

See ball, get ball ... get drafted? IU'S Jamar Johnson awaits NFL opportunity

By Jon Blau
Bloomington Herald-Times
April 27, 2021

When Indiana University safety Jamar Johnson decided to place his name in the NFL Draft, a memory surfaced.

It's from seventh-grade history class at Booker Middle School in Sarasota, Fla., when he filled out a piece of paper asking the most common but inevitably weighty question children face.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Johnson never doubted his answer. He always scribbled down "NFL player" or "professional football player." He wasn't the only boy in the history of seventh grade to have the thought, but Johnson had just an extra level of belief in his dream. He actually worked for it.

In the years that followed, he'd be lounging around, and thoughts of football popped into his head, and he'd reflexively hit the floor for pushups. He'd be over at a friend's house, and it was dark outside, but he'd want to go outside and throw a football around.

Johnson was a no-star recruit in high school because he didn't have the ride or the money to attend scouting combines. But he never believed the five-star athletes were better than him. Or he couldn't achieve greatness at a non-traditional football school like IU. Or he couldn't make the NFL.

From a young age, he believed in it. He wrote it down.

"Jamar, come here," said Torrey Grimes, Johnson's seventh-grade history teacher at Booker. "I want you to sign this, man. This is going to be worth a lot of money one day when you go to the NFL."

In the coming years, Johnson's signature gained some value. He went to IU, helping the Hoosiers to back-to-back January bowl games, earning first-team All-Big Ten recognition in the process. Submitting himself for an evaluation from the NFL after the 2020 season, the committee returned a second- or third-round grade. That meant his long-held dreams could be a reality.

Johnson admits he forgot about Mr. Grimes' paper while at IU. It's been a while. But as he waits for the NFL Draft, which starts Thursday with the first round, those memories are flooding back. He believes Mr. Grimes still has that seventh-grade questionnaire, because he showed up to Johnson's football games throughout the years, reminding him, "Still got that paper you signed."

The ink on that page hadn't faded. Neither did his dream.

"I'm that type of person. I set my standards and my goals as high as possible," Johnson said. "My goal for (IU) was to win the national championship. If you're not trying to win a national championship, why are you even playing?"

“Oh, let’s just have a 50-50 record. Oh, let’s just beat more Big Ten opponents. Let’s just win the Big Ten. No, you might as well shoot for the stars, and whatever you get, you’re going to get.”

After three years, Johnson and his teammates did a lot to push IU to another level, which in turn elevated his profile with NFL teams. Pro scouts see the 6-foot, 205-pound safety as a versatile defender, someone who is physical enough to play in the box, as he did at IU’s “husky” position, but athletic enough to split out and cover a slot receiver. As a junior, Johnson moved back to free safety, demonstrating his ability to “See ball, get ball,” as he likes to say. He tied for the team lead with four picks.

It’s a simple saying, “See ball, get ball,” but its origins strongly link to Johnson’s chase for greatness. It still gnaws at him that as a sophomore at Booker High, he didn’t log an interception. On one play, Johnson broke up a pass in the end zone on fourth down, on a corner route by a tight end. An incomplection sealed the win.

But he could have had a pick. The ball from Port Charlotte’s quarterback hit both of Johnson’s hands. “Just dropping an interception, it’s so heartbreaking to think about,” Johnson said. “We barely get that opportunity, and when you get it, and you drop it? Mmm — you never forget it.”

So after that sophomore season of high school, when he transferred from Booker High to Riverview — a bigger, more organized but below-.500 prep program — he gave himself a saying to focus his energies. See ball, get ball.

“He’s very passionate about football,” his coach at Riverview, Josh Smithers, said. “He’s ultra, ultra competitive. I think that’s just the blood that’s inside of him. That’s his DNA.”

The stars Johnson didn’t have by his name, it didn’t matter once college coaches turned on his film. He logged six interceptions as a senior. A captain, he led Riverview to back-to-back district titles. College coaches took note.

IU just did what it does best, forging a bond with a player others overlooked. IU coaches traveled to Sarasota a half-dozen times. Eventually, some more tradition-rich schools tried to enter the fray, like Florida State and Willie Taggart. But Johnson turned down a meeting because he was determined to leave Florida. Jeremy Pruitt at Tennessee called a week before signing day, but a week wasn’t enough to form a real relationship. So it was a no.

Loyalty was important to Johnson, as well as what he believed he could accomplish at IU. He helped spark a turnaround at Riverview. Why couldn’t he do it at IU?

“IU, man, they suck. They are bottom-feeders of the Big Ten, man. They are always losing every game, man,” Johnson recalled hearing, far too often. “I never listened. I always felt it could work out because I’m a good player. I’m going to shine wherever I go.

“And I wanted to do something more than just go to a team that was already souped-up and they got these five-star guys. I wanted to get it out of the mud.”

