FOOTBALL

How Jared Verse has unified the Browns defense after the Myles Garrett trade with handshakes, screaming and a whole lot of love
By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com
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BEREA, Ohio — Browns defensive end Jared Verse makes a grand entrance at practice each day, arriving last to the field and then making his big, booming presence felt during stretching.

One by one, he stops by his defensive teammates — sometimes even an offensive player such as Shedeur Sanders — and performs a special handshake or offers some words of encouragement.

When he arrives daily at fellow newcomer Quincy Williams or rookie linebacker Justin Jefferson, he starts with the handshake and then both do the Lebron James trademark chalk toss, complete with arms spread wide.

Young or old, practice-squader or Pro Bowler, Verse doesn't discriminate. If he's inspired to hit you up, you'll get your shot of Verse straight up to start the day off right.

"I want to get my hands on them, let them know I'm with them," he told cleveland.com.

And showing up fashionably late to stretching?

"I always try to come out last, and it's for a big reason," he said. "I like to have everybody out before me and I like everybody to know, 'hey, I'm with y'all. Y'all are taken care of.' It's like a safety thing I've been doing since I was at Albany, since I went to Florida State, the Rams and here. I always have these little, small characteristics I just want to keep with me."

It's one of the many ways Verse, 25, is planting his flag on the Browns in the aftermath of the Myles Garrett trade, which sent Garrett west to win a Super Bowl and Verse east to help fill the enormous shoes of the two-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year and single-season sack recordholder.

Garrett was larger than life in looks and deed, but Verse isn't conceding anything. Watching him make his rounds during stretching, you'd think he was Mr. Uni-Verse. Megawatt smile, firm handshake, knuckle-jarring fistbumps and just the right message if the spirit moves him, like when he bent all the way over and had a few words for recuperating linebacker Carson Schwesinger (shoulder), his successor as NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year, and co-leader of the defense. When he's not shaking hands and spreading some of that abundant Verse love, he's trash-talking anyone within earshot. Actually, he's trash-screaming at the top of his lungs. Verse's bellowing voice carries across the practice field, into the bleachers and out to the massive construction site next to the fields.

He yells so loud that Rams coach Sean McVay had to tone him down in L.A.

But what's he actually screaming about?

"Sometimes you don't know," defensive tackle Adin Huntington said with a laugh. "You hear his projection and you're like 'okay, it's time.' It's like a war call.

The day Verse — the No. 19 overall pick of the Rams in 2024 — was traded, he spent a few hours commiserating with his Rams teammates at his house and shedding a few tears. But then he picked himself and generated the Good Verse Vibes that have carried him through his improbable journey to the NFL, from zero-star recruit out of high school to Division I FCS Albany to cracking the starting lineup at Florida State to the Rams and now here.

Even now, with three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year Aaron Donald coming out of retirement to join Garrett, the two-time NFL Defensive POY, Verse isn't wishing he were part of the Rams' fully-loaded Dream Team.

"AD is a great player," Verse said of his fellow former NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year from the Rams. "If anyone can take off two years and come back and be in that shape to go back and ball out anytime, it's A.D. Now they've got Myles over there. They've got Kobe (Turner), they got (Braden) Fiske , they've got Poona Ford. They got a whole stacked D line. Defense across the board, offense has already been high-powered, and I'll sing their praises every day, but I'm not remiss not to be there."

That's because Verse wants to make something out of nothing. To be counted out and shock everyone with the climb.

"I'm happy they're all doing that, but I love to play the game on hard mode," he said. "I love to play where it's a little bit harder, where people don't expect you to win. I don't want the fans always on my side. I want them to be like, 'all right, no, they can't do that' and work our way back up. Obviously (the Rams) are going to go out there and do great things but that's kind of the most beautiful thing of sports because everybody roots for the underdog."

Besides, Verse has already experienced something here that he didn't in L.A.: an overwhelming love affair with a barking, dog-bone eating, orange-and-brown blooded fan base.

"Oh, my God, everywhere I go, I run into Browns fans," he said. "I had accidentally bumped into someone's car the other day at a stop sign, and I apologized. Thankfully, everybody was okay. There were no scratches or anything like that. We pulled over and everything and I was making sure they were good. And the guy gets out the car. He's like, 'are you Jared Verse?' I'm like, 'yeah.' The first thing he didn't say was, 'oh, you hit my car.' He was like 'we're glad to have you here.' I'm just smiling. I'm like, 'I'm happy to be here, man. I wish it was under better circumstances, but I'm happy to be here."

Verse loved playing for the Rams, but the passion of fans here is already hitting differently.

"Browns fans are one of a kind," he said. "I've talked to my friends at other teams and my time at the Rams. The love that the Browns fans show is a different level."

It's why he already feels such an enormous responsibility to them. Back home in Ohio — he was born in Dayton and lived there until he was 13 — he understands the assignment.

"Fans don't deserve empty promises," he said. "They don't deserve a season where we're waiting to try to win and tanking to get a better pick or anything like that. They deserve results, and we're here to bring that."

One of six kids, Verse is in the middle of his three sisters and two brothers, and was showered with love from above and below. His dad, Eric, was a marine and now an engineer, and his mom Jannienne is a high-level marketing exec who helped handle Verse's NIL deal at Florida State and now his marketing opportunities in the NFL.

Jannienne, he's proud to say, is his biggest "why," followed closely by the rest of the family.

"My biggest dream was to take my mom on a vacation," he said. "To take the whole family on a vacation, and I got to do that. After my rookie year, I took everyone to Japan, and we went there in cherry blossom season. My mom's face really just lit up. She's one of the happiest people in the world, but I've never seen her that happy to that extent where she was crying tears of joy."

Even now when Verse bench presses, he does sets of five, reciting his five siblings' names — Soleil, Aneira, Miyah, Aaron and Terrance — four times over to get to 20 reps.

"I've always wanted to get better for my siblings, get better for my family, get better for her," he said. "My parents did so much. Besides sports, I've never really had to struggle. I've been blessed with a good life."

The day before training camp, Verse found himself sitting on his porch, watching the rain and some deer running by. It never rained in Southern California, and he missed it.

"I love everything about life," he said. "I see the beauty in everything. I love rainy days. I love when the sun shines. I love the beach. I love the mountains. I love every type of person because I feel like every person you can learn something from."

His words to live by are tattooed on his right forearm in big, black, block letters. He thrusts it forward to show it off: BURN THE BOATS.

"It's from a Spaniard (Hernán Cortes)," Verse said. "They went to take over a foreign land. They ended up burning their boats because there's no retreat. You have to give it your all. I try to do that in every aspect of my life, whether I'm writing, working out and trying to get a new personal record, with my friends and we're just doing something fun, or on the football field. I try to always just burn the boats and give my absolute best."

He urges his teammates to set their vessels aflame too.

"I tell everybody, just take your shot," he said. "Worse comes to worse, there's always only two options. Either it works or it doesn't. No matter what, you're always going to live on the other side."

Like his predecessor Garrett, whose film Verse studies daily, Verse is a Renaissance man. He visits art museums whenever he can, loves the orchestra, and writes poetry like Garrett did.

“I have a bunch of poetry books at my house,” he said. “I love to write poetry. If anything hits my mind real quick, an inspiration, I try to type away and later on, go back and retype it, do it again. I just love the arts in every aspect.”

Verse played four instruments growing up, including the saxophone in middle school and again when he picked it back up at Florida State. He also played piano and is relearning it now.

“I had to start with Hot Cross Buns again,” he lamented.

He leads with his heart in every aspect of life, except on the football field. There, he wants to rip your head off.

“That’s what they call diversity,” he said.

By his first day of Organized Team Activities with the Browns in late May, he was dancing on the field between drills with his new teammates and bringing his defensive brothers closer. Shellshocked by the Garrett trade, they found a fast friend and leader in Verse, the two-time Pro Bowler who comes off the ball like an angry bull.

From Day 1, teammates such as fellow defensive end Alex Wright came out of their shell in his presence, encouraged to step up and seize their share of the spotlight. With Garrett, some seemed dwarfed. With the pull-it-in-for-a-hug Verse, they blossomed.

Verse also sensed early on that the Browns’ defense, also minus their beloved former defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz, could use some brotherly love. But he didn’t come to be the savior.

“I just came to be me,” he said.
When Wright ruptured his Achilles in the joint practice Aug. 20 against the Bills, Verse was crushed. He knew that his fellow edge-rush bookend had missed most of 2024 with a torn triceps, and was eager for a breakout season.

“I’ve only known Alex maybe a month and some change, and that just tore me apart,” Verse said. “Just seeing him after all the work he’s put in, have to deal with that injury and have to deal with another one and come back from it again, which I know he will, he always will. But to see him go down like that, it genuinely bothered me.”

Despite a new coordinator in Mike Rutenberg and a handful of new players including Verse, Quincy Williams, defensive end Derek Barnett and Sam Williams, Verse has helped foster a tight bond on the unit.

“Here, it genuinely seems like we’re brothers,” Verse said. “It genuinely seems like we care about one another.”

He’s also eased the loss of Garrett with a lot of love for his new teammates.

“I feel like that plays a role for sure,” defensive tackle Mason Graham said. “He brings a level of energy that’s good for the room. I feel like that kind of just elevates everyone.”

Verse also has a special place in his heart for the guys that had to fight their way here like he did, playing the game on hard mode all the way through.

“The people naturally around me are always the epitome of what hard work should be,” he said. “I think about Carson (Schwesinger’s) story at UCLA how he got there (as a walk-on), how he had to work his way up and everything like that. Everyone around me is always working and striving to be better.”

While Garrett often kept to himself after work, Verse is a unifier, a force multiplier.

“Right before I left L.A., I had the whole defense come to my house and I had a chef come cook for everybody,” he said. “It was Cinco de Mayo. It’s just the type of guy I am.”

He planned to do it here, but defensive tackle Adin Huntington beat him to it.

“I will give it to Adin Huntington,” Verse said. “He just did it, had everybody over at his crib. He had a chef come cook for everybody. Wings, steak and everything like that. He beat me to it, but that’s just the type of player I am (too).”

Next practice, Verse will undoubtedly be the last one out to the field again. But his heart will definitely get there first.

Deshaun Watson and Shedeur Sanders co-host passing camp for teammates in Miami
By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com
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CLEVELAND, Ohio — There's a good chance that Deshaun Watson and Shedeur Sanders will show up for Browns training camp with even more chemistry and camaraderie with their receivers than they had when they broke minicamp.

The two quarterbacks — locked in a heated battle for the starting quarterback job — conducted a joint passing camp for their offensive teammates this week in Miami.

The list of participants included receivers Jerry Jeudy, Isaiah Bond, Cedric Tillman, K.C. Concepcion, Denzel Boston, Jamari Thrash and running back Dylan Sampson.

In addition to intense and fast-paced drills conducted by Watson's private quarterbacks coach Quincy Avery, the players bonded during dinner and other off-the-field time together.

Watson and some of the receivers stuck around through the weekend, while Sanders returned to Cleveland to conduct a youth football camp on Sunday for 500 kids at Brooklyn High School.

Watson and Sanders have both also spent time at the Browns facility during their six-week summer break before training camp, which begins July 29, to get some extra work in and demonstrate how much this starting job means to them.

As for the passing camp in Miami, Sanders revealed during mandatory minicamp in June that the two quarterbacks never considered conducting separate sessions.

"Nah, we're all team," he said. "We're all going to come as one. We're all going to get together as one team and get things done. Because then that causes separation and just a messed-up vibe and it's like, that's not really what we're on this year. We're on being a great team."

The quarterback competition was so close during Organized Team Activities and mandatory minicamp that Monken abandoned plans to name his QB1 coming out of camp on June 11. Instead, the two will head into training camp with an equal chance to win the starting job, and the competition could last through the three preseason games.

"Every day I kind of lean one way or the other with quarterbacks," Monken said during the final week of OTAs. "But we've still got to get to that point. Who's going to start for us? But I'm fired up by the quarterbacks. I just tell you, we've got two starting-level quarterbacks. We really do."

At the end of minicamp, he reiterated that he wasn't ready to name his man.

"I think they both can start and play winning football," Monken said. "I'm convinced of it. And I'd say it if I didn't. I can't decide now because I think both have earned the opportunity to continue to compete once we put the pads on."

The battle raging on, the two are doing everything possible to win the job, including spending most of their break honing their craft.

Browns veteran DT Maliek Collins isn't asking for favors — he's just making plays
By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com
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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Everyone wanted a piece of the Browns' defense's first sack against the Jets on Sunday.

On third-and-11 from the Jets' own 34 with 2:41 remaining in the first quarter, veteran Maliek Collins undeniably got to quarterback Geno Smith first. Adin Huntington arrived second, followed by Isaiah McGuire.

All three got up celebrating like it was theirs.

"It says that we hungry, man," Collins said after the game. "Everybody wants their piece of it."

It was initially ruled a solo sack for Collins, before the official stats were updated: It was ruled a split sack between Collins the vet, and Huntington, who made his first career start with Mason Graham (ankle, knee) and Mike Hall Jr. (ankle) both out.

"He just jumps up celebrating, you know him," Collins said while shooting a wry smile towards Huntington's locker in the visitors' locker room at MetLife Stadium. "I don't think I should have been a half at all. So we'll see about that — nah, I'm just playing. I wouldn't do that."

Postgame, some vets will insist that a shared sack was actually theirs alone. Some will even give younger players a hard time for impacting their stats.

But not Collins, the Browns' no-nonsense veteran in who is still demanding excellence of himself and everyone around him in the 11th year of his career.

"Ain't no such thing, man, they gonna take them all," he said when asked if Huntington should have offered him up the full sack. "Everybody greedy, man, Everybody want credit for it."

Collins and the Browns defense did their best to keep Cleveland in the game, a weird and rainy 17-12 loss that dropped them to 3-2 and halted their three-game win streak.

Linebacker Quincy Williams forced three fumbles, and safety Ronnie Hickman recovered one. Carson Schwesinger also recorded a strip sack late in the fourth quarter that could have helped the Browns ice the game if not for late offensive and special teams miscues.

And the 31-year-old Collins did end up getting that solo sack a short while after Cleveland's first quarter takedown.

On the Jets' first play in the second quarter, Collins came barreling into the backfield after getting two hands into the chest of Jets right guard Joe Tippmann and shaking him off.

Collins now has 2.5 sacks this season, building on his career-best 6.5 sacks he had with the Browns last season. That output came in only 12 games before a torn quad ended his 2025 season.

And while Collins missed all of training camp rebounding from that injury, he's not having a slow start.

"I just feel like I put a good rush plan together, we executed, we got guys covering on the back end," he said. "Whenever rush and cover works together, we get that extra tick or that extra second, we're able to get home. So credit to the rest of the guys, man, the cover helps for us to be able to get there in time."

Even though it took a couple of weeks for Collins to get his first sack in a Browns box score — his first sack this season came in Week 4 against Aaron Rodgers and the Steelers — Browns head coach Todd Monken said he didn't feel like Collins was ramping up in Cleveland's opening weeks.

In fact, this is the same Collins that Monken remembers from last year, when he had to game plan against him as offensive coordinator for the Baltimore Ravens.

"Sometimes games present itself, sometimes opportunities, sometimes you win and the ball comes out quickly," Monken said on Monday. "Sometimes they're sliding to you. … I've always seen him as that player. I saw it last year. I voted for him to be All-Pro, so I saw it last year."

What exactly has made Collins so formidable?

"He's relentless," Monken said. "I think that he's got elite explosiveness off the ball. He was meant for attack style, and his ability with the varying pass rush moves, he's hard to handle if you're not going to slide to him. And it's been a credit to him coming back from the injury he had last year. And he's explosive.

"He seems to always have the right mind frame and the ability to – if he doesn't get a clean release or if he doesn't get a clean get-off or rush plan, then he pushes the pocket. So, it's been impressive to watch."

On the CBS broadcast of the game, play-by-play announcer Andrew Catalon and analyst Logan Ryan marveled at Collins' explosiveness and the way he moves, especially given the fact that he's 31.

It was something Collins got a kick out of after the game.

"I'm just wise, man," he said. "I done played a lot of ball. I don't know how many games I've played, but I done played a lot of them. I done seen it all. I see you get blocked on your first rep, and then you come back and you respond on your second one.

"So I just try to preach that to the guys. You know, it's about the next rep. Just having fun doing this, man. It's a pleasure. It's a privilege to be in here in this locker room."

The answer is 153 career regular-season games. And he's arguably playing some of the best ball of his career right now.

Collins has been around long enough to know he doesn't need to ask for anything — including credit for a full sack he initially thought he earned.

He got his solo sack a few minutes later, making the argument for himself the way he always seems to: with the next rep.

