

In midst of recovery, Jake Butt showing promise

By AricDiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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Before Jake Butt headed out to the practice field for the first time, he paused for an extra second in the Broncos' locker room.

The Saturday morning practice was just a walkthrough for Butt as he recovers from a torn ACL. There was no sprinting nor contact.

Butt certainly wasn't heading out of the the locker room for a game.

He relished the opportunity all the same.

"Really, I can say this 100 times, this is such a dream come true," Butt said. "It's a dream to play in the NFL, but I feel especially lucky to be in such a great organization. I put my cleats on today, I looked at my helmet and I just had to take it in for a second because it is so special and I'm very grateful to be here."

Once on the field, Butt spent most of the hour-long session with Tight Ends Coach Geep Chryst, whose instruction was more mental than physical due to Butt's limited status.

There's no set timetable for a full return, Butt said, but he's making up for the lost physical reps by burying his head in the playbook. When he does return to full participation, he'll be more than motivated to prove he should've been a first-round selection rather than the sixth tight end selected.

"It's something [Tight Ends] Coach Geep [Chryst] texted me from Day 1," Butt said. "He wants me to prove that I'm the best tight end in this class. That is why I'm here and that is why I'm here to work. That is how I feel.

"Right now, my job is just to get healthy and learn as much of this playbook as I possibly can. That has been my focus. Down the line, that is the ultimate goal."

Head Coach Vance Joseph has seen Butt's commitment to the rest of the process as he recovers. Though the rookies have only been in the building for a few days, he's made a strong impression on the first year head coach.

"When you're around Jake, you can see the maturity as far as the football player and the person," Joseph said. "In meetings, he's in the front row. He's taking every note. He's a guy that's played at a high level for a long time. We're excited about Jake.

"He just needs time to get healthy. It's his second injury, very similar to the first one. He's aware of the process. He's in good spirits and happy to be here. When he gets healthy, he can help us."

With Butt's versatility, which the rookie tight end said is "fading away" among the position group, the Broncos will gain a valuable playmaker when he's 100 percent. Butt said his biggest strengths are his

understanding of defenses and his ability to play all over the field. After a 2016 season in which the Broncos struggled to produce explosive plays, that's exactly what Denver needs.

But for now, the Michigan product must wait. Though he may continue to participate in walkthroughs, he's still weeks away from being a full participant. And for a competitor like Butt, that's difficult to process.

"It's really tough [to watch]," Butt said. "Being out there, my adrenaline is still pumping. I'm so locked in and I know what I'm doing out there on every play, I just can't go out there and do it. That's tough being a competitor and being a player that wants to help the team win. I'm living through these guys out here. They're having fun and they're living out their dreams. I'm just helping where I can."

Broncos hope opponents find Jake a -- wait for it! -- pain in Butt

By Mike Klis
9 News
May 26, 2017

Sure, there was a time when it was pain in the Butt for Jake to always be the Butt of jokes.

But after he survived the insensitive, mean-spirited arena that is elementary school, Jake Butt came around to embracing his last name.

"I love it, honestly," Butt said in a sit-down interview with 9News this week. "It's become a brand for me. Growing up, it was tough. When you're in second and third grade, everything hurts."

No one is meaner than elementary school kids.

"Exactly. And you don't take anything more personally than when you're in elementary school," Butt said. "But now it's a brand and you see the pictures back in Michigan and it'll transfer here to the NFL. My family is going to be decked out in the Butt jerseys and hopefully we'll get some Broncos fans following suit, too."

There are 22 positions on a football field and naturally, Jake Butt is a tight end. At Michigan, he was the Kwalick-Clark (named after Ted Kwalick and Dallas Clark) Big Ten tight end of the year in 2015 and Butt did one better in 2016 when he was the John Mackey Award winner as the nation's best tight end.

