

2024
LEGENDS
NEWSLETTER



Welcome to the 4th edition of the Legends Newsletter!

Spring is in full bloom and no matter where you call home, the sense of renewal that comes with the warmer weather and greener landscape also touches the football world. In fact, by the time you read this the Jaguars will have infused the roster with the franchise's 30th NFL Draft Class. It's always exciting to watch as General Manager Trent Baalke and Head Coach Doug Pederson pull back the curtain and let us in on the months and months of draft preparation to give us a sense of the team they'll be putting on the field come this fall. There's no hiding the energy that young, eager players bring to the franchise and the fan base.

In this edition, we'll reconnect with defensive tackle Esera Tuaolo who shares his very personal journey from feeling like an outsider inside an NFL locker room to letting people inside his world. He's thriving in many business and philanthropic endeavors in his adopted hometown of Minneapolis and his story is one you won't want to miss.

Tom McManus shares his transition from NFL linebacker to Renaissance Man with TV, radio, podcast, book and screenplay projects to his credit. He's a big voice in Jacksonville since his career ended more than 20 years ago.

You'll also connect with recent retirees Neal Sterling and Jarrod Wilson. Both the tight end and safety have moved beyond meaningful careers in professional football and have started businesses on the First Coast and have jumped in with both feet.

Finally, we'll take you to Charlotte with safety Jamaal Fudge, wide receiver Mike Sims-Walker, running back Jordan Todman and cornerback Drayton Florence who attended the NFL & NCAA Coaches Clinic in Charlotte, North Carolina. All are coaching and all have big aspirations for the next stage of their football lives. We'll share their experience in Charlotte and hear where they're going in their future endeavors.

As always, we're interested in fostering a strong sense of community among Jaguars Legends which means we'd like to hear from you! Your story and the stories of your teammates are the Jaguars stories, and we'd love to share them with your fellow Legends. Feel free to reach out to Jason Trosclair or me and we'll talk about where you are and what you're doing.

Respectfully yours,

Brian Sexton

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Legends Programs and Resources

The Jaguars and the NFL provide Legends a variety of programs and opportunities to leverage quality of life through benefits, resources, discounts, grants and more.

NFL Foundation Grant Opportunities

Legends may apply for a matching grant to a youth or high school football program of their choice.

There is a grant to help fund youth football camps conducted by Legends for a turnkey solution or receive financial funding to support their free camp.

If a former player is coaching youth or high school football, they may apply for up to \$5,000 for their respective program.

There are also grants to assist Legends with their own foundations or nonprofits in which they work full time.

Social justice and community grants recognize the contributions of alumni working to better their communities.



Legends Programs

Legends programs are designed to assist and engage Legends in their post football careers. Everything from coaching and scouting to owning and running their own successful businesses. There are workshops and special educational events conducted specifically for Legends.

Legends Discounts

Former NFL players can take advantage of the many discounts on products and services that include vehicle rentals, golf equipment, NFL merchandise, gifts and more. Please note that some discounted opportunities require an active NFL Alumni membership.

Legends Benefits

Health Care Benefits and Mental Health Resources are listed on our Legends website at Jaguars.com/Legends under resources. Whether you need general medical assistance, disability benefits, or struggling with substance abuse, there are multiple resources that we encourage you to explore and take advantage.

If you or someone in your family are ever in need of help, call the NFL Life Line (800) 506-0078. This is an extremely valuable resource that is secure, confidential, and independent. This line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all 365 days of the year.

For more information on Legends programs and resources, contact Jason Trosclair at trosclairj@nfl.jaguars.com

NFL & NCAA Coaches Academy

Jordan Todman walked through the Miller Electric Center last summer, his bright eyes taking in everything that passed in front of him. The one-time Jaguars running back was amazed, as was everyone else, by the gleaming new practice facility and all the amenities it offered. He was also soaking in every moment of the NFL's minority coaching internship which offered the opportunity to add to the coaching career he hopes will bring him back to professional football one day soon.



He's currently the running backs coach at Limestone University in Gaffney, South Carolina. That opportunity last summer and the NFL & NCAA Coaches Academy in Charlotte, North Carolina in February, have helped his players and himself as he grows as a coach. He knows first-hand that his players benefit from all his NFL experience.