At 31 and coming off a major injury, Collins could probably ask for a few favors.

He's not going to. He'll just keep earning them.

‘My goals are much bigger now’: Kicker Andre Szmyt looks to build on whirlwind Browns rookie season
By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com
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BEREA, Ohio — A year ago, Andre Szmyt spent training camp trying to prove he belonged.

This summer, there was no one for the Browns kicker to beat.

The Browns gave Szmyt the kicking job from the start, a vote of confidence for a player who had gone from undrafted rookie to winning two games for Cleveland in his first NFL season.

But Szmyt doesn’t view the lack of competition as permission to exhale. He views it as a reason to push himself even further.

“Not having any competition, I don’t want to get comfortable and feel like it’s my job, it’s easy,” Szmyt told cleveland.com Thursday. “My goals have surpassed ones that I had last year.

“I think you just keep striving for greater things. So I’m trying to get comfortable in the moment. It’s great. I’m honored and blessed to be the guy, but my goals are much bigger now. ”

Szmyt still struggles to put the 2025 season into words, even nine months later.

The undrafted product out of Syracuse had to earn his way onto the roster last year, beating out veteran Dustin Hopkins for the starting job.

Once he did that, however, it wasn’t smooth sailing — he missed an extra-point attempt and field goal in the opener against the Bengals contributing to a 17-16 loss.
To his credit, Szmyt bounced back.

He was perfect on his 24 remaining extra points that season and also won two games for Cleveland, nailing a 55-yarder against the Packers in an upset Week 3 win, and hitting a 49-yard walkoff against the Bengals in the finale on the road to give Cleveland its fifth victory.

He missed only two field goals the rest of the way, a 56-yard attempt in Detroit in Week 4 and a 47-yard kick in New England in Week 8.

“You look back and you’re like, wow, that was kind of crazy,” Szmyt said. “And you almost can’t even put it into words like how the season went, with everything before the season, winning the job,

training camp, how the Week 1 went, how the season ended. It was a lot. It was overwhelming to even think about."

He did all that while also dealing with the sudden death of his mom, Lala, just before he reported for training camp last summer.

"I mean obviously it's a different feeling than last year," Szmyt said. "Last year I was living out of the hotel, obviously competing, a lot of personal stuff going on as well."

Now for Szmyt, as the Browns prepare to open on the road against Jacksonville on Sunday, it's an undoubtedly more-secure situation.

A former Lou Groza winner, Szmyt had never kicked in a real NFL game before last season with only practice squad and UFL stints under his belt.

However, in choosing Szmyt over Hopkins, the Browns bet on the then-rookie's body of work in the offseason, training camp and during a practice squad stint in Cleveland in 2024.

Owner Jimmy Haslam praised Szmyt's production at the end of the season, and this year there was no kicking competition. The job was Szmyt's from the jump after he spent the offseason training in Florida.

Heading from year one to year two, Szmyt said the biggest change for him is confidence, and understanding the long game of an NFL season.

"Where I came from Week 1 to the end of the season, it was just kind of a blessing because it was obviously a lot of pressure," he said. "There's a lot of rah-rah around the first game. But looking at what I did in the first game and then how I ended the season, it's just one game at the end of the day. It's not do or die right here in Week 1.

"You obviously take every game and give it your all, but kind of seeing that it's a long journey, it's a long road, it's a long season. So, just taking it one game at a time and just putting your best foot forward."

That desire is also something Szmyt's new coaches have gotten to know well already.

Special teams coordinator Byron Storer even singled out the way Szmyt responds when things don't go right as a key trait of his.

"One thing I know about Andre is that he does not like to miss a warm-up kick, a practice kick, a game kick," he said. "He's one of those rare guys that, when he goes through adversity, he responds

really well to it. So, I do not feel any type of complacency from him. I feel like he's more sure of himself, and he's more confident in his ability to go out there and win games."

Szmyt ended his 2025 on a high note, but now the time for reflection is over.

It's all about what's next in year two and beyond.

"Towards the end of the offseason, kind of looking back and seeing like, OK, we accomplished some pretty cool things," he said. "But then you move on and you're like, all right, how do we be better this year? What are the goals for this season? And then just moving forward and how do I maintain this job and have a long term career here?"

The kicking job may be his, but Szmyt has no intention of treating it as the finish line.

Browns rookie Emmanuel McNeil-Warren's mom helped him find the football — and everything else
By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com
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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Sharona McNeil can still throw a tight spiral.

She'll tell you so herself.

So will her son, Browns rookie safety Emmanuel McNeil-Warren.

When McNeil-Warren was growing up just outside of Tampa, Florida, football was a family affair. In the yard, he threw his ball with his four older sisters, his grandfather or his uncles.

But no one made the impact his mother did when he first began playing.

That's because she had her own unique method — one that shaped the trajectory of McNeil-Warren's life and career.

"I taught my son to listen for the ball," Sharona told cleveland.com.

After sunset on those hot and humid Florida evenings, the real work began for mother and son.

During nighttime throwing sessions, she repeated the same thing to McNeil-Warren as she threw spirals in the dark.

"Listen for it."

"Catch it."

Nearly 15 years later, the Browns rookie safety is still doing a version of the same thing.

In a week 2 practice during training camp, he ranged deep on a ball overthrown by Shedeur Sanders, tracked it downfield and scooped it into his outstretched arms before returning it 35 yards down the field.

It's the kind of play that the Browns have envisioned for months — the kind that inspired them to trade up in the second round to select a 6-foot-3, 210-pound ballhawk safety they were shocked was still available at No. 58.

McNeil-Warren has had a nose for the ball his entire football life. It showed up on his high school highlight tape after formative years playing for his dad, followed him to the University of Toledo and quickly caught the attention of the Browns during the pre-draft process. Now, they are hoping that knack will help keep their defense, which has been one of the best in the league statistically over the last three seasons, elite amid sweeping changes.

But that ability to find the ball didn't start with a coach.

It started in a crowded Florida household with his eight siblings, where his extended family threw him the ball and his mother taught him to listen for it.

Because of how McNeil-Warren found football as a kid, the ball now always seems to find him.

Emmanuel McNeil-Warren as a child holds a football in his left hand and poses with his right wrist up.
Browns safety Emmanuel McNeil-Warren in his childhood backyard where his mother, Sharona McNeil, would throw him the football.cleveland.com

A family affair
McNeil-Warren was around 7 years old when he first played organized flag football.

Sharona herself was an athlete who tried anything growing up. Outside of throwing the football with her dad and brothers, she participated in basketball, volleyball, track, dance and cheerleading. Her own experience led her to encourage all her kids' passions as they went through school. These days, her youngest daughter, TaMya, is heavily featured on her social media dancing and cheerleading.

With McNeil-Warren, Sharona did everything she could to encourage him in football.

"He just loved football," she said. "He just loved the idea of football. He was good at basketball as well. But his passion was always football.

"I started them all out younger with flag football and kept them in it, even though it was a struggle. But I still made sure that they stayed connected to football and basketball, whatever their passion was."

It was a lot to manage for the self-described "tough single mom" of nine children.

Emmanuel is the oldest boy in his family, behind his four older sisters Fernicia, Jada, Javia and Pooh. He's got three younger brothers: Leon, and twins L.J. and L.L. TaMya is the baby of the family.

Being the eldest boy, McNeil-Warren tried to be the man of the house, making sure everyone looked good and learned right from wrong.

“There’s a lot of fun memories, a lot of all of us arguing,” he said. “But at the end of the day, we all love each other. So just all being in the same house taught us a lot: How to grow, how to overcome a lot of adversity too.”

McNeil-Warren watched his mother not only care for her nine children, but also inspire them to be great.

“She pushed all of us to chase our dreams and never give up on something that we want,” he said.

Sharona had strict rules for her kids growing up — rules she still easily rattles off.

On any report card, she expected B’s or higher. One C was allowed, as long as it was in your hardest class.

“They knew that I really meant that,” she said. “And they knew I stuck to it.”

But the example Sharona set was better than any rule she verbalized.
Before Emmanuel was born in 2004, she went back to school, earning her high school diploma. Her rationale was that if she prioritized school for her three oldest daughters, she had to prioritize it for herself, too.

She continued to work multiple jobs at a time, including as a supervisor at a cell phone provider, before going back to school again in 2011 for medical billing and coding.

“I wanted to show my kids, at the time when I had three, that if I can do it, you can do it,” Sharona said.

The hardest decision
The family that was tightly knit was suddenly about to be separated.

After trying to help out a friend, Sharona lost her home at the time, she said. Since her oldest daughters were already adults and on their own, her focus shifted to her sons.

“I was moving in with someone that didn’t have enough room for my kids,” she said. “So I had no choice but to separate my boys during this time. And it was definitely not easy for me because I was always the head, the one that ran the house, like the gold. I was always that person.

“And it felt like I just failed, you know? And I had to find a way to make it positive.”

So Sharona came up with the solution that she thought would help McNeil-Warren thrive as he took the next step on a football field: living full time with his dad, Tarus Horne, while his younger brothers went with their dad, Leon Warren.

Horne also served as an assistant football coach at Lakewood High School in St. Petersburg, Fla. — roughly 40 minutes from Armwood High School, where McNeil-Warren had planned to attend.

It was an incredibly difficult move for the incoming freshman, who didn't have much of a relationship with his father at the time.

All Sharona could do was promise she would still be there for her son, however he needed her. "He tried so hard to fight against it," Sharona said. "And he was like, 'I hate you, Mom. I can't believe you're doing this to me.'"

His dad urged Sharona to let McNeil-Warren grow up and stop babying him.

"My heart was breaking, and it's like, I didn't even want to go through this," she said. "But I knew that this was the best way to do it, I just knew it.

"I just was telling him, 'Baby, I got you. Mama's got you. So just go be obedient to your dad. Make sure you're following his rules. Work on your craft. Let's move to the next level.'"

McNeil-Warren eventually accepted the move, albeit reluctantly.

He came around when he saw how it could shape his football future — something Sharona had stressed all along.

"I didn't want to leave her," McNeil-Warren said. "She felt like it's better for me to go move with my dad, just to play football, chase my dreams, and that it'll be a better situation for all of us. Sometimes my mama couldn't do stuff for me. Sometimes she couldn't take me to every practice, because she had a lot of stuff to do. She still had to go to work and still take care of my brothers and sisters too."

Now, it's a decision he looks at with fresh eyes.

He's grateful not just for the opportunity to develop a real relationship with his dad, but also for the ripple effect it had on his life.

"Moving in with my pops, he taught me how to become stronger, how to become a man," McNeil-Warren said. "Everything is not given to you. You gotta earn it. You gotta push yourself to be great. People don't tell you to get up. You gotta tell yourself to get up.

“Moving in with my dad was the best decision I ever made. For real. That’s why I’m here right now, because of him too. Without him, I don’t know where I’d be either.”

A new position
It’s not an exaggeration: McNeil-Warren may not be in Cleveland if he hadn’t moved and played at Lakewood.

That’s not just because of the tough love instilled by his dad.

It’s because of a tough position change.

After growing up with all of those late-night throwing sessions with his mom, McNeil-Warren wanted to be a receiver. He loved the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and six-time Pro Bowler Mike Evans was his favorite player.

So when the coaching staff suggested that he move to safety after his freshman season, he was taken aback.

“I was a little mad, kind of like, ‘Dang,’ ” McNeil-Warren said. “I was an athlete, but I just loved catching the ball and scoring touchdowns and stuff. So them telling me about that, moving me to defense, it was hard. But I feel like they told me to move to defense for a better reason.”

His background as a receiver helped McNeil-Warren with several key parts of the game on defense, including route recognition, understanding formations, tracking and attacking the football and hand-eye coordination.

That first showed in 7-on-7 sessions when he accumulated interceptions at a rate that was hard to ignore.

While he missed working directly with Horne, who was an offensive assistant, he loved going against him even more.

“He’s talking his smack,” McNeil-Warren said. “I’m talking smack to him, especially when I pick him off. Like, ‘Yeah, keep throwing to me.’ So that just made me. We just had that bond. We started building that bond for real, just to push each other to be great.”

By the end of high school, he had six interceptions, 11 passes defensed, and two forced and recovered fumbles.

Just a three-star recruit, he had eight college offers — but the right eyes saw his tape.

And then-Toledo head coach Jason Candle couldn't forget turnover after turnover that he saw on that film.

"Just the ball production and his ability to take the football away, being gifted but severely undersized at the time," the current UConn head coach said.

"And so what I saw was a guy that had great instincts, a guy that could really close space between receivers and take the air out of running plays and go get the guys on the ground, and I thought had tremendous upside."

They were going to find him
Taking the football away got McNeil-Warren to uncharted territory at Toledo.

He saw snow for the first time when he moved to northwest Ohio. He also got his first chance to play in it during mid-week MAC games.

Toledo offering a scholarship also meant McNeil-Warren became the first member of his family to attend college.

"That moment was like, 'Whoa. Wow. We made it,' " Sharona said.

As a true freshman in 2022, McNeil-Warren played mostly on special teams.

The following season he broke out of his shell more, and started a game early on against Western Michigan when veteran safeties were banged up.

From the very first play of the game, former Toledo and current Syracuse defensive coordinator Vince Kehres said that McNeil-Warren was ready.

"He had a tackle on about the line of scrimmage coming from 10 yards deep," he said. "It was like, 'Whoa,' that was a flash play.'"

He finished the game with 13 tackles, two breakups, an interception and a forced fumble. It led to him being a MAC Player of the Week in his very first start.

"It was just a sign of what was to come," Kehres said. "And he never disappointed."
As a sophomore and junior, McNeil-Warren had a combined five forced fumbles, three interceptions and 10 passes defensed.

And in the world of NIL and the transfer portal, people outside of Toledo and the MAC noticed.

With plenty of interest from bigger programs, McNeil-Warren talked to his dad every day about possibly entering the transfer portal.

While Horne promised to support his son no matter what, he continued to highlight the defensive backs who had been drafted out of Toledo in recent years. The list features Eagles cornerback Quinyon Mitchell, Broncos safety Tycen Anderson and Jets cornerback Samuel Womack III.

Horne also left him with one big question.

“What legacy do you leave there?”

“I didn’t leave no legacy yet,” McNeil-Warren said. “So that was on my mind. Just to leave a legacy there, building on from that and just, they’re gonna find me.”

As a senior, he recorded two more interceptions, including a 37-yard pick-six against Western Kentucky — a play nearly every NFL team talked about with him during the pre-draft process. He also broke up five passes and forced and recovered two fumbles.

He was one of just three finalists from Group of Five schools for the Jim Thorpe Award, given annually to the nation’s top defensive back. He was also a third-team Associated Press All-American.

And McNeil-Warren was right. The NFL still found him, even though he stayed at a smaller school — maybe even partially because he made that choice.

“It’s becoming an uncommon thing,” Candle said. “I think that money and status change people in a hurry, and you have to go back to your foundational principles. And I would credit his parents for instilling the right moral values in him to do the right thing.”

As Kehres prepared for the 2026 season at Syracuse, he compiled a teaching tape for his players, using clips primarily from his six-year stint as Toledo’s defensive coordinator.

Most of those clips featured McNeil-Warren, and they gave his former coach a new appreciation for all he accomplished.

“Gosh, the more I watch him play, the more I appreciate the level of consistency that he played at,” Kehres said. “Really, he’s got a real knack for the ball. It’s the best that I’ve seen in a defensive player.”
The call
Before the draft, some believed McNeil-Warren could be a late first-round pick.

There was so much noise, in fact, that he was surprised when it didn't happen.

Sharona sat next to her son on the couch on draft day listening to Commissioner Roger Goodell call name after name. As they waited, she reminded McNeil-Warren that it was all part of a larger plan, just like eight years prior when he moved in with his dad.

"You could tell his spirits were dropping, especially from the first night when he wasn't called," she said. "He was kind of disappointed, but I had to tell him, 'If you look at it, they called mostly people that were on offense, so you're gonna be called in the second.'

"All we gotta do is claim it and speak it into existence."

But the draft stress was being compounded further by academic stress.

On the same night, he scrambled to finish final assignments to earn his bachelor's degree, majoring in individualized studies. Sharona helped him as they watched the draft clock tick.

It all fell into place. McNeil-Warren got his work done and his degree this spring. He also landed with the Browns late in the second round.

But McNeil-Warren's draft weekend slide still remains a bit of a mystery.

The Browns considered taking him at No. 39, until receiver Denzel Boston fell that far. For a team that was trying to reinvigorate its wide receiver room, the chance to grab the big-bodied red-zone threat was too enticing.