Big and strong enough to block at 6-foot-5, 246 pounds, Butt also has the hands that helped him record 97 catches for 1,200 yards and seven touchdowns during his two seasons with head coach Jim Harbaugh.

Butt was on his way to becoming a second- or third-round draft pick on April 28 until he suffered another torn ACL in his right knee in Michigan's Orange Bowl game against Florida State on Dec. 30.

Instead, he wasn't selected until April 29 with the first pick of the fifth round by the Broncos.

It wasn't necessarily that Butt suffered a torn ACL. Elite athletes bounce back from that type of injury all the time. It was that Butt suffered a similar injury to the same right knee in February, 2014.

"That definitely hurt it a little bit," Butt said. "That can scare some people away. There's studies out there that the average man with two knee injuries might have this or that, but I don't want to be categorized with the average man."

"I look back on it now and it couldn't have worked out better. I had to wait a little longer to hear that phone ring but I'm here in Denver and it really couldn't have worked out any better."

While some star college stars like Leonard Fournette, Christian McCaffrey and Butt's Michigan teammate Jabrill Peppers were sitting out their bowl games to protect their draft stock, Butt never

flinched at his decision to play – even if the difference between the first pick in the third round and first pick in the fifth was about \$700,000 in signing bonus.

“I knew some guys were sitting out,” he said. “People were asking whether or not I would. Personally, I would never sit out of a big game. I never played this game because I wanted to make money. I play it because I love the game and I wouldn’t want to squander an opportunity.

“But I can definitely relate to some guys who want to sit out. I think that’s going to come on an individual basis.”

His latest injury occurred as he was high-lowed by two Florida State defenders while finishing up a 16-yard gain off his third reception. Although the direct blast on Butt’s right knee was gruesome as it was replayed in slow-motion, he was able to walk off the field.

What does it feel like when the ACL goes?

“The first time it was painful,” he said. “The second time I was like, man, did this really happen? I heard it. I felt it. It’s like a pop and tear. My leg went numb for a second. And I remember the whole stadium went quiet. I’m like, ‘Oh man, I’m making a big scene. I was like, just get me off the field. Get back to playing football.’

“I stood up – and the first time I couldn’t walk, this time I could walk. Actually, I jogged and made a little cut going back to the locker room and I thought, ‘Oh man, I’m going to look so soft when they send me back out there to play after such a big scene.’”

Unfortunately, Butt was spared the embarrassment as doctors rather quickly diagnosed the ACL injury. Although Butt would not put a timetable on his recovery, it would be a surprise if he’s game-ready before October. If he does miss the first month of the season, it won’t be for lack of effort.

Butt arrives at Broncos’ headquarters each day at 5 a.m. to begin his treatment and he doesn’t leave until about 5 p.m.

“My mom said, ‘Oh you’re getting some free time,’” Butt said. “I tell her, ‘No, I’m going home and learning the install (of the playbook) for the next day and going to sleep because tomorrow comes fast.

“But it’s a dream come true and you love the challenge that football presents to you every single day and you love competing. And for me, I love the opportunity I was given here. I’m not 100 percent healthy but I’m working back towards it and I’m excited about trying to help this team this fall.”

During rookie camp two weeks ago, Butt participated in some walkthrough drills with tight ends coach Geep Chryst. And during the Broncos’ organized team activities (OTAs) this week, Butt would lean into the third-team huddle to hear the play call, then stand up and shadow his assignment as the play is run.

“It’s tough but complaining or worrying about this or that is not going to change anything,” he said. “Right now my job is to get healthy and to learn this offense so when I do get healthy and I do get cleared I can hit the ground running.

“So for me I want to hear how the quarterback makes the calls. I want to hear the full call and snap count and walk back, line up where I would line up, take a couple steps where my assignment would be that play.”

Once he’s ready, don’t be surprised if there are variations of Butt jerseys in the Denver stadium stands. At Michigan, his family and friends wore No. 88 maize and blue jerseys with “I Want More Butt,” written on the back of one, “I Like Big Butt” on another. Then there was “HEADBUTT,” “KICK BUTT,” and, as sported by one of his African-American friends, “BLACK BUTT.”