"Seven seasons plus, at the NFL level, I think when I'm teaching, it connects with them where I've been," said Todman. "I'll tell them something and

you can see it in their eyes and the way they pay attention that they know I know what I'm talking about. I attack coaching the game the same way I attacked playing and I'm able to let them know what it takes to succeed at the next level. It's so hard to get there but at least they can compete knowing what it takes."

Todman isn't the only Jaguars Legend who attended the Coaches Academy in Charlotte, wide receiver Mike Sims-Walker is also aggressively pursuing a coaching career to complement his time on the field and jumped at the chance to take another step.

"I have a passion for coaching, I love everything about it," said Sims-Walker. "I love working with the players, coaches, developing athletes, I like the meetings, it doesn't feel like work. I've coached in high school; I've coached in college and the goal is to coach in the NFL so this is another opportunity towards that goal."

It didn't take the former Jaguar and UCF Golden Knight to figure out how much he has to learn if he's going to get back to the highest level of football, this time as a coach.

"I learned quickly that I wasn't as sharp as I thought I was," he admitted. "The assessment really exposed my strengths and weaknesses as a coach. The mock interview process was a little intimidating. I discovered that I need to learn how to better answer questions and give more details in my answers."

That's the point for many of the players who want to transition into coaching. They understand the game but there is so much to learn about how to prepare for an opponent, build a roster and develop their players. Safety Jamaal Fudge is coaching in the Jacksonville area and wants to take the next step. He left Charlotte with a clear picture of what it takes.



"There is a lot of preparation required off the field," he offered. "The football part is easy, it's the work required in the offseason and learning how to prepare for the entire year including making adjustments and ensuring my coaching staff is equally prepared. I thought I knew spending my entire life around the game but the Academy gave me a chance to process all the information they gave us and to put it into a format that we could take action with when we left."

"The breakout sessions with special guest speakers gave me great value for my time," he said. "Coaches like the offensive coordinator at Charlotte, Mike Miller, and the defensive backs coach for the Cincinnati Bengals, Charles Burks. They both broke down film and reviewed different concepts, schemes, and coverages. I also found the DISC assessment was extremely valuable. As the head coach, you're the communicator and the information received from these results can really help in your communication with the different players. The experience gave me a lot to work with and to work on."



Todman has taken the step from high school to college and he has his sights set on climbing even higher. He's excited to get back to Limestone and start applying what he took away from the NFL & NCAA Coaches Academy.

"It was exactly what they said it was and what I hoped it would be," Todman said. "I was hoping to get a bunch of knowledge, the opportunity to connect and network with people from the higher levels to really, you know, learn different things and see how they went about their journey to navigate this business. I went in with open eyes and an open heart and will use the experience to make my players and myself better at what we do."

Cornerback Drayton Florence is a businessman and entrepreneur in North Florida who has also added a coaching position at the Bolles School to his resume. He is a busy guy who took in as much as he possibly could during the three days at the Coaches Academy.

Love is the Focus

Legend Esera Tuaolo

Esera Tuaolo wore a big smile when we connected via Zoom in February, it felt like the same smile I remembered from his brief tenure in Jacksonville more than 25 years ago. The longtime NFL defensive tackle was, and clearly still is, a thoughtful and engaging man, the kind of player you sought out in the locker room.

But it turns out his warm smile and gregarious personality aren't quite the same.

The smile he shared in the 1990's guarded a secret, and the smile that shone through the computer screen turned out to be the more authentic and genuine Esera. In 2002, he decided the world could handle an NFL player who lived his life as an openly gay man.

"I found myself living Shakespeare, right?" offered Tuaolo, explaining the decision to 'come out.' "To be or not to be? I had to decide not just for myself and my life, but to be part of the cause, part of the solution, part of the change. I felt like I had an obligation to be a leader, to be a role model for love, tolerance and acceptance."

Esera wanted to be happy. He was determined to live free and be himself, for himself and his family. He had an idea what to expect after the announcement, but that didn't completely prepare him for the experience.

I wanted to be happy, but there was a dip there and a little depression because some of the people I thought would have my back, the guys I went to battle with on Sundays, didn't. The funny thing was, the guys I thought wouldn't accept me are some of my best friends now.

In the years that followed, Tuaolo felt the pain and the burden of hiding his identity slip away. He lived truthfully and free. He authored a book, became a celebrity chef and took his incredible singing talents to NBC's *The Voice* where he shared his song with the world.