So Cleveland sat back and watched as McNeil-Warren fell into the 50s. At that point, GM Andrew Berry was ready to pounce. He traded the Nos. 70 and 107 overall picks to the San Francisco 49ers in exchange for pick No. 58, to select their new ballhawk safety.

Meanwhile, McNeil-Warren sat on the couch with Sharona by his side as his phone rang with a FaceTime from an unsaved number.

Expecting a regular phone call, he was afraid to answer at first. But Sharona, doing her best to ignore the camera crew in her living room, urged him to pick up.
Waiting on the other end was Berry and head coach Todd Monken. Berry congratulated him and told McNeil-Warren about the Post-it note he still had on his computer. It was given to him by Browns defensive pass-game coordinator Ephraim Banda, and it had McNeil-Warren's name written inside a heart.

Inside Mike Rutenberg's rise: Why the Browns believe he's the right defensive coordinator for a new era
By Ashley Bastock, cleveland.com
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https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2026/07/inside-mike-rutenbergs-rise-why-the-browns-believe-hes-the-right-defensive-coordinator-to-lead-a-new-era.html

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Mike Rutenberg didn't just inherit a defense.

He inherited a defense in transition. One that could have splintered after losing two of its most influential figures in a five-month span.

For three seasons, Jim Schwartz was more than the Browns' defensive coordinator.

He was one of the organization's most-respected voices, a coach who top players publicly backed to become head coach after Kevin Stefanski's dismissal in January. He was the architect who helped restore Cleveland's defense to one of the NFL's best.

When Schwartz resigned in February after being passed over for the top job, the Browns weren't simply replacing a defensive play-caller. They were looking for someone to take charge of a group that had just lost one of its most trusted leaders.

Then came another seismic shift.

On June 1, the Browns traded Myles Garrett, the face of the franchise. Garrett won two NFL Defensive Player of the Year awards and broke the NFL's single-season sack record last season in Schwartz's scheme.

Suddenly, one of the NFL's elite defenses was searching for a new identity.

But Browns coach Todd Monken believes he found the right person to redefine the unit, even though Rutenberg is a first-time defensive coordinator.

And hiring him was about something bigger than just innovative scheme or lengthy résumé.

Just as important to the Browns was someone who could relate to players and build relationships in a potentially tumultuous environment.

That's what set Rutenberg apart.

He isn't an ex-NFL star or a celebrated football prodigy. He's climbed from Cornell's lightweight football team to holding Hall of Fame coach Joe Gibbs' headset cord in Washington to becoming the Browns' defensive coordinator by mastering something just as important as football:

Connecting with people.

And he was doing that long before NFL linebacker Quincy Williams called him "my dawg." Long before Browns players described his energy as contagious. Long before fellow coaches praised his willingness to listen.

The deeper you dig into Rutenberg's background, the more you realize stories like these aren't unusual. They actually date back decades.

The Browns are counting on those qualities now more than ever. They need someone who can throw an arm around the group, earn its trust and lead it through a period of drastic change.

Those who know Rutenberg best believe that's exactly why he's here.

When Terry Cullen heard that Rutenberg was hired as the Browns' defensive coordinator this winter, he had one thought.

"It was about time," Rutenberg's former college coach told cleveland.com.

Cullen is a legendary figure in sprint football — a lightweight version of the game that originated in the 1930s as a northeastern Ivy League sport.

He's now the sprint football director of advancement and alumni engagement at Cornell, but he's been with the program for 60 years, serving as co-head coach and head coach from 1977 through 2022.

"It was called 150-pound football," Cullen said. "Same as any program anywhere. Full-time coaching staff, full staff, full everything, with a weight limit. And so what you do is the kids have to weigh in two days. Back in the day it was 150 (pounds). Now it's up to 178."

Rutenberg, a native of Chevy Chase, Maryland, joked at his introductory press conference in March about how he found the game.

At the time, he self-deprecatingly said he "wasn't very good" at football, and he was only 5-foot-9. His real love was hockey, but his dreams of playing in college were dashed when his dad clipped out a college roster for him, showing how many international players there were.

But when he was still a high school senior and visited Cornell, then-junior linebacker August Cardona and his friends showed Rutenberg around campus.

It didn't take long for Cardona to see how enthusiastic his future teammate already was about the possibility of playing the sprint version of the game.

"He was just all-in excited," Cardona said. "You know, (saying) like, 'This is amazing. This is awesome. This is like what I want to see.'

"Intensity is the word, but it's like a positive intensity. It's like a 'we can do this, you can do this,' attitude."

By the time he got on the field a year later, Cullen knew he had an "outstanding" outside linebacker on his hands. But after a shoulder injury, Rutenberg moved to offensive line.

It was the way Rutenberg handled that change, Cullen said, that allowed the veteran coach to envision Rutenberg becoming a coach one day.

"He actually called the line blocking assignments from tackle, which is very unusual," Cullen said. "To have an offensive tackle call blocking schemes … I've been coaching 50 years. I've never had that before.

"He was an outstanding player and really an outstanding leader, but one of those on-the-field coaches type of person."

And after watching Rutenberg grind through college, 14 years coaching in the NFL and seven more coaching in the college ranks, Cullen has another prediction.

"He'll be a head coach, I think," he said.

Rutenberg says he's just happy Cullen's memories about him have skewed positive.

An old-school coach, Cullen was always the one who pushed Rutenberg, and even questioned him back then once he told his mentor he wanted to be a coach.

"He really took a never-say-die attitude with us and with himself," Rutenberg said. "There were no excuses with him. You were going to practice, and you were going to go to school, and you were going to grind. He just made it very, very uncomfortable to make any type of excuses.

"And the truth is, when I first talked to him about it, I'm glad he selectively forgot this part: He said, 'No way. You're not getting into coaching.'

“And then I was like, ‘Oh, no, I am getting into coaching.’ And then he dove all in with me and actually helped me.”

The freshman who found a family

Cullen eventually helped Rutenberg land some of his first coaching job interviews at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and the University of Albany.

But maybe just as important as Cullen’s influence were several of his older teammates.

Cardona only spent one season as Rutenberg’s teammate at Cornell.

That was 1999.

Twenty-seven years later, Cardona still calls him “Rute.” He still texts him after games. He’s still part of a group chat with former teammates trying to coordinate a trip to Cleveland this fall to watch their friend coach.

When asked what makes Rutenberg different, Cardona doesn’t start with football.

He talks about a little brother.

“It was like, ‘Yeah, come on. You’re with us. You’re our little bro,’” Cardona said.

Some key mentors for Rutenberg at the NFL level include Gibbs, Falcons defensive coordinator Jeff Ulbrich, Titans head coach Robert Saleh, current 49ers defensive coordinator Raheem Morris, and Monken.

But before those big names had a direct impact on his coaching style today, it was Cardona and his other Cornell teammates who left their mark by going out of their way to include a freshman.

Whether it was a ride home from practice or an invitation to a party, Rutenberg says those interactions are much more meaningful now than maybe he even realized at the time.

“As I reflect back to those experiences, there’s no question it’s informed me,” Rutenberg said. “They were the ones who big-brothered me. They were the ones who taught me some hard lessons. They were the ones who whooped my butt.

“I know looking back, that’s what you do for people who are coming up under you.”

Those relationships on the field only lasted one season.

But off the field, they are still going strong.

And more importantly for the Browns, the way Cardona and others went out of their way for Rutenberg has influenced how the defensive coordinator does his job to this day.

“It’s all the same, and I hope that I’m doing it for guys on our staff and the previous staffs,” Rutenberg said. “Because when you connect with each other, especially when it’s somebody who’s either older or in an elevated position, to be the person younger underneath them, it hits you so hard in the heart.

“It’s like, ‘Damn, they care about me so much. They’d freaking do anything for me, those guys have my back.’

“And they still do. Yeah, they still do to this day.”

The headset cord

Rutenberg has never been a defensive coordinator before, but he does have an extensive résumé.

It begins right after his graduation from Cornell in 2003, when he worked in Washington as a player personnel intern. For the following two years, he served as assistant to the head coach under Gibbs.

“Those first years, he was literally holding the cord of Joe Gibbs’s headset, and you’d see him on TV sometimes,” Cardona said. “We’d totally bust his chops about it, like ‘Hey, you’re holding the cord, you’re doing great.’”

Rutenberg took the ribbing for what it was: good-natured joking from his buddies.

“It’s just big-brother love, and that’s what you want as a little brother, for lack of a better word,” Rutenberg said. “There was so much love between us that that ribbing was really encouragement. They thought it was the coolest thing in the world.”

But his friend still had some genuine concern as well about his chosen career path.

While Cardona had moved to New York and was becoming an entrepreneur and restaurant owner, Rutenberg was on a very different path from anyone else in their friend group.

“First of all, there’s like no money in it, right?” Cardona said. “You can be basically working for free. And I’m like, ‘Is this really what you want to do?’

“He’s like, ‘This is what I want to do, and my parents are supportive.’”

Rutenberg took the questions in stride. His résumé makes clear he never wavered.

After three years in Washington, he moved to the college coaching ranks for the next seven seasons, serving as a graduate assistant at UCLA for the first three before heading to New Mexico State University, where he coached defensive backs and eventually became the defensive pass game coordinator.

He returned to the NFL in 2013, serving in Jacksonville as an assistant defensive backs coach, a defensive assistant and assistant linebackers coach during his final two seasons there in 2018 and 2019.

In 2020, he became a pass game specialist in San Francisco under Saleh, who was defensive coordinator at the time.

Rutenberg then spent the next four years with the Jets after Saleh was hired as their head coach. In New York, it was his first time running his own NFL position room as a linebackers coach.

That stop in New York is what helped Cardona articulate what makes Rutenberg so good at his job.

He recalls a conversation with Rutenberg about former NFL linebacker C.J. Mosley. While Cardona couldn't get past the fact that Mosley looked like a "monster up close," it was Rutenberg's breakdown of what made Mosley a "genius" that stuck with his friend.

"I'm so intrigued by that," Cardona said. "I think it's because Mike has true understanding and admiration for talent. And it's on the football field, it's on his ability to break down plays and his ability to lead teams. That probably allows for him to connect with what, to me, are these kind of otherworldly guys.

"He just asks a lot of questions. He's genuinely interested."

After New York, Rutenberg spent one year in Atlanta as defensive pass game coordinator before landing in Cleveland.

It was a rise that was anything but straightforward, punctuated with anecdotes about sleeping in his office when he was coming up through the ranks.

While it's a habit he says ceased once he married his wife, Stacey, and they had a daughter and son, Laney and Luke, they are "very real" stories nonetheless.

"He loves it," Cullen said. "He loves working, and he's a hard worker."

Heart before football

It's easy to imagine Rutenberg visiting Cornell's campus as an excited high school senior.

That's because Cleveland glimpsed a version of that same guy during his introductory press conference in March.

Browns GM Andrew Berry described Rutenberg as "high-octane" after he was hired, and it couldn't have been truer as Rutenberg sat in the team's media room, emphatically talking about playing violent football, leading with his heart and maximizing the skill sets of his players.

One of the players who came up that day was Williams, whom Rutenberg coached in both Jacksonville and New York.

After detailing how he first connected with Mosley over football X's and O's, he said his approach with Williams had to be different.

"Quincy and I connected from the heart, from the start," Rutenberg said. "It went heart to football. And we spent a lot of time on our hearts and then a lot of time on football."

Less than a week later, the Browns agreed to a two-year deal with Williams, reuniting player and coach.

For a first-time coordinator, having a player he previously coached can be a comfort, both for grasping the system and helping others do the same.

Williams has that ability, but he also has a deeper understanding of Rutenberg at a key time of transition.

"That's my dawg, he's like my brother," Williams said. "First thing before we talk about football, the biggest thing is Rudy cares about the heart. Biggest thing, what I did off the field affects what I do on the field."

For Williams it has a tangible impact in games.

Players often talk about the importance of having a "why" on the field. Knowing everyone else's "why," including the coach's, leads to more connected play, Williams said, adding that Rutenberg does a good job emphasizing that.

"He cares about you as a person and he understands that to get something out of a person, you have to first understand what the person comes from and what type of person he is," Williams continued.
Another recent example of this?

This offseason, when Rutenberg learned that star linebacker Carson Schwesinger idolized Luke Kuechly growing up, he took it upon himself to connect the reigning NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year and Hall of Famer for an offseason phone call.

In many ways, making those sort of connections for the people around him isn't just a huge part of Rutenberg's rise. It's the essence of his story.

And it's easy to see just how much emotional intelligence is a part of his coaching philosophy.

"Awareness of what somebody else could be going through is extremely important," Rutenberg said. "And I don't know if I'm emotionally intelligent or not, but what I believe is important is tapping into what's important to people.

"Finding out what's important to them and helping them achieve that is what it's all about."

Rutenberg has already made an early impression in Cleveland, which is impressive considering the circumstances.

Schwartz resigned after being passed over for the head coaching job in favor of Monken. Multiple reports indicated that the former defensive coordinator packed up his office the January afternoon Monken was hired, saying he wouldn't be back. Multiple players, including Denzel Ward, Grant Delpit and Garrett, had previously expressed support for Schwartz getting the top job.

Cornerback Tyson Campbell had never played for Rutenberg before, but once the dust settled, he reached out to a handful of his friends who played for his new coordinator last season in Atlanta.

They described a passionate players' coach, and Campbell said he witnessed those characteristics throughout spring.

"You bring in that type of positive energy into a room, it's so addictive and I feel like everybody around him can pick off of that energy," he said. "And that's what you want out of a defensive coordinator, a guy that's passionate about ball, passionate about his guys, and it's contagious."

During spring practices, you could always spot Rutenberg on the field wearing a backwards cap, barking out orders, and even at times running onto the field to celebrate a big play or defensive takeaway.

The same has been true in the early days of training camp. On Saturday, when a scuffle broke out during team drills, Rutenberg was right in the middle of the action with his defense.
Already, Rutenberg-isms have infiltrated players' and assistant coaches' vocabulary.
Maybe the most popular?

Look no further than the first four days of training camp to see how that philosophy has taken hold. Already, the Browns defense has nabbed 10 interceptions, including five in one day in practice No. 4.

“I really love that the energy that he gives to our players,” defensive backs coach Brandon Lynch said. “It’s infectious. He really puts it where, we talk about ‘heart, mind, fist’ and ‘the ball is oxygen,’ he’s a guy who lives it. He’s constantly in the meeting rooms. He’s constantly communicating with all of the teachers, all of the students that are out there. You’re going to see it on the grass.”

While Rutenberg is new in Cleveland, all of his position coaches remain the same, with several — including Lynch, Ephraim Banda (defensive pass game coordinator), Jason Tarver (run game coordinator and linebackers coach) and Jeff Anderson (nickels coach) — getting title bumps.

So far, there’s been a blending of old and new that by all accounts has been seamless.

“His willingness to listen and also apply things that we bring up and talk about has been great,” Banda said. “I love that. I give him a ton of credit. He’s come in here, he could easily change everything on the defense, but he didn’t. He deserves a ton of respect for keeping things as much as he can the same for the players and coaches, and I respect that.”

The first test
When it comes to keeping some things similar, it helps that not only is the rest of his staff intact, but that a Rutenberg defense naturally has plenty of schematic similarities to Schwartz’s.

Both come from the scheme originally crafted by Jim Washburn and Gregg Williams in the late 1990s with the Tennessee Titans. Rutenberg came up through an offshoot of that system, thanks to his years spent under Saleh.

When Monken hired Rutenberg, that was part of what made him so unique, along with his “Ph.D.-level knowledge” of the secondary, as his former boss Ulbrich put it this offseason.

“I think he’s unique from the perspective that he understands what an attacking front system looks like,” Berry said. “But if you also look at what he did in Atlanta, he was a big part of that group taking over a defense that was about as far away from attack as you can and almost creating this hybrid that was really effective with the players that they had.”

The Browns will still attack, even after trading Garrett to the Los Angeles Rams.
That’s largely because of the return from that deal.

In exchange, they received draft picks and edge rusher Jared Verse, the 2024 NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year who is one of the best young power rushers in the league.

Garrett's departure represents the first true on-the-field test of Rutenberg's leadership. Because the Browns didn't just lose production when they traded away Garrett. They lost the face of their defense and a one-of-one player in the league.

However, Rutenberg's response after the deal wasn't to talk about what had been lost.

It was to highlight the players still in the room in the weeks following the trade.

"We are so excited about what we have here," Rutenberg said. "We are so excited about the group that's here and then getting Jared. I can't wait to see us rush. I can't wait to see us jump off the ball with the group that we have. I'm so excited about them."

For all the discussion about scheme, pressure packages and replacing Garrett's production, the people who know Rutenberg best don't believe that's what got him here.

