



Cultivating a culture: Players, coaches believe they've built strong foundation for sustained success

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

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Kevin Stefanski never bought into the popular yet nebulous concept of culture. When the term's been brought up, as it has many times, the coach boils it down to people.

Good people equal good culture.

The Browns had the right people this season as they went 11-6 and reached the playoffs for the first time since 2020. It took a lot of them, as injuries gutted the roster of many of its best players.

With the season coming to a screeching halt in the 45-14 wild card loss and change inevitable before next season — it already started with coaching staff moves — the question becomes whether the culture (sorry, Coach) is strong enough that it can be maintained.

The Browns believe the work doesn't stop but the key pieces are in place.

It starts with general manager Andrew Berry and Stefanski, who arrived in 2020 and are expected to receive contract extensions in the coming weeks.

"We learned what it takes to be resilient and obviously each year is different, but the main core is going to be back and the main core can carry that over," Pro Bowl left guard Joel Bitonio said Sunday. "We had 11 wins, we made the playoffs and hopefully that's our floor now — a playoff team that has a chance to win a division and host a playoff game in the future."

That hasn't been the baseline for the Browns since the late 1980s. Instability and incompetence too often led to sustained losing and dysfunction.

Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah shows growth as player and leader, but even more expected next season

Since the return to the NFL in 1999, the Browns made the playoffs in 2002, 2020 and 2023. The only other winning season was 10-6 in 2007.

As much as it pales in comparison to the league's best teams, including all three AFC North rivals, the two winning seasons and playoff trips in this four-year span is a tremendous sign of progress.



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And the core Bitonio referred to appears to be strong and one that can survive changes to the rest of the roster.

Bitonio, defensive end Myles Garrett, cornerback Denzel Ward, tight end David Njoku, safety Grant Delpit, linebacker Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah and defensive tackle Dalvin Tomlinson are entrenched at their spots. Quarterback Deshaun Watson is perhaps the biggest piece of the long-term plan but has appeared in only 12 games in two seasons with the team. And running back Nick Chubb, who's been the heart and soul of the team, is trying to come back from a major knee injury and his contract will have to be redone, so his future is at least somewhat uncertain.

Kevin Stefanski has 'no doubt' Deshaun Watson will hit ground running in return from injury, says rehab going great

"The core of this football team, the guys that we know are coming back, are guys that represent who we are, that understand what they need to do on a day-to-day basis to be great," Stefanski said. "So we're excited about that. But bottom line is when you're talking about the locker room, it's the people. It is just the people in that locker room, and I feel strongly about the people."

Cornerback Greg Newsome II, a first-round pick in 2021 who could also be considered part of the core, said continuing the culture is "easy" when a "great structure" has been laid.

"The core guys will always be the core guys," he said. "I feel like those core guys were able to make a good locker room. So I think it'll be easy to just incorporate people and just teach 'em our ways.

"When you build something so strong that we've built, I feel like it'll be hard to tear down."

Berry and Stefanski began to instill their principles when they arrived, preaching the need to have "smart, tough, accountable" players. That grew into S.T.A.R.T. — adding resilient and team-first. Bitonio said Stefanski references S.T.A.R.T. every day.

Resilience was necessary in the season of serious injuries and became a rallying cry.

The players attributed the ability to overcome the adversity to their personal bonds, with the training camp trip to The Greenbrier Resort and the in-season week in Los Angeles most significant in the building of meaningful relationships that reached beyond the locker room. The winning also helped.

"We were a really close-knit group," linebacker and captain Anthony Walker Jr. said. "When we went to L.A. and we came back after those two losses I said, 'we lost those two games but we got



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closer as a team and it'll be better for us moving forward.' And I remember somebody said, 'well, we want to win more than we want you guys to get close.' And we won and we got close.

"That trip was really crucial for our success this year. And also The Greenbrier. That was a huge one, as well. So very close-knit group. And when you have that culture in the locker room it makes it easy to play the game with each other."

Whether it was a night out in Los Angeles in which new quarterback Joe Flacco stayed out with the guys until well after midnight, the defensive linemen traveling in a pack all season or support for each other's off-the-field ventures, the players gave example after example of how the dynamic was special.

"We're still going to be hanging out and being with each other during the offseason and working out together and training and everything," Ward said. "That's going to be big once we get back and being able to build upon the foundation that we already set."

Berry and Stefanski recognized the chemistry wasn't good enough in 2022, with communication issues on the field and bickering and resentment off it. The most blatant example was defensive end Jadeveon Clowney refusing to play on first and second downs against the Ravens and telling Cleveland.com's Mary Kay Cabot the organization favored Garrett over others.

Berry focused on changing the dynamics of the locker room last offseason. He signed Tomlinson, Ogbo Okoronkwo and Maurice Hurst II on the defensive line, Juan Thornhill and Rodney McLeod at safety and brought back Walker.

Stefanski also hired defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz, a strong personality credited with strengthening the culture.

"Andrew Berry's built that with the guys he's brought in, revamping the D-line this year with the guys that he brought in tremendously changed the culture on that side of the ball and for the team," Bitonio said. "I do think we've built something."

With the number of impending free agents and the inherent volatility of NFL rosters, it's imperative for Berry to find the correct pieces this offseason to supplement the talent pool and augment the chemistry.

"It sucks because in the NFL you're probably going to have a 20-guy turnover no matter what you do, but you want to bring in the right guys," Bitonio said. "You want to focus on some of those intangibles. But I think the core is here, and when you start from the top down, ownership to



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Andrew Berry to Coach Stefanski to the coaches to the players, everybody's connected right now, and everybody has that same vision. I think that helps out the most."

The players who won't return can still have an impact. Stefanski cited the lasting effect of former linebacker Malcolm Smith on the young position group.

"You do learn from a lot of veterans that you bring into your program," Stefanski said.

Owusu-Koramoah liked the intentional and organized approach of the front office in building the roster and the chemistry, identifying "anchors" and role players.

"Culture is actually what sustains the society as we see it itself," he said. "Once the culture is established, people act a certain way. They live by a certain moral code, a certain standard and are able to continue to be in that same mindset.

"The culture's not out there. The culture is inside of all of us as individuals and as players."



Why it's OK for the Browns to hold Myles Garrett to a 'Superman standard:' Ashley Bastock **By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com**

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/01/why-its-ok-for-the-browns-to-hold-myles-garrett-to-a-superman-standard-ashley-bastock.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- It's a bird ... it's a plane ... it's ... Myles Garrett likely on the verge of winning his first Defensive Player of the Year award.

On Monday in his end-of-season press conference, GM Andrew Berry reiterated what the Browns have been campaigning for over the last month-plus regarding Garrett, their five-time Pro Bowler and star edge rusher.

"The larger point for me is, I know the focus is on sack numbers, but the reality of it is that really doesn't tell the whole story or even enough of the story to be honest," he said. "He's the Defensive Player of the Year."

A quick Google search or scroll on X will show you that Garrett has momentum for the award, which will be announced on Feb. 8 at the NFL Honors award ceremony during Super Bowl week. Voting for the award concluded just following the regular season, so no, the Browns' 45-14 loss to the Houston Texans in the wild card round, a loss that Garrett called the "most painful" of his career after he and the Cleveland defense failed to record a sack, won't count against him.

Garrett ended the year with 14.0 sacks, but tailed off towards the end of the season. Pittsburgh's T.J. Watt led the league with 19.0 while Garrett finished in seventh place, tied with Dallas' Micah Parsons.

He recorded just one sack over Cleveland's final eight games (he sat the regular season finale against the Cincinnati Bengals with the rest of the Browns starters), and went his final 10 games without forcing a fumble, and the final nine without recovering one.

So is there another level even still for him to reach, even if he wins the award? It seems like an obvious and resounding "yes" should be the answer.

"If I'm being honest, I mean this guy is a guy who's been a first team All-Pro and will hopefully take away his first Defensive Player of the Year award this season," Berry said. "I think at times we hold Myles to a Superman standard, which, look, he deserves. He looks like Superman and he's played so well for the first six or seven years of his career. We're really pleased with him."

And Berry is exactly right.



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Garrett is held to a different standard. And maybe that's not fair. But it's how it should be.

That's how it should be for any player who hopes to be generational.

For what it's worth, Garrett himself hardly seemed thrilled with his lack of individual production down the most important stretch of the season.

Ahead of Cleveland's Christmas Eve game against the Houston Texans just a month ago, Garrett acknowledged the rut he was in as his teammates and coaches spent the days leading up to the game leading a grassroots effort for him to get attention for the award.

"As far as beating blockers and having success against my matchup, I think yes, I'm as successful as I've been in the past," he said at the time. "But that doesn't mean I can't take it to another level. Doesn't mean I can't find ways to improve or help improve the people around me, my teammates. Got to continue to find a way to make more explosive plays. That's been, I don't want to say lacking, but a little bit of a shortage of late. But got to continue to get the ball for us and make those plays on defense."

To be fair, it wasn't just Garrett down the stretch who fell off at a key time. Of course the defense as a whole picked a bad day to have a bad day in that wild card matchup with Houston. They failed to record a sack as a group (the only other time that happened this year was in the loss to the Rams) and as a unit, they seemed to be caught off guard by chaos as opposed to being the ones wreaking havoc.

"We made a lot of errors that up until that point hadn't been characteristic of our team, but also give Houston a ton of credit," Berry said. "They had a good plan, they played well and when you're in the playoffs, the margin of error is even slimmer than what we talk about in the regular season. So I wouldn't, as we go into the off season, I'm not necessarily overreacting based off of one game."

One of the most common arguments we've heard from the Browns, and one that Berry repeated on Monday regarding the Superman expectations is that sacks don't tell the whole story of Garrett's season and production -- and that's true to an extent.

According to Pro Football Focus, he had a career year with pressures with 89 total. He was second among edge rushers in ESPN's pass-rush win rate metric at 30% (the metric tells us how often a pass-rusher is able to beat his block within 2.5 seconds) just behind Parsons. He was also second behind Parsons in double team rate, at 29%.



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So yes, compared to most players across the league, Garrett also managed to produce despite seeing doubles, chips, slides, and unflagged holds (complaining about those holds after the Browns win over the Jaguars cost him \$25,000 in a fine) more often than most players.

But even considering all of those factors? For how talented Garrett is, it's OK if everyone, including himself, still expects more in terms of those sacks.

Pressures may still be disruptors and valuable analytically-- but everyone knows sacks have the potential to not only disrupt, but be game-changers in the right moment. It's why DC Jim Schwartz came to Cleveland last year believing Garrett could get to another level in his attack-minded defense despite setting and then tying the franchise single-season record with 16.0 sacks the two seasons prior. It's why sacks are a common incentive in contracts. It's why the sack race is such a big deal every single year. It's why Garrett was willing to acknowledge the rut he was in at the end of the season as he headed towards that seventh-place finish in the league sack race after leading it earlier in the season with 13.0.

Ultimately both things can be true. Sacks don't have to tell the whole story, but can still really matter. Garrett can be Defensive Player of the Year and still be held to that higher standard. Like Berry said, that's how it should be.

When you're a superhero come to life, sometimes you have to carry the weight of the world -- or the defense -- on your shoulders.



Cleveland Browns' continued rise hinges on Deshaun Watson

By Jake Trotter, ESPN.com

https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/39387415/cleveland-browns-super-bowl-hopes-hinge-deshaun-watson

BEREA, Ohio - Cleveland Browns owner Jimmy Haslam was among the first to exit the visitors' locker room in Houston. He pushed his hand through his hair as he walked through the Texans' stadium tunnel with his son-in-law, team executive vice president JW Johnson.

It had been nearly two years since the Browns had sent Houston three first-round draft picks for quarterback Deshaun Watson. As part of the blockbuster trade, Haslam then gave Watson a five-year contract extension worth an NFL record \$230 million fully guaranteed. The Texans were rebuilding. Cleveland was pushing its chips in to make a run to its first ever Super Bowl. Yet here in the wild-card round of the AFC playoffs, Houston and its new franchise quarterback - and surefire NFL Rookie of the Year - C.J. Stroud had torched the Browns on the way to a 45-14 victory, ending Cleveland's season. Watson, meanwhile, was in street clothes still recovering from surgery on his right shoulder.

Since the trade, Watson has played just 11 games for the Browns. He was suspended 11 games in 2022 for violating for violating the NFL's personal conduct policy after more than two dozen women accused him of committing sexual assault and inappropriate conduct during massage sessions. Then in 2023, Watson battled two different right shoulder injuries, the latter requiring season-ending surgery in November.

Due in large part to the Watson contract, the Browns were the NFL's most expensive team in 2023. They could remain there for the foreseeable future, as well. And yet, even after two seasons, it's still unclear what the Browns have in Watson, and whether he still has the ability to propel Cleveland to a deep playoff run in a loaded AFC.

Watson has shown flashes of his former Texans self, when he once led the NFL in passing. Most notably, he completed all 14 of his second-half throws in a stunning comeback victory at the Baltimore Ravens. Unfortunately for him and the Browns, Watson also suffered the season-ending injury in that Nov. 12 win.

Those flashes, however, have been overshadowed by injuries and inconsistency. Watson has posted just a 41.9 QBR since making his Browns debut in 2022. The only passers with worse QBRs during that span include Mac Jones, Aidan O'Connell, Will Levis, Bryce Young and Zach Wilson. O'Connell, Levis and Young were rookies this past season; Jones and Wilson almost assuredly won't be starters next season.



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All the more damning, the Browns' offense took off only after 38-year-old Joe Flacco took over at quarterback on Dec. 3. From that point on, Flacco led the NFL in passing yards per game (323.2) and Cleveland ranked fourth in scoring (28.6), while Watson watched on from the sidelines.

"Obviously, we want him on the field more often than he's been," general manager Andrew Berry said this week of Watson, who is on track to practice again sometime in the spring. "I do feel really good about him, happy with the progress that he's made within our organization, both on the field and off the field, and we're looking forward to getting him back next year. We think he's going to have a really big year and have a ton of confidence in him as our starting quarterback. ... We really feel good about him moving forward."

Even with the perpetual questions surrounding Watson, the Browns have plenty else to feel good about moving forward.

They boast a star-studded defense led by All-Pro pass-rusher Myles Garrett and lockdown cornerback Denzel Ward that should be among the best in the league again next season under coordinator Jim Schwartz. Linebacker Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah, safety Grant Delpit and cornerback Martin Emerson Jr. showed this season they could be on their way to being Pro Bowl performers, as well.

Above all, though, after cycling through so many over the years, the Browns learned they have their long-term head coach, too.

Going into the season, Kevin Stefanski appeared to be on the hot seat after back-to-back losing records. His job security seemed to be tied to getting Watson to play at a high level. Instead, Stefanski got the Browns to continue playing at a high level even after a rash of season-ending injuries to a multitude of key players, including Watson, Pro Bowl running back Nick Chubb (knee), offensive tackles Jedrick Wills Jr. (knee), Jack Conklin (knee), Dawand Jones (knee) and Delpit (groin).

Cleveland finished with 11 regular season wins, tied for the most by the franchise since 1986. Multiple players told ESPN that the "next-man-up" culture the even-keeled Stefanski has instilled over his four seasons as coach helped the Browns weather and overcome so much adversity this season.

"We've learned what it takes to be resilient," said Pro Bowl guard Joel Bitonio. "We talk about [being a] smart, tough, accountable, resilient team. He probably says that every day and that's something we focus on."



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After leading the Browns to the playoffs, Stefanski could be in line to win his second NFL Coach of the Year in four seasons.

"The way that he was able to lead and manage through challenges in adversity this year was absolutely phenomenal," Berry said. "We have a smart, adaptable, emotionally intelligent leader who - the crazy part is - is not even close to his ceiling. ... I know that our organization is in really good hands with him."

The Browns still have work to do. They're sure to be in the market this offseason for another playmaker to help bolster the offense and Watson. Berry will also have to get creative again restructuring contracts to keep the core of the team in place. The AFC won't be any easier next year, either, with Stroud ascending to join a quarterback contingent that features former MVPs Patrick Mahomes and Lamar Jackson, as well as Josh Allen, Joe Burrow, Justin Herbert, Tua Tagovailoa and Trevor Lawrence. Save Allen, the Browns will have to face all of those quarterbacks in the 2024 regular season, plus the Philadelphia Eagles' Jalen Hurts and the Dallas Cowboys' Dak Prescott.

Yet to truly contend, the Browns need Watson to perform like an elite quarterback again, too, and not just for a half here or there.

Berry said that he'd "absolutely love" to bring Flacco back next season to back up Watson, and Flacco has indicated an interest in returning, as well. But Berry also compared the situation to Jacoby Brissett, who left Cleveland for the Washington Commanders last offseason after starting those 11 games Watson was suspended in 2022.

Whatever happens with Flacco, Cleveland's future outlook ultimately hinges on Watson, who hasn't talked to the media since before undergoing the shoulder surgery.

The Browns were a fun story with Flacco. Thanks to Stefanski, they proved to be one of the league's most resilient teams, too. With Bitonio and Garrett, among several other veterans, the leadership is in place. Berry and his front office have upgraded the overall talent on the roster, as well. But the Browns can't get to the Super Bowl unless Watson takes them there. Two years ago, the Haslams staked it all on that bet. A franchise-defining gamble that has yet to pay off.



Browns' Maurice Hurst on comeback trail, which 'absolutely could' lead to Cleveland return **By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/01/27/cleveland-browns-offseason-news-nfl-free-agency-maurice-hurst-ii-injury-gm-andrew-berry/72352328007/>

CLEVELAND — Belly-rubbing Browns defensive tackle Maurice Hurst II is hungry for a comeback.

An aspiring NFL front office executive known for caressing his abdomen to celebrate key plays, Hurst is attempting to rebound from an injury again.

Hurst said Tuesday he would like his recovery and rehabilitation from a surgically repaired torn pectoral muscle to result in him returning to the Browns.

“It's definitely a special spot. I've been lucky to be at a few great spots,” Hurst said backstage during the Greater Cleveland Sports Awards at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse.

“Being here with the guys that we have in the room that we have and the coaches that we have, it's really something that you can tell that we're building, that we could be the team that wins it all at some point.”

From Hurst's perspective, the secret sauce to the 2023 Browns becoming “special” lies in General Manager Andrew Berry collecting players who are willing to sacrifice for each other without complaining or creating much drama.

Hurst proved to be one of those selfless guys for the Browns, who went 11-7, including 0-1 in the playoffs, after Berry signed him in March to a one-year, \$1.24 million contract as an unrestricted free agent.

In 13 games, Hurst compiled 22 tackles, including 1.5 sacks, five quarterback hits, a fumble recovery, three passes defensed and an interception. His season ended when he suffered the torn pec on Dec. 10 in a 31-27 win over the Jacksonville Jaguars, costing him the final five games, including a 45-14 wild-card playoff loss in Houston.

“Mo was excellent. Not just the acrobatic [interception] he was able to make in the Seattle game, but he really embodied what we wanted in an attack front throughout the entire year,” Berry said backstage during the Greater Cleveland Sports Awards. “And as you all probably got a sense of, Mo's a big personality. He's great for the locker room. He really jelled with the group, so we couldn't be more pleased with the season that he had up until the injury.”



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Asked whether Hurst could fit into the category of players Berry has repeatedly re-signed to one-year deals, the GM said, "He could. He absolutely could."

Hurst, 28, said his rehab is ahead of schedule and he expects to "be ready by March, April."

NFL rules state the Browns will be permitted to begin their voluntary offseason workout program on April 15.

Another important date will occur roughly a month earlier when NFL free agency officially begins at 4 p.m. March 13.

Hurst spoke as if he may test the open market, but he emphasized his desire to re-sign with the Browns.

"Definitely always a discussion is in the air about returning, and then it's just trying to see how things sort of play out these next couple months, see how things fall, see what their draft plans are, see what their free-agency plans are, see where the money's at," said Hurst, who's listed as 6 feet, 2 inches and 290 pounds.

Hurst entered the NFL in 2018 when the Oakland Raiders drafted him in the fifth round (140th overall) out of the University of Michigan. He joked about "Wolverine blood" coursing through his veins and aiding the process of returning to full strength.

In a much more serious tone, Hurst insisted his love of football is motivating him to complete another comeback.

A torn biceps wiped out his entire 2022 season and a calf injury ended his 2021 season after he appeared in just two games. He suffered those injuries as a member of the San Francisco 49ers.

"I just generally love the game of football," he said when asked what is driving him to continue playing. "It's something that I've always had a passion for since I was a kid, and I've always wanted to be the best.

"Knowing that I have the ability to do that and being able to show that within a season and just getting comfortable and having [recent] film now, it's something [I hope to] really build on. But, yeah, football is amazing. It's something that I want to do once I'm done playing and something that is always going to be a special part of my life."

Hurst clarified his goal is to eventually work in a team's front office. For now, he can be found on a path toward resuming his career on the field.



How the Browns land stadium concerts—and why Taylor Swift isn't one of them

By Joe Scalzo, Crain's Cleveland Business

<https://www.craincleveland.com/sports-recreation/how-cleveland-browns-land-rolling-stones-billy-joel>

This is a story about how the Cleveland Browns land concert acts at their stadium — including two big ones this summer — but since this is the Year of Our Lord 2024, we must first answer the city's most pressing question:

“Why isn't Taylor Swift coming?”

“Yes, I get asked about that often,” sighed Michele Powell, vice president of event development for the Haslam Sports Group. “Obviously, we'd love to have her.”

Powell has communicated as much — many, many times — to Swift's promoter, the Messina Touring Group. But while Swift has played plenty of shows in Cleveland, including then-FirstEnergy Stadium in 2018, she's in the middle of one of those zeitgeisty moments that rivals the Beatles in 1964 or Michael Jackson/Bruce Springsteen in the mid-1980s. One industry executive told me her Eras Tour is “probably the biggest touring act in history.”

Consequently, there was no need for Swift to play Cleveland in 2023 when she was already playing Detroit, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. And while Swift did add some North American dates for 2024, they were October and November when Indianapolis (dome) and Toronto (dome) made sense. An outdoor stadium on Lake Erie? Not so much.

“That October-November time frame, that's a really big challenge for us,” Powell said.

But wait! Her boyfriend, Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce, is from Cleveland Heights! Can't she have the Kelce family put in a good word?

“I'll work on that one,” Powell said, laughing. “I'll go directly through them and see what I can do.”

The good news is, the Rolling Stones ARE playing Cleveland in June 2024, the band's first date in the city since 2002. (The Stones were going to play Cleveland in 2020, but the date was wiped out by COVID-19.) Plus, Billy Joel and Rod Stewart will perform together for a one-night-only date in September, which was another win for the city even if, yes, the press conference announcement could have been an email.

“It's going to be a really big summer for Cleveland,” Powell said.



So, how do the Browns land stadium acts? And what are these concerts worth, both to the Browns and the city?

To answer those questions — and a few more — I turned to Powell, as well as Barry Gabel, the SVP of marketing and sponsorship sales for Live Nation; David Gilbert, the president and CEO of Destination Cleveland and the Greater Cleveland Sports Commission; and the aforementioned industry executive, who has spent 20 years in the business and knows this market well, but who I agreed to keep anonymous in exchange for his candor.

Why do artists/bands choose Cleveland Browns Stadium?

The biggest reason, obviously, is because they think they can sell a lot of tickets. Some of that depends on the artists' popularity (which can ebb and flow), but some of it depends on how long it's been since they played in each city. That worked in Cleveland's favor with the Stones, who are only playing 16 cities this summer and whose next-closest sites are Chicago and Philadelphia.

"These tours are predominantly driven by promoters who are asking themselves, 'Is this viable?'" Powell said. "It needs to be the right demographic and the right market."

While Swift and the Stones can sell out anywhere, someone like Cleveland native Machine Gun Kelly only did one football stadium on his 2022 Mainstream Sellout Tour and it was FirstEnergy. Puerto Rican rapper Bad Bunny, meanwhile, did a massive stadium tour that same summer, "but he's probably not going to do that in this market," Powell said.

Cleveland Browns Stadium has a capacity of 67,431 for football games, but that number shrinks to about 45,000 to 50,000 for concerts, depending on the size of the stage. U2 drew 51,849 for their Cleveland concert in 2017 and Taylor Swift had 51,323, which is pretty much the upper limit. There are only a handful of acts in the world that can consistently sell that many tickets and in Cleveland, they tend to be rock or country acts.

"This has always been a great rock and roll town, but it's also been a phenomenal country town," Gabel said. "It's a big concert market and it has been since the mid-60s, when the Belkin family put rock and roll on the map. And it doesn't hurt to have the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame down the street. A lot of performers love that. Machine Gun Kelly loved the idea of having a display at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

"So I think there's a perfect storm of the fact that it's a great market, people travel here to come to the Rock Hall, the venue's really accessible and it makes for a rewarding experience."



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OK, so why don't they choose Cleveland Browns Stadium?

The biggest reason is that it's outdoors in a cold-weather city. Detroit, Indianapolis and Toronto all have domes, so they can hold concerts year-round. Cleveland is mostly limited to the summer months, which means more competition for stadium acts.

"The artist needs to be available and the venue has to be available," Gabel said. "Things like stadium shows don't just happen where somebody is sitting in the room and says, 'Hey, let's put on a show.' It's a jigsaw puzzle."

The Browns' puzzle is even trickier because the Browns play on a grass field, which is more vulnerable to damage from concert acts than turf. The Billy Joel/Rod Stewart concert is on Friday, Sept. 13 — a week after the NFL season begins — which means a lot of people in Berea had to sign off on it.

"Even if I get up to five or six concerts in a year, the main business here is still football and I have to work through that," Powell said.

Making matters tougher, there are plenty of other open-air stadiums within driving distance of Cleveland, from Columbus (where Billy Joel played last summer) to Pittsburgh to Cincinnati to Buffalo. Plus, bands can always opt for slightly smaller Progressive Field, which is hosting Journey, Def Leppard and Heart in July.

"If you think about what's within a two- or three-hour drive, there are a lot of markets that can support a show like this," Gilbert said. "If you're in Denver, you're it. There's nothing else around. And even on the East Coast, there are a lot of cities together but the population is so dense, you can do Philadelphia and Baltimore and New York. Here, they're often only going to pick one or two of those.

"But I will say this — the Cavs and the Browns get more than their share, which is great. Part of it is because they want it. They know what it means for Cleveland. I don't know if that's always the case everywhere."

So how much do these concerts cost? And how much are they worth?

To answer that, we turn to our insider, who didn't have the exact numbers on this summer's Cleveland show but felt confident in his ballpark figures, no pun intended.

The guarantee for stadium acts themselves can range from \$5 million to \$10 million per night with a percentage of sales, and the Stones are in the upper part of that range.



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Then there's the production/staffing end, which costs as much as \$5 million. For instance, setting up a Rolling Stones stadium show (stage, lighting, video, etc.) takes 7-10 days, "with a good piece of that round-the-clock work," the insider said. Tearing it down takes another three or four days. Then you add in the cost of stagehands, security, EMT, police, ushers, cleaners and parking attendants and the expense adds up quickly.

The good news is, if you sell 50,000 tickets at an average price of \$400, that's \$20 million. Add in parking, concessions and merchandise and you can easily make another \$5 million. Our insider said the average Stones fan will spend an additional \$150 on ancillary items like food, beer, parking and T-shirts.

"I don't know how this all gets chopped up — and even if you had the right numbers, they'll never admit to it if they don't like how it looks — but your exposure might be in the \$15 million to \$17 million range, and you're bringing in somewhere between \$22 million and \$25 million," the insider said. "And that doesn't even count the sponsorships for the tour. You could be looking at \$5 million or \$6 million in profit, if not more.

"That's why it's one of the biggest tours on the planet."

As for what it's worth to the city and the region? Well, that's a matter of debate, although our insider believes that, because of inflation, the economic impact will rival that of hosting the Republican National Convention in 2016. ("And they redid the airport for that," he said.)

But even if you don't buy that optimistic outlook, the concerts will draw people downtown who would have otherwise spent their money elsewhere, whether that's a neighboring city like Akron or Canton, or a neighboring state like Michigan or Pennsylvania.

Plus, it doesn't hurt to use Cleveland Browns Stadium a few extra times, something Powell and Co. are increasingly trying to do.

"People talk all the time how, in the U.S., stadiums are publicly funded," Gilbert said. "These concerts will bring in tens of millions of dollars (to the city) that would not have been here otherwise. The more uses the better in terms of showing the value back to the community of having a building like this."



'Myles Garrett's that guy': John Randle views Browns star as NFL Defensive Player of Year
By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/02/07/browns-myles-garrett-nfl-defensive-player-of-the-year-coach-kevin-stefanski-joe-flacco-jim-schwartz/72437285007/>

CANTON — As John Randle bonded with Myles Garrett last fall, the Browns All-Pro defensive end reminded the Minnesota Vikings legend of three Pro Football Hall of Fame pass rushers.

Bruce Smith.

Reggie White.

And especially Chris Doleman, Randle's late Vikings teammate.

“It was seeing Chris Doleman reincarnated,” Randle told the Beacon Journal during a recent interview at the Hall of Fame.

Smith (1990 and '96) and White (1987 and '98) each won the Associated Press NFL Defensive Player of the Year award twice. Doleman (1992) claimed the United Press International version of the award, representing the NFC while iconic San Diego Chargers linebacker Junior Seau took the AFC honor.

Browns defensive end Myles Garrett celebrates during the second half against the New York Jets Thursday, Dec. 28, 2023, in Cleveland.

Randle said he “definitely” believes Garrett is worthy of being named the AP NFL DPOY this season.

Garrett is a finalist for the award along with Dallas Cowboys cornerback DaRon Bland, Las Vegas Raiders defensive end Maxx Crosby, Dallas Cowboys edge rusher Micah Parsons and Pittsburgh Steelers edge rusher T.J. Watt.

Three other members of the Browns are also finalists: Kevin Stefanski for Coach of the Year, defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz for Assistant Coach of the Year and quarterback Joe Flacco for Comeback Player of the Year.

The winners will be announced Thursday night during the NFL Honors awards show.

Randle and Garrett spent time together on Nov. 4 while an NFL Network film crew captured their interactions at Browns headquarters in Berea. They talked shop on a practice field and watched each other's highlights in a studio. The episode debuted on NFL+ on Dec. 13, with a shorter version airing on NFL Network on Christmas Eve.

Randle has been closely monitoring developments involving Garrett ever since they met.

“When you talk about 2024 players, hey, Myles Garrett's that guy,” Randle said.



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Garrett publicly stated his goal to become the NFL Defensive Player of the Year even before the Browns drafted him first overall in 2017 out of Texas A&M University. He was voted the Professional Football Writers of America NFL DPOY last month. However, he is still awaiting his first selection as the AP NFL DPOY, which the league recognizes as the official award.

It's important to note a nationwide panel of 50 media members who regularly cover the NFL completed voting for AP awards before the playoffs began. Whoever wins DPOY will be honored for his performance in the regular season, not the postseason.

During the 2023 regular season, Garrett compiled 42 tackles, with 17 for loss and 14 sacks, four forced fumbles, one fumble recovery, three passes defensed and 30 quarterback hits in 16 games. With Cleveland's playoff seeding secured, he rested in Week 18 along with other key Browns players.

Garrett joined Randle on a prestigious list in November. They are among seven players in NFL history who tallied at least 10 sacks in six consecutive seasons. The others are Smith, White, Lawrence Taylor, DeMarcus Ware and Jared Allen.

And, yes, it's a special teams play, not a defensive snap, but don't forget about Garrett hurdling the Indianapolis Colts to block a 60-yard field goal on Oct. 22. The feat blew Randle's mind.

"Dude, I'm looking at him going, 'We didn't think about this type of stuff [when I played].' And for him, it's just where the game's at," Randle said.

Despite some remarkable moments and an 11-6 record in the regular season, the Browns flopped in the wild-card round of the playoffs. Among the many disappointing aspects of their 45-14 loss at the Houston Texans is Garrett — and the entire Cleveland defense — did not sack rookie quarterback C.J. Stroud.

Minnesota Vikings great John Randle has advice for Cleveland Browns All-Pro Myles Garrett. Randle is well aware of the criticism Garrett receives whenever he doesn't register a sack.

From Weeks 12-16, Garrett endured a five-game streak without a sack, though the stretch should include an asterisk. He sacked Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback Trevor Lawrence during a crucial two-point attempt in Week 14, but the NFL doesn't track statistics from such plays.

Randle's advice to Garrett is centered on uplifting teammates.

"It's not always going to be about you," Randle said. "It's going to be about your supporting cast because that's going to help you get there. It's almost like a Batman or Robin. I was telling him about the Minnesota Vikings when it was Chris Doleman and myself. I was talking about Bruce Smith having Cornelius Bennett, old Biscuit, and Darryl Talley.

"I go, 'You've got to have somebody that you can bring along. When you're working on your craft, don't work at it alone. Bring somebody else with you. Bring the other guys to teach those guys because your supporting cast makes you better.'"



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The Cleveland Browns have been pushing for Myles Garrett to win the NFL Defensive Player of the Year award

Since December, Browns brass and players have campaigned for Garrett to become DPOY. The company line is he's the best player on the league's best defense. The reference stems from Cleveland ending the regular season atop the NFL in several defensive categories, including fewest yards allowed per game (270.2).

"We take pride in the work that Myles has put in and really the person that he is within the walls of the building," Browns General Manager Andrew Berry said last month during the Greater Cleveland Sports Awards. "And to see that external acknowledgment, it's just something that we really want for him just because we see how much blood, sweat and tears he puts into it on a daily basis."

Members of the football analytics community have presented cases for Garrett, too.

For example, ProFootballFocus.com named Garrett its top player regardless of position, DPOY and best pass rusher. PFF credited him with a 27.5% pass-rush win rate, first in the league during the regular season by 3.4 percentage points and the best single-season figure the website has ever recorded. PFF also assigned Garrett its top overall defensive and pass-rush grades this season.

Meanwhile, ESPN Analytics gave Garrett a pass-rush win rate of 30%, second to only Parsons' 35%.

The 2021 AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year, Watt led the league with 19 sacks and 36 quarterback hits in the 2023 regular season. PFF gave him a pass-rush win rate of 16.9% and ESPN Analytics 25%.

Garrett and Watt tied for seventh in the league with 86 pressures apiece, according to PFF's count.

Myles Garrett's father, Lawrence, taught him about John Randle's football legacy

Before PFF and similar websites existed, Randle played defensive tackle and end in the NFL from 1990-2003, 11 seasons with the Vikings and three with the Seattle Seahawks. He earned seven Pro Bowl and six first-team All-Pro selections. He never won defensive player of the year, but he finished runner-up to White in voting for the 1998 AP award. In 2010, Randle was inducted into the Hall of Fame.

A native of Arlington, Texas, Garrett grew up hearing stories from his father, Lawrence, about Randle. The elder Garrett would tell his son, "John Randle was a bad boy," whenever the family would drive through Hearne, Texas, where Randle played high school football.

"I always had a lot of respect for how he played the game, how much it looked like he enjoyed the game," Garrett said during the NFL-produced TV segment. "He loved being around his teammates, and that's something that I aspire to do every time I walk in the building."



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Cleveland Browns first-round pick defensive lineman Myles Garrett and his father Lawrence. Garrett, 28, looped his dad into his conversation with Randle by calling him during NFL Network's filming. Randle said he hopes to hang out with Lawrence Garrett this spring during a golf tournament in Texas.

“Being around Myles, what a young, wonderful man that's so humble and just has his head on straight,” Randle said. “He has so much respect for his father, and unfortunately I didn't have my father, but I still had people in my life who were like my father — my uncle, my brother — who mentored me.

“To see that, I realized that, man, we're just so fortunate to be around [Garrett], and I just can't wait to see so many things that will come his way because he's just such a humble guy and just a man who cares about the game, loves the game, but, at the same time, cares about his team, cares about his family.”

Cleveland Browns news: Former quarterback Derek Anderson confident Ken Dorsey will excel as offensive coordinator

On and off camera, Garrett picked Randle's brain about techniques.

“We were talking about pass rush,” Randle said. “We were talking about elbows and hands.

“A lot of times when you're talking pass rush, a lot of guys don't understand all this, and he was all with it — open to everything.”

The pursuit of excellence never ends for someone who's truly determined to be defensive player of the year.



How Browns guard Joel Bitonio first met his new offensive line coach and what he'll miss about Bill Callahan

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/02/how-browns-guard-joel-bitonio-first-met-his-new-offensive-line-coach-and-what-hell-miss-about-bill-callahan.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Browns left guard Joel Bitonio will have at least his seventh new offensive line coach this season. The good news is he has some familiarity with Andy Dickerson.

"He made a trip to Reno, Nevada, to work out me when I was coming out of (Nevada in the draft)," Bitonio said at a charity event on Thursday. "So we had dinner at a little -- I think it was called The Wolf Den across the street -- at a little bar across the street from the school, we had some meetings the next day and he was with the Rams and they were in St. Louis at the time but they were really interested in me pre-draft, so I got to know him a little bit then."

Bitonio did acknowledge that was 10 years ago, so he doesn't remember much, but he has a teammate who knows Dickerson well.

"(Center Ethan Pocic) said good things, high energy," Bitonio said. "I know he's developed those young tackles in Seattle and done a really good job and he's been in the league for a long time, like he was in Cleveland previously, so he's definitely been around, but I think he is young and has a youthful energy to him as well."

Pocic and Dickerson overlapped in Seattle in 2021 before Pocic signed with the Browns the following offseason. Dickerson was the Seahawks run game coordinator.

At 42 years old, Dickerson is a young veteran. He was a training camp intern for Washington in 2003 and then a grad assistant at Tufts, where he graduated with a master's degree in education. He worked various roles with the Patriots, Jets and Browns -- on Eric Mangini's staff here -- before landing with the Rams as assistant offensive line coach in 2012, a position he held until he left for Seattle in 2021. He was the Seahawks offensive line coach the last two seasons.

He has big shoes to fill, taking over for Bill Callahan, who left to work for his son, Brian, who was hired as Tennessee's head coach.

"It is bittersweet because you want him to stick it out with us," Bitonio said, "but he gets to go coach with his son which I'm pretty sure is a dream come true for everybody, so couldn't really blame him for that. He has a chance to do that and we'll miss him but I think he's taught us a lot and we appreciate all the work he's put in."

Under Callahan's guidance, the Browns' offensive line developed into one of the best units in football with Bitonio a staple at left guard.

"He helped instill a culture in the O-line of being technicians, understanding your assignments, all those things that great O-line coaches do and he's one of the best in the league," Bitonio said.



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Perhaps the best work Callahan did showed when the Browns had to turn to backups, whether it was during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 or this past season when they lost their top three tackles to season-ending injuries.

Callahan, along with assistant offensive line coach Scott Peters, who left to take a job in New England working under former Browns offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt, were masters of getting players ready to play.

“He’s done a great job of being detailed with the guys, where if you have a Michael Dunn or a Blake Hance or Kendall Lamm, going back a couple years, come into the game, they’re ready to play and ready to do their jobs for the time they’re in,” Bitonio said.

Even the veteran Bitonio, who didn’t miss a regular season snap between 2017 and Week 6 of this season against the 49ers, learned valuable lessons from Callahan about evolving his game.

“Their emphasis in hand use -- it goes back to Scott and his background in jiu jitsu and martial arts - - but being more aggressive in the pass sets and using your hands and leverage and little details like that that maybe not every coach goes into,” he said, “but they did a really good job of teaching those. For me personally, more of an aggressive set in pass (protection), where I was a little bit more passive. There’s different ways to do it, but it adds tools to my toolbox and I think it helped me become a more complete player”

Bitonio spoke at the Gunning Park Recreation Center, where he surprised the Cleveland Muni Football League’s West United Gators with \$20,000 worth of football equipment.

After he surprised the team, he helped unload the truck. During a pizza party after, he even FaceTimed Nick Chubb after one of the kids asked Bitonio if he knew the star running back.

“I don’t know if (Chubb) was ready for it, but he did answer and the kids were real excited,” Bitonio said.

The California native, who had never lived east of Nevada until the Browns drafted him, has become one of the faces of the Browns since arriving here.

“Being in the city of Cleveland, they’ve supported me since the day I got here and it’s become our home, me and my wife Courtney and our kids, we love it here,” he said. “Just having the opportunity to give back when we do is such a blessing for us and we want to help these kids out and we know they had a great football season, one of their groups won a championship. They’re just starting up, though, so we wanted to try to help them with some new equipment and get them going on the right foot.”

After a few years of stability, he’ll have to adjust to a new offensive line coach this season. It’s a familiar face at least, even if it has been a while.



How a CYO basketball coach in West Chester ‘won’ the NFL’s Coach of the Year award By Matt Breen, The Philadelphia Inquirer

<https://www.inquirer.com/eagles/kevin-stefanski-coach-of-the-year-nfl-honors-steve-stefanski-20240214.html>

It was a school night and the NFL Honors show was dragging on last Thursday when the Stefanskis told their four children that it was time to get ready for bed.

“One more award,” Steve Stefanski said he told his kids. “If it’s Coach of the Year, you get to watch it. If it’s not, tough luck. You’ll catch it in the morning.”

The kids were in luck. The next award was the Coach of the Year, which Uncle Kevin — better known as Kevin Stefanski, head coach of the Cleveland Browns — was a finalist for.

“My wife was filming,” Steve Stefanski said. “But then she stopped filming. She kind of panicked a little when she heard ‘Steven.’”

The presenter — actor Justin Hartley — misread the card and announced “Steven Stefanski” as the Associated Press Coach of the Year. Hartley was quickly corrected and announced Kevin Stefanski’s name. But it was too late. Steve Stefanski, an assistant CYO basketball coach at Saints Peter and Paul Church in West Chester, was the NFL’s Coach of the Year.

“My one son and I were just jumping up and down,” Stefanski said. “I just kept saying, ‘I won. I won.’ Because frankly, I was the winner there.”

It didn’t take long for Stefanski’s phone to ring. It was his cousin, who was not at the ceremony in Las Vegas. Kevin Stefanski won the award for the second time, but he had to share the honor this time.

“I told him, ‘I did it.’ He had to know first that I was the real winner,” Steve Stefanski said. “I told him, ‘Hard work pays off,’ which he appreciated.”

The fifth brother

Kevin and Steve Stefanski were born six months apart, spent every summer down the Shore, and are the godfathers of each other’s children. Steve Stefanski grew up in Exton and went to Bishop Shanahan High. Kevin Stefanski, 41, grew up in Wayne and played football at St. Joseph’s Prep and Penn.

“I have three brothers, and Steve is probably the fifth brother in the family,” Kevin Stefanski said. “His friends are my friends and vice versa. He was a fixture at our house growing up, and it would drive my mom crazy because Steve played hockey. His hockey bag made its way into our garage, and it smelled so horrible. He was relegated to the garage at times.”

Twenty years later, Kevin Stefanski is one of the NFL’s premier coaches. For Steve Stefanski, his cousin will always be the guy he found a different job with every summer in Ocean City, N.J., and shoots only three-pointers in basketball.



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“He’s still my cousin,” he said. “I don’t look at him like he’s this coach. It’s really cool. He’s the guy I was putting awnings up with and running morning sports at Ocean City Rec and things like that.”

Steve Stefanski’s goal with his CYO team is that every child has enough fun that the player wants to play another season. Different pressures, he said, between him and his cousin. Three years ago, the team was 0-10, but the CYO squad has a winning record this season. Things are moving in the right direction, Stefanski said. It’s Coach of the Year-type stuff.

“Exactly,” Stefanski said.

The gang of 10-year-olds — which includes son Colin — can run “stack” and that other inbounds play that Stefanski believes is in every CYO playbook.

“The inbound pass where it goes to the guy at the top of the key and then the guy who inbounds it runs to the corner for a jumper,” said Steve Stefanski. “Everyone runs it and it still works. Every single team runs the same play, but every time, the kid manages to get a shot off.”

Kevin Stefanski’s father, Ed, was a basketball star at Monsignor Bonner and Penn and spent four years as the 76ers general manager. The son started his NFL journey in the summer of 2005 — “The second T.O. summer,” Kevin Stefanski said — as an intern with the Eagles during training camp at Lehigh University.

“Coach Reid is the head coach, Brad Childress is there, John Harbaugh, Sean McDermott, Pat Shurmur, Steve Spagnuolo, just all these people who factored mightily onto the NFL scene and then in my life,” Stefanski said.

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“I remember having lunch with Jim Johnson. Pinch me. I remember going to the dorms to turn the lights out and there’s Brian Dawkins in there watching tape. That’s the type of stuff that’s incredible to see firsthand.”

A year later, Childress, the former Eagles assistant under Andy Reid, brought Kevin Stefanski to Minnesota as an “assistant to the head coach.”

Steve Stefanski knew then that this was more than an entry-level job, as he told his wife, Kathy, that his cousin would eventually become an NFL head coach. Fifteen years later, the Browns proved him right.

“There was never a doubt in my mind that he was going to make it as a head coach,” said Stefanski, who lives in West Chester and works in commercial real estate for Cresa. “Now, did I think he was going to win these awards? That’s the cherry on top. I wasn’t really thinking about that, but he’s always been so poised and so good. It’s weird to say it, but it doesn’t surprise me.”

Overcoming injuries



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The Browns lost tackle Jack Conklin to a season-ending injury in Week 1 and running back Nick Chubb a week later. Quarterback Deshaun Watson played just six games before he was shut down with a shoulder injury. The Browns signed 39-year-old Joe Flacco and clinched a postseason berth by winning seven of their final 10 games.

Kevin Stefanski, just like his cousin with those CYO kids, had the Browns moving in the right direction.

The four Stefanski kids — S.J., Colin, Annie, and Kevin — root for the Browns every Sunday, the family takes a trip every year to visit their uncle, and the kids think up trades that Uncle Kevin can bring to the front office.

Steve Stefanski's buddies joke that he might be known as "Coach Steve" the next time he's in Cleveland.

"I'm always making sure I'm shipping a ton of gear back east," Kevin Stefanski said. "I would imagine that people probably notice a Browns hat every once in a while and say this is 'Iggles Country.' Not 'Eagles Country' but 'Iggles Country.' But it's the AFC. They can have an AFC team."

Not everyone thought Uncle Kevin was going to win last week. Annie Stefanski thought the award was pegged for Kyle Shanahan, because the 49ers were in the Super Bowl.

"The majority of our family and friends think we did this on purpose," Steve Stefanski said. "Which I laugh at because Kevin wasn't even there to finish the punch line. It's kind of a weird joke to do remotely. But because we're so close, everyone texted, 'I wouldn't put it past you two to do it on purpose.'"

Steve Stefanski's phone has been buzzing ever since with friends, family members, and clients cracking jokes. Someone Photoshopped his face on his cousin's body. Kevin Stefanski had fun with it, too, as he told a Cleveland radio station that the CYO coach was a candidate to be Cleveland's next offensive coordinator. For the second time in four years, Kevin Stefanski was the NFL's top coach. He just had to share it this year with the cousin who always knew he'd make it there.

"I understand the odds and the percentages of him being an NFL coach when you really think about it are so slim," Steve Stefanski said. "These jobs are so hard to get. But I just kind of always thought he'd be able to do it. He works really hard. Obviously, he's smart. He's good in high-stress situations and he's always had that. That part that he displays — the confidence — that's always been him. It's not an act. It's just the way he's wired."



Myles Garrett has a promise for Browns fans after winning NFL Defensive Player of the Year **By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com**

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/02/myles-garrett-has-a-promise-for-browns-fans-after-winning-nfl-defensive-player-of-the-year.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Myles Garrett made a promise to Browns fan after winning AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year on Thursday night at the NFL Honors show in Las Vegas.

“It doesn’t light the fire any more or any less,” Garrett told cleveland.com about winning the coveted award. “I’ve still got that same fire, that same passion for winning it all for Cleveland. That’s what it’s all about. Bringing it back to the city of Cleveland. Love you all, and going to continue to fight, scratch and claw to make it happen.”

It was the third time after winning his first NFL Defensive Player of the Year award that Garrett made it clear what he really wants.

After accepting the award on the NFL Honors stage and thanking everyone who helped him get there, he closed by holding up the trophy and stated his No. 1 goal.

“To the city of Cleveland, this one’s for you,” he said. “We’re going to bring home something bigger the next time. Let’s go.”

To be sure, Garrett would trade the NFL Defensive Player of the Year award for the Lombardi Trophy in a heartbeat. It crushed him for the Browns to lose 45-14 to the Texans in the wild card round after finishing 11-6 despite losing key players to season-ending injuries such Deshaun Watson, Nick Chubb, Jack Conklin, Jedrick Wills Jr., Dawand Jones and more.

But watching four key members of the organization clean up at the NFL Honors show, including Kevin Stefanski for NFL Coach of the Year, defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz for Assistant Coach of the Year and Joe Flacco for Comeback Player of the Year, Garrett can’t wait to get back out and finish what they started in 2023.

“It was a special year for a special team and I’m just so glad to have men like that amongst this team and it’s thanks to a hell of a management staff with Andrew Berry, Kevin, who got an award himself, and the Haslams,” Garrett said at the media room mic. “They’re putting together something special, and I think next year’s going to be our year.”

In fact, he said on the ESPN set Friday morning that the Browns could’ve been in the championship game, which the Chiefs won, 25-22, over the 49ers.

“If we stay healthy, there’s no reason we’re not playing this Sunday,” he said.

It certainly won’t be any easier in 2024 than it was this season. The Browns have a second-place schedule for the first time since 2008, when they tumbled to a 4-12 finish after going 10-6 in 2007. They’ll face a much tougher slate of quarterbacks in this season, including a healthy Joe Burrow



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twice, NFL MVP Lamar Jackson twice, Super Bowl MVP Patrick Mahomes, Dak Prescott, Justin Herbert, Tua Tagovailoa, Jalen Hurts, a healthy Trevor Lawrence, Derek Carr and more.

But the Browns will get their injured stars back — including Watson coming off of his shoulder surgery — and will aggressively add talent to try to get past the Jacksons and Mahomes of the NFL. They might also bring back former Super Bowl MVP Joe Flacco, who believes Garrett's goal is realistic.

“For sure,” Flacco told cleveland.com. “Anytime you have a team that’s feeling good and actually has a lot of talented players, you should feel good. You should feel like, ‘alright, we didn’t get it this year but we got a little bit of confidence and we’re ready to go next year. at the same time, you don’t want to get into the habit of saying next year. So there’s that fine line. But the whole city and the whole team should feel that way.”

The NFL Defensive Player of the Year certainly does.



Kevin Stefanski says new OL coach Andy Dickerson will bring 'passion and energy'

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

https://www.brownszone.com/2024/02/15/kevin-stefanski-says-new-ol-coach-andy-dickerson-will-bring-passion-and-energy/#goog_rewarded

Andy Dickerson has big shoes to fill and an important job to do.

The Browns made official his hiring as offensive line coach Thursday — it had been previously reported — and he'll replace respected veteran coach Bill Callahan.

"We were all very impressed with Andy, along with his background and knowledge when we first met about our offensive coordinator position," coach Kevin Stefanski said in the news release.

"When our offensive line position opened, he was among the first calls I made. Andy loves teaching and will bring a passion and energy that will greatly benefit our linemen.

"He understands the high standard that room must have in order for our offense to be successful and we know he's excited about being back in the building with this organization."

Dickerson was with the Browns in 2009-10 as an assistant, including assistant offensive line coach in 2010. He interviewed in January for the coordinator job that went to Ken Dorsey.

Roy Istvan was announced as assistant line coach.

Dickerson, 42, is in his 19th season as an NFL coach and spent the past three with the Seahawks. He was run game coordinator in 2021 and line coach the last two years.

Myles Garrett named AP Defensive Player of Year as Browns go 4-for-4 at NFL Honors

Istvan, 55, has been a coach for 33 years, mostly at the college level. He was assistant line coach with the Eagles the last five years.

Jonathan Decoster, an offensive assistant who works with the line, will remain on staff and join Dickerson and Istvan. Decoster is in his fourth season with the Browns.

Callahan left the Browns after four seasons to coach the line for the Titans, who recently hired his son Brian as head coach.

"Organizationally we realized that's a unique situation and did not want to stand in the way of that," Stefanski said recently.

Brook Park site among stadium alternatives Browns considering

Brian Callahan told reporters in Nashville on Wednesday he appreciated the Browns' understanding.



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“There was a complicated process because it wasn’t something that I had anticipated him in the moment that that’s what he wanted to do,” he said. “I wasn’t sure he would be contractually allowed to. And it was a process we had to work through with the Browns organization. Thankfully they were aware enough to know the uniqueness of the situation and allow it to continue to go down that road. So appreciative of that perspective from them in allowing it to happen.

“Probably one of the coolest moments for me is being able to have that happen. It’s been really fun to drive to work with him every day. To be here with him is a really awesome moment for me both as a son and as a professional because I know how much he can help us with his knowledge.”

Brian Callahan also hired Ben Bloom as outside linebackers coach. Bloom had been with the Browns for four years, including as defensive line coach in 2023. The Browns had hired Jacques Cesaire to replace him.



Cleveland Browns bank on 'new perspectives' after 'unique' offensive staff overhaul

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/03/01/browns-new-perspectives-help-unique-offensive-staff-change-ken-dorsey-kevin-stefanski-andrew-berry/72787416007/>

INDIANAPOLIS — Continuity has been one of the defining factors in why the Browns have had the relative success they've had during the last four seasons.

General manager Andrew Berry and coach Kevin Stefanski are going into their fifth seasons together. It's the longest the Browns have had the same GM and coach since Peter Hadzazy was the general manager and Sam Rutigliano was the coach from 1978-84.

That said, underneath that top-of-the-organization consistency, the Browns have experienced a relatively significant amount of change. But it's change that those at the top consider healthy for the organization long term.

"I think you always want some new perspective," Berry said Tuesday at the NFL combine. "I think that's healthy in any organization. We'll always pride ourselves on trying to stay ahead of the curve and not remaining stagnant. That won't mean that we won't have some foundational things that we believe in, whether it's how we build the team, how we play or how we run the operation. But, at the same time, we're also not going to be afraid of making alterations if that's what we think is necessary."

A year ago, those alterations mostly impacted the defense and the special teams, and they made a difference. Defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz won the Associated Press Assistant Coach of the Year after running the league's No. 1 defense, while special teams coordinator Bubba Ventrone helped that unit take strides forward as well.

This offseason, it's been the offense that has undergone significant renovations. Offensive coordinator Alex Van Pelt, offensive line coach Bill Callahan, running backs coach Stump Mitchell, tight end coach T.C. McCartney and assistant offensive line coach Scott Peters either were let go or left for other opportunities.

Stefanski replaced them with Ken Dorsey, Andy Dickerson, Duce Staley, Tommy Rees and Roy Istan. He also had to replace defensive line coach Ben Bloom, now with the Tennessee Titans, with former Houston Texans defensive line coach Jacques Cesaire.

"Year to year, you're constantly looking at different things and what you can do better," Stefanski said Wednesday at the combine. "There were some unique instances this year that came up, so obviously there's a bunch of new people in our room, which I view as a positive. And the conversations that we've had already have been great. ... These are guys that come from different perspectives, obviously different teams, different schemes. So we're still in the infancy of putting it back together."



CLEVELAND BROWNS

NEWS CLIPS

Dorsey's been the centerpiece of that offensive makeover, which Stefanski has repeated labeled as a "collaborative" effort among the entire staff. The former quarterback spent the past season-and-a-half as offensive coordinator for the Buffalo Bills, who were a top-five offense in the NFL over those 27 games before he was fired in Week 10 last season.

Much like Schwartz and Ventrone, Dorsey was not a coach with whom Stefanski had a prior history with in terms of having worked together along their paths up the ranks. That's part of the idea, although there is some identical schematic DNA between the two offensive coaches.

"Ken's been in a bunch of different systems," Stefanski said. "I know most recently you mentioned Dabbs (former Buffalo offensive coordinator and current New York Giants head coach Brian Daboll) and what they're doing in Buffalo, but Ken has been in versions of (longtime NFL offensive mind) Norv (Turner's) system, which I was also in, when he was in Carolina. So we see the game very similarly, but all of his experiences I think are important in what he brings with us."

While Dorsey, Dickerson and Staley have spent most, if not all, of their coaching careers in the NFL, Rees is the definition of going a different route for the Browns. He spent last season as the offensive coordinator under Nick Saban at the University of Alabama after having spent the previous three in the same position at Notre Dame, his alma mater.

A former Browns ball boy while his father Bill was a scout during Phil Savage's tenure as general manager, Rees brings an almost exclusively college background to the offensive staff. Rees did spend one year with the then-San Diego Chargers, but it's his college philosophies that have Stefanski most intrigued.

"I think the game, you're always trying to stay ahead of all the evolutions of this game that's taking place," Stefanski said. "One thing that keeps me up at night is, where's the game going? Where's the offensive game going? I tell people all the time you can put on tape from 20, 15 years ago, I'm on the sideline at those games but that game doesn't resemble our current game.

"Just think of shotgun. How simple that is, right? Shotgun has shot up a ton in the last 15 years. So where are those evolutions coming (from)? And oftentimes those plays from high school and college make their way to the NFL. So certainly we're always looking at plays that maybe will be showing up there.



Coach Kevin Stefanski always trying to stay ahead of ever-changing NFL

By Scott Petrak, Chronicle-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2024/03/01/coach-kevin-stefanski-always-trying-to-stay-ahead-of-ever-changing-nfl/>

INDIANAPOLIS — One number illustrates the turnover on Kevin Stefanski's coaching staff during his four-year tenure.

Two.

Linebackers coach Jason Tarver and receivers coach/pass game coordinator Chad O'Shea are the position coaches who remain from the original staff hired by Stefanski after he got his first head coaching job in 2020.

The departure of each coordinator or position coach is its own story, but there are themes. The organization hasn't accomplished its ultimate goal of winning the Super Bowl, strives every offseason to improve and believes in the power of change.

"The only constant in the NFL is change realistically, whether you're successful or unsuccessful," general manager Andrew Berry said Tuesday at the scouting combine. "I think that the way we look at it is we love having stability and I love working with Kevin on a consistent basis, but that won't always mean continuity.

"Our mind is towards improvement and sometimes that can lead to change. So that'll really be our mindset every year as we go into the offseason. What are the things that we can do, add, subtract, change that will allow us ultimately to reach a Super Bowl?"

The first significant moves came after the Browns went 7-10 in 2022, as defensive coordinator Joe Woods and special teams coordinator Mike Priefer were fired and replaced by Jim Schwartz and Bubba Ventrone. More surprising was the overhaul on the offensive side after the Browns went 11-6 and made the playoffs in 2023 despite quarterback Deshaun Watson, running back Nick Chubb and the top three tackles ending the year on injured reserve.

Coordinator Alex Van Pelt, running backs coach Stump Mitchell and tight ends coach T.C. McCartney were let go, and line coach Bill Callahan was allowed to leave to join his son Brian, who was hired as coach of the Titans. Stefanski raved about Van Pelt on Wednesday, saying the Patriots have gotten a "great one" as coordinator.

"Somebody I love as a person, as a coach," Stefanski said. "Just we make decisions that are tough sometimes in this league but doesn't change how I feel about him."

The front office is led by a pair of Harvard graduates in chief strategy officer Paul DePodesta and Berry, and Stefanski went to Penn. The Ivy Leaguers embrace a variety of perspectives and wanted new ideas for 2024 as they try to get the most from Watson.



CLEVELAND BROWNS

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Ken Dorsey was hired as coordinator, Tommy Rees as tight ends coach/pass game specialist, Duce Staley as running backs coach, Andy Dickerson as line coach and Roy Istvan as assistant line coach.

“Obviously there’s a bunch of new people in our room, which I view as a positive,” Stefanski said. “And the conversations that we’ve had already have been great. Ken’s done a great job with the new coaches, but to have Duce in there, to have Tommy Rees, Andy Dickerson, Roy, these are guys that come from different perspectives, obviously different teams, different schemes.”

Maximizing Watson’s dual-threat skill set is only part of the reason for expanding the playbook.

“We’ll always pride ourselves on trying to stay ahead of the curve and not remaining stagnant,” Berry said. “That won’t mean that we won’t have some foundational things that we believe in, whether it’s how we build the team, how we play, or how we run the operation. But at the same time, we’re also not going to be afraid of making alterations if that’s what we think is necessary.”

Schwartz brought an attacking defensive scheme and called a lot more man coverage than Woods, capitalizing on the talent of cornerbacks Denzel Ward, Martin Emerson Jr. and Greg Newsome II to have the No. 1-ranked defense. But much of life on defense is trying to keep up with innovations on offense. Stefanski cited the vast increase in shotgun in his nearly two decades in the league and the recent proliferation and variations in presnap motion.

“It can make life really hard on the defense,” Stefanski said. “You can put your receivers in advantageous positions via motion. What Coach (Mike) McDaniel did in Miami, those were new things that you’re going to see throughout the league. What we talk about a lot is you want to shift and motion with a purpose. But if there are opportunities to create advantageous looks for you, you certainly want to do it.”

On the offseason to-do list is trying to figure out where the game is headed. Stefanski said it keeps him up at night.

“I tell people all the time you can put on tape from 20, 15 years ago, I’m on the sideline at those games but that game doesn’t resemble our current game,” he said. “That’s the fun part of the offseason for us is looking at where these trends are going. We look at the trends both from a data standpoint — let’s gather all this information, let’s look at it, what literal trends and play type do we see going up, do we see going down — and then from a coaching perspective, as we watch all this tape, why are they doing it? What advantages are they gaining? Then it’s fun for us as we see it all show up then in the fall as teams start to implement some of those changes.”

He wouldn’t divulge what developments he expects across the league.

“What can we zig while everybody else zags?” he said. “The game will always be evolving based on the players, the players coming in, the rules that are changing year to year. You’re just trying to stay ahead of the evolution.”



CLEVELAND BROWNS

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The hiring of Rees is an example. Stefanski wanted to add someone with recent experience in college to join the rest of the staff who've been in the NFL for a long time. Rees was coordinator at Alabama last year after holding the same position with Notre Dame.

"Where are those evolutions coming (from), and oftentimes those plays from high school and college make their way to the NFL," Stefanski said.

Dorsey's coached in the NFL since 2013 but brings experience with dual-threat quarterbacks after coaching Cam Newton and Josh Allen.

