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FOOTBALL

Deshaun Watson and Shedeur Sanders co-host passing camp for teammates in Miami

By Mary Kay Cabot, cleveland.com

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<https://www.cleveland.com/sports/2026/07/deshaun-watson-and-shedeur-sanders-co-host-passing-camp-for-teammates-in-miami.html>

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.



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“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.



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Browns rookie Emmanuel McNeil-Warren's mom helped him find the football — and everything else

By Ashley Bastock, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com)

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<https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2026/09/browns-rookie-emmanuel-mcneil-warrens-mom-helped-him-find-the-football-and-everything-else.html>

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](https://www.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.



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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.



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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.”



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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.



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“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 defended, and two forced and recovered fumbles.

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



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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 defended.

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



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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.



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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.



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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.



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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.



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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.'"



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“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.



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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.’”



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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



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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?



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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?



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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.



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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.



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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."



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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 the 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 mischievousness.

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



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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."



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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.



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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 allow 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're handing our ass whoopings because we're all out of lollipops."



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How Jared Verse has brought a different vibe to Browns defense

By Chris Easterling, Akron Beacon Journal

Aug. 18, 2026

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/sports/pro/browns/2026/08/18/jared-verse-browns-vibe/91348248007/>

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."



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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 hunger, 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."



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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.



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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."



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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."



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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



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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 thought 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."



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Mason Graham stronger, more comfortable in Year 2, aims to be cornerstone of defense

By Scott Petrak, BrownsZone

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<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 defended.

"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.



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“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.



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“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.



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“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.



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Spencer Fano's climb to No. 9 pick started with dad-demanded footwork drills when he was 6

By Scott Petrak, BrownsZone

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<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.



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“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.



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“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.”



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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."



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COMMUNITY

Browns named finalist for ESPY's Sports Humanitarian Team of the Year Award

By Kelsey Russo, ClevelandBrowns.com

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<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.



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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.



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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."