being present. I feel like that seemed like a show of disrespect, the way they were handling the situation, and I think the way ours was handled was a bit more respectfully all around.”

Now solidified on their respective teams after each’s strenuous offseason, Parsons and Garrett will spearhead two of the NFL’s best defenses through the season’s early weeks when the winless Browns look to upset the undefeated Packers in Cleveland.

Last December, Garrett became the youngest player to accumulate 100 career sacks when he reached 100.5 two weeks before his 29th birthday. With a league-high 3.5 in this season’s first two games, he’s two short of tying former Packer Reggie White for the most sacks by a player under 30.

Last year, Parsons joined White as the only players to record 12-plus sacks in each of their first four seasons. Garrett only had seven sacks in his rookie year, but he’s had at least 10 in every season since.

Only three players registered 30-plus sacks and 300-plus pressures from 2021-24: Parsons, Garrett and Cincinnati’s Trey Hendrickson.



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Since 2021, Garrett has led the NFL in sacks with 63.5. Hendrickson is next with 59 and Parsons is fifth with 54. Per TruMedia, Parsons has led the NFL since 2021 with 340 quarterback pressures. Garrett is fourth with 330.

While about three and a half years separate them in age, there's not much separating Parsons and Garrett in caliber. Not only do they share a friendship and insatiable desire to be the best at their position, but they're both on pace to don gold jackets when their careers are over.

"I think we're two of the very best," Garrett said. "I think we're two of the very best in this generation, so (we've) just got to continue to lead the way. There are definitely some other names in that conversation, but I think saying that he's in it and that I'm in it is not out of the norm."

Dawand Jones has built relationship with Joe Thomas, appreciates belief from Hall of Famer - BrownsZone with Scott Petrak

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2025/09/20/dawand-jones-has-built-relationship-with-joe-thomas-appreciates-belief-from-hall-of-famer/>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Dawand Jones and Joe Thomas have one critical thing in common: playing left tackle for the Browns.

Beyond that, they're a bit of an odd couple.

"We have a really good relationship. I really like him," Thomas recently told The Chronicle-Telegram.

"I wouldn't say we have a million common interests. He's a NASCAR guy. I've never watched a race in my life, but trying to do anything I can to learn about it and pick his brain and just be curious about what he likes to do and how he likes to spend his free time and just understand how he thinks and how he learns and the best way to get through to him."

Jones holds up his end of the relationship.



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“I try to ask him about beef. I try to ask him about what he likes,” Jones told The Chronicle this week. “He’s from Wisconsin, which they do have a track up there, Road America, and he said he’s never been. So I was like, you’ve got to do something besides football and take care of beef.”

Before Thomas was a cattle farmer, he was a 10-time Pro Bowl left tackle who played 10,363 consecutive snaps and was enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility.

He spent time with the Browns during the preseason, not only serving as an analyst on the TV broadcasts but attending meetings and practices and working with Jones as a coach.

As Jones, a fourth-round pick out of Ohio State in 2023, continues to get acclimated to the left side after spending most of his life as a right tackle, he has a trusted advocate to help him navigate the struggles and challenges, including the matchup with Green Bay pass rusher Micah Parsons coming Sunday.

“We really got along and had a lot of great opportunities just one-on-one to watch film and to talk and chat,” Thomas said. “Anytime you want to make a connection with somebody to make an imprint and get through to them about certain things, I think you need that personal connection. We definitely have that.”

Jones is grateful. And a bit in awe to have such a heavyweight in his corner.

“It’s something that I never thought I’d be able to get to, having that as a resource,” he said.

“Growing up, that was definitely one of my favorite tackles. So it’s pretty dope, just having Joe here. He even texted me today, just letting me know, what am I thinking today? He’s just checking up on me, making sure I’m all right.

“It’s a Hall of Famer, he’s willing to make sure I’m OK, make sure I got everything handled for this week and I really appreciate that.”

According to the coaches, Jones has made progress in an up-and-down first two games. Pro Football Focus has seen mostly downs, grading him 63rd among tackles at 33.4 — 43.0 pass blocking and 37.4 run blocking.

He was held out for 10 snaps Sunday against the Ravens as a precaution due to the heat. With the forecast calling for temperatures in the 80s Sunday on the lake, coach Kevin Stefanski could go with a similar plan.

“That rotation will come down to Kev and what he thinks is best,” line coach Mike Bloomgren said.

“You look at the second half of football there in that game against the Ravens, and it’s the best



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football we've seen from Dawand with very good strain and some very good things. Now, again, there's still the rep of pass pro we've got to clean up.

"Anytime you have an opportunity on a down block to take No. 0, Roquan Smith, and put him into the ground on the other side of the formation, that's good stuff, and that's the violence and the expectation of physicality we have for our room. And there's still so much more out there, there's no telling how much more progress we can make with Dawand and we're going to keep working towards it."

Parsons, a four-time Pro Bowler, was acquired by the Packers before the season in a trade with the Cowboys and signed a record deal for a non-quarterback. He moves across the defense and will spend at least a few snaps across from Jones.