"The allure to Ken was his varied experience in a number of different offenses, working with different styles of quarterbacks and then ultimately just his work sample as a coordinator," Berry said. "We thought he fit us and our players. We love his expertise in the spread and RPO game and drop-back world, as well, and we think that he's a fantastic addition to this staff."

One that doesn't look the same as it did two years ago.



The GMs who executed the Russell Wilson and Deshaun Watson trades have something in common

By Tony Grossi, TheLandOnDemand

<https://thelandondemand.com/news/2024/mar/04/the-gms-who-executed-the-russell-wilson-and-deshaun-watson-trades-have-something-in-common/>

Everyone who listened to Sean Payton's Combine interview last week understood that the Denver Broncos were intent on releasing quarterback Russell Wilson before a contract trigger guaranteed Wilson another \$37 million in 2025.

On Monday, the Broncos and Wilson confirmed his release from the club.

So it's fair to evaluate Denver's trade for Wilson as one of the colossal worst deals of all time in the NFL.

For now.

In May, 2022, the Broncos acquired Wilson and a fourth-round draft pick from the Seattle Seahawks for two first-round picks, two second-rounders and one in the fifth round, along with three players – quarterback Drew Locke, tight end Noah Fant and defensive lineman Shelby Harris.

(The Seahawks released Harris last year and he signed with the Browns.)

In September, the Broncos added to their mistake by signing Wilson to a five-year, \$242.6 million contract extension with about \$161 million in guarantees.

The Broncos proceeded to go 11-19 in Wilson's 30 starts over two seasons.

For that, the Broncos wound up paying \$161 million, including a \$37 million guarantee for 2024 triggered last year. The release will cost the Broncos \$85 million in "dead money" – or lost cap room – over the next two years. It breaks down to \$35.4 million in lost cap room in 2024 and \$49.6 million in 2025.

The architect of the trade and contract extension was Denver GM George Paton, who somehow retained his position under new Broncos ownership and the addition of Payton in 2023.

What's interesting is that Paton was the runner-up to Andrew Berry when Browns chief strategy officer Paul DePodesta sought to partner new Browns coach Kevin Stefanski with a GM in 2020. Paton had been in the Minnesota Vikings' front office during Stefanski's time there as an assistant coach.

Berry, of course, executed the controversial trade for Deshaun Watson in March of 2022.

Now, the Watson trade hasn't turned out as bad as the Wilson trade. After all, Watson will see at least a third year with the Browns and he has a 7-4 record in two seasons with them.



But the Browns have paid \$92 million and six draft picks so far for those seven wins.

With \$138 million still fully guaranteed Watson, Berry needs a full, winning season out of Watson in Year 3 to avoid challenging Paton for one of the league's worst trades of all time.

Houston, we don't have a problem anymore

At the Combine, Texans GM Nick Caserio was all smiles answering questions about his team's stunning turnaround from 3-13-1 in 2022 to 9-8 last season and a wild-card victory over the Browns in the first year of coach DeMeco Ryans and quarterback C.J. Stroud.

In March of 2022, the Browns acquired Watson and a sixth-round pick in 2024 for first- and fourth-round picks in 2022, first- and third-round picks in 2023, and first- and fourth-round picks in 2024.

(The fourth-round pick in 2024 was not included in original reports of the deal. Sources in Houston speculated the Browns had to throw in a sixth draft pick to avoid tampering charges by the Texans when the Browns guaranteed Watson's total contract after initially being turned down by the Watson camp.)

Following further trades of some assets of the Watson deal, Houston so far has ended up with the following players as a result of the original Watson deal:

Guard Kenyon Green, receiver John Metchie, linebacker Christian Harris, running back Dameon Pierce, defensive end Will Anderson, receiver Tank Dell, receiver Xavier Hutchinson, and safety Brandon Hill.

They also have the two Browns' picks in this year's draft – No. 23 overall and No. 124. The latter pick could drop after NFL compensatory picks are assigned this month.

At the Combine, I asked Caserio how much of the team's turnaround can be traced to the trade of Watson.

Caserio could not suppress a grin upon hearing the question. But he settled himself and was careful not to take a victory lap in his response.

There's a creed in the GM ranks: Don't gloat about a lopsided trade because you'd like to continue the relationship with the team you just fleeced.

"I haven't been able to keep track of all the moves," Caserio said, "but ... anytime you give up an asset you're getting assets in return. What you do with those assets is all about the decisions that you make. We were fortunate we've added players that have been able to help our team.

"Each year is going to be different. But that's in the past. Where we are today, we have a number of players that have helped our team. Hopefully that continues moving forward.



CLEVELAND BROWNS

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“Cleveland ... all the respect for Cleveland. They have a good football team, won a lot of football games. Deshaun’s going to be a good player in this league for a long time. So we’re focused on the Houston Texans and what can we do to continue to build our team.”

About that Ken Dorsey viral video

New Browns offensive coordinator Ken Dorsey is lendararily “fiery” and “hyper-competitive.” Those attributes were on display in the viral video of his infamous temper tantrum in the coach’s booth during a Buffalo Bills game in 2022.

Dorsey had a meltdown when the Bills’ offense failed to stop the clock to set up a potential game-winning field goal against the Miami Dolphins. After time ran out, cameras caught Dorsey ripping off his headset and slamming it on a table, and then doing the same with his hat, playbook and electronic notebook.

The New York Post reported that earlier in the preseason, Bills QB Josh Allen joked that Dorsey had to move upstairs in the booth from the sidelines to avoid drawing penalties because of how “fiery” he was.

To which Dorsey responded at the time, “I like to think I’m not too much of a psychopath. It probably wouldn’t hurt to be up in the box in that regard.”

At Dorsey’s introduction as Browns OC, he remarked, “It was darn near like a root canal to get this job, I mean you go through a lot of testing and I met more people in this building than I have in any building I’ve ever been in.”

Berry confirmed the Browns’ long, thorough vetting process at the Combine.

So I asked Berry if part of that process included a conversation about Dorsey’s temper tantrum.

Berry responded, “It’s a good question. I think that No. 1 I would say about this: I always think it’s maybe a little bit shortsighted for people to judge an individual off of one of their weaker moments, a moment of emotion. Ken is uber-competitive. You should ask the Buffalo guys. He’s like urban legend when it comes to pick-up hoops in terms of how competitive he is.

“But we have no concerns about him being able to manage the players, manage the coaches, manage himself. I love having competitive coaches, I love having competitive players and he’s really fit in really well with us.”

When asked the same question, coach Kevin Stefanski said he did not address Dorsey’s temper in his interviews with him.

“No,” Stefanski said. “I know Ken. I know what he’s about. He is so hyper-competitive. That’s who he is. The stories of him playing pickup basketball are legendary. He wants to win. Look at his career as a player, the teams he was on, how he competed like crazy. I think he’s just such a competitive person. That one moment is really not a big deal.”



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I also asked Bernie Kosar about Dorsey's temper. Kosar has known Dorsey more than 20 years.

"That's not him," Kosar said of the video. "That's a rarity right there. He's super intense, super fiery. He has that emotion in him. When you see him stoic and not acting emotionally like that, we still have that emotion and passion residing in us. Despite [that video], he does an amazing job of keeping himself in check."



Jerry Jeudy believes he is "at the right spot" with the Browns

By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/jerry-jeudy-believes-he-is-in-the-right-spot-with-the-browns>

As Jerry Jeudy walked through the halls of CrossCountry Mortgage Campus, he took in all the sights of his new NFL team.

He made his way around the building to meet with Executive Vice President of Football Operations and General Manager Andrew Berry and head coach Kevin Stefanski. He saw his name above a locker in the Browns' locker room. He even picked out his jersey number and was surprised with his jersey. Jeudy was officially a member of the Cleveland Browns.

On March 13, the Browns announced they acquired Jeudy from the Broncos in exchange for a 2024 fifth-round pick (from Panthers via QB Baker Mayfield trade) and a 2024 sixth-round pick (from Houston via QB Deshaun Watson trade). They added a key depth piece to their receiving corps, anchored by Amari Cooper and Elijah Moore.

"I heard that the Browns were interested in me even two years ago," Jeudy said. "To actually be here, it's a surreal moment. So, I feel like I'm at the right spot because they have been trying to get me for a long time, so I feel like I'm wanted here. As a player, you always want to be in a place that you feel welcomed and want to make it feel like home and want to be wanted. And so having that feeling is great."

Jeudy spent four seasons with the Broncos after he was drafted at No. 15 overall pick of the 2020 draft. He appeared in 57 games with 44 starts and recorded 211 receptions for 3,053 yards and 11 touchdowns. During the 2022 season, Jeudy set career highs with 67 receptions, 972 receiving yards and six touchdowns. Last season, he appeared in 16 games and recorded 54 receptions and 758 receiving yards with two scores.

He now joins a wide receiver room in Cleveland that features Cooper and Moore, as well as young players in Cedric Tillman and David Bell. Cooper finished the 2023 regular season with 72 receptions for a team-high 1,250 yards – the third-most by a Brown in a season – and five touchdowns. Cooper also became the first Browns player to record back-to-back 1,000 receiving yard seasons. Moore played in all 17 games during the 2023 regular season and had career-highs in total number of receptions, as well as reception yards. He finished the regular season with 59 receptions for 640 yards and two touchdowns.

Jeudy said both Cooper and Moore can get open against a variety of coverages, and he sees his skillset as one that can complement their receiving corps.

"I feel like I could bring the same thing to the table – get open, create separation and make plays after the catch," Jeudy said. "I feel like we got a great set of receiving corps that could bring all that to the table actually."



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He also provides QB Deshaun Watson with another deep threat in the pass game. Jeudy said that he has followed Watson's career since he was the quarterback at Clemson from 2014-16. Now, he has the chance to catch passes from someone he grew up watching.

"I think we can complement each other really well," Jeudy said. "Deshaun is a smart, accurate quarterback that knows where to put the ball for a receiver to make plays."

Following the news of the trade, Jeudy said he heard from different teammates who reached out. Players like Watson, Cooper, Moore and RB Nick Chubb connected with Jeudy to welcome him to the Browns.

For Jeudy, that introduction was impactful – especially hearing from Cooper.

"It means a lot," Jeudy said. "In my time at Bama, I got a chance to catch up with Amari and become close friends with him. That's a guy that I've been modeling my game after for a long time and been watching him since I was young. So, being able to play alongside him it's going to be exciting."

Cooper was a wide receiver for Alabama from 2012-14 before he was drafted as the No. 4 overall pick in the 2015 draft by the Oakland Raiders. Two years later, Jeudy would also play for Alabama from 2017-19. Jeudy appeared in 42 career games at Alabama and recorded 159 receptions for 2,742 yards with 26 touchdowns and won the 2018 Biletnikoff Award, an award given to the nation's top wide receiver.

Even so, the reality of being in the same wide receiver room as Cooper – someone who he looked up to while at Alabama and studied as he was growing up – still hadn't quite sunk in.

"I'll be having my moments like, I'm about to play with Coop," Jeudy said. "I've been watching him for so long – I don't think you understand how much time, how many highlights I've been putting in, how many hours I put in watching him. So, being able to just be in the same locker room and learn from him, it's going to be exciting."

As Jeudy begins the next step of his NFL career in Cleveland, he wants his love for the game of football and the competitive nature of the sport to shine through. As he learns the Browns' fan base and vice versa, he wants to show just how much he wants to win.

"I just want this chapter to be better than before. I'm just looking for a home and a great opportunity here to be part of a winning program," Jeudy said. "Really just being the best version of myself. It's been a tough few years at Denver, but it's just good to have a fresh start here."



Why The Great Browns Backup Quarterback Debate matters – Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto, Cleveland.Com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/03/why-the-great-browns-backup-quarterback-debate-matters-terry-pluto.html?outputType=amp>

CLEVELAND, Ohio – “Who cares about the backup quarterback – if Deshaun Watson isn’t healthy, the Browns have no chance to go to the Super Bowl.”

I’ve been hearing that from some fans and media members during Cleveland’s Great Backup Quarterback Debate: Joe Flacco vs. Jameis Winston.

In one sense, it’s probably true. No Watson playing at a Pro Bowl level, no chance of a Super Bowl.

That seems to be the rationalization.

WHY THE BACKUP QB MATTERS

Browns fans, was the 2023 season fun? That’s a legitimate question.

Sports should be a diversion from real life. Did the Browns allow fans some relief from the daily problems? Was it fascinating to watch coach Kevin Stefanski find a way to win games with four different QBs and make the playoffs with an 11-6 record?

Were the Browns going to the Super Bowl with a parade of Dorian Thompson-Robinson (DTR), P.J. Walker and Flacco filling in for the injured Watson?
Or course not.

But is that a reason to give up on the season? You know the answer to that.

Watson was 4-1 in games where he played the majority of snaps. The collection of DTR, Walker and Flacco were 7-4.

The Browns lost the final game of the season with a fifth QB – Jeff Driskel. It was a game where they rested the starters as they awaited the playoffs.

My point is the backups were 7-4 in meaningful games without Watson. It’s why they made the playoffs. Flacco was the great QB closer, having a 4-1 record in his final five regular season starts.

Illustration by Ted Crow for Crowquill. QB Joe Flacco leads the Browns into the New Year and the playoffs.

WHAT THE TEAM OWES THE FANS

The failure to have a legitimate backup QB is inexcusable, especially when a team is supposed to be a playoff contender. NFL teams charge big money to the fans. It’s their obligation to put a respectable product on the field.



CLEVELAND BROWNS

NEWS CLIPS

A decent backup QB helps keep fans interested in the team in an era where starting QBs are regularly injured. There were 66 different starting QBs last season, the changes mostly due to injuries.

Heading into the 2024 season, the Browns front office knows Watson is coming off major shoulder surgery. They can be hopeful about him staying healthy, but they must be realistic.

So far, Watson has not been the same player who led the NFL in passing yardage in 2020 as a member of the Houston Texans. That's a fact.

He's also only played 12 games over the last three seasons due to a holdout (2021), suspension (11 games in 2022) and injuries (2023).

It took a while in 2023 for the Browns to bring in Flacco, but they did – just in time.

CAN'T REPEAT LAST SEASON

The Browns went into 2023 operating under the assumption Watson would stay healthy. That had been the case from 2018-20 in Houston when he missed only one game.

In his first three years running the Browns, GM Andrew Berry knew he needed a solid backup QB. He had Case Keenum (2020-21) and Jacoby Brissett (2022). You could start those guys and not fear a disaster.

Last season, they had Josh Dobbs and DTR. Right before the opener, they traded Dobbs and a seventh-round pick to Arizona for a 2024 fifth-round pick.

That left them with DTR and Walker as backups. Watson began having rotator cuff problems early in the season. He came back and played. Then hurt his shoulder and was done for the year after the Nov. 12 victory over Baltimore.

The Browns won a game with DTR, two games with Walker and then Flacco arrived.

By signing Winston, Berry returned to his usual business with backup QBs. While not my first choice for the job, Winston is a viable option.

Jameis Winston grew into a respected player in the community and with the Saints organization.

WINSTON THE PERSON

Let's start with the character issue, and Winston had major problems in this area early in his career. But his last trouble spot was a three-game suspension in 2018 for his conduct with an Uber driver.

I did some research for a column, and Winston has grown into an excellent teammate and a beloved member of the New Orleans community. He is well known for his civic and church activities. It's an impressive turnaround.



When he joined the Saints in 2020, he came under the influence of Drew Brees. It was part of Winston's growth as a person.

"I really love Drew Brees like I don't think he understands," Winston said when Brees retired in 2021. "I know my wife does and I know my family does. But you don't understand the impact that him and a lot of other quarterbacks have had on me."

Brees is a great role model, person and pro. His impact on Winston is obvious.

WINSTON THE PLAYER

I'm more concerned with the football question: Can Winston help the Browns win enough games to make the playoffs if called upon to do so?

Let's break it down:

1. The Browns are counting on Winston to be the 2021 model. He started the first seven games for New Orleans. The Saints had a 5-2 record. He threw 14 TD passes compared to three interceptions. It was the only time in his career he stayed away from high interception totals.
2. That 2021 season ended after those seven games for Winston, who had ACL knee surgery.
3. In 2022, he opened as a starter, but suffered a foot and back injury in the first three games. Andy Dalton took over as the starter.
4. In 2023, Winston backed up Derek Carr. Winston didn't start a game in 2023. He was 25 of 47 passing with a pair of TDs and three interceptions.
5. In his last two seasons, Winston has a 1-2 record as a starter. He completed 59% of his passes, with six TDs compared to eight interceptions. Not much to go on.

The 6-foot-4, 231-pound Winston is only 30 years old. Once upon a time, he was the No. 1 pick in the 2015 draft by Tampa Bay. He has a strong arm, but threw a lot of interceptions. It also was in the poor decision-making period of his life.

His last full season as a starter was 2019, when he had a 7-9 record. Tampa Bay threw it all the time, Winston firing 33 TD passes and 30 interceptions.

I would have preferred Brissett, Flacco or Gardner Minshew for the spot. But I do respect Berry's track record selecting backups – Flacco, Keenum and Brissett. That's why I'm very open to seeing if Winston can deliver a winning performance. Watson's injury history shows why this was an important move for the Browns.



Give him one reason? Jordan Hicks had plenty for joining the Browns

By Scott Petrak, BrownsZone.Com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2024/03/17/give-him-one-reason-jordan-hicks-had-plenty-for-joining-the-browns/>

Top-ranked defense? Yep.

Former teammates? Got 'em.

Former coordinator? Sure.

Playoff team, two-year, \$8 million contract, chance to start? Check, check, check.

Linebacker Jordan Hicks listed a roll call of reasons the Browns were an attractive destination last week during the start of free agency.

“First and foremost, what the defense and this team was able to do last year and the historic nature of that,” he said Thursday. “I know guys like Rodney McLeod, I know guys like Dalvin Tomlinson, Za'Darius (Smith). I have followed their careers and obviously got to play with them personally. And just watching them, talking to them, obviously, is a huge part of free agency and just understanding different situations.

“And then you look at (coordinator) Jim Schwartz and the ability to get back to playing with him, having success with him in Philly and then watching his success here. With the opening at linebacker and the talent that this group has and this organization has, I think it's a recipe for something special. When an opportunity like this presents itself, you can't say no.”

Hicks, who'll turn 32 in June, is a key piece of Cleveland's linebacker transformation. Starter and captain Anthony Walker Jr. signed with the Dolphins and Sione Takitaki with the Patriots, while Devin Bush signed a one-year contract with the Browns.

Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah returns following a breakout season of 20 tackles for loss, two interceptions, 3.5 sacks and a forced fumble, so he and Hicks are expected to be on the field in the two-linebacker nickel package preferred by Schwartz. Bush will compete to join them in the base defense.

“I've seen his game over the years just continue to excel,” Hicks said of Owusu-Koramoah. “And you watch him, he's all over the place. Just his ability to understand how to attack the ball, how to just use his natural ability, his instincts to find the ball. And obviously his speed and strength is God-given, something you can't teach. So excited to get around him. I'm excited to get around the entire group.”

Jerry Judy excited to work side-by-side with Amari Cooper, expects it to lift his game

Hicks, a third-round pick of the Eagles in 2015, has started 119 of 122 games, totaling 13 interceptions, 49 passes defensed, six forced fumbles, 11 fumble recoveries, two touchdowns, 14.5



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sacks, 874 tackles and 47 for loss. In 13 games last year, he reached 100 (107) tackles for the fifth straight season, adding an interception, five passes defensed, a sack, a forced fumble, two fumble recoveries and a touchdown.

Just as general manager Andrew Berry had a plethora of resources to inquire about Hicks, the linebacker could scroll through his phone and find someone with information about the Browns. He played with Tomlinson and Smith in 2022 with the Vikings and played for Schwartz from 2016-18 with the Eagles, winning the Super Bowl after the 2017 season.

“One thing about Jim and his defense is it’s concise,” Hicks said. “You know your role and you know how offenses are going to attack you. When I look back on my career and I look back at the times and the years that I played as clear-minded as I ever have, it was those years with Coach Schwartz. And I think that’s just due to the preparation that he brings, the understanding of the defense, the understanding of how offenses are going to try to scheme you up and then just executing at a high level.”

Schwartz joined the Browns last season and turned the defense into the NFL’s top-ranked unit. In addition to leading the league in yards allowed, it led in passing yards, first downs and third-down conversions. The defense helped the Browns survive a series of season-ending injuries and using five starting quarterbacks to go 11-6 and reach the playoffs for the second time in four years.

“Excited to be a part of it,” Hicks said. “That’s what you play this game for. I’m going into Year 10. I want to win. I played on teams that don’t win, and it’s not fun to play this game. “So when you’re in an organization that takes it as serious as the Browns do and have an expectation of doing more than what is just acceptable, that’s what good teams do.”

Culture and chemistry were key pieces to the success last year, and Hicks will be counted on to help continue to cultivate the winning environment.

“It’s kind of been my role since I was in Philly, as more of a young guy still took on that leadership role,” he said. “But I don’t force anything. I try to just be who I am. I try to be authentic. I’m here to aid in other people’s maturation and grow all our IQs and our ability to play together.

“When you have 11 guys on a defense who are playing with that type of mindset to serve and to help each other to grow, to excel, I think that’s what makes certain defenses special.”

Hicks joins several players in their 30s as the Browns try to seize the opportunity to chase a championship. Left guard Joel Bitonio, defensive end Za’Darius Smith, defensive tackles Dalvin Tomlinson and Shelby Harris, kicker Dustin Hopkins, long snapper Charley Hughlett and tight end Jordan Akins will be joined by receiver Amari Cooper and right tackle Jack Conklin, who will turn 30 before the season.

“It just speaks to the culture that I think they’re trying to build and then also the fact that they’re trying to compete right now,” Hicks said. “It’s not always about looking ahead and always going younger. If that was the case, I wouldn’t have a job right now. So appreciate that. Very much so.



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“It’s a testament of what’s being built here, and I think it’s good to have a good blend of veteran leadership along with young energy and young players.”

Hicks got quite a scare last year when what seemed like an ordinary shin bruise during a game Nov. 12 wound up being compartment syndrome, a painful condition when pressure within the muscles builds to dangerous levels. He was taken to the hospital and had surgery. He missed four games but returned to finish the season.

“When I woke up on the table, I was told by the doctor it was a good thing we cut it open because I could have lost my leg, at worst,” he said. “And then from there, it’s like, OK, you could have had muscle damage, you could have had nerve damage, you could have had a whole list of things on top of that. So everything went exactly the way you could ever hope for it. But being a veteran in this league and seeing a lot of injuries, it’s the first time I’ve ever seen that one firsthand. And so things definitely get put into perspective. I’ve got three children. I got a wife, I got a family that if something would have gone south — you think about those thoughts. And so count your blessings.

“But for me, there was a lot of opportunity to show the amount of grit and the amount of fight that I try to instill in my kids and my family through that injury and was able to get back.”

RUN IT BACK

Berry retained several of the team’s free agents and is close to doing the same with McLeod, a 33-year-old safety, according to multiple reports. Berry already re-signed Smith, Harris, defensive tackle Maurice Hurst II, punter Corey Bojorquez and offensive lineman Michael Dunn.

McLeod signed with the Browns last offseason and was the No. 3 safety until a torn biceps against the Steelers ended his season Nov. 19. He had 29 tackles, two for loss, and a pass defended.

McLeod is a respected leader who stayed with the team following the injury.



Jordan Hicks believes the Browns have "a recipe for something special"

By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/jordan-hicks-believes-the-browns-have-a-recipe-for-something-special>

Jordan Hicks knows a thing or two about Jim Schwartz's defensive style.

Hicks played for Schwartz in Philadelphia from 2016-18 and started all 35 games he played over those three seasons. The Eagles went on a successful run in that stretch, and while Hicks missed a majority of the 2017 Super Bowl run with an Achilles injury, Hicks still found success in Schwartz's system.

Six years later, the linebacker veteran is reunited with his former defensive coordinator, as he signed a contract with the Browns on March 14. He returns to the attack-oriented defense under Schwartz as defensive coordinator in Cleveland.

"One thing about Jim and his defense is it's concise. You know your role and you know how offenses are going to attack you," Hicks said. "When I look back on my career and I look back at the times and the years that I played as clear-minded as I ever have, it was with him. It was those years with Coach Schwartz. And I think that's just due to the preparation that he brings, the understanding of the defense, the understanding of how offenses are going to try to scheme you up and then just executing at a high level."

The Browns' defensive success in 2023 was a major draw for Hicks. They led the league in total defense (270.2 yards per game), passing defense (164.7 yards per game) and third-down percentage at 29.1 percent.

Hicks also had a number of connections who were a part of the Browns' defense in 2023. He played with S Rodney McLeod in Philadelphia, as well as DT Dalvin Tomlinson and DE Za'Darius Smith during his two seasons with the Vikings. He'll have the chance to reunite with Tomlinson and Smith, as Smith re-signed with the Browns on March 13 and Tomlinson is under contract.

"I have followed their careers and obviously got to play with them personally," Hicks said. "And just watching them, talking to them, obviously, is a huge part of free agency and just understanding different situations."

The Browns linebacker room saw some change this offseason, as free agents Anthony Walker Jr. and Sione Takitaki signed with other teams. However, Hicks still believes they can have a dynamic linebacker room alongside Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah and newly signed Devin Bush.

"I think with the opening at linebacker and the talent that this group has, and this organization has, I think it's a recipe for something special," Hicks said.

Hicks has appeared in 122 games with 119 starts with the Eagles (2015-18), Cardinals (2019-21) and Vikings (2022-23). He has recorded 873 career tackles, 14.5 sacks, 13 interceptions, 11 fumble



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recoveries and six forced fumbles. Hicks has also registered at least 100 tackles in each of the past five seasons.

Owusu-Koramoah had a breakout season in 2023 as he established himself in Schwartz's defense. He led the Browns with 98 tackles, while also adding 3.5 sacks, six passes defended and one forced fumble. He finished fourth in the NFL with 20 tackles for loss during the regular season, with an additional four in the Wild Card game against the Texans.

Bush signed with the Seahawks for the 2023 season, and he played in 13 games with 37 tackles and five tackles for loss.

"You look at JOK and his natural ability. I mean, he's all over the field. I've watched him for years now. Got a ton of respect for his game," Hicks said. "Have played against and competed against Devin Bush multiple times. So got a lot of respect for those guys. Excited to get in the room and get back established, get back to playing football, because that's what we do this for."

He's also heard about the culture of the Browns' locker room, especially among the defense. Even though he hasn't met several of his teammates yet, he picked up on it during the first few hours in CrossCountry Mortgage Campus.

It reminded of similarities from 2017, when the Eagles went on to win the Super Bowl that season. While Hicks was hurt for a portion of the season, he watched as different players stepped in and played important roles in their success. It created a culture in their locker room about supporting one another whoever was on the field and on the sideline.

The Browns experienced the same type of mentality during the 2023 season as they dealt with a plethora of injuries to both sides of the ball and relied on the next man up mentality.

"You can tell it's something special," Hicks said. "Culture within a building can propel you to win the type of games that a lot of people don't expect you to win."

Hicks is entering his 10th year in the league and knows that his level of experience in different situations, as well as his familiarity with Schwartz, can be beneficial in the linebacker room and the defense as a whole. During his four seasons with the Eagles – even as a young player – he took on a leadership role. With the Browns, he's ready to do so once again.

"I don't force anything," Hicks said. "I try to just be who I am. I try to be authentic. I try to be genuine and I'm here to help. I'm here to aid in other people's maturation and grow all our IQs and our ability to play together. And I think that when you have eleven guys on a defense who are playing with that type of mindset to serve and to help each other to grow, to excel, I think that's what makes certain defenses special. So again, I'm just here to be me, do my role and obviously, fit in well with this team."



Jameis Winston aims to help Deshaun Watson be ‘the best person that we possibly can be’ after overcoming his own issues

By Mary Kay Cabot, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/03/jameis-winston-aims-to-help-deshaun-watson-be-the-best-person-that-we-possibly-can-be-on-and-off-the-field-since-hes-overcome-his-own-issues-as-well.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — If any quarterback in the NFL can help Deshaun Watson overcome his off-the-field issues and become a better man, it's Browns new backup Jameis Winston.

Winston, who's overcome his off-the-field transgressions and by all accounts become an upstanding citizen committed to helping others, acknowledged on Wednesday that he's uniquely qualified to help Watson become the best version of himself both on and the field.

Winston, who signed his one-year contract with the Browns worth \$4 million plus \$4.7 million in incentives on Wednesday to be Watson's backup, will celebrate his four-year wedding anniversary next week with his high school sweetheart from Alabama, Breion Allen, a former Rice basketball player.

Winston and Breion have two sons, Antonor 5, and Taurus, 3, and the three most important people in Winston's life have helped him leave his trouble in the dust, according to all who know him now.

Now, he preaches hope and help from the top of his mammoth lungs, and shakes the room with his unwavering faith. Former teammates such as Saints Pro Bowl tight end Jimmy Graham have called him the best teammate they've ever had, and those close to Winston vouch for the genuine turnaround.

“The person that this organization is getting, is first and foremost a man of God and faith who is about increase,” Winston said Wednesday during his introductory video conference. “And in terms of changing over the course of the past few years, significantly, four years ago, I got married to the love of my life, my high school sweetheart. So not just being a man of God, but a husband and a father of two kids. So priorities change when you see and know that things are bigger than you. So I'm here to do what God called me to do, and that is to lead and advance his kingdom in any way, shape or form. That's the man that you're getting.”

Like Watson, Winston has served an NFL suspension for sexual misconduct, with his coming in 2018 for three games after allegations he groped an Uber driver two years before. Winston also settled a civil suit in 2016 over allegations of sexual assault from 2012 at Florida State, for which no criminal charges were filed. He was also suspended from the FSU baseball team after a citation for stealing crab legs and crawfish.

To meet Winston now, you'd never guess he was that man. Which is why he feels adequate to the task of helping Watson continue his turnaround from the player who was accused by more than 24 massage therapists mostly in Houston of sexual misconduct during appointments. Watson served an 11-game suspension in 2022, paid a \$5 million fine, and underwent extensive counseling



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prescribed by the NFL, which is likely ongoing. He also settled most of his civil suits out of court, with two pending.

The Browns had a chance to re-sign 2023 savior Joe Flacco as Watson's backup, but opted for Winston, who's nine years younger at 30, a better scheme fit, and more qualified to mentor Watson through his personal struggles. They knew they'd suffer some backlash from acquiring another player with previous allegations of sexual misconduct, but they determined folks would soon see how he'll be part of the solution.

"Throughout everyone's life, they are given certain circumstances, conditions, and facts," Winston said Wednesday during his introductory video conference. "But just because you're presented with those things doesn't mean that those things have to define you. So, the resilience and perseverance that Deshaun already possesses, I believe that we're all going to be able to build and move forward through being the best person that we possibly can be, whether that's on the field and off the field."

He hopes that Watson's mistakes can lead to the same kind of transformation he's had in his own life.

"It's necessary for our individual growth, it's necessary for us to learn so we can be able to apply a better way," Winston said. "Being a father of a 5-year-old and a 3-year-old, you see them learning how to walk. I think the walking process is one of the most amazing, amazing processes because people think that you just get up and you just start walking, but you have to fall down and you have to learn how to get your balance and you have to learn how to continue to grow and grow 'til you can walk with authority and walk with your head up high and experience the amazing things that life has to offer."

Winston first got to know Watson when his Florida State Seminoles played Watson's Clemson Tigers in 2014, and they've remained friends.

"Just from his success then on, I've always encouraged him, shot him Instagram messages every now and then about being proud of him and continuing to persevere," Winston said. "We just kind of just stayed in contact in that way."

Not only were they both high first round picks — Winston going No. 1 overall to the Bucs in 2015 and Watson No. 12 to the Texans in 2017 — they have similar backgrounds and shared experiences.

"The biggest thing about this relationship is not only is this going to be a credible relationship because me and him have both had a lot of success throughout our football career, but it's going to be a relatable experience with us both being African-American quarterbacks out of the deep South," Winston said. "So I've experienced some of the certain things that he's experienced throughout his career, which allows him to be able to depend on me or to lean on me to different specific avenues that he might want to pursue or any questions that he might have. But one of the biggest things that I'm bringing to Deshaun is just really support and encouragement because he's achieved so much and that's why he's this organization's franchise quarterback."

In the wake of Watson's allegations, the Browns have carefully selected the quarterbacks to join him in the room, adding friends, mentors and players who can be part of his support system. The



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QB room is a sanctuary of sorts, and the Browns knew it had to be a place where Watson could grow and learn personally, as well as be supported. Jacoby Brissett was a tremendous mentor for Watson in 2022, and the Browns have added other quarterbacks who are his close friends, such as Joshua Dobbs, now with the 49ers, and Dorian Thompson-Robinson, their 2023 fifth-round pick out of UCLA. But none of them can relate to Watson's legal troubles the way Winston can.

"The most important thing I believe is the relationship between me and Deshaun is in a place where it will continue to grow and flourish," Winston said. "And I just admire him as a person and definitely as a football player, I look forward to allowing him to lean on me for anything that he needs and also encouraging him and providing him with different resources that he probably hasn't gotten from people that have been in the same room as him.

"Whether that's film studies, film tendencies, whether that's cooperating with the receiver room, cooperating with the running backs, just serving him and this team the best way that I can. Like I said earlier is that I'm a man of increase. I'm a man of faith and God. So I know it is not only a passion of mine to lead and to impact those around me, but I feel like it's a privilege. It's a privilege. When I'm provided with an opportunity, I tend not to look ahead of me or tend to look behind me. I tend to focus on the now. So I'm so excited to work with this young man and allow him, help him be what he is capable of being, and that's being one of the best quarterbacks in this league."

Winston, who still believes he's a starting quarterback in the NFL, is grateful for this opportunity to back up Watson and mentor the young QBs.

"Growing and experiencing the highs and lows and learning how to be content with every situation that I'm in has just created a different type of confidence and a different type of will," he said. "Knowing that I can impact anybody, anywhere despite the role that I may have. I've played some incredible roles over the course of my four years in New Orleans, which I believe has equipped me for anything that this game, that this business has to give me."

Since joining the Browns, he and Watson have been in close contact and they're eager to work together. Watson is starting to throw this week in Los Angeles after undergoing the surgery Nov. 21st to repair the fractured glenoid bone in his right throwing shoulder, and Winston knows he might have to take the bulk of first-team reps during the offseason while the Browns give Watson all the time he needs to heal. And if Winston must start games in his place — which isn't anticipated at this time — he'll be ready to go.

"This opportunity really stood out because of the great organization that it is, two, the incredible fan base and incredible people that this city possesses," Winston said. "And three, just the opportunity to remain grateful and to build and influence others around me."



Jameis Winston Vows To Help Deshaun Watson 'Be What He Is Capable Of Being'

By Tony Grossi, TheLandOnDemand.Com

<https://thelandondemand.com/news/2024/mar/20/jameis-winston-vows-to-help-deshaun-watson-be-what-he-is-capable-of-being/>

It was apparent in Jameis Winston's introductory Zoom conference that the Browns chose him to be Deshaun Watson's backup for reasons other than what he brings to the field.

Like Watson, Winston, 30, has had his share of controversial off-the-field incidents. He not only has overcome them but also has grown from them.

In his first comments upon signing a 1-year contract on Wednesday, Winston spoke eloquently of being a supporter and spiritual mentor to Watson.

"I'm a man of faith and God," Winston said. "So, I know it is not only a passion of mine to lead and to impact those around me, but I feel like it's a privilege when I'm provided with an opportunity. I tend not to look ahead of me and tend to look behind me. I tend to focus on the now.

"So, I'm so excited to work with this young man and allow him, help him, be what he is capable of being, and that's being one of the best quarterbacks in this league."

Winston said their paths first crossed in 2014 when Watson was a freshman and his Clemson team played Winston's Florida State. Winston was on the sideline for the game serving a suspension for shouting "vulgar and offensive" obscenities in the campus student union earlier in the week.

Winston said that after meeting Watson, he followed him from afar and "always encouraged him, shot him Instagram messages every now and then about being proud of him and continuing to persevere, and we just kind of stayed in contact that way."

"The biggest thing about this relationship is not only is this going to be an incredible relationship, because me and him have both had a lot of success throughout our football career, but it's going to be a relatable experience with us both being African American quarterbacks out of the deep south, right. So I've experienced some of the certain things that he's experienced throughout his career, which allows him to be able to depend on me or to lean on me to different specific avenues that he might want to pursue or any questions that he might have.

"But one of the biggest things that I'm bringing to Deshaun is just really support and encouragement because he has achieved so much, and that's why he is this organization's franchise quarterback."

Watson hasn't been able to rediscover his former self since joining the Browns in 2022 after allegations of sexual misconduct that resulted in an 11-game NFL suspension for violations of the league personal conduct policy. Two shoulder injuries reduced him to five games and one quarter in 2023 and resulted in season-ending surgery in November.



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Winston acknowledged his past transgressions, which included his own personal conduct violation in 2018 with Tampa Bay for allegedly groping a female Uber driver.

He said his life changed four years ago when he married “my high school sweetheart.” They have two children.

“Yes, throughout everyone’s life, they are given certain circumstances, conditions and facts,” he said. “But just because you are presented with those things doesn’t mean that those things have to define you, so the resilience and perseverance that Deshaun already possesses, I believe that we’re all going to be able to build and move forward through being the best person that we possibly can be, whether that’s on the field and off the field.

“I just know that some of the things that we all go through are necessary. It’s necessary for our individual growth. It’s necessary for us to learn so we can be able to apply it in a better way.

“You have to learn how to continue to grow and grow until you can walk with authority and walk with your head up high and experience the amazing things that life has to offer.”



Jameis Winston excited to support, encourage Deshaun Watson from backup role

By Scott Petrak, Brownszone.com

<https://www.brownszone.com/2024/03/20/jameis-winston-excited-to-support-encourage-deshaun-watson-from-backup-role/>

Jameis Winston is more than ready for the role of support Dawg. He's embraced the idea of backing up and propping up starting quarterback Deshaun Watson.

"I look forward to allowing him to lean on me for anything that he needs and also encouraging him and providing him with different resources that he probably hasn't gotten from people that have been in the same room as him," Winston said Wednesday during an introductory news conference.

D'Onta Foreman agrees to deal, adds depth at running back

Winston (6-foot-4, 230 pounds) signed a one-year, \$4 million contract that can reach \$8.7 million with incentives. The deal was agreed to last week during the start of free agency, as the Browns chose Winston over Joe Flacco as the No. 2.

Winston, 30, was the No. 1 overall pick of the Buccaneers in 2015 and has started 80 games in his career. While he still wants to be a starter, he's committed to supporting Watson.

"I'm so excited to work with this young man and help him be what he is capable of being, and that's being one of the best quarterbacks in this league," Winston said. "One of the biggest things that I'm bringing to Deshaun is just really support and encouragement because he has achieved so much and that's why he is this organization's franchise quarterback."

Jerry Jeudy quickly gets 3-year extension to remain in Cleveland

The Browns picked Winston over Flacco, who won four straight starts in December to clinch a playoff berth, because he's nine years younger and a good fit for the offense and quarterback room. The organization continues to try to create the best situation for Watson to succeed, and Winston echoed the comments of new coordinator Ken Dorsey.

"That's the exciting part about working with him is getting him back to the elite level of who he is," Dorsey said of Watson in February.

Analysis: Younger doesn't necessarily mean better when it comes to Jameis Winston, Joe Flacco and 2024

Winston's help will take many forms.

"That's film studies, film tendencies, whether that's cooperating with the receiver room, cooperating with the running backs, just serving him and his team," Winston said. "I know it is not only a passion of mine to lead and to impact those around me, but I feel like it's a privilege."



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Winston spent the last two years as the backup in New Orleans and became a free agent when the Saints cut him. He called the Browns a “great fit” because of the organization and the fan base.

He said he met Watson in 2014 when his Florida State team faced Watson’s Clemson squad.

“I’ve always encouraged him, shot him Instagram messages every now and then about being proud of him and continuing to persevere,” Winston said. “The biggest thing about this relationship is not only is this going to be a credible relationship because me and him have both had a lot of success throughout our football career, but it’s going to be a relatable experience with us both being African-American quarterbacks out of the deep South. So I’ve experienced some of the certain things that he’s experienced throughout his career, which allows him to be able to depend on me or to lean on me to different specific avenues that he might want to pursue or any questions that he might have.”

Mike Vrabel hired as coaching/personnel consultant

Winston went 28-42 as a starter in his five years with the Buccaneers, throwing 121 touchdowns and 88 interceptions. He wasn’t re-signed after leading the NFL with 626 pass attempts, 5,109 passing yards and 30 interceptions in 2019.

He didn’t start a game in 2020 with the Saints, then went 5-2 in 2021 before a torn anterior cruciate ligament ended his season. He went 1-2 in 2022 and didn’t start a game last year behind Derek Carr, throwing only 47 passes. For his career, he’s completed 61.2 percent for 22,104 yards, 141 touchdowns, 99 interceptions and an 87.0 passer rating while rushing for 1,214 yards and 11 TDs.

Winston’s learned to not only accept but cherish the role of backup.

“The most important thing is just the opportunity. The opportunity that we get as football players,” he said. “We’ve been playing this sport — me, myself — since I’ve been 4 years old. So the experiences that I’ve been able to accumulate, the experiences that have taught me things for anyone’s benefit, just the wisdom that I have attained. Knowing that I can impact anybody, anywhere despite the role that I may have.”

Winston says he’s a changed man from his younger days. He served a three-game suspension to start the 2018 season for violating the NFL’s personal conduct policy. He had been accused of groping an Uber driver in March 2016 and an NFL investigation determined Winston violated the conduct policy by “touching the driver in an inappropriate and sexual manner without her consent.”

Winston had previously called the accusation “false” but apologized in a statement after the suspension.

In 2016 he settled a federal lawsuit accusing him of sexual battery of a fellow Florida State student in 2012. Winston had called the encounter consensual, and no criminal charges were filed.



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Watson's alleged transgressions are also well known. He was suspended for the first 11 games of 2022 following more than two dozen accusations of sexual misconduct during massage therapy sessions.

"The person that this organization is getting is first and foremost a man of God and faith who is about increase," Winston said. "And in terms of changing over the course of the past few years, significantly, four years ago I got married to the love of my life, my high school sweetheart. So not just being a man of God, but a husband and a father of two kids. So priorities change when you see and know that things are bigger than you."

He became a locker room favorite in New Orleans and credited being genuine, optimistic and consistent.

"I'm focused on how we can get better and how we can get better together," he said. "So I'm always looking for ways to enhance those around me because I know that that is what a leader encompasses."



Jameis Winston sees 'opportunity' in role as Deshaun Watson's backup with Cleveland Browns

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/03/21/jameis-winston-backup-qb-role-browns-depth-chart-nfl-deshaun-watson-free-agency/73040464007/>

Jameis Winston has been used to being "The Man" when it comes to playing quarterback.

Winston was The Man while leading Florida State to the BCS national championship in 2013 and to the first College Football Playoffs in 2014. He was The Man when the Tampa Bay Buccaneers took him No. 1 overall in the 2015 draft and made him their starting quarterback for 70 of the 72 games in which he played over a five-year run.

Even after spending a year behind Drew Brees in 2020 with the New Orleans Saints, Winston appeared to be The Man again to start the 2021 season. Then he suffered an anterior cruciate ligament tear that cost him the final nine games of that season, and a chance to stay The Man.

The next year, after injuries again struck three games into the Saints' 2022 season, Winston saw his chance to be The Man disappear. First it was to Andy Dalton for the remainder of that season, then to Derek Carr last season.

Winston yet again finds himself as the man behind The Man now after signing a one-year deal with the Browns

Wednesday, the same day they also signed former Baltimore Ravens backup Tyler Huntley. He comes to Cleveland as the expected backup to Deshaun Watson, a quarterback who Winston first got to know while both of them were the The Man in college at ACC rivals Florida State and Clemson.

"The biggest thing about this relationship is not only is this going to be a credible relationship because me and him have both had a lot of success throughout our football career, but it's going to be a relatable experience with us both being African-American quarterbacks out of the deep South," Winston said during an introductory Zoom call Wednesday. "So I've experienced some of the certain things that he's experienced throughout his career, which allows him to be able to depend on me or to lean on me to different specific avenues that he might want to pursue or any questions that he might have.

"But one of the biggest things that I'm bringing to Deshaun is just really support and encouragement because he has achieved so much and that's why he is this organization's franchise quarterback."

The last time Winston started a game was in Week 3 of the 2022 season, a loss at the Carolina Panthers. He didn't get on the field again until Week 3 of last season, when he made the first of seven appearances off the bench for the Saints at the Green Bay Packers.



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Winston started 80 of the first 87 NFL games in which he appeared. The last seven, though, he's found himself cast as an understudy.

Where some, though, may see obstacle, Winston sees something else.

"The most important thing that I saw and I continue to talk about it, is just the opportunity," Winston said. "The opportunity that we get as football players. We've been playing this sport — me, myself — since I've been 4 years old. So the experiences that I've been able to accumulate, the experiences that have taught me things for anyone's benefit, like just the wisdom that I have attained, whether it's strategic from a football side or whether it's emotional, physical from just a personable side."

Winston's gone through his own share of experiences — some good, some bad and some of his own doing, even a little ugly. There have been on-field struggles, including a year in which he threw a league-high 30 interceptions, with Tampa Bay and injuries to his ACL, his back and his foot with New Orleans.

There was also an incident in 2018 while with the Buccaneers in which he was suspended three games for personal conduct policy violations. That suspension followed an investigation that concluded he inappropriately touched an Uber driver in a sexual manner without her consent.

"I think from the outside looking in, a lot of people view football players as these athletes who put themselves on the pedestal," Winston said. "But growing and experiencing the highs and lows and learning how to be content with every situation that I'm in has just created a different type of confidence and a different type of will. Knowing that I can impact anybody, anywhere despite the role that I may have."

The role Winston may have in Cleveland could be among the more unique ones of his career. While he arrives as the understood backup to Watson, he does so knowing that the established starter won't be ready to play for some time.

Watson was only this week starting to throw again after undergoing surgery Nov. 21 to repair a broken glenoid and other structural damage in his throwing shoulder. That's likely to leave him extremely limited for any part of the Browns' voluntary offseason program, which starts with off-the-field meetings April 15 before beginning on-the-field activities in May.

The expectation remains that Watson will be back for training camp in late July. Winston said, regardless of when Watson returns, he's ready to fully offer himself up to help.

"I look forward to allowing him to lean on me for anything that he needs and also encouraging him and providing him with different resources that he probably hasn't gotten from people that have been in the same room as him," Winston said. "Whether that's film studies, film tendencies, whether that's cooperating with the receiver room, cooperating with the running backs, just serving him and this team the best way that I can."



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"... So I'm so excited to work with this young man and allow him, help him be what he is capable of being, and that's being one of the best quarterbacks in this league."



What Browns OL Dawand Jones' ongoing recovery from 'gruesome' injury means for OTAs **By Nathan Baird, cleveland.com**

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/03/what-browns-ol-dawand-jones-ongoing-recovery-from-gruesome-injury-means-for-otas.html>

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Dawand Jones no longer needs crutches, but the Browns' biggest player continues his recovery from MCL surgery last December.

The right tackle called it a “gruesome” injury — unlike anything he had dealt with in his career. The 6-8, 374-pound Jones now must deal with the realities of rehabbing a significant injury for the first time.

“Going down and just feeling your leg kind of go numb, and then the next day it just be stiff to the point where you can barely move,” said Jones, who said he also sustained damage to his meniscus.

Jones came back to the Woody Hayes Athletic Center on Wednesday to attend Ohio State's Pro Day. He said he remains hopeful he can participate in some portion of the Browns' organized training activities in May or June.

A year ago during his own draft process, Jones faces scrutiny over his conditioning and stamina, among other perceived shortcomings. It explained why he fell into the fourth round.

Starting nine of 11 games prior to the injury allowed Jones to answer those doubts.

“I feel like my game did a lot of the talking,” Jones said. “... I put it out on the tape, and that was one of my main goals.”

When he returns to full participation, Jones will need to make another adjustment. Offensive line coach Bill Callahan left to join his son, Brian's, staff with the Tennessee Titans. The Browns hired Andy Dickerson as the new offensive line coach.

“I'm definitely missing my guy coach Callahan,” Jones said. “I'm so happy for him. He gets to be with his son. He's gonna be dearly missed this year.

“But you know, we've got Andy coming in and hopefully he leads us on the path and puts us in the right plan and pushes us the right way.”

Starting right tackle Jack Conklin's own torn knee ligaments forced Jones into the starting lineup as a rookie. Along with returning left tackle Jedrick Wills, the Browns could bring back three potential starters for two spots.

“I don't know what the next year holds for me, but I'm gonna put my head down and my hard hat on and go to work,” Jones said.



NFL fans might not notice new tackle rule change watching games - but players' wallets will feel the impact: Ashley Bastock

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/03/nfl-fans-might-not-notice-new-tackle-rule-change-watching-games-but-players-wallets-will-feel-the-impact-ashley-bastock.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The NFL will have a new tackling rule in place this upcoming season, but it's one fans may not notice a ton as they watch their team's games week-to-week.

It's likely that players who use the swivel technique to make hip-drop tackles won't be called for it in real time, simply because it's going to be too difficult for an officiating crew to spot in the moment.

NFL team owners on Monday unanimously approved a rule that bans players from using the technique. It would require officials to notice two actions: If a defender "grabs the runner with both hands or wraps the runner with both arms" and also "unweights himself by swiveling and dropping his hips and/or lower body, landing on and trapping the runner's leg(s) at or below the knee."

Browns cornerback Greg Newsome II had a spot on reaction when news broke on Monday about the rule change at the NFL's annual meetings.

"Wait so when they mean ban... what happens if someone hypothetically does it? You get fined?" Newsome pondered on X.

In short? Yeah, pretty much.

The reality is, since an officiating crew would be hard-pressed to make a call on this, the rule change will cause fewer 15-yard penalties (which yes, would be the call for this kind of play) than it will warnings and fines for players after the fact.

For this reason, players and the NFLPA have continued to voice their displeasure with the rule.

In addition to Newsome, former star edge rusher J.J. Watt was one of the people expressing displeasure, posting to X, "Just fast forward to the belts with flags on them..."

The Lions D.J. Reader added: "These rules getting crazy out here. Two hand tag better fits the game." Darius Slay of the Philadelphia Eagles posted: "It's about to be a lot of miss tackles," with two crying laughing emojis too.

But during Roger Goodell's press conference on Tuesday, he told reporters in attendance at the annual meetings in Orlando that the reasoning for the new rule was largely safety.

"We met with them in the competition committee back in Indianapolis (during the NFL combine). They came in and they expressed their view," Goodell said. "Immediately, we had an opportunity to go through all of the plays from a video standpoint. We had them hear from our engineers as well as ask questions (to) the engineers and our committee members.



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“So, listen, it’s a play that has a 20-times injury factor. From that standpoint, we can’t allow that. We’ve been very, I think, effective and very clear when we see a technique that we think is going to increase the safety of our players — particularly at that kind of rate, I’m not sure we’ve had anything at that kind of rate — we’re going to work to try to remove it from the game. I think we’ll be very effective in doing that.”

The safety component is somewhat understandable — this goes especially for rules the league has implemented in recent years, like the “use of helmet” rule to help curb head injuries.

But this isn’t that.

And at the same time, football is a contact sport. You’re never going to stop every injury from occurring, and I understand why defensive players view this as a sort of micro-managing money grab.

After all, how much will this rule change bring when there aren’t going to be in-game penalties called that often? Is it really going to stick in players minds to not use this technique going forward?

On that note, I remain skeptical that the rule change will be in the best interest of players — and certainly not in the best interest of their wallets.



What will happen to Cleveland Browns Stadium?

By Justin Dennis, Fox8.com

<https://fox8.com/news/live-what-will-happen-to-cleveland-browns-stadium/>

CLEVELAND (WJW) — An ordinance set to go before Cleveland city councilmembers on Monday will address “the future of the municipally owned, taxpayer-funded” Cleveland Browns Stadium.

Amid reports that team owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam are considering moving the team out of downtown Cleveland, Ward 16 councilperson Brian Kazy said he plans to introduce a measure requiring them to go before council to ask to move the team, or to give six months notice of their intent to leave and offer the team up for sale locally.

Here’s where the Browns’ owners may move the team

The measure invokes Ohio Revised Code Section 9.67:

No owner of a professional sports team that uses a tax-supported facility for most of its home games and receives financial assistance from the state or a political subdivision thereof shall cease playing most of its home games at the facility and begin playing most of its home games elsewhere unless the owner either:

(A) Enters into an agreement with the political subdivision permitting the team to play most of its home games elsewhere;

(B) Gives the political subdivision in which the facility is located not less than six months’ advance notice of the owner’s intention to cease playing most of its home games at the facility and, during the six months after such notice, gives the political subdivision or any individual or group of individuals who reside in the area the opportunity to purchase the team.

OHIO REVISED CODE SECTION 9.67

The statute became law in June 1996, a year after former Browns owner Art Modell announced the city’s football team would move to Baltimore. It was also used in 2018 to keep the Columbus Crew soccer team in that city, Kazy said Monday.

“What this basically does ... is ensures that the Cleveland Browns have to go through the legal process of leaving the city of Cleveland,” he said. “They have to go before the city, Cleveland City Council, ask for permission to move the team, or they have to give us six months notice and offer to put the team up for sale.

“We’re hoping that the latter does not happen. However, this is going to ensure that the Cleveland Browns are going to be a part of the legislative process and that Cleveland City Council’s going to have a say-so in that.”



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How fans are reacting to potential Browns stadium move

The Haslams are now considering whether to renovate the 25-year-old Cleveland Browns Stadium or build new, moving the team to a new domed stadium that could be built in Brook Park, they said in an interview last week with ESPN Cleveland.

Kazy, in a Monday news release, said he's "committed to keeping the public informed about the stadium" and that he "recognizes the importance of transparency and public engagement in shaping the future of our city and our professional sports teams."

The Haslams' lease on the stadium expires in 2028, but they suggested that could be extended as development plans take shape.



Could a Browns domed stadium in Brook Park spawn a vibrant entertainment district and what might it look like?

By Joey Morona, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/entertainment/2024/03/could-a-browns-dome-stadium-in-brook-park-spawn-a-vibrant-entertainment-district-and-what-might-it-look-like.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- From 1974 to 94, the Cleveland Cavaliers played its home games at the Richfield Coliseum. But during that time, the sleepy little town between Cleveland and Akron never transformed into the kind of entertainment district typically associated with sports stadiums these days. It was never designed to.

In fact, the site on a prairie near both I-271 and I-77 was chosen specifically to draw people who could drive to the arena in less than an hour and designed to get them in and out as quickly and efficiently as possible.

“The idea was you build a massive parking lot around the facility. Therefore, there’s no retail activity there, no restaurants, no shops,” said Andrew Zimbalist, an economics professor at Smith College who has consulted on stadium projects. “When people got to the arena and got hungry, they had to go inside to buy their hot dogs and drink their beer.”

“That was a very different model and, hence, I don’t think what happened 50 years ago is pertinent to this.”

Richfield Coliseum

The Richfield Coliseum, aka “The Palace on the Prairie,” was home to the Cleveland Cavaliers from 1974-1994. (Photo by Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer)Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer

This is the estimated \$2 billion-plus domed stadium Cleveland Browns owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam are considering building on the 176 acres in Brook Park they have the option to buy while simultaneously remaining open to renovating the existing stadium on the lakefront. The Haslams have not released specific plans or renderings for the potential domed stadium, but their comments this week combined with league-wide trends and the size of the property suggest their concept consists of much more than a solitary stadium in the middle of big parking lot.

“You could paint the vision of what our community could be and the jobs it can provide and the surrounding development or just the growth that could happen from it,” Dee Haslam told cleveland.com’s Mary Kay Cabot and four other reporters who cover the team. “I look at it as very positive.”

Such a project could have the potential to “transform our area,” Haslam said. It would almost certainly include plans for restaurants, bars, shopping — all sorts of attractions — that people could enjoy not just on game days, but year-round.

Zimbalist says a Brook Park dome would need to be part of a designed district with mixed-used development around the stadium to have “even a remote chance of making sense economically.”



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Victor Matheson, an economics professor at the College of the Holy Cross who studies public stadium deals, agrees, saying most new stadiums in the suburbs feature adjoining, entertainment districts.

“Owners don’t just want to be in the sports business, they want to be in the real estate business as well,” he said.

Of the NFL’s 10 suburban stadiums, nearly all are located either near existing mixed-use development with entertainment or land that is currently being developed for that purpose. The trend started in the early 2000s with the New England Patriots, who play their games in Foxborough, 30 miles south of Boston.

The Patriots are owned by the Kraft family, who built their own stadium there and left it “basically surrounded by a sea of parking for nearly a full decade,” Matheson said. By 2007, they realized they could get a better return on their investment.

Constellation Energy's Completed Solar Installation at Patriot Place

The result was Patriot Place, a 1.35-million square foot lifestyle center with about 30 stores, including a giant Bass Pro Shop, more than two dozen bars and restaurants, a 14-screen cinema, a bowling alley, two hotels and even a medical center. The complex draws more than nine million people every year

“We were the first and I think we’ve been very, very successful,” Patriot Place general manager Brian Earley told WGRZ-TV in Buffalo in 2022.

Patriot Place, however, might not be the best example of what could happen in Brook Park. The Foxborough site is more than double the size of the parcel the Haslams are eyeing. And its isolated location along a four-lane state route can sometimes make it feel empty, as it did when I strolled its promenade on a random Thursday in 2018.

But perhaps more noteworthy, Gillette Stadium and Patriot Place were almost entirely privately funded. The Haslams are pursuing a public-private partnership for the lakefront stadium renovation, and it’s believed they’d want the same for a dome.

“I can’t imagine the Cleveland Browns owners building this thing on their own dime,” Matheson said.

Westgate Entertainment District

Westgate Entertainment District in Glendale, AZ is served by two stadiums: Desert Diamond Arena and State Farm Stadium, home of the NFL's Arizona Cardinals. (AP Photo/Ross D. Franklin, file)AP Some have pointed to suburban Phoenix as an example of a thriving stadium entertainment development. The Westgate Entertainment District is located opposite State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Arizona, the home of the NFL’s Cardinals. It bills itself as a “livable, walkable outdoor oasis” offering an eclectic mix of retail, dining and entertainment, plus loft-style apartments and



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several hotels. Highlights include nearly 50 restaurants and bars, a 20-screen movie theater, a Dave & Buster's and a pickleball bar.

But like Patriot Place, Westgate is a private venture. It was built as a complementary piece to not one, but two publicly financed stadiums — the 19,000-seat Desert Diamond Arena is the other — making it a less analogous comparison.

On paper, Texas Live!, the lively \$250 million entertainment complex in Arlington, outside of Dallas, might seem like a better harbinger if a dome is built in Brook Park. But while it was developed as a public-private partnership, Texas Live! is more focused on nightlife, with a dozen restaurants, bars, clubs and live music venues — not exactly Brook Park vibes.

Not to mention, the district is adjacent to three stadiums: the Cowboys' AT&T Stadium, Globe Life Field, where Major League Baseball's Texas Rangers play, and Choctaw Stadium, home to professional rugby, soccer and spring football teams.

Texas Live! opened next to Globe Life Field in Arlington, TX, home of MLB's Texas Rangers, in 2020. The entertainment district is located near other stadiums as well: AT&T Stadium and Choctaw Stadium. (AP Photo/Michael Ainsworth)AP

Could the Browns organization perhaps glean something from the league's two existing domed stadiums in the midwest, Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis and Ford Field in Detroit? Matheson notes the Brook Park option is different than a downtown stadium, which are used as anchors to spur organic urban development. "(With suburban projects), there's generally not a lot there to begin with and so you have to artificially create it with the idea that if you build it, they will come."

Instead, he said the template the Browns and their fans should be looking at is what MLB's Atlanta Braves pulled off several years ago.

"That tells you what's possible, but it also very clearly shows the drawbacks."

Divisional Series - St Louis Cardinals v Atlanta Braves - Game Five

In 2017, the Braves were lured to Cobb County, 10 miles northwest of downtown, as the centerpiece of a \$1 billion mixed-use development that included \$300 million in taxpayer money. To put the scope of it in Northeast Ohio terms: think Crocker Park or Pinecrest and then add a 41,000-seat baseball stadium and a 4,000-seat concert venue.

The project, known collectively as Truist Park and The Battery Atlanta, has been touted as a financial success. In its annual report last year, the Cobb County government reported the ballpark district hosted more than 10 million visitors and generated \$38 million in tax revenue during fiscal 2022. What's more, the Braves earned \$59 million from rental income from The Battery tenants in 2023, making it their third largest source of income, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. But there is a big caveat behind all of this. Experts say developments like these don't create new spending.



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“The success (of The Battery) has come at the expense of other restaurants and retail in the rest of the county,” Matheson said. “You didn’t get anything new for Atlanta as a whole, you didn’t even get anything new for Cobb County. You just redirected where the spending in Greater Atlanta was being done.

“But the county still is on the hook for these huge subsidies.”

Could the Haslams replicate something close to The Battery? Again, it might not be an apples-to-apples comparison. Truist Park hosts at minimum 81 baseball games a year — that’s a lot more events than a Brook Park dome could likely book even under the best circumstances. The Atlanta metropolitan area has a much bigger population than Cleveland, too, and it’s a warm-weather city.

“NFL stadiums are a real tricky thing to get right,” Matheson said. “Even the best of them sit dark most of the year, and that makes it hard to build neighborhoods around them.”

“I think it’s a real stretch,” Zimbalist said of the Browns’ suburban stadium aspirations. “I would want to study the area where they’re putting it and the plan for mixed-use development. But I start out being very skeptical and pessimistic. It would depend on the details (of the financing).” This much is clear: if a dome were to spawn an entertainment district in Brook Park, it would require the sort of intention and momentum that didn’t exist when the Richfield Coliseum opened all those decades ago.

“What you need is not just a plan of the kinds of structures you’d like to see,” Zimbalist said. “You’ve got to have commitments from private capital. What often happens is that owners simply have ideas about what could happen, but there’s no commitment.”

“There’s no reason it can’t work if you throw enough public subsidy at it,” Matheson said. “The real question is: is there any rational reason why you should throw the sort of public money at this that would be required to make it work? We have reams and reams of evidence that stadiums are not particularly good economic drivers and tend to be a poor public investment.”