Ask Cullen, Cardona or Williams what separates him and they don't start with football. They talk about the phone calls that still come, the questions he asks, the way he remembers what's important to people. The ways he makes them feel seen.

It's why a former college teammate who only shared a locker room with him for one season is still coordinating trips to watch him coach nearly three decades later. It's why Williams is so excited to play for him again. It's why Cullen still hears from him and still invites him to speak to current Cornell players.

These relationships that shaped Rutenberg and his career never really ended. Now, as the Browns enter a new era on defense, he's tasked with building new ones at a crucial time.

And if you ask Rutenberg, that's the whole point.

"Everybody's had people in their lives who have thrown an arm around them," he said.

The freshman who once needed that arm around his shoulder has become the coach providing it for others.

Can the Browns find ways to help their quarterbacks? – GM Andrew Berry talks to Terry Pluto
By Terry Pluto, cleveland.com
September 13, 2026
https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2026/09/can-the-browns-find-ways-to-help-their-quarterbacks-gm-andrew-berry-talks-to-terry-pluto.html

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Before discussing the Browns quarterback situation, Andrew Berry had something else in mind.

"We wanted to upgrade the infrastructure around the quarterback position," said the Browns general manager. "We brought in three veteran offensive linemen and we drafted three more."

The Browns had one of the NFL's worst offensive lines in 2025, based on several ratings services. Pro Football Focus ranked them 31st out of 32 teams. Pro Football Network had them dead last at No. 32.

"The overall offensive infrastructure wasn't conducive to success (at quarterback)," said Berry. "As much as the quarterback is the biggest driver toward winning, it's also the most interdependent position on the field."

Berry means the quarterback needs linemen to protect him from opposing pass rushers. He needs receivers to catch the ball. A good running game also is a huge asset, but that also depends on the blocking.

"A big part of successful quarterback play is putting him in situations where he can be successful," said Berry. "If your offense is constantly behind the sticks in third-and-long … or in obvious dropback passing situations, it makes the QB's job almost impossible."

Berry then turned to baseball to illustrate his point.

"Think of it as being a hitter who is constantly in an 0-2 or 1-2 count," he said. "This is why it's important to be effective on first and second down where you can keep your quarterback in either advantageous or neutral down and distance. That opens up what you can do and provides more uncertainty to the defense."

Attacking the problem
The general manager vowed to improve the line and made offseason moves to make that happen.

He acquired tackle Tytus Howard (93 NFL starts), guard Zion Johnson (65 NFL starts) and guard/center Elgton Jenkins (94 NFL starts). The Browns also have Teven Jenkins (42 NFL starts) for depth on the line.

Then came the draft:

First round: Spencer Fano, left tackle. He'll start.

Third round: Austin Barber. He was a left tackle at Florida, but is battling Teven Jenkins to start at guard.

Fifth round: Parker Brailsford. He was a center at Alabama. The Browns like his long-term future in terms of becoming a starter. He battled injuries in training camp.

The Browns have been searching for an impact offensive line coach since Bill Callahan left after the 2023 season. They believe they have one in George Warhop, who was on the same Baltimore coaching staff with current Browns head coach Todd Monken.

"Part of doing (better QB play) is game strategy and scheme," said Berry. "But another big part is the surrounding players. It certainly starts up front where the game is won. Monk (Todd Monken) likes to say, 'Protection beats coverage.' He's 100% right. You have to protect the QB."

If the Browns can rise even to the middle of the pack when it comes to pass protection, then the team can truly begin to evaluate its quarterback.

What about receivers?
Berry knows the team has struggled to find good receivers. Amari Cooper had a Pro Bowl season in 2023. Jerry Jeudy made the Pro Bowl in 2024.

But overall, the Browns have been weak at that position.

"It also makes the quarterback's job easier if you can run the ball as a way to create favorable down and distances." said Berry, "Likewise, playmakers make the job of the quarterback easier because he has a greater margin for error."

Berry talked about receivers who can catch a short pass and turn it into a long gain. Or receivers talented enough to get open and catch passes in tight coverage.

Pro Football Focus ranked the Browns receivers as the worst in the NFL in 2025. Other ratings systems had them very low.

Berry addressed this need in the draft:

First round: KC Concepcion, No. 24 pick.

Second round: Denzel Boston, No. 39 pick.

Before selecting Concepcion, the Browns had not selected a receiver in the first round since Corey Coleman in 2016. The last time the Browns had used a second-round pick on a receiver (before Boston) was on Greg Little in 2011.

“They (Boston and Concepcion) have both hit the ground running,” said Berry. “KC’s ability to multi-align, separate and create with the ball in his hands will be a boost to the offense. Denzel’s ability to expand the quarterback’s strike zone with his catch radius and sure-handedness makes him the perfect foil.”

Berry means that Concepcion can line up in a variety of spots and also be used in motion to create openings for him to catch the ball and run.

The 6-foot-4, 215-pound Boston gives the Browns the sure-handed big receiver they have been seeking for several years.

Hiring Monken also is a factor. The new head coach will also call plays. He was considered one of the best offensive coordinators/playcallers in the NFL in his last three seasons with Baltimore.

While Deshaun Watson will open the season as the starting QB, it’s likely Shedeur Sanders will also play. The Browns have had 12 different QB changes in the last three seasons.

“We will continue to see growth from Quinshon (running back Quinshon Judkins), Isaiah Bond and (Harold) Fannin,” said Berry. “The moves we made should help us make a good honest assessment on where we are (at quarterback), and it gives our quarterbacks a chance to be more successful.”

What do the Browns think of their QBs? – GM Andrew Berry talks to Terry Pluto
By Terry Pluto, cleveland.com
September 12, 2026
https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2026/09/what-do-browns-think-of-their-qbs-gm-andrew-berry-talks-to-terry-pluto.html

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Can the Browns have at least respectable quarterback play?

That's one of the questions hanging over the team as the 2026 season opens Sunday.

Most "experts" view the Browns quarterback as one of the worst in the NFL. I can cite several stories and analytic studies. They virtually all rank Deshaun Watson and Shedeur Sanders at or near the bottom of possible NFL starting QBs for 2026.

The Athletic's Mike Sando polled 50 NFL coaches and executives about 35 quarterbacks. Coming in 35th was Sanders. At No. 31 was Watson, although it was difficult to evaluate him because he's played only 19 games in the last five seasons.

When Watson opens the season as Cleveland's starting QB, it will be his first regular-season game in 22 months. Sanders is in his second NFL season.

The Browns also have Dillon Gabriel (on the injured list with a back problem) and rookie Taylen Green.

"We have a room with one veteran who is working hard to re-establish his career, and three young players who are working hard to cement their places in the NFL," texted Browns GM Andrew Berry. "We're not naive to the range of outcomes that are possible given the profiles of each player. But we also realize the importance of consistently investing at the position in different ways regardless of the current starter."

For this story, I'm concentrating on Watson and Sanders.

But first, here is what Berry texted about Green and Gabriel:

"Dillon is a processor who will only continue to improve with time on task. He's a highly anticipatory thrower who is also excellent in presnap (situations). Taylen brings the deluxe version of physical tools with his size, arm strength and speed. He couples that with an elite work ethic and intelligence. That gives him a very good starting point for developing as a young passer."

My interviews with Berry continued with one long phone conversation. Then later, a series of texts.

Todd Monken chooses Deshaun Watson as QB1: Crowquill
Who makes the call?
The decision to start Watson in the opener was Coach Todd Monken's call. I wrote a long story about how he came to that conclusion. It was not forced by ownership or the front office.

Had Monken turned to Sanders, that would have fit with the youth movement of the current roster, which I wrote about in Part 1 of this series.

But Monken wanted to begin with the veteran.

"Lineup decisions have always been under the head coach's control," texted Berry. "That is not different for Todd. We always discuss a range of things pertaining to the players on our roster or players we might potentially acquire.

"Part of the head coach/GM relationship is to serve as a sounding board or counsel to one another. In terms of which players are on the field and how they are deployed, we have great faith in Todd to have the final call on those sorts of things as he brings our vision to life."

For the Browns, the offseason focus was rebuilding the offensive line (five new starters) and adding talented receivers. I'll deal in-depth on those topics with Berry in Part 4 of this series.

"Consistency and performance are something we haven't seen at quarterback in the last couple of years," admitted Berry. "We are positioning ourselves to make sure we can make a fair and accurate assessment of what we have. We want to do everything we can to make them (QBs) successful."

That is part of the reason Monken (Part 2) was hired: offensive expertise. He has been successful with a variety of passers. His last stop was as offensive coordinator in Baltimore, where he raised the level of play for Lamar Jackson.

In 2021-22, he helped Georgia win a pair of NCAA national titles with Stetson Bennett, a more traditional pocket passer.

What about Watson?
"He deserves a lot of credit for working his way back from major injuries," said Berry of Watson. "He has been an excellent teammate during that time – especially last season when he was hurt. He stayed fully engaged and helpful to the young players. There are a lot of positives in that regard."

At the age of 60, Monken is a first-time head coach in the NFL. This has been a dream job for him.

“Todd saw a lot of positives in Deshaun’s return,” said Berry. “He likes Deshaun’s mobility. That was not a given because he’s coming back from two Achilles injuries. That’s been a nice outcome from rehab.”
Once upon a time in 2020, Watson had made three Pro Bowls and was considered one of the top five quarterbacks in the NFL.

Then came the trade to Cleveland, the 11-game suspension, along with two Achilles operations and a major shoulder surgery. He has not played in more than seven games in a season since 2020.

“Deshaun is going into his 10th year in the league,” texted Berry. “He has great command of the offense. He can be a calming influence. He is very good at the line of scrimmage in terms of the operation.”

Watson didn’t help himself last month when he ripped Browns fans for booing him after his final exhibition appearance. Two days later, Monken named Watson the starter.

“That (fans booing) is something he’s going to have to uniquely deal with,” said Berry. “He’d be the first to admit he didn’t handle it well in that moment. You don’t have to be defined by a moment of weakness or by your mistake.”

Watson is in the final year of his contract. This is an important season for him. He turns 31 on Monday,

“Deshaun is physically healthy and brings a level of experience, mobility and off-script playmaking that is attractive,” said Berry. “He is resolved to play good football, very focused. That’s what the fans want to see – giving us a chance to win and scoring points.”

What about Sanders?
The Browns remain intrigued by the 24-year-old Sanders. He was a fifth-round pick in 2025. He had been projected in some places as a first-rounder, but the NFL had another opinion.

He played in eight games (seven starts). He completed 57% of his passes, seven TDs compared to 10 interceptions. It was a rocky rookie year.

But as Berry has said, the Browns had problems on the offensive line and with the receivers. The GM believes both spots have been upgraded with offseason acquisitions.

“Shedeur has made enormous strides as a player from year one to year two,” said Berry. “I’m talking about improvement in terms of (pre-snap) processing, footwork, you name it. He put in a lot of work in the offseason and it shows.”

In two preseason games last month, Sanders completed 15-of-22 passes for 153 yards.

“His growth curve is vertical,” said Berry. “I’m talking about how quickly he’s applied the lessons from last year – both his successes and his failures. In some ways, it’s been pretty incredible.”

Then Berry brought up the personality of Sanders.

“Shedeur is very comfortable in his own skin,” said the GM. “If he doesn’t know something or has a question … he asks. He is focused on getting better.”

There’s more.

“I’ve heard it said that no one improves faster than someone who lacks a sense of embarrassment,” said the GM. ““He doesn’t care what anyone else thinks. If he has to go over something multiple times to make sure he gets it, he does it. That’s an outstanding trait for a young player, particularly a quarterback.”

What about Sanders the quarterback?

“I would almost call him a classic pocket passer,” said Berry. “At his best, he can sit in the heart of the pocket, process and then deliver the ball accurately. He has a good feel for the game.”

Berry clearly is intrigued by Sanders.

“Shedeur does his best work from the pocket with his accuracy and football sense,” he texted. “But he provides enough mobility to keep a defense honest with his legs.”

Berry doesn’t say it directly, but it’s clear the Browns are still searching for a quarterback. Watson’s turn comes first, but Sanders likely will have his chance at some point.

(This is third part of a four-part series with Browns GM Andrew Berry. Next is Berry discussing the Browns offseason moves to improve the offensive line and receivers.).

Why did the Browns hire Todd Monken as coach? Browns GM Andrew Berry talks to Terry Pluto
By Terry Pluto, cleveland.com
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CLEVELAND, Ohio – Why Todd Monken?

That's what a lot of fans asked when the Browns hired their new coach.

The 60-year-old Monken had never been a head coach in the NFL. His only experience at any level as a head coach was with Southern Mississippi.

In 2013, Monken took over a team that was 0-12 in the previous season. In the next three seasons with Southern Mississippi, he had records of 1-11, 3-9 and 9-5. Then he went to the NFL with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 2016.

"We wanted to hire a coach who would be uniquely qualified to shepherd a young team, but still have a lot of coaching experience," said Browns GM Andrew Berry.

Monken had spent the three previous seasons (2023-25) as offensive coordinator with the Baltimore Ravens. If he had not been hired by the Browns, Monken was set to become the offensive coordinator of the New York Giants. That was where John Harbaugh was hired after being fired by Baltimore.

Prior to Baltimore, Monken was the offensive coordinator at the University of Georgia (2020-22). The Bulldogs won two national titles in that span.

"With our draft resources and knowing we'd have one of the youngest teams in the NFL, Todd's recent college experience was important," said Berry. "Yes, he's 60, but he knows how to relate to the younger athletes coming out of college."

The coaching finalists
Kevin Stefanski was fired as coach after the 2025 season. The final three candidates to replace him were Los Angeles Rams assistant Nate Scheelhaase, Browns defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz and Monken.

It was a unique group.

Scheelhaase is 36 and has zero head coaching experience.

Like Monken, Schwartz is 60. He had been the head coach of the Detroit Lions from 2009-13. He had spent the previous three seasons (2023-25) building one of the NFL's best defenses with the Browns.

When it became apparent that Monken was a serious candidate for the Browns job, many in the media asked: Why?

He had previously interviewed for head coaching positions with Jacksonville and Chicago, but didn't appear close to being hired.

"You can't always look at where a guy was interviewed," said Berry. "Kevin Stefanski never interviewed for a head coaching position with anyone but us (Cleveland). He became a two-time NFL Coach of the Year."

Berry mentioned how Schwartz basically took 2021-22 off as he dealt with some physical problems. He was an advisor for the Titans in 2022.

"When we interviewed Jim (in 2023) to be our defensive coordinator, we were the only team talking to him at that point," said Berry. "Jim did a great job as our defensive coordinator."

Schwartz or Monken?
When Stefanski was fired, it seemed Schwartz was the leading candidate and a natural replacement as the Browns head coach.

"Jim is a Hall of Fame-caliber defensive coordinator and an excellent football coach," said Berry. "He did a great job for us. He is one of my most favorite coaches who I've ever worked with."

But the Browns were determined to find someone who could revive their offense. Over the previous two seasons, the Browns scored the fewest points in the NFL.

Monken has a strong background when it comes to creating a variety of offenses.

"Todd is one of the few NFL coaches who also has had great success in Power Four (college) football," said Berry. "He has been a national champion (coordinator) at Georgia and then was a record-setting (coordinator) at Baltimore. He did that with two completely different styles of offense."

Several times, Berry talked about Monken being "super adaptable."

In his three seasons at Georgia, the Bulldogs averaged 32-39-41 points.

With Baltimore, the Ravens ranked 1-3-15 in scoring in his three seasons.

“College football is different from the NFL,” said Berry. “He is able to marry the best of those (offenses) to the traditional NFL.”

Monken’s experience with offenses helped him secure the job.

Will it work?
Berry has said Monken doesn’t seem like a first-time head coach. His experience shows.

“He can relate to anyone from a 17-year-old college freshman to a 35-year-old father with three kids near the end of his NFL career,” said Berry. “He has a very intimate understanding of players coming from college to the NFL, because he was coaching in college only a few years ago.”

Will it work?

“We know we were criticized for the hiring,” said Berry. “We need someone to come in here with a blank slate, especially when it comes to offense. Todd can do that.”
But there’s more.

Unlike many head coaches who need to hire a brand-new staff, Monken already had veteran coaches in mind.

The most important was George Warhop, the offensive line coach at Baltimore with Monken. He came to Cleveland.

“George is one of the most respected coaches in the NFL,” said Berry. “Joe Thomas has said George is the best line coach that he ever had. We knew we were getting someone special in George.”

Also joining Monken from Baltimore are new offensive coordinator Travis Switzer, Danny Breyer and Mike Bajakian. Monken also retained former offensive assistant Duce Staley and Christian Jones.