"It was a great journey," he remembered. "My kids weren't with me when I played in the NFL, so I couldn't give them that experience, but I could give them this and I became the popular dad again, the cool dad who was on *The Voice*. It helped open my eyes and my heart to the opportunities to push my 'Aloha' out into a world that is struggling with so much hate, politics and everything. It showed me that you can push positive energy and love into the world."

His success left him wondering what his football career might have become had he been able to be as free in the locker room and in the NFL.

"It took me a while to realize just how good I was as a football player," he said. "I had more than 200 career tackles, which is amazing for a defensive tackle, and I did that with a crippling secret, with anxiety about being a gay man in professional football. Imagine if I felt like this while I was playing and not looking over my shoulder. I played with and against some amazing, legendary players but I'll never get the chance to wear a gold coat. I know how good I was, but wonder how good I could have been if I could have just played the game. That's why I speak, why I try to educate the NFL, the sports world, everyone. So that someone else coming through the ranks can



be their best without all the stuff I went through and have a chance to get a gold coat.”

The pain in his voice overtakes the joy but only for a moment. Tuaolo is making up for lost time and spreading his wings in a vibrant way for a variety of causes, almost all of which involve service to others. He routinely offers his talents to organizations such as Hate is Wrong and Firefighters for Healing, where they're put to good use.

“Food and music create joy, right,” he said. “You could have a horrible day at work, but go home and put on the right song and start cooking and you start to feel better immediately. That’s the approach I take with food. If I can create a moment, a memory for someone with a meal that takes them to Hawaii in their mind and on their taste buds, then I’ve helped do something really important. Folks spend thousands of dollars on my dinners, and we’ve raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for really important charities. I love doing that.”

If he isn’t cooking, then he’s likely singing. His journey with The Voice ended short of the finals, but it certainly didn’t end his musical career.

“I’m getting ready to fly to Las Vegas and sing at their Pride convention,” he said. “I’ve written a new song and am chasing that passion also. My mom taught me that if you’re going to do something make sure you love it. Make sure you have a passion for it and do it with all your heart. I cook because I love it, I sing because I love it, I speak because I love it.”

Love is the focus of Esera’s life in 2024. He and his partner are involved in a number of different endeavors from opening a new restaurant to helping young people in the LGBTQ community with a Prom, to finding ways to bridge the social gap that existed when he was their age and working to be himself.

“My partner is an interior decorator and lighting guy, and I cook the food,” said Tuaolo. “It’s so rewarding when you see these kids so happy and the simple thank you is way more than we need. We have kids coming from Wisconsin and Iowa to Minneapolis and we know that we’re helping.



We also host inclusion panels and giving them a forum for communication with their peers and their parents.”

Tuaolo has fond memories of that 1997 season with the Jaguars, though he wonders what might have been if he could have let the community in Jacksonville and Jacksonville Beach, where he lived know the real Esera.

“The camaraderie was amazing, fun, it was a special group of players,” he recalled. “That was a good team and one on the rise that I enjoyed being a part of. But I still had to smile to hide the pain. It was a very religious team and I went further into the closet to hide and to make sure no one found out. I cherished every moment with that group, there were some amazing young players that went on to great careers.”

Esera hopes to make a return to Jacksonville this fall where there’s the beginnings of a plan for him to sing the National Anthem. He’s excited to come back to a place he has fond memories of and this time to be who he is. He knows that if he is truly himself while he’s in Jacksonville, that will be enough to make it a great trip.

“I’m a better me, a better man now that I’m out,” Esera said with no small measure of pride. “Am I perfect? No. But I’ve always tried to be a good man, a good teammate, a good father and a good friend and I know that by coming out and speaking up, I am helping others find their voice. I hope that when I leave this world, someone will remember my name because I stood up for what I believed was right.”

A New Game for Linder

Legend Brandon Linder

Brandon Linder made playing offensive line look easy. The Jaguars third round pick in 2014 stepped onto the practice field during that summer and walked right into a starting role. In Week 2 of that season, he lined up against Miami's All-Pro defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh and didn't let the highest paid defensive player in NFL history record a single tackle.

Over the next eight seasons, Linder would shift from guard to center, but would maintain his high level of play. Injuries and the desire to spend more



time chasing other passions, most notably, his wife, Lauren, who was in medical school in south Florida, led him to retire following the 2021 season.

Retirement wasn't easy for Linder, at least not initially.

"I really wanted to go out on my own terms," Brandon stated. "I thought it might be a more graceful transition than it was. That first year was rough because the Jags were having success, and I knew I could still play. I got one year with Trevor [Lawrence], and I think he's really going to be special and that played with my emotions a little bit. But last year I started focusing on doing what I really wanted to do, and life has been beautiful since."