Browns RB Nyheim Hines says he's 'learned my lessons' following jet ski accident, recovery on track

By Eric Edholm, NFL.com

<https://www.nfl.com/news/browns-rb-nyheim-hines-says-he-s-learned-my-lessons-following-jet-ski-accident-recovery-on-track>

Nyheim Hines is fortunate he was able to find quality work this offseason after missing all of the 2023 season. But he's even more lucky the injury that caused him to miss the season wasn't worse. Hines, who signed a one-year deal with the Browns this offseason, suffered a torn ACL while being on a jet ski after being hit by another rider last July. After spending last season on injured reserve, Buffalo allowed Hines to walk in free agency.

Hines joined the Up & Adams Show and discussed the freak injury.

"I could do better not putting myself in that situation," Hines said Monday. "It was a freak accident, but I've learned my lessons from that mistake. I won't put myself in the situation to even miss the season off the field.

"Based off that, I could say whatever I want to about the Bills, but really it's on me. I shouldn't have put myself in that situation."

Since the accident, Hines has been in rehab mode -- and it has been as frustrating as it has been productive. But he said he's made some significant progress and believes he's on the right track back to the field.

"I'm feeling a lot better than I did even a month ago. There's been progress," Hines said. "I don't wish an ACL surgery on anybody. It's tough the first two or three months, but you start seeing the light at the end of the tunnel in Month 4, 5, 6, 7.

"Three months ago, I didn't think I was walking well or running well, and now I'm doing both those things. So I'm thankful for that, thankful for the people I work with and thankful for my recovery process so far."

The Browns have a solid 1-2 punch at running back on paper with Nick Chubb and Jerome Ford, although Chubb is coming off his own knee injury this offseason. Hines said he and Chubb have gotten to know each other while rehabbing, but the Browns recently said they have committed to a "conservative" approach in Chubb's return.

That might mean that Hines could be in for a bigger role than imagined initially. But once the Browns are full speed, Hines said he understands what role he came in to serve.

"As far as complementing the Browns, Jerome and Chubb, they're over 200 pounds, they're bruisers of runners," Hines said. "I can get my nose dirty, too, but I'm looking to complement them in the passing game. I can run the ball well, but we all know I'm known for my receiving ability. So I'll make sure I go out there on third down, pick up the blitz when they're not in."



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Hines also has game-changing return ability, running six career kicks back for touchdowns -- two punts and four kickoffs. The last two of those kickoff-return TDs came in the same game, in a stirring Week 18 Bills game against the Patriots following the Damar Hamlin's frightening cardiac arrest the game prior.

Although Hines told Kay Adams that he wants to "make sure I make a big splash in the return game," especially given the NFL's newly adopted kickoff rules potentially making returns a more competitive play again, he also wants to make sure people give him his proper due as a running back, too.

"I've been hearing the whole return-specialist thing -- I'm not that," he said. "I believe I play offense, but returning is something I love to do as well. But I like to do both."



Justin Hardee Sr. is embracing opportunity to play for his hometown team in the Browns **By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com**

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/justin-hardee-sr-is-embracing-opportunity-to-play-for-his-hometown-team-in-the-browns>

Justin Hardee Sr. began his day on April 2 knowing that he would be signing a contract with an NFL team. Yet, this day had a different feel to it than his previous NFL stops, as he got into his car and drove a short distance to the Browns CrossCountry Mortgage Campus.

The hometown kid had earned his chance to play for his hometown team, as he officially signed a contract with the Browns on April 2.

"It was between a few teams, but ultimately it came down to what made sense for me and what was the best situation for me," Hardee said. "It was kind of a no brainer with the teams I had. I felt like this was the best situation for me where I'm at in my career. This is the perfect situation. So, I'm embracing it."

Hardee grew up in Cleveland and attended Glenville High School where he graduated from in 2012. He has been a Browns fan throughout his life, keeping his fandom as the Browns struggled through losing seasons and tough situations. He followed different players across position groups like WR Josh Cribbs and CB Joe Haden during their individual stints in Cleveland. Hardee also had an opportunity during his career to meet both and played against Haden.

Over the years, he held on to the dream of playing for his hometown team during his career. It just came earlier than he originally anticipated.

"I knew I was going to eventually play for the Browns," Hardee said. "I just didn't know when. I thought it would have been later in my career, but I felt like God's timing was perfect timing and he wanted it to come in the prime of my career. So, what's better than to be playing for your hometown team in your prime rather than when you're on the way out the league."

Hardee toured the facility on Tuesday and met with Executive Vice President of Football Operations and General Manager Andrew Berry, head coach Kevin Stefanski, special teams coordinator Bubba Ventrone and other members of the Browns' coaching staff. Hardee had a mutual connection with Ventrone from Hardee's time with the Saints in former teammate Craig Robinson. They've also crossed paths along the way.

"I know Bubba has coached some pros in his past and Pro Bowlers in his past, isn't as fast and I looked them in about a day and I said, 'You're gonna add Justin Hardee to that list.' So excited man just to meet him, I love his energy," Hardee said. "Coach (Kevin) Stefanski, you hear about stuff, but you don't necessarily know the person until you actually meet the person. So just actually meeting these guys and actually putting the character to face and just seeing how they act, how they talk." Hardee is now entering his eighth NFL season out of Illinois and has been a key piece in kick and punt return coverage over his career.

He was originally signed by Houston as an undrafted free agent in 2017 and has appeared in 100 career games with the Saints (2017-20) and Jets (2021-23). Hardee was also named to the Pro Bowl



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in 2022 in his second season with the Jets. He has recorded one career interception and 63 special teams' tackles. Last season, he appeared in 11 games and registered five special teams' tackles.

As Hardee takes the next step in his career, the success of the Browns during the 2023 season played an integral role in his decision. He believes he can play a part in the Browns taking another step in their playoff success, whether on the defensive side of the ball or on special teams.

"I feel like defensively, we can lead the league and take away and lead us to the promised land and special teams, I feel like we can do the same thing. I can't wait to tap into more into special teams and meet the special teams' guys," Hardee said. "Being able to be here and being able to be a part of the championship instead of me just rooting for the championship, I can actually be a part of it. I can help bring whatever tool I can bring in to help the franchise in any way possible."

As Hardee transitions to a new team and learns the nuances of the Browns, he knows his connection to the city of Cleveland and understanding the fanbase of the Browns will allow him to flourish – especially with his family and friends present in the area.

"They are definitely going to see nothing but passion from me, and me giving everything that I have," Hardee said. "I pride myself in that, just taking everything and everything is earned, not given. So, just embracing that mentality and embracing that I get to be in my city to play for my hometown fans and that they'll be able to watch me play, my family will get to watch me play every single week. Now that we all together, I feel like it's gonna be special. I feel like this year will definitely be special. I feel like if I was to ever be on the Browns any year, I feel like this is the best year to be a part of it."



The connection between Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski and UConn's Geno Auriemma **By Dan Labbe, Cleveland.Com**

<https://www.cleveland.com/sports/2024/04/the-connection-between-browns-head-coach-kevin-stefanski-and-uconn-genno-auriemma.html?outputType=amp>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- UConn women's basketball head coach Geno Auriemma remembers the current NFL Coach of the Year, Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski, long before he ever got into coaching football.

"I tell people all the time that that kid running around (the yard) is now coach of the year in the NFL," Auriemma said. "It's a pretty cool story, right?"

Auriemma and Kevin's father, Ed Stefanski, both played in the Philadelphia Catholic League at the same time. Auriemma attended Bishop Kenrick High School and Stefanski went to Monsignor Bonner.

"Eddie and I played in the same league, in the Philadelphia Catholic League, and by coincidence we had a house, we were next door neighbors in Avalon, New Jersey, during the summer," Auriemma said.

"Kevin, I don't know, might've been in high school or something, so he was always down there," he said.

Auriemma, in his 39th season, was born in Montella, Italy, before his family moved to Norristown, Pennsylvania. He graduated from West Chester University in 1981. Ed Stefanski played basketball at Penn before being drafted into the NBA. He has been an executive in the NBA with the Nets, 76ers and Pistons.

Kevin Stefanski played football and basketball at St. Joe's Prep before playing football at Penn.

He has twice been named NFL coach of the year, following the 2020 and 2023 seasons, and sports a 37-30 regular season record, already the fourth most regular season wins in Browns history.

He has a ways to go to catch Auriemma, who is the second-winningest coach in the history of college basketball, but he's not off to a bad start.

"There's something in the water in Philly," Auriemma said, "and you're not surprised. You're not surprised."



How past dome stadium efforts by a governor, mayor, Cleveland business leaders failed & what happened next

By Rich Exner, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/how-past-dome-stadium-efforts-by-a-governor-mayor-cleveland-business-leaders-failed-what-happened-next.html?outputType=amp>

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Before there was a Gateway, a Browns move to Baltimore or a new Browns stadium on the lakefront, there were years of work in Cleveland toward gaining support for a domed stadium.

So real was the effort that after voters rejected one dome tax proposal, a non-profit organization of civic leaders was formed to revisit the idea, with support from the governor's office and the mayor, even securing state money for planning.

But in February 1989, then-Mayor George V. Voinovich declared the death of the Greater Cleveland Domed Stadium Corp. Instead, 15 months later, voters approved what would become the Gateway sports complex.

The Plain Dealer on Feb. 12, 1989, alongside of stories by Catherine L. Kissling and Russell Schneider, published this timeline, covering the failed effort to gain voter approval for a dome in 1984 and a renewed attempt that fizzled out years later.

February 1984: Cuyahoga County commissioners vote unanimously to place a 25-year, \$150 million bond issue on the ballot to finance a 72,000-seat domed stadium downtown at the Central Market area. A property tax increase would be used to retire bonds used to finance the proposed stadium. Mayor George V. Voinovich and Gov. Richard F. Celeste oppose the ballot issue.

March 1984: Voinovich sketches out his own plan for a domed stadium on the city's lakefront in connection with a park and other development but later endorses the commissioners' ballot issue with one proviso - that no more than one-half the stadium's cost be financed with property taxes.

May 1984: Cuyahoga County voters turn down the dome bond issue by a 2-to-1 margin. Political and civic leaders pledge to form a united front to pursue another stadium plan.

January 1985: Voinovich and Celeste formally back a renewed effort for a domed stadium that would use some state funds and possibly require creation of a regional sports authority. The dome stadium committee is charged with coming up with a plan by mid-March.

February 1985: Then-State Rep. Jeffrey P. Jacobs, of Rocky River, and Westlake architect Robert Corna lead a group advocating construction of a six-sided covered stadium - dubbed the Hexatron - near the lakefront.

March 1985: A dome committee recommends a combination baseball-football stadium, with a retractable roof, to be built in the Central Market area downtown. The ballpark, with an estimated



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\$150 million cost, would be paid for with a combination of public and private funds. The public money would likely come from a “sin tax” on cigarettes and alcohol.

April 1985: Civic leaders form private, non-profit Greater Cleveland Domed Stadium Corp. and name trustees representing the sports teams, local corporations, City Council, the state legislature and suburban elected officials. The Dome Corp. is to develop a final stadium plan based on the civic committee’s recommendation.

May 1985: Cleveland lawyer Allen C. Holmes is named Dome Corp. chairman. Later, Dennis Lafferty, Growth Association government relations director, is named executive director of the corporation. Celeste announces \$100,000 state grant to the corporation for start-up funding.

October 1985: State Controlling Board approves \$4 million loan to the Dome Corp. for acquisition of 28 acres in the Central Market area. The loan, from a state development department fund, buttresses a larger loan from a consortium of major Cleveland banks. Stadium planners pursue a financing plan for the project, shooting for pre-Dec. 31 sale of tax-free industrial revenue bonds; after that date, the new federal tax law prohibits that type of bond-financing for private sector projects.

November 1985: Celeste awards Dome Corp. \$2 million grant while county commissioners remain at odds with the state over the source of public money for the ballpark. Commissioners advocate a state tax. Dome Corp. leaders oppose a public ballot issue on any tax funding. Meanwhile, Dome Corp. acquires the first of land needed for the stadium. Dome leaders have until 1990 to use tax-free bond financing thanks to the federal legislation exempting the project from changes in federal tax laws.

January 1986: Dome Corp. leaders announce project timetable, proposing groundbteaking by spring 1988 and completion of the project by fall 1990. The schedule, however, hinges on voter approval of the “sin tax” and successful negotiations on leases with the sports teams.

February 1986: Ohio Legislature passes legislation paving the way for Cuyahoga County voters to tax cigarettes and liquor to pay for a domed stadium.

April 1986: Browns majority owner Art Modell says the “dome is dead” while Voinovich maintains the project is alive and well.

Dome stadium players, Cleveland, 1989

Key players in a failed effort in the 1980s to deliver a domed stadium for Cleveland. (The Plain Dealer, Feb. 12, 1989)

July 1986: Pending sale of the Indians by the O’Neill family to developers Richard and David Jacobs made public. (American League approves the deal later in the year.)



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September 1986: Management company controlled by George and Gordon Gund, owners of the Cavalier basketball club and the Coliseum, is hired to manage the proposed stadium.

April 1987: Trustees of the Dome Corp. vote to explore developing an open-air stadium instead of a dome. Questions of roof technology, cost and a desire by sports teams to play on grass trigger the consideration. Thomas M. Lynch, retired Ernst & Whinney executive, replaces Dennis Lafferty as executive director.

June 1987: City files eminent domain actions against seven Central Market property owners who have resisted purchase offers. All eventually settle before their hearings in county Probate Court.

Gateway sports complex site, 1990

A 1990 view of the Central Market site in downtown Cleveland once eyed for a potential dome stadium and later home to Progressive Field and Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse.

July 1987: Dome Corp. begins demolition of selected buildings it owns in the Central Market area; plans call for the building sites to be turned into temporary parking lots.

September 1987: Modell requests an option to extend his lease at the Stadium.

November 1987: Dome Corp. completes acquisition of the last of 47 properties at the Central Market site needed for the proposed stadium project. Total land cost: \$19.3 million.

May 1988: Legislation is introduced at City Council proposing that Modell's Stadium Corp. be given two options to extend its lease, which expires in 1998, for 10 years each. Voinovich notes that the legislation calls for stiff penalties should Modell move the Browns from Cleveland during the lease's term. Modell also agrees not to use the lease extensions to his advantage in potential negotiations on the proposed stadium project.

October 1988: Lynch resigns as Dome Corp. executive director, and Holmes leaves as chairman. Cleveland Tomorrow, a group of local corporate executives, joins with the Dome Corp. and new Chairman Frank Mosier, to work toward a consensus on a stadium plan by the end of March 1989.

December 1988: Modell quietly withdraws his bid for a lease extension, later accusing civic and political leaders of sabotaging his request. Months earlier Modell told Dome Corp. leaders he won't support a multi-purpose stadium but will consider twin stadiums for football and baseball.

February 1989: Voinovich declares the death of the Dome Corp.'s drive to build a football-baseball stadium, blaming Modell's refusal to participate. The mayor calls meeting of political leaders to build consensus on the best development for the sports teams and the Central Market area.

End of timeline published in The Plain Dealer on Feb. 12, 1989.



What happened next

While the dome efforts failed, the land acquired as part of the Dome Corp.'s work eventually became the Gateway sports complex, with voter approval of a 15-year tax on cigarettes and alcohol in 1990 to pay for no more than half of the cost of the arena and baseball stadium. The vote was close, 51.7% to 48.3%, with success likely aided by a last-minute decision the Cavs to commit to moving from Richfield to downtown Cleveland.

Modell, who still ran the lakefront Stadium Corp., supported the Gateway project with a \$10,000 campaign donation but said he would keep his team at Cleveland Stadium.

Jacobs Field, now known as Progressive Field, opened in the spring of 1994. Gund Arena, now known as Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse, opened later that same year. Both have since undergone extensive renovations.

Modell after the 1995 season moved his team to Baltimore, becoming the Ravens. Just days after Modell announced the move in November 1995, Cuyahoga County voters approved extending the so-called sin tax for 10 years, from 2005 to 2015, for a new or renovated football stadium.

That vote, however, did nothing to stop the move. The Ravens later paid the city as part of Modell's settlement to break the lease. And the NFL and the city of Cleveland in February 1996 reached an agreement calling for football to return under the Browns name by 1999, along with construction of a new stadium that would include a 30-year lease.

In May 2014 voters extended the sin tax for another 20 years to help pay for repairs and renovations to the baseball stadium, football stadium and basketball arena.

Browns owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam announced last month that they are exploring both a deal to renovate the 25-year-old stadium on the lakefront, or building a domed stadium on property they say they have an option to buy in suburban Brook Park, near Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

"Here's how we look at it," Jimmy Haslam said. "We have two potentially really good options, a major remodel of where we are now ... or build a new domed stadium. They're both very hard to work out. But we have two great options. We're going to pursue them both. And sometime in the next year or two, we'll say, 'OK, here's the direction we're going.'"



He wrote the 'Art Modell' law after the Browns left Cleveland. Now, Dennis Kucinich hopes it can stop them from doing it again

By Sabrina Eaton, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/news/2024/04/he-wrote-the-art-modell-law-after-the-browns-left-cleveland-now-dennis-kucinich-hopes-it-can-stop-them-from-doing-it-again.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio – The year was 1996. Former Cleveland Browns owner Art Modell had just moved the city's longtime football team to Baltimore. Cleveland sports fans and their elected representatives - including then Ohio Sen. Dennis Kucinich - were outraged.

"Taxpayers invested many millions of dollars in the Cleveland Browns before 1995, and when the team left, it was not only our civic pride that was severely wounded, it was the fact that the taxpayers were left holding the bag," Kucinich recalled this week.

As Ohio's state legislature deliberated over the state's budget in 1996, the former Cleveland mayor and future congressman who represented part of Cleveland's West Side saw an opportunity to keep future sports franchises from betraying taxpayers by relocating.

He offered a budget amendment requiring that teams playing in tax-supported facilities keep playing most of their home games there unless the host city agrees otherwise or unless its owners give six months' notice of their intent to relocate. Before relocating, a departing owner would have to give the city or local residents a chance to buy the team. Kucinich's amendment passed unanimously, and made it into the final bill signed by then-Ohio Gov. George Voinovich.

"When I got to the State Senate, I just waited for the opportunity to be able to pass a law that would protect the taxpayers, the sports fans and the communities from that ever happening again, and that's what this law does," Kucinich said. "If we had this before, the Browns would not have gone."

The Browns resumed Cleveland operations in 1999 as an expansion team. When current Browns owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam broached moving to a domed stadium in Brook Park as an alternative to renovating the lakefront stadium, Cleveland councilman Brian Kazy invoked Kucinich's law as a way to keep the team in Cleveland.

Kucinich was delighted. Although he is currently mounting an independent campaign for the congressional seat that represents the section of Brook Park where the stadium would be located, he questions whether a stadium could actually be built on that site because of environmental considerations and its proximity to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. The Republican congressman who currently represents that area, Rocky River's Max Miller, has encouraged the Haslams to relocate to his district

Kucinich pointed out that Brook Park, or any other community in Cleveland that uses tax money to attract a sports franchise, could use the law he drafted, from investing hundreds of millions of



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dollars in a team “only to find their investment is for naught.” He also isn’t sure that a community like Brook Park, with a population under 20,000, would be able to provide the sort of taxpayer-funded investments sought by team owners that a bigger city like Cleveland could offer.

“My concern is they’re just using Brook Park as a foil and they may be looking elsewhere, out of state,” Kucinich continues. “This law protects the taxpayers wherever they live ... If the Haslams no longer want to be in Cleveland, then let a group of investors from Cleveland keep the team here. And again, nothing against Brook Park, but you know, this a law that that must be abided by.”

Kucinich says Mayor Justin Bibb’s administration has an obligation to let Cleveland’s taxpayers know exactly what is being discussed, and to provide an accurate tally of how much tax money has already gone to help the Browns.

It took more than two decades before the law was invoked to stop a team from moving. Now, it could happen twice in the span of six years.

The only other time the law has been invoked in Ohio, then-Attorney General Mike DeWine and the city of Columbus filed a 2018 lawsuit in Franklin County Common Pleas Court to fight the Columbus Crew professional soccer team’s proposed move to Texas. The team’s owners argued the law is unconstitutional and the lawsuit should be dismissed, but the judge said they didn’t prove their case.

That case eventually settled, though, with help from the Haslams. They stepped in with other investors to purchase the Crew, while the team’s previous owner established a new franchise in Texas.

Kucinich noted that the law he wrote doesn’t apply to teams unless they take tax money from host communities. Teams that finance everything on their own are not affected.

“We’ve got to put an end to this manipulation of cities by the sports team owners,” says Kucinich. “It’s time to take a stand for taxpayers and for the sports fan and to stop this endless chess game that goes on, where the taxpayers and the sports fans always lose.”



Browns coach has special tie to Final Four games at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse

By Marc Bona, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/entertainment/2024/04/browns-coach-has-special-tie-to-final-four-games-at-rocket-mortgage-fieldhouse.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Cleveland Browns coach Kevin Stefanski was among the fans taking in the Final Four at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse on Friday.

Stefanski's tie to the Final Four: Connecticut coach Geno Auriemma and Kevin Stefanski's father, Ed, both played in the Philadelphia Catholic League at the same time. Ed Stefanski played at Penn and was drafted, then became an NBA team executive. (Check out cleveland.com's Dan Labbe on the story.)

Stefanski took a break from the gridiron to catch the semifinal games. In the opener South Carolina defeated North Carolina State, and Iowa and Connecticut tangled in the nightcap.

Cleveland's shot at hosting the Final Four couldn't come at a better time, as the women's game has captivated diehard and casual fans. Actor-comedian Jason Sudeikis and singer Darius Rucker were among the celebrities in town for the games.

South Carolina will face the Iowa-Connecticut winner at 3 p.m. Sunday. The game will be televised on ABC.



Sought-after dome could be leverage for city to host future Women's Final Fours

By Joe Scalzo, Crain's Cleveland Business

<https://www.crainscleveland.com/sports-recreation/cleveland-may-need-dome-host-future-womens-final-fours>

One of the reasons the Browns want to build a dome in Brook Park is because it will help Cleveland attract two major events it currently can't handle: the Super Bowl and the men's Final Four.

Could the Women's Final Four soon be added to that list?

Maybe.

"As we continue to evaluate the championship and the growth of the experience, there will be evaluation also about the Women's Final Four and the type of venue that we're in," said Lynn Holzman, a Rocky River native who is now the NCAA's vice president of women's basketball.

The Women's Final Four has traditionally been held in NBA/NHL arenas such as Cleveland's Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse, something that will continue over the next four years in Tampa, Phoenix, Columbus and Indianapolis.

But it has been held in domes before, most recently in 2021 at San Antonio's Alamodome, albeit with limited seating due to COVID-19. Going back further, the 2002 semifinals and finals in San Antonio both drew 29,619, setting attendance records that still stand. (By contrast, the 2018 men's semifinals at the Alamodome had 68,257 fans.)

The Alamodome will also hold the 2029 Women's Final Four, and the NCAA will be watching carefully to see whether future semifinals and finals should be held in domes, both from a ticket demand standpoint and an atmosphere standpoint. The Women's Final Four might not need 70,000 seats, but the NCAA could decide that 20,000 isn't nearly enough.

"Through being at the Alamodome, there are some different configuration opportunities that we can of course continue to look at through a larger facility and the type of student-athlete, team and fan experience that provides for our event," Holzman said. "That provides information on any future decision made relative to Women's Final Four."

Every men's Final Four since 1996 has been held in a domed stadium due to NCAA venue capacity requirements. This year's men's Final Four will be held at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Arizona, which has a capacity of 63,400 but can accommodate up to 73,000 fans.

By contrast, Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse — which also hosted the 2007 Women's Final Four — seats just 19,432 fans, making this year's event one of the hottest (and priciest) tickets of the year.

Some of that demand is due to the presence of Iowa standout Caitlin Clark, but some is due to the growing popularity of college women's basketball, which has seen record television ratings during the regular season and earlier rounds of the tournament. Iowa's Elite Eight victory over defending champion LSU drew a record 12.3 million viewers on ESPN, which outdrew all but one of the five



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games in last year's NBA Finals and was higher than the clinching game of last year's World Series (11.48 million).

"We have a tremendous, generational player in Caitlin Clark but there are many other great players out there on the court this season and we've seen that in this year's championship," Holzman said. "The game is in a great place for numerous years and it's also important to note that with everything Caitlin Clark has done ... is that it's increased exposure to women's basketball throughout broadcasts during the regular season, not just on subscription and cable, but on mainstream TV. That exposure is bringing in more fans."

The Women's Final Four is awarded years in advance — Cleveland submitted its bid for this year's tournament back in 2017 and won the bid in 2018 — and the NCAA has booked sites through 2031. By then, Cleveland will either have a remodeled football stadium on the lakefront or a domed stadium, most likely in Brook Park next to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

If it's the latter, Cleveland would be eligible to host a men's Final Four, an event the city has never hosted — but would like to.

"We would try to make a bid for it, for sure," said David Gilbert, president and CEO of the Greater Cleveland Sports Commission.

A dome would also allow the city to host smaller sporting events, such as the U.S. Olympic swim trials, as well as attract major stadium-sized acts outside of the May-September window.

"We're certainly closely following it (the stadium debate), although I wouldn't necessarily say we're directly involved," Gilbert said. "The way we look at these things is: we have certain cards we're dealt as an organization trying to do what we can for the community. One of those sets of cards we're dealt with is facilities and we do our best to win with the cards that we're dealt. If one of the added cards is a dome, we'll deal with that. If it's not, we'll deal with that."

Of course, hosting these events involves more than just facilities. While this year's Women's Final Four games are being held at the FieldHouse, the NCAA is also using the Huntington Convention Center, Public Square and Gateway Plaza. Host cities also need to have airport access, as well as the requisite number of hotels, meeting spaces, restaurants and the like. And it needs to support the NCAA's broadcast partners, something made easier by the fact that Cleveland has an NBA team.

"What's important for people to recognize is that what Cleveland bid on in 2018 is not what this event is today — and what Cleveland has done well is adapted and leaned into what this event is today," Holzman said. "This event has probably quadrupled, if not more, in size and magnitude and demands and expectations, but it's also an opportunity for the city to reap the benefits of that. So, there's a can-do attitude and commitment from the leadership in this community, knowing that they have to elevate beyond what Dallas did last year.

"They want to make sure that they do that in response to being a city that hosts major sporting events, but also because of what it means for women's basketball. They have been very adaptable, flexible and responsive."



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That said, the NCAA views the Women's Final Four as the premier women's sporting event in the world and future bids will be "highly, highly, highly competitive," Holzman said. A dome could soon be an element in that decision. But while Holzman is a Cleveland native, she declined to weigh in on what the city should do, stadium-wise.

"Cleveland has to decide what strategy works for Cleveland around major sporting events," she said. "Obviously, major sporting events can have a tremendous positive impact on communities in many different ways, economic and otherwise, so it's up to Cleveland to decide what that looks like."



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The New Center of the World is Cleveland. Locals Say It's About Time.

By Hannah Miao, Wall Street Journal

<https://www.wsj.com/lifestyle/solar-eclipse-cleveland-tourist-destination-dd78d2cd#> =

For four days, Cleveland is the center of the universe. At least it feels that way in Cleveland.

"I see dollar signs, dollar signs, dollar signs everywhere," says Mayor Justin Bibb, gleeful over hitting the tourism jackpot. "This is our moment to shine."

Talk about cosmic kismet: The women's NCAA Final Four runs through Sunday in Cleveland. On Monday, the city will be a prime spot to view the total solar eclipse.

Don't dunk on Cleveland

"It's crazy that all this stuff is happening at once," says resident Ian Meadows, who works for Downtown Cleveland, an organization promoting the city center.

Destination Cleveland expects the Final Four-solar eclipse convergence will draw more than 200,000 visitors to the county, which has a little more than a million residents. The NCAA tournament alone could bring in more than \$25 million of revenue, it says.

Good luck trying to get there if you haven't already planned your trip. Some domestic flights are going for more than \$1,000 round-trip. Hotels are sold out, and locals have rushed to list their homes on Airbnb. A one-bedroom apartment downtown is listed at \$9,500 a night.

Cleveland-area native Gia Polo, general manager of the Kimpton Schofield Hotel downtown, says all 128 rooms are booked this weekend at roughly double the price from a year ago.

A listing titled "Eclipse House Big Ol' Loft" offered a furniture-less room for \$50 a night. "Bring your own sleeping bag or whatever," the description said. The room got booked for the weekend.

Cleveland jokes? They've heard them.

The city hasn't always enjoyed the rosier reputation. It has been called "mistake on the lake." The Cuyahoga River, which runs through town, caught fire in 1969, spawning pop songs and a national outcry over the environment.

Even Clevelanders poke fun at their city. Comedian Mike Polk Jr.—whose decade-old tourism videos featured such taglines as "at least we're not Detroit"—says Cleveland is a lot different than it was in 2009.

"It is funny sometimes to look at those videos now. It just doesn't even look the same," he says of downtown Cleveland. "I like when people are pleasantly surprised when they come here."



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After basketball star Caitlin Clark led the University of Iowa to victory over LSU to clinch the Hawkeyes' spot in the national semifinal, she posted on X: "CLEVELAND!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Not since Liz Lemon have we seen a talented and famous woman this excited to go to Cleveland," said local librarian Terry Metter, referencing Tina Fey's character on the TV series "30 Rock."

Out-of-town sports commentators looking for an easy job at Cleveland on air might think twice.

During the Iowa-LSU game in Albany, ESPN analyst Rebecca Lobo quipped, "Good luck finding something to do in Albany." One Albany bar owner called for a boycott of the network. The mayor offered Lobo a personal tour.

'It's been awesome'

Cleveland sits in the swath of the U.S. where eclipse views will be the best, because the moon will completely block out the sun. The last total solar eclipse visible in Ohio was in 1806. The next one won't be until 2099.

Cleveland's twin attractions could be the biggest tourism event since the 2016 trifecta: The city hosted the Republican National Convention, the World Series and the NBA finals—won by the Cleveland Cavaliers when the team still had LeBron James.

"It is amazing the amount of attention that is on women's basketball now," says Robert Dorr, the director of sales, events and marketing at Hyatt Regency Cleveland at The Arcade, which is also sold out this weekend.

The feelings are mutual. Caitlin Clark, who had never been to Cleveland, told a news conference that "it's been awesome."

She added the city felt like a larger version of Des Moines.

That prompted some locals to suggest a new city slogan: "Cleveland: a bigger Des Moines."

Ticket holders at the Cleveland Guardians home opener will get a twofer on Monday. Fans will be able to see the eclipse from the stadium.

Mason's Creamery, a ramen and ice-cream shop in the westside Cleveland neighborhood of Ohio City, is offering a solar-eclipse special: a lemon creamsicle shake with black vanilla whipped cream. Co-owner Helen Qin says she has no idea what to expect. "We're just treating it like a normal weekend," she says. "If it's busier then we'll certainly figure something out."

She would like travelers to fall in love with Cleveland, just as she did when she landed in the city a decade ago. "I hope that people visit and they stay," she says.



Hakeem Adeniji brings his passion for cooking to next NFL chapter with the Browns **By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com**

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/hakeem-adeniji-brings-his-passion-for-cooking-to-next-nfl-chapter-with-the-browns>

One morning when Hakeem Adeniji was about seven years old, he wanted to make himself breakfast. So, he took out some bacon and cooked it up to eat. That was when he first discovered his interest in cooking.

"It started from there and it always fascinated me, so from there just kind of grew," Adeniji said. "I always watch Food Network, and so it's just always been a nice little step away passion for me."

Since then, he's developed his own methods and experiments with dishes to create his own recipes. Adeniji said that he sometimes will follow recipes as a baseline but finds ways to add his own twist to the dish.

"I cook a lot, just whatever I'm feeling from different cultures, the whole spectrum of things. I cook almost everything, especially in the offseason," Adeniji said. "It's a nice little way to express creativity."

Adeniji is now bringing that creativity with him to Cleveland, as he signed a contract with the Browns in March 2024.

When free agency began in March, Adeniji said he heard from his agent about the interest from the Browns. Seeing the success of the Browns during the 2023 season, it peaked Adeniji's own interest.

"Just being in the division and familiar with Cleveland, there's a lot of good pieces here," he said, "And so, for me with just the staff here and everything around it just felt like a good choice."

As he walked around CrossCountry Mortgage Campus on his signing day, he took in the layout of the facility and had an opportunity to meet Executive Vice President of Football Operations and General Manager Andrew Berry, head coach Kevin Stefanski, offensive line coach Andy Dickerson, assistant offensive line coach Roy Istvan and others.

When he met Dickerson for the first time, Adeniji noticed the high level of energy and authenticity Dickerson brings to his job as the offensive line coach. And when he met with Stefanski and Berry, he felt a sense of balance in their approach of incorporating fun while also playing and competing to win, which stood out as elements of a successful organization. For Adeniji, those meetings built a level of excitement about what the 2024 season could hold.

Now that he is with the Browns, Adeniji is looking forward to joining an offensive line room that consists of veterans like G Joel Bitonio, T Jack Conklin, G Wyatt Teller, C Ethan Pocic, G Michael



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Dunn and T Jedrick Wills Jr. Adeniji believes he also brings a level of experience and athleticism with his skillset to the offensive line.

"I've watched a lot of film on these guys over the years and just being able to learn from those guys that have played for a really long time at a really high level," Adeniji said. "But also, be able to contribute my part and help out in whatever way I can."

The veteran offensive tackle is entering his fifth NFL season out of Kansas after he was originally selected by the Bengals in the sixth round of the 2020 draft and spent his first three seasons in the league with Cincinnati. He then joined the Vikings for the 2023 season, first signing to the practice squad and serving as a backup. He's played in 43 career games, including 15 career starts with the Bengals and Vikings. He played in just four games with Minnesota in 2023.

Those experiences have shaped him over the course of his NFL career. Adeniji said it adds a level of comfort when coming to a new team because he's experienced other environments, and so it allows him to be prepared and have other ways he can add value to his current team.

"Just being in the NFL is a lot," Adeniji said. "It's a business and there's so many different aspects and going from a team where we were last in the division to going to the Super Bowl next year and being around a lot of good players from all different types of positions. I just feel like I've seen an entire landscape in these four years. And so, I think that brings a depth of experience different places, and from different situations."

Adeniji believes the Browns have the players to build off the success they had during the 2023 season. After overcoming a multitude of injuries, they still won 11 games and clinched a playoff appearance. He thinks they can take another step forward in 2024.

"To withstand all of that and to be able to have that success is a testament to that it takes all 53," Adeniji said. "And so, for me, it's just like come in here, and we build upon that. There's no limit to what this team this offense can do."



How Browns GM Andrew Berry lived up to his vow to keep Nick Chubb on the roster with a win-win contract restructure

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/browns-restructure-nick-chubbs-contract-as-he-works-towards-a-heroic-comeback-from-major-knee-surgery.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns GM Andrew Berry vowed three times in the offseason that he didn't want Nick Chubb's devastating knee injury in Pittsburgh to be his last snap as a Cleveland Brown, and he made good on that promise on Thursday.

As expected, Berry restructured Chubb's contract to make it feasible for him to remain on the roster, but also take all the time he needs to get back on the field.

It's a win-win for both sides, and a major step in Chubb's return to the field this season.

Berry lowered Chubb's base salary of \$11.75 million to probably just over \$1 million, but gave him the opportunity to make the full \$12.2 million of his 2024 salary with an incentive package based on playing time and other metrics.

The move reduced his salary cap charge from \$15.85 million to a much more manageable \$6.275 million, giving the Browns more than \$9.5 million in cap relief. He's one of several Browns veterans who had their contracts restructured this offseason including Jedrick Wills Jr., Denzel Ward and Jerry Jeudy.

Berry stated his intentions to keep Chubb on the roster unequivocally during his postseason wrap-up, while also praising his unforgettable cameo appearance as Batman smashing the guitar as the Dawg Pound captain before the playoff-clinching victory over the Jets in Week 17.

"I probably came into this year let's say on a scale of one to 10 in terms of respect for Nick Chubb, it was a 10 and probably coming out of this year, it's now a 20," Berry said in January. "You would've never guessed that Nick was out for the season with how he operated within the building. I mean it was like he was doing two a day practices for rehab .. the tenacity at which he has attacked his rehab and he did everything in his power this year to heal himself but also make a positive impact with the team.

"It culminated — he's not like a super talkative person — but for him to do the whole Batman thing in front of the Jets game, it's like he wanted to do everything in his power to help the team win. In terms of Nick moving forward, obviously I understand that's a little bit the elephant in the room. Nick, I can say for myself, no one in the organization, I understand our family, nobody wants to see that carry in Pittsburgh be the last time he carries the ball for the Cleveland Browns. And obviously there are things that we'll have to work through, but that would not be our intention as well. We obviously will work to keep him on the team."



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Berry re-iterated that sentiment at the NFL combine in Indianapolis in late February, and again at the NFL annual meetings two weeks ago in Orlando, Fla. It's the final year of a three-year, \$36.6 million extension Chubb signed in July of 2021, with \$20 million guaranteed.

"Maybe the easiest thing is we fully expect Nick to be here and he's doing a great job with his recovery and everything," Berry said at the meetings. "And I meant what I said at the end of the season, I meant what I said at the combine. We do not want the injury in Pittsburgh to be his last snap as a Cleveland Brown."

It will almost take a superhero to accomplish what Chubb is trying to do — make his second comeback from a major reconstruction of his left knee. No one believed he could do it when he blew out the knee at Georgia in 2015, and he proved everyone wrong by becoming a four-time Pro Bowler and arguably the best running back the NFL. He has his doubters again now, but took a big step this month when he began "load running," adding cutting and agility work into rehab regimen.

"Honestly, it's probably too early to really understand what he's going to look like (at the start of the season)," Berry told cleveland.com and four other reporters who cover the Browns. "He's doing truly doing a fantastic job with the rehab and he should start to load run probably sometime this upcoming month."

Berry explained that "right now he's strengthening his quad, he's doing the rehab and everything, but it's not like he's going out and doing sprints, agility drills, stuff like that. But this month we expect that he will."

Chubb's recovery will take longer than a routine reconstruction because he tore the MCL, the meniscus and the medial capsule as well as the ACL. It's also a revision of his injury at Georgia, which involved a torn MCL, LCL and PCL.

"As we think about it, until we see him in the next couple months, I think the next — call it three — months will be pretty telling in terms of his potential readiness for early in the season," Berry said. "We're going to be conservative in terms of our approach in our assessment with building the roster because he's coming off of a major knee injury."

"But I do have to give him a lot of credit. He's done a really, really nice job. But I think we'll have a better sense. Don't hold me to it, but I think probably if you ask me that question around the draft, I may have maybe a little bit more of a specific answer."

With uncertainty over Chubb's start date, the Browns will likely run the ball by committee early on with Jerome Ford, Pierre Strong Jr., and free agent pickup D'Onta Foreman, who essentially replaces Kareem Hunt. The Browns also signed free agent Nyheim Hines, who's coming off a torn ACL of his own from a jet ski accident, but he's primarily penciled in as a kick returner.

The Browns are also scouting running backs in the NFL draft, but probably wouldn't spend their top pick, No. 54 in the second round, on one. It's not a premium position, and they're still hopeful Chubb will be close to himself. They'd be more likely to pick one up later, or sign one as an undrafted rookie.



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The Browns' commitment to keeping Chubb on the roster is a testament to his value to the team and the way the organization feels about him. The players immediately dedicated their season to Chubb after he was hurt on a low-but-legal tackle by Minkah Fitzpatrick in the 26-22 loss to the Steelers in Week 2, and powered their way to the playoffs in his honor.

Browns owner Jimmy Haslam, who was as thrilled as anyone to watch Chubb don his Batman mask before that magical night at Cleveland Browns Stadium, hopes Browns fans get to see the same superhero back they know and love this season.

"There's nobody any of us would root harder for than Nick Chubb," Haslam said at the meetings. "I think we're cautiously optimistic. Andrew or Kevin said he's in there at 5 in the morning in the hyperbaric chamber. I mean, that's just Nick Chubb.

"And so we're all pulling for him. We think he can do it. We hope he can do it. But it was a serious injury, as you all know. But I can't tell you how much we appreciate and it symbolizes the kind of man he is about how hard he's worked."



Why Christian Kirksey and Rashard Higgins wanted to retire as Cleveland Browns

By Dan Labbe, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/christian-kirksey-rashard-higgins-retired-as-browns-the-organization-that-first-believed-in-them.html?outputType=amp>

BEREA, Ohio -- Christian Kirksey and Rashard Higgins came back to Cleveland to retire because Cleveland was the city that believed in them.

“My whole motto behind everything I did was making them believe,” Higgins said, “and I felt like in order to make them believe somebody had to believe in me and Cleveland was the first to believe in me. I spent six years of my life here, hard years of my life here. And I feel like the group that we had, we set the standard, we went to the playoffs and that’s where the bar is for each group that comes in here. And it only made it right to do it as a Brown the same way I came in. It’s the same way I got to go out.”

Kirksey and Higgins signed one-day contracts on Tuesday and retired as members of the team that drafted them.

Kirksey came to the Browns as a third-round pick in 2014 and Higgins was a fifth-round pick in 2016.

“I wasn’t expecting to come to Cleveland and I wasn’t expecting to go as high as I did in the draft,” Kirksey said. “And I just remember the day that I got drafted and I was just in disbelief that they gave me an opportunity, they gave me a chance. So I wanted to come back full circle.”

Kirksey played 73 games in six seasons with the Browns recording 463 tackles, 11.5 sacks, two interceptions, 16 passes defensed, four forced fumbles and three fumble recoveries after the Browns selected him out of Iowa.

Higgins became a fan favorite in his six seasons with the Browns, catching 137 passes for 1,890 yards and 12 touchdowns. He had his best season in 2020 when the Browns made the playoffs, catching 37 passes for a career high 599 yards and four touchdowns.

His red carpet touchdown celebration became a social media sensation, a celebration gleaned from his nickname, “Hollywood.”

“You think of Hollywood, you think of lights, camera, action, and it was just like, ‘You know what? We’re going to go out in fashion, we’re going to go out in style,’” Higgins said, “and we practiced it and we practiced it, then that game came up and we did it and it was just like that was a staple point.”

Kirksey had his own celebration, yelling out a “Dawg Check” during practices and eventually on the video boards prior to games.

“Where the dog at in you,” Kirksey said of the callout, “and I think that the city of Cleveland embodies it because hard work, dedication, that’s what it’s really about. And when everybody has an underdog story, everybody has a story of being underlooked overlooked or whatever.”



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Kirksey never got to experience the playoffs in a Browns uniform -- he cited the Christmas Eve win over the Chargers to avoid 0-16 in 2016 and the Browns starting 7-4 in 2014 as his favorite moments -- but Higgins did.

"The whole city was lit," Higgins said, "the food tasted better, everything."

"It was a little bittersweet," Kirksey said of watching the Browns go to the playoffs the year after he left. "It was like, I wish I was there to enjoy it, but I was so happy to see Cleveland go to the playoffs. I was cheering them on."

Still, being back in Cleveland, the place he met his wife and where his daughter was born, was special for the 31-year-old Kirksey.

"It's just a blessing to be able to be a part of an organization and to officially end my career here," he said. "It is something that I dreamed of since I was a kid, to be able to play in the league and to be able to buy in into an organization and become family and just to come back and to do that." For both Kirksey and Higgins, 29, they just needed someone to believe in them.

"It only made it right to (retire) as a Brown," Higgins said, "the same way I came in."



Why Denzel Ward thinks it's so important to keep the Browns cornerback core intact **By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com**

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/why-denzel-ward-thinks-its-so-important-to-keep-the-browns-cornerback-core-intact.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- Denzel Ward hasn't rewatched the Browns' wild card loss to the Texans this offseason. He didn't need any extra motivation as the offseason program opened for the Browns on Monday.

"That (game) was one of the main reasons why I'm back in this building right now," Ward said Tuesday. "Definitely didn't like the taste in my mouth from that last game and the showing that we put out there on the field, so I think that's why a lot of guys are in here now, just ready to get back to work, ready to get back to it and work towards our goals that we got in making it to the playoffs and extending our season."

Another key to extending the season in Ward's eyes? Keeping the Browns' cornerback room intact.

Cleveland is entering year three with its three core players at the position. Along with Ward, a three-time Pro Bowler, it's Greg Newsome II, the team's 2021 first-round pick who plays primarily in the slot, and Martin Emerson Jr.

"I feel we're the best corner group in the NFL," Ward said. "I feel that we went out there and showed that, but this is a new year and we got to go out there and show that again. So that's what we're doing now, putting that work in to go out and show why we're the best group and so that's all it is, just getting to the work."

The Browns finished with the top-ranked defense and top-ranked pass defense in the NFL last season.

While Ward made it to the Pro Bowl, Emerson continued to develop in his second season, leading the team with four interceptions and allowing no touchdowns in the regular season, according to Pro Football Focus. He allowed 33 catches on a team-high 70 targets.

Emerson's emergence in each of the last two seasons has raised questions about the future of the position, particularly Newsome. As a rookie in 2021, the Northwestern product played most of his snaps at outside corner opposite of Ward -- 517 versus 102 in the slot. The last two seasons however, as Emerson has proved to be adept at using his 6-foot-2 frame and physicality on the outside, Cleveland has opted to move Newsome into that slot role primarily.

In 2022, it was something he accepted begrudgingly, playing 374 snaps in the slot with responsibilities he felt were too akin to a linebacker. After pushing back on his desire to play there again last offseason, Newsome stepped up to the challenge in Jim Schwartz's system in the latter's first year as defensive coordinator. In 2023, Newsome played 397 snaps in the slot and 276 outside.

Cleveland Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski speaks to the media at a press conference during offseason workouts.



But given the makeup of the room, Newsome is the one whose name has most-frequently popped up in offseason trade rumors in each of the last two offseasons. Newsome said the chatter is just something he tries to ignore, saying he feels comfortable in Cleveland and adding, “I feel like A.B. (GM Andrew Berry) and the ownership and all my coaches know what I’m capable of, they know what I bring to this team, not just on the field, being one of those glue guys, being a guy that’s always energetic, celebrating no matter what, I feel like they know my value.”

Ward laughed off the trade rumors regarding his teammate on Tuesday.

“I mean Greg’s in the building now working,” he said. “But I don’t know all the behind the scenes stuff. But we’re all in the building now working towards the same goal and trying to be the best.”

The corners may not be paying too close attention to the offseason trade fodder, but nevertheless, Ward hasn’t been shy about his desire to keep this unit together so they can keep building.

It’s not often in the NFL that secondaries can have this kind of stability and familiarity, and the hope is Cleveland will be able to take advantage.

“That was one of the things I’ve kind of been openly sharing,” he said. “I want to keep us together. I feel like even A.B. says all time you can never have enough great corners and enough corners on the team, and I mean, that’s real. Guys go down and just having the ability to be able to match up with any teams across the board, whether that’s inside in the slot with Greg or outside with me and Martin and being able to rotate and do different things and having multiple number one corners on the team.

“So we’re definitely in an ideal situation position and those guys did a great job of drafting all of us and getting us all here. But like I said, we just got to continue to go out and show that that we’re number one though.”



Deshaun Watson focused on load management as he progresses from shoulder injury

By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/deshaun-watson-focused-on-load-management-as-he-progresses-from-shoulder-injury>

Deshaun Watson returned to CrossCountry Mortgage Campus on April 15 as Phase One of the voluntary offseason program began – something he has done throughout his NFL career.

To Watson, it's important for him to be around the team from the beginning to build the chemistry in the locker room from the jump.

"It starts with of course the quarterbacks and if we're in here leading by example every day, putting in extra time, everyone else is going to see us and follow," Watson said. "And so, it has always been very important for me. But also, just me being in the facility and being around the coaches and being around the players, I love doing it. This is what I love to do, this is why I do it, is just to be able to be around football and everyone that's a part of it."

Watson is continuing to progress in his rehab from the right shoulder surgery that ended his 2023 season. He suffered an injury in their win over the Ravens in Week 12, and an MRI revealed a displaced fracture to the glenoid in his shoulder. Since the surgery, Watson has spent time rehabbing his shoulder, following a customized program that will allow him to ramp up and set him up to return and be fully ready to play.

"I think in this process right now, it's all about load management and not doing too much, even though I probably could," Watson said. "So yeah, we just make sure that we take it day by day and we do exactly what everyone came on months before got on that call and we put the plan together just to make sure we're on the right track and stay on the right track and not getting ahead of ourselves."

As he has followed the steps of the program, Watson said that his shoulder is responding and that he feels confident in their process and the progress he has made. Watson said that he has been able to throw the ball at full speed with no limitations in motion or velocity, has the strength in his throw, and that the mechanics of this throw have not changed.

Watson said that there is not a specific timeline or date of when they believe he will be 100 percent healthy, as they are monitoring how he hits each milestone and how his shoulder responds to each step. However, Watson said that the glenoid has fully healed, and he is working on building his endurance and the management of throwing the football consistently without getting tired.

"I'm doing everything that the doctors have planned out," Watson said. "So, if it's throwing 60 balls, if it's throwing 40 balls a day, it varies. And they have a very strategic program for my shoulder. So, it goes up, down, up, down. For me, I just take it one day at a time."

The Browns can begin OTAs in Phase Three, which is the final four weeks of the program. They can conduct 10 days of organized team activities, where no live contact is permitted, but 7-on-7, 9-on-7, and 11-on-11 drills are allowed. The Browns' OTS dates are May 21-23, May 28-30, and June 3-6, before the mandatory veteran minicamp set for June 11-13.



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Watson said the initial plan is for him to be able to participate in portions of OTAs. They could look to take a more conservative approach this spring due to the nature of the injury, that would allow Watson to be ready for the summer and for training camp. They will continue to monitor Watson's progress over the next few weeks before OTAs begin before there is a final decision about his level of participation.

"They have a very, very good plan," head coach Kevin Stefanski said. "Deshaun, the medical team of ramping him up and throwing. He's doing all the things he's supposed to be doing when it comes to rehab. So, when we get to those points in OTAs and minicamp, we will go with what's suggested by the medical team, but he's doing a great job."

Through the first two days of the offseason program, the Browns have spent in the classroom and meetings. With a new offensive coordinator in Ken Dorsey and new members of the offensive staff, Watson said it's an opportunity for them to build connections with the new coaching staff as they learn the nuances of the offense.

As they have begun to discuss the offense, Watson believes there are opportunities for the receivers to showcase their skillsets and can allow players to be in different spots. He also feels like he will be able to play free in the offense and showcase a spread offense.

"Time, that's one thing you can't get back is time," Watson said. "And the time, just for me being here face-to-face, being able to hear his voice, hear how he communicates, hear how he runs things, calls things a little bit different than Kevin or AVP did the previous two years is good to be around that, and we can kind of communicate. He can do the same thing for him, get around me and see how I operate, how I learn what's good, what's not good, what we want to change. We've been doing that the first two days. We've had a lot of conversation and a lot of meetings, and it's been very good."



Why Deshaun Watson doesn't care who call plays; and what he thinks of new OC Ken Dorsey so far: Mary Kay Cabot

By Mary Kay Cabot, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/why-deshaun-watson-doesnt-care-who-call-plays-and-what-he-thinks-of-new-oc-ken-dorsey-so-far-mary-kay-cabot.html?outputType=amp>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Kevin Stefanski has a running joke with a Browns beat writer that he'll be the first to know when he decides who will call plays, because he asks the question so much. But Deshaun Watson, for one, won't be waiting for the punchline.

Watson, coming off surgery to repair his fractured shoulder, couldn't care less if Stefanski retains the play-calling chore, or hands it over to new offensive coordinator Ken Dorsey.

The fact that Stefanski is taking his time with the decision means he's giving serious consideration to letting Dorsey handle it. By the same token, he didn't announce he was going to do it himself over Alex Van Pelt in 2020 until right before the season.

"No, it doesn't (matter)," Watson said at his offseason program availability on Tuesday.

Why not?

"Because they both work together," Watson said. "So they both have the same mindset. They both have the headsets and communicate. So for me, whoever calls the plays is going to call the plays. We as an offense and as a quarterback, we've still got to go execute and go out there and perform."

Heading into his third season with the Browns, Watson hit it off immediately with his new coordinator when Dorsey and Stefanski flew to Los Angeles to have dinner with Watson last month. With a mutual friend and colleague in Cam Newton, whom Dorsey coached in Carolina, they already had some common ground. Dorsey also spent the past four seasons coaching Bills quarterback Josh Allen, whom Watson admires.

With Dorsey in his ear, Watson knows he'll be in good hands in terms of when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em, when to run and when to slide.

"Those are very similar guys to myself," Watson said. "But for me, I just try to, whatever offense is getting called, I try to execute as best as I possibly can. So hopefully, yeah, I'll be able to showcase my skills that I've shown before in this league."

Watson took it in stride when the Browns parted ways with Van Pelt in January, and hired Dorsey, the former Bills coordinator.

"It's part of the business," Watson said. "I kind of heard through the weeds there might be a change, but I wasn't sure. Me and AVP have a great relationship, we built that over the last two years. We went to dinner, talked about vacations and still talk to this day. So I think he's going to do a hell of a job over there in New England."



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“And then of course with Dorsey here, he’s going to do a heck of a job for us to be able to try to take this offense to another level. So as far as my reaction, of course I love AVP, but business is part of this and that’s out of my control.”

Just three days into the offseason program, Watson can already see big changes in the offensive scheme, including more of a spread philosophy. In addition to Dorsey, Stefanski is getting input from his completely overhauled offensive staff, with receivers coach Chad O’Shea the only position coach holdover.

“It’s really good,” Watson said of the changes. “A lot of opportunities for the receivers to be able to really showcase their skills. A lot of guys moving around, a lot of guys being able to play different spots and then myself to just be free and not really kind of controlled in a sense and really just kind of go out there and be able to showcase the spread offense, throw it around, run around and make some plays happen. So that’s very exciting for myself.”

Even though he’ll likely have to take it easy when team drills begin during organized team activities in May, Watson said he wouldn’t have missed the start of the offseason program for the world.

“For me it’s always been important,” he said. “I’ve always reported on the first day, so it’s always been important for me to just get around the guys, get with the team, build that chemistry, build that friendship, build that locker room that we had last year and it starts with of course the quarterbacks. If we’re in here leading by example and every day putting in extra time, everyone else is going to see us and follow.

“Me being in the facility and being around the coaches and being around the players, I love doing it. This is what I love to do.”

He acknowledged it’s even more important this year to get to know Dorsey and the new staff.

“That’s one thing you can’t get back is time,” Watson said. “Me being here face to face, being able to hear (Dorsey’s) voice, hear how he communicates, hear how he runs things, calls things a little bit different than Kevin or a AVP did the previous two years, it’s good to be around that and we can kind of communicate. It can do the same thing for him, get around me and see how I operate, how I learn, what’s good, what’s not good, what we want to change. The first two days, we’ve had a lot of conversation and a lot of meetings and it’s been really good.”

He said his carefully prescribed rehab program, as set forth by his Los Angeles-based surgeon Dr. Neal ElAttrache, is designed to have him ready to start the season.

“Everything is aligned with that as far as the new offense, the timing with the receivers, with my skillset getting on the field,” he said. “So I’m doing everything that I can to make sure I follow that.”

Watson noted that the mental side of the game is very important, especially for a player coming off an injury and being limited in the offseason, and one learning a new coordinator and possible play-caller.



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“Certain things are going to carry over, but it’s going to be a lot of new things and we got to know how he communicates his offense, he communicates the way that him and Kevin are communicating so we all can be on the same page,” he said. “It’s a lot of different new moving parts, especially throughout the position groups.

“The offensive line who’s very familiar with the past of what they’ve been coached on. And then the receivers, the running backs. We’ve seen it on the defensive side last year that when we brought in a new DC how everything kind of meshed together. And if we can put the time in like they did last year, I think we can do the same thing and take a huge leap.”

Watson stressed that he won’t have a mental block in returning to the field.

“It won’t be (an issue),” he said. “It won’t be.”

By the same token, he vowed not to put undue pressure on himself coming off two mostly lost seasons, with only six starts apiece because of the suspension and injuries.

“If I would’ve played the full year and we would’ve won the Super Bowl, it would’ve been the same idea and vice versa,” he said. “So for me it’s just taking it one day at a time, building a leadership that we built and carried over from last year and getting this team exactly where we need to get to and to get ready to play each and every week.”



Why Greg Newsome II isn't worrying about speculation over his Browns future

By Dan Labbe, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/why-greg-newsome-ii-isnt-worrying-over-speculation-about-his-browns-future.html?outputType=amp>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — [Browns](#) cornerback Greg Newsome II is a prime candidate when it comes time to speculate about potential roster decisions.

First, there's his contract. The Browns will likely decide to pick up his fifth-year option by the May 2 deadline, which guarantees him \$13.377 million for the 2025 season, which, for now, would be the 11th highest annual average for a cornerback, but it likely won't rank that high a year from now.

Still, it's not a small number.

Then there's the state of the position for the Browns. Denzel Ward is the marquee name, having signed a \$100.5 million extension in 2022, about a year after the Browns drafted Newsome. Then the Browns unearthed Martin Emerson Jr. in the third round in 2023, a lengthy, outside corner who could develop into a No. 1-type talent on the outside.

It's easy to simply tab Newsome as the odd man out as his time comes for an extension — he's eligible to receive one now, but the Browns have him at a steal this year when his cap hit is just \$4,056,422 and then, assuming they pick up the option, they can revisit their next season.

Newsome fills a valuable role for this team, however, and while it took some time and a change in scheme, he's embraced it.

"I feel good. Whatever I can do to help the team win, I'll do," Newsome said during an event with the Berea-Midpark High girls flag football team at Lou Groza Field on Tuesday. "I was able to do a lot of things, blitz, I was able to cover a lot more in man-to-man. So I think I had a great role last year and I'm just ready to keep getting better at it."

According to Pro Football Focus data, Newsome played 412 snaps in the slot last season and 286 outside in 14 games. His ability to move inside while Ward and Emerson play outside gives defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz flexibility and depth on a unit that allowed the fewest passing yards in the league in 2023. It allows him to have his top three cornerbacks on the field as much as possible.

Newsome even snagged his first two career interceptions in 2023, the first a pick six against the Ravens in Week 10 that pulled the Browns within 31-30 with 8:16 left in a game they won on a last-second field goal, 33-31.

Coming back in his second season under Schwartz and cornerbacks coach Brandon Lynch brings a measure of stability for Newsome and the rest of the secondary that should only help them all improve and feel more comfortable.



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“I feel like it’s like freshman year in high school versus sophomore or senior year in high school,” Newsome said, “where now you know what things are, you know where things are, you know what you’re already doing now, you just continue to grow upon what you already learned.”

Still, the speculation about Newsome’s future will likely continue, at least until some long-term solution is worked out. He said he didn’t know if an extension has been brought up and told his agent not to talk to him about that stuff. Newsome is represented by Drew Rosenhaus and Ryan Matha.

He also has done a good job of blocking out the rumors about his future. He’ll hear things from family and friends when they come across it, but says he doesn’t think much of it.

“I’m comfortable here,” he said. “I feel like (GM Andrew Berry) and the ownership and all my coaches know what I’m capable of, they know what I bring to this team, not just on the field, being one of those glue guys, being a guy that’s always energetic, celebrating no matter what, I feel like they know my value. So I wasn’t too worried about that.”

While Newsome previously admitted he likes to keep receipts, he thinks four years in the league has allowed him to be comfortable with who he is as a player and a person and stay away from outside noise.

“At the end of the day, as long as I’m good with my teammates, and my coaches trust me and things like that, it’s fine,” he said. “I wouldn’t say it was easy right away. When you get to the league and you start getting on Twitter and things like that and start doing that stuff — but that’s just a sign of maturity. I’m going into year four. I’m a more mature version of myself than I was year three, two, and one. So, nah, at this point it’s not too hard because I know myself and I know at the end of the day I just come out here to play football and have fun.”

Things will work out with Newsome in Cleveland one way or the other, but he already knows how he wants to see it play out.

“I want to be one of those guys that sticks around one place their whole career,” he said. “So if God be willing, I’ll be here for a long time.”



How Browns have weathered no 1st-round pick in 3 straight NFL Drafts due to Deshaun Watson trade: Mary Kay Cabot

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/how-the-browns-have-weathered-no-1st-round-pick-in-3-straight-nfl-drafts-from-the-deshaun-watson-trade-mary-kay-cabot.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — How's life without three straight first-round picks for the Browns?

They head into the NFL Draft next week without a first-round pick for the third straight season due to the Deshaun Watson trade, but they're not exactly bereft of talent. In fact, they are poised to challenge again for the AFC North crown and hope to make a strong run at the Super Bowl in 2024.

How have they weathered the first-round drought? Probably a lot better than most folks imagined.

"One, time will tell," Browns GM Andrew Berry said during his pre-draft press conference on Thursday. "There are a variety of ways to build a team, right?"

He cited the Los Angeles Rams, who have a first-round pick this year for the first time since they moved up to draft Jared Goff in 2016.

"If they keep their first-round pick, it's the first first-round pick that they'll have in the Sean McVay era (which began in 2017)," Berry said. "I also think the reality of the first-round picks like the league hit rate, it's like 50%. They're lottery tickets, they're good lottery tickets at the end of the day and they're highly, highly valuable. But even if you have a first-round pick, it's certainly not a certain thing."

In the case of the Rams, they've made the playoffs in five of McVay's seven seasons without a first-round pick, including winning the Super Bowl after the 2021 season, a 23-20 victory over the Bengals. So maybe there's a method to their madness.

As for the Browns, they've made the playoffs once in their two years without a first-round pick, going 11-6 last season and losing 45-14 to the Texans in the wild card round. In 2022, with Watson suspended the first 11 games, they went 7-10. It hasn't helped that they haven't been able to reap the benefits of the trade, with Watson's suspension his first year and 11 missed games with shoulder injuries in his second.

"Having a level of realism in terms of what can be achieved with your pool of resources or your assets, that's really part of it," Berry said. "But we've been pretty systematic in terms of how we were going to deploy our picks, our dollars. How we were going to manufacture picks to make it up with volume. So we feel pretty good about where the roster sits today, but look, we're looking forward to having one back next year for sure."