That is not to say there wasn’t a process that shaped an ambitious young man into an NFL draft prospect. Johnson readily admits he wasn’t all that mature when he first arrived at IU. He made “childish” mistakes,

on and off the field. But IU coach Tom Allen stuck by him, sitting him down in weekly meetings, checking in, giving guidance.

Allen's "love each other" motto, Johnson was hooked by it.

"LEO, love each other, that's really important to me. Where I come from, man, we don't get much love. We are in survivor mode," Johnson said. "Just sticking with me through thick and thin, trying to help me, not trying to 'Boom, get out of here,' or something like that. He stuck with it. He helped me get through situations. He knew I would be better, he knew I would do better."

Johnson did his part. That first summer at IU, he chose not to go back home and hang out with friends on the beach. Instead, he stayed in Bloomington. He settled into an apartment. He later found himself with feet in the sand, but that was in IU's sandpit with fellow "husky" Marcelino Ball, doing drill work.

He got on the field as a freshman, but his breakout moment — which NFL teams have cited the most during the draft process — was his pick-6 versus Tennessee in the 2020 Gator Bowl. It was sweet, not only because it came against a team he could have played for, but because it came in Jacksonville, Fla., in front of loved ones. It capped a season where family was top of mind.

During fall camp of 2019, Johnson unexpectedly lost one of his uncles. He may have been short the money for recruiting combines, but Johnson never had to worry about fees for little league teams, because Uncle Pookie paid for them. Uncle Pookie came to every one of his high school games, even if it was a three-hour drive to Vero Beach.

"I was mad grieving for a few weeks," said Johnson, who missed a few practices that fall to attend the funeral. "Got over it, and turned it into motivation and fuel."

In a very emotional sophomore season, Johnson went into games with Uncle Pookie's name written on his athletic tape. And then, ever so perfectly, Johnson's star shined the brightest in Florida, with family in attendance.

Saw the ball, got the ball. Weaved through some Vols and up the sideline for a 63-yard touchdown, too.

"Man, just being able to do that in front of my family and let my family see that type of crowd reaction from a play, on that stage, nobody in my family has played on that stage," Johnson said. "No one has gone D-I like that, playing in the Jacksonville Jaguars' stadium, playing against Tennessee, let alone a pick-6 in a bowl game. That was a special moment."

After an appearance in the Outback Bowl in Tampa as a junior, taking part in IU's historic ascent in top 25 polls, Johnson decided he had accomplished enough in college. He very much saw the ball and got the ball in 2020, tied for the team lead in interceptions.

Allen and safeties coach Jason Jones sat with Johnson after the bowl game in January to discuss his NFL opportunity. They understood, it was time to go.

"I knew I can't go to IU for eight years. I'm going to have to leave someday," Johnson said.

It's a surreal time in Johnson's life. But not completely. He believed this would happen. As a seventh-grader, Johnson wrote it down.

The 17-year-old who had never left Florida and wanted to get away for college, he's now a 21-year-old man who has no idea what NFL team will draft him or where he will end up. Johnson has met with pretty much every organization. His game tape caught coaches' attention, again.

And some of the same coaches are watching. In his Zoom calls with NFL teams, Johnson met with Pruitt, now a defensive assistant with the Giants. Derrick Ansley, once the Vols' defensive coordinator, is the secondary coach for the Chargers. It's a small world in football.

"They both said, 'Hey, man, the last time I've seen you, you were taking a pick-6 back on us,'" Johnson said. They promised to show that play to their respective colleagues in New York and L.A., if they hadn't seen it already.

Until draft day, it's just waiting to see which organization likes Johnson's film the most. Whether it's Thursday, Friday, or Saturday, Johnson will be with his family, watching each pick get announced. He'll just let himself be surprised when his name is called, thinking about the journey and the people who brought him here.

That includes Mr. Grimes and Uncle Pookie. That definitely includes his coaches and teammates at IU.

"It's kind of like I'm not really leaving. I'm just going to be representing them in the league, which has always been a dream of mine," Johnson said.

"To me, I'm still a Hoosier for life."

JOHNSON THE VERSATILE PIECE THAT HELPS DRIVE DOMINANT SECONDARY

By Jon Blau
Bloomington Harold-Times
January 1, 2021

Ohio State running back Master Teague didn't seem to know what was coming as Indiana's Jamar Johnson came blitzing off the edge.

Johnson, the Hoosiers' safety, made a step to his right, acting as if he was going to try and whip around Teague with his speed. That's what many athletic, ball-hawking safeties might look to do.

But after that quick step, Johnson did something that belies his 197-pound frame. He took a couple of hard steps into the 225-pound running back, lowering his shoulder. Teague, whose left foot was still wide to his left, aiming to cut off a speed rush, was far too separated from his right. His rear end was squatted far too low to absorb Johnson's impending bull rush.

"Really, it didn't feel too hard," Johnson said of the collision, which leveled Teague, leaving quarterback Justin Fields prey to IU's safety for a sack. "But that's just the aggressiveness that comes with the game."