Just before the draft, the Charmin tissue company delivered Butt a truckload full of toilet paper, while writing on Twitter: “We’ve got a special destination for a Butt-load of TP.”

Butt’s Twitter handle is “JBooty.” Why wouldn’t it be?

“That was kind of my nickname in college,” he said. “Had some fun with that.”

First impression? He seems like a nice Butt.

Broncos take highly rated Michigan TE Jake Butt

By Connor Orr

NFL.com

April 29, 2017

Though he was not selected until the back end of the 2017 NFL Draft, Michigan tight end Jake Butt will find himself in an offense perfectly suited to his skills.

The Denver Broncos selected Butt with the first pick of Saturday's fifth round, No. 145 overall.

The highly rated prospect, who fell out of the first few rounds after tearing his ACL in December's Orange Bowl, was viewed as a high-value pick on the final day. NFL Network draft analyst Daniel Jeremiah said Butt was "locked in" as a second-round pick before the injury. There remains a possibility that he won't have to sit out the entire season if his rehab goes according to schedule.

"We were holding our breath these last few picks hoping to get Michigan TE Jake Butt. A top-notch TE, we're fortunate to select in the 5th," Broncos general manager John Elway noted on Twitter immediately after the selection.

With Denver looking to continue their run-first offense under new coordinator Mike McCoy, Butt will be the perfect addition for whichever quarterback earns the starting nod thanks to his ability to hold blocks and get out into open space. During his senior season, Butt logged 46 catches for 546 yards and four touchdowns. Even after his injury, he impressed by saying he had no regrets playing in the Wolverines' final game.

"never once crossed my mind to sit this game out and I would never change that mindset," Butt wrote on Twitter back on Dec. 30. "I play this game bc I love it, my teammates, coaches"

That passion seems to have earned him his chance in the pros, even if it came a little later than initially expected.

Jake Butt could be a tight end matchup nightmare for the Broncos

By Christian D'Andrea

SB Nation

April 29, 2017

Jake Butt isn't just a leader of the 2017 NFL draft's All-Name team. He also emerged as the dependable backbone of Michigan's offense his final two collegiate seasons. Now, he'll be called on to add a receiving threat for the Denver Broncos.

The Broncos selected the former Wolverine with the 145th pick of the 2017 NFL draft — the first selection of the fifth round — despite questions about his health. Butt is rehabbing a torn ACL suffered in late December in an Orange Bowl loss to Florida State, which will limit his production this fall.

How can Jake Butt improve the Broncos offense?

Butt finished last season as Michigan's second-leading receiver with 46 catches for 546 yards and four touchdowns. He's a sure-handed receiver who creates windows of opportunity downfield with crisp routes and strong hands. He works hard to get to the ball at the first possible point of contact, boxing out defensive backs and linebackers to limit turnovers and maximize gains.

Though he doesn't have elite top-end speed, he can be a threat up the seam and throughout patterns that break 10-20 yards from the line of scrimmage.

He's not going to leave defensive backs in the dust after the catch, but he's a powerful runner who can crash through arm tackles. He sees the field well with the ball in his hands and can turn safeties around or otherwise maximize his yardage. He's reliable over the middle, using his 6'5, 250-pound frame to absorb contact and drive through to first downs when his team needs him.

And, he's already raking in endorsement money. Butt signed a deal with, who else, Charmin toilet paper the week of the draft.

What are Butt's weaknesses?

Butt isn't a premier athlete, so he's never going to be a Rob Gronkowski or Jimmy Graham kind of presence in the NFL. He's fast and shifty enough to break off many linebackers in college, but he may struggle against higher-profile players at the next level. His surgically repaired knee and his inability to work out at the combine or Michigan's pro day have only heightened that concern.