There are a number of other reasons the Browns haven't withered without a first-round pick, including some good mid-round drafting and shrewd trades. They traded for Amari Cooper two days before they made the Watson trade, but he still helped make up for not having a first-round



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pick in 2022 and 2023 with back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons. In exchange for a fifth-round pick, he's proven to be one of Berry's best acquisitions.

Last offseason, the Browns traded for another potential 1,000-yard receiver in Elijah Moore, who had career-highs in catches (59) and yards (640), with the expectation for more with Watson at the helm. He was acquired for the bargain basement price of moving back 32 spots from No. 42 to No. 74, where they drafted fellow receiver Cedric Tillman in 2023.

This offseason, the Browns' offset the absence of a first-round pick by trading for former Broncos' first-round receiver Jerry Jeudy, the No. 15 overall pick out of Alabama in 2020. He also came at the fire sale price of fifth- and sixth-round picks in next week's draft, and also has 1,000-yard potential. With Berry citing the 50-50 chance of a first-rounder hitting, Jeudy brings proven potential and he'll turn only 25 next week heading into his fifth NFL season.

The Browns also drafted two players in the third and fourth rounds over the past two years that have outplayed their draft status and would be considered "hits" even if they were taken in the first round. In 2022, they selected cornerback Martin Emerson Jr. in the third round, and he's proven to be one of their best cornerbacks with still plenty of upside. Last season, they pulled off one of the steals of the draft when they tabbed Ohio State offensive tackle Dawand Jones in the fourth round. Originally projected as a first-rounder, Jones played closer to a first-rounder than a fourth, and could be in the Pro Bowl before long.

As for Berry's two first-round picks, left tackle Jedrick Wills Jr. at No. 10 in 2020 and Greg Newsome II at No. 26 in 2021, they're both considered hits with both starting and both having their fifth-year options picked up once Newsome's is exercised by May 2. It remains to be seen if they'll get their blockbuster second deals, but they're on track to do so.

The Browns also hit big on some other free agents such as center Ethan Pocic, who was signed in 2022 and has climbed to the top of his position, with a No. 9 ranking his first season, and No. 12 in 2023, according to Pro Football Focus.

All told, the trades, signings and smart picks, with very few usually hitting after the third round, have helped ease the absence of the first-round picks. Besides, having Thursday nights off on draft weekend hasn't taken the luster off the draft for Berry and his personnel staff.

"Not at all," he said. "Not at all. I understand that from an external perspective because those are usually the most well-recognized prospects coming into the draft, but we're excited about maximizing the group of players that we can acquire during the weekend and there's still a number of good players up and down the draft board."

What's more, he's not worried about how the three-year hiatus will impact the core of the roster going forward.

"It's probably less about where you select them and how they perform," Berry said. "We have a really strong, young nucleus with our team and we don't feel internally like there's a huge gap in terms of our young veteran pool of players. If anything, the question becomes, 'Okay, how do we



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retain as many of these guys as possible?’ as we get into a phase where they’re going to get in their mid-twenties and be eligible for second deals.”

Likewise, their approach to the draft hasn’t changed. They often grade players differently than other teams, and when they have players such as Emerson and Jones to hang their hats on, it’s a testament to their process.

“Where it’s probably been the most different is it’s just been a slower Thursday night,” Berry said. “But in terms of how we think about building the board or how we think about evaluating prospects or managing our picks, that really hasn’t fundamentally changed.”

It’s gone so well to this point, maybe the Browns will make like the Rams and abstain from the first round for a few more years.



New kickoff rule has Cleveland Browns 'trying to understand' impact on game, personnel **By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/04/20/browns-understand-new-kickoff-rule-impact-game-roster-nfl-kevin-stefanski-andrew-berry/73356084007/>

BEREA — It may be one of the most transformative rules in the NFL in years. However, very few in the league actually know what impact it's going to have on the game.

That's the reaction to the new kickoff rule the league owners passed last month by those who hope to utilize it to win games. That includes Browns coach Kevin Stefanski, who acknowledged this week just how much time he and his staff have spent trying to learn the rule.

"We've spent a lot of time on that," Stefanski said as the Browns opened their offseason program. "(Special teams coordinator) Bubba (Ventrone), myself, (assistant special teams coordinator) Steven Bravo-Brown, (consultant Mike) Vrabel has helped in this as well because we're all trying to understand this hybrid kickoff. It's new for everybody.

"So, we look at that as a great opportunity in this league to add an exciting play for this game, and it's another touch for an offensive player. It's another opportunity to get a tackle for a defensive player or an offensive player on special teams. We're excited about what it is, but we're working through it. I don't think anybody in the league can tell you exactly how it's going to look, but that's an opportunity for us so we've spent a lot of time on the board with it."

The rule has essentially been cribbed from the XFL, with some modifications through a series of conversations with special teams coordinators around the league. It essentially tries to turn the kickoff into more of a "football play," starting with the alignment of the players who are neither the kicker — who will still kick off from the 35-yard line — nor the "up to" two return men aligned deep.

The other 10 players on the kickoff team and the other nine or 10 players on the return team have their own set space in which they can be aligned. Those on the kickoff team must line up on the return team's 40, while the non-return men will be aligned between their 30 and the 35, with at least seven required to be along the 35.

The only two players allowed to move before the ball touching the ground or being fielded by the returner are the kicker and the returners. That must occur inside the 20.

"Bubba's been in the indoor [facility], literally with a helmet on, taking drops, which is true," Stefanski said. "So we want to be as prepared as we can be. But I don't know that there's any club that knows exactly how it's going to look."

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If the kick reaches the end zone in the air, it can be returned or the receiving team can opt for a touchback and possession at the 30. Kicks that reach the end zone in the air and go out of bounds or out of the end zone also will result in a touchback at the 30.

The Browns had 11 total kickoff returns last regular season, compared to 41 during the 2022 season. They had 37 kickoff returns in the 2014 season, and 70 in the 2010 season, which was before the 2011 rule change that moved the kickoff up from the 30 to the 35.

"Truth is none of us will really know until we get into it," general manager Andrew Berry said Thursday. "I mean, we've watched a ton of XFL film. Even though it's not the same design, we've had a lot — I think Kevin mentioned probably earlier this week — how much time they've put into it. ... And I'm sure we're going to learn a lot as we get into the preseason and then the regular season with the new rule."

The goal of the rule change is to increase the number of kickoff returns in the game. Last season, a league-low 21.8% of all kicks were returned, with just four kickoffs being returned for touchdowns.

A year prior, in 2022, the return rate was 37.5%. The XFL, meanwhile, had a 97% return rate on kickoffs in its 2023 season.

"In all honesty, rules are rules, ball is ball, so whatever rules they give us I'm ready to go out there and play," linebacker Tony Fields II said Tuesday. "I've looked at it. We know it's going to be a lot, maybe a little bit less physical, but a lot more hands-on and you have to start being a lot more technical with your skillset, but otherwise I'm not really worried about it. I can't wait for it."

Fields has been one of the top special teams players for the Browns since being drafted in 2021. The 6-foot, 220-pound linebacker has been the mold for the kind of player who has been heavily utilized on both kickoff and kickoff return teams over the last several years.

However, the rule changes open the door to a change in the kind of players teams prefer on those kick teams.

"I think the style of returner will change ever so slightly," Berry said. "I think the blocking schemes that you see on kick return will be different, and I think the body type for kickoff coverage players is going to potentially change pretty significantly because you're taking a lot of speed and space out of the traditional play. I think you're going to probably see bigger body types, guys that are really good with their hands and that can, I would say, traditionally get off blocks as opposed to maybe use their speed and quickness to avoid a block just because of the setup rules.

"But I'd say that's maybe more of a working hypothesis than let's say a stated fact."



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Why the Browns should stay downtown: Roger Cohen

By Roger Cohen, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2024/04/why-the-browns-should-stay-downtown-roger-cohen.html#:~:text=Moving%20from%20downtown%20will%20hurt,to%20attract%20big%2Dticket%20events.>

VIENNA, Virginia -- As one of the millions of Browns fans in the Cleveland diaspora and a continuous season ticketholder since 1946, no reason for a Brook Park dome justifies moving the team from its ancestral homeland.

Traffic: Clevelanders enjoy arguably the NFL's most accessible stadium. Patriots fans suffer gridlock across four states, New Yorkers a daylong slog on the Jersey Turnpike.

Before freeways, 80,000 Modell-era fans found and parked at Cleveland Stadium. Moving to Brook Park would erase generational connections forged on the Muni Lot, the pilgrimage down West Third.

Cost: Despite economic and political hurdles, innovative planning and TIF financing can achieve "higher and better land use" while keeping our stadium where it has always been.

No stadium project will turn Brook Park into a year-round travel destination. Moving from downtown will hurt tourism, killing Cleveland's unique selling point as one of four big league cities where fans can walk a mile or less between three major sports venues. The Rock Hall and Science Museum, too.

A dome? The region does not need a dome to attract big-ticket events. Downtown staged a national political convention, a Final Four. The Beatles rocked old Cleveland Stadium. Browns fans want to reach a Super Bowl, not host outsiders.

Despite its obstructions and traumatizing restroom troughs, 80,000 fans showed up at Cleveland Stadium every Sunday. The current stadium can be updated for a fraction of what Buffalo will spend on its new canopied open-air showpiece.

A dome could make the Browns less competitive, with the increased injury risk of playing half a season on artificial turf while our three AFC North rivals play outdoors.

If Clevelanders insist on a new domed stadium, build it downtown. The city, not the Federal Aviation Administration, controls zoning. There are safe, though costlier, workarounds to any height restrictions from Burke Lakefront Airport. SoFi Stadium lies directly in the flight path of LAX, the world's sixth-busiest airport.

Big league teams belong downtown: The Commanders' inaccessible suburban stadium turned a decade-long waiting list into the NFL's worst attendance. Now, congressional Republicans and Democrats have united behind the team's return to Washington, D.C.



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In Chicago, the McCaskey family spent \$197 million to buy, not option, land for a new suburban stadium. Reversing course from their expensive mistake, the owners will partner with the city's anti-business mayor to build a new Bears stadium. Downtown, on the lakefront.

Not just football: "Teams Staying in the City a Clear Win for the Fans" headlined The Washington Post after the NBA/NHL owner scrapped plans for a mixed-use development in Virginia, admitting "we had to remember our DNA is here ... can I innovate and add things?"

More than cost or convenience, the Browns must stay downtown because it's what The Move was all about, the words on the plaque. Our team, our colors. Our history.

Graham, Brown, Groza, Sipe, Kosar. Thomas. Chubb. Every Browns player played every home game snap on that dirt, from 1946 to today. No other pre-merger NFL team shares that distinction, not even Green Bay who for years split games between Lambeau Field and Milwaukee.

Many still lament our baseball team's decision to change an offensive nickname. Moving to Brook Park would end another Cleveland sports tradition, erasing an 80-year legacy just to build a speculative shopping mall and new parking lot.

Initially, I was skeptical of the Haslams, doubting they "got us" Clevelanders. Over time, they have invested in the franchise, recognized the privilege of stewardship. Fans have stuck by through losing seasons, national ridicule, personnel decisions that conflicted with our personal values.

The team's ticketholder surveys ask about pre-game entertainment, concession choices. This fan's only request: Please make it work where the team was born, thrived and returned.

That dirt is our DNA. Our civic identity, what we call ourselves as a community.

The Land.



Would a new stadium increase Browns ticket prices? History says it's likely

By Lucas Daprile, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/news/2024/04/would-a-new-stadium-increase-browns-ticket-prices-history-says-its-likely.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio – If Cleveland Browns owners Dee and Jimmy Haslam follow through on their idea of building what could be a billion-dollar stadium in Brook Park, history suggests an increase in ticket prices is likely.

In March, the Haslams told reporters they were considering building a domed stadium in Brook Park as the team approaches the end of its lease on the existing city-owned stadium in downtown Cleveland in 2028.

In the late '90s and early 2000s, many NFL teams built new stadiums. Following that, ticket prices at 20 newly constructed stadiums showed the average ticket price increased from \$43 the year before a new stadium was built to \$57 the year the new stadium opened, according to a 2006 study. The study was published in *Public Finance and Management*, a peer-reviewed journal.

Study co-author Victor Matheson, a professor at College of the Holy Cross who specializes in sports economics, said "it's definitely true" that building new sports stadiums precede increased ticket prices.

"The owners are not building a new stadium because they want to improve the fan experience out of the goodness of their heart," Matheson said. "They want to build a stadium that will most efficiently extract the most money out of fans' pockets."

Teams improve that experience by improving concessions, adding/renovating luxury boxes and structuring seats to have better lines of sight to the game, Matheson said.

Though the Browns built a stadium in the late '90s, the team was not included in the analysis Matheson co-authored. However, the Browns' three AFC North rivals were, and their average ticket prices increased after their stadiums were opened. Compared to the prior year, here is how much AFC North teams' average ticket prices increased in the year the new stadium opened:

Baltimore Ravens: \$5.49 increase
Pittsburgh Steelers: \$21.27 increase
Cincinnati Bengals: \$18.44 increase

In some cases, teams' ticket prices fell after the first or second year of a new stadium. That was the case with the Steelers and Bengals, which saw the largest ticket price increases. The Ravens' ticket prices decreased only slightly in the two years after building a new stadium.

"It goes up high, and then it stays up high," Matheson said.

But the Haslams may not build a new stadium. After all, they are asking for at least \$1 billion in upgrades for the existing stadium. It's less clear if substantial stadium upgrades precede ticket price



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increases, Matheson said. However, when the Chicago Bears made substantial upgrades to their field in the early 2000s, ticket prices increased by roughly 26%, Matheson said.

Matheson is also not the only one to quantify the connection between new stadium construction and increased ticket prices. In 2012, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution analyzed ticket prices when the New York Jets, New York Giants, Dallas Cowboys and Indianapolis Colts moved to new stadiums. The newspaper found those teams increased ticket prices an average of 26%, which was several times higher than the league average.

Browns and Haslam Sports Group spokesman Peter John-Baptiste didn't dispute that ticket prices could rise following a new stadium or substantial upgrades to the existing stadium. However, the Browns are aware not all city residents can afford pricey tickets, and take that into account when deciding on prices, John-Baptiste said.

"We always approach our ticket pricing by offering a wide range of pricing levels to accommodate all our fans," John-Baptiste said. "There's a lot of competition for entertainment dollars...so we're going to consider that when making any pricing decision."



Browns head into NFL draft this year with eye on 2025 and beyond | Jeff Schudel's The Cleveland Beat By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald

<https://www.news-herald.com/2024/04/20/browns-head-into-nfl-draft-this-year-with-eye-on-2025-and-beyond-jeff-schudels-the-cleveland-beat/>

Remember the bad old days when the Browns were hopelessly out of playoff contention before Halloween and fans had little to look forward to but the NFL draft the following April?

There is very little buzz in Cleveland about the 2024 draft, which gets underway at 8 p.m. April 25. The three-day event is being staged in Detroit this year.

Maybe the local excitement will build as the time draws closer to the moment NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell will say, "The Chicago Bears are on the clock!", but probably not because the Browns won't be on the clock until the second day of the draft when they prepare to make the 54th overall pick.

The Browns for the third year in a row are going into the draft without a first-round pick, and for the first time in a long, long time they are heading into the draft without a gaping hole that needs filling. They have a total of six picks — 54 (second round), 85 (third), 156 (fifth), 205 (sixth) plus 227 and 243 (seventh).

The Browns do not have a first-round pick because they traded their first-round picks in 2022, 2023 and 2024 plus more picks in later rounds to the Texans in March 2022 for quarterback Deshaun Watson. They have no glaring needs because, well, Andrew Berry has put together a very competitive roster since taking over as general manager in 2020. But Berry isn't buying the notion his 2024 roster has no openings.

"The NFL is full of surprises," Berry said during a draft preview news conference April 18 in Berea. "I don't think any of us anticipated going into the (2023) season that we would be down three tackles (Jack Conklin, Jedrick Wills and Dawand Jones), Nick Chubb and Deshaun Watson for most of the year, that we would lose (safeties) Grant Delpit, Juan Thornhill and Rodney McLeod late in the season.

"So in terms of spots on the 53 or who's going to play what, it all looks good in May until adversity hits or something unexpected happens, whether it's injury or performance."

Twelve players were on the Browns' injured reserve list by the end of the 2023 season. Nine of them were starters — linebacker Jacob Phillips, right tackle Conklin, Chubb, Watson plus Delpit, Thornhill and McLeod, left tackle Wills and right tackle Jones.

Defensive tackle Maurice Hurst, return specialist Jakeem Grant and quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson also finished the season on injured reserve.

"The draft has always been about long-term investment in the roster," Berry said. "It's rare for a player to come in immediately and play at a starting caliber level. We really look at it with, 'OK, how are these players going to impact, call it the 2025 to 2027 Cleveland Browns?' And if they develop



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quickly and produce with impact in their rookie season, that's great. Dawand Jones did that. We're not going to keep them off the field, but we really do look at it in terms of a long-term investment in the team."

Berry's research revealed 32% of rookies play an average of 17 snaps a game, and that doesn't take into account how many of those might be on special teams or late in the game in so-called garbage time.

The Browns would be picking 23rd in the first round if they didn't trade the pick to Houston.

Berry's research also showed the first overall pick has a 59% chance of being a starting caliber player or better as a rookie. The success rate drops to 48% for picks 1-20 and to 40% for picks 1-32.

- One of the surprises of the NFL offseason was Mike Vrabel did not get another head coaching job in 2024 after being fired by the Titans. Vrabel was 54-45 in six years coaching the Titans, though he was 7-10 and 6-11 the last two seasons.

The Browns hired Vrabel on March 15 to be a coaching and personnel consultant. So what exactly does that mean?

"Coach Vrabel has been awesome having him up here for a few weeks this offseason," Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski said during his news conference April 16 to kick off the 2024 offseason program. "For me and for us, we're just excited to add a really smart football person into our building. A guy who's had success as a player, a guy who's had success as a coach.

"He's a huge resource for me. He's a huge resource for Andrew in different, in varying ways. The exact role, how it unfolds, that's really up to him. And making sure that I'm not asking too much of him, if you will, but I just don't think you can have enough good people. I've been told you can't have enough good Buckeyes as well."

Vrabel, born in Akron, played college football at Ohio State and was an assistant defensive coach there from 2011-13.

Browns cornerback Denzel Ward and offensive tackle Dawand Jones also played at Ohio State.



Browns admit they're still trying to grasp new kickoff rules entering 2024 season

By Nick Shook, NFL.com

<https://www.nfl.com/news/browns-admit-they-re-still-trying-to-grasp-new-kickoff-rules-entering-2024-season>

One of the major news items to emerge from the Annual League Meeting was a significant change to the kickoff. How NFL teams adjust in 2024, however, remains to be seen.

Take Cleveland, for example. The Browns are venturing into these uncharted waters by putting their own special teams coordinator, Bubba Ventrone, in the place of their players to get a feel for the new setup.

"Bubba's been in the indoor [facility], literally with a helmet on, taking drops, which is true," Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski recently said, via the Akron Beacon Journal. "So we want to be as prepared as we can be. But I don't know that there's any club that knows exactly how it's going to look."

Stefanski admitted everyone across the league is currently attempting to understand the new rules, which were essentially borrowed from the XFL (which has since merged with the USFL to become the UFL) and modified thanks to suggestions from NFL special teams coordinators. It requires plenty of drastic changes, including shifting the kickoff coverage unit downfield and requiring them all to remain stationary until the ball touches the ground or one of two returners.

The changes are motivated by two goals: Improve player safety by shortening the distance between kick-coverage and kick-return units -- long understood as the most dangerous play in football -- and bring intrigue back to a play that had been tempered by adjustments over the last decade.

Stefanski sees the potential in it. He and the rest of the league just aren't yet certain how to capitalize.

"So, we look at that as a great opportunity in this league to add an exciting play for this game, and it's another touch for an offensive player," Stefanski said. "It's another opportunity to get a tackle for a defensive player or an offensive player on special teams. We're excited about what it is, but we're working through it. I don't think anybody in the league can tell you exactly how it's going to look, but that's an opportunity for us so we've spent a lot of time on the board with it."

As part of their efforts, the Browns are doing what most every other club is likely turning to in April: film. But they can only gain so much before attempting to put it into practice, something that begins with offseason programs and organized team activities.

"Truth is none of us will really know until we get into it," general manager Andrew Berry said last week. "I mean, we've watched a ton of XFL film. Even though it's not the same design, we've had a lot -- I think Kevin mentioned probably earlier this week -- how much time they've put into it. ... And I'm sure we're going to learn a lot as we get into the preseason and then the regular season with the new rule."



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Buckle up, football fans: The preseason might be used to work out a few new kinks unseen in previous years. It might be rough at first, but if all goes according to plan, the kickoff should become an entertaining play for everyone once again.



Unique ways Andrew Berry has used 7th-round picks, and what it might mean for 2024 NFL Draft

By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/the-unique-ways-the-browns-and-andrew-berry-have-used-7th-round-picks-and-what-it-might-mean-for-their-2024-nfl-draft.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — There are a few certainties in life, and the NFL.

Death, taxes, and Browns GM Andrew Berry not drafting players in the seventh round.

During his four prior drafts at the helm of the Cleveland front office, Berry has made only two selections in the seventh round, both coming in 2022 when he selected edge rusher Isaiah Thomas at pick No. 223, and center Dawson Deaton 23 selections later. Other than that, Berry has packaged up all of his other seventh-round selections as parts of trades in his other three drafts.

But is it a trend that will continue heading into this weekend?

The Browns currently have two seventh-round picks on Saturday, one at 243, and their newly-acquired pick at 227 after they traded offensive tackle Leroy Watson IV to the Tennessee Titans.

“I’ve got two of them. We’ll see if we make two selections there,” Berry said last week at his pre-draft press conference. “So it’s a resource, it’s a trade that we thought could give us a resource that we could use effectively. How we deploy that resource remains to be seen.

“We could select players with those two picks. It could be part of a move up, it could be part of a move down, it could be a trade for veteran player, you just never know. So we’ll be open and flexible in terms of how we use them.”

It’s very Berry to leave every option open in regards to how the picks might be used, but he’s had a definite trend of using them in trades.

In 2020, he set the 244th overall pick to the Saints in exchange for a third-round pick that year (which they used to take DT Jordan Elliott) and a third-round pick the following year which they used to take Anthony Schwartz. While Elliott is gone now, departing to San Francisco in free agency this spring, he was a starter the last couple of years on the D-line. And while Schwartz didn’t work out, that second third-round pick in 2021 gave the Browns the leeway to use their own selection in that draft to trade up with the Panthers to acquire Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah in the second round.

That same draft, Berry sent the team’s seventh-rounder and a fourth-rounder to the Detroit Lions in exchange for a 2021 fifth-rounder, which they used to take linebacker Tony Fields II, and a 2022 fourth-rounder, which became part of the Deshaun Watson trade package.

Finally, last year Berry sprung into action before the Browns could select at 229, sending the selection to the Ravens for a sixth-round pick in this year’s draft, which is No. 205 overall. And in 2024, he already sent away one of their seventh-round picks to the Cardinals in the Joshua Dobbs trade last summer.



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Of the only two players Berry has taken in the seventh round, Thomas got a chunk of playing time in 2022 with 162 defensive snaps, but spent the entirety of 2023 on the practice squad after suffering a knee injury in the preseason. Deaton tore his ACL during a 2022 August practice, and was ultimately waived with an injury designation in 2023.

So while Berry laid out every possible scenario with seventh-rounders this year, from past moves it's easy to see that the Browns have found more value in wheeling and dealing those late picks to teams who want more swings at the plate, rather than selecting players late, who they would likely be able to still get as undrafted free agents, and locking them into four-year deals.

For the most part, it's worked out, given the most likely return on investment with players selected that late.

So while options might be open, don't be surprised if Berry doesn't sit still on Saturday.



Cleveland Browns' in-stadium announcer Jeff Shreve reflects on career heading into 25th season

By Adam Ferrise, cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/04/cleveland-browns-in-stadium-announcer-jeff-shreve-reflects-on-career-heading-into-25th-season.html>

CANTON, Ohio — If Jeff Shreve's name and face aren't familiar to Northeast Ohio sports fans, his voice certainly should be.

In the last three decades, Shreve has made a lap around the region's sports teams as the in-stadium public address announcer for the Cleveland Cavaliers, the Cleveland Rockers and the University of Akron basketball and football teams.

And next NFL season will mark his 25th as the in-game voice at Cleveland Browns Stadium, where he lets fans know that, when the Browns are on defense, "it's thirrrrrrrrrrd down!"

Shreve first started announcing games while attending GlenOak High School in his native Canton, where he was paid \$10 a game for girls' basketball games. He also did some public address work while a student at Mount Union College.

Shreve worked as the public address announcer for the Cavs from 1996 until the end of the 2004-2005 season, shortly after Dan Gilbert bought the team.

He has been the in-game voice for Zips games since 2006 and handled the Mid-American Conference basketball tournament since 2000, when the tournament first was held in Cleveland.

Shreve also started calling Browns games in 2000.

Shreve is married with five sons, and he still lives in the Canton area.

He sat down with cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer at the Pro Football Hall of Fame, where he's the manager of Hall of Famer Relations and Wellness.

How did you get started with public address announcing?

"You know, I started doing it in high school and in college, but I did my internship with the Cavs at the Richfield Coliseum in the late 1980s. Howie Chizek was the PA announcer, but he had a radio show at the time on WNIR in Akron. The Cavs played a couple of matinees a year, sometimes on holidays or whatever, and they'd be nationally televised on CBS. But Howie couldn't leave his radio show to do those games.

"[In 1988] we had two of those games. The first one was earlier in the year and [former Cavaliers and Indians television broadcaster] Jack Corrigan did that one. The second one was in the spring, and he was with the Indians in Tucson for spring training, so they were looking to fill that role.



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“As they’re having the conversations and trying to think of guys that they could get to do one game, I kind of chimed in and said: ‘Well, if you’re in a pinch, I did this in high school and college.’

“And the response I got was the kind of like the response, you know, when your 7-year-old says he can help you paint the living room: ‘OK, I’ll get back to you.’ Because they didn’t know any better. They didn’t know if I could do it or not. And a couple days later, they said if that offer is still good, we’d like you to do the game.

“I don’t know why they took that leap of faith. Nobody auditioned me or put me in front of a microphone. They just said, ‘Sure you can do it.’

“So I’m in college and I’m doing a nationally televised NBA game, and I’m terrified and excited at the same time. Really, I honestly didn’t tell a lot of people, because if I fell on my face, maybe nobody would know. But I did well enough that I ended up being Howie’s backup for eight seasons.”

What was your first game like?

“Howie had this way of calling 3-pointers, like “Mark Price for tharee!” I wasn’t going to do a Howie Chizek imitation. And so everybody at Mount Union asked me, ‘How are you going to call a 3-pointer?’ And I’m like, ‘I don’t know.’

“I really racked my brain trying to figure out a different way to do it. I didn’t want to be terribly different. But I didn’t want to clone what Howie did. That was kind of his signature thing.

“So, as a 21-year-old guy, I kind of talked myself into that there probably wouldn’t be a 3-pointer, and I won’t have to worry about it. And the part I remember from the game is we won the tap and missed a shot, Indiana went down and missed a shot, and we came down and Mark Price hit a 3. The first basket of the game.

“So I had to come up with something pretty quick. The shot was in the air, and I had to come up with something. So, I just did it backwards. ‘Threeeee, for Mark Price.’ And when Indiana would score, I would just say, ‘Reggie Miller. Three points.’ You know, kind of downplay it. You kind of make those things up things as you go.

“I kept a couple of things the way Howie did, like how he called a timeout: ‘Timeout, Cleveland. Cavaliers timeout.’ I kept that as a kind of tribute to Howie because he was so instrumental in me being able to do it. I poked him a lot and asked him a lot of questions. He was always so generous. He was a real mentor to me, along with [Cavs radio announcer] Joe Tait.”

What advice did Joe Tait give you?

“You know, Joe was never a big fan of the pomp and circumstance around NBA games nowadays. He often said his favorite halftime was at the Boston Garden, where they just pushed the ball rack out



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and said the second half begins in 12 minutes. So he would, I think, keep me from going too far over the top.

“As a kid, I listened to Joe Tait religiously. I would never watch a game on TV. I sat in my room with the lights off and loved the way he painted a picture. And that’s really what I wanted to do.”

On leaving the Cavs

“When Dan Gilbert bought the team, I think they wanted to change the look and feel of the team. And so when you’re making cosmetic changes to the building and adding a new floor and new seats, I think they wanted to have a fresh voice in there. I understood it. I didn’t want to go, but I understood what their motive was.

“And you know, sometimes that’s just how the business goes. But I was really glad for my years there. I still have a lot of friends I stay in touch with. I still go back for the MAC tournament and can see all the people once a year. So I’m blessed that standpoint, too.

“Once the MAC tournament started being in Cleveland, I got to do that. And then Akron called and asked if I wanted to do those games, and it’s right down the road, so I was like, ‘Yeah sure.’”

On calling Browns games

“Browns fans are fantastic. I’m just another fan with a really loud voice. It’s kind of like you’re the head fan or the conductor of the orchestra.

“They’re all great; they’re very smart. They know it’s third down, and it’s almost like you just need to go, ‘OK, everybody go now.’ They’re ready to make noise.

“I know every team says they have the best fans. But they’re all playing for second place as far as I’m concerned, and I’ve to a lot of NFL venues.

“Another NFL public address announcer from out west contacted me in the summer and said, ‘We just had a meeting, and we’re trying to find ways to get our fans engaged and get them in the stadium earlier. What do you do in Cleveland?’ And I said, ‘Well, I’d like to help you. But we do two things: We print the schedule, and we open the gates. And the fans do the rest.’ He couldn’t believe that I said 5 in the morning they’re rolling in.

“They’re just so passionate, and it’s just such an honor to be among them and have the opportunity to be at those home games. I get the same butterflies when they put the ball down now as I did in 2000.”

Best memories from the Browns?



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“The Browns, you know, there’s a lot of memories, good and bad. You know, we’ve had some tough times, and we’ve had some great times. I don’t know that I could isolate just one. I mean in recent times, I guess the Jets game last year when they clinched a playoff spot, and the year Baker [Mayfield] came off the bench and opened the Bud Light coolers for everyone. That was a really fun night.

“We’ve had some good times, and a lot more bigger games, I think, are right around the corner.”



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Amid growth, Cleveland Browns lead charge to see flag football become state-sanctioned sport in Ohio

By Camryn Justice, News 5 Cleveland

<https://www.news5cleveland.com/sports/local-sports/amid-growth-cleveland-browns-lead-charge-to-see-flag-football-become-state-sanctioned-sport-in-ohio#:~:text=The%20Cleveland%20Browns%20have%20made,ahead%20of%20their%20scheduled%20games.>

BEREA, Ohio — Last week, Tennessee became the 10th state in the United States to make girls' flag football a state-sanctioned sport. On Tuesday, Colorado became the 11th. The sport has been growing exponentially over the past several years, led in part by the NFL and its 32 clubs. It's become such a global phenomenon it's been adopted as an Olympic sport, set to debut in the summer of 2028.

Here in Northeast Ohio, the growth of the game has flourished under the support of the Browns' youth sports programming and the launch of the organization's flag football program. Hannah Lee, who manages youth sports for the club, has seen just how invested young people are once given the opportunity to play the sport,

"When I started as an intern in 2021, that was kind of my baby project was girls high school flag football. We started with six teams in 2021," Lee said. "To 2024 now is 51 teams. So the growth has been really awesome."

Dozens of teams across dozens of Northeast Ohio schools quickly formed rosters of girls who were eager to dedicate their time to the sport. At Berea-Midpark High School, the girls were quick to join the team and have poured themselves into the program. Players like Deionna Borders, who also joined the school's girls wrestling team the year it became a state-sanctioned sport, have the experience. Borders played center on the football team and now gives her talents to the flag football program at her school.

"It's been great, the group of girls we have are fantastic and the support we've got from the school and the parents and boys team has been awesome," said girls flag football head coach Jonathan Hunek.

Despite all of the interest and despite all of the growth, girls' flag football has hit a snag in Ohio. Because of the 11 states that have seen the sport state-sanctioned, Ohio is not among them.

Without a sport being state-sanctioned, it can only truly function at a club level. Athletes can sign up and compete against other clubs, but their sport isn't recognized under the school's umbrella of programming or funding. There's no state tournament to play for or state titles to win for their schools.

That's something many in the Buckeye state are pushing to change.



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"I think it would be awesome to have a state-sanctioned sport. I think it fills a void," Hunek said. "And as a high school coach, a high school educator, anytime we can get kids out doing stuff, I think it is a big deal. So I think we would push for it hard. I'm 100% in on it."

From local schools like Berea-Midpark to NFL's executive vice president of football operations Troy Vincent Sr., who wrote an op-ed pushing the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) to sanction the sport, support is everywhere.

"Ohio has a chance to make a statement. The influential Ohio High School Coaches Association made its voice heard in February when board members held an impromptu vote, unanimously approving girls' flag football as an OHSCA sport, clearing a critical hurdle before the Ohio High School Athletic Association takes up the debate," Vincent wrote just a few weeks ago. "By giving young women the opportunity to play high school flag, the Buckeye State would send a message to families like mine that football — and all that comes with it — is indeed for all."

But the biggest driving force behind the push lies in Berea where athletes who had the opportunities to play their state-sanctioned sport in high school have gone on to become pros, to take the field any given Sunday and follow their passion onto the football field. The Cleveland Browns have made it a mission to see flag football reach that level for the youth here in Ohio.

Browns cornerback Greg Newsome II and linebacker Tony Fields II recently attended the Berea-Midpark girl's flag football team's practice, giving them advice and support ahead of their scheduled games. Both advocated for the state to make the change and include their sport among those recognized by OHSAA.

"Flag football is very pivotal, I started off playing flag football," Fields said. "I feel like its just another avenue, another aspect for the kids to be out of trouble and be out on the field and doing something they enjoy doing."

Newsome shared the same sentiment, knowing the importance of a sport for an athlete and what having something to compete for at a higher level can mean to a player.

"It would mean the world. That's what you compete for is to play in a championship in some sort, especially around the state. I think if it does become state-wide it would mean a lot for them," Newsome said. "They come out here and practice when they don't have to. Girls were talking about they got AP tests and things like that but they took the time out of their day to come here and practice because they're passionate about the sport so I think it would be great for them."

The Browns have listed the goal of their girls flag football programming as follows:

Together we have been working to elevate girls flag football to promote equality in sports offered at the high school level. Ultimately, the Browns are focused on creating a pathway for Girls High School Flag Football to become a sanctioned varsity sport under the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA).



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It's been two years since OHSAA sanctioned girls' wrestling and boys' volleyball. There are now 28 sports recognized at that level by the association. At that time they were discussing ESports as another possible addition, and last May partnered with ESports Ohio to host a state tournament. But as ESports players can vouch, discussions take time, and for many in Ohio, the time to add at least one more sanctioned sport—flag football—is now.

As Lee continues her efforts with the Browns flag football programming, seeing major events and tournaments scheduled in the coming weeks and months, she hopes those efforts culminate in bigger results.

"To see other states—Alaska has girls flag sanctioned—we're hoping girls flag in Ohio is the next state up," Lee said. "Hoping within the next couple months, year, girls flag is something that is brought up in conversations with the association. Would love to get that sanctioned, would love to get those girls that equal opportunity to play at the high school level, get to wear their school colors, get to put on that Letterman jacket and walk in on Friday knowing they have a game that night."

Until that day, the efforts continue in the form of club-level tournaments and outings.

On May 4, the Browns are hosting their NFL FLAG Super Regional Tournament at the Cross Country Mortgage Campus in Berea. Hundreds of athletes in a range of ages will compete in a flag football tournament with the winners of the age divisions going on to compete in the NFL Flag Championship Tournament at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium in July.

Then, on May 6, the Browns will host their Girls High School Flag Football Championship Tournament at Cleveland Browns Stadium. The event will feature 28 of their varsity teams competing for the championship.



Mike Hall Jr., Zak Zinter 'building a bridge' with Cleveland Browns after past connection **By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/04/29/mike-hall-jr-zak-zinter-browns-2024-nfl-draft-picks-ohio-state-michigan-injury/73417911007/>

BEREA — Mike Hall Jr. and Zak Zinter walked into the media room inside the Cleveland Browns' headquarters for the first time as teammates on Saturday afternoon.

The fact it was only about 17 hours removed from the Browns' first two 2024 draft picks — the former an Ohio State defensive tackle; the latter a Michigan offensive guard — finding out they were going to be on the same team gave it a bit of a surreal feeling.

That was felt by no one more than maybe the two players themselves.

"I would just say first off, 'The Game,' in itself, (the school) up north and Ohio State rivalry is insane from day one," said Hall, the Streetsboro High School graduate who was taken with pick No. 54 in Friday's second round. "Whenever you attend these prestigious colleges, that's the main goal.

"But being my rival, my three years throughout my career, then finally being teammates, yeah, it's crazy to see him in the building. I'm going to be seeing him day in and day out. But we're brothers now and it's all about that."

Bringing together a former Buckeye and a former Wolverine certainly has its own dynamics, as Hall said. However, they're far from the first two to go from being on opposite sides of arguably the greatest rivalry in college football to being teammates in the NFL.

No, what made the fact Hall and Zinter, who was taken with pick No. 85 in the third round, were sitting two feet apart at the dais on Saturday was what occurred the last time they were on the field together, last Nov. 25 in the latest chapter of the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry. That's when Hall, after being blocked by Wolverines center Drake Nugent, fell into the back of the left leg of Zinter, who was engaged with another Buckeyes defender.

Cleveland Browns draft picks Michael Hall Jr. of Ohio State and Zak Zinter of Michigan speak at their introductory press conference on Saturday, April 27, 2024 in Berea, Ohio.

The impact of the 6-foot-2, 290-pound Hall into Zinter's leg led to both the fibula and tibia snapping. He eventually needed surgery on the leg, which raised questions about whether or not he would even get a legitimate shot at the NFL.

"I mean, it definitely crossed my mind," Zinter said. "I mean, you know, going into that game and, you know, the year I've had and then that happening, I didn't know what had happened at that point, but, I mean, it definitely crossed my mind. You know, I knew something had happened to my leg. I didn't know how bad or how good it was, but, I mean, it's definitely something that crossed my mind for sure."

Takeaways from the Browns draft: What was learned about the Cleveland Browns through NFL draft weekend | Analysis



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Turns out, the concern was for naught. Despite not going through either the NFL combine or Michigan's pro day, Zinter tried to assuage teams' concerns with a short video he recently put out showing him working out.

The video did the job for at least one team, the one whose building Zinter found himself standing — without any visible effects of the injury — inside on Saturday. The one who also re-connected him to the person who, unintentionally, created the initial doubt in his mind about an NFL future.

"It was just real tragic to see that," Hall said. "He's a hell of a player and he's my teammate now. My brother. But we were just real. Because when you go out there against those guys, you want to play against the best. You don't want to go against — no offense to anybody — but the second or third, you want to go against the top, top. And this game is all about competing."

The Browns had a scout in attendance for that game in Ann Arbor. Director of Player Personnel Dan Saganey also said Saturday they've seen that play, as well as every other play in that game, "probably 80 times as a group together at this point."

So, despite general manager Andrew Berry saying on Friday night he could say "off the top of his head" whether he was aware of the two players' connection on the play, it was known inside the building. Saganey, who followed Hall and Zinter to the dais shortly after, couldn't even resist a slight joke about the situation.

How the Browns look post-draft: Cleveland Browns depth chart projection following the 2024 NFL draft

"Before we get started, did you guys have Hall and Zinter square off in some one-on-one's out there?" Saganey said. "I love to know who won because it's going to be a good battle. We're building bridges. We're building bridges. Two good players, excited to get them, so hope it all went well with them."

The next time either Hall or Zinter talk to the media, the questions about that one unfortunate moment that tied them together. It will be about actual on-field football, specifically the on-field adjustment both of them are now going through from the highest level of college to the highest level of the sport in its entirety.

Both, at least for the time being, benefit from older veterans directly in front of them. Hall joins a defensive tackle group with at least four — Dalvin Tomlinson, Maurice Hurst II, Quinton Jefferson and Shelby Harris— standing in his way.

Zinter, meanwhile, has two of the best guards in football in front of him in multi-time All-Pro Joel Bitonio and two-time Pro Bowler Wyatt Teller. It's opportunities for both of them to absorb what they can from those who haven't just done it, but done it at a high level.

"I mean, I'm pumped to have two guys like that, you know, that have done it and are doing it at a high level," Zinter said. "I mean, just, you know, I'm pumped to come in, be in that room, and just



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learn from them. Just see how they go about their everyday lives, you know, how they prepare, how they attack practice, all that kind of stuff. And just mimic and attach on them at the hip and just try to grow.”



June 1, 2024

For some downtown businesses, losing the Browns would be about more than money

By Joe Scalzo, Crainscleveland.com

<https://www.crainscleveland.com/sports-recreation/downtown-businesses-wary-browns-brook-park-plans>

The Winking Lizard's downtown location is just over a half-mile from Cleveland Browns Stadium, which means you could grab a free bag of popcorn as you exit the lobby and still have a few kernels left by the time you walk past Jim Brown's statue at the University Hospital gate.

Consequently, if you ask Winking Lizard co-owner John Lane if he sees a huge uptick in business on Browns game days, you'll get this:

"Yeah, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes."

(Pause for a breath.)

"YES, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes."

"We're probably the first spot when you come up the hill (on East 9th), or if you're walking down to the stadium, we're kind of the last bar before you hit down there," said Lane, who really did say "yes" 15 times to that question. "Our patio is always jammed and our restaurant is jammed."

Like a lot of downtown business owners, Lane isn't a fan of the Browns' proposal to build a \$2.4 million dome in Brook Park. And, like a lot of downtown business owners, his reasoning goes beyond dollars and cents.

"It's Cleveland, right?" he said. "What the hell are we gonna call the team? The Brook Park Browns? What the hell is that? This is Cleveland. It's crazy."

Officially, the Browns have narrowed their options to building the airport-adjacent dome or a \$1 billion renovation of the current stadium, which was built in the same spot as Municipal Stadium. But it's clear the Browns favor building a dome, both because it would allow them to attract more events year-round and because it would allow the city to develop the lakefront.

That potential move doesn't sit well with many downtown business owners, who not only fear losing Browns-related revenue but also feel their departure would weaken downtown as a whole.

"The Browns leaving the downtown area would not only negatively impact our revenue but would send a signal that would send ripples through the community," said Laurie Torres, who owns Mallorca Restaurant and is the president of Cleveland Independents, a group of locally owned and operated restaurants. "It would say there is no faith in Cleveland and no value in the benefit of a strong downtown. It would be an abandonment of the businesses that have supported them for years."



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“As a downtown restaurant owner there is a symbiotic relationship between us and our sports teams. They bring folks down to watch a game and we provide the entertainment that surrounds that so folks can make a day of it and create a strong economy around that. We depend on each other to make the city strong again.”

Fabio Salerno is the chef and owner of Lag Restaurant & Wine Bar in the Flats East Bank. He’s a diehard Browns fans — one of his favorite game day activities is making the walk to the stadium with his wife and kids — and he not only appreciates the extra customers, but he’s also nostalgic about the location and the overall downtown experience.

Still, he understands why the Haslams are looking elsewhere.

“My business brain tries to look at it from their perspective,” he said. “We do significant business on Sundays and Monday nights and Thursday nights, so to think there wouldn’t be a huge economic impact downtown (if they left) would be pretty naive. But the Browns are in a competitive NFL market and I do see the advantages of having a different location.

“I do a lot of work with the team and I travel to a lot of games, and you see when you go to other stadiums and venues how state-of-the-art they are and how advanced they are. It does create an almost uncontrollable draw to want to upgrade the facility and be the best. I understand the drive for that.”

The Barley House, which is located on West 6th about a half-mile from the stadium, gets about a third of its annual revenue from Browns games, managing partner Corey May said. In fact, the Browns’ home opener and St. Patrick’s Day are its two biggest days of the year. The Barley House opens as early as 8 a.m. on game days and typically closes at midnight, although it will stay open as late as 2 a.m. for night games.

Asked what would happen if the Browns left, he said, “We’d just have to thin down staffing. There would be less jobs downtown and we’d have to lose some people. That’s not a fun situation to go through. There’s not too many things that can draw people downtown like a sports team.”

Obviously, the Browns’ decision will have a greater impact on businesses located closer to the lakefront. Cleveland Clothing Co., which has a retail location on East 4th, gets more traffic when the Browns play night games, but the 1 p.m. Sunday games aren’t much of a driver, said owner Michael Kubinski.

“We really see more visitors Friday and Saturday for those fans that come into town for the game, stay at hotels downtown and make a weekend of it,” he said in an email. “Then we also see them on Mondays before they leave town.

“In all reality, the stadium provides eight to 15 dates for events out of the year. The ballpark (Progressive Field) and the arena (Rocket Mortgage Field House) are much closer in proximity for us and provide events year round in our area.”



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The same is true for Hilarities 4th Street Theatre, but owner Nick Kostis echoed Lane's sentiments — that the city would lose more than money if the Browns left for the suburbs.

“Economically, there are arguments on both sides and they’ve been made time and time again,” he said. “I’m left more to ponder the psycho-social impact of the Cleveland Browns leaving. They have been identified with Cleveland for so long.

“Nothing is sacred and I guess we have to adapt to the possibility should it occur. I just think it’ll have an impact on the sense of who we are and our identity as the kind of city that’s tough and loyal. Things change and I understand that, but it’s lamentable.”

There’s one other variable, Lane said: What if the Brook Park location doesn’t work?

Like many NFL teams, the Browns plan to surround the new stadium with what’s known as a “Sports Venue-Anchored Development,” which would include things like hotels, offices, retail stores and youth sports fields. Eight NFL teams have venue-anchored developments, two are under construction and eight others are in the planning stages, according to the real estate consulting firm RCLCO. For those developments to be a success, they need foot traffic.

Cleveland Browns stadium, meanwhile, is already built.

“There’s gonna have to be a whole infrastructure put in place (in Brook Park),” Lane said. “And just because there’s development there doesn’t mean it’ll be busy all the time. It doesn’t always work. A lot of people are talking about the (Atlanta) Braves (and Truist Park), but I have family down in Atlanta and unless a game is going on, the area isn’t what everyone thought it would be.”

Lane’s solution? Keep the Browns downtown and spend the money elsewhere near Brook Park.

He even knows the perfect place.

“We need a new airport,” he said.



Kevin Stefanski and family kick off their Keeper's Foundation with a flag football game: 'It does feel like home to us'

By Mary Kay Cabot, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/06/kevin-stefanski-and-family-kick-off-their-keepers-foundation-with-a-flag-football-game-it-does-feel-like-home-to-us.html>

Kevin Stefanski is cool and all, but the 200 kids who participated in his Keeper's Foundation flag football event at Cleveland Browns Stadium on Thursday night got a special treat when Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson showed up to participate in drills and help his coach kick off of the inaugural event for the foundation established by him and his family.

Watson was mobbed by the cheering kids, and willingly high-fived them and posed for photos. Fortunately for the campers, Thursday was a throwing day for the recuperating Watson, and he happily tossed some footballs to the kids during drills.

But Watson wasn't the only VIP who showed up to help Stefanski, his wife Michelle and their kids Will, Gabe and Juliet officially launch their foundation to support youth in Northeast Ohio, especially the underprivileged.

Browns offensive coordinator Ken Dorsey, receivers coach Chad O'Shea, and former Saint Ignatius coach Chuck Kyle all turned out to help the kids learn the basics of football, and foster teamwork and sportsmanship under the lights of Cleveland Browns Stadium. Included were 50 kids from Boys Hope Girls Hope and the Cleveland Muny Football League who received scholarships to attend.

"When we sat down with the kids and said we wanted to start a foundation, the first thing we wanted to do was give back to this community that has given us so much, and we really want to focus on the kids in this community, the underprivileged kids, the disadvantaged kids, and that's what we're trying to do," Stefanski said. "We're trying to raise awareness for this foundation tonight, and then next week we have another event that will be a big deal for us as we get started here.

"But bottom line is this, what we're trying to do is give back, and the idea behind keepers is you are your brother's keeper, you are your sister's keeper, and ultimately we're trying to look after those kids in our community, the ones that need us to look after them the most."

The second event is Night out by the Lake on June 13th, which will include dinner, drinks, music and a program, all to benefit local children in need.

"We'll have some of our players down there," Stefanski said. "The tickets are sold out, unfortunately. We'll have to find a bigger venue next year. But again, the support has been incredible. The interest has been incredible, so that's going to be a really unique night where we get to have some fun with people down there at Lago in the East Bank, and again, with the goal of raising a bunch of money so we can help these kids."



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The flag football game came one day after Stefanski signed a contract extension that will keep him here for years to come and further establish Cleveland as the Stefanski's second home, after their native Philadelphia. GM Andrew Berry also received an extension.

"We've been very, very blessed and fortunate, to be in Minneapolis for a bunch of years, to be here," Stefanski said. "So I know there are different coaching stories where you're bouncing around every year, but we have our roots here. We've got three kids in this community going to schools locally here, so it does feel like home for us. Obviously being here now for going onto this fifth season, it's a special place that we're excited about starting this foundation here."

Stefanski acknowledged becoming part of the community was delayed a year by Covid 19, but now they're part of The Land, and want to give back as much as possible.

"Maybe it wasn't the first year," he said. "Maybe it was once you got out of that crazy time where you could actually get around town and meet your neighbors. But we're entrenched. The community's been incredible, the schools, the people just around town, but probably something that we didn't realize until that next year when we all came out of our slumbers."

Michelle is especially thrilled to start a foundation of which their children can be a big part. They all attended the flag football event, helping out on some drills, participating, or cheering on the other kids.

"We want not only to pass down to them how to learn how to treat others, to help others, especially, but we always say, to those that a lot is given, a lot is expected," she said. "So it's a way to help our kids understand that, and see that come to life and be a part of it."

And with Stefanski here for the long haul, he just might find some future Browns in the bunch.

"We're a football family," he said. "(Michelle) is our director of family operations here, so we want these kids to have fun on this field. We know that this is a great sport that you can play safely. Coach Kyle here, Chico's here, who's such a big part of this community when it comes to playing football and teaching these kids the right way to play football. So flag's a great, great entry into tackle football. So for these kids to get on this field and play flag football where their heroes play on Sundays, we think is awesome. I was down here a few weeks back for the girls flag football, the high school girls flag football, and I can tell you it's a fast, fun, exciting sport to watch and we're excited to watch these kids tonight.

But above all, it's the start of something big for kids in Northeast Ohio.

"For us, if we impact one kid, we consider that a success," Stefanski said. "I would tell you, the response from the community has been unbelievable. People that are joining this cause with us. So again, we're looking out for the group that needs us to look out for them the most. That's what we're most excited about is impacting these kids."



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N E W S C L I P S

Kevin Stefanski and Andrew Berry built a partnership to lead the Browns to success



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By Kelsey Russo, [Clevelandbrowns.com](https://www.clevelandbrowns.com)

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/kevin-stefanski-and-andrew-berry-built-a-partnership-to-lead-the-browns-to-success>

When Executive Vice President and General Manager Andrew Berry and head coach Kevin Stefanski were first hired in 2020, they stepped into new roles as a duo.

First time head coach. A new general manager. And yet, in their first season they began to re-shape the Browns and started their partnership. Four years later, the two are set to stay at the helm of the Browns, as the Browns announced they extended both Berry and Stefanski.

"It's a partnership where we take our job seriously," Stefanski said. "We understand the jobs we have in this town. We understand our fans and what they want this team to be. So, we're just going to focus on working every waking minute to get this thing where we want it. But I just come back to this – for the organization to trust Andrew and I, it speaks to what we've been able to do, but we have plenty of work to do. Fortunately for us, we've got some great people in this building – coaches, players, staff. So, we'll just continue to work."

Following the end of each season since Stefanski became head coach, they have had conversations with ownership about the previous season. This season was no different. After the Browns finished the 2023 season with an 11-6 record and a trip to the Wild Card round, they had those conversations with Managing and Principal Partners Dee and Jimmy Haslam, Executive Vice President and Partner JW Johnson and other members of ownership.

Those conversations served as the building blocks for the future. During the NFL Annual League Meeting in March, the Haslam's said at the time they were close to extensions with Berry and Stefanski. They praised the way the two handled a number of different circumstances throughout the 2023 season and didn't bat an eye.

Now with the extensions, there is a level of stability and continuity within the organization moving forward. Yet, Stefanski said they aren't focused on the element of stability; instead, they are focused on continuing to do the job ahead of them to lead the Browns.

"To entrust myself and Andrew, their family has given us that trust to be here is a big deal," Stefanski said. "So, with Dee and Jimmy, Whitney (Haslam Johnson) and JW, I mean, they've been ultra supportive of us in a football way and in a personal way. They've been great to our families. So, really excited to continue to partner with Andrew and we have work to do."

Since Berry and Stefanski took over in 2020, the Browns have a record of 37-30 (.552), which is the highest winning percentage for the team over a four-year stretch since 1986-89. They also reached the playoffs twice in the four-year stint, beginning in 2020 and again in 2023.

The Browns also finished the 2023 season with an 11-6 record and another trip to the postseason. The 11 regular season wins tied for second-most in team history, trailing only the 1986 team, which had 12 wins. Following the 2023 season, Stefanski (2020 and 2023) joined Pro Football Hall of



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Famer Paul Brown (1951 and 1953) as the only coaches in team history to record multiple seasons with at least 11 regular season wins.

Cleveland had seven players selected to the Pro Bowl for the 2023 season, the club's most since sending eight in 1988. During his tenure, Berry has inked five of the players — G Joel Bitonio, DE Myles Garrett, TE David Njoku, G Wyatt Teller and CB Denzel Ward — to contract extensions. Berry made his other moves by acquiring WR Amari Cooper through a trade with the Cowboys in 2022 and selecting LB Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah as a second-round draft pick in 2021.

Berry also added the contract extensions of WR Jerry Jeudy – who the Browns acquired in a trade with the Broncos in March – and S Grant Delpit – who was drafted by the Browns in the second round of the 2020 NFL Draft.

As the two have molded the Browns over the last four years, they have worked as a pair to do so.

"I feel very blessed to have Kevin as a partner and I think you guys all know how highly I think of him both professionally and probably more importantly as a person," Berry said during NFL Owner's Meetings in March. "It's fun to go to work with him every day. It really is. And I think as much as he's accomplished in his first four years, there's a lot more runway in call it the next 10. So, I'm really excited to see where the team heads under his stewardship."

Even with their level of success in the first four years, Stefanski believes there is room to improve as a head coach. He knows there are a number of ways, such as how practices are run, how to reach the football team and messaging of the football team. He holds a growth mentality and works to emulate for his players.

"I think it's one of our jobs as coaches is to reach our players, and that can come in a variety of ways," Stefanski said. "We talk even when you're teaching and you're learning, there are different ways to do that there are different settings for a guy to learn. So, we spend a lot of time as coaches trying to find ways to reach our guys. Not everybody learns the same way, not everybody thinks exactly like you do. So, we work really, really hard to meet our guys where they are. I think part of that is getting to know each other and building trust with each other. That allows you to get to that point, but it takes some hard work."

He knows he and Berry can also continue to grow together as they lead the Browns through the next chapter of their story.

As they have built the Browns up to where they are heading into the 2024 season, both Stefanski and Berry have felt the support of ownership over the last four years. It's allowed the two to succeed in their approach to building the roster and finding success on the field.

"And then I would say to Jimmy and Dee, they've been fantastic," Berry said in March. "I don't think that they get enough credit for their ownership of the Browns. They're incredibly supportive, they're great with resources, they push where appropriate. But I think the thing that often goes overlooked or not said enough is as much as they push their people, they really care about them as



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people. We're not just commodities so to speak. And that's something that means a lot to me. I know it means a lot to Kevin and we're fortunate to have good ownership here."

How Deshaun Watson emerged from his frightening collision with a Browns tight end while playing 1st base in David Njoku's celebrity softball game



By Mary Kay Cabot, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/06/how-deshaun-watson-emerged-from-his-collision-with-a-browns-tight-end-while-playing-1st-base-in-david-njokus-celebrity-softball-game.html>

EASTLAKE, Ohio -- Browns first-year tight end Zaire Mitchell-Paden had 230 million reasons to breathe a huge sigh of relief during David Njoku's celebrity softball game at Classic Park on Saturday afternoon.

In the first inning, Deshaun Watson, playing first base despite still recuperating from surgery to repair his fractured right shoulder, leaped to catch a pop-up and collided with second basemen Mitchell-Paden, Watson's cap flying off as he made the catch and flipped onto his right shoulder.

He remained down for a few seconds while the crowd gasped before getting up and raising both hands in the air to signal that he was fine. More than anything, he seemed thrilled to have caught the ball.

The crowd cheered loudly that their QB was fine.

"I was good," Watson told cleveland.com after the game.

But Mitchell-Paden was rattled by the fact that he nearly hurt the Browns' \$230 million man, who's being counted on this season to lead them to the Super Bowl.

"When I found out he flipped, I was like, 'Man, I hope I didn't hurt him,'" Mitchell-Paden told cleveland.com. "I didn't hear him saying, 'It's me, it's me, it's me' so once I saw him in my periphery, I stopped and moved out of the way, but I'm glad he's OK."

Watson shook off the incident quickly, signing autographs after the inning and trotting back out for the second inning, and every other one en route to a 20-5 loss to the team captained by Myles Garrett.

"The whole time he was down I was like, 'Are you good? are you good?'" Mitchell-Paden said. "You ain't hurting and there's nothing lingering?" I was just making sure he was OK, because that was a mistake. So going forward, if I'm ever doing something like this again, I'll just make sure I'm just laid back, and I'm just chillin."

Watching Watson engage with fans, teammates and other players in the game, Mitchell-Paden thanked his lucky stars.

"I was really, really happy that Deshaun was not hurt at all," he said.

Watson, who didn't bat, dropped another pop-up in the third inning and caught another one in the fourth to end the inning. He also threw once to Amari Cooper at third, and tossed a couple of balls back to the pitcher.



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The Browns will of course be thrilled that he emerged unscathed from the run-in with Mitchell-Paden. Watson, who underwent surgery in November to repair the fractured shoulder socket and partially-torn labrum, will take the field Tuesday for the Browns' three-day mandatory minicamp, and will still likely be limited according to the protocol set forth by his surgeon, Dr. Neal ElAtrache.

During the 10 organized team activities, Watson threw every other day, and didn't participate in any offense vs. defense drills. It remains to be seen if he'll do any more than that in minicamp, but ElAtrache wants him to be conservative until training camp in late July.

In the first week of OTAs, Stefanski said Watson "looks like himself."

Mitchell-Paden, for one, is overjoyed that still holds true after the softball game.

Browns Pro Bowler David Njoku headlines softball game, reflects on his growth in Cleveland
By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal



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<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/06/08/cleveland-browns-david-njoku-celebrity-softball-game-travis-kelce/74027324007/>

EASTLAKE — David Njoku arrived in Cleveland as a 20-year-old first-round draft pick seven years ago.

Now Njoku is a Pro Bowl tight end and a bona fide favorite — a status highlighted during Saturday's David Njoku Celebrity Softball Game at Classic Park. In the past, popular Browns players Joe Haden, Jarvis Landry and Greg Newsome II have had their names attached to the event.

Njoku, 27, said he has evolved “from a kid to a man” during his Browns tenure.

“I appreciate the city of Cleveland tremendously,” Njoku said during a news conference before the softball game. “Becoming a man here, there's a lot that entails.

“It's so much deeper than just that statement. You get me? So, yeah, I'm blessed. I'm truly blessed to be here.”

The 29th overall pick in 2017, Njoku has endured a roller-coaster ride of a journey with the Browns. The team went 0-16 when Njoku was a rookie, and he requested a trade in 2020.

“Things wasn't always great with Njoku,” Arizona Cardinals linebacker and former Browns player Mack Wilson Sr. said before participating in the softball event. “I just saw the will and desire for him to just stay grounded and just keep working day in and day out. To see where he's at now, it's crazy. I knew he was one of the best tight ends in the league at the time, and now he's getting that recognition.”

Some key relationships between Njoku and the Browns were indeed repaired, including with coach Kevin Stefanski. Njoku signed a contract extension in 2022 and earned his first Pro Bowl selection last season with 81 catches for 882 yards and six touchdowns as Cleveland made the playoffs for the second time in four years.

Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce walks down a ramp leading to the field before the David Njoku Celebrity Softball Game on Saturday, June 8, at Classic Park in Eastlake, Ohio.

Legendary Browns quarterback Bernie Kosar has known Njoku for many years because they're both University of Miami products. Kosar considers Njoku one of the top tight ends in the NFL along with Kansas City Chiefs star and Cleveland Heights native Travis Kelce, who won the home run derby Saturday and participated in Njoku's softball game.

“What David's done with his confidence and self-esteem in the community, hats off to him that he's able to do this,” Kosar said. “Where he's come on the field with that even more so. A lot of people when he got drafted maybe were down on him, but he was 20 years old.

“A lot of people kind of were on his case back four or five years ago. ... But a lot of people were supportive of him and he was supportive of himself, and it was big when he had that confidence and



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belief. I love what Travis Kelce's doing, but David Njoku's up there as one of the elite tight ends in the game.”

Cleveland Browns legend Bernie Kosar speaks during a news conference before the David Njoku Celebrity Softball Game on Saturday, June 8, at Classic Park in Eastlake, Ohio. Njoku said he's aiming in 2024 to “just be better than last year” as an encore to his Pro Bowl season.

Like Kosar, new Browns offensive coordinator Ken Dorsey is a former Miami Hurricanes and Cleveland quarterback who has had a bond with Njoku for years. Njoku explained he's excited about the elements Dorsey has added to Cleveland's playbook.

“It is juicy,” Njoku said. “I am not going to say anything else. Leave it at that. But I'm really excited for this year.”

Duce Staley has mission with Cleveland:Assistant coach wants Browns running backs to 'run through a brick wall' with him, not for him

Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson has softball scare
Playing first base, Browns starting quarterback Deshaun Watson collided with Cleveland tight end Zaire Mitchell-Paden while catching a pop-up during the first inning of the softball game. Mitchell-Paden played second base.