"He's elite as we know," Jones said, putting Parsons on the same level as teammate Myles Garrett. "You can't take no reps off. He's a high-motor effort, everything that you see is what you get."

"He's just fast."

The Browns opened vs. the Cowboys in 2024, and Parsons spent much of the game against Jones. Parsons had a sack and five quarterback hits in Dallas' win.

"I'm prepping on that film, take those plays, my good plays, my bad plays and just reorient to my game," Jones said. "Just bring the fight to him. Just play your game. Don't do nothing out of the ordinary, honestly."

Parsons is only one piece of a Packers pass rush that has eight sacks, 18 quarterback hits and 33 pressures. End Rashan Gary has 2.5 sacks, tackle Devonte Wyatt two and Parsons 1.5. He had eight pressures last week against the Commanders.

Jones is also a work in progress as a run blocker. At 6-foot-8, 374 pounds, he has the potential to destroy defenders but hasn't done that consistently.

"I thought Week 2 the run game was a lot better. He's improved in that," left guard Joel Bitonio said. "It's crazy how we're all big people, but he's just so big and so when it clicks on film and he had one, it wasn't a huge run, but he had one where he got his hands on Roquan and drove him past the ball and put him down and I was like, I would love to see that every play."

"It might be him getting more comfortable and just understanding the offense and getting there, but you saw some strides and hopefully it continues and consistency continues."



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Thomas said the hardest part of the transition to the left side is the pass set because of the “very unnatural” movement of going backward.

“You’re kicking with your opposite leg, you’re pushing with your opposite leg, you’re using your opposite hand as maybe a dominant hand or your lead hand in certain situations,” said Thomas, who spoke as part of a Crown Royal promotion. He visits NFL stadiums before games and hangs out with fans.

Jones said the best tip from Thomas is to take two square kicks and punch.

“He’s in pretty good shape right now, but I think you are going to see progress throughout the course of the season,” Thomas said. “Just having more of those full-speed game reps playing left tackle.”

The Browns need Jones to be good, as they search for young, homegrown cornerstones. If he’s not the long-term answer, they could be looking at an entirely new starting line in 2026, as the other four starters — Bitonio, center Ethan Pocic, right guard Wyatt Teller and right tackle Jack Conklin — are at least 30 years old and in the final years of their contracts.

“The first two games, I think I played OK, pretty average, nothing over the top,” Jones said.

“Definitely got room for improvement and I can’t wait to do it this game.”

His confidence is buoyed by the faith shown by Thomas.

“Just knowing that a Hall of Famer is watching me and he believes in me, wouldn’t text me, wouldn’t do all this extra stuff if he didn’t believe in me,” Jones said. “I really appreciate that.”



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Dillon Gabriel says he's 'ready for every moment' as he assumes Browns starting QB job

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/10/01/dillon-gabriel-browns-starting-qb-vikings/86438056007/>

LONDON — It's Dillon Gabriel's moment. That's whether the rookie is ready or not.

The new Browns starting quarterback insists he's ready for the moment. Just to remind himself of that, he mentioned something he received from a friend.

"I think it's funny because I got a text from a good buddy of mine, and he sent me a picture of a fire station," Gabriel said during an availability Oct. 1 with reporters in Berea. "It's kind of like, why are you sending that? But when he sends it, he just lists the obvious, right? Doors are open, garage doors are open, things are ready to go, and they're just waiting on that phone call to respond surgically. Just what a great representation of the job I had and being ready for that moment.

"I think I smile because it's like a moment you prep for and you are extremely excited for, but also got to realize that it's extreme focus, and that's what I've continued to harp on. But



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you wait for the perfect time, you're going to wait a whole lifetime. So for me ... I've always been ready for every moment."

Gabriel's being called to put out the fire that has been the Browns' first four games.

Cleveland is 1-3 as it heads to London for an Oct. 5 game against the Minnesota Vikings.

Joe Flacco wasn't directly responsible for all of the things that ailed the Browns offense over that span. He did have six interceptions and two lost fumbles, two significant numbers that indicated to coach Kevin Stefanski it was time to make a change.

Now that the change has been made, Gabriel's aware of his role in turning everything around. It's got to start long before the day of the game.

"I think initially it's great juice and great energy, and that starts on Monday, the beginning of the prep week," said Gabriel, who had been getting a handful of first-team reps the last few weeks of practice. "That starts with just having great meetings, having great practices.

"So we're taking small sample sizes and bites at the whole thing and making sure that we just focus on what we got in front of us. ... But like I said, it's not just one person, it's all of us coming together, creating momentum together so we can go move the sticks and put points on board."

The Browns made a quarterback change to do just that — put more points on the board. A 34-10 loss in Detroit was the fourth game in a row they didn't score more than 17 points, and their 14.0 scoring average is 31st in the league.