Four members of Schwartz’s defensive staff stayed with the Browns: Jason Tarver, Ephraim Banda, Brandon Lynch and Jacques Cesaire.

The Browns believe this has made the transition from Stefanski to Monken much easier.

“Fewer growing pains when you have a staff that has worked together before,” said Berry.

But the bottom line is Monken fit the profile the Browns wanted for their new head coach.

“You need to hire a coach who has a feel for where your team is in terms of its life cycle,” said Berry. “We need a leader who can relate to and develop young players. Todd has a history of that, along with everything he has done with his various offenses.”

Can young Browns 'first finish breakfast' & still win games? — Andrew Berry talks to Terry Pluto
By Terry Pluto, cleveland.com
September 10, 2026
https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2026/09/can-young-browns-first-finish-breakfast-still-win-games-andrew-berry-talks-to-terry-pluto.html

CLEVELAND, Ohio — A young team doesn't necessarily mean it will be a bad team.

That was one of Browns GM Andrew Berry's messages as we talked about the upcoming season.

Now in his seventh season on the job, Berry knows Browns fans cover their ears and close their eyes when hearing their favorite team will have a youthful roster.

He was in the front office as an assistant GM when Sashi Brown and Paul DePodesta ripped up the roster, dumping veterans and basically playing to lose. The result was a 1-31 record from 2016 to 2017.

The 2026 Browns will be the NFL's second youngest roster behind Miami.

But this is not a return to 1-31.

"You have to be deliberate when you are turning over the roster – going younger," said Berry. "Youth is a priority. You may move away from some veterans. But you have to have a balance in the various position groups ... you need some guys with experience."

He means veterans such as players he recently acquired. Some recent examples are Jared Verse (25), Tyson Campbell (26), Zion Johnson (26) along with holdovers Grant Delpit (27) and Denzel Ward (29).

"Every player you acquire can't be a project," said Berry.

The GM mentioned the additions of linebacker Sam Williams (49 NFL games, five starts, age 27) and cornerback Noah Igbinoghene (69 NFL games, 17 starts, age 26) late in training camp.
"Being young doesn't necessarily mean you're purely developmental," said Berry. "Seattle had the NFL's fourth youngest roster last year and they won the Super Bowl. Green Bay has had the youngest roster in the last three years and they've been a playoff team every year."

Berry isn't predicting playoffs. He's also not going to pick a record.

Young talent is real

Berry talked about the two recent draft classes. Linebacker Carson Schwesinger was the 2025 NFL Rookie Defensive Player of the Year. He also mentioned Quinshon Judkins, Harold Fannin Jr. and Mason Graham from the 2025 draft.

Judkins rushed for 827 yards in 14 games. Fannin caught 72 passes and was a Pro Bowl alternate as a tight end. Graham was a fixture in the middle of the defensive line.

The 2026 class features two starting receivers (KC Concepcion and Denzel Boston) along with drafting two promising offensive linemen – Spencer Fano and Austin Barber. Second-rounder Emmanuel McNeil-Warren will play a lot at safety.

The Browns have been praised nationally for their last two draft classes. ESPN recently ranked the top teams with players 25 or younger. A year ago, the Browns ranked 29th.

“The most important young talent a team can have is a young quarterback,” wrote ESPN’s Aaron Schatz. “But we’re not giving the Browns much credit for their two young quarterbacks. Shedeur Sanders, who is 24, struggled last season with 18.9 Total QBR. Dillon Gabriel has already aged off this list, as he will be 26 in December. However, the Browns have added a ton of other young stars in the past two drafts, enough to move from 29th on this list a year ago to fourth.”

Watching the Browns in training camp, it’s easy to see how Concepcion and Boston will bring an immediate upgrade to the receivers. A first-round pick, Concepcion is the last receiver picked that high by the Browns since Corey Coleman in 2016.

Boston was a second-round pick. The Browns had a first-round grade on him. The last time the Browns selected a receiver in the second round was Greg Little in 2011.

While there has been much discussion about the Browns’ recent draft failures when it comes to receivers, they had not been drafting them high.

The Browns drafted three offensive linemen in 2026: Spencer Fano (first round), Austin Barber (third round) and Parker Brailsford (fifth round).

“You have to give young players a chance to play, grow and develop,” Berry said. “Part of the reason our rookie class did so well last season was they were unencumbered. They had significant roles from the start of the season and those roles grew larger as the season progressed.”

8 wins in two years, but there’s hope
What about the Browns, who have an 8-27 record in the past two seasons?

2026 Feature Clips

At the start of the 2024 season, the Browns were still trying to make the Super Bowl. Deshaun Watson was back after shoulder surgery. The team had an 11-6 record in 2023.

That 2024 team had the 24th oldest roster in the NFL. Everything fell apart as the Browns finished with a 3-14 record and Watson was injured again.

“We came to the realization that some of the players who helped us make the playoffs (2020 and 2023) had reached the back nine of their careers,” said Berry. “That ends up creating a bit of a painful transition period.”

Berry admitted the team had been in a “deficit because of the trade we made for Deshaun.” The Browns sent six draft picks to Houston, including first rounders in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Berry talked about how after those playoff seasons in 2020 and 2023, there was no carry-over of success. The franchise still has not had back-to-back winning seasons since the Bernie Kosar period of the late 1980s.

He is hoping the last two draft classes along with the next two can lead to some degree of sustained success. The Browns have three first-round picks and another three picks in the second round coming in the next two years.

When it comes to the Browns’ approach to the 2026 season, Berry quotes Oklahoma City Thunder GM Sam Presti: “We have to first finish our breakfast. We have to establish a foundation, how we want to play and do things right.”

Yes, the P-word is mentioned.

“We have to position the organization to be more consistent from year-to-year,” said Berry. “Everybody wants to see a winning product as soon as possible. But we don’t want make what I call an ‘emotional fix.’ It’s something for one year and that’s it. We’re in the team’s life cycle where we’re developing players and our goal is to be playing our best football at the end of the season.”

Yes, patience will be required.

“Winning football is always the goal when we step on the field,” said Berry. “That is the focus for the organization every week. However, there are a subset of things we care about with this current team as well: Continued development of the roster core, showing resiliency to overcome adversity, playing clean football in areas that are within our sole control.”

(This is the first of a series of stories based on Terry’s Pluto’s interview with Browns general manager Andrew Berry. Coming next: Berry talks about the hiring of coach Todd Monken.)

How 'wise' Maliek Collins set tone for depleted Browns defensive line
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal
October 15, 2026
https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/10/15/maliek-collins-browns-defensive-line-jets/92243722007/

BEREA — Maliek Collins is the old guy in a young man's world. Well, "old" in this instance is a very relative term for the Browns defensive tackle.

Collins has a different term he uses to describe himself.

"I'm just wise, man," Collins said in the locker room after the Browns' Week 5 loss to the New York Jets. "I done played a lot of ball. I don't know how many games I've played, but I done played a lot of them. I done seen it all."

At age 31 and in his 11th season in the NFL, Collins is the second-oldest Browns player behind 34-year-old fullback Michael Burton, a 12-year pro. Among the Browns' defensive line group, though, he's the graybeard of the group.

The arrival of 30-year-old 10-year pro defensive end Derek Barnett in late August after Alex Wright's season-ending Achilles tear gave Collins some company in the 30-and-over group, Otherwise, outside of 28-year-old Kalia Davis — who's been sidelined with a quad injury since the first day of training camp, although he's been cleared to practice — and the 26-year-old Wright, there's no one on the Browns' defensive line who's older than 25.

And yet, the "old guy" in the room is still playing at a high level. All of which is just setting the standard for everyone else in the group.

"I see you get blocked on your first rep, and then you come back and you respond on your second one," Collins said. "So I just try to preach that to the guys. You know, it's about the next rep. Just having fun doing this, man. It's a pleasure. It's a privilege to be in here in this locker room."

That privilege is something Collins knows very well not to take for granted. A year ago, his first in Cleveland, he was in the midst of a career-type season when a Week 13 quad injury against his former team, the San Francisco 49ers, ended it.

Cleveland Browns defensive tackle Maliek Collins (96) hits Jacksonville Jaguars quarterback Trevor Lawrence (16) on Sept. 13, 2026, in Jacksonville, Fla.
Collins spent the entirety of the offseason and most of training camp working his way back from the injury. He was finally able to get back on the practice field Aug. 24, making him good to go once the regular season began.

Once it began, Collins picked right back up where he left off. Through five games, he's second on the team in sacks with 2.5, while he's been credited with 14 total pressures, per Pro Football Focus, which is tied with defensive end Isaiah McGuire for most on the team.

"Yeah, I mean, I just feel like I put a good rush plan together, we executed, we got guys covering on the back end," Collins said. "Whenever rush and cover works together, you know, we get that extra tick or that extra second, we're able to get home. So credit to the rest of the guys, man, the cover help us for us to be able to get there in time."

Those words came moments after Collins' best game of the season, despite the Browns' loss. He sacked Jets quarterback 1.5 times and had three pressures, plus two tackles for loss and four combined tackles.

All of that came in a critical situation for the Browns defense, which was down two key players because of injuries to defensive tackles Mason Graham (ankle, knee) and Mike Hall Jr. (ankle). Collins' performance set the tone for an overall solid showing by the defensive line, especially defensive tackles Adin Huntington, Sam Kamara and Chris Williams, the latter two being practice-squad call-ups to the gameday roster.

The defensive tackle group combined for three of the Browns' four sacks of Smith, three tackles for a loss, eight total pressures, five quarterback hits and a fumble recovery. Kamara picked up a full sack, while Huntington shared a sack with Collins and also recovered a fumble by Smith with 4:13 remaining.

"I see a lot of depth in a lot of different positions," Collins said on a Zoom call the day after the game. "I mean, we only dressed eight [defensive linemen] so when guys come back, it's going to put everybody in tougher positions. But whenever somebody's number called, everybody steps up and does what they supposed to do."

There's no assurances that either Graham or Hall, as well as Davis, will be available when the Browns play host to the Baltimore Ravens in a hugely pivotal AFC North game Oct. 18. The obvious statement is they would benefit greatly by at least one, if not more, to come back against a Ravens team that's expected to have quarterback Lamar Jackson back from an ankle injury.

And that's in addition to the constant presence of running back Derrick Henry to drive an offense that is fifth in the league in total yards per game (394.2), third in rushing yards per game (164.4) and sixth in points per game (29.2).

That's where Collins' sage "old-guy" wisdom comes into the picture. For the good the defensive line did last week, it has no bearing on what they'll do next, unless they take it and build on the good and the bad.

"We could have did some things better," Collins said the day after the game. "As you go through the film, sometimes you look at the stat sheet, you look at the amount of rushing yards or it was plays where we didn't get enough pressure where rushing and coverage didn't work together as well.

"So I look at it for what it is versus always trying to look at the glass half-full. I just look at it and be honest with myself and see where I can improve and then hold my teammates accountable."

Jerry Jeudy finds perspective in tough times through his daughters
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal
October 5, 2026
https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/10/05/jerry-jeudy-browns-girl-dad/92078284007/

BEREA — Jerry Jeudy would be the first to tell you he's not a lot of fun to be around after a difficult game.

There is, however, someone who can break through the tough shell the Browns wide receiver puts up. Actually, someones, plural: Jeudy's daughters, Jaliyah and Journee.

"Honestly, after a tough game, can't nobody really change my mood or my attitude other than my kids and my daughters," Jeudy told the Beacon Journal in a exclusive training camp interview. "Because after a tough game, people, you know, don't say nothing to me, don't talk to me, don't do nothing. Just a quiet ride home. But my daughters, they don't care about what nothing's going on. They're going, 'Daddy, daddy, daddy,' and all this, and eventually, they just break me, too. It's not even that serious to be mad about to ruin this special moment for my kids."

Those warm greetings at home have no doubt been even more important for Jeudy so far this season. While the Browns have won three in a row to start 3-1, the seventh-year former first-round pick has seen his role diminished with the emergence of rookie wide receivers KC Concepcion and Denzel Boston.

Going into the Oct. 1 "Thursday Night Football" game against the Pittsburgh Steelers, Jeudy had been targeted just five times with two catches for 26 yards in the first three games of the season, with four targets and both catches coming in the opener at the Jacksonville Jaguars. He wasn't even targeted in the Browns' Week 3 win over the Carolins Panthers.

This was also coming on the heels of 2025 season in which he posted the second-lowest receptions (50) and receiving yards (607) totals of his first six seasons in the league. Jeudy, though, has kept his head up.

"I just focus day-by-day, man," Jeudy said. "I focus what I can control each and every day. Being where my feet are and not really focus too much on the future and don't really focus too much on the past. What happened in the past is you can't do nothing about it. It's the past. And I just focus on being where my feet are and just take it and living day by day, honestly."

There's a younger version of Jeudy who may have struggled with that perspective. He was, after all, the No. 15 overall pick in the 2020 draft by the Denver Broncos, selected ahead of CeeDee Lamb, Justin Jefferson and Tee Higgins.

That version existed in Denver, which was why the Broncos felt the need to trade Jeudy to Cleveland in 2024. Yet, as he's grown older — he's 27, now, compared to the 21-year-old he was coming out of Alabama — he's gained a perspective that's been aided by the addition of his two little girls.

"It makes you realize life is bigger than just football, like I said before," Jeudy said. "You can't let just one situation or your job just affect your day-to-day activity, your day-to-day life. So having my kids just show me, it was a tough game or whatever, but at the end of the day, man, you still got daughters to attend to, you still got a family, you still got your whole life ahead of you. So you can't let one moment just ruin the rest of your life and career or whatever."

Jeudy's also been around long enough to understand a player's next positive moment could be just around the corner. And that leads to last Thursday night against the Steelers.

There is no game-winning Andre Szmyt 56-yard field goal without the final Browns drive. There is no final drive without Jeudy making a play.

Actually, plays, plural. There was a 17-yard catch on the first play of the drive, followed by a 10-yard catch-and-run on second-and-3 from the 50 on which he was also able to get out of bounds to stop the clock with 49 seconds.

"I'm so happy for Jerry," Browns coach Todd Monken said after the game. "And it probably wasn't enough for a game ball, but for a guy that really isn't starting now, he's a rotational player, that's so cool for him. And it's not easy. Not easy for a veteran player to have young players kind of beat him out, but we needed it in a big time, and that was a big time catch."

What the future holds for Jeudy, no one can state with 100% certainty. He still has a year left on the three-year extension he signed with the Browns after being acquired from the Broncos, although his biggest cap hit of more than $28 million doesn't kick in until 2028, the year after the deal ends.

There's certainly a chance another team shows interest in trading for Jeudy, believing like the Browns did in 2024 a change of scenery might help unlock the player he was in his Pro Bowl first season in Cleveland. For now, he's still with the Browns, who play at the New York Jets Oct. 11 with a chance to win four in a row for the first time since 2023 and to start 4-1 for the first time since 2020.

Regardless of where Jeudy finishes this season, be it in Cleveland or elsehwere, he knows what will be waiting for him when he gets home after a day at work. Those are the moments, more than anything else, he's treasuring the most.

"Time's valuable," Jeudy said. "We only on the earth for so many times, and all we do is, when we do play football, we get so much time to spend with our family. So I value them moments. I value them times whenever I can get the opportunity to spend time with my kids and my daughter and my family, I take full advantage of that."

What drew Browns' Jared Verse to football? It's 'beauty' in the 'chaos'
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal
September 10, 2026
https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/09/10/browns-news-jared-verse-stats/91665358007/

BEREA — The moment in the fourth grade Jared Verse realized he was going to be a pro football player remains as vivid now as it was in the moment.

"It was a nice little afternoon," Verse, the Browns defensive end, recalled in an exclusive interview with the Beacon Journal. "You know how it is out in those summer days. Beautiful stuff. It was beautiful. Trees all orange, nice little shades. I remember the sky was starting to turn into a little hazy, darker, orange-ish almost.

"I remember sitting there and I remember like, OK, I can do this for life. I didn't watch NFL as a kid. I just watched college football and I just look at them like, oh, yeah, I didn't know NFL players made money. I was just like, I would love to do this for the rest of my life."

A lot of time has passed since that afternoon in Beavercreek, Ohio. Verse's life has taken him from the suburbs of Dayton to the central Pennsylvania town of Bloomsburg; from Albany to Tallahassee; from Los Angeles to, now, Cleveland because of the seismic Myles Garrett trade.

Football is back: Stream every big game, rivalry matchup and can't-miss moment all season long
The 25-year-old has gone from overlooked college prospect in high school to FCS Division I star at the University of Albany to first-round NFL prospect at Florida State. He's achieved his dream of playing football for a living.