There were audible gasps from the crowd when Watson fell, but he appeared to be fine and remained in the game. He also looked unscathed as he exited the stadium after the event.

The team captained by Browns defensive end Myles Garrett won the softball game. Garrett carried an MVP trophy out of Classic Park.

Former Browns linebacker Mack Wilson Sr. happy with Cleveland reunion
In 2022, the Browns traded Wilson to the New England Patriots for defensive end Chase Winovich. Wilson said it felt great to return to Northeast Ohio, where he had positive experiences as a member of the 2020 Browns.

“I was one of those guys who was in the locker room that was a part of the time we did go to the playoffs and beat Pittsburgh Round 1 and should have beat K.C.,” Wilson said. “So I was a part of those special moments, and that's something that I'll always remember. Just being a part of that culture change is tremendous to me.”

Brook Park council cautiously optimistic that Browns will pick old Ford plant for new stadium

By Maura Zurick, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/community/2024/06/brook-park-council-cautiously-optimistic-that-browns-will-pick-old-ford-plant-for-new-stadium.html>



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BROOK PARK, Ohio -- Several City Council members are cautiously optimistic in the wake of council unanimously passing a resolution to urge the Cleveland Browns ownership to build a new stadium at the old Ford plant site.

Browns owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam announced in March that they are exploring options for where the team will play after the lease for Cleveland Browns Stadium ends in 2028.

The Haslams said they are considering a new domed stadium in Brook Park or renovating the existing Cleveland Browns Stadium in downtown Cleveland.

In May, Brook Park City Council passed the resolution to “strongly” encourage the Browns ownership to leave Cleveland and build a new domed stadium in the spot of the old Ford plant near Interstate 71.

Council said in the resolution that the city is ready to work with Haslam Sports Group to build a new domed stadium on the 176-acre site along I-71 and Snow Road across from Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

There is also a mixed-use development area around the venue.

The Browns have made no official purchase or announcement.

Several Brook Park City Council members told the News Sun that they haven’t received a response from the Browns on the resolution.

While some critics of the potential move to Brook Park argue that the Cleveland Browns stadium should stay within the boundaries of its namesake city, several council members point to established precedents in the NFL.

They noted that the Dallas Cowboys play in Arlington, Texas, and the New York Jets and Giants both play in New Jersey.

Mayor Edward Orcutt declined this reporter’s request for an interview or comment for the article.

Councilman Thomas Dufour, who introduced the resolution, discussed the non-binding document with the News Sun in an email interview Wednesday (June 5).

Dufour said the resolution, which passed unanimously May 21, “stands as a testament to the fact that our City Council is ready to work.”

“Brook Park is and always will be a great place to do business,” Dufour said. “The resolution highlights the many advantages that Brook Park can offer the Haslam Sports Group or, truly, any entity looking for a place to set down roots.



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"Many of the strategic benefits offered at the property -- such as proximity to Hopkins Airport, the RTA, I-71, I-480 and the nearby Ohio Turnpike -- would excite anyone looking to do business in Northeast Ohio, but are also reasons the site would be an excellent place for a multi-use dome with an adjacent entertainment district."

Dufour described the Ford site as "the crown jewel of Brook Park's economic development portfolio" and listed numerous highlights that he thinks could help persuade the Haslams to consider the location.

"The Ford site offers many unique advantages," he said. "From a size perspective, a monumental amount of land is available for development.

"It doesn't abut the lake (Lake Erie), which allows travel from every direction. And as mentioned before, it's adjacent to Hopkins Airport, as well as I-71 and I-480, the RTA and less than six miles from the Ohio Turnpike.

"Those reasons alone make the site an incredible spot for development for many types of projects, but throw in that the site is nearby the Browns' existing property in Berea, and imagine an adjacent entertainment district to the stadium with easy access to all our region has to offer, and I believe it becomes the perfect site to build a world-class facility."

While Dufour says the city is ready to work together if the site is selected, he said the resolution isn't meant to insinuate that "we're bending over backward here."

"At the end of the day, this project will have to be a good fit for our community."

Council President Rick Salvatore told the News Sun in a phone interview Thursday (June 6) that he's hopeful that "this possible deal will put us back on the map."

"We're located very well to be the home of the Cleveland Browns, that's for sure," he said. "I mean, you can throw a rock and hit the airport from the site and you can throw a rock and hit the boundary of Cleveland."

While Salvatore says the Browns selecting the Ford site for a new stadium "could be a really wonderful thing for our city," he said there are several concerns Brook Park leaders have to consider.

"The biggest thing we have to be concerned with is we really haven't had a seat at the table, so we really don't know what they want from us or what they're willing to do for us," Salvatore said.

"We don't really know yet what's in it for us."

He said the idea of the Browns building a new facility on the vacant Ford property "sounds great," adding "who doesn't love the Browns?"

However, he said city officials must move cautiously.



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“This is the most important opportunity to do something everlasting for our town,” Salvatore said. “There’s no room for error with this.”

Councilman Steve Roberts told the News Sun in a phone interview Thursday (June 6) that the “ball is in the Haslams’ court right now.”

“The resolution puts it out there that we’re open for business,” Roberts said. “It shows that those of us on council are all united, and we’re all open to bringing the Browns to Brook Park.”

Roberts said that while he “would love” to see the Browns move to Brook Park, he also expressed concerns over what the team would want and need to consider the Ford site.

“Me personally, I would love it,” Roberts said, adding he is a lifelong fan of the team and even has a Browns’ helmet tattooed on his left arm.

“The thing is, Brook Park doesn’t have a ton of money,” Roberts said.

“So, you know, they come to Brook Park and say, ‘Hey, we need \$50 million to get this done.’ We obviously don’t have \$50 million to give them.

“I’m not saying they would ask for it, but just as an example that we don’t have that kind of money.”

Councilman Brian Poindexter told the News Sun in a phone interview Wednesday (June 5) that he’s “all in” on trying to entice the Browns to make the move.

Poindexter said he has been in contact with a representative for the Haslam Group and has been told that no decision has been made, but “Brook Park is very much in the hunt.”

“He couldn’t give me any conclusive way that they’re leaning towards Cleveland or towards Brook Park,” he said.

“But he said they’re doing their due diligence, and Brook Park is definitely up there on the option list.”

However, he said city officials have yet to hear any plans and proposals from Browns’ owners, saying that it’s “too early in the game to put a package together because, quite frankly, we don’t have nowhere near the resources that Cleveland has.”

“I take the opposite stance of everyone saying, ‘We want it but ...’ There should be no ‘but.’ We should be all in,” Poindexter said.

“I mean, this would change our city for generations.



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“There’s no reason why we should be apprehensive,” Poindexter said. “Some want to tread cautiously and carefully. I’m like, if we don’t get this, that’s going to be the biggest downfall, the most depressing thing we’ve done ever in our city.”

“The stadium belongs there, and that’s the attitude we should take.”

Councilman Jim Mencini said in an email that the resolution was an effort to “encourage the Haslams to really consider the Brook Park property.”

“What’s next, that’s what everyone is waiting for,” Mencini said. “I think the decision is with the Haslams and them alone.”

As for the site, Mencini joined several of his council colleagues in listing multiple highlights of the Brook Park property.

“All the plus factors are there,” the Ward 2 councilman said. “Space, freeways (two), rapid and rail, and let’s remember the airport is (in the) early stages of a big remodel.”

“If the airport and Browns work together, WOW!”

While Mencini supported the resolution and voted in favor of its passage, he said there is still plenty to consider.

“Much is unknown; who pays, how much -- cost is always the deciding factor,” he said.

“I agree with many that you can’t keep going to the voters for sports and entertainment venues.”

Mencini continued: “Do we want it? Yes. Do we want to surrender and sacrifice much of our revenue and resources to get this project when we don’t at all know the rewards and parts of our city structure and cash we might have to put in the tank it might take?”

“I’m not so sure. We’ll find out when things start to transpire.”

Councilman Rich Scott declined this reporter’s request for an interview or comment for the article.

The reporter reached out via email to Councilmen Tom Troyer and David McCorkle for comment but has yet to receive a response.

As Amari Cooper holds out of Browns minicamp, a reminder of what has made him so great:

Ashley Bastock

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/06/as-amari-cooper-holds-out-of-browns-minicamp-a-reminder-of-what-has-made-him-so-great-ashley-bastock.html>



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BEREA, Ohio — As the Browns went through their first of three mandatory minicamp practices without Amari Cooper present, I couldn't help but think back to the story I reported last winter, attempting to delve into what has made the wide receiver great.

My conclusion at the time — and now — is that it is about so much more than route running.

Yes, over the last two seasons, he's been the Browns' most consistent threat in the pass game. Last season, the five-time Pro Bowler led the Browns with 72 receptions for 1,250 yards and had five TDs. He broke the Browns' single-game receiving record with 265 yards in their regular-season win over Houston, and became the first player in team history with back-to-back 1,000-yard receiving seasons.

But there's more to Cooper. He's a difficult critic on himself, a teacher in a receiver room full of young players who have grown up idolizing him.

He also, in a league full of mercurial pass-catchers, has remained understated and underrated.

Which is really the main point I came back to on Tuesday, as Cooper's absence and evident holdout became the story of the day.

Often when fans hear about players holding out, it's relegated to the category of "diva" behavior, especially when you're talking about players who earn millions.

But Cooper is no diva, even in a position group that is often flippantly categorized as such.

As I wrote last year, Cooper is fairly reserved. He's always willing to talk the mechanics of the game, explain the nuances — that's often when I've had my best interviews with him during his Browns tenure. He's the kind of player who's just content to hand the ball back to the ref after a touchdown. He's the guy who's started book clubs on the teams he's played on, and who plays chess in his spare time.

"I tend to believe how you carry yourself off the field translates on the field too," receiver David Bell told cleveland.com last year. "He's always looking out for us, whether it's something big or something small, we can go to him with any problem. He's like a big brother to us and he seems to have all the answers.

"That's a correlation that translates to both his humility and you can see it in his play when he makes a big play. He don't really do too much, Just hands the ball to the official and it's like he's been there before."

I'm reminding readers about this side of Cooper for a couple of reasons.

One, as he holds out, I think it's important to point out that his value goes beyond his stats — which, again have been nothing short of impressive.



But in a year when so much is changing with the offense, and when choice routes are about to become a key factor, the mentorship, leadership, and reliability he can provide in that room are all undeniable and invaluable. He's been there, done that, and guys like Bell, Cedric Tillman, and especially Elijah Moore and Jerry Jeudy, who both hail from Cooper's south Florida, are more than willing to listen to him and accept his advice.

And two, it's worth drawing outside observers away from just assuming this is "diva" behavior.

Skipping out on minicamp is a finable offense, and over the three days this week Cooper could lose \$16,953 for missing Tuesday, \$33,908 for missing Wednesday and \$50,855 for missing Thursday, bringing the grand total to \$101,716 if he does skip out on all three days.

But it's also worth delving a bit further into the circumstances. The wide receiver market has exploded around Cooper, who has always been a value for the Browns at his roughly \$20 million-a-year price tag, especially considering they only had to give up a 2022 fifth-rounder to the Cowboys to acquire him in the first place.

Earlier this month, the Vikings' Justin Jefferson signed a four-year deal worth \$140 million, making him the highest-paid receiver in the NFL, and the highest-paid non-QB in the league.

The Browns have also been active in the market this year, extending Jeudy at a rate of \$17.5 million a year after acquiring him in an offseason trade with the Broncos. That three-year extension is worth up to \$58 million, including \$41 million fully guaranteed.

Cooper is due to make \$23.77 million in the final year of his contract. And while he's been remarkably consistent, in NFL years he's not getting any younger — he'll turn 30 in six days. This upcoming contract for him will very likely be his last chance at some big money, to take advantage of the market growth around him.

I don't know how all of this will turn out. In the NFL, it's hard for players to really maintain leverage in these situations, considering the fines for missing mandatory practice days.

But what I do know is, Cooper has shown his value in Cleveland, and this is the furthest thing from a move for theatrics.

How Browns linebacker Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah is continuing his journey from student to master

By Dan Labbe, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/06/how-browns-linebacker-jeremiah-owusu-koramoah-is-continuing-his-journey-from-student-to-master.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Browns linebacker Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah still considers himself a student, even as he enters his fourth year in the league, a year that promises an even more prominent role on the field and a bigger leadership role off it.



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“Every student has to become a master some day,” he said after practice on Tuesday. “Every master has to start off as a student. So (I’m) continuing to progress there.”

Where is he on that scale?

“Right now, I’m a student still,” he said.

Owusu-Koramoah is coming off his best season as a pro, a dynamo in the middle of Jim Schwartz’s defense who plays with a style that looks reckless but isn’t. It’s a combination of anticipation and athleticism, knifing through blockers like a running back and anticipating and diagnosing what’s in front of him so quickly, it’s as if he’s the one calling the offense.

“It was a couple times I thought I was going to make the play and then he just comes out of nowhere and shoots through the gap,” defensive tackle Dalvin Tomlinson said. “... You don’t even know he is over there at one point and then he just pops up, big play made.”

He set career highs with 101 combined tackles, 3.5 sacks and two interceptions in 2023. He saw his snap count grow to where he was playing 90% or more of the defensive snaps in three of his final five regular season games — he played 86% in one of the five and the other was the Christmas Eve blowout win in Houston when the Browns were preserving players for the quick turnaround to Thursday Night Football — and all 46 of the defensive snaps in the wild card game.

Beyond the statistics were the eye-popping plays, the moments when you noticed No. 6 causing disruption in the run game and quick passing game.

“The ability to run, the ability to hit, make plays sideline to sideline, utilize his speed,” head coach Kevin Stefanski said about what makes Owusu-Koramoah so effective in Schwartz’s scheme. “Just watching Jeremiah as a rookie to now, I do think he’s another player that has come a long way. He’s always possessed some incredible physical gifts, but the game has slowed down for him in some ways, and I’d give a ton of credit to Jeremiah, and I give a ton of credit to (linebackers) coach (Jason) Tarver. I think those guys have worked hand in hand over the years to really slow this game down for Jeremiah.”

Owusu-Koramoah doesn’t like to qualify it as the game slowing down.

“I think it’s more so of just understanding the positions that are around you, understanding your position more, understanding the offensive personnel and things like that,” he said. “You start to have more knowledge of the things. For some people they say it slows down. For me, it’s more just I have a better understanding of the game, better IQ.”

He credits his teammates, current and former, for helping him increase his football IQ.

“It’s preparation. It’s the coaches, it’s my teammates, it’s (former Browns linebacker Anthony Walker Jr.) saying, ‘Hey look, this is a draw.’ Or ‘Hey, hey look, this is crack toss, right?’” Owusu-



Koramoah said. “I think for me it’s a combination of many things. It’s not just my own personal understanding or IQ, but it’s all those all encompassing reasons.”

Despite how far he’s come in his career and with his football IQ, Owusu-Koramoah still believes he has a ways to go.

“It’s good to get the acknowledgement, Pro Bowl and everything, but I mean, I think that there’s a higher level to it and whenever there’s a high level, there can’t be this satisfying attitude,” he said. “I think for me it’s more so there’s a lot more to do, there’s a lot more to conquer and to persevere through. I haven’t necessarily gotten the amount of tackles that I want. I haven’t gotten the amount of TFLs that I want. I haven’t gotten the amount of interceptions that I want.”

Reaching a higher level could be very lucrative for him. Owusu-Koramoah is eligible to sign an extension now and his rookie contract is up after this season.

He’s currently toeing the company line and brushing off questions about his contract by saying he’s letting his agent handle it.

“It’s about compartmentalization,” he said. “There’s a time for it, and then there’s a time to focus on football. You may go home and maybe six o’clock at night, you’re done studying and then, OK, you may give some time to it, but there’s always a time and place for everything.”

For now, he’s focused on learning and growing and, maybe one day, mastering his craft.

“The thing with every master is usually they’ll say, ‘Hey, I know nothing,’” he said. “Every wise man, any monks and things like that, they’re all, ‘I don’t know anything. Knowledge is nothingness, all this spiritual stuff that’s going on. But I think that’s the beauty about knowledge, that’s the beauty about experiences is that even with the more that you have, the more humble you are and you just say, ‘Hey look, I’m still the student. I’m still here to learn. I’m still here to progress in my knowledge and everything that I’m doing.’”

Why Myles Garrett is closer to the end than he thinks, and how that affects the Browns’ Super Bowl window — Jimmy Watkins

By Jimmy Watkins, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/sports/2024/06/why-myles-garrett-is-closer-to-the-end-than-he-thinks-and-how-that-affects-the-browns-super-bowl-window-jimmy-watkins.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The football god still flashes more bicep than body fat. His balletic footwork still baffles opposing linemen. And like most immortals of his ilk, Browns edge rusher Myles Garrett still can’t even conceive of the finish line, let alone see it.



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Garrett, the reigning NFL Defensive Player of the Year, began his eighth (!) mandatory minicamp this week, which sounds hard to fathom for a fanbase that has always considered him its future. The 2017 offseason, during which Garrett and fellow first-round pick David Njoku landed in Cleveland, feels like yesterday, in Njoku's estimation ("Crazy, right?" Njoku said Wednesday).

But fellow teammate Denzel Ward, who joined the Browns in 2018, is starting to sound like the uncle whose wisdom you don't want to hear at the family reunion — "I don't feel old, personally," Ward said. "It is crazy, though. Time flies. That's what I be telling (people) all the time." And the football god himself ties Njoku for the second-longest tenure on Cleveland's roster (behind Joel Bitonio), even if he rejects the veteran label.

Asked about his, ahem, distinguished status with the Browns, Garrett responded with a correction to the record:

"I'm still a young guy on the team," Garrett said. "Not the younger guy, but still a young guy on this team."

Garrett's response fits a 28-year-old's mindset. His life is moving fast, but the changes age brings are still hard to see, if perceptible at all. He's maturing into adulthood, but he still feels like a young man. Essentially, when Garrett wakes up each day, his life (and body) feels the same as it did seven years ago, besides the fatter wallet and longer list of accomplishments.

But truth be told, Garrett is approaching middle age in football years, even if he still looks (and feels) like he can sack quarterbacks forever. Among the 39 Hall-of-Fame players who began their careers in 1995 or later, the average football lifespan is 13 seasons. Among the four defensive ends in that group — Jason Taylor, Richard Seymour, Dwight Freeney, and Julius Peppers — who averaged 15 seasons between them, only Peppers made a Pro Bowl after Year 11. And among current stars like Garrett, Canton's legends depict a shorter runway than one might think.

In that case, the best time for Cleveland to win a Super Bowl with peak Myles Garrett is last year, closely followed by this one. The Browns spent his early, contract-friendly years rebounding from a tank job that yielded a young core. But now players like Garrett, Ward and Njoku have blossomed into veteran playmakers, and the front office has spared no cap expense or draft pick in adding reinforcements around their homegrown talent.

Ward said Wednesday that urgency is ever present in football circles. And Garrett added that he felt the same desire to win as a rookie that he does now. But as both players mature into their primes?

"The focus is just different," Garrett said. "Understanding the moment, understanding the other guys we have in this room, taking all that in and taking into account and realizing that we have a special opportunity – more than any other year."

A younger Garrett has no doubt said something similar. And the older one will say the same thing next June if Cleveland falls short of a Super Bowl this season. As Njoku said Wednesday, "We didn't come this far just to come this far. We came this far with a purpose, and I think everybody knows that that purpose is."



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But with each passing minicamp, time creates a tighter crunch for the Browns' young-ish core. If 2017 feels like "yesterday," to Njoku, what might tomorrow bring? If Ward is already talking like the wise, experienced family member, how long until he feels like one? And Garrett might not see the finish line now, but how long until that means he needs his eyes checked?

Ask any elder when age hits you — particularly any that played pro football — and they'll all say sooner than you think. Garrett can shrug off such questions off now, next week and even next year — aging happens gradually at first. But one day, you wake up and your body hurts. You see more wrinkles and gray hairs in the mirror. You don't have the same drive that Garrett described on Wednesday.

"It'll never be enough," he said when asked what would fulfill his career. "It might be a little satisfaction once we win one for Cleveland. But then there's always next year. I'm not gonna stop until the body tells me it's time to hang 'em up, until I stop having fun, until I stop loving this game and wanting to be near my teammates. Until all of that fades, I'm gonna be in here giving my all."

See? Nothing to worry about. Garrett still has the motivation, the bulging biceps and the footwork of a football god. He still has his youth, too, and he'll correct reporters who suggests otherwise.

Now, former Browns offensive lineman Joe Thomas? He was old. Thirty-three, to be exact, when Garrett joined the Browns in 2017, A.K.A. old enough to help Garrett with weekly scouting reports for each opposing tackle.

"What's my plan? How am I attacking this guy? What's different between him and the next guy?" Garrett recalled Thomas asking him.

Funny thing: Garrett is one of few current Browns with enough tenure to remember Thomas stories, and he told a similar one about himself and rookie Mike Hall Jr. on Wednesday. Garrett praised Hall for taking good notes and asking Garrett quality questions since joining the team. Then the football god dropped a line that might make fans question his immortality.

"I'm happy to play that Joe role," Garrett said. "I guess I'm the older mentor."

How one young Browns receiver turned heads this spring

By Dan Labbe, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/06/how-browns-wide-receiver-cedric-tillman-turned-heads-this-spring.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Browns pass game coordinator/wide receivers coach Chad O'Shea stopped short of saying second-year receiver Cedric Tillman won the offensive MVP this spring.

"I'll just say I'm so happy with Ced's development and he really took advantage," O'Shea said. "He was in this building nonstop, he didn't miss a day. He worked so hard. And I can't say enough about the job he did."



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To be fair, we don't even know if they hand out an offensive MVP for spring. Regardless, if there is such an award, Tillman would be in the running.

"Cedric Tillman's been outstanding," O'Shea said. "He has taken every rep and used that as an opportunity to become better. I see a lot of improvement in him in Year Two."

The offseason program, and especially minicamp, were Camp Opportunity for young Browns receivers. The top of the food chain took much of the spring off for various reasons.

Amari Cooper is holding out for a new contract and didn't even report to mandatory minicamp. Jerry Jeudy spent this week not practicing due to injury, also the likely cause for his absences at various OTA practices.

Only Elijah Moore was a consistent figure among the top three and even he was out of the mix of some wide receiver reps when he spent time working kickoff and punt returns.

Enter Tillman, who faces a climb at least as difficult to get on the field as he faced his rookie season. He's acting like he has to earn it.

"I don't believe Ced missed a day of the offseason program," head coach Kevin Stefanski said. "He was here every single day. I know he got better because of that."

The Browns picked Tillman with the No. 74 overall pick in the 2023 draft, a pick they added from the Jets when they acquired Moore. He struggled to get on the field early in the season, stuck behind Cooper, Moore and, most importantly Donovan Peoples-Jones, who the front office flipped at the trade deadline for a sixth-round pick in 2025 from the Lions.

Whether the move was made to force Tillman on the field — think the Carlos Hyde trade in 2018 — or if the resulting increase in Tillman's playing time was simply an inadvertent byproduct, it did get Tillman on the field.

The results, however, were mixed. He caught just 21 passes for 224 yards in 14 games, with three starts, and failed to find the endzone. There were times down the stretch when quarterback Joe Flacco appeared visibly frustrated with him.

When quarterback Deshaun Watson said earlier this week, "I think he's going to be a great addition for this offense, and he's going to help us out," addition might have been the right word because Tillman never appeared quite ready to contribute at a meaningful level his rookie year.

This spring, however, offered encouraging signs for the 6-foot-3, 215-pounder out of Tennessee.

"He's been working really hard, and you can see it," Watson said. "He's been improving. He's knowing what he has got to do on each and every rep. He can play different positions, he can run all the routes, he can catch the big boy balls, you can toss it up to him, and he can catch the tough ones and the easy ones."



It wasn't all bad for Tillman as a rookie. While his receiving numbers didn't jump off the page, he proved a willing blocker downfield, one of the best ways to get O'Shea's attention. His top highlight of the season was when he flattened Ravens pass rusher Kyle Van Noy during the Browns' overtime win in Baltimore.

"There were some things he did in Year One we were very pleased with and so excited about his future watching him in Year One, but can't say enough about how well he's done on the field for us as far as his work ethic, making plays," O'Shea said. "I think he's more confident in Year Two, which you would hope is the case with a young player. But Cedric, I just spoke to him and spoke to the group about how impressed we've been with him and how much he's improved, and to see his development has been really great as a coach to see."

It's not lost on anyone that coaches were laying it on thick regarding Tillman in the same week Cooper held out, but the Browns need Tillman to grow in Year 2 with or without Cooper — and no one has him tabbed as a Cooper replacement anyway.

There's a gap behind the Top 3 of Cooper, Jeudy and Moore and Tillman is battling with fellow Browns draft picks David Bell, Jamari Thrash and Michael Woods II along with players who found different ways here, like Jaelon Darden, who made a nice catch on Thursday, and James Proche II, who has return experience.

He's off to a good start.

"(Tillman) got better in the weight room, got better in the meeting room, definitely got better on the grass," Stefanski said. "So, you know, you would love to say, 'Hey, everybody be here every day.' It's a voluntary program. That's not the case. But I do want to highlight a guy, like Ced that, because he was here, because he worked extra, I think he's a young player that's getting better."

Jobs, like Super Bowls aren't won in the spring, but that's a time when you can lay the groundwork to win them.

After enduring the lowest of lows, new Browns running back finds that the grass can still be green

By Irie Harris, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/06/after-enduring-the-lowest-of-lows-new-browns-running-back-finds-that-the-grass-can-still-be-green.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Last week's veteran minicamp was the last of the Browns' practices ahead of training camp later this summer. For D'Onta Foreman, it's another week to enjoy the hot days on grass around the game of football.

The 28-year-old, signed in March as a free agent, is close in age with his peers in the running back room. Nick Chubb is also 28, but has five months on Foreman. Nyheim Hines is 27, seven months younger than Foreman.



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However, what separates Foreman from his peers is his life experiences of highs and lows; because there was a time when Foreman took his blessings for granted, endured two tragedies, and had to find his way back into the NFL from the bottom.

The origins

There was mom, dad, and the Foreman twins — a family that pushed each other to perform to the highest level of their capabilities, then push for extra. Foreman's battles with his twin brother, Armanti, increased his competitive nature as they'd looked to one-up each other.

"I knew if I didn't go out there and do it, he was gonna do it. So it put both of us out there to be at our best each and every day," Foreman said.

There was Darreck, their father, who planted the seeds of positivity in both of his sons. He'd consistently speak positive affirmations and train their mind for both the football field and life.

"My dad was a person who always told us, don't be good, be great, always maximize your potential," Foreman said. "He would tell us stuff like, 'Y'all not like everybody else. Y'all different and got a chance to go be great.' He really pushed me to the point that I truly believed I could do everything that I wanted to do."

Positivity reigned over the Foreman household in Texas City, Texas, a family-oriented small town where everybody knows everybody. It's a place Foreman holds dear to his heart, for he understands it's a place many people don't get a chance to make it out of.

"We got a lot of talent where I come from, we just don't always have the best resources or the best understanding, that it's life outside of where we come from," Foreman said.

Football has exposed Foreman to new experiences, but he keeps in mind those from back home who haven't had the same fortune he's had.

"I think that's part of my growth, just understanding where I've come from and where I'm going," Foreman said. "Just to see when I go back and see how some stuff is just the same, and people are still in the same mindset doing the same stuff."

Raging bull

If not the best, the state of Texas is among the best breeding grounds for football players. The talent pool is immense, and forces players to adopt a skill that'll separate them from the rest.

What was Foreman's niche? Oh, just running over players like a raging bull that hasn't eaten all day.

Foreman became one of the country's best high school players, concluding his high school career with 4,392 yards (8.3 yards per carry) and 61 touchdowns. The accolades were endless, including a selection in the 2014 Semper Fidelis All-American Bowl.

D'Onta Foreman, Chance Waz



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D'Onta Foreman etched his name into Texas' record books during his three years with the Longhorns.AP

Both D'Onta and Armanti chose to stay in-state and play for Charlie Strong and the Texas Longhorns, starring there for three seasons. Texas football played far under expectations, with three straight losing seasons for the first time since late 1930s under Dana X. Bible, though Foreman found a way to etch his name in the record books.

All eyes were on Foreman when rushing for 2,028 yards on 323 carries (6.3 per carry) and 15 touchdowns during his junior season. His single-season total is the second most in program history, right behind Ricky Williams' 2,124 yards in his 1998 Heisman Trophy season.

The All-American decided to forgo his senior season and enter the 2017 NFL Draft, and multiple draft websites cited him as a top 10 running back prospect in his class. The Texans drafted Foreman in the third round.

And like a rollercoaster, things were on the up ... until they quickly dropped down.

Turn for the worse

Things started to click as a rookie for Foreman during Week 11 versus Arizona. Houston won 31-21, but it was Foreman who practically won the game.

Arizona led 21-17 going into the fourth quarter, then came Foreman, with 37 of his 65 yards and two touchdowns. During his second touchdown, Foreman veered right and sped past everyone for 34 yards.

A snapshot of Arizona's defenders showed them stuck in time as Foreman ran by them ... except one defender.

That defender was Antoine Bethea, and he was Arizona's best chance at stopping Foreman. Bethea leaned forward to stop Foreman's momentum, and Foreman lost his balance while going into the end zone.

While fans at NRG Stadium rose to their feet and cheered, Foreman was down and grabbing his left ankle in pain. That became his last carry of the season, because he had just torn his Achilles.

This was the start of his deep depression.

Watching from the sideline the rest of the season led Foreman to emotional low points, a poor work ethic, and late arrivals to team meetings.

D'Onta Foreman, Bill O'Brien

Houston Texans head coach Bill O'Brien held the hand of D'Onta Foreman after he was injured on the 34-yard touchdown run.AP



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“I wasn’t happy for a long time,” Foreman said. “I started dealing with different situations — family, friends, a lot of stuff that was just bringing me down.”

Foreman’s return to the field came during Week 16 during the 2018 season versus Philadelphia, carrying the ball seven times for minus-1 yard.

Physically, Foreman was there working out and studying film, but he was elsewhere mentally. Houston had enough during his tenure and waived him during 2019 training camp.

“I think that God really put me through everything and opened my eyes and showed me what’s around me, who’s for me, who’s not,” Foreman said. “What I really wanted to get out of (football), the energy and work I put into it ... and not take it for granted.”

The Colts picked up Foreman and waived him three weeks later. He awaited the entire 2019 regular season for another team to call.

Nobody ever did.

It wasn’t until Tennessee’s 2020 training camp when Foreman touched the field again for a tryout. Making the practice squad, Foreman played six games as Derrick Henry’s backup and recorded 22 carries for 95 yards, and one receiving touchdown.

Tennessee didn’t resign Foreman; he signed with Atlanta during training camp in 2021, then was part of the final roster cuts.

Again, an NFL season started with Foreman looking in from the outside.

Tragedies

Foreman experienced hardships long before the NFL, and a big one of his wasn’t public knowledge until the week of the the 2017 NFL Draft.

Foreman was increasing his stock during the 2016 college season. However, his record-setting season was marked by a tragic fact that wouldn’t be publicly known until the draft cycle.

Foreman was coping with the death of his infant son, D’Onta Jr., who had died at seven weeks, halfway through the season, due to an intestinal infection.

Foreman told The Florida Times-Union that he, “really didn’t know how to feel ... I was numb. I felt like something was taken away from me before I had a chance to experience it.”

Texas had a Week 10 game at Texas Tech, and he found out about the infection the night before. The game became a tribute from D’Onta Sr. to his son, having a career-day with 33 carries for 341 yards (10.3 per carry) and three touchdowns in the win.



He'd find out his son passed after the game in the midst of driving from Austin to Texas City with Armanti.

"It was just something about that game, it was like, 'I'm doing it for my son. I'm leaving it all out here,'" Foreman told The Florida Times-Union after the game.

Though Foreman played through this tragedy and recorded impressive numbers, the fact remains he was still coping with this death.

Then came his injuries that led to 17 games played in four years between 2017-20, and sitting on the couch, watching the start of the 2021 NFL season.

It was during this time Foreman started making investments and owned a trucking company, Foreman Transport, while helping coach a youth football team with his brother.

Then tragedy struck, again.

His father was killed in a one-vehicle crash after losing control of his Freightliner truck in rural Oklahoma. The man who had planted his self-belief for dominating on the field was gone.

Door after door closed on Foreman as he tried to reach his potential, and now he felt lost. It was during the preparation for his father's funeral in late October 2021 when a door finally opened for Foreman.

Redemption

Foreman had workouts with Washington and Tennessee. Washington's workout ended with no signing, so he flew to Tennessee the next day.

The Titans also sent him home, but made it clear he had a good workout and they were prepared to bring him back if needed. And that's exactly what happened on Halloween, as Foreman was helping coach his youth football team when his agent called.

Henry suffered a broken bone in his foot that day in a win over the Colts, sidelining him for the rest of the regular season. Mike Vrabel, then the Titans head coach (and now a Browns personnel consultant), called with news of bringing Foreman back.

Tennessee was 6-2 at the time, and Henry had been on pace to break the NFL record for rushing yards in a season. Foreman jumped on board with one career start and 107 NFL carries to his name.

But he didn't care, he wasn't taking this chance for granted.

"I remember the days when I wasn't able to go, the days when I was at home and I was sitting just wishing on somebody to give me an opportunity," Foreman said. "I would always tell myself and my



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family that if I get that opportunity, man I'm gonna show the world why I'm supposed to be here, I'm gonna show the world why they counted the wrong person out."

D'Onta Foreman running versus New Orleans
D'Onta Foreman running versus New Orleans.AP

Foreman grew from his dark times and learned from his past inconsistent approach, and ran full force. Through nine games, Foreman ran for 566 yards on 133 carries (4.26 per carry) and three touchdowns.

The Titans won in six of Foreman's nine games. And three of his games came with 100 or more yards, including 132 yards and one touchdown in the regular-season finale win over Miami.

Foreman had not taken part in an offense such as Tennessee's before, and he felt free in the system. His confidence built more and more by the increasing volume of carries per game.

"I fell back to my old self ... I'm in the rhythm of the game, I can get my flow, get my feet wet," Foreman said. "Once I got to that point and really got submerged into the offense, I know what I can do."

Foreman was a key piece in the Titans clinching a playoff berth in Henry's absence, along with clinching consecutive division titles for the first time since 1960-62 when they were the Houston Oilers.

And it's Vrabel, who he's since reunited with in Cleveland, that he thanks.

"I told Vrabel a couple of days ago ... I told him how much I appreciate him, how thankful I am for giving me the opportunity and believing in me," Foreman said. "Ever since then, I just never wanted to let him down, I never wanted to let my family down, myself down."

Here to stay?
Foreman had officially learned how to stick in the league.

He carried it into Carolina during the 2022 season and was prepared when Christian McCaffrey was traded to San Francisco halfway through. He eventually started nine of the last 10 games, and six of Carolina's seven wins came with him as the main back.

Foreman recorded 203 carries for 914 yards (4.5 per carry) and five touchdowns on the season. He delivered five games of 100 or more rushing yards, including 165 yards and one touchdown in a Week 16 win over Detroit.

And after one season in Chicago, Foreman joins a Browns squad he believes can make a deep run.

Cleveland Browns OTAs in Berea



D'Onta Foreman | John Kuntz, cleveland.com

"I'm getting older in my career so I'm just trying to get that Super Bowl," Foreman said. "I want to be able to say I checked all my boxes and did it the way I wanted to do it."

The hardships reminded Foreman that what's been given to him can be taken in an instant. Those moments of sorrow have made him who he is today.

"I'm just thankful. I'm happy to be here" Foreman said. "I'm still growing, still maturing and still trying to challenge myself to do more and be better. Just not taking days off."

He'll never again take a day on the grass for granted.

How one Browns rookie made a mark during the offseason program

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/06/how-one-browns-rookie-made-a-mark-during-the-offseason-program.html>

BEREA, Ohio -- Ask any of the Browns position coaches, and they will be adamant about the fact that in the spring, there's no depth charts.

And even though it was a point that linebackers coach Jason Tarver made once again last week, still, it was interesting to see throughout the offseason program just how much mixing up their position group did during drills, meaning that the spots next to Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah seem to be up for grabs.

And some of that mixing and matching included rookie Nathaniel Watson getting first-team reps and making plays.

The Browns drafted Watson in the sixth round. He was the 2023 AP SEC Defensive Player of the Year winner and All-SEC first-team selection as well as a finalist for The Butkus Award, given to college football's best linebacker. He led the SEC with 137 tackles and 10 sacks.

At 6-foot-2, 233 pounds, he played six total seasons at Mississippi State and turns 24 on Sept. 1.

"He's played a lot of football," Tarver said last week. "He's experienced, so he sees things pretty well for a rookie, but like you said, a slightly older rookie in the NFL. So, we like where he's going. I'm excited to see him in pads. Yeah, I want to see him in pads. "



That's a high compliment for any rookie to get this early in their first year.

But you definitely saw Watson's football acumen throughout the spring. He certainly passed the eyeball test, and never looked lost or out of place throughout OTAs or minicamp when the veterans arrived.

During the first week of OTAs, Watson ended the second day of practice when he picked off a Tyler Huntley pass intended for running back Jerome Ford, and ran it back the length of the field. He was mobbed by his teammates after the play, and they posed for a photo.

curious what the best defense in the league looks like?

Not only did Watson obviously benefit from having played a lot of college football, he's proven to be extremely coachable for one reason in particular.

"He's very experienced, and what Nathaniel does a really good job of is not making the same mistake," Tarver said. "And if you're a rookie and you can learn from your mistakes and not make the same mistake twice, he got better and better and better. Like, he had a play today that was the same as one yesterday, and he corrected it.

"So, if he keeps going on that's what rookies need to do is don't be the guy that's making mistakes over and over, be the guy that's fixing things."

After spring Watson seems to be thoroughly in the mix in a linebacker room that also include Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah, who's coming off his best year yet, Jordan Hicks, Devin Bush, Tony Fields II and Mohamoud Diabate.

No matter how the linebacker depth chart turns out in the fall, though, Watson seems in perfect position to make an impact with the NFL's new kickoff rules, even though he didn't have a ton of special teams experience in college.

The new rules will have 10 members of the kicking team lining up on the receiving team's 40-yard line and a minimum of nine members of the receiving team lining up between the 30 and 35-yard line. The play doesn't begin until the ball is either caught or hits the ground in the landing zone between the 20 and the goal line — and any ball that lands in the landing zone has to be returned.

While the Browns have been working and drilling the new rules in the spring, the fact remains that no one really knows just what the new kickoff will look like yet — not until we at least get some preseason games in the books.

"I don't know how it works either, but I know we're close together so that means it's just a better impact," Watson said during rookie minicamp in May. "Like I said, I'm a physical person, I just love hitting somebody, so I mean I just can't wait to get out there on special teams."



Based on his performance in the spring, he seems poised to show off that physicality wherever the Browns need him.

Why Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson should embrace low QB rankings and expectations in 2024

By Jimmy Watkins, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/sports/2024/06/why-browns-quarterback-deshaun-watson-should-embrace-low-qb-rankings-and-expectations-in-2024-jimmy-watkins.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — The Lion cares nothing about a sheep's opinion. He cares so little that he blocks all the sheep who chirp (bleat?) him — or whom he perceives to be chirping/bleating — on social media. And he alludes to the sheep's lion power rankings during an offseason interview, not that he's ever read the rankings or put any stock into them.

"... I don't get involved with people trying to rate me places where they think I'm at the bottom of the list," Browns lion, er, quarterback Deshaun Watson said last week at minicamp. "It is what it is. If I was at the bottom, no one would talk about me. So obviously if anyone is talking about me and going to continue to talk about me, then I must be pretty damn good."

One sheep's opinion? Watson cares plenty about his place in the NFL's passing hierarchy, as evidenced by his answer to a question that did not allude to any quarterback list or his ranking therein. He also seems to know where he stands on your favorite internet QB list, because most of them do feature him toward the end.

The Ringer ranked him 25th exiting the 2023 season, which is four spots behind Giants QB Daniel Jones. Pro Football focus ranked him 23rd (four spots behind Bears rookie Caleb Williams) as of last month. And the 33rd Team slotted Watson 27th, one spot behind Cardinals backup Desmond Ridder, entering the offseason.

If Browns fans think those beliefs are ridiculous, wait 'til they hear this one: I think it's a good thing that Watson's profile has fallen so far since he joined the Browns two years ago, to the point where it could help him play better in 2024.



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You could call this false hope for a fan base desperate for its highest-paid player to play well. Or you could call it a belief in the power of underselling and overdelivering. But I think we can all agree that the pressure Watson has felt in Cleveland to deliver on the promise he showed with the Texans has hindered his ability to recreate it, which is why he could benefit from lower, more tempered expectations in 2024.

Don't get me wrong, Watson should and will feel an urgency to perform given that the Browns (quite literally) can't afford to wait on his resurgence much longer. And the quarterback's play will be dissected both locally and nationally regardless of the numbers he produces. But after 12 games and fourteen touchdown passes in two years, the outside standards for Watson's success feel lower and more manageable heading into next season. And though he'll be chasing his own goals, it might help to earn more grace during his return from shoulder surgery, even if that grace is rooted in doubt that he can become the player Cleveland traded and paid for two years ago.

Remember that guy? Browns fans expected Watson to play like the man who made three straight Pro Bowls from 2018-20 when he first arrived. They expected to see the quarterback who led the league in passing yards while throwing to Brandin Cooks, Will Fuller and Randall Cobb in 2020. They expected a top-five quarterback because that's how NFL.com viewed him after his last season in Houston.

Sounds like a heavy standard to shoulder, even for a healthy quarterback with a reputation that doesn't need repairing. In fact, Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes is the only passer who has made three Pro Bowls over the last three seasons. And only future legends and superstars should be compared to Mahomes, the two-time MVP and three-time Super Bowl champion.

The Browns once thought (and perhaps still think) Watson belonged in that company. And along with their fans, they hope he can play his way into that conversation again. But the best news for Cleveland's lion is that most sheep don't believe he will.

Watson can say he cares not about public perception, just like he can block every social media hater he perceives. But the more Watson proclaims his indifference to both, the more he sounds to me like he cares. The more a player considers his reputation, the more I believe it hinders the freedom with which they play. And the more Watson diverges from the free-flowing playstyle he showcased in Houston, the more Cleveland worries about its investment at quarterback.

So the less bleating he hears from the sheep, the better off he'll be this offseason. Watson has fallen out of top quarterback conversations since 2022, but that might be the perfect place to find him entering a crucial third year in Cleveland. Call it false hope if you want, but I'd call it the first break Watson has caught since the Browns paid him like the quarterback he used to be.

En route to becoming that player again, Watson's best path might be the quietest. Good thing he doesn't hear the noise.



Kicker Phil Dawson named Browns legend

By vguerrieri, Chronicles-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2024/06/18/kicker-phil-dawson-named-browns-legend/>

BEREA — Sometimes, it seemed like kicker Phil Dawson was the only highlight on a lot of Browns teams.

His longevity and dependability led to a host of team records, as well as a few memorable moments. And now, he'll be immortalized as one of this year's class of Browns Legends.

Dawson will be honored during a halftime ceremony in Week 3 (Sept. 22), when the Browns host the Giants at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

"I'd be lying if I told you I didn't ever dream about it," Dawson said in a statement released by the team. "You see these things through the years, and you get to know some of these former players, and you look up to them, and you start dreaming like, man, I want to be one of those guys someday. And that certainly was me. And it's not about me. I want to represent the Browns and to have a chance to come back home and be recognized like this is about as humbling recognition as I've ever received, and it's all because of the way I love Cleveland and I love the Browns organization. So, it's as impactful of recognition as I've ever received and it just kind of blows me away, to be honest."

Dawson appeared in 305 career regular season games during his 20 NFL seasons from 1999-2018, ranking him seventh all time in the NFL in games played. He also ranks among the all-time NFL leaders in field goals made (eighth with 441), points scored (11th with 1,847) and field goal percentage (16th with 83.8). He scored 1,271 points with Cleveland, the second most by a Brown, and his 215 games are the third-most by a Browns player. His 14 seasons with the club are tied for the second most among any Browns player.

He holds team records for most career field goals with 305, highest career field goal percentage at 84 percent and highest field goal percentage in a season with 93.5 percent in 2012, the year he made the Pro Bowl. He also holds team records for most field goals in a game when he hit six on



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Nov. 5, 2006, most consecutive field goals made with 29 and most consecutive games with a field goal at 23 games.

“I kind of took a workman-like approach – first quarter, fourth quarter, game on the line, blowout, none of that mattered,” Dawson said. “I had a job to do. I was going to go out there try to be that pickup truck that could be called upon no matter what.”

While there were certain moments over the course of his career that stand out as highlights, Dawson approached every opportunity he was on the field with a high level of focus and preparation.

“I had a very kind of a boutique role on the team,” Dawson said. “I got a handful of plays a game. It was an opportunity for me to go on the field and help my team. I wanted to be a guy that could be counted on at any moment, at any time, to do his job. And so, I really took a great deal of satisfaction – whether it was a long game winner that everyone remembers, or a nothing burger of a kick early in the game that really didn’t have an impact on the outcome – I’ve looked back really fondly on just knowing I was able to do my job meant a lot to me.”

Even so, there were momentous kicks that decorated his career in Cleveland. One of his most famous occurred in 2007 against the Ravens in Baltimore. Dawson attempted a potential game-tying 51-yard field goal, which was initially ruled no good when it appeared to bounce back onto the field after hitting the crossbar. However, officials reconvened and said the kick was good, having gone through the uprights and hit the gooseneck holding the goalposts, and sent the game to overtime. Then, the Browns beat the Ravens 33-30 on another field goal from Dawson.

In 2008, on Monday Night Football against the Bills, Dawson hit a 56-yard field goal with less than two minutes left in the game in what turned out to be a 29-27 Browns win.

“Playing on Monday Night Football and being a Texas kid – even though I’m at home in Cleveland – just chance for everybody back home kind of see what I’m up to,” Dawson said. “And so that was a big win for our team. It was a big personal moment for me, because anytime you can hit a long one on Monday Night Football at the end of the game, that’s pretty cool.”

And in blizzard-like conditions at Browns Stadium in 2007, Dawson made two field goals, providing the only offensive scoring in an 8-0 win over Buffalo.

“That one means a lot to me, because on face value looking back on it, I had no business making those kicks,” Dawson said. “But somehow, someway, in that moment, was able to figure out a way to just kind of get the ball through the uprights. That’s one I really look back on.”

Originally signed as a free agent by the Browns in their return year of 1999, Dawson won the placekicking job during training camp and remained with the team through the 2012 season. Dawson then signed with the San Francisco 49ers, playing four years there and two more with Arizona before signing a one-day contract in 2019 to officially retire as a Brown.



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A perennial team captain, Dawson also made a major impact in the Cleveland community. He teamed up with the Adoption Network to invite families who recently adopted children to each home game from 2008-12, so they could form new memories as a family.

He was voted the 2012 Browns Player of the Year by the local PFWA chapter, the 2007 Dino Lucarelli "Good Guy" Award honoree by the PFWA, the 2006 Ed Block Courage Award winner by his teammates and the 2006 winner of the Doug Dieken Humanitarian Award for his charitable and community efforts.

"I was very fortunate that I had a long run in one place," Dawson said. "A lot of guys in the league these days don't have that. So, because of my 14 years there, I was really able to build relationships and develop a love for the city of Cleveland. It became a home for my family. We were plugged in. And so, as I look back on the whole thing, just the relationships I was able to build and then my love for the city – I really felt a connection with the people of Cleveland. I was one of them. It was my home. And I was very fortunate to be able to be in one place long enough for those things to happen."

The Legends Program started in 2001 with the automatic induction of the Browns' then Pro Football Hall of Famers along with the initial class of five other inductees. An eight-person selection panel chooses the players to be honored. To qualify as a Browns Legend, the players must have played for the team for at least five years, been a major contributor at their respective position and been retired from the NFL for at least five years.



Phil Dawson named to 2024 class of Browns Legends

By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/phil-dawson-named-to-2024-class-of-browns-legends>

Phil Dawson didn't want to be like a souped-up sports car.

Instead, he always strived to be like the dependable old pickup truck that would fire up whenever it was needed. That's how he approached his kicking career in the NFL, and particularly with the Browns.

"I kind of took a workman-like approach – first quarter, fourth quarter, game on the line, blowout, none of that mattered," Dawson said. "I had a job to do. I was going to go out there try to be that pickup truck that could be called upon no matter what."

Over his 14-year career with the Browns – and 20 seasons in the NFL – Dawson accomplished that goal. After retiring as a member of the Browns in 2019, Dawson's legacy will be highlighted once again in 2024.

The Browns announced they have named Dawson to the 2024 class of Browns Legends. Dawson will be honored during a halftime ceremony in Week 3 (Sept. 22), when the Browns host the Giants at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

"I'd be lying if I told you I didn't ever dream about it," Dawson said. "You see these things through the years, and you get to know some of these former players, and you look up to them, and you start dreaming like, man, I want to be one of those guys someday. And that certainly was me. And it's not about me. I want to represent the Browns and to have a chance to come back home and be recognized like this is about as humbling recognition as I've ever received, and it's all because of the way I love Cleveland and I love the Browns organization. So, it's as impactful of recognition as I've ever received and it just kind of blows me away, to be honest."

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"I had a very kind of a boutique role on the team," Dawson said. "I got a handful of plays a game. It was an opportunity for me to go on the field and help my team. I wanted to be a guy that could be counted on at any moment, at any time, to do his job. And so, I really took a great deal of satisfaction – whether it was a long game winner that everyone remembers, or a nothing burger of a kick early in the game that really didn't have an impact on the outcome – I've looked back really fondly on just knowing I was able to do my job meant a lot to me."

Even so, there were momentous kicks that decorated his career in Cleveland. One of his most famous kicks occurred in 2007 against the Ravens. As Dawson kicked a 51-yard field goal attempt, the officials originally called the kick no good. However, they reconvened and overruled the call, and sent the game to overtime. Then, the Browns beat the Ravens 33-30 on another field goal from Dawson.

In 2008 when the Browns faced the Bills on Monday Night Football, Dawson hit a 56-yard field goal with less than two minutes left in the game and would win the game for the Browns.

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Even the blizzard game against the Bills in 2007, where Dawson made two field goals and helped lead Cleveland to an 8-0 win over Buffalo, is still meaningful to him. Dawson described the atmosphere of the game as playing football in the front yard. Both teams struggled to throw the ball because of the wind gusts and the blowing snow. Yet, Dawson took the field and hit two crucial field goals.

"That one means a lot to me, because on face value looking back on it, I had no business making those kicks," Dawson said. "But somehow, somehow, in that moment, was able to figure out a way to just kind of get the ball through the uprights. That's one I really look back on."

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The Cleveland Browns organization honors the men who have contributed to the success of the Browns organization. The Legends Program started in 2001 with the automatic induction of the Browns' then Pro Football Hall of Famers along with the initial class of five other inductees. An eight-person selection panel chooses the players to be honored. To qualify as a Browns Legend, the players must have played for the team for at least five years, been a major contributor at their respective position and been retired from the NFL for at least five years.



What NFL players aren't supposed to do in the offseason

By Marc Raimondi, ESPN.com

https://www.espn.com/nfl/story/_/id/40342801/what-nfl-players-allowed-do-offseason

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS All-Pro tight end George Kittle was ringside at WrestleMania 39, and he wasn't a passive spectator. Kittle began taunting WWE villain The Miz during his match against former NFL punter and current ESPN personality Pat McAfee.

The Miz shoved Kittle, who hopped over a barricade, ran at the 6-foot-2, 221-pound heel and clotheslined him. Kittle then positioned The Miz so McAfee could land a move from the top rope.

"Hope you had fun," 49ers general manager John Lynch later texted, according to Kittle. "Don't do that again."

Kittle said he didn't inform the team he would be getting physical during the WWE match in April 2023. His philosophy was "just don't get hurt, and we won't have any problems with anything."

That's the tightrope NFL players will be walking as they scatter for their offseason before training camp in late July. The standard NFL contract states guarantees could be voided if players are injured participating in activities with a significant risk of injury, and first-round picks often have specific endeavors listed. But teams can't monitor players 24/7, and history suggests incidents -- and injuries -- are inevitable.

"All the dangerous things," Kansas City Chiefs coach Andy Reid said when asked what he'd like his players to avoid. "Things where they get hurt, you don't want them to do."

But "dangerous" is a relative term. Roster Management System scanned several contracts, and they all include prohibitions on things such as hang gliding, rock climbing and skiing. But there were some surprises.

Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes would void guarantees in his contract if he got hurt playing basketball, among other activities.

"When I was in Kansas City, basketball was the thing that you couldn't do," New Orleans Saints safety Tyrann Mathieu said. "I think somebody took a video of [Mahomes] playing basketball, and that's how that started, because then they didn't want anybody playing basketball."

Several contracts list basketball, although many players aren't shy about hooping in public. Dallas Cowboys linebacker Micah Parsons, Houston Texans QB C.J. Stroud, Los Angeles Rams receiver Puka Nacua and Chiefs receiver Mecole Hardman all participated in the NBA Celebrity All-Star



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Game in February. And Miami Dolphins star receiver Tyreek Hill recently posted a video of him dunking while playing with the Harlem Globetrotters.

"If it's basketball against guys that look like me, I'm good with it," Cleveland Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said with a laugh. "But the guys, they always need to be careful about whatever they're doing off the field.

"I'm like a mother hen. I just want everybody to be safe. I'd love to keep everybody locked in Berea [Ohio] in Bubble Wrap for the entire offseason."

NACUA INTERCEPTED AN outlet pass near half court, dribbled up the left wing, flew by a defender and threw down a vicious, one-handed dunk. It was one of several aggressive moves by Nacua during the NBA celebrity game as he finished with 16 points, four assists and four rebounds.

Nacua is an avid basketball player, and there's nothing in his contract to specifically prohibit the former fifth-round pick from playing. Stroud, who was a first-round pick, would be in default if he got injured playing basketball, but he got clearance to play in the NBA celebrity game, according to a team source.

It's unknown if Hill received permission to play with the Globetrotters.

"We did get some good runs in the offseason, but it's definitely winding down, especially since we got back out here," Nacua said recently during OTAs. "I'm like, 'My feet can't take that much burden.'

"I'd say basketball would be the one thing that I've advised myself to stop doing [during the season]. It's like, man, we do so much running and cutting already, by the time I get there to Friday, I'm like, I don't know if I can even do a layup right now. I'm like, my hips and my knees hurt so bad. And changing surfaces has honestly been one of the things I've noticed as well. [Basketball courts] don't have soft grass."

Cleveland Browns All-Pro defensive end Myles Garrett was a high school letterman in basketball and grew up playing against his older brother, Sean Williams, who was a first-round pick of the New Jersey Nets in 2007.

But after signing what was the richest contract extension for a non-quarterback in 2021, Garrett "retired" from playing pickup basketball, according to Stefanski.

"It's for the better now," Garrett said. "I'm still able to go to the gym and shoot, and every now and then get a little 2-on-2, 3-on-3 with the boys.

"But it's definitely the smarter approach not to be with a random person who has nothing to lose. In those instances, those are unknown variables that I'm playing around with that I just don't need to for the sake of the season or my career."



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Garrett played in the 2022 NBA Celebrity All-Star Game, and although he was still feeling sore from the bumps and bruises of the season, he said he'd like to do that again.

"It definitely gives me that tingly feeling when I see guys in our sport hooping," he said. "I can't get rid of that love."

While Stefanski retired Garrett from pickup games, some coaches have different philosophies. Atlanta Falcons assistant head coach Jerry Gray encourages players in the secondary to play hoops. Several Falcons players, including cornerbacks Clark Phillips III and Dee Alford and safety DeMarcco Hellams, go to a local gym in Flowery Branch, Georgia, near the team's facility to play pickup games during the offseason.

"That's the best thing for a defensive back," Gray said. "If you can cut in tight spaces, you can play corner. ... You learn how to play with four other guys. You learn how to keep vision on your man while you're looking at the backboard. You start learning how to rebound.

"All of those things start helping you intercept the football, because now you're not just focused on one guy. In basketball, you're actually covering everyone around you."

Falcons All-Pro safety Jessie Bates III said he hasn't gotten the invite to play with his secondary mates, because "they might be scared or something." Bates added he probably has "the best jumper on the team," and he does hit the court during the offseason with one of his best friends, Malik Williams, who played last year with the Toronto Raptors.

"I'm a three-sport athlete, so I try to play softball a little bit, try to go play basketball, because those things I think translate into the game of football," said Bates, whose contract does not prohibit basketball. "So yeah, I'm a hooper."

NYHEIM HINES WAS sitting on a jet ski on July 2, 2023, when his watercraft was hit by another. The running back tore his left ACL and MCL, and his season with the Buffalo Bills was over before it started.

The Bills put Hines on the non-football injury (NFI) list, meaning they were not required to pay him for the entire season. Buffalo had previously renegotiated a two-year, \$9 million contract with Hines.

Ultimately, Hines and the team came to an agreement. According to Spotrac, Buffalo paid Hines \$3.98 million in 2023. But the team released him on March 6, and he signed with the Cleveland Browns a week later.

"[The accident is] a terrible look, and that's been real hard," Hines told The Athletic in November. "If I was doing jumps or being stupid, I wouldn't even be really upset, but it's the fact that I literally wasn't even riding the jet ski. I was just getting gas."



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Riding a jet ski is one of the more common prohibited activities in contracts. Riding all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) is another.

Former Seattle Seahawks defensive tackle Malik McDowell, the team's second-round pick in 2017, sustained a concussion in July 2017 in an ATV accident. He never played a down for the Seahawks because of the injury and the team sued, attempting to recoup almost \$800,000 of his signing bonus. An arbitrator ruled McDowell forfeited that money by violating the standard language in his contract.

Former New York Giants safety Xavier McKinney, who's now with the Green Bay Packers, also sustained an injury riding an ATV. During the Giants' bye week last season, McKinney went to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, and he had to undergo surgery with pins being placed in his left hand. The former Giants captain and defensive signal-caller missed seven games.

Other high-profile instances of injuries occurring during offseason activities include:

Retired Colts quarterback Andrew Luck admitted two years after the fact that he aggravated his throwing shoulder injury in a 2016 Colorado snowboarding accident.

In 2015, then-Giants linebacker Jason Pierre-Paul needed his right index finger amputated following a Fourth of July fireworks accident at his home.

Former Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger broke his jaw and nose in a 2006 motorcycle crash in which he was not wearing a helmet.

It's no surprise that snowboarding, motorcycle riding and exploding fireworks are included among prohibited activities in many contracts.

"Pretty much everything off the field [is off limits]," Giants defensive lineman Dexter Lawrence said. "I like to play video games, so ..."

MINNESOTA VIKINGS HEAD coach Kevin O'Connell was a quarterback for the New York Jets in 2010 when he got married to his then-fiancée, Leah. O'Connell attempted to appropriate the prohibited offseason activities language in his contract for his own purposes.

"I tried to use that clause to get out of dancing at my own wedding," O'Connell said with a laugh. "It didn't necessarily work, and I was able to make it through without any injury."

On a more serious note, O'Connell said there has to be a discussion between coaches and players about what they should and should not be doing in the offseason.

"I think you have to [talk about it], just because there's been some examples of guys maybe getting an injury, and sometimes it's taking part in one of those reckless activities," he said. "Sometimes it's not."



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"But that whole non-football injury world, that NFI world, it's the last thing you want to see as a coach because you know how impactful this game is already on guys' bodies."

Some coaches, like the Cincinnati Bengals' Zac Taylor, are in the camp of wanting to trust players to make the right decisions without having to feel like a babysitter.

"You can't just live in fear all the time if someone's going to get hurt or something," he said. "So, you got to go live your life and be healthy for us. ... I like to take players that are smart enough to know which things they should and shouldn't do."

Added Arizona Cardinals coach Jonathan Gannon: "I don't outline each guy's contract and what they can and what they can't do. But they know that their job as an Arizona Cardinal is to maximize themselves, and anything that takes away from maximizing themselves as a football player is not putting the team ahead of themselves."

Other coaches have specific things they'd like their players to avoid. Tennessee Titans coach Brian Callahan said he'd prefer his players "stay off of mountains."

There are front-office executives, per sources, who have concerns about what the future looks like with flag football, which has been the centerpiece of the Pro Bowl Games the past two years.

In 2028, the sport will make its debut in the Olympic Games, which will be hosted in Los Angeles. NFL executive vice president of football operations Troy Vincent said there is a likelihood of NFL players competing.

But even flag football is not without risk. Former Carolina Panthers receiver Steve Smith suffered a broken left forearm while playing flag football in 2010.

Days after the injury, Smith said: "I won't do it again. But I was just having fun, playing with some guys." And that's what Kittle was doing at WrestleMania: having fun.

Kittle is a massive pro wrestling fan and said he would have considered doing something with WWE again this year had he not had core muscle surgery this offseason. Instead, recently retired Philadelphia Eagles center Jason Kelce and his offensive line mate Lane Johnson did a run-in at WrestleMania in Philadelphia.

Kittle said when it comes to wrestling, he'd probably end up asking for forgiveness rather than permission. But if he did get injured while wrestling, he would be at risk of voiding his \$100,000 workout bonus.

"I honestly am one of probably the safest guys," Kittle said. "I don't do anything."

"I might occasionally be in a wrestling ring, but I'm not doing too much. I'm very aware football is everything, and so I don't even try to go skiing and stuff like that. That's not even on my mind."



But they are in his contract, and his general manager is watching

D'Onta Foreman says physical style and hunger for Super Bowl make him good fit for Browns
By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/06/22/donta-foreman-cleveland-browns-nfl-free-agency-playoffs-super-bowl/74127387007/>

BEREA — D'Onta Foreman noticed it while he studied film and then felt it in the game. When Foreman and the Chicago Bears visited the Browns last season, he gained a tremendous amount of respect for Cleveland.

“Just the physicality and everything that they brought when we played against those guys last year, I just knew I'd fit in well,” Foreman told the Beacon Journal on June 12 during mandatory minicamp. The Browns defeated the Bears 20-17 on Dec. 17, 2023, and their style stuck with Foreman this offseason as he considered his options in free agency.

Foreman explained he has admired Cleveland's running game for years and thought Jim Schwartz coordinated the best defense in the NFL last season. He said competing against the Browns defense in December was akin to encountering a relentless full-court press on the basketball floor.