Gabriel, though, will make his debut against a Vikings defense coordinated by Brian Flores, who is known for creating confusion with his coverages. Minnesota is seventh in the league in yards allowed and points per game, and is third against the pass.

Not exactly the ideal place to drop a rookie for his first start. Then again, there never really is in the NFL.

"A lot of respect for what he's done. Even this year, I think he's just a unique defensive mind and has created a lot of turnovers, a lot of negative plays, confusion, like you said," Gabriel said. "But I think it's just gonna be a great challenge for us all, coming together, and we got a lot of respect in how we attacked our craft with diligence and want to make sure that we're ready for that moment. But, like I said, a lot of respect for our competition."

One thing Gabriel could bring to the offense is a little bit more mobility than Flacco. The combination of Flacco's lack of mobility and the Browns' offensive tackle issues led to him having very little time when he was in the pocket.



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Gabriel's isn't a "running quarterback," necessarily, but a part of his game is to utilize his mobility to find windows through which to throw. He can, however, pull it down on occasion when that's what the defense gives him, which he acknowledges is something he can bring to the offense without it being too much of the offense.

"I think it's a combination, and being able to ad lib complements as using your legs as a weapon is real in this day and age. But I think it's a great combination of a lot of things," Gabriel said. "You want to use it when you need to, not when you just feel like doing it. So I think moving when necessary is important, and [I] have confidence in that but also throwing and make sure we're running the offense the right way."

Dillon Gabriel on taking over as starter: I've always been ready for every moment - BrownsZone with Scott Petrak

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2025/10/01/dillon-gabriel-on-taking-over-as-starter-ive-always-been-ready-for-every-moment/>

BEREA — Dillon Gabriel didn't immediately understand the text from a close friend — a picture of a fire station.

He quickly grasped the meaning.

"Garage doors are open, things are ready to go and they're just waiting on that phone call to respond surgically. Just what a great representation of the job I had and being ready for that moment," Gabriel said Wednesday after being named the starting quarterback. "And I think I smile because it's like a moment you prep for and you are extremely excited for, but also got to realize that it's extreme focus, and that's what I've continued to harp on.

"You wait for the perfect time, you're gonna wait a whole lifetime. I've always been ready for every moment."



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Browns QB Dillon Gabriel said buddy texted him photo of fire station. Simple metaphor: always have to be ready.

Coach Kevin Stefanski made the anticipated move, benching 40-year-old Joe Flacco in favor of Gabriel, a rookie third-round pick. Flacco will be the No. 2 ahead of fifth-round rookie Shedeur Sanders.

A change was always likely at some point this season, but four games in was quicker than expected. The Browns are 1-3, last in the league with a minus-6 turnover margin and 31st with 14 points a game.

Gabriel was named the No. 2 on Aug. 25 when Kenny Pickett was traded to the Raiders. He played a series each at the end of blowout losses to the Ravens in Week 2 and the Lions on Sunday.

Browns QB Dillon Gabriel on being named starter.

“From the beginning this is the moment you look forward to as a competitor,” said Gabriel, whose first start will come Sunday against the Vikings in London. “But it’s part of my job to be ready, to be that sense of hope for everyone to continue to be better and come together and create momentum for each other. So excited for that, but just also extremely focused at doing my job at a high level.”

In announcing the switch, Stefanski again stressed the offensive struggles are a teamwide issue and Flacco isn’t the only one to blame.

“The big thing for me is we need to all be better,” Stefanski said. “We need to coach better, we need to block better, catch better, run better. All the above. We need to be better. And I know the quarterback position gets quite a bit of scrutiny, I understand that, but this is about our entire team playing better.”

The hope is Gabriel, 24, can provide a jolt. He’ll be the 41st quarterback to start for the Browns since the franchise returned in 1999.

“I’m pretty sure that’s what everybody is looking for is that spark,” receiver Jerry Jeudy said. “Like Coach said, it’s all 11 guys on that field. All 11 guys got to do their job just for that play to be successful. So if one guy messes up, the whole play is screwed. So as long as everybody do their job, you can go places.”

Gabriel explained how he plans to elevate the guys around him.

“Initially it’s great juice and great energy,” he said. “And that starts on Monday, the beginning of the prep week. That starts with just having great meetings, having great



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practices. So we're taking small sample sizes and bites at the whole thing and making sure that we just focus on what we got in front of us.

"But it's not just one person, it's all of us coming together, creating momentum together so we can go move the sticks and put points on board."

Browns QB Dillon Gabriel said he's trying to create positive momentum.

Gabriel (5-foot-11, 205 pounds) was selected No. 94 overall out of Oregon. He played six years across three colleges, starting 63 games, an FBS record for quarterbacks. He's second in FBS history with 18,722 passing yards and 155 passing touchdowns and No. 1 with 189 total touchdowns.

He missed the first preseason game with a hamstring injury but played well in the final two, going 25-for-37 for 272 yards, a touchdown, an interception, two sacks and an 86.8 passer rating. In his two regular-season drives, he's 3-for-4 for 19 yards and a touchdown.

