

Josh.Rupprecht@chargers.nfl.com ⚡ Jennifer.Rojas@chargers.nfl.com ⚡ Jamaal.LaFrance@chargers.nfl.com
Brock.Anderson@chargers.nfl.com ⚡ Danny.Markino@chargers.nfl.com

Chargers Guard Zion Johnson Introductory Media Availability **Friday, April 29, 2022 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.**

Opening statement:

“Hello, everyone. I’m glad to be here. First time in L.A., ever.”

On joining the Chargers:

“It feels great. The weather is great, but just the people I’ve met — some of the players, some of the coaches, [Head] Coach [Brandon] Staley — they’re just really good people. I could tell that they’re building a culture here that’s excellent on the field, but also has excellent people, as well.”

On if he had any prior familiarity with anyone from the Chargers

“Not particularly. Kind of a coincidence, though; I met with [Offensive Line] Coach [Brendan] Nugent at the Senior Bowl when he was with the Saints, then I met with him again when he was with the Chargers — that’s kind of a funny coincidence. Other than that, there’s no one that I had known from prior.”

On if he played against OLB Chris Rumph III in college when Rumph was at Duke:

“Yes, I did. I did play against Chris Rumph. When I was left tackle, he was one of the ends — him and [Cardinals OLB Victor] Dimukeje. And I did play against [CB] Asante Samuel Jr. in 2019. So, yeah, you have that.”

On which Chargers players he met today at the facility:

“It’s all been in passing, so there haven’t really been formal introductions. A few guys just came by and said, ‘Hi,’ to me — didn’t actually say their names, which is weird [laughter]. They said, ‘Hello,’ to me, and that was cool. I look forward to meeting everyone formally. That will be awesome. I got to see Coach Nugent, who I’ve met before, but just to see him here is a good thing. Then, Coach Staley, who I met at the Combine, to see him again was cool. I talked to Mr. [Owner and Chairman of the Board Dean] Spanos, that was awesome. It’s a nice facility here and it’s great to be in L.A. for the first time ever for me.”

On his draft experience since being selected by the Chargers:

“Honestly, after I got drafted — I did some media stuff, but after that I went to the draft party for the Chargers. It was great to see all of the fans. They were pumped. It was cool to see how excited they were. I took some pictures with them. That was really cool. Afterward, I went back to the hotel to see my family. We hung out for about 30 minutes or so in the lobby, but we were all spent, so I went back to the room thinking that I was going to crash, but I ended up not sleeping at all because I was so excited. It’s been so exciting, not just for me but for my whole family, my head coach and everyone who was involved.”

On how many congratulatory phone calls and text messages he has received since being selected:

“A lot of text messages — I put the over/under at 100, but there were a lot of text messages. It’s been good, just people who have helped me throughout the way, people who may not be family, but are family, pretty much. It’s been good to talk to everyone. It’s just awesome knowing that people that were a part of your journey are so proud of you.”

On if he replies ‘right away’ when receiving a message:

“I’m a reply right away guy, but I’ll send the reaction thing, where you can click and love the post or like the post, and then I’ll go back later and do a formal response. If someone sees that you just saw it, and then you forget later on, that’s pretty bad.”

On a bus driver ‘getting him into football’:

“That was definitely part of it — it was really him and my mom. He was the one who mentioned it first. I would ride the bus home after golf practice and he said, ‘Why don’t you try out football?’ I was on the fence about it. I kind of went back-and-forth for a while because I hadn’t played, I was undersized and I didn’t really know a lot about the ins and outs of being a football player. But it was really my mom who pushed me to play. She always taught me that you should try things so that you don’t have regrets later on in life. I’m glad that I tried football because that would’ve definitely been a regret that I would have had. I love the game. There isn’t another sport that I would have wanted to play.”

On being high school teammates with Vikings T Christian Darrisaw:

“Yeah. We actually had quite a few guys that have had the opportunity to get drafted. Me and Christian were pretty close in high school because our O-line coach would have us over to the house. He liked to have a family between our offensive linemen, where we would go and eat and have cookouts at his house, that sort of thing. With him going to Virginia Tech, we weren’t able to stay as close because it’s like, ‘I want to beat you.’ He’s definitely someone who has pushed me, especially in high school and throughout my career, because with his level of play, I’ve always wanted to out-do him as a rival sort of thing.”