“We couldn't even run the ball,” Foreman said. “We couldn't get a yard on those guys. It was crazy.”

On March 20, Foreman struck a deal with the Browns after pondering the possibilities with a couple of other free-agency suitors. The one-year contract he signed is worth \$1.29 million, according to [spotrac.com](https://www.sportrac.com).

Foreman has forged ahead on his football journey despite tragedies in his personal life. During his final season at the University of Texas in 2016, his infant son died of an infection. In 2021, his father, Darreck Foreman, died in a one-vehicle crash after losing control of his Freightliner.

Foreman, 28, has played for four NFL teams in six seasons, appearing in 54 games, including two in the playoffs. He has overcome a torn Achilles tendon suffered in 2017 and persevered after being out of the league for the entire 2019 season.

Through it all, Foreman has yet to experience a deep postseason run.

“I'm at the back end of my career, so I just feel like winning the Super Bowl is everything on my mind right now,” he said. “Anything I could do to help us win a Super Bowl and get to that point is what I'm trying to do.”

“I really feel like we have a true contending team, a team that we really can get over the hump and go win a Super Bowl. ... Everybody's hungry, and it's not like that in every organization. I'll say that.”



Why Kareem Hunt's 2023 role could be a logical blueprint for running back D'Onta Foreman and the Cleveland Browns

How the workload is divided among Browns running backs in the coming season will hinge on injury statuses and competition.

Four-time Pro Bowl selection Nick Chubb and March free-agent acquisition Nyheim Hines are attempting comebacks from major knee surgeries. Jerome Ford and Pierre Strong Jr. remain on the Browns roster after appearing in all 17 regular-season games last season.

Ford and Kareem Hunt were the running backs on Jan. 13 in the Browns' 45-14 wild-card playoff loss to the Houston Texans. Strong had a back injury and was inactive. The franchise did not re-sign Hunt, whose contract expired in March. Hunt thrived in short-yardage situations last season, and Foreman has a reputation for being able to handle those duties with his power.

"He's a big, physical runner that's played a lot of football, has had a lot of success and recent success at that," Browns coach Kevin Stefanski said June 13 when asked about Foreman, who's listed as 6 feet and 235 pounds. "So excited to add his skill set, but in terms of roles, it's just so early to say." Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson signals to running back D'Onta Foreman during minicamp June 13 in Berea.

Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson signals to running back D'Onta Foreman during minicamp June 13 in Berea. Jeff Lange, Akron Beacon Journal

The Houston Texans drafted D'Onta Foreman the same year they chose Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson in the first round

Since Foreman entered the league as a third-round pick and Texans 2017 draft classmate of Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson, he has compiled 2,326 yards and 14 touchdowns on 552 carries (4.2 average) to go along with 34 catches for 342 yards and another three TDs in 52 regular-season games, 21 of which he started.

Last season with the Bears, Foreman started eight of his nine games and posted 425 yards and four TDs on 109 carries (3.9 average), plus 11 catches for 77 yards and another TD.

"I think my best attribute is running the ball and just getting downhill, being physical, making the opposing team have to tackle me," Foreman said. "There's still room that I could grow, though." More Browns [news: 'Hard Knocks: In Season with the AFC North'](#) to feature Cleveland and its division rivals

Foreman pointed out he has played every game in a single season just once in his NFL career. It happened with the Carolina Panthers in 2022, when he started nine of his 17 games and rushed for 914 yards and five touchdowns on 203 carries (4.5 average) and caught five passes for 26 yards. It's the only season in which he has tallied at least 200 carries, and it occurred as a byproduct of the Panthers trading Christian McCaffrey to the San Francisco 49ers in October 2022.



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“I don't feel like I've reached my ceiling because I don't feel like I've been able to play a full season from start to finish to where I'm able to show I could be one of those top guys,” Foreman said. “... If I could just get to a point to where I could just really display my ability for a whole season, I think I'd be able to show the world who I am.”

Browns running back D'Onta Foreman runs drills as running backs coach Duce Staley watches during minicamp June 12 in Berea.

Browns running back D'Onta Foreman runs drills as running backs coach Duce Staley watches during minicamp June 12 in Berea. Jeff Lange, Akron Beacon Journal

D'Onta Foreman joins a Cleveland Browns running backs room led by star Nick Chubb and assistant coach Duce Staley

In the meantime, Foreman has been trying to get to know his teammates and coaches in Cleveland. He said Chubb is “cool” and new Browns running backs coach Duce Staley is “upbeat.”

Foreman realizes he'll need to convince the organization he's worthy of opportunities in his latest NFL home.

“I just got to come out here and prove it every day — who I am and what I am and what I can bring to the team,” Foreman said. “I'm new here, so there's guys who have been here before me that already were able to kind of put their mark and show what they could do. I've just got to come in here and show every day that I could play at a high level and what I bring to the team is dominance.”

The Browns would welcome the evidence.

Remembering Cleveland Browns pioneering star Marion Motley 25 years after his death
By Marc Bona, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/entertainment/2024/06/remembering-cleveland-browns-pioneering-star-marion-motley-25-years-after-his-death.html>



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CLEVELAND, Ohio – Some athletes accomplish greatness, others enjoy fleeting moments. Then there's a rare breed who go through the battles on their fields and courts and emerge with dignity intact. They make their marks in the record books, but somehow have the grace to overcome off-the-field, darker forces working against them.

One such man is Marion Motley, one of the first Black players to play professional football in the modern era, along with Bill Willis.

Motley was raised in Canton and eventually would star for the Cleveland Browns in the 1940s and early '50s. This Thursday, June 27, marks the 25th anniversary of Motley's death. He was 79 and had cancer.

Former sportswriter-turned teacher David Lee Morgan, whose biography "Breaking Through the Lines: The Marion Motley Story" came out last year, remembers Motley as much for what he endured off the field as much as his on-field accomplishments.

At his funeral, 400 people showed up, including Morgan.

"I actually can't believe it's been 25 years since I covered it," he said. "The weather we're having now, I remember that's exactly the weather it was for his funeral. It was hot, it was sticky, we were in an old church in Cleveland – Mt. Sinai Baptist Church. I grew up in church; my mom was a gospel singer. It reminded me of a Sunday in church when it was hot and the congregation had those fans.

"It was a funeral," Morgan said, "but it really was a celebration."

"I remember there was a white man, he came up to me. He was by himself. I was 33 at the time, he had to be in his 50s. I remember him saying, 'Well, I never saw Mr. Motley play, but as a die-hard Browns fan I thought it was my duty to be here. I just had to come here and represent all of the die-hard fans who couldn't be here but appreciate everything Mr. Motley did for the Browns and who he was as a person.'

"That comment as I was walking into the funeral put me at ease in a sense. I felt like it was going to be a privilege listening to that man tell me what Marion Motley meant to him as a white man and a diehard Browns fan. He kind of encapsulated what I was about to experience in a funeral. It was really, really comforting to me."

Browns greats including Paul Warfield, Lou Groza, Dante Lavelli and others spoke.

"It was an amazing celebration," Morgan said. "In Black culture, those types of funerals, you have sadness because you're losing somebody, but you are very, very much uplifted when you leave because of the stories and the memories that are shared."

Those memories were rooted in a melting-pot neighborhood of Canton, where Motley grew up. As a teen he actually helped build Fawcett Stadium in Canton in 1937, and a year later, he threw the first touchdown pass recorded in the stadium.



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Despite always being the fastest man on whatever team he was on, Motley actually started as a guard, pigeon-holed into that position, common for Black players then.

Motley once told a newspaper reporter about his college playing days at Nevada, “Rival players intimidated and battered us, and referees often didn’t call obvious fouls on them. We were determined not to fight. The way I dealt with the intimidator was if I caught one in my way, I just ran him over.”

Over time, professional teams realized that not signing Black players was racist but also made for bad business. When Motley started with the Browns, it took head coach Paul Brown all of one day of practice to elevate Motley from second team to first. (Morgan makes the case that Paul Brown’s greatest innovation was signing Black players, a salient observation considering Brown is known for everything from developing the playbook to inventing equipment.)

Motley could block and run, a rare duality even today. Morgan’s biography paints a picture of a man who showed a lot of restraint while his greatness shined through and who was respected by his peers.

“He was a train wreck,” Morgan quotes Don Shula as saying, “and I was one of the guys he wrecked.”

Browns quarterback Otto Graham considered him better than Jim Brown, an amazing compliment considering Brown is arguably the greatest running back of all time.

If Motley held any animosity it was over lack of opportunity to coach, which he blamed on former Browns owner Art Modell.

“No question,” Morgan said. “If Mr. Motley had felt held any animosity – it did come out once in the book – but because of his character and the type of person he was, he held it in. But it really didn’t show how much it affected him the rest of his life. He felt he could have given so much to the team, the organization and especially to the African American players who had come after him. The fact that Art Modell wouldn’t give him a shot was really earth-shattering to him.”

Not getting that chance was akin to “a blow, a gut punch,” Morgan said.

But like Jackie Robinson’s role in breaking baseball’s 20th century color barrier, Motley stayed classy. When he was being enshrined into the Hall of Fame, Motley delivered one of the shortest acceptance speeches, one filled with humility rather than a litany of personal accomplishments.

Motley didn’t have post-season accolades, fame and wealth. He struggled to find regular work after he retired, Morgan said. But he never spiraled into bitterness. It “never made him compromise who he was and what his character was. He was always a gentle giant who treated everyone with love and compassion.”



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For that, Motley “should be remembered for someone who played in an era when his teeth were knocked out, players stepped on his hands, he was called epithets all throughout his career and could never fight back other than using his body on the football field. To experience all of that but still have empathy and compassion for so many other people who did him wrong, it says so much about who he was off the field, as a person,” Morgan said.

“You knew,” he said, “that Marion Motley was bigger than the game.”

More than two dozen sports books crossed our desk this year, covering football, baseball, gymnastics, running, rugby and much more. Here is our guide to what was published.

More info

Marion Motley:

- Born June 5, 1920.
- He was a 6-foot-1, 232-pound fullback and linebacker.
- He played 1946-55 – eight years with Cleveland and his final season with Pittsburgh.
- Hall of Fame induction: 1968.

How the book came about: The book followed a previous project Morgan was involved in.

“I had known of Marion Motley being a huge Browns fan from my childhood, because my dad and Paul Warfield went to (Warren G. Harding) High School together. ... I knew of Marion Motley from their conversations and going to the games, but as I became a sportswriter and covering a lot of Cleveland Browns games, I got to know a little bit more about who Marion Motley was.”

Morgan said a group that included James Waters, Shaun Horrigan, Eric Loughry, Dave Jingo and James Wells wanted to honor Motley. They started by raising money for a marker to denote his home, and the grassroots effort snowballed. As more money came in, the group decided to make a film. It won a regional Emmy in 2022. Enough money was raised to have a statue honoring Motley at the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

“It’s just a surreal, surreal kind of moment and event that I never thought I’d be part of it,” Morgan said. “I’m blessed and honored that I had this opportunity.”



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Browns safety Rodney McLeod is taking one last lap before calling it a career

By Zac Jackson, The Athletic

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5584867/2024/06/26/browns-rodney-mcleod-final-season/>

The leader of the group with a tinge of gray in his mustache and a new number on his chest always sits up front in the Cleveland Browns' safeties meetings. He often stands up front, too, relaying assignments, counter moves and general life wisdom to his younger teammates.

Those younger teammates love Rodney McLeod Jr. Because they love him, they mock him a little bit, too, calling him Grandpa and reminding McLeod that some of them watched as middle schoolers when he was playing for the Rams.

"St. Louis Rams," Browns safety Grant Delpit said with a chuckle. "That's not even a team anymore."



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McLeod turned 34 this week. Last spring, he announced that the upcoming season, his 13th and second with the Browns, would be his last. McLeod isn't sure of his future plans. He said he's "at peace" knowing his football career is almost over, "but still driven" to make his final season fulfilling. McLeod played in 10 games and made five starts for the Browns last season before suffering a biceps injury that he initially feared might end his career.

In March, McLeod signed a one-year deal to return to the Browns and wrote on social media that he was "grateful to run it back for one last lap."

He chose those words carefully. McLeod has always viewed his path from undrafted player to Super Bowl champion as a race — to earn a job, keep a job and stay ahead of the younger players coming for his job. But to also help prep those players for their marathon. For McLeod, the run-up to his final season is not a celebration as much as it's a confirmation that he's in the right place, physically and mentally. And if it adds to the sense of urgency that McLeod has been stressing to his younger Browns teammates since he arrived 14 months ago, that's just a bonus.

"I just want to enjoy the moment," McLeod said. "I'm not here to make the moment about myself. I know at the end of the day what's on the line for me, (that) this is the last run that I have and there's only one answer to the way I really want to go out. So that's my focus, trying to go out holding that trophy up one more time. But in order for that to even happen, it starts with myself being healthy, being durable and being available for my team in order to make the plays that I envisioned myself making and being a factor for this defense."

McLeod stayed around last season after the injury, continuing to attend meetings and serve as sort of an extra coach during games. His favorite motivational sayings stayed on the board in the safeties room. McLeod was there, too, continuing to participate in weekly game prep. After one December win, the players were given Monday off as extra rest for a pivotal stretch ahead. McLeod called for (and led) a 9 a.m. Monday defensive backs meeting, and all attended.

Among McLeod's favorite sayings on that board were constant reminders of the way he pushed his teammates to establish work-day routines and double-check their assignments in various defensive packages. Among them:

1. "Are you committed? Or are you interested?"
2. "Do the little things in an extraordinary way."
3. "How you do anything is how you do everything."

"There are different ways Rod phrases things," Delpit said, "but most of it comes down to, 'If you just do the simple s—, the rest tends to fall your way.'"

McLeod has changed his number to 12 for his 13th season. He's never worn No. 12 at any level before, but he said the change is "symbolic of new beginnings, completion and walking in God's purpose." He recently became a first-time father, and he said he spent the offseason rehabbing his injury with a focus on being able to play a full season. Last year marked just the second time in his career that he played in fewer than 13 games. He didn't miss a game over the first five years of his career.



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“Being available start to finish, that’s so important to me and I hope important to this team,” McLeod said. “I want to be able to look back on this last ride fondly. I just recently saw a picture of myself in No. 12 for the first time and I think it looks good, so we’ll see if I can go out and make the last one a pretty good one altogether.”

Ahead of 2023, the Browns made major staff changes highlighted by the hiring of Jim Schwartz as defensive coordinator and Bubba Ventrone as special teams coordinator. McLeod tied a career high with three interceptions for the 2017 Philadelphia Eagles that won the Super Bowl with Schwartz as defensive coordinator. In 2022, McLeod made 15 starts and played 183 special teams snaps for Indianapolis, where Ventrone led the special teams units.

With the 2022 Colts and 2023 Browns, McLeod was often the personal protector — the first upback — on the punt team. That’s generally where special teams coaches put their smartest player.

“It’s not just brains, it’s instincts to read the rush and know that your guys have their assignments right,” Ventrone said. “A coach’s dream for that spot is someone who puts in the work, who has the feel. Rod is a consummate pro and a great teammate. If someone’s out of place, he doesn’t just scream at the guy. He coaches him all the way through it.”

In 2020, McLeod was the Eagles’ nominee for the prestigious Walter Payton Man of the Year award. In 2021, he won the Alan Page Community Award, the NFL Players Association’s highest honor for community involvement. The Alan Page award brought a \$100,000 donation to McLeod’s Change Our Future Foundation, which he and his wife, Erika, co-founded in 2020. In December, the Change Our Future Foundation provided 20 Northeast Ohio families with a \$500 pre-Christmas shopping spree.

McLeod serves on the boards of DeMatha Catholic High School in Washington, his alma mater, and also the Community College of Philadelphia, where he and Erika make their full-time home. Though he’s open to opportunities both in coaching and in football media, McLeod is “completely undecided” on what’s next, with his “total focus” on fatherhood and the season ahead.

“I hope Rodney stays involved in the game,” Schwartz said. “Whether he does media, player engagement, maybe high school coaching ... he has a lot to give the game still. Speaking as a parent, I’d want my kid to play for a guy like him. He certainly has the intellect and the feel to coach. If he does get into NFL coaching, he’ll be one of those fast-rising stars. He might be a head coach in five years.”

Before it became obvious that then-21-year-old safety Ronnie Hickman was making a real push to make Cleveland’s roster last August, McLeod already saw a little of his younger self: an undrafted player who had shown he could play but was guaranteed nothing — and needed to adjust to the uncertain life of someone who might be solely on special teams one week but starting on defense the next.

“I think right away, Rodney was telling me that I had the talent and I was going to write my own ticket if I really loved the game,” Hickman said. “We had so many conversations about mental



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toughness, focus, working every day. He's living proof that it doesn't matter how you get to the NFL. You can stay if you're willing to earn it."

In discussing his 13th and final lap, McLeod said he learned the importance of practice and preparation habits from longtime NFL defensive backs Quintin Mikell and Cortland Finnegan during his rookie season in 2012. He added that he's "never been content," whether he was a starter, part-timer or a bottom-of-the-roster player looking to stick.

"A lot goes into making it 13 years — and a lot of that is health, luck, just generally timing being on your side," McLeod said. "But I have always believed it started with work ethic. There are so many talented individuals, so how are you going to outlast them? It's almost always going to start with being willing to do the work a lot of people won't. I think contentment can really knock a lot of us off our path, in football and in life, and in this league every year there's a new group of hundreds of guys who want to have NFL careers and probably have the ability to do it. So how are you going to stay on the right side of that? You'd better stay hungry and always be willing to work."

Said Schwartz: "Playing 10-plus years in this league doesn't happen by accident. With Rodney, it's a combination of perseverance, talent and character. And it's his willingness to work and to share. Why did we want him here? Because we knew he was going to come in and share what he's seen, connect with players from a lot of different backgrounds and always put the team first."

Ventrone cited McLeod attending every special teams meeting last season as an example of his leadership. At least one of those meetings provided a forum for the players who take so much from McLeod to fire some old-man jokes at him.

"I showed film of me playing against Rod when he was a rookie with the Rams and I was with the 49ers," said Ventrone, whose eight-year playing career ended in 2014. "The guys really got a laugh out of that. I think some of the young guys needed a minute to process it."

When it was revealed inside the Browns' facility in the spring that McLeod had taken his retirement plans public, Schwartz wondered aloud, "If we were gonna push him around in a wheelchair, let him get one last round of cheers."

Hickman said the team's safeties call McLeod "Gramps, O.G., Triple O.G., sometimes just Old Man Rod ... but it's all out of love. Whether it's football, financial stuff or just general life stuff, we go to Rodney. He's got a lot of wisdom to share."

McLeod said he's "blessed" to be able to declare his plans to play one more season because so many careers end unexpectedly, and prematurely.

"I went from always being healthy to really climbing the ranks to all of a sudden I had a torn ACL, a torn rotator cuff, all sorts of uncertainty with my body and what my football future was going to be," McLeod said. "After Year 11, I just knew I wanted to keep playing but I didn't know where or if that opportunity would come. To be able to come to Cleveland with such a talented team and be in a position to have my voice and my experience help younger guys and help try to push everything forward, it was really ideal."



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When the Browns open McLeod's final training camp next month, he said he'll feel "no extra pressure because it's the last, but pressure on myself to just be healthy and be available." Schwartz said he let McLeod know at the end of last season that he wanted the veteran back as long as McLeod was healthy enough to play.

"I know this: Whether he's on the field or not, he's an extremely valuable resource to me and to all the other players just from his experience," Schwartz said. "He's an easy guy to (approach) and ask questions. He's seen a lot. He's a really calming influence. Some guys are high-energy guys and get guys all hyped up, but Rod keeps guys calm and there are moments where that matters.

"When we're talking about Rodney McLeod, we're talking about one of my favorites. And I could talk about his character and his brains and his selflessness for hours, but he can still play. He was an extremely valuable part of our defense last year. We really took a step back late in the year when we lost Rod and Delpit to injury. We don't beat San Francisco (last season) without Rodney McLeod because of how well that (49ers) team uses motions and different formations ... we don't stop them the way we did without Rodney playing how he did."

When camp begins, McLeod said he'll be in the meetings and in the drills "demanding excellence, like always." He said the Browns' big goals for 2024 are realistic because the team has the talent to play with anyone. Though he acknowledged he can envision "holding that trophy one more time" as part of the ideal ending, he said his focus in July and August will be on the little things that will help Cleveland's defensive backs in the season ahead — and not at all on what lies ahead for McLeod personally.

"The journey continues," McLeod said. "Just not in the helmet and shoulder pads."



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At Recent Panel, Sports Stadium Financing Experts Warn Against Massive Public Subsidies for Cleveland Browns

By Mark Oprea, Cleveland Scene

<https://www.clevescene.com/news/at-recent-panel-sports-stadium-financing-experts-warn-against-massive-public-subsidies-for-cleveland-browns-44571866>

If you were to pick out any average Browns fan or Northeast Ohioan off the street, you'd probably get a mixed bag of answers to what's become an increasingly controversial question: What should come of Cleveland Browns Stadium?

Let the Haslams relocate to Brook Park with a \$2-billion dome (with half coming from the taxpayers of Ohio, Cuyahoga County and other sources). Focus on renovating the current one to the tune of \$1 billion (again, with the Haslams asking for half the tab to be picked up by the public). Forego costly renovations and instead do the best we can with the current stadium?

Last Thursday afternoon at the Cleveland Public Library a panel of experts on stadium builds and sports politics gathered for two hours to discuss the hard facts and real-world implications of those possibilities.

The panel—comprised of Ward 16 Councilman Brian Kazy, former Law Director Ken Silliman, and stadium economics experts Brad Humphreys and Victor Matheson— offered lots of opinions and facts but one seemed to come with agreement: That erecting a \$2.4 billion Brook Park dome and surrounding village, saying goodbye to the lakefront, would not carry the perks to Clevelanders some have been touting.



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Namely, Cleveland plus Domed Stadium equals Wealthier City.

"There's zero evidence in 30 years of peer-reviewed academic research that a professional sports team in a city generates any substantial jobs, raises wages, raises income, raises property taxes," Humphreys, an economics professor at the University of Alberta, said.

"What professional sports are good at," he added, "is moving economic activity around to different parts of the city."

With Browns owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam's stadium lease with the city to end in 2028, time is closing in on a decision that's divided Clevelanders, just as it seemed to divide attendees at Thursday's panel: Ask for public dollars to bankroll a projected \$1.2 billion upgrade of Cleveland Browns Stadium where it is, or use (more) public dollars to construct a \$2.4 billion football neighborhood 14 miles south in Brook Park, across from the airport and where the old Ford plant once stood.

The Haslams have been vague on their intentions after it was announced, in April, they secured the rights to buy 176 acres of land east of I-71 big enough for a ballpark village to stand. The move, seen by Thursday's panelists as a chess ploy, has nevertheless prodded local politicians, from Mayor Justin Bibb to Councilman Kazy, to ensure that Cleveland doesn't lose—with some PTSD—the Browns to a southwest suburb. (Bibb has said his preference is for the Browns to stay downtown, and has argued the city has put forth what, in their opinion, is a good deal for the city and the team.)

It's what seemed to beckon Kazy, who was the face of Council's emphasis of the 1996 Art Modell Law that attempts to protect cities from billionaires seeking to pick up their team and leave, to gather three experts on stadium deals to espouse the starry-eyed Clevelander's wish for a shiny new domed megapalace. Like Nissan Stadium in Nashville. Or Jerry's World in Dallas. Or Los Angeles' behemoth that is AT&T Stadium.

Sensing some in the crowd yearned for a Taylor Swift-level echelon of concerts, or say another Rolling Stones stopover, Matheson was quick to shut down the perception of huge change with some hard data. From 2002 to 2022, he and Humphreys found, Cleveland Browns Stadium hosted 12 concerts. Detroit's dome hosted 38. Indianapolis' Lucas Oil Stadium, 31. (And two Super Bowls, in 2006 and 2012.)

The bottom line for the two visiting professors, who speak regularly against city-subsidized stadium deals, was evident: the billions of dollars that go into inviting a Swiftie World Tour doesn't produce a sound return in investment. They quoted a Chicago economist: "It would be better to drop [money] from a helicopter than invest it in a new ballpark."

"So if you said, 'Well, look. There's so much more you can do with an indoor stadium,'" Matheson said. "Well, yeah: one more concert [a year] here. You might get a men's basketball Final Four. And a Super Bowl—but you'll get one."



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For Silliman, the former chair of the Gateway Economic Development Co. who recently published a 600-page memoir-slash-stadium exposé on Cleveland's own chaotic history with sports stadiums, the more sensible route was to convince the Haslams, the city and its denizens to reframe Cleveland Browns Stadium in the historical vein of Fenway Park in Boston, or Wrigley Field in Chicago.

Which meant, he said, doubling that dollar stream Cuyahoga County residents have been using for stadium upkeep since 1990. The tax on booze and cigarettes. The tax on concerts and shows. The tax on parking lots and car rentals.

"You know, our sin tax has never been adjusted for inflation," Silliman, who was an adviser to former Mayor Mike White in the 1990s, said. "If you were to double the annual amount available for each sports facility that would take it from \$4.5 million per facility, to about \$9 million."

Silliman, like Kazy himself, reminded everyone in attendance that he was first and foremost a Cleveland sports traditionalist.

And believed that, in reality, most Clevelanders had more practical priorities than the Haslam Brook Park renderings. (Only five percent of members of the Cuyahoga County Progressive Caucus thought the public wanted to or should pay for a new stadium in the first place.)

"If you ask the average ticket buyer at Cleveland Brown Stadium," Silliman said, cracking a smile, "they would say, just give us a team that's consistently competing for the playoffs."

A bold idea for saving Cleveland's sports teams and building a gleaming new airport
By Lucas Daprile and Zachary Smith, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/news/2024/07/a-bold-idea-for-saving-clevelands-sports-teams-and-building-a-gleaming-new-airport.html#:~:text=The%20proposal%20would%20provide%20new,would%20pay%20half%20the%20bill.>



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CLEVELAND, Ohio – What if we could guarantee that Cleveland sports fans would never have to worry again about the potential that a team would move elsewhere to get a better stadium?

What if we could build a state-of-the art, luxurious Cleveland airport – a regional source of pride -- that airlines could use at virtually no cost?

We can.

Today we offer a bold thought exercise for a radically different approach to how Northeast Ohio finances, builds and manages airports and sports facilities, including minor league stadiums. It carries a minimal cost to a lot of people, but it could forever end the anxiety the region regularly suffers about losing sports teams and the eternally poor condition of our international airport.

We don't offer this with any delusions that it will happen. Greater Cleveland has long demonstrated a reluctance to embrace bold ideas or regional change. We can dream, though. We offer the exercise to stoke imaginations and, we hope, spark some conversation.

The foundation of this proposal is that the entire region benefits from sports teams and airports and should have a role in paying for them. A huge swath of northern Ohio uses Cleveland Hopkins International Airport for travel. And love for the Browns, Guardians and Cavs permeates the region. And yet, the current funding model for stadium improvements relies heavily on sin tax dollars that have all but run dry, and the fees that the airport charges individual airlines for using the facilities have historically made Hopkins an expensive place for them to do business.

To solve these problems, we propose creating a district of counties that use the airport and attend the games, with a facilities commission appointed from within that district. And we propose adding a quarter-percent sales tax throughout the district to pay for the facilities.

A cleveland.com analysis indicates that such a plan – while politically difficult – is economically feasible.

We should say here that a whole bunch of calculations, suppositions and caveats went into our analysis, and rather than bog down this story — which is about the vision -- we've put all of that information in a separate piece, which you can find here. One of the most important caveats is that a multi-county facilities commission is not allowed under state law today. The Legislature would be asked to create it, and we propose a district-wide vote on the sales tax, rather than one that would have to pass county by county.



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If Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage, Stark and Summit counties were to levy a quarter-percent sales tax, they could generate \$20.1 billion over 40 years, according to our analysis.

And with those billions, each of Cleveland's professional sports teams would get a new stadium and a massive renovation, we could build the stadium that would persuade the National Women's Soccer League to establish its next team here, the area's three minor league baseball teams would hand off their debt and the cost of running their facilities to the regional taxing district, and Hopkins would get a new terminal and some help with the cost of operations.

Whether we've piqued your interest or your skepticism, cleveland.com invites you to join us on the rest of this thought exercise, as we walk you through how it would all work.

Let's start with the largest group of expenses: sports stadiums.

Ending stadium drama, once and for all

The proposal would provide new stadiums or arenas for the existing pro teams every 40 years, as well as major renovations and overhauls after 20 years. Yes, that's right. A brand-new home every four decades. Our plan would pay half the bill. Team owners would pay the other half. And, apart from the new construction and midlife overhauls, the team owners would have to maintain them. They might not like that, but that's the price of having guaranteed funding.

As mentioned above, this proposal also includes money for the initial construction of a women's soccer stadium. Should Cleveland win the bid for a new NWSL team, this plan could be amended to address future capital needs at the facility.

Based on a whole lot of data we describe in our companion story, we estimate future costs of professional stadium construction and upgrades at \$11 billion over 40 years. Theoretically, this model could be extrapolated for centuries to come, with inflation built into it. But we recognize that casting those calculations so far ahead is complicated by many unknown factors – including future expectations for the extravagance of stadium renovations and changes in the economy that could affect inflation. So, we'll just give you the first 40 years to chew on.

We're using the \$2.4 billion domed stadium estimate from Browns owners Dee and Jimmy Haslam, with stadium construction to start in 2028. For the Guardians, we used \$1.3 billion, based on a new stadium in Tampa and several other stadiums. The new Cleveland ballfield would open in 2040, four years after the Guardians' contract with Progressive Field ends in 2036. We use the new, \$863-million Little Caesar's arena in Detroit as the basis for the Cavs'



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new arena, which would open in 2035, the year after the lease with Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse expires.

Then, we adjusted those numbers for inflation, based on when each of those projects would be completed.

Here is a “ballpark” of how much each professional sports team would get from the tax district:

- Browns: \$1.7 billion (Half the \$2.4 billion for a stadium rebuild and half the \$1 billion for a 2049 renovation)
- Cavaliers: \$1.7 billion (Half the \$1.5 billion for a new arena and half the \$1.9 billion for a 2060 renovation)
- Guardians: \$2.1 billion (Half the \$1.9 billion for a new stadium and half the \$2.2 billion for a 2060 renovation)
- Professional women’s soccer team: \$75 million (Half of the \$150 million that backers of the campaign to establish the team say they need for a stadium)

The tax district would also assume the total costs -- \$318 million through 2064 -- for running and improving the three minor league baseball stadiums located in the area: Akron Rubber Ducks, Lake County Captains and Lake Erie Crushers.

Please note: Whether our teams are any good on the field or court is beyond the scope of this analysis.

An airport that’s not a regional embarrassment

If Greater Cleveland is to thrive, it needs a great airport – and that is, perhaps, the biggest benefit of this proposal. Of course, it’s all predicated on whether the city of Cleveland agrees to cede control and ownership of Hopkins to the new tax district. But with that abdication would come freedom from the responsibilities of building a new terminal and maintaining it – or negotiating with airlines to cover the cost.

Our plan puts aside \$3 billion for a new terminal, which is based on the airport’s recently unveiled plan to rebuild Hopkins on the backs of the airlines. And if that figure is too low, our budget has room to expand.

Using the sales tax to build the facility relieves the airlines of the fees they pay to construct and maintain it. Cleveland competes for flights with other airports, and making ours nearly free for airlines to use just might induce them to bring more flights here.

Instead of an airport with decrepit bathrooms and an antiquated layout that inconveniences travelers, we’d have one of the nation’s best. And using a sales tax to pay for



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transportation is not unprecedented. In fact, most of the Regional Transit Authority's budget comes from a Cuyahoga County sales tax.

In addition to rebuilding the terminal, the tax district would absorb costs that airlines typically pay in landing fees, arrival fees, rents, utilities and federal inspection fees. According to recent data, that figure is close to \$35 million, or just around 30% of the airport's total operating budget, which also includes non-aviation related revenues, such as concessions, parking and federal grants.

Just as the tax district would pick up the costs of running minor league stadiums, it would also cover the same portion of fees for Akron-Canton Airport. Those costs would amount to about \$1 million per year, plus inflation.

At long last, Northeast Ohio practices regionalism

While the eventual goal of the tax district is to have a reserve of money for big projects, the region won't start out with cash on hand. This means the district would still need to borrow money through bonds that would be repaid with interest, especially for the earliest projects, such as the airport terminal rebuild and women's soccer stadium.

But when it's all said and done, a quarter-percent sales tax will pay for most of the facility construction with only a handful of outstanding bonds by 2064. And bonus: the tax district would enjoy a surplus of \$3.2 billion to use on future rebuilds and renovations, or to adjust for future inflation.

Historically, the tax burden has largely fallen on Clevelanders and Cuyahoga County residents. But it is not just Cuyahoga residents who benefit from having professional sports stadiums in Cleveland. Between September 2023 and December 2023, only 14.6% of the fans attending Browns games were Clevelanders, and another 14.4% were from suburbs in Cuyahoga County, according to data from location analytics company placer.ai.

Nor are Cuyahoga County residents the only ones using Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. Ours is still the largest and busiest airport between Detroit and Philadelphia, with 2024's number of travelers to surpass 2019, which had the highest passenger volume in the decade leading up to the pandemic.

So, here's the big takeaway: We all use these facilities. It makes sense that we all chip in to pay for them. By spreading a quarter-percent sales tax across the counties that use the airport and attend the games, we can fund new and improved facilities without putting the burden on just one area.



But this isn't just about money. It's about coming together as a region to end the seemingly constant anxiety about losing the sports teams that feed our regional identity. It's about building an airport for our region that would be a source of pride and efficiency – a welcoming front door to Northeast Ohio – attractive to airlines and travelers alike.

This idea is just one proposal, and it's an ambitious one that's not without its caveats. But is it the game-changer that would help Northeast Ohio manage the financial needs of these mega-projects? We again invite you to take a deeper dive here, for the full breakdown of our methodology.

Work, and wait: Grant Delpit and his life-changing lessons of patience

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/07/work-and-wait-grant-delpit-and-his-life-changing-lessons-of-patience.html>

BEREA, Ohio — The irony isn't lost on Grant Delpit, as he sits on the bleachers just off the Browns' practice field after the second day of Organized Team Activities in May.

"It's crazy," he says, a laugh catching in his throat. "The two years we went to the playoffs, I missed both. I mean, unlucky, but you can't do nothing about it."

In 2020 when the Browns ended their 17-year playoff drought, Delpit was sidelined for the entire year after tearing his Achilles in training camp.

And then in December of last year, during what seemed to be a breakout season, Delpit suffered a groin injury against the Jacksonville Jaguars that required surgery and cost him the final five games — including Cleveland's wild card loss to the Houston Texans.

"That sucked," he said. "That sucked pretty bad."

Nearly five months removed from the injury, this seems to be about as deep as he's willing to go when discussing his shortened season and watching from the sidelines as the Browns' stout defense, the No. 1 defense in the league last year, sprung a leak at the worst time.

But for most of 2023, he was a natural fit for defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz's system, one that allows him to play all over the field and show off his athleticism. Even with the missed games, he was second on the team with 77 tackles, had 1.5 sacks, one interception and three passes defensed. He was named a Pro Bowl alternate.



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But there's a dichotomy to those contributions in his mind.

In December just before the injury, he offered this about his season: "If you're not giving up plays, you're playing great football. And I think that, personally, I'm doing a good job of that."

But now, he's not nearly as content, even after signing a \$36 million, three-year extension in December.

"I don't have to worry about that anymore," Delpit said in May. "I'm never satisfied though. I feel I haven't done nothing. I feel like I haven't shown anything, to be honest.

"I had one pick, one sack. I feel like I played trash."

Two things can be true at once, especially for Delpit — especially given his circumstances.

For most of Delpit's life, the one undeniable virtue has been patience.

He had it as a 6-year-old, when his family relocated to Houston from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

In college he had it, becoming one of the most-sought-after safeties in the 2020 NFL Draft — only to have his predraft process upended by COVID, unable to workout in person and show he had moved on from the ankle injury that plagued him for most of his final year at LSU.

And there's no doubt he had it with the Browns a few months later, when that Achilles injury cost him his entire rookie year.

So when the groin injury happened in December, he knew the drill: Do the work. Try and make it back for the playoffs post-surgery. Worry about what you can control.

That patience has helped Delpit get through the most difficult periods of his life, but hearing him reflect on it now, it also seems to be a burden he bears — one that has changed how he views football and life, and one he hopes will push him to the next level.

Cleveland Browns safety Grant Delpit

An unexpected ending

December 10, 2023, was supposed to be a banner day for Delpit.

His contract extension was officially announced. There wasn't much to feel down about considering his future in Cleveland was now secure, and he was one of the best coverage safeties



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in the NFL at the time, ranking 18th in that category with a 75.5 grade, according to Pro Football Focus.

Instead of celebrating his new deal, however, Delpit left Cleveland's 31-27 victory over the Jacksonville Jaguars with a non-contact groin injury.

He could walk and get around on his own, but was in obvious pain in the immediate aftermath. Initially, everyone, including Delpit himself, just assumed it was a strain.

An MRI the following day, however, showed a worst-case scenario: Delpit's left adductor muscle was "snapped in half," he said. Doctors realized they were going to have to clean up the same muscle in his right leg too.

And with that, Delpit was on his way to Philadelphia to see renowned surgeon Dr. William C. Meyers, who has pioneered core muscle procedures and injury prevention, and who is the go-to guy for a lot of NFL players who experience groin and core muscle injuries.

Initially, there was optimism that Delpit would make it back in time for a playoff run as he returned to rehab at the Browns facility.

But this was undeniably a depressing detour.

"I never really had groin problems," Delpit said. "It just so happened it was just like my Achilles, a non-contact thing."

By this point, Delpit had steadily improved in each of the last three seasons, rebounding nicely from the 2020 Achilles injury he referenced, and was having his best year yet in Schwartz's system. It's a defense that has allowed him to use his length, athleticism, and instincts to make plays.

But it was just too short of a turnaround for Delpit, especially with the Browns falling in the wild card round.

In retrospect, it seemed like Delpit was never quite as close to making a return against the Texans for that game as everyone hoped.

"Honestly, I was still pretty far away," Delpit said. "I was going to have to push myself. It was going to hurt pretty bad, but right now I'm fine. I'm getting to that 100 percent."

"Let the people know I was trying."



The storm

You'd expect nothing less from Delpit in the face of an unexpected injury.

This was only the latest instance in which he felt like he was close to accomplishing something big football-wise, only to have everything yanked away at the last possible second.

The first time came in August of 2005.

Delpit was 6 years old, living in New Orleans with his dad Marc, mom Endya, and sister Grace.

He was a typical sports-obsessed kid who was already playing baseball, soccer, and flag football. But even now, Delpit recalls with a smile how excited he was to finally hit the minimum age required to play tackle football in the state of Louisiana.

After a mini-combine going through some basic catching, throwing and kicking drills with the other kids in his age group, Delpit made an impression. One of the coaches called Marc to relay the good news.

"I was going to be the No. 1 pick in the draft," Delpit said. "And then the storm came."

About seven days later, Hurricane Katrina made landfall.

In some sense, it was business as usual between his tryout and the storm arriving.

The Delpits, natives of New Orleans, knew the drill: They packed weekend bags and headed to Memphis for what they thought would be a quick trip. That assumption proved incorrect when they were still in Tennessee and learned as more news coverage rolled out that their neighborhood, New Orleans East, was underwater.

"There was a lot of people in New Orleans that Katrina affected worse than me," Delpit said. "Because we were able to get out. I fortunately didn't have any deaths in the family, but everybody knows the story. And we were able to get out the day before too, my whole family."

The storm claimed more than 1,800 lives and ranked as the costliest hurricane in U.S. history.

Unable to return to the home they built, Endya and Marc decided to go to Houston where they had extended family, making the Delpits just several of the estimated 250,000 people that were taken in by the city in the initial aftermath of the storm.



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They were also several of the thousands that made Houston their new home in the years following.

“I never saw us living in Houston, but Katrina changed that for us, obviously,” Endya Delpit said.

It was a lot of change for Grant Delpit to digest in a very short amount of time. A new home, a new school, but one that was similar to the all-boys Catholic school he attended in Louisiana.

One of the biggest blows, however, was that in Texas, you had to be 7 to play tackle football. With Delpit’s birthday on September 20, he just missed the cutoff for that season.

“He had to wait a year,” Endya said. “So that, again, patience. He did flag football when we first moved there.”

Waiting that extra year may not have been what her son wanted, but a few short years later, it was like he never missed a beat.

‘Who is this?’

In middle school from 2010-2012, Delpit played on a powerhouse youth team, the Fort Bend Express. In those three years, the team never lost a game.

It was on that first team in sixth grade that Delpit met one of his best friends, an already-flashy player whose family also relocated to Houston in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: CeeDee Lamb.

“Man, that was a time,” Delpit recalled with a smile.

Lamb became a star receiver in college at Oklahoma before being drafted by the Dallas Cowboys. Last year he earned All-Pro honors and broke Michael Irvin’s franchise record for receptions and receiving yards in a single season.

But before all that, Lamb was one of the stars of that Fort Bend Express team — and it didn’t take him long to realize he was in good company with Delpit.

“We were both in practice and he (Delpit) came late from baseball practice right before,” Lamb told cleveland.com.

“But he made a couple plays on our quarterback, and I’m like, ‘Who is this?’ He was wearing No. 3 at the time, I remember. Obviously, he looked the part. The whole team, we went through the whole season, obviously just deep guys. We were undefeated that year.



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“And at the time, obviously we were very talented and very young. Didn’t really know where everybody’s intention or everything else was headed, but I knew that he was a great football player.”

While they went to different high schools — Lamb attended Foster High School in Richmond, Texas, and Delpit attended St. Thomas High and Lamar High in Houston before transferring to national powerhouse IMG Academy in Florida for his senior season — the two remained close.

Both Lamb and Delpit were introverted, and had an overlapping friend group. Even after those Fort Bend Express days, they would still see each other at seven-on-sevens, as college offers piled up.

“I knew we could both make it — it was when we were in high school, when we got to high school and we were still close, and we were still doing the thing,” Lamb said. “But for Grant, he started flying around, catching picks, hitting guys, and I’m like, ‘Oh yeah, he’s like that.’”

Missed rookie opportunities

Delpit went on to star at LSU, becoming a full-time starter as a sophomore in 2018. Around that same time, his parents and sister also moved back to New Orleans, finally returning to the city they left over a decade before.

Back home, Delpit thrived.

In 2019 as the Tigers won a national title, he won the Jim Thorpe Award, given to the nation’s top defensive back. That accolade came despite playing through an ankle injury for most of the year.

At the 2020 NFL combine, he didn’t participate in drills as the injury lingered, opting instead to wait for LSU’s pro day.

But again, Delpit found his football plans changing. That day never came with in-person visits and pro days canceled across the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Delpit never built up enough momentum to climb into the first round, and instead was available for the Browns to scoop up at pick No. 44.

Despite the uncertainty the pandemic caused, it went on to be a banner year for Cleveland as the Browns broke that playoff drought and made it to the divisional round.



Delpit, however, missed it all.

During a training camp practice, he suffered that non-contact Achilles injury, one that Endya heard on the radio as broadcasters narrated her son being carted off the practice field.

“I tried texting him and called and I couldn’t reach him,” Endya said. “And Grant will tell you that I was on the plane before he could text me back.”

Players nowadays can overcome Achilles injuries in 6-8 months. But the recoveries can be longer — and worst-case scenario, it’s an injury that can be career-ending.

The significance of essentially redshirting his very first year in the NFL wasn’t — and isn’t — lost on Delpit nearly four years later.

“Your rookie year is when you put yourself on the map,” he said. “The league gets ahold of you and doesn’t let you go if you do well your rookie year.

“I kind of disappeared.”

He may have gotten a late start, but he kept a positive attitude.

Delpit fought his way back in 2021, even being named the team’s 2021 Ed Block Courage Award winner. The honor is given annually to a member of each of the 32 NFL teams who best exemplifies the qualities of Ed Block — the former head athletic trainer of the Baltimore Colts — based on courage, compassion, commitment and community.

But even though he came back and has steadily improved in each of the past three seasons, the Achilles injury was a trial that altered his NFL trajectory.

“As far as mentally, it gives you an aspect of this game can be taken away from you at any moment,” Delpit said. “And you see that all the time, but we never think about it. It could be gone today, it could be gone tomorrow, knock on wood.”

Grant Delpit poses with LSU's championship trophy from 2019 as well as the Jim Thorpe Award he won that season (left), after going back for graduation in winter of 2023 after he completed his bachelor's degree. LSU Football

‘Start what you finish’



Delpit's words about the game being taken away at any moment turned out to be eerily prophetic. That quote came from an interview four days before last year's season-ending groin injury.

But watching how Delpit handled this injury, and all the setbacks before it, shows that those aren't just words for him. Everything being fragile and finite — Delpit has lived that in a visceral way, on the field and off.

So knowing that, he's trying to make the most of every opportunity he's been given.

Off the field, one example of that came last year, when he earned his sports administration degree from LSU nearly four years after leaving school early for the NFL.

He credits Endya, an attorney and academic, for staying on him about his grades for most of his life — he did a good job with that, other than getting tripped up by an economics class at one point, he jokes.

"Start what you finish," Delpit said. "I was so close. I actually took my schoolwork seriously. Not as serious as I could. It's not like I had a 4.0, but I wanted to make my mom proud."

It's a mentality you see on the field too with Delpit's aggression and versatility that allows him to play deep in coverage or down near the line of scrimmage on runs.

Lamb considers himself lucky that he got in on the ground floor when it comes to being a fan of his friend.

"His range is with the best of them, and obviously he's the type of safety that would come down and still make a play on you," Lamb said. "I love his game, always have, always been a fan since I was younger when I got to see it up close and personal."

It remains true in Delpit's mind, however, that so far, nothing he's done has been good enough, even as he keeps climbing.

Something more than patience

As far as what Delpit is chasing individually, for the most part he's staying coy.

"I keep my goals to myself really, but I mean, you could pretty much imagine (what they are)," he said.

There's the usual prizes most players chase: Super Bowls. Individual accolades like Pro Bowls and All-Pro recognition. League-leading stats.



But in December, just before getting hurt, Delpit was willing to go a little deeper when it comes to his mindset.

“If you’re not stepping on the field thinking you’re the best on the field, you don’t have the right mindset,” Delpit said. “If you don’t have the mentality that you want to be one of the best ever when you’re done with the game, I just don’t think you’ve got the right mindset.

“It’s not just for this game. This is to solidify your name and solidify the teams that you’ve been on. You don’t want to be associated with losing teams. You want to be associated with greatness. So that’s what I want to do.”

Maybe that’s really the best insight into why Delpit has embraced patience the way he has.

Still early in his career, he’s after greatness — something that is impossible to achieve overnight.

For Endya now, it’s easy to draw the parallel between two very different situations for her son — Delpit missing out on his rookie year in the NFL, and having his life totally changed as a 6-year-old in the aftermath of the storm.

“Having to relocate your life as a 6-year-old, and then having to deal with that injury as a rookie,” she continued. “I think resilience is just the word that comes to mind for me with respect to Grant.”

Delpit has had to be patient and flexible, adjusting and re-adjusting his football goals throughout his life when unexpected setbacks are thrown at him.

But mother knows best — it’s something more than patience that’s driven Delpit all these years. There’s a stubbornness to Delpit and his goals, the kind you can only have through years of practicing resilience. It’s part of his drive, what keeps him grinding even when everything around him is seemingly telling him to give up.

It’s a part of his story, too.

“Everybody has their own story,” Delpit said. “I got a lot of goals for myself that I feel like I haven’t hit yet.

“They’re on the way, though.”

Delpit will wait — and work — however long it takes.



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Here's how a 1/4 percent sales tax can pay for new stadiums, airport and more for Northeast Ohio

By Zachary Smith and Lucas Daprile, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/news/2024/07/heres-how-a-14-cent-sales-tax-can-pay-for-new-stadiums-airport-more-for-northeast-ohio.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Envision a future where Cleveland's sports teams play in top-notch stadiums, and the city's airport becomes a premier hub with minimal costs for airlines.

Cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer have proposed a groundbreaking way to fund these crucial facilities through a regional quarter-percent sales tax and manage them with a special commission. This plan would aim to generate \$20.1 billion over 40 years, securing new stadiums for the Browns, Guardians and Cavaliers, relieving minor league teams of debt and building a state-of-the-art airport.

While it's an ambitious and politically challenging idea, our analysis shows it's financially viable and could finally bring regionalism to Northeast Ohio in a meaningful way.



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You'll find the proposal here. And for a deeper dive into our methodology and calculations, keep reading.

Sales tax

We used sales tax for this analysis for two main reasons: It grows with inflation, and it's mathematically straightforward. Ohio Department of Taxation records show a quarter percent sales tax would have raised \$165.5 million in 2023. We then inflation-adjusted going forward, based on historical trends for rising sales tax collections. But at the end of 40 years, there is money to spare, if sales tax trends don't hold.

To make all this happen, we would need legislation at the state level to permit the creation of such a district, which would include the nine core counties in the Cleveland-Akron sports/airport market – Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Medina, Portage, Stark and Summit. And if the Legislature required a vote of the new district's residents, that would have to be a simple yes or no vote regionwide – not county by county.

A regional effort makes sense if Cleveland – and the region – is going to continue supporting teams in three major sports. Cleveland happens to be the smallest U.S. city to enjoy such a status, and with the city's stagnant population growth, it risks losing at least one of its teams without a way to provide state-of-the-art facilities.

Interest rate

We assumed the Facilities Commission would receive a 5% interest rate on the bonds needed to finance its projects, based on the recommendation of Michael Sudsina of the Ohio Association of Public Treasurers, and on other projects now in the works. For example:

- Cleveland Metropolitan School District is projecting a 5% interest rate on a proposed \$295 million bond it is hoping voters will approve in November.
- Last September, Cleveland got a \$63 million bond at a 5% interest rate.
- In 2022, Cleveland got a 5% interest rate on a \$46 million bond.

Other government bonds have received lower interest rates in recent years. One example is Cuyahoga County's 4% interest rate on a \$123 million Ballpark Improvement Project loan from 2022. However, 4% is also an old number that's lower than 30-year, A-rated municipal bond interest rates that were available in late May, when we did our research.

Inflation

For all future inflation projections used in this analysis, we assumed a 2.5% rate of inflation, near the 10-year average. We did not apply inflation to the cost of the proposed



Browns stadium in Brook Park, since that is the amount being discussed for the stadium today.

Future stadium costs

We budgeted for each professional sports team to get one new stadium and one major upgrade over the next 40 years. The only exception would be the women's professional soccer team, which would receive a new 12,500-seat stadium at a cost of \$150 million – half of which would be covered by the new tax, paid with 40-year bonds. But our model does not include a mid-life renovation for that facility. That's because the team does not yet exist, but building the stadium is critical to persuading the National Women's Soccer League to establish a team here. Should Cleveland win the bid, this model could be amended to include future stadium renovations and reconstructions.

Moving on to the Browns. Owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam are seeking a \$2.4 billion dome in Brook Park, and we assumed that price was valid. As with the other major sports stadiums, we assumed a 50-50 split between the facility commission and each team, or in the Browns' case, \$1.2 billion for each.

To figure out the cost of hypothetical future facility improvements, we wanted to know how the stadium's last major facelift compared to its construction cost.

The Browns Stadium, which opened in 1999, cost \$283 million to build, and its last, major renovation in 2014 cost \$120 million. Based on that ratio, and for a \$2.4 billion new stadium, we budgeted just over \$1 billion for a full renovation of the new facility down the line.

We repeated this process for the Cavaliers and Guardians, calculating build/upgrade ratios for each team.

For the Guardians, we felt \$1.3 billion was a likely stadium cost in today's dollars. The Tampa Bay Rays are planning a \$1.3 billion stadium; the Oakland A's are planning a \$1.5 billion stadium in Las Vegas and when Utah sought an MLB stadium, it projected spending at least \$900 million. Given the high cost of these other stadiums, \$1.3 billion for a facility in Cleveland sounds likely for a future project.

However, the Guardians' lease lasts until 2036, and construction materials, labor, etc. will be more expensive in the future. Assuming 2.5% inflation per year, a \$1.3 billion stadium in 2024 would cost \$1.9 billion in 2040, the assumed first year the stadium would be used.

And, again using the ratio of the cost of building the existing stadium to the cost of its first major renovation, we set aside \$2.2 billion to eventually upgrade the yet-to-be-built home of the Guardians – leaving the public share at about \$1.1 billion.



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For the Cavaliers, we projected a new arena construction cost of \$1.5 billion for a 2040 opening. We based that figure on the construction cost of Little Caesar's Arena, home to the Detroit Pistons and Red Wings that opened in 2017 for \$863 million, and we factored in inflation since then. Detroit's was neither the most, nor the least expensive stadium construction project in the past 10 years.

In total, the three stadiums would cost \$11 billion for initial construction and mid-life full renovations. Given our assumption that taxpayers would foot 50% of the bill, this means the commission would need \$9.3 billion to cover the bond payments over 40 years for its 50% share of construction costs, and the 50% of renovations paid separately.

Minor league costs

We assumed the facilities commission would absorb the full cost of running, improving and paying debt on the three minor league stadiums in the area: Canal Park, home of the Akron RubberDucks, Classic Auto Group Park, home of the Lake County Captains, and Crushers Stadium, home of the Lake Erie Crushers.

To figure out how much this would cost, we calculated the current cost of operating the stadiums, by year, using financial documents from Akron, Eastlake and Avon. During the most recent available five-year period, Eastlake spent a total of \$11,078,232 on Classic Auto Group Park; Akron spent \$10,306,673 and Avon spent \$1,125,575, not including debt service. We adjusted these totals for inflation and applied annually going forward.

Cleveland-Hopkins International Airport terminal costs

Airports are traditionally supported by revenue generated by the airport itself, and that includes a variety of fees charged to airlines and often passed on to customers. Our model approaches funding for airport construction and operations differently, because our aim is to alleviate that cost burden and make Hopkins more competitive and an attractive place for airlines to do business, while also giving the region a voice in how its major transportation hub is managed.

We acknowledge that the logistics and feasibility of what we're suggesting is fodder for debate – and that's the point.

With a total operating budget of about \$130 million, Hopkins is currently owned by the city of Cleveland, and it is managed as one of the city's enterprise funds. That means it's self-sufficient, relying on about \$35 million a year from airlines for aviation-related costs for passenger flights -- which includes landing fees, arrival fees, rents, utilities, federal inspection fees, terminal area apron charges and tiedowns. The airport also relies on non-aviation related revenue, such as concessions, parking and federal money. The "enterprise fund" designation also



means the city is not permitted to make money on the airport, and its revenue can never co-mingle with the city's general fund.

That said, City Hall views the airport as one of Cleveland's great assets. For our model to work, the city would have to relinquish control of that asset to the new facilities commission. We recognize that would be a tough sell to city leaders. But in exchange, the city could also relinquish the headache of negotiating with airlines to fund major projects, like building a new terminal.

As cleveland.com reported in November, a Cleveland Hopkins terminal rebuild is expected to happen in the coming years in two phases, totaling \$2.9 billion. The first phase would be \$1.1 billion.

Under cleveland.com's proposal, however, those costs – and the cost of airport maintenance -- would not land on the airlines, but rather, would be covered by the new sales tax and the airport's other non-aviation related revenue streams.

The analysis also assumes the tax district would absorb \$1 million per year, plus inflation, that Akron-Canton Airport now charges airlines, like landing and arrival fees, adjusted for inflation based on projections.

Existing sin tax

We did not factor into this model any money from the existing sin tax, originally established to build the Gateway sports complex in Cleveland. That money could go to demolishing Browns Stadium and the other existing facilities, as they are replaced, or it could be used to help the team owners with their maintenance responsibilities for the facilities.

One Browns DT is finding his voice, and his next career, while still denouncing the NFL's new training camp proposal

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/07/one-browns-dt-is-finding-his-voice-and-his-next-career-while-still-denouncing-the-nfls-new-training-camp-proposal.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Browns defensive tackle Shelby Harris has stewed for weeks over the NFL Players Association's proposal to scrap the voluntary offseason program in favor of a longer training camp ramp-up.



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And the 10-year veteran remains as adamant as ever that he thinks it's a bad idea that won't benefit players in the slightest.

"You want us to concede and give up the voluntary part of OTAs and make it mandatory?" Harris told cleveland.com last month at Browns mandatory minicamp.

"So then what do we get? That's business. And so I think our NFLPA is doing terrible business right now, and honestly, I think it's a terrible idea. It's going to make the season extremely long, and I know players and coaches alike don't want that."

Currently, the offseason program is three phases and runs from mid-April through mandatory minicamps in June. All sessions except for the minicamp are voluntary, and most training camps start in late July, giving players a roughly six-week-long summer break.

But in May, NFL.com reported that the players' union is working to finalize a proposal that would overhaul the offseason starting as soon as next year, eliminating all voluntary on-field work in the spring in favor of a longer training camp. Players would have to report in mid-June or early July for a ramp-up period. Virtual meetings could take place in spring, but no practices.

Offseason work rules are collectively bargained, so any changes require an agreement with the NFL.

Harris was incredibly vocal on social media offering opposition when news of the proposal broke, and stands by his statements.

"We can sit here and talk about football all we want to, but this is a business," Harris said.

NFL Network's Tom Pelissero reported that a majority of players support the changes. He also reported that the NFLPA has consulted with medical and performance experts in establishing the proposal.

Harris, however, contends the opposite — and also hypothesized that perhaps the proposal was losing steam, since there hasn't been any news about it following those initial May reports.

"I haven't heard a single person really say that they agree with this, other than people that don't play football," Harris said. "Players just know that this is not what they want. And ever since then, see how no one's really heard anything else about it?"

"So hopefully they killed it because it's a terrible idea, but I just hope it's not something that secretly comes out and then it gets passed, because that would really (tee) everybody off."



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The NFLPA is under new management, with Lloyd Howell Jr. elected to take over for Executive Director DeMaurice Smith in June of 2023. Lions linebacker Jalen Reeves-Maybin took over for president and former Browns center J.C. Tretter in March as well.

While Harris continues to be outspoken against the proposal, he's found his voice in other ways this offseason.

In April, he went to Los Angeles to attend a three-day broadcasting bootcamp hosted by the NFL and NFL Network, and was one of only 23 current and former players selected following an application process.

"You had to apply, you had to send in some clips and to kind of say why you wanted to be there, so it definitely was worthwhile," he said.

"It was an amazing experience. I think it was a very well-run bootcamp. The reason I wanted to get into it though, is just because I would love to do anything like radio or TV after (I'm done playing). So I just wanted to try my hand at it and get some experience, and it was a really enjoyable experience."

While at the bootcamp, Harris tried his hand at podcasting, calling games for a radio broadcast, calling games for a TV broadcast, and working as an on-air TV analyst. He left with a professionally produced reel of his work.

Harris comes back to Cleveland for his second season with the Browns, signing a two-year deal in the spring after becoming a key rotational piece on coordinator Jim Schwartz's D-line in 2023.

With the Browns last season, Harris started eight games, including Cleveland's final five. In the regular season he registered 28 tackles, 1.5 sacks, three QB hits, five passes defended and a forced fumble. According to Pro Football Focus data, among qualifying DTs he ranked 32nd in the league with a 70.5 defensive grade. For his career, he's recorded 289 regular-season career tackles, 26.0 sacks, four forced fumbles and one interception.

It was an easy decision to return to Cleveland, he said, after realizing that last year it was the closest D-line group he had ever been a part of, as the Browns ascended to the No. 1 defense in the league.

"I just think it's a perfect blend of personalities," Harris said. "Everybody's personalities work well together and everyone just kind of encourages each other. Everyone's willing to help, everyone's willing to, everyone wants the best for each other and there's no haters, there's no issues. Everyone just wants to work and wants to win."

Harris will certainly remain vocal about that too.



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How one Browns linebacker found a new perspective after a devastating injury changed his career

By Dan Labbe, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/07/how-devin-bush-found-perspective-after-a-devastating-injury-changed-his-career.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — We're not all that far removed from Browns linebacker Devin Bush, then with the Steelers, finishing third in defensive rookie of the year voting, just behind Nick Bosa and Maxx Crosby.

Bush was doing what was promised after his career at the University of Michigan and a 2020 NFL combine performance that saw him run a 4.43 40-yard dash and register a 40.5-inch vertical.

"Man, that guy was 21 years old, just running around just hitting everything that had a ball in his hand," Bush recalled about his rookie season in Pittsburgh.



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The Steelers traded up to select Bush No. 10 overall, giving Denver picks 20 and 52 as well as a third-round pick, to take the Butkus Award winner from the Wolverines, still searching for a replacement for Ryan Shazier, who had suffered a career-ending spine injury in 2017.

The pick appeared on its way to paying big dividends after a rookie year in which Bush collected 109 tackles, nine tackles for loss, forced a fumble and recovered four — including one returned for a touchdown — and intercepted two passes.

Bush was ready to break out in Year 2. He became the Steelers' defensive play caller and played every defensive snap until he tried to make a tackle against the Browns in Week 5, diving after running back D'Ernest Johnson and then grabbing at his left knee after he landed following the play.

He underwent surgery for a torn ACL, the first major injury of his football life. It quickly derailed the promising start to his career and it's why Bush is in Cleveland now, working on a one-year deal for the second season in a row and, on the verge of turning 26 in a few weeks, doing whatever he can to stay in the league.

Mental warfare

Cleveland Browns vs. Pittsburgh Steelers

The promising start to Devin Bush's career was derailed by a torn ACL in 2020. Joshua Gunter, cleveland.com

Like many players left to rehab major injuries during the season, it was easy for Bush to feel detached after he tore his ACL.

"I personally felt like I wasn't on the team," he said. "The team was traveling and practicing and doing what they do during the year; I'm at home. They're saying, 'Hey yo, you got four more weeks with the crutches. Hey, slow down. You can't run yet. You can't squat yet.'"

He called the whole process "mental warfare."

"I'm so used to just getting out there and just flying around," he said, "and having to take the slow route definitely taught me a lot of being present."

He returned Week 1 of the following season, but he was never quite the player he was his rookie year. He recorded 151 tackles and just four for loss in 2021 and 2022 combined. A player known for his ability to make splash plays, he forced just one fumble and didn't intercept a pass in those two seasons.