He's a solid presence on the offensive line but not the kind of standout who handled run-blocking duties so well his transition isn't in question. He's stiff as a runner when it comes to moving laterally, which will have repercussions as both a receiver and blocker in the NFL. He'll be an asset chipping blitzing pass rushers as they hit the line of scrimmage, but he has plenty to prove.

What does his selection mean for the Broncos?

Butt is an interesting pick, as his knee injury will prevent him from playing up to his full potential in 2017. As a result, his rookie year is an essential redshirt year even if he doesn't recover quickly and see the field this fall.

Charmin drops off toilet paper to Jake Butt prior to draft

By Staff

ESPN

April 29, 2017

Former Michigan tight end Jake Butt doesn't mind people having fun with his last name. The folks at Procter & Gamble sure are taking advantage.

The parent company of Charmin toilet paper delivered a truckload of the squeezable, soft product to him in his hometown of Pickerington, Ohio, on Wednesday.

@971thefan

Draft prospect Jake Butt just got a special delivery.

The nature of the relationship between Procter & Gamble and Butt is unclear. A request for comment was emailed to P&G.

The gesture surely was a nod to Butt's last name, which elicits snickers wherever he goes. He embraces it.

"I love it so much," he told ESPN last August. "I think that's one of my greatest traits. It has really allowed me to grow my platform and build my brand."

Butt has made a name for himself as a football player for being a two-time Big Ten tight end of the year. He is ranked by ESPN Insider Todd McShay as the fifth-best tight end in the NFL draft, which starts Thursday.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Yes, Michigan's Jake Butt realizes his last name is funny

By Brian Bennett

ESPN

May 26, 2017

One of the best players in college football is named Jake Butt. His position: tight end.

We'll pause here for your jokes. Just understand that the Michigan senior has heard them all before.

Even Jimmy Fallon and his "Tonight Show" writers have made their wisecracks over his name. Last December, after Butt claimed the Big Ten tight end of the year award, Fallon dedicated a full minute of his opening monologue to some rapid-fire, bottom-shelf humor.

"Other tight ends are mad, but they don't want to make a big stink about it," Fallon deadpanned. "Butt would brag, but he doesn't want to toot his own horn."

@FallonTonight

"Other tight ends are mad, but they don't want to make a big stink about it." #FallonTonight

So go ahead. Be cheeky. You won't be laughing at the Wolverines' All-American. You'll be laughing with him.

This is a guy whose Twitter handle is @JBooty_88. He once changed his avatar to spoof a meme about Kim Kardashian, owner of the world's most famous posterior. Rather than get upset about Fallon's digs, he retweeted them.

Butt is more than just OK with all the fun people have with his surname. He's fully behind it.

"I love it so much," he said. "I think that's one of my greatest traits. It has really allowed me to grow my platform and build my brand."

His sprawling family loves the Butt brand, too. They're easy to spot at any Michigan game. As many as 50 of them tailgate together while wearing versions of Jake's jersey, sporting his perfectly rounded No. 88 along with a fanny pack full of puns.

His father, Rob, goes with either "Head Butt" or "Papa Butt." Other family members wear jerseys such as "I Like Big Butt," "Nice Butt" and "Kick Butt." One of Jake's aunts, Theresa, added an apostrophe to her name to make her jersey read "There's a Butt."

"We taught our kids at an early age to just have fun with it," Rob Butt said. "The whole family, we just enjoy the silliness of it."

The silliness wouldn't amount to much if Butt were merely an average player, one only Sir Mix-A-Lot could love. The reverse, however, is true. Butt is arguably the best tight end in America, a key component of Michigan's College Football Playoff hopes and a future high NFL draft pick.

And it's all because he works his tail off.

Butt keeps turning heads at Michigan

Jake Butt always had great athletic genes in his back pocket. His grandfather, Bob Lally, never lost a game as an offensive lineman in high school or on Frank Leahy's Notre Dame teams in the 1940s. His dad played rugby at Cincinnati. Jake's first word: "Ball."