Linder wandered from Miami where he lives with Lauren who is in residency for orthopedic surgery to north Florida and Georgia where he has hunting and farming interests to Costa Rica and Scotland. He also decided to focus on getting his body to a strong position for the future and focused on a journey towards a long and healthy life.

"Football was always number one, but after I retired, I put my family in that spot," he explained. "I also knew that attacking my health while I'm young and my metabolism is still kicking would be better and easier than waiting. I do have the time right now so I'm making the most of it."

Living with an aspiring orthopedic surgeon keeps him on his toes.

"I'm just so proud of her," said Linder of Lauren. "In a male dominated space, she's making her mark and it's incredible to hear what her colleagues and people she works closely with think of her. She supported me and my career for so long and now that I'm retired, I get to support her and will forever. Our relationship is amazing, has always been amazing and I'm her biggest cheerleader."

While Linder is working on his six-pack, he joked that he's got four in place already and almost where he wants to be, he is managing his life and the money he made while playing professional football. He knows all about the medical struggles that many players have and the challenges too many guys have with taking care of their finances. He's in a strong position thanks to a team approach that includes his father and brother who help him make good decisions about the future.

"I've always been pretty frugal, and I think it's because I was always grinding in football and didn't think too much about what I wanted to buy. I just wanted to play while I still could," said Linder. "I've bought my dream farm and the boat I wanted and a few other things, but I took care of my money because I wanted to be in control of my life when football was finished. I had a good team around me to help figure out what was real and what wasn't and I never went and dropped \$50,000 at the club on a Saturday night. I knew the window to earn like that was small and I wasn't going to blow it."

Linder has only been away from the game and the locker room for a short time, but he saw enough while he played in the NFL and has enough experience post career to share at least one tip for success for current and soon to be retired players.

"It's really difficult when you are playing and everyone has something they want you to invest in or has their hand out," said Linder. "You don't have the time to handle it or do the research to learn what they're selling. I was fortunate to have my family and an agent who took care of my interests. I always told guys to learn to say no or to have their agent say no for them. It becomes very powerful when you learn to say no and take control over your own financial future. There is a great opportunity to make a lot of money and create financial freedom for players, but if they don't take the time to find people who can help them, they're going to make a mistake and one is all it takes to make things really hard on yourself."

Linder loved his time in Jacksonville, and when Lauren is done with her medial residencies, fellowships and ready to settle down, the plan is to return to north Florida full time.



"We both love Jacksonville. She's from Charleston and I'm from south Florida but south Florida has gotten crazy," Linder offered. "Part of me retiring as a Jaguar was strategic because I love this city, I love Florida and Georgia. My farm is only a two-hour drive away and the fishing in Jacksonville inshore and offshore is amazing. Plus, they're building a winner and I want to be around to experience that. I only got that one winning season and I want to see them build it and take it to another level."

There is a quiet sentiment that runs deep among thoughtful players both those still in the locker room and those that were. It's the memories that make them rich, the relationships that keep their hearts full and connected to the game they played.

"You only have so much time and so much energy to give," Linder said. "You realize when you find those people that you have something special. I think about all the people I played with and worked with and fought with on Sundays and all the people I have in my life today because of football. It's special and I hope the future is filled with more people and relationships that help me realize how beautiful life is."

Wilson Had a Plan

Legend Jarrod Wilson

Jarrod Wilson loved playing football. From his early days of Pop Warner in Akron, Ohio through his stint at the University of Michigan, to his NFL days in Jacksonville, New York and San Francisco, Wilson took advantage of every opportunity to play.

Wilson showed up in Jacksonville undrafted in 2016, but it was clear the former Wolverine had the size, length and skills to play professional football. He was a key cog in the 2017 defense, which is not only the best defense in Jaguars' history, but one of the best in recent NFL history.

"I look back and can't think of just one memory," he thought out loud when asked. "The entire journey through football is a lasting memory because you don't realize what you have until it's gone and then you look back fondly on them all. If you forced me to



pick one, it's probably the playoff game in Pittsburgh in 2017. I had a good game against a good team and our entire defense played to its potential. That was a great run to the AFC Championship Game."