Stefanski said Gabriel took snaps with the first-team offense during the first four weeks, which was part of the plan to develop the rookies. He'll likely get them all moving forward and threw seeds in the early portion of practice open to reporters.

"As much as we could. Reps here and there throughout practices, but also respecting Flacco getting his reps throughout those weeks," Gabriel said. "So we tried to fit in as much as possible, but we also did a good job of that in training camp. So you got to build those moments up to get to this moment. And a great week of prep will set us up for success." Flacco has been impressed with Gabriel's intensity.

"Listen, he's into it, man," he said. "He's ready to go. I'm sure he's super excited about this opportunity. You can tell he takes it seriously just by the way he studies and his intent in the meeting rooms and on the practice field."

Flacco has shared his 18 years of experience with Gabriel and Sanders.

"What I appreciate about Joe is it's not his job to be a mentor, it's his job to be a great quarterback," Gabriel said. "And just his openness to answer questions, it's my job to ask questions and search for those answers. So appreciate him for that."

"And he's a captain on this team. He's still a huge piece of what we do, and we look to him for a lot of things because he's been through it a bunch. So there's a ton of respect there for me and a guy I definitely look up to. And it's going to be important to have that going into this week."



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The Browns trust Gabriel's intelligence and preparation, and he moves better than Flacco, which should help behind a line that's been missing its starting tackles.

"Obviously from the second he's been here, he's been working very hard, very intelligent young man," Stefanski said. "He's done a nice job throughout practice and this whole season he's been learning how to get yourself ready and understand the rhythm of an NFL week and what that looks like as a backup and obviously now feel like he's ready to go in as a starter."

Stefanski didn't say much in explanation of the move.

"I felt this decision was best for the football team," he said. "Across the board we have to be better and that's the we in this thing. So obviously expect Dillon to play well, but we have to be good around him."

"The focus is on doing all those things that allow you to be sound on offense. We're just going to have to support the young man, coaches, players, offense, defense, special teams."



Andre Szmyt more 'confident' as he's 'settling into what the NFL is' as Browns kicker
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2025/10/18/andre-szmyt-browns-kicker-week-7-nfl/86746050007/>

BEREA — To notice the difference in Browns kicker Andre Szmyt, it doesn't require someone to go back to the first couple of games of the season. Just a couple of weeks ago, even, to now has made a world of difference.

"Yeah, I think obviously a lot more confident," Szmyt told the Beacon Journal this week.

"Just kind of settling into what the NFL is and just seeing that it really is no different. Just kicking a ball, that actual thing I do, is no different. So just kind of realizing that and just building off that and going in week in, week out and just having my process and doing my routine. I think that's what builds the confidence."

The story of Szmyt's first regular season in the NFL, or at least its beginning, is well known.

There were the two missed kicks — a third-quarter PAT and a 36-yard field goal with 2:22 remaining — that cost the Browns a chance to win the season opener against the Cincinnati Bengals, and many thought might cost Szmyt a chance to continue kicking in the league.

Two weeks later, in the same stadium, Szmyt was the toast of the town when he knocked through a 55-yard field goal as time expired to help Cleveland gain its only win of the season, 13-10 over the Green Bay Packers. That's been part of a run since the opener in which he's made 8 of 9 field goals and all six PATs.

It's also been part of Szmyt's continuing education as a kicker at the highest level of football. It's an education he started while in training camp with his hometown Chicago Bears in 2024, but has been accelerated since signing with the Browns in the offseason.

"I think in NFL there's obviously more attention to things," Szmyt said. "Obviously just going back to my rookie year, being in Chicago, every kick's filmed, everything is this, everything is charted, everything is written down. So I was like, in [college at] Syracuse when I won the job in my redshirt freshman year, it was kind of mine for as long as I wanted to stay there. Obviously in the NFL, it's a very performance base, so you needed to show up every day and do your job, whether that's practice as well as in the games. So obviously that was different."

That level of analysis was part of the mental side of the game to which Szmyt was having to adjust in Cleveland. That's on top of the obvious aspects of kicking in the NFL that have



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caused some of the best kickers college football has produced to ultimately fail in the league.

Szmyt was one of those college kickers at one time, winning the Lou Groza Award as the top college kicker as a redshirt freshman in 2018. That, however, doesn't matter much now that he's employed at 76 Lou Groza Boulevard.

The 27-year-old knows at this point it's not what's on his mantle but his mental state.

"Yeah, I think it's a huge part to kicking," Szmut said. "There are a lot of people that can do it and there are a lot of people that do it and can do it. But there is the added aspect of pressure and expectation to do your job. There can be a short leash whether you're a rookie or a veteran.

"So it's kind of always having to show up, do your job and stuff. The mental part of it, just being able to lean back on whatever it may be. For me, it's faith. My religion and just grounding myself with that. And the football and the job just comes as it goes."

Szmyt's mental and physical state will be tested this week when he finally gets to kick at home for the first time since the game-winner against Green Bay. The weather conditions are going to be significantly different than the sunny, upper-70s day it was then.