"I wish it had been 'Mom' or 'Dad,'" Rob Butt said.

Jake starred in youth soccer until his dad, seeing that Jake was sprouting toward his current 6-foot-6 frame, nudged him toward football in the sixth grade. Reluctant at first to give up his dreams of being an MLS midfielder, Butt nonetheless gave football everything he had. When he found out that kids had to be under 125 pounds to touch the ball, he spent his summer vacation running and cutting weight so he could play tight end.

Soccer had helped him develop great footwork. His size made him a prototype tight end. Work ethic did the rest.

Tom Phillips has been coaching high school football for nearly 30 years. In all that time, he said, the two most competitive players he has ever had, in practice and in games, are Butt and D.J. Durkin, the former Michigan defensive coordinator and current Maryland head coach.

"Jake was out there to win everything," said Phillips, the head coach at Pickerington North High School in Ohio. "He would easily lose 15 pounds in practices because of sweat. He was a motor, and he always wanted to be the best."

Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh praises Butt as "one of the most gung-ho players I've ever been around."

"He can sit through a two-and-a-half hour, three-hour meeting and be on the edge of his seat," Harbaugh said last month. "[He'll] walk out of that meeting with a bounce in his step and put his football gear on, the hair on the back of his neck is standing up. Whether he's going out to hit his sled or rattle somebody's fillings, he's just as excited about doing that as he is running a post route or corner route."

Here's an example of Butt's inner drive. In February 2014, he tore the ACL in his right knee. He promised anyone who would listen that he would be back for the Notre Dame game in Week 2 of that season. Barely six months after his surgery, he made good on that pledge.

(Butt had some extra motivation. His grandfather, who died in 2008, had wanted to have his cremated ashes spread on the Notre Dame Stadium field. The school declines such requests. Jake brought a plastic baggie with some of Bob Lally's remains to South Bend and placed them on the 50-yard line before the game. True to form, the Fighting Irish won again with Lally on the field, crushing the Wolverines 31-0.)

Butt's intensity and skill set found their equal when the hard-charging Harbaugh took over the Wolverines -- "You talk about a perfect personality match," Phillips said. Harbaugh has long been known for his creative use of tight ends, and Butt's production immediately and predictably soared under his new coach. After catching 41 passes combined in his first two seasons, Butt had 51 receptions for 654 yards and three scores as a junior.

"I'm really reaping the benefits of having him as a coach," Butt said. "The main thing he does is push me as a player, not just to catch passes but to be a complete tight end."

Fans like Jake Butt and they cannot lie

That Butt even ended up at Michigan is mildly surprising. His family was full of diehard Ohio State fans. Rob Butt even threatened to wear his Buckeyes gear at the Big House during Jake's recruiting visit during the night game versus Notre Dame in 2011.

That epic victory over the Irish -- U-M scored with 2 seconds left to win 35-31 in the first prime-time game at Michigan Stadium -- and the atmosphere made a huge impression on Butt, who found himself rooting for the Wolverines against Ohio State later that season. Michigan won, and the Buckeyes never even offered Butt a scholarship.

"Even if Ohio State would have come around with an offer," Rob Butt says now, "he wouldn't have changed his mind."

Now it's hard to picture him anywhere else, and Butt has developed into something akin to a folk hero in Ann Arbor. Fans make unofficial T-shirts honoring him. At a game last year, Rob Butt sat behind some students who grabbed the rump of those to either side of them whenever Jake caught a pass.

They like Jake Butt, and they cannot lie.

Jake hasn't always found mirth in being the Butt of jokes. In the third grade, he fought another kid who'd poked fun at him.

"Back in my elementary school days," he said, "any little thing hurt to hear."