The money is certainly a very nice part of being an NFL player for Verse. However, it's something much more basic that grabbed him all those years ago in that moment and maintains a vice grip on him.

"I'm like, 'Dang, it's just beautiful to me,'" Verse said. "A lot of people look at basketball and think, 'Oh, it's so beautiful.' People play golf and they're like, 'Oh, it's so beautiful." People will look at women and be like, 'Oh, she's so beautiful.' I just look at football and I'm just stunned by the beauty of how something so chaotic can be so beautiful."

That contradiction of ideas, the juxtaposition of chaos and beauty, has formed the foundation of some of the great pieces of pop culture, from works of art to music riffs to memorable acting performances. It's also the foundation of Jared Verse, football player.

2026 Feature Clips

The word "relentless" has been thrown around with regularity to describe the 6-foot-4, 260-pound pass rusher, by both Verse himself and his teammates. It's been used to not just describe Verse's pass-rush style or his general football mindset, but just the way he is in every aspect of his life.

Browns defensive end Jared Verse looks on during the second half of a preseason game against the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field, Aug. 15, 2026.
However, Verse doesn't view it as a contradiction. He sees the chaos as the natural byproduct of beauty, whose mere presence allows the other to be better appreciated.

"If everything went perfect, it would never be beautiful, it would never be amazing," Verse said. "It would never be all stunning. I don't know if you've read the book 'The Giver.' It's a book that a lot of kids read in middle school, elementary school, and it's a really good book. ... it's a perfect society. Everything's perfect. Everything's laid out perfectly, but everything's chosen for you. It's a perfect society. Nothing bad, but nothing's good happening. There's nothing like, I find chaos in the imperfections of things."

Nothing may better sum up that than what a defense, especially a pass rusher, is trying to do on a play-by-play basis. Verse wants to be an agent of chaos within the beautiful choreography that is a well-designed offensive play.

As Verse describes it, there's nothing like finding his way into the B gap, even if by accident, and blowing up the perfect picture the offense has drawn up. It's akin to the kid in art class who looks at a classmate's picture and decides he needs to take a crayon and scribble all over it.

It makes no sense why, except it makes all the sense to Verse. It's one of the first things anyone who's coached him notices.

"He's an emotional player," Florida State coach Mike Norvell told the Beacon Journal in a June phone interview. "He plays with a great passion, and I think one of the things that I tried to help him with is just making sure that in all moments that he was in control of his emotion. As people know, Jared likes to talk, he doesn't ever stop during a game or in practice and just making sure that even with all of that ... I think that's a great part of his game as long as he's in control of it."

Verse has found a way to channel that chaotic energy into a motor that runs at 100 rpm at all times. It's the never-ending reservoir of energy that helped him go from FCS scholarship to Albany to two-time All-American at Florida State, then to a two-time Pro Bowler and, finally, the central piece in the return for future Hall of Famer Garrett.

There's a play from Verse's time at Albany that crystalized that energy. It was a 56-yard touchdown run by Syracuse running back Sean Tucker in a 2021 game during which Verse nearly chased Tucker down, despite coming from the other side of the field.

Norvell pointed to that play as one that stuck with him so much that it led him to making sure the Seminoles pushed to get Verse when he got into the transfer portal after that season. It's been brought up to Verse so much that, when asked about the play, he practically finished the sentence with "Syracuse" when asked about the play in question.

"What's that quote?" Verse said. "It's not over till the fat lady sings. I take that to heart. ... It's not over. I'm going to keep pushing. I'm going to try to get my hands on you no matter what it takes."

There's an alternative universe where Verse's path is much more straightforward from high school to the NFL. A path much like the one taken by the player whose shoes he now tries to fill in Cleveland even as he insists he's not trying to fill them.

It's a path that goes directly to a big college power, then to a high first-round draft pick, then to multiple Pro Bowls and, maybe, then to the kind of career that ultimately leads to getting measured for a gaudy jacket of gold. That would be the path any football player would dream of taking.

Verse may have taken a road slightly less traveled between high school to the big college power, and his path since coming into the league may have taken an unexpected turn because of the trade from Los Angeles to Cleveland. As for where it ultimately ends, well, there's still plenty of chapters left to write in the book that is his career.

That journey, though, wouldn't be nearly as fulfilling to Verse. After all, where's the fun and the beauty if not for the chaos?

"I love my journey," Verse said. "I love every second of going to Florida State, from getting drafted to the Rams to getting where my feet are right now and being with the Browns. I love every second because every second is just another chance for me to become better and upgrade."

How Browns tight end Harold Fannin Jr. finds 'time away' in fishing
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal
August 14, 2026
https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/08/14/harold-fannin-jr-browns-fishing/91268108007/

CHICAGO — Jeff Blasko loves to fish. Ask the Browns tight end coach and he will tell you about that love.

When Blasko was hired to join Todd Monken's staff, he quickly discovered the best player in his position group, Harold Fannin Jr., shared the same passion away from the football field. So, he thought, how better to connect than the two of them going out to wet a line or two while maybe talking about something other than football?

So the two set it up for one day in the offseason. Blasko showed up with his litany of rods and lures and what-have-you he's purchased to assist him in pursuing his fishing passion.

As for Fannin? Well, let Blasko tell what happened next.

"So I'm fishing and fishing and fishing and he shows up and he's got one of those Fisher Price rods," Blasko recently told the Beacon Journal. "And I think he's screwing around with me, but he said that he typically takes it golfing with him and anytime he comes across a pond, it's easy for him to carry, which I thought was, wow, that's pretty cool. That's a good idea.

"Well, then we're there for about another hour, and he catches seven bass and I'm still waiting to catch my first. I'm like, holy s---, this dude is, he knows what he's doing. So [it] turned into a little bit of a healthy competition."

For Fannin, there are a couple of true loves. There's football, at which the Canton native and McKinley High School product has proven to be quite good, proven by a rookie season in 2025 when he set a Browns' rookie record for receptions with 72, while leading the team with 731 receiving yards — the most ever by a Browns rookie tight end.

Away from football, though? Well, there are few joys in life Fannin ranks above sitting beside a lake or pond as dusk envelops the light and casting out a line and seeing what he can catch.

"I think it's like, you're just out there with nature," Fannin told the Beacon Journal before a recent training camp practice. "So that's how I clear my mind. It's almost like it's time away. That's how I look at it. Now there's just water, trees, just relaxing."

As it does for so many, Fannin's love of fishing goes back to his youth. For him, specifically, it goes back to his trips with his mom, Lakeesha Wise, and grandfather, typically around the Canton area.

Like many young people, though, Fannin grew apart from the activity as he worked his way up through his teenage years. There were, after all, other things to do, such as play football and baseball, when he wasn't in school.

Then Fannin went away to college at Bowling Green State University. While seeking something to do outside of class and football while there, he reconnected with the activity of his youth as there "ain't really too much to do."

"We just got into fishing, and it was pretty much relaxing," Fannin said. "It ain't really taxing on the body. It's calm. You catch fish. I don't know. It's something that just, I don't know, I just like doing. I enjoy doing it, especially people I do it with."

Cleveland Browns tight end Harold Fannin Jr. shows off one of the fish he caught.
It's easy to be put at ease around Fannin. Even with the kind of frame — 6-foot-4, 241 pounds — and athleticism that make him he ideal tight end in the current offensive game of football, the aspect of Fannin that draws you in is the wide smile and countenance that almost belies a bit of boyish mischieveousness.

Spend time with Fannin, and you can see why fishing would be something that connects with him. It's because it's almost like his quiet, reserved personality was transformed into a recreation activity.

"Yeah, I feel like it does a little bit," Fannin said. "When you fish, you typically don't really talk. So that might be another reason why I like it. I ain't really got to hold a conversation. I'm just out there, like I said, relaxing. But I'll say a little bit just to the part, I ain't really got to talk too much."

The thing about Fannin is he doesn't necessarily have to talk too much to connect with his teammates and coaches. The paucity of words can often make the words that do come out carry even more weight.

So it is when Fannin heads out with a teammate. There's no reason to waste words on nonsense while trying to take in the serene surroundings.

Cleveland Browns tight end Harold Fannin Jr. holds up a fish he caught during a recent trip.
It's why Blasko jumped at the chance to go fishing with Fannin.

"Let me say this, this profession, the National Football League, it's all about people," Blasko said. "It's all about relationships. And for me to be able to know what buttons to push in order to get the

best version of Harold, I need to connect with him on a personal level to really dive into his why and dive into what makes him tick. ... We were probably there for four or five hours, and I don't know if we talked about football one time."

That's just fine for Fannin. After all, Blasko has plenty of time to talk about it during the hours of meetings and practices and walkthroughs the Browns have between the start of training camp and the end of the season.

So when Fannin's out on the water — some of those in the Hudson area are his personal favorite — he's no longer "Harold Fannin Jr., rising star of the Cleveland Browns." Instead, he's just Harold Fannin Jr., and that's more than fine with him.

"I feel like everybody needs a safe space," Fannin said. "Like you said, mentally, things can get draining and it's OK to take that time away, take that step away, whatever you got to do. And, like you said, mine just happened to be fishing. I feel like it benefits me because I come back here and I feel refreshed. I'm just ready to get back to work."

Quincy Williams' smile, intensity contagious for Browns defense
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal
June 22, 2026
https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/06/22/quincy-williams-browns-defense/90540745007/

BEREA — The first thing you notice about Quincy Williams is his smile. It's almost perpetually on the Browns linebacker's face, no matter the situation.

"I wish I could smile as big as he does to show you what it is, because that smile, it's his superpower," linebackers coach Jason Tarver said at the end of minicamp. "His superpower is a smile and his speed. And when he is who he is, it's contagious."

What that smile may hide is an intensity that Williams brings to the field. That intensity is just as contagious as the smile in the way it radiates outward toward those who come into contact with him.

You could see it when the Browns defense was on the field together during the open OTA and minicamp practices. Williams' intensity was like a superconductor from which the other 10 players on that side of the ball drew.

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The defense seemed to play with a "hair on fire" attitude, creating havoc for their offensive teammates. Williams was often at the center of it, getting hands into passing lanes or creating pressure on the quarterback.

“I'm always happy," Williams said after the May 20 OTA. "I'm going to be honest with you — you’re going to hear me celebrating whether they get the ball or not. I'm going to make sure you hear me. My defense is going to hear me, but being a violent defense, whether that's 11 on 11, seven on seven, being a feared defense, all those hitches and stuff, those 50-50 balls, they ain’t really 50-50. They're more like 70, whatever that number is, because we want that ball. The ball is oxygen.”

Williams' presence on the Browns is a direct reflection on who new coach Todd Monken hired as his defensive coordinator. Mike Rutenberg came to Cleveland after a season as the Atlanta Falcons' defensive pass game coordinator.

Before that, Rutenberg spent four seasons as the linebackers coach for the New York Jets. There, the coach they call "Rudy" worked with Williams, who he helped turn into an All-Pro in 2023, one of four consecutive seasons he also had more than 100 tackles.

That background made Williams a natural replacement for Devin Bush, who departed in free agency to the Chicago Bears after revitalizing his career the last two seasons in Cleveland. Rutenberg has pushed back on Williams being an on-field extension of him, because he said that doesn't allows players to be themselves.

"Quincy's Quincy, and would never want anybody to be an extension of me," Rutenberg said at the May 27 OTA. "I want them all to live in their superpower. His superpower is his smile, his infectious personality, his run and hit, his fist pump. His other superpower is getting along with people. And, together, that linebacker room transfers to the D-line room, the DB room, the coaching staff. Quincy, to them, we're all together. So it's great having him here. I love seeing his smile every day."

Williams has made an instant bond with Carson Schwesinger, his linebacker teammate. A year ago, Schwesinger was the new kid on the block in Cleveland, arriving as the first pick in the second round of the 2025 draft.

Schwesinger won NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year while playing alongside Bush and under defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz. He's looking to build on that, and finds Williams and, by extension, Rutenberg the perfect combination to help do that.

"Energy is the word I use for it," Schwesinger said after the June 3 OTA. "I mean, I just love being on the field finally again. I mean, you get enough time off; it's fun to be out there. But the field's so important, too. Being able to learn how Quincy is on the field and how Rudy is on the field and vice versa, them learning how we are, it really just builds that connection that allows us to play faster. And it's been a whole lot of fun being able to do that and be on the field with them."

The next step comes when training camp begins. That's when the intensity only ramps up because the start of the season is so close at that point.

It's also when the Browns should have everyone together on their defense, which they didn't either through voluntary OTAs or mandatory minicamp for one reason or another. That thought makes the smile on Williams' face really light up.

"That's the craziest thing about OTAs just because you don't have everybody, but the biggest thing is also a newer scheme, too, though," Williams said. "So you're playing with people who are starting to get their confidence and then you're also playing with a couple of people that already have their confidence.

"So you don't really know, like I said, we're not trying to win tomorrow, but we're coming with the mindset that if we were to play tomorrow, we handing our ass whoopings because we're all out of lollipops."

How Jared Verse has brought a different vibe to Browns defense
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal
Aug. 18, 2026
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BEREA — You don't see Jared Verse on the field first. You hear the Browns defensive end.

You hear Verse talking loudly to defensive teammates. You hear Verse talking, loudly, to offensive teammates. You just can't help but hear Verse throughout practice, because he's just been omnipresent.

That's just because it is who Verse is unabashedly.

"Yeah, 100%," Verse said this week. "I mean, when you see the way I've attacked the game, I'm very physical, very violent, very loud, very ... expressive is a very good word to use for it. You see everybody else's personality start to finish. I mean, with a lot of people, when you're mixed with a lot of different people, you can't show your full personality on the field. I have no problem with that, but when you see somebody like me go out there yelling and screaming, you have no problem showing your true character and you see everyone's personality start to flourish on the field."

Verse continues to be a revelation to everyone associated with his new team. He also continues to back up with actions what he's said multiple times since the Browns acquired him from the Los Angeles Rams in exchange for future Hall of Famer Myles Garrett, which was, "I'm not this guy, I'm not that guy, I'm Jared."

Although Garrett certainly had his moments when he could be vocal on the field, and don't think he couldn't talk his share of trash to an overwhelmed offensive lineman, he might as well have taken a vow of silence compared to Verse. If nothing else, there's no denying the 25-year-old is authentically himself.

How to describe the "authentic" Verse? Left tackle Spencer Fano called him "relentless," which probably best fits the way he can just wear people down.

“I think that’s a good way of putting it," Browns coach Todd Monken said. "I do think he’s a guy that backs it up. He’s not a phony. He’s highly competitive, and it gets him going, his juices start flowing. He’s a self-made guy, and he just wants to be great, he just wants to be elite and help his team win. It’s fun to be around. It’s contagious because he backs it up. He only knows one speed, and that is what’s fun to be around — a guy who backs it up.”

If you wanted to describe Verse, both as a pass rusher and a trash talker, like an ocean wave, then the land mass that wave has regularly crashed against has been Fano. The No. 9 overall pick in April's draft has been adjusting to both life as a full-time left tackle at the same time he's adjusting to life in the NFL.

While Fano's doing all of that, he's also daily having to deal with having to try to block Verse, all while listening to the perpetual chatter that accompanies every play like a director's commentary. It's led to several near-confrontations around one very memorable fight that ended up with both of them on the ground.

The one who most appreciated what Fano did in that moment? Verse, who ended up on his back in the wrestling match the skirmish turned into.

"That boy got heart," Verse said. "I mean, a lot of rookies were going through a situation against me, against top edges in the league and stuff and kind of back down, kind of like being a little nervous, a little bit timid. But, no, he's never shown that."

There's certainly no indication Verse knows what "nervous" or "timid" actually mean. The trajectory of his football career — from FCS Division I Albany to tradition-rich college power Florida State to Rams first-round pick to NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year to, now, the Player Traded for Myles Garrett — proves that fact.

The reason why Verse projects it the way he does is because he wants to bring his teammates along at that level. Those teammates have felt it like a cool breeze on a hot summer's day.

"The vibe is different off the urgency," defensive end Alex Wright said. "I feel like the urgency has been very, very, very quick this past, not only OTAs, but going into training camp. There's a lot of fight on the offensive side, there's a lot of fight on the defensive side, and sometimes the tempers flare, and that's just football.

"And just being in Cleveland, me personally, I feel like it's good that we have that because it shows fight. It shows some type of hungriness, if that makes sense. So at the end of the day it's about just being competitive and just pretty much just fighting your ass off just to make a play and just being yourself at the end of the day and just getting your opponent."

Akron grad Travis Switzer turns 'love' of football into Browns OC job
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal
July 15, 2026
https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/07/15/travis-switzer-browns-assistant-akron/90765743007/

BEREA — Travis Switzer knew whatever he did when he was an adult, it was going to involve football.