The big smile and friendly posture, which Wilson carries today is nearly identical to the one he wore in the Jaguars' locker room for five NFL seasons. He always talked about his strong interest in real estate and began working towards his next venture while still grinding away on the field. These days he's working every bit as hard on his real estate career at Keller Williams Atlantic Partners, as he once did as a ball hawking defensive back.

"My grandmother was a realtor," he explained. "Over the years playing football, I saved some money and wanted to invest it the right way. Real estate was tangible, something that would appreciate. I saw a lot of guys spend their money on things that wouldn't appreciate, and I knew the money wouldn't last forever. Money well invested makes more money and I wanted to make sure my money was doing that for me and my family."

Wilson looks, speaks and sounds like a longtime realtor even though he's only been working at it for a few seasons, actually a few years. He's comfortable in the new role and clearly working with people who are looking for a new home, or who are looking to sell their home, fits him like the number 26 he wore playing ball.

"I like everything about being a realtor," he said. "Everyone needs a roof over their head, but not everyone has the knowledge of what it takes to find the right home at the right price. It's a process and I love the complexity of it. It's kind of like a gameplan to stop Ben Roethlisberger or Tom Brady, you have to know your stuff. At the end of the day, I love helping people make smart choices and get the home they want. I enjoy the chance to serve and leave them in a better position than they were before they met me."



Wilson looks like he just left the field and he acknowledged he works hard to still look like a player. But for the most part the sweat has been replaced with a smile as he greets prospective clients at an open house or works evenings and weekends showing homes to people moving to north Florida.

"I still pretty much have an attacking mindset," said Wilson. "But now I'm attacking the MLS database, which is pretty much my playbook. I've had to dig in and learn how to put together a CMA to gain a new listing and then build a business plan around that house. Or I'm onsite at an Open House and I'm dialed in to the conversation and listening intently to what the folks are looking for and if they're not working with a realtor, I am working to build a relationship and perhaps become their realtor. You must have the same work ethic, the same approach to being your best and winning at everything you do, otherwise someone else gets the business. It's competitive and that speaks to who I am."

Wilson is making the transition from defensive back to realtor look easy, though he cautions that it isn't. He was prepared for it because he understood that football wasn't going to last forever. He credits a strong family and parents deeply invested in their children for where he is today -- a realtor, husband and father himself.

"My family was very grounded," Wilson said. "I don't come from much, but I have good parents with a good head on their shoulders and a strong work ethic. They were hustlers. They would do whatever it took to give us a chance at a better life. I owe them so much and the Wilson name means a lot to me because of them. I know I'm not just working for myself, my wife and daughter, but to represent them and the standard they set for me also."

It didn't take Wilson long to discover that real estate is a family business. Ask any realtor you know, and their family is an integral part in getting a successful real estate career off the ground and keeping it there.

"My wife, Desaray, is the brains of the operation," he joked. "She handles the social media posts and video, placing open house signs and answering emails. She's all in, which makes it easier when the days get long and you know you can work seven days a week in real estate, another parallel to football!"

Wilson is already a success story even though he's just getting started. He's made the transition from player to Legend and is out building a family, a career and a life in his adopted hometown of Jacksonville, Florida.

"You can't beat north Florida," said Wilson. "When you think of Florida you mostly think of south Florida, Tampa or Orlando, but what we have in Jacksonville is a gold mine. It's a great place to live and a great place to grow. It's everything you love about Florida, the sunshine, the beaches, and golf courses and a lot of opportunity."

The Renaissance Man

Legend Tom McManus

Tom McManus made his professional career as the NFL's version of a caveman. That's essentially what middle linebackers are or at least were when McManus roamed the middle of the Jaguars defense between 1995 and 2000. The 255-pounder relished the chance to do what his massive frame looked built for and enjoyed the chance to play professional football which no one really seemed to think he would get out of Boston College.

He wasn't invited to the combine and washed out in his free agent attempts in Washington and New Orleans and was looking for what his post-football life would be when a call came from Jacksonville, Florida.

"I was living back in Boston and thinking I was going to get into the fitness business selling equipment and Steve Szabo called," recalled McManus. "He was my linebackers coach from Boston College and I hadn't talked to him in two years since I left BC. I knew Tom (Coughlin) was the new coach in Jacksonville but wasn't really expecting much. Szabo asked if I was in shape and wanted to try out. No contract offer, no guarantee just did I want a chance."