In the first month of his freshman season at Michigan, he couldn't believe how many people asked him on Twitter if he realized the connection between his name and his position. As if he'd never thought about it. Which led to this classic tweet:

@JakeButtTE

Yes I'm a tight end. Yes my last name is butt. Hhahaha

That tweet caused a social media splash and helped Butt see the power of laughing at himself. Luckily, his supersized family -- his father has seven siblings, and his mother was one of 16 kids -- were blessed with wry self-awareness. Rob Butt, who after all lived through the same experiences with that last name well before Jake, offered his son this optimistic outlook: "At least it's a name you don't forget. It can work in your favor, if you're not embarrassed by it."

Jake is most certainly in on the joke these days.

"I have a great last name," he said. "I'm proud of it. It's pretty marketable. That last name stands out a little bit."

So does Jake Butt the football player. No ifs, ands or ... well, you know.

Jake Butt Aims To Meet Broncos' Expectations Quickly

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
May 15, 2017

Jake Butt has no regrets and one thing to prove.

The former Michigan star and Denver Broncos rookie wants to show he's the best tight end of the 2017 NFL draft class even though six were selected ahead of him, including three in the first round.

Butt was considered a first-rounder, too, until blowing out his right knee in the Orange Bowl, which caused him to slip to the fifth round.

His new position coach, Geep Chryst, texted him right away and issued a challenge.

"He wants me to prove that I'm the best tight end in this class. That's why I'm here to work and that's how I feel," too, Butt said Saturday after working with Geep on the side at the team's rookie minicamp. "Right now my job is just to get healthy and learn as much of the playbook as I possibly can and that's been my focus.

"But down the line, that's the ultimate goal."

It's just that he won't get the opportunity to prove he's every bit the pro that first-round picks O.J. Howard, David Njoku and Evan Engram are until sometime this fall, after he fully recovers from his second torn ACL.

"Oh, man. It's really tough. Being out there, my adrenaline is still pumping," Butt said. "I'm so locked in. I know what I'm doing out there on every play. I just can't go out there and do it. And that's tough being a competitor and being a player that wants to help the team win. But I'm living through these guys out here."

Coach Vance Joseph said he's been impressed with Butt's maturity so far.

"In meetings, he's in the front row. He's taking every note," Joseph said. "When he gets healthy, he can help us."

Butt said he figures coming out of Jim Harbaugh's program with its pro-style offenses will help him quickly meet the Broncos' expectations.

"It's still very early to tell what my role is going to be in this offense," Butt said. "So, I'm just committed to working hard right now and getting healthy. That's my job."

Butt, who won the John Mackey Award as the nation's top tight end his senior season, projects as more than just the type of pass-catching tight end that the NCAA's spread offenses are producing. "I'm versatile. It's kind of fading away in this game, you see more spread tight ends," Butt said. "For me, I believe I can line up anywhere. I can be a Y (receiver) tight end, line up in the backfield, flex me out in

the slot or by myself and with that, you have to have a very good understanding of the offense, too, for the coaches to trust you to line up anywhere.”

Butt signed a four-year, \$2.7 million contract with the Broncos. He also got an additional \$543,000 tax free from a loss of value insurance policy for his draft fall, according to ESPN. And he signed an endorsement deal with, appropriately enough, Charmin toilet paper.

TAKING IT EASY: The Broncos no longer conduct full-fledged practices with their rookies following the draft after tight end Jeff Heuerman blew out a knee at rookie camp in 2015.

“We had nine hours of football meetings and a 40-minute practice today,” Joseph said. “And in my opinion, that’s enough as far as the football part. The entire goal was to bring in the guys and get them comfortable with our system. That was accomplished.”

Unlike a lot of teams, the Broncos also didn’t use their rookie minicamp to invite players for a weekend tryout. All two dozen players in attendance — QB Chad Kelly was absent because of Ole Miss’s graduation Saturday — were either draft picks or undrafted college free agents the Broncos signed right after the draft.