Accuweather.com is calling for temperatures in the low 60s, although it will feel like the upper 50s. Even worse, it's calling for an 80% chance of rain and thunderstorms, along with wind blowing 27 mph with gusts up to 41 mph.

"People have been talking about the weekend early in the week," Szmyt said. "I'm aware of the conditions that'll be. I mean, last week wasn't the friendliest of conditions either. And we've practiced here, we're rarely indoors, unless it's an indoor team obviously we're trying to simulate. Kicked in the rain out here, kicked in windy conditions and I dunno what. Since the weather's changed, it's been windy every single day out there. So kind of what to expect."



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Joel Bitonio passing Joe Thomas for most starts since '99 a tale of loyalty, friendships and Hall of Fame play - BrownsZone with Scott Petrak

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2025/10/17/joel-bitonio-passing-joe-thomas-for-most-starts-since-99-a-tale-of-loyalty-friendships-and-hall-of-fame-play/>

Joel Bitonio passing Joe Thomas in the record book comes with a certain symmetry.

No one has played at a higher level or conducted himself with more class than the close friends who used to block next to each other on the left side of the offensive line.

When Bitonio lines up at left guard for the first snap Sunday against the Dolphins at Huntington Bank Field, he'll start his 168th game — one more than Thomas for the most since the Browns returned in 1999. They'll share a sense of pride and a deep connection.

"When you come in the league and you see a guy like Joe Thomas and how long and what he's meant to this organization, to be like, 'oh, I got him in something,' is special just because of the player he was, the toughness he exemplified and just what he meant," Bitonio, 34, told The Chronicle-Telegram on Thursday. "It's definitely special, the guy you played with and a guy you've been around."

Thomas is delighted to lose his record to Bitonio.

"He's been one of my best friends since the moment he was a rookie in the NFL and we remain close to this day, and I love cheering for good people and good friends, people that are doing it the right way," Thomas told The Chronicle by phone. "And so having a record broken by somebody that you love and you care for and you appreciate and respect the way that they play the game, that's what you want."

FOREVER A BROWN

Bitonio wouldn't be passing Thomas if he didn't love the Browns and feel a tremendous responsibility to always give everything he has. The latest of many examples came four weeks ago when he willed his way onto the field despite a painful back injury.

"My whole life, my dad always taught me your loyalty is who you are, your respect and loyalty is kind of the only thing you got sometimes," he said. "The Browns have been loyal to me and I know it's a league and I know there's a lot of BS that goes around, but my relationship with the Browns and their relationship with me I feel like has always been strong."

"And living here and being part of this, it just becomes part of your life. I feel like I'm part of Cleveland and it's all I've ever known. I don't know if I would even — I mean, I'm sure I would — but function somewhere else. I could never picture myself in a different uniform."



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You know how people dream of things, for me, it's just like, ah, I'm part of the Browns and that's how it is."

For a city tortured by its sports heroes leaving for greener pastures and more money, Bitonio is a blessing. He's been paid handsomely but made himself a part of the community and fit in seamlessly.

"He loves the Browns," center Ethan Pocic said. "He's a Brown for life, for sure."

Thomas was the same way. He played all 11 years in Cleveland.

"It's rare to find somebody that values loyalty in today's world, probably even more rare in sports, but it's one of the foundational values that I was brought up on, that I was taught by my parents," Thomas said. "And so hopefully maybe some of that rubbed off on Joel when I got to play next to him, because it's not something that pays dividends in the moment or immediately, but I think down the road, it's something that he's going to be really proud of and he's going to feel when he's sitting in his rocking chair with his grandkids on his lap, that may be the most important thing that he did during his football career."

Right guard Wyatt Teller said Bitonio is the same guy whether the Browns are undefeated or winless.

"Man, he's Year 12. He's got the bone spurs, the arthritis and this man's running around from place to place," Teller said of Bitonio during practice. "It's that consistency. He is who he is and we love him. It's impressive to see."

GREAT ON THE FIELD ...

Bitonio was the No. 35 pick in 2014, when Thomas was already a seven-time Pro Bowler. Thomas retired after the 2017 season having played 10,363 consecutive snaps before a torn triceps, and entered the Pro Football Hall of Fame five years later.

Thomas expects Bitonio to join him in Canton.

"He has multiple Pro Bowls, All-Pros and continues to play at a level which puts him among the best offensive linemen in the NFL, and he's done that almost since the first year he got into the NFL," Thomas said. "He checks all the boxes of what a Hall of Famer should be."

"He's super consistent," Pocic said. "He's got a center brain, tackle feet and guard strength."

The feet got a lot of praise from Bitonio's linemates.



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“Something that stands out right away is just his quick feet,” backup center Luke Wypler said. “His feet are unlike anything other. They’re on hot coals all the time.”

Teller called Bitonio the whole package.