Thirty years later McManus can lean back in his chair with a coffee, a smile and run through the many memories in his head. An expansion year and everything that came with being the 'first,' that dramatic run to the AFC Championship Game in 1996, playoff seasons in 1997, 98, 99 and all the men he worked alongside to build the first era of Jaguars football in Jacksonville which has now coincidentally, become his home.

"I love Jacksonville," McManus exclaimed with his trademark energy and enthusiasm. "I met the girl of my dreams, we got married, moved to the beach and raised three daughters. There is something special about this place, and the Jags have something to do with that of course, but there is a sense of community here and its got a flavor that's all its' own. Staying here was a no-brainer

and that's kind of becoming the norm. There are so many former players and coaches here because of the quality of the people and the quality of life in north Florida."

McManus smiles broadly when he's described as a renaissance man of sorts. The former professional 'caveman' is an author, a singer, a broadcaster, and a businessman. He's still loud and as physically imposing as he was in his 20's but much more mellow and contemplative of his life and many loves. He's the host of a local television show, a podcast, a radio show and makes more appearances on social media channels than many current players. He's also working on a screen play based on the book he wrote about his father's perilous journey behind enemy lines as a prisoner of war in World War 2.



"Sam Kouvaris kind of took me under his wing and got me started," said McManus of his partnership with the longtime Jacksonville television personality. "It sparked my creative side and after reading Tom Brokaw's book about the Greatest Generation I decided to tell my dad's story. He was part of a flight crew that was shot down and captured and he made it through a hellacious experience and lived to tell the story. He didn't tell it, he wasn't that kind of guy, he just went back to



his life. I wanted to tell it to honor him and the men he served with who sacrificed so much.”

“We’ll Always be Pals” launched McManus towards Hollywood but the story didn’t stick, at least it hasn’t, yet. He consumed Tom Hank’s Band of Brothers a decade ago and The Pacific and more recently Masters of the Air, and was inspired by them all. He’s gearing up for another run at his father’s story, now passionately his own story, in this new era of streaming media which should open a lot more doors of opportunity for his labor of love.

“I was just blown away by the story,” McManus explained. “You’re 23 years old, flying a plane and on your 23rd mission you’re shot down. It’s amazing to survive the crash but then you’re captured and picked up by the Nazis and thrown into a prison camp for a year, surviving brutal train rides in cramped box cars and extreme weather conditions. Then with little fanfare you come home and build your life like any other American. I already loved my dad, you know, but he became a hero, a larger-than-life man for me and my brothers to try and emulate.”

McManus is a vibrant personality as you may already know or have gleaned from this telling of his story. He’s passionate about everything in his life, especially his wife Kristina and his three daughters. He’s also still emotionally connected to the franchise he helped build. He comments on almost every show about the most recent Jaguars performance, the draft, free agency and he does so with a love that belies his interest in the team and one that can be described as ‘parental’ when he feels they need a little ‘tough’ love. “I’ve always stayed independent of the team as a media guy,”

he explained. “It’s my tough love upbringing. I am going to speak my mind, I’m from Chicago and Boston you know, I can’t sugar coat it. People who know, know how strong my feelings are for the Jaguars and they know when I have something to say it’s because I want the best for the franchise. When the Jags are successful, we’re all successful. I mean everyone is happy, business is good, and the community is united and that’s what I want for us all. I’m not scared to say what I think about anything, especially about football and the Jags.”

So, whether he’s crooning from the stage with the Dad Bodz, standing behind Tommy Mac’s Bar filming the Horse’s Mouth or pounding the keys on his laptop revising the screenplay for his opus, his father’s story, he is driven by his faith in God, his family and the blessings he sees and feels every single day.

“This is where I’m supposed to be,” he thinks aloud. “I think a lot of my friends and former teammates feel the same way when their careers in football are over. We helped build the foundation of this franchise and we’re still connected to it. But we’re also building families, businesses and our communities. It’s a beautiful life and I’m grateful to live it with my wife, my girls, my friends and my former teammates. Tell ‘em how happy I am, and you’ll understate it, I guarantee you that.”

McManus is writing his story and telling it quite well. A renaissance man in every respect.

Two for One

Legend Neal Sterling

Neal Sterling knew that football was just a door to his future when he left Monmouth College and arrived in Jacksonville shortly after the conclusion of the 2015 NFL Draft. In the “Not For Long” world of professional football the wise ones are the players who focus on football but also think about the future. The wide receiver turned tight end, spent four seasons with the Jaguars and New York Jets and was one of the wise ones.