“I think the evaluation is over. We’ve drafted and signed these guys. So, the evaluation process, that’s behind us. It’s more now about getting guys ready to play NFL football,” Joseph said. “It’s time to help these guys become NFL players.”

This rookie minicamp mostly consisted of media training and other on-the-field instruction.

“Yeah, it was kind of like college orientation,” said wide receiver Isaiah McKenzie, a fifth-round pick out of Georgia.

“No, it’s more serious, to be honest with you,” said defensive end DeMarcus Walker, a second-rounder from Florida State. “It’s a job, and I’m just very happy to be a Denver Bronco.”

'He's really going to miss Michigan. So am I': Jake Butt's mom reflects on raising star Wolverines tight end

By Meg Lally
Sports Illustrated
November 25, 2016

Did I cry when I watched my oldest son play on Senior Day last week? Not as much as you'd think. The real tears came game one of this season against Hawaii. That day, I scooted down to the front row of the 50-yard line. I just wanted a front row view of Jake coming out of the tunnel as a captain and hitting that banner. I cried the whole first quarter.

Fast forward to Saturday against Indiana, and it's all about the seniors. This is his last game at the Big House. I didn't cry as much as I thought I would because it was so darn cold. The snow was coming and going until it finally decided to just keep coming. But it was a beautiful day because I got to see Jake take it all in. He didn't let a moment pass. He didn't let a snowflake falling or a fumbled ball get by him. He knew it was the last one at the Big House. He's really going to miss that school. So am I.

Now I'm getting ready to watch him play his last regular-season game on Saturday, and he's going to do it just down the road from where he grew up in Pickerington, Ohio. It takes about 15 minutes to drive to Ohio Stadium from there, but it took us more than 21 years to get here. The road to Jake Butt, University of Michigan tight end, began with Jake Butt, massive toddler.

When Jake was three and his twin brothers Andrew and Zac were one, I was talking to my sister. I said, "I know moms say this all the time, but there's something about this kid. I love all these boys, but now that I've got three and can do a little compare and contrast, there's just something different about Jake. Something just a little... bigger." He was huge. I had him tested for the giant gene. I did. I got the genetic tests, and the doctor told me he did not have the Gigantor gene, but he would be a giant. I had to bring his birth certificate through sixth grade. People thought I was one of those moms who kept their kid back until he was 20. My ex-husband Rob gets the credit for the Butt name. That's a beautiful name for a tight end. But I'd like to think the height comes from my side of the family. My dad played on the line for Frank Leahy at Notre Dame. I've got a brother who is 6'7". Another one is 6'4". My sister and I are 6'0".

We tried baseball. It was a little bit too slow-paced for him. He didn't last long with that. But soccer was a huge passion of his for years. He was thinking MLS all day long. He was on these elite teams. He was a center midfielder, and half his goals were headers. He loved it, and I guarantee he's such a great tight end because of soccer. He worked on his footwork almost exclusively from Kindergarten through sixth grade.

He started playing football in sixth grade. It was a discussion we had as a family. He was worried about soccer. We were able to assure him that he could try football and still play soccer. But he made the adjustment quickly.

He wanted to be a quarterback, but the coach said, "Meg, he's too damn tall. It takes him too long to get out from under center." They could use him elsewhere. I remember when he caught his first pass for the Lakeview Panthers as a sixth-grader. It was just the look on his face. I saw something go off in him. It was like, "This could be fun."

I went to every game and took him to every practice. When he was a freshman and moving up through JV and varsity at Pickerington North High, I realized football might lead somewhere. When he was a junior, they named him a captain. That's something that had only been done once before. The first one was Pat Elflein, who now happens to be the center for the Ohio State Buckeyes. The two of them have been dear, dear friends. They're obviously rivals, but they have a brotherhood. When Jake has his brief moments in Pickerington, he always gets together with Pat. They go down to campus, and Jake doesn't wear any Michigan stuff. Saturday, they'll meet at midfield for the coin toss as captains.