“He is so athletic, he’s smart, and not only that, he’s a physical player,” Teller said. “He’ll pancake you, but also he’s going to be good with his hands, good with his hat placement. Feet, unbelievable feet.

“I always say that he’s the upper half of a stereotypical offensive lineman, but lower half he looks like a tight end. He’s got very athletic legs, foot fire and he’s not usually out of position.”

Bitonio has missed only one game due to injury since the start of the 2017 season, and that was after arthroscopic knee surgery during the 2023 bye week. But as the chronic aches and pains piled up, along with the frustration of going 3-14 last season, he contemplated retirement.

He’s glad he came back.

“I wish we won a few more games, but my play and how I feel physically is good enough to keep playing,” he said, citing the 1-5 record. “I still had it. There’d be a lot of what-ifs if I was sitting at home right now. Obviously I want the record to be better, but I think it was the right decision.”

The starts record is a bonus.

“It wasn’t part of the decision, but when I did come back, I’m like, all right, well, if we stay healthy, we can pass Joe Thomas,” Bitonio said.

Bitonio will tie Walter Johnson (1965-76) for 11th on the franchise’s all-time games played list with 168. Dick Schafrath is No. 10 with 176. Clay Matthews Jr. played 232 to place No. 2, and Lou Groza is the leader at 268 after the 52 from the All-America Football Conference were included.

“When you see guys that played a taxing position that play every snap, it’s impressive,” Bitonio said. “And then you look back on what science they had and what their bodies probably felt like or were going through, it’s pretty impressive. Some of these guys back in Browns history is all time.”

... AND OFF IT

Bitonio has been voted the Good Guy Award winner five times. The local media aren’t the only ones who appreciate him as a person.



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“It’s how he treats other people,” Thomas said. “It’s how he treats his family, how he’s a family man, a father, a husband, how he gives back to the community. That’s really important to me, and obviously it’s shown as how important it is to him.”

Teller said Bitonio is his favorite teammate of all time.

“He’s a leader in his household, and as well as I’ve known him for the past seven years, he’s been nothing but respectful,” he said. “Builds into his young guys, builds into everyone.”

“As a leader and as a teammate and as a friend, he’s a cool, calm and collected guy,” Wypler said. “He’s the three C’s right there. He never gets too high. He never gets too low. He always knows how to right the ship and sail forward.”

Thomas’ greatness makes Bitonio’s accomplishment even more impressive.

“Joe Thomas was a first-ballot (Hall of Famer), just unbelievable guy,” Teller said. “But Joel kind of took that and became the next, and I truly believe that Joel’s going to be a Hall of Famer.

“Joel is an awesome guy. He’s a great teammate, great leader, and I’m happy for him, proud of him.”



No garnish, no spotlight: How Browns rookie Mason Graham is the ‘electrolyte martini’ of Cleveland’s defense

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2025/11/no-garnish-no-spotlight-how-browns-rookie-mason-graham-is-the-electrolyte-martini-of-clevelands-defense.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Mason Graham will take that martini shaken, not stirred.

Usually with passionfruit, and a hint of lime. A new flavor, piña colada though, has recently entered the mix.

Dillon Gabriel, the Browns’ starting quarterback, knows Graham’s preferred drink order – electrolyte drink order that is – better than anyone.

The quarterback, the No. 5 overall pick, and No. 33 overall pick Carson Schwesinger are new neighbors after all being drafted by Cleveland in April. Electrolyte martini nights have become a staple among the rookies.

“We’re always going to each other’s houses and playing jokes,” Gabriel said. “We’ll all get together and I’ll shake up the electrolyte. We don’t drink, so we make electrolyte martinis.”

No fancy glassware. No olives. Just a few teammates, electrolyte mix, and a rookie defensive tackle who would rather blend in than stand out — even as a top-five pick.

That’s been the constant refrain about Graham since the Browns traded out of No. 2 overall and selected him three picks later, picking up an extra first-rounder from Jacksonville for the 2026 draft, too.

It was a big story on the night that trade happened. But in many ways Graham has flown under the radar.

Perhaps it’s because he plays defensive tackle, an often-overlooked position. Maybe it’s because he has yet to break out with his sack numbers, with just a half of a sack through Cleveland’s first eight games. Another factor is certainly the never-ending quarterback storylines in Cleveland.

But he’s just fine with that.

“I don’t really care if the media is on me or not,” Graham told cleveland.com. “I’m out here to play football, and that’s what I want to do.”



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In the early stages of his NFL career, Graham has done just that. Through eight games, Graham has 13 pressures, in the top two among rookie linemen. And while he has only that half a sack, he's shown that there is still room for growth.

Most importantly, he's shown why the Browns thought he would be a DNA fit for their defense.

"Disruptive, interior penetrator," GM Andrew Berry said after the draft. "I think he can really affect the pocket from inside. High-motor player, really physical, really tough. We thought he was one of the more dominant trench prospects in this year's class."

Even if he doesn't want attention for it, it's undeniable given his football IQ and pass-rush traits: Graham is in Cleveland to shake things up.