Just like that, he went from potentially becoming the next great Steelers linebacker to Pittsburgh declining the fifth-year option on his rookie deal.



It didn't go the way he or the Steelers had planned, but Bush has managed to find some perspective.

"Honestly, when you're actually in it, you are like, 'Man, what's going on?'" he said. "But after you're removed and you're outside of it, honestly, that's probably the best thing that could happen to me."

Changing perspective

Maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration. The best thing would have been building on his rookie season and eventually signing a lucrative extension. That wasn't in the cards for Bush, so once his time in Pittsburgh ended, it was about resetting.

He signed a one-year deal with Seattle in 2023 and he described what he was doing there in one word: Learning.

Shortly after the Seahawks added Bush, they brought back one of the legends from their "Legion of Boom" defenses, Bobby Wagner.

It was an opportunity for a young linebacker. He was around All-Pro linebacker Bobby Wagner and other veterans like safeties Quandre Diggs and Jamal Adams, quarterback Geno Smith and receivers DK Metcalf and Tyler Lockett.

"I got to learn from a lot of guys that you can say are where I want to be and where I want to head towards," Bush said.

Learning is something Bush has embraced since the ACL injury changed his career. He's come to appreciate playing for coaches like Jim Harbaugh at Michigan, Mike Tomlin in Pittsburgh and Pete Carroll in Seattle.

"I'm just taking all the information I can get. I'm just taking all the people that I'm working with and learning from and I'm just running with it," Bush said. "And you never know when your number's getting called or when your time is to come."

Bush had to change his perspective from those early days in a Steelers uniform when he appeared destined for stardom. He quickly went from Top 10 pick to figuring out where he would fit in on Seattle's defense.

"OK, I'm not going to take a job from Bobby Wagner, that's not happening," Bush said. "Having to really accept that and having to work around that and just trying to find my place in it was the hardest part."

Where he fit was, in part, special teams. During the Seahawks' first preseason game, Bush covered a kickoff for the first time in his NFL career.



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Overall, he played 138 special teams snaps in 2023, only three fewer than his final three seasons in Pittsburgh combined. He played a higher percentage of special teams snaps (38%) than defensive snaps (27%); and he played fewer defensive snaps than in any other year of his career, including the season he lost to his ACL tear.

Bush wasn't thrilled he wasn't playing as much.

"I'm a competitor," he said.

But instead of complaining, he took the opportunity to learn and grow. He's learned to take a big-picture perspective.

"I think I'm way more appreciative," he said. "Not saying I was taking it for granted before, but just as you get older and things that you go through, you just realize that each year that you're in the league is one step closer to retirement. So just enjoying all the moments, just run down on kickoff and just being able to walk out of this game one day and saying, 'Yeah, I ran down on kickoff.' "

Back in the AFC North

Day two of Cleveland Browns mandatory minicamp in Berea

Browns linebacker Devin Bush still believes he can be the player he was during his rookie season in Pittsburgh in 2019. John Kuntz, cleveland.com

Bush has always been an AFC North guy. His dad, Devin Bush Sr., who finished his NFL career with two seasons in Cleveland in 2001 and 2002, played in the division the first year of its existence.

So he's happy to be back after a season out west.

"The AFC North, it's football," he said. "NFC West was fantasy and West Coast-style and five wide. In here you're going to get 13 (personnel, meaning 1 running back with 3 tight ends) and 12 and big dudes, extra O-linemen and stuff. So I mean that's the football I grew up playing, watching. So I just love it."

His familiarity with the division is part of what drew him to Cleveland, as well as what he saw defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz do with the defense in 2023.

"This is a place where linebackers get used, get better or whatever you want to call it," he said. "A linebacker is a big thing in this defense."



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He loves the read-and-react style Schwartz has his linebackers play behind a defensive line built to cause chaos. And you can see how the 5-foot-11, 235-pound Bush, who was drafted for his ability to play fast and make splash plays, might fit in here.

“It’s a lot faster pace because you’re allowed to react fast,” Bush said. “You don’t have to slow down all the time.”

He knows things are different now and nothing is guaranteed. The Browns have two of their linebacker spots set with Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah and veteran free agent addition Jordan Hicks. Bush will compete with players like Tony Fields II, rookie Nathaniel Watson and Mohamoud Diabate for a turn in the rotation.

Part of the determination will be who can thrive in the league’s new kickoff format, which lines up the coverage and receiving team across from each other, putting an emphasis on shooting gaps and getting off blocks.

It has been a long time since anything was guaranteed for Bush, since he was an ascending star for one of the league’s marquee franchises. He believes he can get back to the player he was then, but for now, he’s just happy to still be part of a team.

“I’ve got a locker in the locker room,” he said, “so I’m good.”

Why did NFL stars gather in June to play chess? It all began with Amari Cooper’s vision

By Jori Epstein, sports.yahoo.com

<https://sports.yahoo.com/why-did-nfl-stars-gather-in-june-to-play-chess-it-all-began-with-amari-coopers-vision-220235307.html>

Kyler Murray considered his lost pawn and strategized his next move.

But before Murray advanced his queen, Cleveland Browns receiver Amari Cooper extended a hand across the chessboard.



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“You won,” Cooper told the Arizona Cardinals quarterback at a Dallas-area arena on June 22. “I blundered it.”

“For real?” Murray asked.

“Damn, how I did that? Wowwww,” Cooper said. “I blundered a queen.”

Just an average NFL offseason night, right?

It wouldn't have been unusual, say, on a Sunday in October, for Murray to compete against Dallas Cowboys pass rusher Micah Parsons, nor for Cooper to match wits with Tennessee Titans cornerback Chidobe Awuzie.

But when those bouts kicked off on a Saturday evening in June, the second-highest-ranked 18-year-old chess player in the country looked on and marveled.

“It's like two alien-mated worlds, the chess world and the NFL world,” Shar Deviprasath told Yahoo Sports. “The chess world is in its own little bubble. Breaking out of that bubble is necessary to make it grow bigger.”

“The bridge is getting closed.”

Browns receiver Amari Cooper (right) faces Cardinals quarterback Kyler Murray during an online stream of their Universal Chess Tour match on June 22. (Screenshot via Jori Epstein) Browns receiver Amari Cooper (right) faces Cardinals quarterback Kyler Murray during an online stream of their Universal Chess Tour match on June 22. (Screenshot via Jori Epstein) NFL stars playing chess isn't anything new. From Baltimore Ravens offensive lineman John Urschel to Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson, players have long gravitated toward the 1,400-year-old game to hone their anticipation and decision-making skills. Some quarterback coaches and Power 5 college football programs even integrate chess lessons into their player development programs.

But rarely do four players who play four different positions on four different teams convene for in-person, “over the board” games as they did in this chess tournament. (Browns quarterback Dorian Thompson-Robinson and free-agent running back Melvin Gordon III also competed.) Rarely are chess tournaments staged in an arena capable of holding more than 2,000 spectators.

And yet: If Cooper and Deviprasath continue implementing their vision, each will become the norm.

“I want to bring more attention to chess so that I can have more people to play against,” Cooper told Yahoo Sports. “I can't think of many things that I can do for hours at a time that I really enjoy doing.”



An NFL player and a 14-year-old walk into a Barnes & Noble ...

When Cooper first drove his Lamborghini into a suburban townhouse complex in 2020, a 14-year-old's parents were wary.

Was a Cowboys player 12 years their son's senior really just driving him to ... the neighborhood Barnes & Noble for chess lessons?

Deviprasath, then a ninth grader on the verge of attaining chess's expert "national master" rating, told his mother he was going to coach Cooper.

"So first she Googles him and tries to understand," Deviprasath said. "She honestly wasn't believing him. Like — how does this happen?"

How indeed.

When the then-Oakland Raiders traded Cooper to the Cowboys in 2018, the 2015 fifth overall draft pick was ready for a change of football scenery.

He was less eager to leave the chess community he'd found at San Francisco's Mechanics Institute Library. And Cooper wasn't interested in competing only online.

So he began challenging Awuzie, a Cowboys teammate at the time, to locker-room matches. Cooper held an edge but saw Awuzie gaining. How could he stave off the corner?

Amari Cooper watches a chess match with Shar Deviprasath, who's coached him in chess for years. (Photo by Austin Roland, courtesy Universal Chess Tour)

Amari Cooper watches a chess match with Shar Deviprasath, who's coached him in chess for years. (Photo by Austin Roland, courtesy Universal Chess Tour)

Cooper asked his six-figure Instagram following for local chess hotspots.

"Hey I never knew you were into chess," Deviprasath responded. "I play constantly every week."

A spontaneous FaceTime call, online matches and chess club recommendations later, Cooper realized he'd discovered one of his favorite things: a new source from which to learn.

He asked Deviprasath to coach him — with one condition: "Don't train [Awuzie]."

They met each Monday night for two to three hours at the Barnes & Noble near Deviprasath's townhouse.

Four years later, lessons continue.



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They've outlasted the Barnes & Noble, which closed in May 2023, and Cooper's Cowboys tenure, which wrapped March 2022 when Dallas traded him to the Browns for a fifth-round draft pick as his salary outgrew their interest. Deviprasath worried then that the lessons and friendship had run their course.

Instead, he and Cooper began FaceTiming each Monday night as Deviprasath shared his screen.

"Then he came back to Dallas [each offseason] and it was almost like no difference," Deviprasath said. "Our chess lessons have grown over the years."

Cooper's chess repertoire has grown, too, from roughly four "openings," or strategies to approach the initial 10 to 15 moves of a game, to more than a dozen. Deviprasath has diagnosed Cooper's preferred play style complete with strengths and weaknesses, queuing up thousands of puzzles to test how Cooper responds to each scenario and position.

"I picked [strategies] that fit his aggressive, attacking style," Deviprasath said, explaining Cooper's preference to chase down his opponent's king rather than set up an elaborate, unfolding trap. "Attacking tactics, he gets those puzzles that normally other people around his rating take longer with.

"But in positions where it's simple and coming up with the plan, he sometimes takes longer."

I want to bring more attention to chess so that I can have more people to play against. I can't think of many things that I can do for hours at a time that I really enjoy doing.

Browns WR Amari Cooper to Yahoo Sports

Deviprasath has learned acutely about the way Cooper thinks; Cooper, in turn, has shared books from his library with Deviprasath and met his coach's parents and grandparents.

They celebrated together when Deviprasath earned national master recognition in 2021 and an International Chess Federation (FIDE) Master title in 2022.

And they celebrated as Cooper's online blitz rating (for games which last no longer than 10 minutes per player, and often fewer than five) rose from 1138 when they began training to a high of 1853 earlier this year.

His 1712 rating ranked in the top third of the 680,292 active players on lichess.org as of Wednesday.



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“Right now in my chess journey, I feel like it’s very similar to when I was in high school trying to get [football] offers,” Cooper told Yahoo Sports during a sitdown interview this spring. “I wanted it so bad and I was working toward it.”

“I feel that way in chess right now.”

NFL players have long learned from chess. But can chess learn from the NFL? As Cooper and Deviprasath nestled into a Dallas café booth on April 26, their energy was palpable.

So too was their brotherhood, as they finished each other’s sentences and prodded their counterpart beyond humility.

They know their lens is unusual.

Cooper is an elite football player, fresh off his seventh 1,000-yard receiving season in nine years. The five-time Pro Bowler’s 9,486 receiving yards and 60 receiving touchdowns each rank ninth among active players.

Deviprasath is an elite chess player, his 2540 rating 90th best in the country among more than 77,000 players. His classical chess rating slots second among U.S. 18-year-olds and 14th among Texas players of all ages. In the increasingly popular online blitz sector, his 2497 rating tops 99.6% of active lichess.org players.

For four years, they’ve taught each other about their “alien-mated” worlds. Now, they ask themselves: What can the popularity of professional football teach them on their quest to grow the game of chess? Can they attract spectators, and perhaps one day broadcast deals, if they encourage the world’s best players to compete in faster-paced competitions like blitz chess?

“If chess is ever going to get money in it and become a spectator sport, it needs to be watchable,” Deviprasath said.

They laid the groundwork.

Deviprasath recruited two of the world’s 30 best chess players for an in-person blitz match between Vidit Gujrathi (2720, India’s No. 3) and Hans Nieman (2703, U.S. No. 8).

Cooper funded the super grandmaster match, also recruiting NFL players for a celebrity rapid tournament (15 minutes each) that would further draw an audience.

They cofounded Universal Chess Tour with Cole Blakeman, a U.S. Chess and FIDE tournament organizer who recommended attracting chess buffs with an open and



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scholastic tournament. Blakeman coordinated chess boards, timers, tables and more for the 362-member open tournaments as well as marquee events.

“I’ve had some very strong players play in my events,” Blakeman told Yahoo Sports. “But I haven’t ran something that had celebrities and super grandmasters.

“Trying to make it exciting for a live audience? That’s something I’ve never done before.”

Cooper, Deviprasath made statement move — but their game isn’t over
On June 22 at NYTEX Sports Centre near Dallas, Parsons got up from his chair, distraught.

He walked around the table for another vantage point of the electronic chessboard.

A conciliatory Murray gave him a shoulder squeeze.

“You good?” the quarterback asked the pass rusher.

“No, I’m not good!” Parsons exclaimed.

He lamented his decision not to wear noise-canceling headphones, like Murray, or to invest more in sleep the previous night.

“Damn,” Awuzie laughed as he looked up from his own board to see Parsons’ loss.

Within the hour, Cooper’s 16th move cost him his queen and the semifinal game to Murray. Murray would last 68 moves deep into the celebrity bracket championship before Awuzie triumphed.

But as Awuzie hoisted the celebrity trophy, Cooper and Deviprasath knew that they, too, had won.

It’s like two alien-mated worlds, the chess world and the NFL world. The chess world is in its own little bubble. Breaking out of that bubble is necessary to make it grow bigger.

Chess national master Shar Deviprasath to Yahoo Sports

They’d brought more eyes to the sport, including 162,000 viewers of ChessBase India’s Niemann-Gujrathi stream (Niemann won the best-of-three, 2-1). They’d intermingled two worlds of avid fans and avid players, Cooper and Gujrathi even scrimmaging in a game that left Gujrathi saying Cooper “played so good.”

“I won of course, but he’s a professional football player,” Gujrathi said. “And for that, he played amazing chess. So I was really impressed.”



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As the tournament wrapped, Cooper and Deviprasath knew they, too, would soon wrap this chapter of their chess journey. Deviprasath would soon leave home for his freshman year at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, orientation tasks already on his docket. Cooper soon would return to Browns training camp, on the cusp of his 10th NFL season.

But as Cooper considered what could lie ahead for Universal Chess Tour, and for his personal chess game, he knew that in many ways this journey was just beginning. More lessons, puzzles and theory books awaited. Solace lay in knowing his competitive juices would cling to their intellectual outlet long after their physical outlet eventually tapers. Determination lay in his goal to one day outshine his master.

Until then — and afterward, if the day comes — he will keep learning.

“The difference between me and [other NFL players Deviprasath has trained] is I don’t think they’re willing to humble themselves and be like, ‘I’m gonna let Shar teach me,’” Cooper said. “Every athlete wants to beat him.

“I really want to get better.”



Haslam Sports Group Diversity and Opportunity Fellowship welcomes 2024 fellows By Patrick Warren, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/haslam-sports-group-diversity-and-opportunity-fellowship-welcomes-2024-fellows>

The Haslam Sports Group Diversity and Opportunity Fellowship welcomed the 2024 class of fellows this month, who will embark on a year-long opportunity to build their knowledge of professional sports and gain experience working in the field.

Fellows will have the chance to join both the Browns and the Columbus Crew over the course of the year-long program and will work in one or more disciplines – sales, marketing, operations and administration – each containing several different departments.

The Haslam Sports Group (HSG) began the Diversity and Opportunity Fellowship in 2021 and has seen multiple alumni receive full-time offers with the Browns and Crew or elsewhere in the sports industry. Other program alumni have returned to school in pursuit of MBA or Juris Doctor degrees.

Get to know this year's four fellows:

Danika Austin

Danika Austin, who finished her undergraduate degree and her master's degree in sports administration at Northwestern in 2024, is originally from Michigan and was a five-year starter for the Wildcats women's soccer team. Austin interned in the Northwestern athletic department, which is where she came across the fellowship opportunity.

"I was like, this is a perfect opportunity for me to be in two different sports that are two completely different industries and figure out my niche," Austin said. "I'm just so excited to learn so many things that I learned in classes, but now I get to actually implement them in everyday life."

Austin believes that the life lessons she learned while playing collegiate soccer will help her as she transitions to the world of professional sports.



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"I feel like it just instilled key values in me," Austin said. "Teamwork, collaboration, communication – all those things directly translate into the workplace and then just being around sports, you already know the grind. You know you're going to have to work weekends and do all of those things [...] so I think that lifestyle has prepared me to work in sports."

Austin will be working in both of the legal and administration departments and for each team.

Lianne Rodriguez

Lianne Rodriguez, who graduated from TCU in Dec. 2023, found the fellowship after doing research on the Browns organization for a sports communications class assignment.

"I was doing a project on multicultural marketing and that led me to an article on the Browns and how there are a lot of women that work here within the coaching staff, professional staff and I was like, that looks like a cool place to work," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez was a member of the marching band at TCU as a clarinet player and started the program's social media accounts. In addition to her musical interests, Rodriguez grew up a big soccer fan and credits her fandom with helping her get into sports.

"I am Mexican. I wasn't born there, but that's how I identify; my parents were both born there. And so, watching soccer games was a way to connect with my culture and my heritage and so that kind of initiated it all since I was little," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez will be working in the communications departments for both the Crew and the Browns this year.

Hannah Oliveros

Hannah Oliveros, a Chicago native and Ohio State alumna, appreciated the opportunity the HSG fellowship gave those just out of college to get into the sports industry.

"I had already been working with Ohio State athletics and football, so I was already in that field and wanted to expand that," Oliveros said. "I really liked how [HSG] put an emphasis on getting more diversity into the sports world."

Oliveros interned with Ohio State athletics for two years in addition to spending time with NBC Sports. She launched the athletic program's TikTok account and credits her experience as a college athlete for putting her in a position to succeed off the field.



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Oliveros not only worked for Ohio State athletics, but also spent three years on the gymnastics team, earning Academic All-Big Ten and WCHA Scholastic All-American honors in 2022 and 2023.

"I think college athletics is probably one of the hardest things that you could ever put yourself through," Oliveros said. "But it helped me very much so get into everything that I needed to do. I was training preseason while I was working football games and competing while I was posting for Ohio State athletics' TikTok account. I think that it gives you a better sense of how you need to manage your time and how you need to manage your priorities."

Oliveros will be working in the digital and marketing departments for both the Crew and the Browns.

Irfaun Delgado Karim

A graduate of the University of North Carolina, Irfaun Delgado Karim is excited to bring his passion for both soccer and football to the Haslam Sports Group fellowship program. Delgado Karim grew up in St. Louis and worked as an intern for the Los Angeles Football Club in 2023.

Delgado Karim appreciates how sports provide ways for a diverse group of fans to connect over their love of the game.

"It just goes to show how much deeper it is than just sports," Delgado Karim said. "It's awesome to be able to go somewhere and it's people of all different races, of all different backgrounds being able to cheer on the same thing."

Delgado Karim is looking forward to the chance to work with both a professional soccer and professional football team across different departments.

"For me, it was just trying to get a foot in the door in the sports industry," Delgado Karim said. "I think it can be one that's pretty difficult, especially for minorities, to get into. So just seeing this opportunity having that focus and also just being able to do rotations was something that piqued my interest."

Delgado Karim will be working in marketing and business analytics over the course of the one-year program.



Amari Cooper & the Browns: A story worth reading

By Terry Pluto, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/07/amari-cooper-the-browns-a-story-worth-reading-terry-pluto.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Let’s hear it for reasonable people.

That’s something you don’t hear very often, be it in politics or mega-million dollar sports.

But reasonable people with two different opinions worked together to make sure Amari Cooper was signed to a new contract in time for the Browns to open training camp Tuesday.

The Browns Pro Bowl receiver missed all the mini-camps because he wanted his contract reworked. You can argue that Cooper was under contract for 2024, so he should have reported for the required minicamps.

That was true – to an extent. Cooper had a contract for 2024. But not a cent was guaranteed. He was in the final year of the 5-year, \$100 million deal he signed with Dallas in 2020. The Browns acquired him from the Cowboys before the 2022 season in exchange for a fifth-round pick. Dallas had salary cap problems and they considered Cooper too expensive.

GM Andrew Berry quickly moved to make a trade for Cooper, knowing the classy veteran receiver was exactly what the team needed.

Cooper had back-to-back seasons of 1,100 yards receiving. He made the Pro Bowl in 2023. He is a solid locker room presence with a quiet personality much like Nick Chubb. He’s all business, all about doing the right things for the team.

So why hold out?

Because the contract was not going to be guaranteed until opening day.

The 30-year-old Cooper is entering his 10th NFL season. He has been a very durable player, having missed only seven games in his first nine seasons.



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Two of those games were in 2023. While the Browns had no interest in cutting Cooper, the veteran wide receiver knows a player can blow out a knee at any moment. It happens, especially when a receiver reaches the age of 30.

Cooper also saw the wide receiver market explode in terms of salaries with new deals in the \$30 million annual range.

Cooper wanted more money and some guarantees. He would have preferred a deal that included some guarantees for 2025.

The Browns could have said, "Look, you're under contract for \$20 million in 2024 – like it or not. Take it or leave it."

Instead, the two sides compromised.

The Browns didn't want to add a year to his contract, but they guaranteed for \$20 million for this season. Then the two sides added another \$5 million in incentives for this season.

Yes, a reasonable conclusion.

Furthermore, Cooper never said anything negative about the Browns during the negotiation process. The Browns continually praised Cooper for his attitude, stressing how important he is to the team.

And that's how deals can be made. Both sides want the same thing – Cooper on the field with the Browns by training camp.

Then they made it happen.



Cleveland Browns celebrate a weekend of flag football

By Patrick Warren, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/cleveland-browns-celebrate-a-weekend-of-flag-football>

As a group of nearly 200 girls took off their gloves and loosened up their cleats on their way to the bleachers at Massillon High, coach Karen Battle smiled when asked about the inaugural Ohio Girls High School Flag Football Camp hosted by the NFL, in addition to both the Browns and Bengals.

"Today has been phenomenal," Battle said. "Just seeing the different girls at different levels running through all of the different stations that they can essentially put into work or production when we play some of the games."

Battle, a former flag football player, emphasized the importance of the roles the Browns and NFL have played as flag football explodes in popularity.

"I think having support from those organizations is essential because let's just be honest, nothing is going to move without big brother," Battle said. "And so, if you want women's sports to advance, you need to have the support of the ones who, at this time right now, are in the spotlight so that they can speak and preach about the things that they see."

For the first time in either team's history, the Browns and Bengals collaborated alongside the NFL to lead the camp, held on July 18 in Massillon, Ohio. The clinic kicked off an extended weekend of flag football as the 2024 NFL Flag Championships also took place at the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

"Hosting this camp is crucial for the growth and success of the sport, especially in expanding its reach across the state. The collaboration between the Browns, the NFL, and the Bengals demonstrates a united effort to make girls' high school flag football a sanctioned varsity sport in Ohio," Browns Manager of Youth Football Hannah Lee said. "This day was extraordinary because it brought together girls from all over Ohio to compete. Whether it was



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their first time touching a football or they've been playing since elementary school, the level of competition, teamwork, and passion displayed was unparalleled."

Over the weekend, the Hall of Fame Village hosted the NFL Flag Championships in Canton, Ohio, featuring over 2,860 young athletes from teams across the world. The first-of-its-kind event was streamed on ABC, ESPN+ and Disney+, with the Metro Select Saints (Boys 15U) and Staten Island Giants (Girls 18U) walking away with titles.

As they prepared for a weekend full of football, the girls flag football clinic was another opportunity for the Browns to further their continued investment in girls flag football.

"We have always been committed to growing participation and equity in the sport for youth and high school football," Vice President of Community Relations Jenner Tekancic said at the camp. "We know it's important to provide opportunities for girls to play the sport and are proud to have introduced the opportunity in 2021 alongside Northeast Ohio Flag."

Since 2021, the Browns have worked with Northeast Ohio Flag Football to elevate girls flag football to promote equality in high school sports. Over the past four seasons, the number of Northeast Ohio high schools with teams has grown from two to 51. The Browns are focused on pushing girls high school flag football to become a sanctioned varsity sport under the Ohio High School Athletic Association.

Flag football is one of the fastest-growing sports in the U.S. and both men's and women's teams will be featured in the 2028 Olympic Games for the first time in the competition's history. According to USA Football, 230,000 girls between ages six and 17 competed in flag football in the U.S. in 2023, a 44 percent increase from 2014.

In May, the NFL hired Stephanie Kwok as the inaugural Vice President, Head of Flag Football, as the league prioritizes flag football. Kwok oversees the development of the flag football ecosystem at the league level – including driving growth in domestic and international participation, fan engagement and partnerships – and attended both the camp on Thursday as well as the weekend's competition.

"It opens the game of football up to so many people," Kwok said. "Flag football now is a way for girls to play football from a youth level through to high school through college scholarships and then obviously flag football will be in the Olympics for L.A. 2028."

In addition to Kwok, Senior Advisor for the NFL League Office Mike Daniels was in Ohio to oversee the weekend's events. Daniels encouraged athletes to have conversations with their athletic directors about expanding their athletic programs to include flag football.

"It's their biggest initiative at the league office and Ohio is the birthplace for NFL football, so it's one of the most important states in the world. And so, when you start thinking about



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that piece of it, it's important for Ohio to lead the charge and sanction girls flag," Daniels said, adding that the league is aiming to have flag football be a fully-sanctioned sport by 2026.

The free clinic on July 18 featured position-specific drills, including passing, route running, flag pulling and agility and featured a flag football tournament in the afternoon.

Football is a pressure-inducing sport, requiring a myriad of different technical and mental strengths. Battle said that through learning the game of football, the young girls on the field Thursday were also learning lifelong skills to help them off the field.

"Confidence, number one," Battle said. "You have some girls who may have never played a sport. And when I looked at them from the first day to the last, just seeing how some of them were able to catch a ball or weren't afraid of pulling a flag. Just watching and seeing them build their confidence and grow each day and each week."

The confidence the girls build through Browns flag clinics and other flag football initiatives was put to the test over the weekend as the competitions began. Mackenzie Brugh – who attends Ohio State – played for the Cleveland Mutts, who represented the Browns in the 18U girls' division during the NFL Flag Championships weekend. Brugh echoed Battle's message that the NFL's efforts to increase flag football's popularity enable young boys and girls to grow both as players and people.

"It's incredible, it creates many opportunities for so many young athletes who just want to play flag football," Brugh said.

Brugh and several other members of the Mutts have participated in a number of the Browns' girls flag initiatives. The Mutts were one of 280 NFL Flag regional winning teams represented in Canton, including six international teams.

"Days like today highlight why the future of football is female and affirm that young women belong in this game," Lee said. "We will continue to drive progress and strive to get this sport sanctioned so that young girls can envision a future where they can confidently say, 'I want to be a football player.'"



The Haslam 3 Foundation donates \$2 Million to Pelotonia for cancer research By ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/the-haslam-3-foundation-donates-2-million-to-pelotonia-for-cancer-research>

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Pelotonia today announced a \$2 million donation from Dee and Jimmy Haslam and The Haslam 3 Foundation to accelerate the scientific research on Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia (CLL), supporting Pelotonia's mission of ending cancer.

"I love Pelotonia's mission and it is an honor to be able to positively impact their efforts," said Dee Haslam. "We have all been touched by cancer and that is why awareness and research is so important. The way that Pelotonia brings the entire community together for such a critical cause has been tremendous and we are inspired by their transformative work."

Dee and Jimmy Haslam are managing partners of Haslam Sports Group, a sports and entertainment group with ownership of the NFL's Cleveland Browns, operating rights to Major League Soccer's Columbus Crew, co-ownership of the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks and investors in the WNBA. The Haslam 3 Foundation is the family's philanthropic foundation which gives back to community organizations in Ohio and Tennessee.

"Pelotonia offers hope for so many people impacted by cancer, including my own family," said Haslam. "Everyone is affected by cancer. My hope is more and more people get involved in Pelotonia – whether they ride on their bikes or make donations. I get excited thinking about all of the ways you can participate. I hope our gift inspires others to support Pelotonia as well."

This donation will directly fund CLL research at The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center—Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute (OSUCCC—James) as well as operational support for Pelotonia, adding The Haslam 3 Foundation as a new funding partner. Pelotonia's funding partners allow the organization to direct 100 percent of every participant-raised dollar to innovative cancer research.



"As I've spent time with Dee and Jimmy over the last few years, they were eager to understand how Pelotonia was making such a big impact not only on research but in engaging the community in such meaningful ways. They wanted to be a part of it," said Doug Ulman, Vice Chair of the Pelotonia Board and cancer survivor. "I've been honored to get to know them as people. It's clear they are big thinkers and have a vision for the difference they want to make. The collective Columbus community is grateful for their impact on our city and beyond. We are thankful to have the Haslams as part of the Pelotonia community and for their investment in furthering our mission of ending cancer."

Investment for CLL Patients Today and the Future

CLL is a cancer involving a type of white blood cell called a B lymphocyte which affects the blood, bone marrow and lymph nodes. The most common form of adult leukemia in the Western Hemisphere, CLL accounts for about one-quarter of new cases of leukemia in the U.S., and the average person's risk of a CLL diagnosis is about 1 in 175.

"I have a family member with CLL who is very symptomatic and know others who are fighting through this disease, so my hope is that our investment through Pelotonia helps the research for CLL treatment go quicker," said Haslam. "I learned that Pelotonia-funded research at the OSUCCC—James is working to find new and novel therapies for CLL. Doug and Pelotonia made the introduction for us to Dr. Woyach and Ohio State. It was remarkable to learn about the CLL expertise and breakthroughs in treatments right in our backyard in Columbus. Getting to know Dr. Woyach is such a gift. CLL is her passion; it's what drives her. If you're going to invest in research for something that you really care about, you want it to be done by someone with the background and qualifications that she has."

The Leukemia and Hematologic Malignancies Research Program at the OSUCCC—James, a global leader in research and treatment for hematologic cancers including CLL, is the recipient of this Pelotonia funding from the Haslam 3 Foundation. Jennifer Woyach, MD, a hematologist-oncologist at the OSUCCC—James, professor in the Division of Hematology, and co-leader of the Leukemia and Hematologic Malignancies Research Program, will lead the work. Woyach is a Pelotonia-funded researcher through both an Idea Grant and Fellow, who was named Pelotonia's 2021 Researcher of the Year for her exemplary work in CLL research and patient care.

"At the OSUCCC—James, we are very excited to use this investment both to strengthen our current work in advancing CLL research and to allow us to go into new directions to benefit CLL patients," said Woyach. "There has been remarkable progress in CLL over the past decade, but there remain areas of unmet clinical need. This funding will help us launch clinical trials for frontline CLL to try to optimize therapy for all patients. As well, we are expanding our research program in immunotherapy for CLL, and this funding will greatly accelerate this work."



Advancements in CLL Treatment with Pelotonia Funding

The American Cancer Society estimates 20,700 Americans will be diagnosed with CLL in 2024 and about 4,440 will die from CLL. While incurable, new targeted drugs – including ibrutinib, acalabrutinib and other versions of this targeted therapy that work by inhibiting a protein essential for the growth and spread of CLL cells – make it manageable to live with CLL.

A \$100,000 Pelotonia Idea Grant in 2013 helped fund the groundbreaking clinical trials that resulted in the development of ibrutinib, which was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2014. Approved for use in 100 countries, ibrutinib has been used to treat more than 270,000 patients worldwide and has dramatically changed the prognosis, rate of remission and quality of life for CLL patients. Acalabrutinib, a second-generation version of this targeted therapy that minimizes side effects, was approved by the FDA in 2019. Both breakthrough CLL therapies were developed largely through research by the OSUCCC—James scientists and physicians, including Dr. Woyach and her team, with Pelotonia funding support.

"Pelotonia has been instrumental in the transformation of CLL treatment. The philanthropy that fuels Pelotonia allows us to do novel work that otherwise wouldn't be funded," said Woyach. "Pelotonia enables research with higher risk but higher reward. In this case, the risk really paid off and we have the reward of great therapies for patients at The James and around the world."

One patient who was enrolled in a clinical trial involving ibrutinib then later acalabrutinib was Raphael Pollock, MD, PhD, FACS, who is a surgical oncologist at The James, Director of the OSUCCC and Pelotonia Board Member. Dr. Pollock credits his survivorship to these targeted therapies that were not available to CLL patients a decade ago.

"As a cancer surgeon and CLL survivor, I am humbled by this donation from the Haslam 3 Foundation to Pelotonia that will help discover the next frontiers in CLL treatment," said Pollock. "I am deeply grateful to the Haslam family and The Haslam 3 Foundation for their investment in this critical science. Philanthropic donations power cancer research and lead to breakthroughs like the CLL treatment that saved my life."

Future of CLL Treatment through Research

The focus for the future of CLL treatment is in creating more novel therapies that are better targeted to a patient's individual cancer. Under Dr. Woyach's leadership, the OSUCCC—James is positioned to continue to make significant advancements in CLL research by exploring areas that include overcoming patient resistance to therapies, working with companies to test new therapies preclinically, performing lab work to identify novel targets and studying new immune therapies. This critical research that aims to improve outcomes and quality of life for CLL patients today and that will be diagnosed in the future is accelerated through Pelotonia funding and donations like this from The Haslam 3 Foundation.



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"The beautiful thing about Pelotonia is that the community can participate in ways most meaningful to them. Not only is CLL deeply personal to the Haslam family but it is a very promising area of cancer research in which the OSUCCC—James is a global leader," said Ulman. "We could not be more grateful for the incredible support of Dee, Jimmy and the Haslam 3 Foundation. This donation is going to change and save lives."

To learn more about the impact of Pelotonia dollars, including the work of The Pelotonia Institute for Immuno-Oncology, visit pelotonia.org/impact and pelotonia.org/institute.

About Pelotonia

In 2023, Pelotonia celebrated 15 years of One Goal, accelerating funding for innovative cancer research, with its signature series of iconic and impactful events with cycling, entertainment, and volunteerism experiences. This year's events included the Opening Ceremony and Ride Weekend in August and a new Gravel Day event in September. To date, the Pelotonia community has raised more than \$283 million. With support from generous funding partners – American Electric Power Foundation, Bath & Body Works, Huntington National Bank, Peggy & Richard Santulli, Victoria's Secret, Ariel Corporation, The Haslam 3 Foundation, M/I Homes, Safelite, Barbasol, Cardinal Health, Diamond Hill, Nationwide Insurance and Pharmavite – Pelotonia directs 100 percent of every dollar raised by participants to cancer research at The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute, including the Pelotonia Institute for Immuno-Oncology.

This year's signature events will include Opening Ceremony on August 2, Ride Weekend on August 3-4 and Gravel Day on September 21, 2024.



Why holding out this offseason was a difficult decision for Amari Cooper, and what he hopes for his future with the Browns

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/07/why-holding-out-this-offseason-was-a-difficult-decision-for-amari-cooper-and-what-he-hopes-for-his-future-with-the-browns.html>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — Even though holding out in the spring led to a contract resolution for Browns receiver Amari Cooper just ahead of training camp, he wants you to know one thing.

It was never an easy decision.

“I love to practice,” Cooper said on Thursday as the Browns began training camp at The Greenbrier resort.

“This is my 10th year and I’ve never missed an OTA or minicamp, so it was really difficult.”

Cooper skipped out on all of the OTA sessions this offseason, as well as the team’s June minicamp.

The two sides avoided any training camp intrigue, however, coming to an agreement on Tuesday after the Browns restructured his contract for 2024. He received \$5 million in new incentives and had his \$20 million base salary fully guaranteed immediately. Previously, he had no guaranteed money heading into the final year of his deal.

That lack of guaranteed money was the biggest sway when it came time to holding out in the spring, rather than the skyrocketing salaries for receivers across the league (Minnesota’s Justin Jefferson tops the class at \$35 million a year, while Dallas’ CeeDee Lamb and San Francisco’s Brandon Aiyuk could soon join the \$30-million-a-year club).

“It wasn’t really about money,” Cooper said. “I think people have a misconception about that. It was more so in the language of my contract.



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“I signed a five-year deal with the Cowboys. Only two years (was) guaranteed. This is the last year of that deal, but it isn’t guaranteed until the week of the first game. And so I was really trying to mitigate the time in which I’d have to be out here practicing and risking injury.

“So it was more so about the guarantees, because you never want to get injured without any guarantees; and in the language of the contract, I could get cut.”

Another misconception: He also says he was never planning to execute a hold out during training camp, a move that would have cost him \$50,000 a day in fines.

“I don’t have any experience doing it,” Cooper said. “I am a routine kind of guy, and I’m the type of guy that I need those reps. So I always knew I was going to be here at training camp for sure.”

Cooper has been dynamite for the Browns ever since they traded a fifth-round pick to the Cowboys for him back in March 2022.

Last season, Cooper led the team with 1,250 yards and five TDs on 72 catches, playing with four different starting quarterbacks en route to his fifth Pro Bowl.

His yards ranked 10th in the NFL and third-most all time by a Brown, and he became the first receiver in Browns history to record back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons. He also set the Browns’ single-game receiving record with 265 yards in a 36-22 victory over the Texans on Dec. 24.

For the Browns, it’s not just about Cooper’s stellar on-field production, but the intangibles he brings.

He’s a proven leader, and a mentor in a room full of 20-something receivers, most of whom idolized him in his college days at Alabama, and a couple of fellow south Florida natives in Elijah Moore and Jerry Jeudy who were even looking up to him when he was in high school.

“Amari is the O.G. when it comes to wide receivers,” coach Kevin Stefanski said. “They all look up to him. They all respect him. When he speaks, everybody listens. They watch how he works. He doesn’t have to say much, but the way he works really factors into our young guys.”

As Cooper skipped practices in the spring, quarterback Deshaun Watson went to bat for his No. 1 pass catcher.



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“He’s the best in the game,” Watson said after Day 1 of Browns mandatory minicamp. “I believe that he shows it each and every year. He’s shown it the last two years with different quarterbacks, so I think you’ve got to put him up there, if not the best.”

For Cooper, it was an encouraging sentiment to hear.

“It was great to hear from my quarterback,” he said. “Obviously you want to hear those type of words coming from the guy who’s throwing you the ball.”

And even though Cooper is satisfied with how this dispute was settled, he still has an eye on his future, and was very honest about what he’s chasing.

The 30-year-old contended there was no bad blood on either end following his spring hold out, and said that he hopes to finish his career as a Brown.

“I’m really the type of guy that takes heed to old sayings,” he said. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. So I’m not really trying to go somewhere else. You never know. The grass isn’t always greener on the other side, so I would rather stay where I’m thriving.”

Cooper is about as thoughtful and introspective as they come, and he doesn’t take for granted even making it to year 10 as an NFL wide receiver.

But what he’s chasing is also bigger than a contract extension.

When it comes to his future, there’s only so much he can control — there’s compartmentalizing that needs to be done.

But the one thing he can control is his production on the field.

“If I have to go earn it, that’s what I’ll do,” he said.

“I’m willing and I’m ready to go out there and just play great football and just be undeniable out there.”



Amari Cooper speaks on remaining in Cleveland and his early impressions of OC Ken Dorsey

By Patrick Warren, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/amari-cooper-speaks-on-remaining-in-cleveland-and-his-early-impressions-of-oc-ken-dorsey>

Amari Cooper is happy to be back on a football field for his third season as a Cleveland Brown.

"It's been nothing but success here in terms of what I've been able to do on the field," Cooper said. "I like to get better each and every year while I'm here. I'm really the type of guy that takes heed to old sayings, you know, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it.' So, I'm not really trying to go somewhere else. The grass isn't always greener on the other side, so I'd rather stay where I'm thriving."

Head coach Kevin Stefanski agrees.

"He's a very productive player, and (general manager) Andrew (Berry) has talked about this before as well, but Amari really fits in with who we are," Stefanski said after the first day of training camp on July 25. "He works very, very hard, doesn't say much. Kind of keeps the focus on the football field. Practices hard, doesn't miss games. We as an offensive staff love moving Amari around, finding different ways to get him the football. So, we're very excited that he's here."

Since Cooper landed in Cleveland, the receiver and QB Deshaun Watson have been an electric duo, accounting for 51 catches for 870 yards and four touchdowns in their 12 games together. Cooper said that he has kept in touch with Watson throughout the offseason.

"I always keep in contact with all my quarterbacks," Cooper said. "I make sure I stay in touch with him, ask him how he's doing and stuff like that."

Cooper added that he appreciated Watson's comments that he made earlier this summer, in which the quarterback called Cooper one of the best receivers in the league.



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"That was great to hear from my quarterback, obviously you want to hear those types of words coming from the guy who's throwing you the ball," Cooper said. "And we're here at training camp and we can go out there this year, starting with training camp, and go out there and prove that we're the best together."

A critical figure in the connection between the quarterback and receiver this year will be offensive coordinator Ken Dorsey, who the Browns hired in the offseason. The five-time Pro Bowler expressed his longtime admiration for Dorsey – who starred at Cooper's hometown Miami Hurricanes.

"I've been following [Dorsey] since I was a little kid because he played for the U," Cooper said. "So, I've been a fan for a long time."

While Cooper was away from the team during the Browns' mandatory minicamp, he said he was still able to review the Browns' offensive installation as he prepared for the season.

"We get the installations sent to our phones," Cooper said. "So, I've been able to look over all the plays while I wasn't there."

Cooper, fresh off a campaign in which he became the first Browns wide receiver to record consecutive seasons with over 1,000 receiving yards, said he was excited about Dorsey's influence on the playbook, which is designed to lead to more scoring opportunities.

"The things that sticks out is the amount of plays that he wants to get ran," Cooper said. "You saw it with the Buffalo Bills, there's an emphasis on scoring every single drive, whether it's a field goal or a touchdown. And I think his whole philosophy is that the more plays you run, the more chances you get at scoring points."

Dorsey wasn't the only addition the Browns made offensively in the offseason, as they traded for WR Jerry Jeudy, a fellow former Alabama standout and Florida native.

"It's definitely a phenomenal thing that we have all the Florida receivers out here," Cooper said, referencing Ahmarean Brown, Matt Landers, Elijah Moore and Jeudy. "We're all cut from the same cloth I would say. We're all South Florida guys, we're all really good route runners, we've all been playing football since a very young age, have been running routes since a very young age. So, we kind of have a natural feel for the position. And I think we'll definitely feed off each other in a good way and there could definitely be some fireworks out there this year."

With a young receiving corps, leadership is vital. Stefanski praised Cooper for his role as a mentor for the younger pass catchers on the roster.



"Amari is the OG when it comes to wide receivers," Stefanski said. "They all look up to him. They all respect him. When he speaks, everybody listens. They watch how he works. He doesn't have to say much, but the way he works really factors into our young guys."

Browns tight end David Njoku explains why he's glad his accident happened last season **By Dan Labbe, Cleveland.com**

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/07/browns-tight-end-david-njoku-explains-why-hes-glad-his-accident-happened-last-season.html>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — It might surprise you to hear Browns tight end David Njoku describe the firepit accident that resulted in burns on his face, arms and hands last September.

"I'm very (glad) it happened," he said after the Browns practiced on Monday morning.

Njoku was burned trying to light a firepit on the Friday night before the Browns' Week 4 matchup with Baltimore, and was checked out by team doctors.

"When it happened, my eyes were open, so I saw everything and I really should have been blinded," Njoku said a few weeks after the accident. "So luckily I'm not. So, yeah, I give all the glory to God."

He played in the game against the Ravens about 36 hours after the accident, arriving to Cleveland Browns Stadium covered head to toe, including wearing a mask, and dealing with intense pain whenever his helmet even shifted, never mind putting it on and taking it off.

He had six catches for 46 yards in a home loss to Baltimore.

"I remember the next day I saw Dave and I was like, 'Dave, that was crazy,'" head coach Kevin Stefanski said. "He's like, 'Yeah, it was lit.' I don't know if I'd use that word, but yeah, that was crazy."

Njoku was able to take the accident and turn it into an opportunity to see things differently.



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“It changed my perspective immensely in terms of just what really matters in life and how far the human body can go,” he said.

Njoku went on to have his best season as a pro, catching 81 passes for 882 yards and six touchdowns, including 28 catches for 373 yards and four touchdowns in the four games between Weeks 14 and 17. He went over 100 receiving yards twice in that stretch, including 104 yards on a career-high 10 catches in a win over the Bears.

“I feel like it was easier because I feel like the hardest part was going through the fire, literally,” Njoku said. “And after that nothing really is as painful as getting your face burned off. So running and pushing on the field, I don’t think it’s anything compared to getting your face burned. So I think the hardest part was the act of burning my face and my hand and everything else started to smooth out a bit.”

Last season was the breakout even the most ardent of Njoku’s supporters had been waiting to see, a realization of all the potential the Browns saw in him when they drafted the raw 20-year-old out of Miami. It has been an at-times tumultuous run for the former first-round pick who turned 28 earlier this month and is now in Year 8.

Browns GM Andrew Berry was part of the group that traded up to draft Njoku with the 29th overall pick.

Berry pointed to some of the struggles Njoku endured in the early years of his career, from injury to feeling unwanted to trade requests and lesser roles before he emerged out the other side, not yet a finished product, but a better version of himself.

“We all grow and mature, so I have a personal affinity for David seeing him go through all that,” Berry said.

The affinity for Njoku will only grow if he builds on the finish to last season and turns it into an even bigger year in a new offense full of new opportunities for him.

“I feel like last year wasn’t necessarily my big season,” Njoku said. “I feel like we just got a little glimpse, but hopefully, God willing, we can put it all together from week one to week whenever.”

Day three of Browns' training camp at The Greenbrier

David Njoku is hopeful he'll find the success with Deshaun Watson he had with Joe Flacco at the end of last season. John Kuntz, cleveland.com

Just glancing at the Browns pass catchers, you don’t have to go far down the list to see where Njoku ranks in terms of priority. It showed in the targets last year, when Njoku was second with



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123, five behind wide receiver Amari Cooper. It's a safe bet this year will play out in a similar way.

"You go into every game thinking specifically about your guys and Dave's top of the list, you know, with who we're trying to get the ball to," Stefanski said.

Njoku is a chess piece for his head coach, making traditional personnel groupings almost irrelevant. He's a tight end, yes, but can line up as a receiver or in the backfield. He can make 12 personnel (one running back, two tight ends, two receivers) look like 11 (one running back, one tight end, three receivers) with his ability to line up wide.

"Versatility is an important part of that," Stefanski said. "You have to have the guys in order to do that. You see across the league, there are different move tight ends that you can find in all those spots that I mentioned. But having the physical ability and then also having the mental ability to do that is rare."

A big part of Njoku's growth has been about embracing all the facets of playing tight end, not just the glamorous parts, but the dirty work, the work in the run game, allowing him to become a player who doesn't often leave the field.

"Whatever they need me to do, I'll do," he said. "Obviously it's some more exciting times, I guess, when they're trying to give me the ball more, so I'm happy, but whatever they need to do, block, catch, run, dive, duck, dip, everything, I can do."

Njoku's perspective has been forged by eight years of growth, some of it difficult, some of it painful, figuratively and literally.

"He's been through the ups and downs," Berry said, "and I think oftentimes in our lives and careers, the hard times, they really have us grow and learn the most."

Once you've been through it, it's possible to see how it made you better, which has Njoku on the verge of building on a breakout season.

"Anything worth anything is going to come with adversity," Njoku said, "and that's the beauty of it."



How David Njoku has grown through embracing adversity and is bringing a new perspective to 2024

By Patrick Warren, ClevelandBrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/how-david-njoku-has-grown-through-embracing-adversity-and-is-bringing-a-new-perspective-to-2024>

After missing the first two days of training camp, TE David Njoku is happy to be back on the practice field.

"It felt awesome," Njoku said. "Exciting energy is all around so we've just gotta keep it going and keep working every day."

Njoku repeatedly emphasized his gratitude for his career's trajectory, now a reigning Pro Bowler set to have a major role in the Browns offense.

The tight end has plenty to be grateful for – most importantly his full recovery from facial and body burns sustained after an at-home bonfire during the 2023 season. Njoku, despite suffering second degree burns across his body, suited up for the Browns' Week 4 game against the Ravens just two days later.

"It was an accident, but I'm very glad it happened," Njoku said. "I feel like it changed my perspective immediately, in terms of what really matters in life and how far the human body can go."

Head coach Kevin Stefanski noted the change he saw in Njoku following the incident, which he called "traumatic."

"For what he went through and then how he grew from that was evident I think from all his teammates," Stefanski said. "Certainly, when you go through something as scary as that, you learn about yourself. You certainly put things in perspective. [...] I remember the next day I saw Dave and I was like 'Dave, that was crazy' and he's like, 'Yeah it was lit'. I don't know if I'd use that word, but yeah, it was crazy."



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Njoku went far following the accident, finishing the season with 882 receiving yards, six touchdowns and his first career Pro Bowl selection. He had standout moments on the field, such as his 23-yard reception in Week 10 against the Ravens, in which he broke two tackles and bodied S Geno Stone on his way to a first down. His season-high 134 yards on six receptions in Week 17 against the Jets helped the Browns end the regular season with a win and his 599 yards after catch led all tight ends and ranked sixth among all pass catchers in the 2023 season.

However, Njoku won't be satisfied with anything less than ending a season with a ring on his finger, something he's dreamed of since the first grade. When he was younger, he watched NFL games on TV and saw the emotions of players as they won a Super Bowl. He's ready to experience that for himself.

"Yeah, I had a Pro Bowl last year, but I was still kind of pissed about being there and not practicing for a Super Bowl. Everyone on this team aspires to be in that position of playing for a championship and that's what team football is all about," Njoku said.

Since Njoku's promising start as a rookie in 2017 to now, Browns Executive Vice President of Football Operations and General Manager Andrew Berry has seen significant growth in the 28-year-old tight end.

"You're talking about a guy who was a first-round pick, had a really good rookie year, got hurt, got to a point where he felt like the organization gave up on him, he got to a point where he was relegated to a lesser role, fought through it, wanted a trade, fought through it," Berry said. "We all grow and mature and I have a personal affinity for David seeing him go through all that."

As one of the longest-tenured Browns on the roster, Njoku is embracing the change that overtook the offensive staff over the offseason. With a new offensive coordinator in Ken Dorsey, as well as tight ends/pass game specialist Tommy Rees, Njoku said he was "happy" with the direction the offense was heading but emphasized that there is still a lot of work to be done.

During the opening days of training camp, Stefanski said that he would retain playcalling duties, cementing an element of consistency in the Browns' offensive identity. Njoku gave his approval of the decision, adding that he is willing to do anything to make the Browns a contender.

"He loves getting me the ball, so I love Kevin calling the plays," Njoku said. "I think he calls great plays. I think that all of us together, just brainstorming our thoughts towards one another, I feel like we can really dissect and get a lot of things done. Whatever they need me to do, I'll do. Obviously, it's more exciting when they try to get me the ball more. But whatever they need me to do, block, catch, run, dive, duck, everything."



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One way the Browns might choose to get Njoku the ball is by lining him up outside the numbers. The tight end's rare combination of size and speed makes it difficult for defenders to bring him down.

"Over the years, there's tight ends that you can line up out wide in the backfield, in line, and Dave's done a little bit of everything for us over the years – not every tight end can do that," Stefanski said. "But any time you put a tight end outside, typically, it's the physicality that corners are not used to. So, just the physicality of how those guys can bump the ball and get in and out of their routes and use their body are some of the things that you'll see with big tight ends."

Njoku's role on the offense will be one of many factors the Browns will need to use to their advantage as they take on a stacked AFC North this season. Njoku credited a roster full of veterans as a reason behind his confidence in what the Browns can do this year and said that "if it's easy, it's not really worth going all out for."

For Njoku, ease is an unfamiliar subject. Through injury and temporary dissatisfaction, through trial by fire to literal fire, Njoku is used to embracing discomfort.

"After that, nothing is really as painful as getting burned, as getting your face burned off," Njoku said. "Anything worth anything is going to come with adversity."



Mike Vrabel comes full circle with the Browns: From eating dog bones to helping the Dawgs eat

By Mary Kay Cabot, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/07/mike-vrabel-comes-full-circle-with-the-browns-from-eating-dog-bones-to-helping-the-dawgs-eat.html>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — Every day at Browns training camp, senior consultant Mike Vrabel races Jameis Winston downfield after a drill, keeping pace with the 30-year-old quarterback, who's 18 years his junior.

It's been a highlight of camp, with an X post of one heat getting more than 101,000 views.

"The quarterbacks, to their credit, they're not trying to waste any time or waste any reps," Vrabel said Tuesday after a morning walkthrough on a stormy Day 5 of camp. "And so we do the routes on air and after the last ball's thrown, they started taking off in the offseason, and I thought, well, it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to get these old bones moving.

"So now we just try to have a little bit of fun with it and certainly those guys are trying to get their work in and focus on the timing with the receivers, but then also they're not wasting a rep and they're taking advantage of getting their conditioning in and also getting back down to the other side to where we can get going again."

Kevin Stefanski, who loves having the fellow NFL Coach of the Year around this season to help out in any way possible, doesn't know who's been winning most of the races.

"As long as Vrabel stays upright," he said. "I don't think we're putting them on the clock, though."

Winston, one of the most competitive players on the field every day, loves the daily ritual.

"We're just competing," he said. "Mike Vrabel knows what it takes to win and is one of the greatest competitors to play the game, so that's how we compete at practice."

The races are just one way Vrabel, an Akron native and former star at Walsh Jesuit High and Ohio State, has been crazy active in this camp, as he was in organized team activities and minicamp. He's been all over the field, giving right tackle Dawand Jones a defensive look in offensive drills, and jumping back into his special teams days as a player to help his former Patriots teammates Bubba Ventrone coach up the new kickoff rules. He sprints from drill to drill, demonstrates hand and footwork, and simulates a rush.



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“That’s part of good coaching is being an active participant, showing the guys the drills that you’re going to be taking part in,” Stefanski said. “There’s a bunch of different ways to do it and there’s a bunch of different styles, but I do think active coaching is really beneficial to the players.”

At the Browns’ Foundation Golf Outing last month, he posed for a photo with Browns second-round defensive tackle Mike Hall Jr., reminding Hall that Vrabel is still Ohio State’s all-time sack leader with 36. He also notched 66 tackles for a loss.

“It’s very competitive energy because Mike’s a little bit of a trash talker sometimes,” Browns GM Andrew Berry said on Tuesday. “But he’s a very active coach, so the guys love having him around.”

Cleveland Browns consultant Mike Vrabel during training camp at The Greenbrier

The coaches and personnel execs do too. In fact, they can hardly believe their good fortune that “Vrabel” is in the house, imparting all of his knowledge and wisdom on his hometown team after getting passed over for head coaching jobs with the Panthers, Falcons and Chargers. Vrabel was fired by the Titans after a 6-11 season in his sixth campaign there, and the Browns took a chance that perhaps he’d like a little something to do while he waits for his next head coaching gig.

“I don’t know what he’d be doing if he wasn’t here,” Stefanski said during minicamp. “He can’t sit on a couch, so we’re getting our money’s worth and he’s in every drill, and he’s doing great in the meetings. And I just, like I’ve told him, he’s an energy multiplier. It’s fun having him around.”

Berry recalled him and Stefanski discussing the idea in January.

“We were like, ‘Do you think he’d do this?’ Like, ‘Do you think he’d do this?’ Or like, maybe he’ll want to take the year off with his family? And so like we kind of came in softly, tactfully, and it was like, from the very beginning, ‘Oh, yeah, I’d love to do this.’ Like, ‘Yeah, that’d be great,’” Berry said. “It’s pretty cool, because we had known Mike from crossing paths. Kevin was on a committee with him and everything, but to see him day to day, I mean, you would think he’s a first time NFL quality control coach by how much he’s sprinting up and down the field.”

The Browns are savoring every moment of the unique opportunity because they know it will be short-lived. Vrabel, who was in line for the Chargers job before they opted for Jim Harbaugh, will undoubtedly get snatched up next year. The NFL Coach of the Year in 2021, Vrabel also interviewed with the Falcons and Panthers before they hired Raheem Morris and Dave Canales, respectively.



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“We’re lucky because — and you all probably see it — we’re probably on borrowed time with him, but we’re going to maximize it as much as possible,” Berry said. “I think he has such a unique perspective because here’s a former All-Pro player, coached in power five college (as a Buckeyes assistant), defensive coordinator (Texans) and then very, very successful head coach in Tennessee. So there’s nothing that he hasn’t seen or that he can’t provide insight into whether it’s how we’re practicing on the field, how we game plan, player development and player support areas, how we think about acquiring players, whether it’s in the draft or free agency. So, we are certainly getting our money’s worth with Mike, and we couldn’t be more pleased to have him here with us.”

Vrabel has touched all facets of the organization since coming on board, including helping out with the draft, helping to coach tight ends at the request of Stefanski, and attending meetings at almost all positions.

“It’s amazing because who you see and who you feel is who he is every day,” said safeties coach Ephraim Banda. “Energetic, but very, very approachable, super intelligent, willing to lend a hand anywhere. Comes to the meetings and he’s been in safety meetings and he’s quick to jump up and help guys in there bringing up little pointers. I mean, he’s just brought a great vibe to him and the players love him. For me, it’s been awesome. A year or two in the NFL, a freaking Hall of Famer and unbelievably good coach to just be around and sense that, see that, feel that and learn from that. It’s just been a blessing for me personally. I know all the other staff feels the same way.”

The consultant role, which also helps repay the favor that Vrabel did for Browns defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz when he made him a senior advisor for the Titans in 2021 and 2022 coming off his defensive coordinator job with the Eagles, allows Vrabel to give back to his hometown team. Like every other young kid growing up in Northeast Ohio, he bled orange and brown — and ate dog bones.

“Absolutely ate the dog bones, you know what I mean?” he said. “I don’t think you were a Browns fan in middle school in Northeast Ohio if you didn’t try to get down a couple of those, because they were necklaces, right? They make the dog bones and the necklaces and then you’d just kind of go down and grab one every once in a while.

“But it’s a long time and you go in different directions, but certainly grew up a Browns fan, went to games and loved a lot of those former players that made this tradition great and you recognize how huge the fan base is in this area and how they embrace football and not only professional football, but high school football in this area and college football, and so it’s certainly a football town.”

Vrabel said he won’t have a role on game day with the Browns.



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“That’s something that we had talked about prior to doing this, which is the right fit for everybody,” he said. “And so I’m going to try to do anything that they ask me to do and be available to help throughout the week and then move ahead to the next opponent. So that will all kind of happen organically, but that’s where I see it being right now, just based off my conversations with Kevin.

“There’ll be games that I’ll be at and support as a fan and have a vested interest in our players playing well and then us winning.”

If all goes as expected, Vrabel will be back on the sidelines as a head coach next season.

“Sure, I mean, at the right time, I think there’s a time and place for that,” he said. “It’s not going to be anytime soon, so I think that things that I’ll ultimately learn here may help me the next time that I get an opportunity to have one of those interviews. This is where I’m focused on and focused on doing that and learning here and helping. And then if those opportunities present themselves after the season, then I’ll absolutely try to do that.”

In the meantime, he’s having a blast with the Browns. With the demands of being a head coach out of the way, he’s having more fun coaching than he probably has in years.

“I think it’s a good reminder,” he said. “I think it’s always a good reminder as you reflect on ultimately what this is and it’s a game and I get that it’s a business and it’s a competitive business, but not losing sight of that and not losing sight of being able to enjoy it along the way. You can work hard and have a good time at the same time. I think that that’s something that’s always important to remember.”

Will he carry that mindset over to his next job?

“Well probably going in, I think you will, but then sometimes things change,” he said. “I have to remember that when things change.”

For now, he’ll enjoy trying to beat Winston on a daily basis.



What Browns receiver Cedric Tillman thinks about every day ahead of the 2024 season

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/08/what-browns-receiver-cedric-tillman-thinks-about-every-day-ahead-of-the-2024-season.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio — It's a constant thought for Cedric Tillman, even in the offseason.

The Browns' receiver, about to enter year two of his NFL career, is fixated on getting his first career touchdown.

"I think about it every day, honestly," Tillman told cleveland.com on Monday, following the team's training camp practice at The Greenbrier resort in West Virginia.

Sure, the 6-foot-3, 215-pounder out of Tennessee thinks about it every day because he just flat-out wants that touchdown.

But there's also some strategy to this thought process.

"Visualization is very important," he explained. "Coach (Kevin) Stefanski always talks about it, so like I said, I would be lying if I said I didn't think about scoring a touchdown every play, and my celebration."

That celebration, he insists, is staying a secret for now.

Day five of Cleveland Browns training camp at The Greenbrier, July 30, 2024

But if Tillman and the Browns have their way, you'll see it quite a bit in the coming months.

Entering his second year of training camp, there's a new confidence to Tillman, who is coming off an MVP spring, one in which he was praised up and down by his coaches and quarterback Deshaun Watson.

But there's undeniably still a long way that Cleveland's 2023 No. 74 overall draft pick is hoping to go.

Early in his rookie year, Tillman struggled to get on the field. Opportunity came his way, however, when the Browns sent fellow receiver Donovan Peoples-Jones to the Lions at the trade deadline in exchange for a sixth-round pick in 2025.

Tillman proved to be a willing blocker, and arguably his best highlight of the year came when he flattened Ravens pass rusher Kyle Van Noy during the Browns' overtime win in Baltimore. With more opportunity, however, there didn't come attention-grabbing stats. He caught just 21 passes for 224 yards in 14 games with three starts, and failed to get that touchdown.



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There were times down the stretch when his position coach Chad O’Shea and quarterback Joe Flacco appeared visibly frustrated with him — the latter especially during the playoff-clinching win over the Jets last December, as the young receiver struggled to get open.

There’s certainly no ill-will on Tillman’s part, who calls Flacco a “great dude” and considers himself lucky that he got a chance to play with the former Super Bowl MVP.

But it was a critical learning experience for a rookie who had to quickly find his way.