Switzer knew it growing up in Lancaster, Pa. That led him to a college football career at the University of Akron in the early 2010s.

When those playing days ended, Switzer's desire to remain in football didn't diminish. That led him to coaching, which has led him back to Northeast Ohio as the offensive coordinator for the Browns.

"I mean, football was always a love of mine," Switzer told the Beacon Journal in an interview on the last day of June minicamp. "I mean, it was always a huge part of my life. I was going to try to play as long as I could. When they told me I wasn't good enough to play anymore, I was going to coach. I knew it had to be a part of me. I wanted to be a part of a team. There's nothing like that in the world, being part of a team, everybody working together for one goal. So, yeah, I think that's really what led to that."

The Browns are only the second stop in Switzer's coaching journey. He got his start with the Baltimore Ravens in 2017 with the title of "Administrative assistant/performance," which grew to "Performance staff assistant" in 2019 to "Coaching analyst/offense in 2019-20."

The big on-field breakthrough had started in 2021, when he was elevated to offensive quality control coach. He remained in that role through 2023, the first year Todd Monken was the Ravens' offensive coordinator.

"When I first got to Baltimore, Greg Roman had been the offensive coordinator, designed the whole run game," Monken said during the NFL owners meetings in March. "Where everywhere else I've been, the O-line coach had a huge hand in the run game. So when I got there, Joe D'Alessandris, who's passed away since then, he did more of the protections. When I interviewed Travis to decide whether to just keep him on the staff, he went through the run game and absolutely killed it."

Switzer was promoted in 2024 to be the Ravens' run game coordinator. That coincided with Baltimore signing running back Derrick Henry to add to an offense that was led by the quarterback unicorn that is Lamar Jackson.

The Ravens were a top-three rushing team each of the two seasons in which Switzer held the run game coordinator title, including leading the league in 2024 in rushing yards per game (187.6) and total rushing yards (3,189). Over the three seasons he worked with Monken in Baltimore, the Ravens ranked first in rushing yards with 8,512 yards (166.9 yards per game), second in scrimmage yards (19,860) and third in points per game (27.9).

"Our job was to mix, blend what I've done in the past and then what Lamar did well," Monken said. "Ever since then, he's just grown leaps and bounds in all aspects of his coaching, not just run game, dealing with players, pass game, overall thoughts, philosophically how to attack people. We wouldn't have had the success we had in Baltimore without him."

Switzer was one of the first coaches connected to Monken after he was hired by the Browns in January. There's little coincidence the assistants who emerged first were Switzer and offensive line coach George Warhop, who also came to Cleveland after being with Monken in Baltimore.

Both Switzer's and Warhop's backgrounds start with their own playing days as centers for Ohio colleges, albeit decades apart. While Warhop played center at the University of Cincinnati in the early 1980s, Switzer played center at Akron from 2011-14, where he was an Academic All-Mid-American Conference selection and two-time offensive recipient of the Harry "Doc" Smith Award (2013-14), which recognizes the most outstanding player of each class.

Switzer said there's a reason why a number of offensive linemen are able to have success as coaches.

"I think, first of all, it's the mentality that it takes to play up there," Switzer said. "And there's a whole game that goes on with those five guys separate than the other six guys on the field that those people don't even know about. All the communication that goes on with those guys up front, them being on the same page allows the rest of the team's talent to shine. I mean, if they don't do their job, then the whole team looks bad, the whole offense looks bad."

The Baltimore connection is one thing that ties a number of Monken's offensive coaches together. Switzer, Warhop, pass game specialist Danny Breyer, tight ends coach Jeff Blasko and offensive quality control coach Ian Kolste all were with the Ravens in 2025.

However, there's another sub-group among Monken's coaches that includes Switzer, which is the number of assistant who have connections to the University of Akron football program. There are, including him, five Browns assistants with connections to the school, including two who are Akron-area natives.

"I mean, I love Akron," Switzer said. "I mean, I grew up there, learned a lot of life lessons there, became a man there, was away from home for the first time, all those things, made lifelong friends.

So, yeah, I mean, we look back. I still talk to a few guys that were on the team there. I mean, obviously the guys here who have been there, I mean, yeah, we've had laughs and shared memories. It's been fun."

Offensive analyst Dom Borsani, a Wadsworth native, graduated with a bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering from Akron. Breyer both graduated from the school and spent two separate stints as a graduate assistant in 2012 and in 2014.

Assistant offensive line coach Bobby Johnson, a former Archbishop Hoban High School standout, started his coaching career for Lee Owens with the Zips, first as a graduate assistant from 1995-96 before moving to two seasons as the defensive line coach. Blasko also started his coaching career at Akron with three seasons as a graduate assistant from 2008-10.

"Yeah, it just happened to time up that way," Blasko said. "It's been pretty cool. Danny Breyer and I were together at Akron. It's interesting. When I was a GA at Akron, I was transitioned. I got a quality control position at the University of Florida, and as I was on my way out, Travis Switzer was on his way in as a recruit.

"So it's been cool to come kind of full circle there. Him and I had no prior relationship prior to this job. The collaboration, the connection, it's been awesome."

Shedeur Sanders embraces 'superhero' role, both with youth camp and QB
By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal
July 19, 2026
https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/07/19/shedeur-sanders-talks-youth-camp-browns-quarterback/90976357007/

BROOKLYN — Shedeur Sanders has faced plenty of rushing defenders during his career as a quarterback. But that he faced in the past may have nothing on what he faced when he walked out to speak to the campers waiting for him at his free youth camp at Brooklyn Memorial Stadium July 19.

The high school that calls the stadium home is nicknamed the Hurricanes. What Sanders faced was a storm surge as many of the 500 campers in attendance swarmed him.

"Oh, I'm a superhero in my world anyway," Sanders said during a break between the football portion of the camp and the food and inflatables portion. "So, nah, overall I'm truly excited that they're excited to see me and stuff. I would say most of the time, usually as athletes and everything, we're isolated more. So it's about getting in the community and just seeing everybody and seeing the inspiration that we give just by showing up. And it's a very simple task, so I truly appreciate it."

Sanders arrived at the camp directly from the airport, where he had flown in from a few days in Miami. He had been in South Florida for a different kind of football camp, which the Browns hope can make a major impact when they get training camp started with the first full-squad workout in a week and a half.

The two quarterbacks who are battling for the Browns' starting job — second-year pro Sanders and veteran Deshaun Watson — co-hosted a group of their offensive teammates in Miami. That group included most of the wide receiver corps — including Jerry Jeudy, Isaiah Bond, Cedric Tillman, Jamari Thrash and rookies KC Concepcion and Denzel Boston — as well as running back Dylan Sampson.

"Yeah, I think it was extremely important that us as a group, for whoever was available, was available to come down to Miami," Sanders said. "And there were a couple other players that schedules didn't align with it, but it's all good for those that came and stuff, it was truly amazing."

Offseason get-togethers like the one in Miami aren't uncommon, either with the Browns or other teams. Even having multiple quarterbacks being a part of it isn't entirely rare, as video came out last week of New York Giants quarterbacks Jaxson Dart and Jameis Winston working out together.

Those two aren't in a direct competition for the starting job with the Giants — Dart's the presumptive starter — the way Sanders and Watson are going into training camp locked in a duel to

be QB1 in Cleveland. However, Sanders had made it clear when he spoke during minicamp in June that if one of the quarterbacks did something, "we all going to do it together as a team. It's not no individual thing."

The South Florida gathering, Sanders said, was about so much more than quarterbacks and wide receivers getting a bunch of reps in ahead of training camp.

"We felt a different type of bond just outside of the facility, outside of these things," Sanders said. "And we all vow to continue doing our part and keep it going while we're here. Those relationships and how funny it is when you have a lot of dialogue and in different situations where a lot of your teammates, is very fun and it's exciting. You create these real memories, these real bonds, and it's irreplaceable. So I'm truly thankful that it happened. I know everybody that came was excited and we had a great time."

That last line could've been talking about the third- through eighth-grade kids in attendance from the Cleveland Municipal youth football league, as well as the youth league from North Coast, Brooklyn, Berea and Legacy U out of Columbus. It also could've been talking about Sanders himself as he wandered around the field, bouncing from group to group with a million-dollar smile gracing his face.

Sanders added a little competition at the end, with all of the campers playing a game that eventually whittled it down to one boy and one girl winner. The prize for each of them? A diamond-crusted necklace with his logo.

"Oh, the chain," Sanders said. "Yeah, that was just a little thing that I just though was cool. So then I was like, OK, let's do it, because I always want to be able to have different memories, and I like competition. Overall, I love the competition factor, and it's fair. I love fair competition. So that's what we did."

Fair competition is what Sanders said is what's coming up soon enough for him. The Browns quarterbacks are expected to arrive around the same time as the rookies report, which will be July 23.

From there, it will come down to what Sanders and Watson do in all facets of the competition. That goes beyond the on-field performance to what they do in the meeting room and elsewhere.

Sanders, though, said he's right where he needs to be mentally heading into training camp.

"Mindset, I would say, how I think every day," Sanders said. "Yeah, how I think every day is my mindset. Be the best. Be the best person I could be, whether that's on the field, off the field, in the community, spiritually, emotionally, everything. I just try to be the best.

A last name rooted in Puerto Rican culture shapes Browns' KC Concepcion
By Alisson Toro-Lagos, Akron Beacon Journal
https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/09/18/browns-kc-concepcion-last-name-puerto-rico-culture/91675350007/

A person's last name tends to hold a lot of history and personal pride, especially for professional athletes whose names are read out loud at stadiums and some of whom become globally known figures.

But have you ever wondered what it truly means to them?

For Cleveland Browns rookie wide receiver Kevin "KC" Concepcion Jr., a whole island is rooting for the "Concepcion" name, which originates in Puerto Rico.

"I want to be that guy that Puerto Rican kids can look up to," Concepcion, the Browns' second first-round pick (No. 24 overall) out of Texas A&M in April's draft, said. "The influence on my life was great. The language, food and culture all came from my dad's side of the family. It played an important role in my life."

Born in Rochester, New York, Concepcion credits his grandmother for all the rice and beans — aka arroz con gandules — he ate growing up that might've played a role in him being a strong athlete.

"I used to eat rice all day. I basically grew up on rice," he said.

But KC's drive to be a one-of-a-kind player stemmed from the philosophy of his dad, Kevin Concepcion, after whom he is named.

"My dad was actually the first person who got me into football," the younger Concepcion said. "He used to make us go through crazy workouts at 5, 6, 7 years old. Honestly, I wouldn't be the football player I am today without him."

From the moment Kevin saw his son catch a football, he knew he was going to be something special, and he wanted to embed his Latino upbringing in KC.

"A lot of Hispanics are known for playing baseball in the major leagues so it ain't many of us in the NFL," Kevin Concepcion said.

Concepcion had four catches for 43 yards and ran three times for 15 yards in the Browns' season-opening 34-10 loss at the Jacksonville Jaguars on Sept. 13. They play Sunday, Sept. 20, at the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Puerto Rico, Rochester and the Concepcion lineage
Kevin's mom was born in PR before his grandmother moved their family to Rochester in the '70s. They still have family in San Juan and Barceloneta, two major cities on the island.

He didn't have his dad growing up, so the last name of Concepcion comes from his mother, which he honors because it's a major part of his identity.

"What I learned in life is that a lot of Spanish people are big on family, so growing up and having to take on my mom's last name, I definitely embraced it," Kevin Concepcion said. "The last name Concepcion is rare. You don't hear it often."

As he was growing up in Rochester, Kevin said he realized you have two paths from which to choose — sports or the streets. So by the time KC was born, he wanted to make sure to keep him focused on his future.

Kevin and sports went hand-in-hand because he played football at the University of Buffalo.

Kevin started KC off in flag football and, as he grew up, he quickly realized KC was naturally gifted.

"I saw how much more advanced and developed he was amongst other kids," the elder Concepcion said. "I instantly realized I got something special."

Kevin had KC do "crazy workouts" at a young age because he had a vision for his son — a good education and, maybe, playing professional football one day.

What a 'dawg' mentality means for Kevin, KC
For a long period of time, Kevin made sure to install a tough "dawg" mentality in KC so he wouldn't let outside situations define who he is as a person or player.

"The biggest thing for me was the mindset, that hungriness inside of you, ambition, that drive, that dawg-ish mentality where you're going to show up everyday and outwork, outcompete and want it more than everybody that's going to take you far, not just in football, in life," Kevin Concepcion said.

Kevin said he could not recall ever seeing KC wanting to give up. He has always given it his all even after an intense workout or when life threw other challenges at him.

Kevin and KC both have speech impediments and dealt with it the "Concepcion" way, which is to not shy away from anybody or anything and embrace who they are.

“I just wanted to put it out there that I do have a stutter, but I don’t shy away from anything," KC Concepcion said. "Any adversities in my life, I take head on and face it.”

KC opened up about his hardships after the 2026 NFL Draft Combine, where he wrote for The Player’s Tribune and directed it toward NFL general managers.

"I've always been the underdog," he said. "I feel like that adds the fuel to the fire for me."

KC is the only one out of his seven siblings to inherit his dad’s speech impediment.

“His mom jokes about it all the time, saying, 'You cursed my boy,' since growing up I also had it,” said Kevin.

So his father understood what KC was going through when he was getting bullied in school. As he got older, Kevin tried to help KC by working on certain techniques and telling him to slow down, take his time when talking because there’s never a rush.

“I would tell him, 'Hey, son, it’s OK. There’s nothing wrong with you. Your dad stutters sometimes,'" Kevin Concepcion said. "That’s why I tip my hat off to KC because he embraced it and dealt with it way better than I did as a kid, and to see him speak in front of a large crowd, I wasn’t able to do that when I was a kid.”

KC and Cleveland go hand-in-hand
Since joining the Browns, KC and the Concepcion family have found ways to take part in their heritage in Northeast Ohio.

On the west side of Cleveland, they enjoy the Puerto Rican bakeries, Dominican restaurants and the Cleveland Guardians.

A few days after KC was drafted, he hopped on the Guardians' Spanish broadcast, giving a shoutout to his Puerto Rican fans.

On Sept. 15 he participated in his first "Stay in the Game" event with the Browns at the Lorain Bilingual Academy. He was able to connect with Hispanic kids through fun interactive events for gym glass. His teammate Denzel Boston joined in on the trip as well.

Despite not speaking Spanish even though he said he tried to learn it, KC is always thinking of the kids who look like him and share similar backgrounds.

"I want to be that guy for the kids so they can see what I've been through and be inspired and driven by that," Concepcion said.

Mason Graham stronger, more comfortable in Year 2, aims to be cornerstone of defense
By Scott Petrak, BrownsZone
August 8, 2026
https://www.brownszone.com/2026/08/08/mason-graham-stronger-more-comfortable-in-year-2-aims-to-be-cornerstone-of-defense/

BEREA — Mason Graham chuckled when the number was mentioned.

His half-sack in 17 games as a rookie fell well short of expectations for the No. 5 pick, but he's not running from it.

"I know what I did. I had a lot of good rushes in the season," the defensive tackle told The Chronicle-Telegram this week after a training camp practice. "I feel like I was effective, but obviously everyone wants the stats to back up how they feel like they're playing. Obviously I wasn't playing fully to my standard last year, but that's in the past now and learned from that."

Graham got better as the season progressed, getting into the backfield and disrupting the offense. He was credited with four quarterback hits, 49 tackles, seven for loss, and four passes defensed.

"I feel like it was a good start," he said. "Obviously there's a lot of plays that I definitely wanted back. I had a lot of reps last year and I feel like I didn't take advantage of all those reps looking back on the film. I feel like I left a lot on the plate, but it is what it is. It's part of the experience and just want to take it into this year."

He pointed to the second Ravens game as an example.

"I think I missed three sacks," said Graham, who returned to practice Friday after missing a couple of days with a minor injury. "They funneled to Myles. I always say that it went to a good cause at the end of the day."

Defensive end Myles Garrett set the NFL season sack record with 23. He was traded to the Rams on June 1, leaving a huge hole only partially filled by two-time Pro Bowl end Jared Verse, who was acquired in the deal.

"Everyone's got to step up their game," Graham said. "Obviously we know what type of player Myles was, and obviously Jared's also a very good player. So I feel like we're all kind of individually working on taking that next step ourselves. So it'll make the whole defense better."

Life without Garrett will be an adjustment, the size of which might not be fully realized until the season starts.