A pass-rushing 'savant'

Before Graham's final season in Michigan in 2024, he headed down to south Florida to do some training with Javon Gopie.

A personal pass-rush coach known as "The Sack Sensei," Gopie trains NFL players, including Graham's Browns teammates Alex Wright and Isaiah McGuire, in the offseason, as well as high school and college players.

When Gopie first met Graham, he was immediately impressed.

"He's a savant," Gopie said. "And I say that in the sense of he understands. Not only does he have his own intangibles that make him great on the field, like quickness and twitchiness and strength. But he understands how to rush."

Graham's upside as a pass-rusher was huge, considering he spent most of his time in Michigan's read-and-react defense eating up blocks and stopping the run.

It makes the fact that he finished as a two-time All-American and with 6.5 sacks over his final two college seasons all that more impressive – and gave Browns defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz a lot to work with when Graham arrived in Cleveland for the offseason program.

"It'll be a process for him," Schwartz said at the time. "I do think there's a lot of meat on the bone as far as his production, and we can see better production from him than even we saw, and he had outstanding production and college."

So what traits exactly does Graham have?



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The most commonly mentioned are his use of leverage, as well as twitchiness. When it comes to comparisons for Gopie, the most accurate one isn't a defensive tackle – it's Broncos edge rusher Zach Allen.

"He's powerful, he's twitchy, he can strike blocks and then still work a pass rush move and get vertical and break guys down with movement," Gopie said.

Those skills were on display in the Browns' Week 3 win over the Packers, when Graham and veteran DT Maliek Collins went in for a combined sack against Jordan Love off of a perfectly-executed twist stunt.

But it's Graham's X-factor that makes him such a rabid pass-rusher, Gopie said.

"He's a dog," he said. "I'm not on the field with him, so I don't know what he's out there saying, but I'd imagine he's a trash talker. So that's what excites me about him the most, that he's very humble, but he definitely has a flip that he switches. He's gritty."

One of the greats, one of the boys

Gabriel already knows Graham has that grittiness to him – but that's because their relationship actually goes back a little further than Cleveland.

There's a chance, Gabriel says, they could have played their final college season together thanks to the transfer portal – of course, Gabriel ultimately chose Oregon instead of Michigan after spending two years at Oklahoma.

But the two still had a run-in in 2024, when Gabriel and the Ducks bested Graham and the Wolverines 38-14 in an early November showdown. Graham got to Gabriel in that game, though, even as Gabriel threw for 294 yards with one TD.

"We talk about it to this day," Gabriel said. "But he hit me after I threw it, helped me up. So he's a good, good dude. It was funny. He was kind. He could have been a lot worse. But he looked out. He looked out."

Graham has gotten the best of Gabriel a few times since that game nearly a year ago, including getting his hands on a couple of Gabriel passes during the offseason program and training camp, batting them down at the line of scrimmage.

Unsurprisingly, both welcome the challenge.

But the two have gotten to know each much better in recent months, and that has allowed Gabriel to gain even more of an appreciation for Graham's skill, his personality as a teammate, and his work ethic.



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“I know he wants to be one of the greats, and he works that way,” Gabriel said. “But I also know he wants to be one of the boys, and I think you just understand that from his perspective. It’s like he doesn’t want to be on a whole other level where there’s a disconnect from player to player. He can still be one of the boys and still work to be one of the greats, just like that. So as a teammate, I appreciate that.”

Schwesinger echoed that sentiment, emphasizing how rare it is for a top-five pick to be as grounded as Graham.

“A lot of times those people can have ego or whatever with that,” he said. “And he just comes in and works just like everybody else does. And continues to work, too. He puts in the extra work. And then just hanging out with him is always cool, too. He just, at the end of the day, he just wants to be himself and just hang out. He doesn’t really care who he’s with or anything like that. He’s just always going to have a good time.”

Schwesinger and Gabriel already offer up a good assessment on Graham, even though the trio has only spent about six months together.

It’s almost identical to what Bears tight end and No. 10 overall pick Colston Loveland says about Graham.

The two played together for three years at Michigan, and both enrolled early ahead of the 2022 season and became fast friends. They spent what little free time they had during the offseason shooting baskets in the campus IM gym in the summer, or hanging out at The Little Brown Jug restaurant across from their first dorm.

“He was always just super, super friendly when we first met,” Loveland said. “Super welcoming. And then obviously he was a dog out there, like from the jump. Yeah, he was messing up the 1s (first-teamers).”

“... He’s vocal when he needs to be, but like you said, kind of a quieter guy. But as far as what he does out on the field and how he handles himself in the building and every day, he’s a pro.”

A glimpse into Graham being vocal when he needs to be?

That came after Michigan’s 13-10 upset of Ohio State last November. After the win, several Michigan players went to plant a flag at The Horseshoe on Ohio State’s Block O logo. Ohio State players took offense and a fight broke out.

At the time, Graham was doing an interview on the Fox broadcast, but quickly went into action, turning mid-answer as the melee erupted behind him.