“I’m just more comfortable with the coaches, the scheme, my teammates and players,” Tillman said. “I’m just able to play more free.”

This offseason, Tillman approached everything with a new invigoration.

Toward the end of this year’s spring program, Stefanski pointed out that Tillman hadn’t missed one day, including the majority-voluntary portion.

“It was important because I just needed to be in the facility, needed to be on the football field,” Tillman said. “I feel like I needed to get those reps so I can just come in this camp and be able to play fast and free.

“I just wanted to show the coaches stuff I’ve been working on. I just wanted to make sure I got into my playbook, knew all the details. I had a good relationship with the quarterback and I was able to play faster and I feel like it was shown.”

He shined those weeks in the spring, especially as the Browns were without Amari Cooper, who was holding out in a contract dispute that was finally resolved last week. Cleveland also didn’t have Jerry Jeudy available throughout their minicamp as he dealt with a minor injury.

It created more opportunities that Tillman felt like he was able to capitalize on, with his coaches and Watson taking notice, the latter praising him for being able to make “big boy” plays. “He has taken every rep and used that as an opportunity to become better,” O’Shea added. “I see a lot of improvement in him in year two.”

Tillman doesn’t take those words lightly.

“Me and coach have a good relationship,” he said. “He’s going to coach me hard, but obviously when he says stuff like that, for sure, it gives me a little boost. ... just trying to take in the message that he’s saying. Just try to, when the opportunity comes, just take advantage of it.”

It may have been a good spring and a good few opening days of training camp for Tillman, but the reality remains that he’s going to have to fight for snaps still in 2024.

The Browns’ undeniable top three receivers are Cooper, Jeudy and Elijah Moore. Tillman seems poised at No. 4, but is battling with fellow Browns draft picks David Bell, Jamari Thrash and Michael



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Woods II. There's also Jaelon Darden and James Proche II, who both bring special teams and return experience.

There's also the fact that the offense will look different this season, with more three-receiver sets and choice routes.

For now, it seems like the best path forward for Tillman over the remainder of the summer is simply to keep doing what he has been if he hopes to stand out among stiff competition.

"Nothing specific, other than showing up, continuing to do his work and whatever role he's asked to do," Stefanski said. "Ced, he's a pro now, not a rookie. So asking him to do a few different things in our offense."

If he can keep progressing, Tillman won't have to imagine what his first NFL touchdown will feel like for much longer.

Mike Vrabel on new Browns role: 'You can work hard and have a good time at the same time' **By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/08/01/mike-vrabel-cleveland-browns-nfl-game-football-consultant-reflections/74608779007/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — There are NFL coaches who are as intense as Mike Vrabel. But the coaches whose intensity surpasses that of the former Tennessee Titans head coach are very small in number.

Vrabel, though, has found himself in a weird place as training camps across the league get underway. The Akron native's still heavily involved in a football team's preparations for the upcoming season, yet he's not technically a member of the coaching staff or front office.



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That's the kind of world in which Vrabel finds himself in his role as a coaching and personnel consultant for the Cleveland Browns. During their camp in the mountains of West Virginia at The Greenbrier, he's been out on the field with the players, teaching tight end David Njoku blocking techniques and racing backup quarterback Jameis Winston between drills.

Yet, when the Browns kick off the regular season on Sept. 8 at home against the Dallas Cowboys, what will Vrabel's role be that day?

"There won't be a role on gameday," Vrabel said Tuesday. "That's something that we had talked about prior to doing this, which is the right fit for everybody. And so I'm going to try to do anything that they ask me to do and be available to help throughout the week and then move ahead to the next opponent. So that will all kind of happen organically, but that's where I see it being right now, just based off my conversations with (head coach) Kevin (Stefanski)."

So Vrabel will get all of the joy that someone whose last decade and a half in football has been spent coaching can draw from the practice field. However, the stress that came with being on the sideline on gameday, he can avoid — at least somewhat. Vrabel won't always been a detached observer from afar when the Browns play this season, not considering the time he's already invested in the organization.

"I mean, there'll be games that I'll be at and support as a fan and have a vested interest in our players playing well and then us winning," Vrabel said.

Mike Vrabel on Browns consulting job: Akron native Mike Vrabel sees Browns opportunity as chance to 'learn myself along the way'

Winning has been something Vrabel has enjoyed quite a bit of, both as a player and a coach. When the winning stopped in Tennessee the last two years, though, so did his time as Titans coach.

The man who won two AFC South titles, made three playoff appearances, was the AFC's No. 1 seed in 2021 and had five consecutive winning seasons to start his head coaching career was suddenly out of a job. The news stunned just about everyone, except for Vrabel.

"Oh, nothing surprises me," Vrabel said. "This is my 25th NFL training camp, so I would say that nothing surprises me in the National Football League. That's part of the job. I think it's disappointing. I think you're disappointed that you couldn't do the job the way that they wanted it or they envisioned it."

Which leads back to a couple of practices fields nestled among the wall of trees that cover the mountains that provide a natural barrier between The Greenbrier and the rest of civilization. On these fields, Vrabel has looked anything but the man who's only two weeks away from his 49th birthday.



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Instead, you can squint and see the 30-something who was just breaking into the coaching business at his college alma mater, Ohio State, or even the player who won three Super Bowls with the New England Patriots in the 2000s. Vrabel is right at home playing linebacker on a skeleton defense during an install period, acting 20 years younger.

And that may be the point of the whole exercise for Vrabel, who tried to land another head coaching job after being fired in Tennessee. He even got three interviews, but none came through with job offers.

Instead of sitting at home and relaxing, though, Vrabel jumped at the ultimate win-win opportunity. The Browns get to mine his vast football knowledge through the consultant role.

And for Vrabel? Well, there's something to getting back to the root of what drew him to the sport, back when he was still a kid running around the fields of Summit County.

"I think it's a good reminder," Vrabel said. "I think it's always a good reminder as you reflect on ultimately what this is and it's a game and I get that it's a business and it's a competitive business, but not losing sight of that and not losing sight of being able to enjoy it along the way. You can work hard and have a good time at the same time. I think that that's something that's always important to remember."

You never feel like you know it all': Browns DT Quinton Jefferson gets better with age **By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal**

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/07/31/quinton-jefferson-cleveland-browns-defensive-tackle-nfl-seahawks-veteran-leader/74622548007/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — Quinton Jefferson's career is one that seems to run opposite of how things normally work in sports.

What normally happens for a player is their best years statistically are often toward the front or middle of their career. However, when one looks at the first eight seasons in which Jefferson has played, it's been over the defensive tackle's last three seasons where he's seen his best numbers, especially in terms of sacks.

"I think really it's personal growth, because my first few years I was just a little banged up," Jefferson said in an exclusive interview with the Beacon Journal last week at The Greenbrier. "So once I just got healthy and was able to just catch my stride, I feel like I just kept getting better and better. I take pride in you never feel like you know it all, never feel like you arrive. I just



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constantly try to find new ways to reinvent myself, just get better and better as a player. I had the opportunity to play with some great players and just take a little bit from everybody."

A year ago with the New York Jets, Jefferson posted a career-high six sacks. It's that production that led the Browns to sign the 31-year-old in the offseason to add even more veteran help on the interior of the defensive line.

Those six sacks came on the heels of a 5.5-sack season with the Seattle Seahawks in 2022. The year before that, he recorded 4.5 sacks with the Las Vegas Raiders.

Indianapolis Colts quarterback Carson Wentz (2) ditches the ball as Las Vegas Raiders defensive tackle Quinton Jefferson (77) brings him down in the backfield Sunday, Jan. 2, 2022, during a game at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis.

That's 16 sacks in the last three seasons for the 6-foot-4, 291-pound Jefferson. Over the first five years in the league — the first four in Seattle — he had 10.5 sacks combined.

"Q's done a nice job," head coach Kevin Stefanski said. "A veteran, has played in different schemes and systems. Understanding how we play is a big part of it right now, but excited about what he brings. And it's early in camp, but excited about having a veteran in there."

Jefferson's growth really can be chalked up to availability as much as anything else. The Pittsburgh native and former 2016 fifth-round pick of the Seahawks out of the University of Maryland only played in nine combined games in his first two seasons with Seattle.

The big injuries for Jefferson were not one, but two separate anterior cruciate ligament tears, one while he was at Maryland and one as a rookie in 2016. However, after playing six games in 2017, he would not miss more than two games in a season until a Week 15 hip injury last year landed him on season-ending injured reserve.

Those early injuries, though, were something that led Jefferson into some deep reflection.

"I had to really just stop and think, what the hell am I doing?," Jefferson admitted. "I got to figure out how to stop this from happening. Really just from the ground up, just taking care of my body and even my mental. The game is, everybody's athletic, so it's like, what's going to separate yourself a lot of time is that mental aspect. Whether just making sure everything's good in your home place and just knowing your plays and just being a student of the game."

Bills Quinton Jefferson pressures Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson.

The thing Jefferson had going for him was the teammates he had around him in Seattle. He landed with the Seahawks at the height of their "Legion of Boom" defensive days, which provided him plenty of veterans to show him the ropes.

Two Seahawks in particular — Michael Bennett and Cliff Avril — became Jefferson's sages. Their advice went beyond just on the field to his role with his, at the time, three children.



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"Those two guys, I credit them with all my success and all my production I was able to do on the field to those guys," Jefferson said. "They took me under the wing and really showed me how to be a pro on the field as well as off the field. How to have balance with your life. I have four kids. I came in with three kids, so Mike really just showed me how to have really that work-life balance."

Jefferson, in some ways, now finds himself in the role of Bennett and Avril. He's the veteran on a defense that's among the best in the league in Cleveland.

The addition of the nine-year pro provides the Browns with a little more pass rush from the interior of the defensive line. That could add a dimension to the defense that only gives their ends, specifically reigning NFL Defensive Player of the Year Myles Garrett, more openings to really wreak havoc on quarterbacks.

Jan 1, 2023; Seattle, Washington, USA; Seattle Seahawks defensive end Darrell Taylor (52) and defensive tackle Quinton Jefferson (77) sack New York Jets quarterback Mike White (5) during the second quarter at Lumen Field. Seattle Seahawks defensive end Shelby Harris (93) watches from left. Mandatory Credit: Joe Nicholson-USA TODAY Sports

"I look forward to seeing what he can do on the inside when the time comes, but you have to have that push in the middle to avoid the QB stepping away from a strip sack or a big hit, a big play to be made," Garrett said. "So with him being able to provide pressure and Quinton stepping up from 6, 5, 4 yards, that'd be perfect. That's when you rushers start working together and you start seeing six sacks games. 7, 8, 9 sack games. So we look forward to putting up numbers like that."

Jefferson's background with the Seahawks gives him a fascinating perspective through which to view the Browns' defense. Like now with Jim Schwartz in Cleveland, he also played for a defensive genius in Pete Carroll in Seattle.

Both of those defenses seemed to almost taken on the personality of the men who ran them. Both carried themselves with a swagger that matched their players', which carried over into their defenses' play.

"They are two men who are confident in themselves and what they do, and they've done it at the highest level," Jefferson said. "They won championships. They know what winning looks like, so it's like they have the blueprint. So I would carry myself with that same swag and confidence as well. I appreciate them both because they let guys just be themselves. They understand that when a guy is comfortable and can be himself, you can get the best out of them."



Grant Delpit finds fit, future in Jim Schwartz's system

By Scott Petrak, Chronicles-Telegram

<https://www.brownszone.com/2024/07/31/grant-delpit-finds-fit-future-in-jim-schwartzs-system/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — The arrival last year of defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz may have changed the trajectory of safety Grant Delpit's career.

Delpit had a decent season in 2022, including a two-interception game against Washington, but his long-term future with the Browns remained unsettled as he entered the final year of his rookie contract. The fit in Schwartz's system was a great one and began to unlock Delpit's potential, earning him a three-year, \$36 million extension.

Mike Vrabel sprinting, coaching, having fun as he and Browns make most of their time together

"Making plays, flying around the field, pulling at the ball, playing man," Delpit said Tuesday during training camp at The Greenbrier Resort. "It's a good scheme. A lot of successful safeties come out of this scheme."

Schwartz relied on man-to-man coverage and used Delpit more at the line of scrimmage than in the deep half of the field. Delpit responded by playing well enough to put himself in the Pro Bowl discussion. He had 80 tackles, seven for loss, an interception, three passes defended, 1.5 sacks, four quarterback hits and a fumble recovery in 13 games.

"Everybody saw what Grant was able to do, how he was able to play in our system, the physicality that he brings to what we do, has great ball skills," coach Kevin Stefanski said.



Training Camp Log, Day 5: Offense recovers after rough start to competitive practice

Delpit is all-in with how Schwartz wants to play.

“Man it up. We man it up,” he said. “I put it on tape a lot last year. Everybody knows we play man 60, 70 percent of the time. So trying to continue that being the best man safety in football really.”

Delpit won the Jim Thorpe Award as the nation’s top defensive back, was the No. 44 pick in 2020 out of LSU and doesn’t lack for confidence. He may be getting ahead of himself with the superlative.

He’s yet to be recognized with a Pro Bowl or an All-Pro, and Pro Football Focus ranked him the 22nd safety entering this season after grading him 75.5 in coverage last year, which ranked 19th in the NFL.

He realizes he can do more.

“We didn’t have the output we wanted last year, but stay tuned,” Delpit said, including safety Juan Thornhill. “We had one pick between me and Juan, so we’re trying to get that ball. We call it takeaways, not turnovers, so we got to get it.”

Safeties coach Ephraim Banda has known Delpit since trying to recruit him to the University of Miami. Banda joined the Browns last year, said Delpit had a “great” season and envisions bigger things.

“I know he’s motivated mentally, physically,” Banda said. “He really wants to attack it and have a really successful year with his body. He wants to go out there and be the guy for the group and really push everyone to get to where we all want to go.”

The story of Delpit’s young career can’t be told without injuries. A ruptured Achilles tendon in training camp ended his rookie season, he came back to start seven of 15 games in 2021, stayed healthy for 2022 and missed the end of last season with a groin injury that sent him to injured reserve.

He was close but unable to return for the wild card playoff loss to the Texans.

“Of course, I feel left out. Never want to finish the season like that,” Delpit said. “We didn’t end how we wanted it to, but new year, new start.”

The Browns have made two playoff trips since Delpit was drafted. He missed the 2020 postseason with the Achilles.

“It’s been twice and I still haven’t played out there. But it’s coming soon,” he said.



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Delpit qualifies as a veteran in Year 5, has taken on a leadership role and welcomes more responsibility, including calling the defensive signals. Middle linebacker Jordan Hicks has that job.

“I feel like I’m a vocal guy. I try not to never leave the field, get everybody on the same page,” Delpit said. “I don’t have the green dot, but I would. I’m open to it.”

“But just being that guy that has everybody on the same page really, that’s a safety’s job. Got to set the tempo. I got to set the pace, set the physicality for the defense. That’s what I try to do.”

Banda has seen the evolution of leadership and believes it’s not done.

“Last year, really pushed him to make sure that the defense feels his personality. He has one,” Banda said. “Sometimes he kind of comes across as stoic and quiet, but when you see him behind closed doors or you see him on the field make a play, it comes out. And my challenge to Grant is to make sure that that defense that’s on that grass feels that consistently because that’s leadership, and people respond to that.”

As Delpit strives to be considered one of the best in the league, he doesn’t have to look outside the AFC North to compare himself with those ahead of him. Pittsburgh’s Minkah Fitzpatrick is a four-time Pro Bowler and three-time first-team All-Pro, and Baltimore’s Kyle Hamilton became an All-Pro last year in just his second season after four interceptions, a touchdown, 10 tackles for loss, three sacks, 13 passes defended and a forced fumble.

“I know he’s motivated to be among those guys,” Banda said. “I know that’s something we talk a lot about. The big thing for him to take that next step that him and I discussed is making sure he grows big picture in the defense. Understanding why and how things are done, not just his position, not just the corners.”

“Identifying offenses to give them more opportunities to make plays, really growing his game beyond just his position in his spot. Finding ways to create more takeaways, get more sacks, get more tackles.”

Delpit has found a comfort zone in Cleveland and is grateful owners Dee and Jimmy Haslam and general manager Andrew Berry committed to him with the extension.

“It looks like I’m going to be here for the long run. We wouldn’t want to be anywhere else, man,” Delpit said. “I’m so thankful for the organization, Haslams, AB believe in me. I feel I haven’t shown you anything yet.”



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Coaching hungry Mike Vrabel putting his stamp on Browns **By Jeff Schudel, News-Herald**

<https://www.news-herald.com/2024/07/31/coaching-hungry-mike-vrabel-putting-his-stamp-on-browns/>

Mike Vrabel is difficult to miss as he roams the practice fields where the Browns are conducting the early portion of their training camp in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. He played 14 NFL seasons as a 6-foot-4, 261-pound linebacker and still looks fit enough to line up for a series or two. He sticks out like the Appalachian Mountains that serve as a backdrop for the practice site.

Vrabel, 48, was hired by the Browns on March 15 as a “coaching and personnel consultant.” He spent the previous six years as head coach of the Tennessee Titans and did not bounce to another head coaching job when seven teams, not including the Titans, hired a replacement after firing their head coach. He was defensive coordinator of the Houston Texans in 2017.

The job of coaching and personnel consultant has no borders. Browns defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz worked as a senior defensive assistant under Vrabel with the Titans in 2021 and 2022. Now Vrabel, who coached the Ohio State linebackers in 2011 and then the Buckeyes’ defensive line in 2012-13, is a sounding board for Schwartz. But during the early portion of training camp, Vrabel has been hovering around the tight ends.

Vrabel’s NFL playing career started in 1997 and ended in 2010. It has been almost four decades since his August days weren’t spent on a football field.



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Amari Cooper talks to Jeffri Chadiha about expectations for his third season as a Brown 'Back Together Weekend'

"It's been amazing to be able to get back on the field and coach and try to help where I can and most importantly learn," Vrabel told reporters. "Be a part of a great staff with some really great veteran coaches, with some really great young and up-and-coming coaches. So, wherever I can help, I'm more than willing to try to do that."

Vrabel was born in Akron in 1975 and graduated from Walsh Jesuit High School. He earned a scholarship to play football at Ohio State. He was 10 years old in 1985 when the Browns began their run of five straight years in the playoffs.

"Absolutely ate the dog bones," Vrabel said. "I don't think you were a Browns fan in middle school in Northeast Ohio if you didn't try to get down a couple of those, because they were necklaces, right?"

"They make the dog bones into necklaces, and then you just kind of go down and grab one every once in a while. But it's a long time and you go in different directions, but I certainly grew up a Browns fan, went to games and loved a lot of those former players that made this tradition great."

Vrabel played linebacker with the Steelers from 1997-2000 under head coach Bill Cowher. He played the same position with the Patriots under Bill Belichick from 2001-08 and then finished his career with the Chiefs in 2009 and 2010.

Cowher and Belichick were snarly. Vrabel at times was the same way as head coach of the Titans. He posted winning seasons in each of his first four years as head coach. His team won the AFC South at 11-5 in 2020 and 12-5 in 2021, but both teams lost in the first round of the playoffs. The Titans were 7-10 in 2022 and 6-11 last year, so Vrabel was fired.

It is safe to say there will be another wave of head coaching changes next January. It is also safe to say Vrabel will be a candidate for one of those openings. But for now, Browns head coach Kevin Stefanski is happy to have "Vrabes" on his staff.

"Vrabes, we're having him do a bunch of different things," Stefanski told reporters. "He helps me a ton in all the head coaching areas. I can bounce things off of him. He helps our personnel group because he's got a very good eye for personnel."

"And then I just think it's valuable to have a former defensive player, a former defensive coach, in the offensive meeting. So Vrabes is in there with us on offense giving that perspective from a defensive side and then in particular working with the tight ends when we get to an individual perspective."



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Vrabel said he will not have a role on game day. That was agreed upon before he was hired.

“I’m going to try to do anything that they ask me to do and be available to help throughout the week and then move ahead to the next opponent,” he said. “And so that will all kind of happen organically, but that’s where I see it.”

Coaching is in Vrabel’s blood. He wants another head coaching job.

“At the right time, there’s a time and place for that,” Vrabel said. “It’s not going to be anytime soon. So, I think that things that I’ll ultimately learn here may help me the next time I get an opportunity to have one of those interviews.

“This is what I’m focused on, focused on learning here and helping. And then, if those opportunities present themselves after the season, then I’ll absolutely try to do that.”

Vrabel won’t be the only former head coach hoping for a job offer in less than six months. Belichick has some unfinished business, too.

NFL Star Amari Cooper’s Apparel Firm Takes Aim at Sneaker Giants

By Eric Jackson, Sportico.com

<https://www.sportico.com/personalities/athletes/2024/amari-cooper-sneakers-route-runners-1234791650/>

A couple of days before the Cleveland Browns’ season-ending playoff loss to the Houston Texans in January, Amari Cooper walked into the team locker room to greet his teammates. And he didn’t come empty-handed—Cooper brought dozens of pairs of his shoes from his apparel business Route Runners, a fitting name for one of the NFL’s top receivers, and gifted each of his teammates with a pair of his signature sneakers, the 001s, modeled after the Air Jordan 18s.

“They enjoyed them because they never had anything like it before,” he said in an interview. “It felt more personalized for them, which was the true intention. As an athlete growing up, everyone one day wants to have their own shoe like Jordan did. But that’s more probable for basketball players than football players.”

Cooper looks to flip that narrative on its head by refusing to wait for one of the sneaker powerhouses to offer him a signature shoe. Instead, he wants to challenge them.

The former Nike athlete runs routes for a living, but he daydreams about the day he’s running a successful apparel business. The five-time Pro Bowl wide receiver isn’t wasting time turning



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those daydreams into a reality either. While his upstart venture is still in its startup mode, launching just three years ago, he's hellbent on building not just a profitable company but one he hopes can rival some of the biggest giants in sportswear such as Puma, Nike and Under Armour.

"That's definitely my main goal after football," he said. "We want to be the sports apparel brand, making shoes and gloves, and things of that nature. That's what I look forward to doing."

Cooper's fashion business ambitions aren't just driven by his eagerness to exercise his creative sense and business acumen on a deeper level. He wants to create generational wealth that even some of the highest earning athletes never achieve. He's not relying on his pass-catching abilities to make that happen.

"It's a cap on how much a receiver can make; for example, the highest paid receiver makes \$35 million (per year), and there's not a receiver who can make more than that right now," he said. "But when you own something, the sky is the limit. You determine how much your company makes. It's something I want to be in control of."

It's become trendy for NBA players to launch their own sneaker brands or partner with lesser-known apparel companies to create their own line of shoes. It's a strategic move that often allows them to garner more influence over creative direction than what's typically available at places such as Nike and Adidas.

In the NFL, it's far less common to find star players doing the same. Shoe companies have found it easier to lean on basketball players—who play a far more international sport, aren't hidden behind helmets and whose playing shoes can be worn on the street—to move product and drive sales. That may be starting to change. New Balance launched its inaugural American football cleat collection and signed Arizona Cardinals rookie wide receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. to promote them.

Cooper looks to ride this wave of shoe brands getting into the football cleat lane, with plans to start designing his own line next year. He first wants to finish out this current series of 10 sneakers, with the 002s and 003s dropping later this year, and then roll out cleats modeled after the 001 sneakers. His vision doesn't stop there. He wants to sign NFLers, similar to what New Balance has done, while creating dialogue with the NFLPA to potentially support his product.

Backed by his agent Chafie Fields and others at talent agency Wasserman, he has a small team helping him elevate his brand, including a former Dallas Cowboys marketing team staffer who helps promote Route Runners on social media. There's another hired gun to help process orders from the brand's fulfillment center in Cleveland. Cooper is currently looking to hire a CEO with sportswear industry experience to help navigate the brand out of its infancy.

The former All-American at Alabama was inspired by billionaire former Nike CEO Phil Knight and Reebok founder Joe Foster after reading their memoirs years ago. He notes their consistency and persistence through many hurdles that led their eventual success. The athlete entrepreneur, who



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also partnered with a Chinese factory to manufacturer his products, doesn't see why he can't capture his own prosperity despite his attempt to make waves in a crowded apparel space. "I was just motivated by [their stories] and understanding that I do believe that Route Runners can be next," he said.

Cooper's putting his money where his mouth is, self-funding his venture to be sustainable long-term after his playing days are over. He has even liquidated some of his other investments, including selling 40 of his 50 rental units across Alabama, North Carolina, Texas and Mississippi to inject more capital into distribution, manufacturing and marketing.

Cooper enters his 10th NFL season looking to finally capture the Lombardi Trophy, which has eluded him his whole pro career. He knows more on-field success will only help drive attention, and potential capital, to his budding apparel company.

Just like the patience he displays when he goes through his route tree on the field, Cooper wants to do the same off the field, remaining focused yet calculated in his approach to grow Route Runners.

"Everything is a process," he said. "Nothing happens overnight."

(This story has been corrected in the antepenultimate paragraph to show that Cooper will be starting his 10th, not 11th, NFL season.)

Mayor Justin Bibb goes public with \$461M taxpayer-funded offer to renovate Browns stadium, asks Haslams to respond by Aug. 12

By Courtney Astolfi, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/news/2024/08/mayor-justin-bibb-goes-public-with-461m-taxpayer-funded-offer-to-renovate-browns-stadium-asks-haslams-to-respond-by-aug-12.html>

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Negotiations between Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb and Cleveland Browns owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam over a possible lease extension on the lakefront stadium reached a turning point Thursday, when Bibb went public with a \$461 million offer for the city to cover nearly half the costs of a roughly \$1 billion stadium renovation.

Bibb, until now, has kept negotiations with the Browns private. His announcement comes days after Jimmy Haslam publicly announced he was still weighing his options -- and still considering moving the Browns to a new domed stadium in Brook Park, rather than staying at the Cleveland stadium.

"It's time," Bibb's chief of staff, Bradford Davy, told cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer. "We've been in good faith negotiations with the Cleveland Browns for over a year, and together, each



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party has made clear what is important to them. We've gotten to a point where we've really exhausted a lot of the deal points."

Davy added: "We're at a place now where we need to be asking questions about what the future of the lakefront looks like, and to answer that question, we need to know whether or not the Browns will call it home."

The Browns owners want the public – be it the city, county, state, or some combination of the three – to finance half of an approximately \$1 billion renovation of the lakefront stadium, or half of a \$2.4 billion domed stadium in the suburbs.

Cleveland's offer nearly meets that condition. And, according to Davy, it would be less of a burden on the region's taxpayers than the Haslams' possible plans to build in Brook Park.

"We believe that our proposal offers the Browns a world class facility and upgraded fan experience at a fraction of the cost to the taxpayers than the alternative being discussed outside the city of Cleveland," Davy said.

In a letter sent to the Haslams dated Aug. 1, which was made public by City Hall, Bibb asks the Haslams to respond to his offer by Aug. 12

Cleveland's offer, according to a press release, would extend the Browns' lease another 30 years, plus a possible five-year extension, and amount to \$461 million in direct city subsidies. They would include:

- \$367 million (\$227 million from increases in admission tax revenues, \$120 million from Cleveland's negotiated share of Cuyahoga County sin tax revenues, and \$20 million in existing stadium capital reserves)
- \$94 million for stadium capital repairs and improvements from expected parking revenues at Willard Garage and the Muni Lot, which would be turned over to the Browns for their exclusive use on game days and event days.
- "Under the current lease, the city covers \$1.3 million in annual property taxes and insurance, while the Browns pay \$250,000 in rent. Under the proposed new lease, rent will be waived for the Browns, but they will assume responsibility for the insurance and tax payments. This adjustment aligns with the lease agreements held by the Guardians and Cavs, making it consistent across sports franchises in Cleveland," the press release said.

Bibb also told the Haslams that Cleveland is committed to developing the area around the lakefront, including the construction of a land bridge connecting the stadium to downtown Cleveland, changes to the Shoreway, and the construction of additional parking around the stadium.



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Cleveland Browns spokesman Peter John-Baptiste said the Haslams are reviewing Bibb's letter and will likely have some questions for the city. Then, he said, they'll have to "figure out where we go from there."

"As we have said consistently throughout this process, we continue to communicate and collaborate with the cities of Cleveland and Brook Park, Cuyahoga County, and the State of Ohio on a long-term stadium solution that creates a world-class experience for our fans and positively impacts Northeast Ohio," Haslam Sports Group Chief Operating Officer, Dave Jenkins, said in a statement. "We are working diligently to comprehensively examine all options to identify the best path for not only our fans, but also Greater Cleveland and Northeast Ohio."

The Haslams are considering the Brook Park option, in part, because that site would offer them an opportunity to cash in on parking, retail, entertainment and dining space they would develop around a new domed stadium – similar to other recent stadium projects around the U.S.

At the lakefront site, on the other hand, Bibb and the North Coast Waterfront Development Corporation – not the Haslams -- would be the ones controlling plans for stadium-adjacent development.

In a term sheet that was also sent to the Haslams on Thursday, Bibb described how the city would be willing to negotiate development rights around the lakefront stadium, and invited Haslam Sports Group to participate in the city-led plans.

Bibb also offered the Haslams exclusive use of the Willard Garage and Muni Lot on event days – but those parking revenues wouldn't go straight to the Browns owners. It would instead be used to fund some of the city's share of stadium repairs, according to the term sheet.

The materials provided by City Hall do not mention possible subsidies from the state or county, and how those might affect a possible deal.

The Haslams will likely struggle to get half the price tag covered by the public if they build a domed stadium outside Cleveland.

Cleveland's sin tax revenues can't necessarily be used for a suburban stadium, Brook Park's city budget can't support nearly the level of subsidy Cleveland can offer, Cuyahoga County's bonding capacity is expected to be stretched thin due to a new jail and courthouse, and the statehouse may be limited on what it can provide, given the number of other professional sports teams in Ohio.

A Cuyahoga County spokeswoman declined to tell cleveland.com whether the county is considering a substantial contribution to make the Brook Park plan more viable.

"We are hopeful that the city of Cleveland and the Browns come to a resolution. We have not been a party to their negotiations. Ultimately, the administration believes that all stakeholders need to come together to discuss a long-term vision for not just the Browns but also the Guardians and



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Cavaliers,” Kelly Woodard, spokeswoman for County Executive Chris Ronayne, said in a statement.

Bibb said in his letter that it would be irresponsible for anyone to offer public subsidies for a stadium outside Cleveland.

In addressing the Haslams, Bibb was emphatic about the importance of the stadium remaining in downtown Cleveland.

He said he was confident his \$461 million offer would keep the Browns on the lakefront. He noted how his funding model ensures that fans who buy tickets will be the ones to cover the cost of upgrades. And he described how the offer he has put forth is an equitable one that would not impact Cleveland’s general fund, which is relied upon for police, code enforcement, trash collection, parks and other basic city services.

“We are implementing a bold vision for lakefront development, and the Browns have been an essential fixture on our lakefront for decades. But our first priority is always our residents,” Bibb said in the press release. “Having the Browns play here is integral to our city’s identity and community spirit. This initiative must go beyond the Browns and be about what’s best for downtown, the neighborhoods, the suburbs, and the region.”

Browns' Juan Thornhill's motivations: Newborn daughter, atoning for injury-plagued 2023

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/08/02/juan-thornhill-cleveland-browns-motivation-newborn-daughter-aspen-injury-season/74619459007/>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W. Va. — Juan Thornhill didn't think he needed any more motivation. That was until his daughter Aspen was born.

"I've always been a person that was very motivated in life," the Browns safety told the Beacon Journal in an exclusive interview Thursday. "Don't really need anybody to really push me. I can push myself. But I definitely could say me having my daughter has changed me big time. Everything that, like I said, I do is for her, and I think twice about everything that I do because



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one little mistake can cause some type of problems with her or something like that. So everything that I do, like I said, is for her."

Aspen was born nine weeks ago, the first child for Thornhill and his wife, Reagan. Mother and baby daughter have been regular attendees during Browns training camp at The Greenbrier.

Thornhill did admit to "going through it a little bit right now." He said their newborn daughter is struggling to eat, but in the very next breath added, "I think we'll find a way to get through that."

"Everything is going great," he said. "I love being a dad. It's truly amazing."

That kind of positivity has been a hallmark of Thornhill's personality. That's why the places he found himself during last season, his first in Cleveland, were so antithetical.

The normally talkative and smiling 28-year-old was anything but as the Browns went through a 11-6 season that resulted in just their third playoff appearance since coming back into the league in 1999. That's because, while his teammates were enjoying the ride, Thornhill was struggling to stay on the field due to a nagging calf injury that cost him six games.

For a player who arrived in Cleveland in March 2023 bubbling over with positivity, by December that positivity had turned to a darkness.

"No, it definitely got that bad, with me," Thornhill admitted. "I'm very competitive, so I tried to do everything possible to get back on that field, and it seemed like I was always injured, but that wasn't the case. It was just that I could never get over that one injury that I had."

That "one injury" originally occurred during the Browns' Week 10 win at the Baltimore Ravens. Thornhill planted his leg at one point in the game and "pushed off of it and I felt my calf pop. I literally felt the pop and I was like, 'There's no way I'm going back in this game. It hurts too bad.'"

The problem for Thornhill was that the best remedy for a calf injury like the one he had wasn't to go back into the game, that one or any other one. However, after missing the following week's win over the Pittsburgh Steelers, he tried to give it a go in back-to-back games against Denver Broncos and Los Angeles Rams.

The tipping point came in Week 14 against the Jacksonville Jaguars when he tried to warm up but couldn't play. He sat out that game, then was inactive the next two weeks after that as well.

"It never had the chance to heal," Thornhill said. "I had a grade-two strain, and with those — you can look it up — it takes more than a week, two weeks to heal, and I never had that much time to really just sit down and let it heal. But, yeah, I just feel like everything this season is more about health, being available for my teammates."



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There's a question, though, about who's available for the positive person who's in desperate need for some positivity? That's exactly where Thornhill was as the Browns were finishing off their push for the playoffs.

The problem for Thornhill at that moment was twofold. It wasn't just the physical pain in his calf, but also the mental and emotional pain he felt as he sat in the valley of depression while the rest of his teammates were on the crest of joy.

"I was in a low place last year, thinking you can go out there and play it and all of a sudden you have another setback over and over and over again," Thornhill said. "You get into a dark place where it was so dark that it got to the point, I wanted to go to the Super Bowl. Obviously that's just me, but at the same time I'm like, gosh, I'm ready for this season to be over so I can finally let my body heal.

"It's not saying that I wanted to lose. That's not the case — I wanted to go to the Super Bowl, play in the Super Bowl — but I also wanted to have time for my calf to heal."

That's exactly what Thornhill did once the Browns' season ended with the AFC wild card loss at the Houston Texans. He said he "didn't do anything for a month" in order to let the calf heal.

Beyond that, Thornhill also tried to block out the noise from the outside. He deleted his X account, which he had used the previous year as a beacon of positivity.

What that's produced is a Thornhill focused on getting back to producing the way he did for most of his first four seasons in the league when he was part of two Kansas City Chiefs teams that won Super Bowls.

"I think his mindset, his focus in the offseason has definitely spilled out to this point," Browns safeties coach Ephraim Banda said Tuesday. "So his mindset, the chip on his shoulder, the attack, the intent and the fire in his eyes is there. So I think he's locked in and focused and ready to really make sure that this is his best season of his career, and that's what he's looking to do right now."

The "old" Thornhill from before last season appears to be back this training camp. The evidence is primarily there from the way he's almost constantly chirping to teammates — offensive or defensive — throughout practice, elevating the energy.

All of that is driven by a motivation to get back to the Super Bowl, only this time with the Browns. Although, this time around, there's the added motivation provided by his 9-week-old daughter.

"I mean, it just makes me want to play, practice and work harder each and every day," Thornhill said. "I'm no longer doing it for myself. I have a whole other purpose. Everything that I do out here is for my daughter. She's relying on me to be that provider for her, so I'm going to do



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everything possible to give her the best life. So I'm going to work harder each and every day on this field so she can live her best life."

Bibb's \$461 million pitch to renovate Browns Stadium comes with a deadline

By Kim Palmer, Crains Cleveland Business

<https://www.crainscleveland.com/politics-policy/mayor-bibb-lays-out-461-million-plan-browns-stadium-deadline-haslams>

After 18 months of negotiations, Mayor Justin Bibb made public his administration's \$461 million plan to help fund repairs and improvements at the Cleveland Browns' current stadium in a letter sent Thursday, Aug. 1, to Jimmy and Dee Haslam, co-owners of the Haslam Sports Group (HSG).

In the two-page letter, Bibb reiterated his commitment to "transforming the current facility" without "any public financial support" from the city's general fund and requested an answer from the Haslams by Monday, Aug. 12.

As part of the proposed 30-year lease agreement, which would start in 2029, HSG would receive a total of \$227 million from admission tax revenues, a total of \$120 million from Cuyahoga County sin tax revenues and an additional \$20 million in existing stadium capital reserves.

The team would also receive parking revenues from the city-owned Willard Garage and Muni Lot on game and event days, projected to generate \$94 million over the terms of the lease, for stadium capital repairs and improvements.



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The new lease would do away with the \$250,000 in annual rent the Browns pay to the city but would require that the team owners pay about \$1.3 million in property tax and insurance premiums.

The rent-and-tax change “aligns with the lease agreements held by the Guardians and Cavs, making it consistent across sports franchises in Cleveland,” Bibb’s letter states.

In response to the proposal, HSG COO Dave Jenkins issued a statement saying, ““We appreciate the latest proposal from Mayor Bibb and his administration and will be following up with the City of Cleveland to better understand the details while we are still reviewing it. As we have said consistently throughout this process, we continue to communicate and collaborate with the cities of Cleveland and Brook Park, Cuyahoga County, and the State of Ohio on a long-term stadium solution that creates a world-class experience for our fans and positively impacts Northeast Ohio.”

The statement continues, “We are working diligently to comprehensively examine all options to identify the best path for not only our fans, but also Greater Cleveland and Northeast Ohio. Our region deserves to be thought of as evolving, forward-thinking, and innovative, so we need to think boldly and creatively in this process. It’s important to reiterate that the goal is to come up with the best experience we can for our fans while creating a long-term, sustainable stadium solution that drives an impact that benefits Cleveland, the Northeast Ohio region, and the entire State of Ohio. We will continue to provide updates as we have more information to share.”

Jeff Epstein, Cleveland’s chief integrated development officer, told Crain’s that the letter from the city was not sent because talks had stalled. He added that the administration is aware that the Browns have been talking to Brook Park and, “it was important for the public to know what we’ve put on the table for the Browns to remain Cleveland.”

The mayor, Epstein added, continues to be committed to not using the general fund to keep the Browns in Cleveland.

“We are eager to get to a resolution on the Browns’ future so that we can move forward with our plans to strengthen the lakefront. We hope the Browns are a part of that, but if they’re not we would like to know quickly so we can move the rest of our planning forward,” Epstein said.

When asked by Crain’s if Cuyahoga County supported one or the other of the Browns’ plans, county spokeswoman, Kelly Woodard acknowledged County Executive Chris Ronayne was aware of the Haslams’ Brook Park proposal and released a statement that didn’t indicate a favorite.

“We are hopeful that the city of Cleveland and the Browns come to a resolution. We have not been a party to their negotiations. Ultimately, the administration believes that all stakeholders need to come together to discuss a long-term vision for not just the Browns but also the Guardians and Cavaliers.”



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The letter comes as the Browns' owners have been shoring up support for an alternative: a \$2.4 billion domed stadium and retail, hotel and residential development located in the city of Brook Park.

The dome proposal would not require city funds but the Haslams have proposed hundreds of millions in bonds from the state of Ohio, Cuyahoga County and tax revenue from Brook Park to help with funding and debt service.

Whether the city would ultimately provide funding for stadium upgrades upfront in the forms of bonds, Epstein said, has yet to be determined.

"The details of how the exact financing will work are still to be determined. What is important is that the city is committing to providing streams of revenue that could help ultimately finance bonds that do not draw money from our taxpayers and do not negatively impact our budget," Epstein said.

In a united front, city council leadership and Downtown Cleveland, Inc. released statements supporting Bibb's push.

Cleveland City Council majority leader Kerry McCormick told Crain's the city has been "nothing but a good partner" to the Browns during the negotiations and wants the team owners to reciprocate by committing to stay in the city.

"As the representative for all three professional sports teams in downtown Cleveland, I have worked diligently on agreements with our Major League Baseball and National Basketball Association teams to ensure that they maintain their presence in the center city, benefit our entire community, and allow our teams to thrive," McCormick said.

A spokesperson for City Council president Blaine Griffin acknowledged that Griffin received the funding package proposed by the Bibb administration on Thursday morning before it was published and that council will review and discuss it "at a later date."

Referring to Browns' Stadium as part of Cleveland's cultural fabric, Griffin said that "keeping the Browns' stadium in the heart of our central business district is not just a matter of sports; it's about economic growth and community pride. A downtown stadium supports local businesses, stimulates job creation, and enhances our city's vibrancy."

Civic group Downtown Cleveland, Inc. released a statement urging the Browns to remain downtown as a key to greater job, resident and visitor density in the city's core and referred to it as "an iconic symbol of our city's identity and a vital economic engine."

"The vibrant game-day experience—packed restaurants, efficient public transit, music-filled streets, and bustling sidewalks—cannot be replicated outside downtown. This concentrated energy gives



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Cleveland a competitive edge in attracting major events and tourism, benefiting the entire region," the statement said.

One stipulation in the city's letter to the Browns is that if the team agrees to the new lease agreement the Browns, "will play all home games at the stadium, with penalties for any breach of this agreement."

In April, Ward 16 City Councilman Brian Kazy introduced an ordinance invoking the "Modell Law," which restricts a team supported by local or state funding from playing most of its home games elsewhere without proffering a six-month notice and making an attempt to sell to a local owner.

Epstein, when asked by Crain's if the administration would support using the law to force the Haslams to reconsider a move to Brook Park, demurred comment.

At a Browns training camp press conference on Saturday, July 27, Jimmy Haslam told reporters, "If we go to Brook Park, and I'm not saying we are, that's a \$2.4 billion project. Plus the real estate development around it would take about three and a half (billion dollars). That would be the third or fourth-largest construction project ever done in Ohio. If we remodel our existing stadium and spend a billion dollars, that's more than Sherwin-Williams is spending on their downtown office building. So just the complexity of these, getting the design right, the cost right, making sure you can finance it, how much equity it's going to take, working with city, county and state just takes time and everybody is working hard on it."

The Haslams have said they were looking to make a decision on whether to fix the existing stadium or build the new dome and development "sooner rather than later."



Girls flag football is booming in Northeast Ohio and the Browns are leading the way

By Joe Scalzo, Crains Cleveland Business

<https://www.crainscleveland.com/sports-recreation/cleveland-browns-want-ohsaa-sanction-girls-flag-football>

Three years ago, when the Cleveland Browns called Tiger LaVerde in hopes of getting him to coach in their new girls' flag football league, he channeled his inner Lou Brown — the crusty manager from the movie “Major League” — and said, “I don’t know. Let me think it over, will you?”

The Browns were partnering with Northeast Ohio Flag Football on a pilot league, one they hoped would eventually pave the way for girls flag football to become an officially sanctioned sport by the Ohio High School Athletic Association.

Recruiting LaVerde to coach the Kirtland High School team seemed like a no-brainer, considering he’d already led the Hornets’ boys team to six state championships and he had two daughters in high school: a senior and a freshman.

Problem was, LaVerde was already coaching basketball, track and lacrosse in the offseason, and he wasn’t exactly looking to add another sport.

“My mind was like, ‘Don’t do it, don’t do it,’” LaVerde said. “But I said, ‘Let me talk to my daughters.’ So I went up to them and said, ‘Do you guys want to play flag football?’ and they were like, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.’”

Kirtland beat out seven other teams to win the inaugural championship for the 2021 pilot season in Mentor — “It was so much fun; we went for pizza and ice cream after every game,” LaVerde said — then repeated in 2022, edging Lake Catholic in the tournament finals, which were now being played at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

Kirtland’s third title came in May, in a single-elimination tournament that now included nearly 400 athletes and 28 teams. Counting varsity and JV teams, Northeast Ohio had 51 girls flag football teams last spring.

“It’s really gone crazy,” LaVerde said.



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Flag football in general is exploding, with 2.4 million kids under 17 playing organized flag football in the United States, according to the International Federation of American Football. The largest growth is coming on the girls side, with nearly a half-million girls between ages 6 and 17 playing the sport in 2024, a 63% increase since 2019.

And Canton's Hall of Fame Village just hosted the NFL FLAG Championships, which featured close to 3,000 athletes representing all 32 NFL teams, as well as international teams from Canada, Mexico, Great Britain, Germany, China, and Australia.

The Village's youth fields are owned by Unrivaled Sports — the company co-founded by Cleveland Guardians minority owner David Blitzer — and the company acquired the second-largest flag football operator in the country in April, with plans to "establish Canton as the epicenter for flag football."

In June of 2023, the Atlantic East Conference announced plans to become the first NCAA conference at any level to offer varsity female flag football, and the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles will feature flag football for the first time, with separate competitions for men and women.

At the high school level, there are 11 states nationwide that sanction high school girls flag football — Washington recently tried to become No. 12, but the amendment failed in May — and the Browns (and, to a lesser extent, the Cincinnati Bengals) are behind the push to add Ohio to that list, starting with plans to establish a club-level league with four regions across the state.

"It's so important to us," said Jenner Tekancic, the Browns' vice president for community relations. "From the Cleveland Browns' viewpoint, and through an ownership lens, we want to do everything we can to grow participation and equity in the sport. We really want to provide the opportunity for girls to play the sport more frequently."

That's not just talk. The Browns have put their wallet where their mouth is, supplying each team with 25 custom Nike uniform kits (jerseys and shorts) and a USA Football flag football equipment kit (which includes everything from footballs and flags to pylons, cones and whistles). They also pay for game officials, hold events and clinics leading up to the regular season (which begins in April) and, of course, sponsor the championship tournament.

"The Browns take pride in it," LaVerde said. "They really have done a fantastic job making it easy for high schools to field a team and be part of it."

But the Browns still face an uphill climb when it comes to getting the sport sanctioned, both because Ohio's spring sports calendar is already crowded with four girls sports (softball, track and field, lacrosse and tennis) and because most of the sport's growth is limited to Northeast Ohio.

"At the moment, there are several dozen schools (that play girls flag football) but they're mainly in the Cleveland area and Northeast Ohio," OHSAA media relations director Tim Stried said. "There are a few schools in Cincinnati that have it as well, but outside of that, it has not started growing yet."



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But we are definitely keeping an eye on it and we are definitely supportive of girls flag football. We're hoping to see it grow."

While there are plenty of OHSAA sports with limited participation — Ohio had just 37 field hockey teams last fall, for instance — LaVerde said there could be pushback to adding girls flag football, particularly at small schools who are already competing for athletes in the spring. Currently, that's not a problem since flag football games are played on weekends and coaches don't require daily practice during the week.

"If the Browns' intention is to get as many girls involved as possible in the Cleveland area and grow the game and the knowledge of the game, I think they should keep doing it how they're doing it now," LaVerde said. "You can get girls who play softball, tennis and track and still do this on the weekends. If you go and sanction it, I think a lot of those girls will have to pick one."

But from the Browns' perspective, Ohio has already made room for new sports in recent years — girls wrestling and boys volleyball were both added in 2022-23 — and considering the game's growth at the youth level, and potential growth after high school, it's a good fit.

"Let's start with the Olympics in 2028 — we want local athletes to have the opportunity to participate and represent our great state there," Tekancic said. "Tackle football is huge in this region and we want to make sure girls have the same opportunities to play in high school and earn a scholarship in college. The possibilities are endless and we want to do what we can to make that happen."

Sanctioned or not, the sport is already making an impact, Tekancic said, with the Browns receiving "overwhelming" feedback from the girls involved.

"We've had so many girls come up to us to say thank you for the opportunity to play," she said. "They're showing up with huge smiles on their faces."

They're also gaining a better understanding of the game, which helps create more football fans. LaVerde teaches his players the same route combinations he uses on Friday nights in the fall — and they've noticed.

"They'll be in the stands looking at each other and saying, 'Oh, my gosh, they just ran 61!'" LaVerde said. "They tell me, 'It's just so different when we watch a high school football game. It's not just 22 kids running around hitting each other. The girls understand the game and it helps them become NFL fans.'"

He laughed, then added, "It's really kind of brilliant."



Jordan Hicks embraces sharing his story and NFL experience with the Browns linebacker room

By Kelsey Russo, clevelandbrowns.com

<https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/jordan-hicks-embraces-sharing-his-story-and-nfl-experience-with-the-browns-linebacker-room>

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va – In his 10 years in the league, Jordan Hicks had never experienced an NFL training camp away from the city in which his team played.

The nine days at The Greenbrier in West Virginia, tucked away in the Allegheny Mountains, was new territory for Hicks. And yet, it provided him a chance to connect with his teammates and build off the work they put in during OTAs and minicamp.

The Browns signed Hicks during free agency, adding depth and a veteran presence to their linebacker room after they lost three linebackers in free agency.

"I think Jordan Hicks is a very impressive pro to me," head coach Kevin Stefanski said. "Awesome off the field. A leader, has been in a bunch of different situations, has been in this system before. So, certainly, somebody that we are really excited to add to our group."

With Hicks' 10 years in the league, he brings a wealth of experience to a younger linebacker room, as well as veteran leadership. Stefanski said those two elements play a large factor in his presence in the unit.

"That doesn't happen by accident," Stefanski said. "That's somebody who really takes care of his body, plays well, has been in a bunch of different systems. So, he can impart a ton of wisdom on those young players just by his sheer numbers of years in this league."

Not only does he bring 10 years of experience in the league, but he's also played for defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz with the Eagles. With Schwartz in Philadelphia, Hicks started all 35 games he played in over those three seasons. The Eagles went on a successful run in that stretch, and while Hicks missed a majority of the 2017 Super Bowl run with an Achilles injury, Hicks still found success in Schwartz's system.

While there are slight differences from the Eagles to the Browns that has created a learning curve for Hicks, he has a foundation and an understanding of the core of Schwartz's defensive style.

"I know what to expect and what Jim is looking for," Hicks said. "But at the same time, you know, a lot of this defense since last time I was in his has evolved. So, there's been some learning curves and



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some understanding but a lot of that was done in OTAs and minicamp, so we came hit the hit the ground running, didn't have to install anything just took off."

The linebackers play a unique role in the defensive system. They line up in the middle of the defense, and Hicks said they have to help set the defense, provide the necessary communication to both the defensive line and the secondary so they are all on the same. Hicks said they also are trying to be one step ahead of the call, predicting what plays the offense can run and thinking about what types of motions can get the defense into their best coverages and fronts.

Hicks has special ability to do just that from the middle of the defense, and linebackers coach Jason Tarver has noted that skillset.

"We're the nerve center of the defense," Tarver said. "We need to be able to get everybody lined up, get everybody chill and then when the ball is snapped, make the play. So, we love his ability to do that."

Since his arrival in Cleveland, Tarver has watched how Hicks focuses on technique and plays. Hicks possesses an ability to see different things on the field, which allows him to stay in the moment and calm his teammates around him down.

"Jordan's at the point where he can really work through some simple technique things," Tarver said. "Like if he feels himself getting up too high, then he'll do something for that. So, he's very conscious. And then, of course, just how great of a human he is and how badly he wants to win and tie everybody together."

And while his experience on the field proves beneficial to a younger linebacker room, it's also his personal experience and leadership that the Browns are looking for. The linebacker room features two rookies in Nathaniel Watson and Winston Reid, first-year player in Caleb Johnson, second-year player in Mohamoud Diabate and two fourth-year players in Tony Fields II and Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah.

Hicks believes the Browns linebacker room is "one of the most athletic groups" he's been a part of. He said they are an energetic, chippy and aggressive group, which are the exact traits needed for a linebacker group.

When he's on the field, he's energetic, talking to the linebackers and the defense, making his voice heard. He knows that as a linebacker, he has to bring the energy to the defense. When he's off the field, he embraces that big brother style of being a mentor and leading by example. He's pulled teammates aside to share when he sees fit.

He's not afraid to step into that role as the Browns look to build off their success in 2023, especially on the defensive side of the ball.



"I think what I embrace is the ability to share my story," Hicks said. "The ability to spread knowledge to some of the young guys who are dealing with the pressures of the NFL and not understanding necessarily what to expect in a 17- or 18-game season. So, just got to share my experience, push my leadership, both on offense and on defense."

What Za'Darius Smith is pushing for in year two with the Browns

By Ashley Bastock, Cleveland.com

<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2024/08/what-zadarius-smith-is-pushing-for-in-year-two-with-the-browns.html>

BEREA, Ohio — Hold the coffee, and don't bother setting the alarm clock.

Za'Darius Smith doesn't need it.

"I'm one of them guys that just wakes up with no alarm clock ready to go," Smith said on Sunday just ahead of the Browns' eighth training camp practice, and their first in Berea. "So that's just me, man. That's my energy and that's just who I am."

In the early days of training camp practices — the first seven of which took place at the Greenbrier — it's been hard to miss Smith's infectious energy as he prepares to enter year 10 of his career and year two in Cleveland.

You don't have to wait long before you see Smith dancing, animatedly joking around with members of the media, or doling out advice to the younger members of the defensive line in between reps.

"Z is a great teammate," coach Kevin Stefanski said. "Awesome around the building, incredible energy, juice, practices hard. Really fits in with us culturally. We like everything about him."

He's made his mark with those intangibles over the last 12 months, but there's no denying Smith is pushing for more.

His 5.5 sacks were second on the team in 2023 behind Myles Garrett's 14.0. Smith also added 60 pressures, which, according to Pro Football Focus, tied for 20th in the league among qualifying edge rushers.

He was disruptive, but for a former defensive player of the year candidate? Still not disruptive enough, especially considering in three of the prior four seasons he finished with double-digit sacks (13.5 in 2019; 12.5 in 2020; 10.0 in 2022) and made the Pro Bowl in each of those years too.



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“I for sure want double-digit sacks,” Smith said. “But it’s a team sport man, so I just want the whole D-line and the whole defense and the whole team to be great. So it’s not all about me, but hopefully we can get double-digit sacks this year. Might be back upstairs.”

Last year, maybe the biggest problem for Smith’s numbers was that he got off to a slow start.

He had just one sack throughout his first seven games with the Browns, coming off of an anticlimactic ending to his 2022 season in Minnesota: That year, after suffering a knee injury, Smith had just half a sack over his final seven games.

Combine those two stretches? That’s a 14-game stretch with only 1.5.

Through Week 12 in 2023, Smith still had only 2.5 sacks, but he recorded three in his final four games, ending the year strong.

In early December, just after the Browns’ road loss to the L.A. Rams, Smith said he knew he wasn’t getting “as many sacks as he was supposed to,” and said on Sunday that it is still a topic of conversation and self-evaluation.

“This was something that I was talking to Myles about, last year I missed a lot of sacks,” Smith said. “I don’t know if you guys watched it, but I had a lot of opportunity to make sacks and I didn’t take that extra step, but this year for sure, I’m working on that to get better.”

But as Smith, it’s not just about his own production. It’s a team sport.

Like his position coach Jacques Cesaire, he believes there are multiple D-linemen on this team who could push for double-digit sacks.

“I would say guys that’s coming along, Alex Wright, he’s doing a great job getting better each and every day,” Smith said. “He’s staying after practice and doing extra things, so I could see him hit that too with the double-digit sacks and I would say Ogbo (Okoronkwo) and I like Q (Quinton Jefferson), the new addition to the D-line.

“Hopefully everybody could get double-digit sacks on the D-line. That would be great.”

Between his individual numbers and the Browns’ disappointing ending to the 2023 season — a 45-14 wild card loss to the Texans in which Cleveland failed to register a sack despite having the No. 1-ranked defense during the regular season — there’s an undeniable theme of the offseason for Smith.

Unfinished business.

“Jim Schwartz, second year D-coordinator,” Smith said. “So I get a chance for myself to basically get comfortable in this defense and just the team period, as a whole. Man, we can really go to the



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Super Bowl if we really work hard and put our minds to it this year because we was that close last year. So I feel like we got some unfinished business.”

So get the decaf brewing. Smith doesn't need any extra motivation.

Consistent Cleveland Browns leadership should be main source of optimism for fans | Ulrich By Nate Ulrich, Akron Beacon Journal

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2024/08/05/cleveland-browns-training-camp-2024-kevin-stefanski-andrew-berry-deshaun-watson/74665220007/>

BEREA — Joel Bitonio has been approached by Browns fans who confronted him with the ultimate pressure.

“I've had some older fans that are like, 'Oh, I remember I was 10 years old in 1964, and I've got to see one more [championship] before I pass away,’” Bitonio told the Beacon Journal on Sunday.

The longest-tenured Browns player on the 2024 roster, Bitonio wants to see Cleveland win its first Super Bowl as much as anyone.

“I'm going into year 11 here, so I feel like I'm part of the fan base,” said Bitonio, a six-time Pro Bowl left guard. “I'm rooting for the Browns for the rest of my life, no matter what happens.”

An estimated 1,600 Browns loyalists joined Bitonio and the rest of the team for the eighth practice of training camp, the first one open to fans this summer at the franchise's headquarters. The first seven practices were held at The Greenbrier in West Virginia.

Cheering children clad in orange Lou Groza Titans Youth Football jerseys formed a human tunnel for Browns players to walk through as they took the field.

As stretching began, guard Zak Zinter fulfilled rookie lineman duties by running toward the fan-filled bleachers and starting the ubiquitous “here we go Brownies” chant.

Optimism is warranted.

“We have the players here, we have the talent here, we have the coaching staff here to make a run as far as we want to go, as long as we put in the work,” said Bitonio, a second-round pick by the Browns in the 2014 draft.



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Consistent leadership under coach Kevin Stefanski and GM Andrew Berry has redefined the Cleveland Browns

With a roster as talented as the one the Browns possess, they definitely should be viewed as a playoff-caliber team. After all, they have appeared in the playoffs twice in the last four seasons (2020 and 2023).

Whether they have a realistic path to reach the Super Bowl on Feb. 9 in New Orleans is another matter. An appearance would require quarterback Deshaun Watson to regain his Pro Bowl form circa 2018-20 with the Houston Texans.

Although not inconceivable, it's a stretch to believe Watson will do it coming off back-to-back Browns seasons defined by inconsistency, an 11-game suspension in 2022 tied to more than two dozen women accusing him of sexual misconduct or sexual assault during massage appointments and a season-ending injury and subsequent surgery in 2023 on his throwing shoulder.

“Continuity” and “stability” aren't fun words to shout in unison from the stands, but they're actually the main reasons fans should be positive about the Browns for the foreseeable future.

The contract extensions coach Kevin Stefanski and General Manager Andrew Berry received two months ago, plus owner Jimmy Haslam's publicly stated desire for chief strategy officer Paul DePodesta to remain a key organizational figure, are the greatest signs of the franchise's health.

In January 2020, Stefanski became the sixth full-time head coach and Berry the sixth head of football Jimmy and Dee Haslam hired since they bought the Browns in 2012.

Despite holding a minority stake in the Pittsburgh Steelers before they purchased the Browns, the Haslams had no clue how to run an NFL club. After cycling through regime after regime, they leaned on DePodesta to guide the searches leading to the Stefanski and Berry hires.

Stefanski and Berry aren't perfect, yet they have proved in four-plus years on the job they are talented, intelligent and competent. They are also compatible with each another and willing to address issues when they emerge.

A lack of locker-room chemistry haunted the Browns in 2022, when they went 7-10. Stefanski and Berry responded by prioritizing team bonding the next year, with extended stays at The Greenbrier for training camp, in Philadelphia for joint practices and in Los Angeles for practices between two regular-season games out west.

Then, amid an absurd amount of significant injuries to key players, the Browns went 11-6 last season before their magical run with former Cleveland quarterback Joe Flacco ended in a 45-14 wild-card loss to the Texans.

If the Deshaun Watson trade flops, Kevin Stefanski and Andrew Berry should not take the fall



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Advancing deep into the postseason is obviously the next step, one Stefanski and Berry can and should have every opportunity to take regardless of whether the Watson era lasts as long as they originally envisioned.

Should Watson fail to turn around his individual performance — he has been up and down in this training camp — shipping away three first-round draft picks and more to the Texans and giving him a five-year, \$230 million fully guaranteed contract in March 2022 will be called the worst trade in NFL history.

However, Browns ownership wanted the Watson deal, a massive swing in an attempt to upgrade from quarterback Baker Mayfield, and drove the decision to a substantial degree, even consulting the Haslams' daughters for approval in light of the off-field allegations stemming from Watson's time with the Texans.

Jimmy Haslam used to say the Browns were “directionally correct” when they clearly weren't. Stefanski and Berry have managed to make it a truism while everyone involved is still in wait-and-see mode with Watson.

“To keep the leadership in place, you have the same standards,” Bitonio said. “Everything's just a little bit more focused, a little easier.”

The Cleveland Browns finally have leaders who are secure enough to not constantly worry about their jobs and become distracted

Chaos reigned earlier Bitonio's career. The Browns went 3-13, 1-15 and 0-16 in his second, third and fourth NFL seasons. He and long snapper Charley Hughlett are the only remaining players from the infamous 1-31 stretch in 2016-17.

Were Browns fans angry and frustrated? Of course. Were many of them loyal anyway? You bet.

“Every Week 1, we'd drive in, me and [former Browns center] JC [Tretter], and I just remember seeing how packed the Muni Lot was, how packed the stadium was, how loud it was for that Week 1,” Bitonio said. “[The fans were] like, 'Hey, this team's going to win the Super Bowl.' I'm like, 'Did we have the talent to win the Super Bowl? Heck, no.' But the fans were passionate.”

Stefanski and Berry are secure with their standing in the organization. Proof came this offseason when they added a wildly popular and highly respected NFL figure as a coaching and personnel consultant: Akron-born Walsh Jesuit High School graduate Mike Vrabel.

It's a refreshing change from Browns bigwigs constantly looking over their shoulders.

“I think there was times when some of our coaches would ride that roller coaster of emotions,” Bitonio said. “They're reading the press clippings. They're reading everything. They're kind of worried about what outside noise is saying.”



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“We've had the continuity [recently], and we don't have to worry about that. We have the coaches here, we have everything here and it's easy for us to just kind of focus on the week ahead.”

What a difference.