When Jake was getting those piles of letters from college football programs while he was in high school, I made a poster board. I used every school logo that made him an offer on one side and the logos of his dream schools on the other. A lot of them matched up. He was sort of waiting to see what Ohio State was going to do, but once he met the guys from Michigan—Brady Hoke in particular—he knew. He was 16. He wanted to commit. I said, "Sweetie, just wait. You're a sophomore. Can you just give it a minute?" And he did, out of respect for the process. But he didn't want to take any other official visits. He didn't want to do anything else. He was a Michigan Man from day one.

Jake loved Hoke and his staff, but those first two seasons were hard. During spring practice in 2014, my phone rang at about 10 p.m. one night. "Hi mom," he said. "Are you sitting down?" He said he got hurt. He hurt his knee. He heard a pop. I didn't know what ACL or meniscus meant. Brady Hoke was right there. Jake passed the phone to him. We had a discussion. Later, we all went up there together as a family for the surgery. It was scary, but we didn't think it was career-ending because that's not Jake. He came back in time to play in 10 games, but the guy he signed to play for was about to get fired. Brady Hoke is a phenomenal man, a wonderful family man and team builder. He really stocked that cabinet for Jim Harbaugh.

For me, as Jake's mom, it was painful by the end of sophomore year to see Jake struggling. Jake didn't sign up to lose. He didn't go to the University of Michigan to struggle. There were so many games where he was just so heartbroken that I couldn't get a word out of him. He just wanted to get back on that bus and go back to Ann Arbor and just be a college kid. He never gave up his work ethic. He never gave up his passion. But it was really hard to see him so sad as a football player. Brady Hoke was great. He was always there for me and our family. But I didn't have a problem when he was let go.

After Hoke was fired, I asked Jake if he'd considered the option of playing for a different school. He hadn't redshirted, so he'd still have two more years to play somewhere else. Jake looked at me like I had three heads. "Mom, Michigan is my team," he said. "It's my world." And then they hired Jim Harbaugh. Boy, does he love his tight ends. It's been wonderful to see that relationship grow. He and Jake could be father and son. Jim's son Jay is Jake's position coach. Jim's dad comes to all the games. It's such a family. They really love each other, and you've seen what they've done for the team and for Jake.

I went up to Michigan in July for Jake's 21st birthday. I took him to his favorite restaurant, The Chop House. "Honey, if you stay healthy and you go to the NFL," I said, "what's that first big ticket item?" Some guys want to buy a Bentley or a boat. Not Jake. "Mom," he said, "I can't think about that." I couldn't believe that. "Honey, you have to have thought about what you could buy," I said. Then he said, "I just found out how easy it's going to be to get my master's degree even while I'm in the NFL." I said, "O.K., Jake. That's great. Can you throw your mom a bone?" Nope. He was sticking with the master's. That's my proudest moment. The only time he said "I" was when he said how fast "I" could get my master's.

But before all that, Jake has a few huge games to play. I'm really thinking positive about Saturday. I think the guys are where they need to be to take down Ohio State this year. I'll tell you what this week is like being a Michigan mom in this town. I work at a flooring company in sales. The conversation on the daily is about how Michigan sucks. That sucks when your kid is doing everything in his power to help that team succeed, and they're just so disgusting about it.

No matter what happens, I'll be happy. When Michigan people talk to me—whether it's a 50-year-old alum or a 10-year-old—they don't talk to me about what a great football player Jake is. The statistics can reflect that. What they always say is what a great young man he is. He's so kind. He's so giving. He's so thoughtful. That, to me, means more than any broken record. It means more than winning the Ohio State game. That's why I'm so chill about the outcome of Saturday's game.

But I already have my outfit picked out for Monday. I'm wearing a bright yellow wig and I'm wearing everything Michigan from my shoes to my scarf. I really have a good feeling they're ready for this.