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In online videos afterwards, Graham made headlines for jawing with Buckeyes defensive end Jack Sawyer, trading a series of expletives.

The two are actually still rivals now, with Graham on the Browns and Sawyer with the Pittsburgh Steelers – but even after a heated moment, Graham’s thinking in those situations and what makes him a good teammate is still on display.

“The rivalry is something that we all take seriously, but it’s all fun and games,” he said.

“When you’re in it, it’s serious. And then even I’ve talked to — when I was at the (NFL) Combine, I talked with Jack Sawyer and all them. It was kind of just cool to talk about. But it’s always just going to those schools, you know what it’s about.”

‘He doesn’t like accolades’

Graham has always been this way. Just ask his dad Allen.

The family’s second-oldest child and the eldest boy, Mason was walking by the time he was 9 months old, Allen said.

Allen joked that Mason was “driving us up a wall,” and they were desperate to keep him busy, so they signed him up for soccer as soon as he turned 4.

“He was always aggressive,” Allen said. “He was knocking people down. And his coach, about halfway through the season talked to us and said, ‘Hey, have you guys ever thought about football?’”

But Allen is adamant that while he and his wife Kimberly wanted to make sure their kids participated in extracurricular activities, they wouldn’t push them in one direction or towards one sport. It’s an unsurprising attitude for a family that moved from Southern California to the north shore of Oahu, Hawaii, where Allen grew up vacationing, after Mason Graham graduated from high school.

Growing up, Graham never solely focused on football. Along with that and soccer, he tried basketball, began playing rugby at 8 years old, and baseball. In high school, he also wrestled and competed in track and field.

Had he chosen an alternate path, it could have been wrestling. Graham won two heavyweight Trinity League championships and qualified for state. The Cal and Stanford wrestling programs both inquired about him; Colorado Mesa, a Division II school, asked him to play football and wrestle. His wrestling background is still evident now in the way he uses leverage.



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Unsurprisingly given Graham's personality, he didn't have a natural affinity for the recruiting process.

He was a four-star recruit, but wasn't big on attending camps. His tape landed in the right guy's hands, though: The then-general manager of the Fresno State football team, Courtney Morgan, originally recruited Graham.

When he took on the same role at Michigan the following year, he passed along his film to then-head coach Jim Harbaugh.

"Harbaugh said, 'Yep, offer him immediately,'" Allen said. "But that offer didn't come till his senior year."

It was a fitting end to a recruiting saga for a player who shied away from attention in the first place.

In fact, Allen recalls one Pop Warner league in which the team wanted to give Mason the Most Valuable Player award at the conclusion of the season, but he insisted it go to another teammate.

"He likes when people notice that if he's doing good or something like that," Allen Graham said. "But he doesn't like the accolades. He likes getting them because he knows he's doing good. But he doesn't like the personal attention. He's a humble kid. He's always been like that."

Shaking things up in Cleveland

Given Graham's low-key nature, Cleveland seems the perfect landing spot for him.

On the field? Graham will never draw the most attention along the Browns' defensive front.

That honor of course goes to Myles Garrett. But it makes it harder for opposing offenses to scheme for all of them. So far, Garrett and the edge rushers have benefitted — Graham is already drawing double teams. But he's still making it difficult on opposing offenses to choose.

"The system is set up for him to be successful for sure," Gopie said. "And that's what excites me. Because at Michigan he played in the two-gap system where he had to read gaps and then go make plays. But now he has the opportunity to get vertical and really get after the quarterback."

He's still got plenty of work to do only eight games in. Against the run, Graham has just a 55.5 grade from Pro Football Focus this season.



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And at this stage, Schwartz believes Graham could still take “another step” as a pass rusher as well.

“His pass rush has been sort of, I’d say 50-50 so far,” Schwartz said recently. “Has had some good reps in there. I mean, it’s a tough business. You look at guards in the NFL; there’s no weak links.”

Since he arrived in Cleveland, the No. 5 overall pick has taken a back seat in the attention department to the Browns fifth-round pick Shedeur Sanders, the famous and flashy son of Deion Sanders. While Graham toiled in relative obscurity, the four-way QB training camp battle that featured Gabriel, Sanders, Joe Flacco and Kenny Pickett grabbed most of the headlines.

And through the first half of the season, one of the biggest questions on a national scale about the Browns is when Sanders might start.

“He didn’t know what to expect,” Allen Graham said of the draft process. “Obviously, when Shedeur got drafted, Shedeur took a lot of the airtime, which I think it was a blessing in disguise. It kind of helped (Mason) because he kind of deflects anyways, so he didn’t really have to deflect. He just had to just roll with what was going on.”

And really, that’s the way that Graham has always operated.

It’s never been about the attention or accolades – in fact, he’d actually prefer to go without those things.

There’s no garnish to Mason Graham’s game or personality — just grit, balance and impact. He’ll keep shaking up the pocket — and maybe an electrolyte martini or two for his teammates along the way.