“I knew that football was eventually going to end, and I understood the opportunity to leverage my career into my future,” Sterling explained. “I knew when I was done playing that I wanted to stay close to sports and athletics. I built my life around fitness, the schedule, the routine and I wanted to find some way to stay connected to who I was as an athlete.”

Sterling and his wife Ashley, who was also a professional athlete, have just opened the doors to ISI Elite Fitness Training at St. John’s Town Center in Jacksonville with the fitness equipment and training turf awaiting their first clients and first class. Their dream of owning their own business and doing it together has been percolating since they first met when Neal was a rookie.

“I met her one of my first months here in Jacksonville, she’s from Jacksonville,” he said. “We went to Wal-Mart when I got into my first apartment in Riverside and she came with me to get all of the furniture and things we needed for the place. She helped me build my furniture back then and it’s crazy but she’s still building with me nine years later. She’s my best friend and we have each other’s backs.”

Now more than ever you would have to assume, St. John’s Town Center is some of the most expensive retail real estate in north Florida. In the super competitive world of fitness and group fitness they’re about to embark on a challenging journey together and they wouldn’t have it any other way.

“We’re attacking the same way we prepared as athletes,” offered Ashley who was a star defender on UCF women’s soccer team and then played professionally in Sweden. “We both knew that it took preparation before practice and games and so we’ve worked hard to build a business plan that gives us a chance to succeed. We understand that we have to lead the way but also that not everything relies solely on us. We’ve built a great team and hired a group of people who can be the backbone of the business, so we can get out and meet the customers and build relationships.”

Neal was looking for more when trying to find the right fit for him, Ashley and their dreams. He found it in ISI which stands for Iron Sharpens Iron and that resonated with him during his first visit to a gym in North Carolina.

“I felt like the workouts were similar to the way I worked out when I was playing football and Ashley felt the same way when she saw it,” said Sterling. “When you’re training with your teammates, and everyone is on the same page to accomplish the mission. Back then it was about the next game. In here, it’s about the next exercise and finishing the class. It’s a competitive class, which creates an amazing workout, but it’s also one where everyone is supportive of one another and leaves feeling like they not only got a great workout in but that they’re part of a team, a community of people and they can’t wait to come back and work out again.”

Building a business can be all consuming, especially when it comes to a brand-new business and everything that comes with a grand opening: construction, finances, hiring a team, selling memberships, marketing. Now mix in an energetic and growing family and things can really get crazy. So far so good for the Sterlings who stay grounded together in Ashley’s hometown and Neal’s adopted hometown.

"I fell in love twice when I got to Jacksonville," Neal said with a glance at Ashley whose smile echoed her husband's thoughts. "I came here and hadn't experienced in New Jersey the warmth of people, and the weather, but the people were so welcoming and wanted to get to know me. Living by the beach makes it that much sweeter and the beaches here are so much nicer than in Jersey. I'm a huge beach guy and my daughter and me in the summer are out there like four days a week. I get to live outside and ride my bike and talk to people. We know how good life is in north Florida and we're excited to build ours right here."

Neal is banking on their hard work and desire to build something special at ISI Elite Fitness Training and he knows their location at St. John's Town Center will be a big help. But he also believes his connection to the Jaguars will at least pique the interest of folks who want to train to be in the best shape of their lives by a former NFL player.

"I became a huge Jaguars fan when I stopped playing and we moved down here full time," he said. "Throughout the pre-sales process, it was me and Ashley out front every day greeting prospective clients and building relationships with people whose lives we hope to make a positive impact on. There wasn't a day that went by that we didn't meet someone who talked about the Jags, and it is so clear what they mean to this community. We're glad to be a part of the Jags family and the Jacksonville family."

Neal is already engaged with the Legends program the Jaguars are building and is thinking of ways to include both former teammates and other professional athletes at ISI.

"It's hard after football to get back to a level of health and fitness that you're happy with," offered Sterling. "Guys need to do it for their physical and mental health, the game is so demanding and can drain you, but getting back to a level of fitness can help in a lot of ways. We're going to block some time off for those guys and help them meet their goals. Spend time with one another and get back to that idea of being a part of a team. I know I miss the locker room and the feeling of being with my teammates. Ashley did too. This will be a good way to help Legends and former players and it's something we're excited about."

As you read this, they're a few weeks into their journey and are likely exhausted with everything it takes to get a new business up and running. They're also likely smiling together because their dream of building a business, a family and a life together is already well underway.





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