On the most influential person on his journey to getting to the NFL:

“My mother. Kind of what I said about her pushing me to play football, but just the model that she led for me growing up. She was always someone who worked hard, whether it being in her career — she was a student-athlete, so her doing that. A lot of the qualities that she taught me have made me the person that I am today.”

On his mother playing collegiate basketball:

“She did. She played power forward and center for Virginia Tech. She had a lot of rebounds. At one point, she had records for rebounding, but I think they get a lot more rebounds now — the girls are almost seven-foot tall. Her records might be down the chart a little bit, but she had quite a career.”

On the amount of his athletic ability he attributes to her:

“I think most of it definitely comes from her. She was definitely a force in the post.”

On playing golf before football:

“I would spend the summers with my grandparents in Virginia. My grandmother is the principal of a school in Norfolk, Virginia. I would go and spend time with the school and they had little camps; tennis, golf, all of these different camps. I did the golf one and kind of enjoyed it as a kid. I kept playing, made the high school team when I was in middle school, and then it kept going from there.”

On which players he ‘patterns his game after’:

“So I’ll split this into two. The guy that I watch the most — I didn’t really pattern my game after him because we’re not similar in dimensions — is [Cowboys T] Tyron Smith. That’s the reason why I wear 77. He’s a great player. I used to spend time watching — I think it was 2014 or 2015 — the Cowboys’ camp practices, and they were joint practices between them and the Rams and I don’t think that he got beat once. It was amazing. That really gave me a goal to strive for. The guys I really watched, and pattern my game after, are [Bills G] Rodger Saffold and [Jets G] Laken Tomlinson. They’re two guys that are in slightly different offenses, and I like them for different reasons. Laken, a lot of what he does in the wide, we did that a lot recently at Boston College. Just seeing the little things that he does in the wide zone is something that I like to watch. Then, Rodger Saffold, just his overall physicality, how he gets up to linebackers and just the power he plays with, the physicality is something I respected.”

On if his game ‘has gotten closer to Saffold’:

“I think so. When I talk with some of my coaches at Boston College, some of them disagree. Some of them think it’s a little more like Laken [Tomlinson], but either one would be an honor. They’re both great players.”

On his master's degree in cybersecurity:

"So I graduated in 2020 from Boston College, my undergrad in computer science. When I decided to go back, a part of that was seeing what program I wanted to get into. In the Woods College [of Advancing Studies], the one program that made sense for me was cybersecurity. It kind of meshed well with computer science to where I could kind of go into more of the hacking routes and take some classes that others weren't able to because of my background. It ended up being a really fun topic and something that I'm glad I ended up majoring in."

On 'seeing the explosion in the field' of cybersecurity:

"It's definitely crazy. When I first started taking the class, it's so interesting because the terms are so new. What you consider like espionage or cyber terrorism, those are very loaded terms where a lot goes into that. Where one person might think it's espionage, which may be allowed in certain circumstances, another person may see it as terrorism. As much of a technical subject as it is, it's also very intertwined in law because international law plays a big part in what we consider cyber terrorism, cyber espionage, hacking, and what's allowed and what is not."

On if he has continued to study cybersecurity beyond his master's course load:

"I didn't take classes in the spring. Really, for me, I wanted to do the best throughout the [draft] process — I wanted to do the best at the Senior Bowl and the Combine — but I keep up with the subjects. I still [computer] program, it's something that I do in my spare time. Really, football is my love, so that's the main thing that I focus on right now."

On languages he codes in:

"I've used a lot of different languages — Java, Javascript, you know, Python, HTML, CSS, I've used webpack before to make websites. There are just tons of different things that I've done. Honestly, when you learn one language, it's not that hard to learn a new one because there are a lot of similarities and things you can pick up after you learn your first one."