“Myles is good at what he does. He’s going to do what he does, at the end of the day he’s going to have more than 20 sacks probably again this year,” Graham said. “But we got Jared now. I feel like he’s just going to help the D-line as a whole. Everyone’s going to be rushing together, just working more together and just kind of doing our thing.”

The Browns saw disruption from Graham in his three years at the University of Michigan and projected that as pass rush production. He had 14 sacks as a senior in high school and nine in three years with the Wolverines, where he was asked to read and react and take on double teams. The Browns’ philosophy is for the linemen to explode off the ball and penetrate the backfield.

The transition took time.

“Last year I feel like I didn’t trust my technique all the way,” Graham said. “I was kind of reverting back to my old ways, not playing the true scheme of the defense and trying to do what I’m comfortable with. But now I’m comfortable with the actual scheme, so I’m starting to adapt more to that.

“So it was all just repetitions at the end of the day. So I feel like I’m starting to hit that second stride and starting to be more comfortable.”

A jump in sack production is an obvious goal, although he won’t put a number on it. His vision is grander.

“Just take that next step,” he said. “I want to be one of the cornerstones of this defense. I want to be that guy that everyone wants to play with. And we call ourselves the engine on the D-line, so I want to be the full embodiment of that.”

Graham believes he’s taken his get-off to another level.

“I feel like it is totally different from last year,” he said. “My stance is different. I feel like I also changed my body, too.”

He said he added 7 pounds of muscle while losing fat. He played at 288 pounds last year and is at 286 with the goal of 290-295 for the season.

“I know I feel way more confident in myself, stronger,” he said. “I feel like that was a big thing last year where I was lacking strength.”

New coach Todd Monken has been impressed with Graham’s football IQ. New Ravens coach and former Michigan defensive coordinator Jesse Minter told him at the owners meetings to expect that.

“In terms of the D-line, in terms of calls and anticipation of what he’s going to see, communication, quarterback, verbal, O-line, I see it every day,” Monken said. “He’s not only that, but he’s more, because he really understands football and he anticipates what offenses are trying to do to him.”

Graham said it comes from experience.

“I’ve played football since I was 5, so I feel like just the instincts come with that,” he said. “I love the game of football. I try to study it. And even when I’m not in, I try to see what the O-line looks like. Backfield sets, tight ends. It all gives certain hints as I anticipate a block before it happens. I kind of have a good feel just based off formations and stances and stuff like that.”

New left guard Zion Johnson noticed right away.

“I know in the spring he was the one D-lineman that’s listening to our calls, trying to ascertain what combination is going to happen based off of what we’re saying and our verbiage,” he said. “So he’s a very smart guy and he has a lot of talent. His future is bright.”

Johnson and Graham match up every day in camp.

“He’s very, very good with his hands,” Johnson said. “Very technical. He can rush with power, he can rush with finesse. He’s a very good player.”

Graham has built a close friendship with quarterback Dillon Gabriel. Graham’s family moved to Hawaii, where Gabriel is from, and they played against each other when Gabriel was at Oregon.

“I hit him after a play one time and he was expecting me to stand over him and talk sh** or whatever,” Graham said. “But I just helped him up and ever since then — I think he said something to me — then both got drafted here and then it was kind of like a comfortability.”

They are next-door neighbors.

“First off, at some point I was trying to get him to Oregon in college, and that didn’t happen,” Gabriel told The Chronicle. “But when we played each other, we always joke around like he almost sacked me, but it was a mutual respect. We kind of dapped up after the game and then we ended up moving in next to each other.

“So a lot of our time spent together. In the off time, we eat dinners together and stuff like that.”

Linebacker Carson Schwesinger was also part of the 2025 draft class the Browns expect to be transformational in their rebuild and is tight with Graham. He didn’t laugh when asked about Graham’s half-sack a year ago.

“His stats don’t show even close to how disruptive he was, especially as the year went on,” he said. “And so I think even just watching the OTAs to now, just the growth he’s had, I think he’s going to have even more disruption and make a whole lot of plays this year.”

“I anticipate that number to go way up,” Monken said.

Spencer Fano's climb to No. 9 pick started with dad-demanded footwork drills when he was 6
By Scott Petrak, BrownsZone
September 4, 2026
https://www.brownszone.com/2026/09/04/spencer-fanos-climb-to-no-9-pick-started-with-dad-demanded-footwork-drills-when-he-was-6/

Agility ladders are common on a football practice field. They are placed on the ground, and the players — primarily running backs and receivers but even linemen on occasion — run through them to improve footwork and quickness.

The ladder is unusual for a backyard.

Especially one used by a 6-year-old.

Yet that's exactly what Browns rookie left tackle Spencer Fano attributes his nimble feet to, particularly for a man who stands 6-foot-6, 315 pounds.

"It comes from just training ever since I was a kid," he told The Chronicle-Telegram recently. "My dad would take me, my brothers and my sister, and we would just do the little foot ladders. I want to say I started doing the foot ladder since I was like 6.

"We always had to do the foot ladder before we ever did anything like hung out with friends or played video games. Dad would come home, he would check in with my mom, make sure we did it."

Fano's father, Bingham, played quarterback and safety at Snow College in Utah.

"He was an athlete and he kind of saw the potential in us since we were little kids and that grew into how me and my siblings are today," Fano said.

The ladder regimen lasted 30 minutes a day. Bingham didn't design it for fun.

"Riding us hard, for sure," Fano said. "It was a very strict thing and made sure we had it done and if we didn't get it done, then, yeah, there was no play with your friends."

Resentment followed.

"Of course. I mean, I was a kid," Fano said. "As a kid, that's not something you want to do. You want to go hang out with your friends, you want to play video games, you want to play with toys, all the stuff.

“But looking back on it today, I feel like that’s an amazing thing that my dad did. I obviously would not be the same kind of athlete or player today if I didn’t do those things.”

He and brother Logan, an undrafted rookie defensive end who’s on Cleveland’s practice squad, would get an occasional respite from their mom.

“There was sometimes where me and Logan would make a deal with my mom and then she lied to my dad, say we did it when he came home from work,” Fano said.

Bingham got his MBA at Harvard and manages mobile homes.

“Pretty freaking cool,” Fano said of the advanced degree.

Fano wasn’t a lineman until high school in Utah. He spent his youth as a power running back.

“I was maybe 2 ounces under the weight limit every time,” he said. “Every time.”

Fano flashes his bright smile routinely and generally carries a sunny disposition. That changes when he’s on the field, as was obvious when he wrestled with defensive end Jared Verse during a training camp fight.

He isn’t sure where the ability to switch personalities comes from but has a theory.

“I feel like just as a kid, I started playing football in kindergarten and I didn’t know what I was doing out there, but they just told me to go hit somebody,” he said. “So I feel like, I don’t know, ever since then, it’s been really easy for me to go hit somebody.”

And he enjoys that?

“Yes, sir,” he said.

The fight with Verse, a two-time Pro Bowler, proved something to Fano’s coaches and teammates

“That boy got heart,” Verse said. “A lot of rookies that were going through a situation against me, against top edges in the league, kind of back down, kind of be a little nervous, a little bit timid. But, no, he’s never shown that.”

Verse is a constant irritant to Fano and the rest of the offense. He’s nonstop trash talk and movement.

“There’s some very explicit things that I don’t think we could put on the record,” Fano said. “Which has driven me to say some explicit things back.”

The ladder work, background at running back and nasty streak were the foundation for him to eventually play left tackle in the NFL. The Browns took him at No. 9 after trading down from No. 6 and immediately installed him on the quarterback’s blindside after playing mostly right tackle throughout his career.

“It’s not an easy task, especially on the fly,” veteran right tackle Tytus Howard said. “I feel like he’s doing a tremendous job of owning the small details of the technique every day.

“He’s really athletic. And that’s something you can’t teach, that’s a God-given talent. It’s helped him out a lot since he’s been here.”

Coach Todd Monken has seen Fano’s overall skill set improve.

“He always had the athleticism piece of it, but I think where he’s really evolved is his upper body working with his lower body in terms of his movement and his punch and not getting overextended,” he said. “Jared going against him every day has helped with that. But I think just the coordination of it all, and I think it’s only going to continue to get better.”

Fano’s first major test will come Sept. 13 in the opener against the Jaguars and edge rushers Josh Hines-Allen and Travon Walker.

“I’m ready,” Fano said. “I know it’s going to be a challenge and I’m ready to take that head on.”

He isn’t sure what to expect, besides nerves.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” he said. “I know I’m going to have my moments, but I’m going to try to cut down on those as much as possible and put together a game.

“I get nervous before everything, before practices. I get nervous before I talk to media. Coach Monken said if you get those nerves it’s because you care. So that’s how I feel about it.”

When Fano wasn’t at the team facility or sleeping during the long grind of camp, he hung out with new wife Sami.

“Every hour that I’m not here, I’m with her,” he said. “I do my hobbies with her, which makes it awesome. I’ll be sitting there building Legos and we’ll be watching a movie together and that type of stuff.”

They've been married for two months and are settling into their new city.

"I've loved it so much," he said. "We've been talking about it every day, how this really does feel like home to us now. So it's been amazing."

He gets recognized "all the time" and embraces the attention.

"It's so cool," he said. "It's such a blessed position to be in. And then all the fans, everybody's so kind. They come in and they're not rude about it. Everybody's awesome, so it's been a lot of fun."

COMMUNITY

Browns named finalist for ESPY's Sports Humanitarian Team of the Year Award
By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com
June 30, 2026
https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/browns-named-finalist-for-espy-s-sports-humanitarian-team-of-the-year-award

The Browns are being nationally recognized for their transformative efforts in the community centered around youth football participation, educational advancement and equitable opportunities across Northeast Ohio.

ESPN announced on June 29 the Browns are one of the finalists for the ESPY's Sports Humanitarian Team of the Year Award. The Sports Humanitarian Awards will be held on July 14 and recognizes changemakers that are using the power of sports to uplift communities.

The Browns are one of those changemakers.

"Being named a finalist for the ESPN Sports Humanitarian Team of the Year Award is a tremendous honor that reflects the dedication of everyone involved from our staff, our players, our partners, and most importantly, the communities we serve," said Managing and Principal Partners Dee and Jimmy Haslam. "Our family is so proud to call Northeast Ohio home and more motivated than ever to continue investing in the young people who make this region so special."

The Haslam and Johnson families have played a direct and sustained role in shaping the Browns' community impact strategy, particularly through investments in youth sports, education and equitable access to opportunities across Northeast Ohio. Since making Cleveland their home, the families have prioritized creating long-term community resources that support student development both on and off the field.

Through the vision of the Haslam and Johnson families and Browns Give Back, the Browns launched the field projects initiative in 2016 with an initial commitment to install five synthetic turf fields in Cleveland Metropolitan School District schools. From the beginning, the initiative required coordinated collaboration between school leadership and Browns Give Back, working in alignment to identify schools, design field spaces and ensure each project met both athletic and educational needs. The impact of the initiative resonated with two organizations the Browns align with, Ohio CAT and ForeverLawn, who each recognized the impact of community investments and partnered with the Browns to continue the progress of the field projects.

That commitment has since expanded to 19 field projects across Northeast Ohio, representing one of the largest and longest-running youth sports infrastructure initiatives led by an NFL organization.

2026 Feature Clips

Designed as an "outdoor classroom," these fields are integrated into daily student life to support extracurricular programming, physical activity and school engagement. Schools have leveraged these spaces to strengthen attendance, student motivation and overall success. This project epitomizes the Stay in the Game! Attendance Network and Browns Give Back vision to impact education and youth football in the community. Launched in 2019 by the Cleveland Browns Foundation, Ohio Department of Education and Workforce and Harvard's Proving Ground, the Stay in the Game! Attendance Network, managed by Battelle, works together to campaign, connect and convene with experts and supporters to dramatically improve attendance. In 2025, the Browns improved attendance for 612,000 total students statewide among 239 school districts.

For many schools, the turf installations have restored access to reliable home fields for the first time in years. Previously, teams often practiced on inconsistent or unsafe surfaces, including poorly maintained fields or public parks with limited resources. The new turf fields have significantly reduced maintenance burdens for school staff while increasing usability, allowing multiple sports teams, bands, cheerleading squads, youth football programs and organizations to share and benefit from the same spaces.

Haslam Sports Group recognizes that youth sports provide more than athletic development. Participation in sports teaches leadership, accountability, teamwork and perseverance while also promoting physical and mental wellness. This belief has guided the organization's investments in safe, accessible athletic spaces and year-round youth programming opportunities. The organization has invested more than $23 million in youth football initiatives since 2014, contributing to a 163 percent increase in youth football participation across the region since 2020.

Beyond infrastructure, the Browns activate these spaces through year-round programming including LEGENDS Clinics, Rookie Tackle and girls flag football initiatives, creating pathways for more than 30,000 young people to engage with the sport.

Since launching in 2018, LEGENDS Clinics have engaged more than 5,000 participants across Northeast Ohio. The clinics bring together Browns alumni and local high school coaches to provide football instruction, mentorship and positive youth engagement opportunities. These clinics are intentionally hosted within the communities where the Browns have installed fields, helping strengthen relationships between youth athletes and their feeder high schools while creating sustainable participation pipelines for local football programs.

The Browns have played a leading role in partnering with 19 local leagues to implement Rookie Tackle throughout Northeast Ohio, making them the only NFL team to do so within their local market. The Browns worked with USA Football to develop Rookie Tackle, which is a modified version of the game designed to introduce tackle football to young athletes as part of the Youth Football Player Development Pathway, serving as a bridge between flag football and traditional 11-player tackle football.

Their leadership also helped advance the growth of girls high school flag football across Ohio, culminating approval as a state championship sport in July 2025 and statewide varsity sanctioning in 2026.

Their community efforts extend to other members of the organization, including Browns' players and staff.

In 2025, the Browns achieved a 99 percent participation rate among active roster players in at least one community appearance, reflecting the organization's strong culture of community engagement. The organization works closely with players to identify causes they care about and provides resources, logistical support and amplification to help maximize their charitable efforts. Whether through youth football, education initiatives, health and wellness programming or social impact campaigns, players are given opportunities to authentically engage with the community in ways that are meaningful to them. Players are also actively involved in the organization's field projects, participating in groundbreaking ceremonies, unveilings, and youth football events hosted at the completed fields. These opportunities allow players to connect directly with young athletes and reinforce the importance of access to safe, high-quality athletic facilities. By involving players in initiatives that create lasting community impact, the organization helps position them for success both on and off the field.

Through the Browns' First and Ten volunteer movement, the organization also encourages staff members, fans and community members to commit to 10 hours of volunteer service annually. The initiative is designed to create a culture of service and civic engagement across Northeast Ohio, beginning internally with Browns staff members. In 2025, 100 percent of Browns staff members completed at least 10 volunteer hours during the season.

Through strategic investment, innovative programming and a sustained commitment to community partnership, the Browns continue to demonstrate how a professional sports organization can create lasting opportunities for young people and strengthen communities for generations to come.

"When we launched the field projects initiative in 2016, we wanted to make a meaningful investment into the communities across Northeast Ohio that deserve so much," said President Dave Jenkins. "Seeing schools, youth leagues and communities come to these fields as a place where they can play, learn and come together reminds us just how important it is to create spaces that are safe and accessible to everyone. We are proud of what this initiative has grown to from five to 19 fields and couldn't be more grateful to the communities of Northeast Ohio for making these spaces their own."

Shedeur Sanders selected as Week 3 NFLPA Community MVP
By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com
September 25, 2026
https://www.clevelandbrowns.com/news/shedeur-sanders-selected-as-week-3-nflpa-community-mvp

QB Shedeur Sanders continues to foster connection with the Northeast Ohio community and give back to the city of Cleveland.

On Sept. 22, Sanders and his team donated 500 backpacks filled with school supplies to students at two schools in the East Cleveland School District, Kirk Middle School and Caledonia Elementary School. The students also received pizza and ice cream as part of the celebration.

The NFLPA has recognized Sanders' efforts to give back to the Northeast Ohio community, as the association announced on Friday that Sanders was named the Week 3 NFLPA Community MVP. The NFLPA is also donating $10,000 to Legendary Impact Foundation in his honor. Additionally, Sanders and the rest of this season's Community MVPs will be eligible for the Alan Page Community Award, which is the NFLPA's highest player honor for outstanding community service and includes an additional $100,000 donation.

"I chose two schools in East Cleveland because I like going to different places a lot of people wouldn't go and showing the positive side to things, because if you just look online and stuff you only see the negativity about parts of East Cleveland and different parts of Cleveland," Sanders said in an interview with WEWS News 5 reporter Camryn Justice. "The school year started, but maybe they needed a little bit more motivation to keep having great attendance and keep going. I just want to give them a reminder that they are seen, they are heard and they are felt."