On if knowing different coding languages will help him with football:

"Absolutely. Similarly, I've been in four different offenses. I think, for me, the more I learn about those different offenses, the easier it was for me each year to pick up on something new just because a lot of times, you're doing something similar with slight tweaks, but someone might call it something different. Just being able to pick up on those little differences can go a long way."

On his mindset during the process of transferring from Davidson:

"So, honestly, Davidson was an awesome experience. I like the people there, but I wasn't on a full scholarship and there was a level of financial strain to my family that I didn't want that to happen anymore, so I decided to go in the [transfer] portal. This was like the first year the portal was really a thing and it was only, really, a line of communication between you and the coaches. So, I went in the portal, got interest from a few schools, but Boston College was really the clear choice for me. The level of school, my connection with [former Offensive Line] Coach [Phil] Trautwein and their history with offensive linemen. That just sold it to me."

On if he was surprised when the Chargers drafted him:

"So, first of all, let me explain this, there's a prospect chair that you're supposed to sit in, so they can get the camera angles and everything. I was glued to that chair for the first hour or so and then someone came up to me and was like, 'You don't have to sit here this whole time.' So, I got up and walked around a little bit, sat on the couch, talked with my head coach, Coach [Jeff] Hafley and my agent and we're just talking about some of the things going on. I think a trade just happened or something. Next thing I know, I get a call and the caller ID says Chargers Football and I'm like, 'Hold on, hold on,' and I answer the phone and it's the call and everyone's quiet. They have no idea who I'm talking to and then all I say is, 'Thank you, Mr. Spanos' and they were all like, 'It's the Chargers!' Everyone started going crazy. It was really a crazy moment and it was a surprise because it was like whiplash for my mind because I'm talking about what just happened in the draft and I'm talking about hopefully I go soon and then — boom, it happens right there."

On what he knew about the Chargers:

“I’m a fan of football, so I know some of the past teams. Philip Rivers at quarterback and those sort of things and, of course, I know the high-powered offense now. The great running back in Austin Ekeler, receivers in Keenan Allen and Mike Williams, and then [OT] Rashawn Slater and a great center in Corey Linsley — an older guy who is a vet who, hopefully, I can learn from and then can’t not mention [QB] Justin Herbert, the guy is electric. Of course, I knew all of that, saw that last year, saw the shootouts that the Chargers had been in and I’m excited to, hopefully, be a piece of that offense and work hard to earn my right to be a Charger, like I said.”

On what came to mind when he thought of Los Angeles:

“Basically, what I’ve seen on TV [laughter]. When I was driving from LAX, I was like, it kind of does look like LA on TV with the palm trees and there’s this certain lighting that’s in LA. It’s like this vibe. I don’t know how to explain it, but it looks like LA on TV, like one of the cop shows, like an NCIS in LA or something like that, like from one of those shows, basically.”

On how much he worked with Offensive Line Coach Brendan Nugent at the Senior Bowl and how much he thinks it’ll help him:

“So, I met with him at the Senior Bowl. We had an interview and I got to talk with him while he was at the Saints and go over some of the things he believes in. I met with him, again, at the Combine, like I said, when he was a Charger at that point. Just talking with him and hearing some of the things he likes in terms of technique and what he believes in as a room. It feels like, for me, what better room would I want to be in? Clearly, building something that’s special.”

On his first year in high school playing football:

“Undersized is an understatement. I was 225 pounds and I played right tackle and our team played Chase Young, so it wasn’t like we were playing scrubs or anything. Really, for me at that point, I wanted to play football, I wanted to prove that I could be a good football player. So, being undersized, I just kind of had to strain on every play and just try not to give up a sack or strain to get my guy out of the way just a little bit. But, once I got to college and really had the resources to develop my body and gain weight, that really helped me and the academics is really what got me there. I had a pretty good GPA in high school and that opened the door for me to be able to go to Davidson.”

On him trying to play tight end:

“So, our offensive coordinator mentioned to me that he wanted to see how I could do at tight end and that was something I kind of explored for a little bit. But, really, the team wanted me to play right tackle, so I played right tackle and things turned out good I’d say.”