Johnson's combo of speed and power is hard for a running back to calculate in pass protection. His ball skills are a chore for quarterbacks to work around, as well, as the junior safety has come away with four interceptions on the season, tied for third in the Big Ten.

But it makes all the sense in the world as Johnson explains it. He grew up playing the linebacker position. He always had that aggressive edge about him, wanting to initiate contact. The Sarasota, Fla., native also played receiver for Riverview High, collecting a modest 13 catches for 219 yards as a senior, but the ball skills were there.

IU fans probably got their first big clue in last year's Gator Bowl, when the then-hybrid linebacker and safety, or "husky," returned an interception 63 yards for a touchdown versus Tennessee. That offseason, IU defensive coordinator Kane Wommack made a decision.

He was moving Johnson to free safety, where he could make more plays like that.

"When you go back and look at this season, one of the best things we've done is to be able to utilize our personnel and maximize our players," Wommack said. "I've certainly made plenty of mistakes in my career, and I'll make others. But moving Jamar to that free safety position certainly wasn't one of them. That's one we hit big on."

Johnson, a first-team All-Big Ten selection, made his share of big plays in 2020. But there are other examples of what Wommack is referring to.

When the Hoosiers lost husky Marcelino Ball to an ACL tear in fall camp, Bryant Fitzgerald plugged the hole, but Wommack also found ways to return Johnson to his husky role from time to time. He also created

packages for cornerback Tiawan Mullen, another Florida native, to use his athleticism as a blitzing “nickel back.”

With the extended absence of defensive end Lance Bryant, who was playing in a two-point stance as IU’s “bull” rush-end position, a former linebacker in D.K. Bonhomme was moved there and continued the athletic evolution of that role in the Hoosiers’ 4-2-5 scheme.

In the run-stopping phase, IU moved a 6-foot-3, 291-pound redshirt freshman, C.J. Person, from a defensive tackle spot to a defensive end to combat opposing offenses’ “heavy” personnel sets. On plenty of run plays in 2020, Person was an immovable object on the edge.

And that brings it back to Johnson. He has 34 tackles on the year, which is just a couple short of Mullen for second on the team. But add in his four interceptions, and he’s been a true dual-threat at the safety position. Not bad for a player who was rated by recruiting sites as the No. 1,130 prospect in the country in the 2018 class.

Going into a matchup with an explosive Ole Miss offense, which can both establish a run game and push the ball downfield, Johnson will be a player to watch.

“You gotta find a way to get the right people on the field in the right situation,” Wommack said. “This week will be a great challenge for that with the tempo that Ole Miss works on. We have to find ways to maximize our personnel and scheme.”

Johnson will not only be in the spotlight schematically Saturday, but he will also have many eyes on him personally. Sarasota is just an hour south from Tampa, so the junior safety will have more than a few fans in the stands at Raymond James Stadium.

Johnson put the number at somewhere around 30.

“We have a lot of family coming ... and then people from my city I don’t even know,” Johnson said. “This is going to be a big one. I’m going to have a lot of representation from the 914 there.”

Johnson’s family can speak to his versatility, but in a totally different way.

He’s not a bad cook.

May Louise Johnson, his grandmother, is a certified chef, and Jamar learned much from her. He was able to cook eggs by the time he was five. He eventually mastered baked spaghetti and key lime pie.

“Anything he wanted to cook, I put him right to the stove and let him do it,” May Louise said. “He started at nine and added his own little touches to things. I used to let him cook for me. He loves cooking.”

Jamar lists a variety of chicken dishes — grilled or barbequed, accompanied by rice or shrimp — as some of his favorites.

“I don’t see anything I can’t make, really,” he said.

IU’s players are the beneficiary. Johnson will make food and then text them to come over.

“Over the summer, we were grilling at the pool every day almost,” Jamar said. “Just everybody go to the store, chip in whatever, everyone bring something. Shoot, we’d just have a little team get-together.”

Jamar then cooked up some plays for the Hoosiers on the field during the season. Just like he did in the Gator Bowl versus Tennessee, Johnson is hoping to shine one more time in the state of Florida.

IU’s last bowl win came in 1991, a little less than eight years before Johnson was born.

“The energy level is high, because we know what’s at stake,” Johnson said. “This program has only won three bowl games, and we’ve taken it upon us this year to make sure we do whatever we have to do to get a win.”

Johnson cooking up success as a safety on Indiana's defense

By Dennis Maffezzoli
Sarasota Herald-Tribune
December 31, 2020

Jamar Johnson is hoping to help Indiana University cook up a victory in the Outback Bowl today.

The former Riverview High standout will be in the defensive secondary for the Hoosiers as they take on Ole Miss in the 35th Outback Bowl at 12:30 p.m. (ABC).

The junior made the media's All-Big Ten second team and the coaches All-Big Ten first team after making 34 total tackles, 25 solos, four interceptions, a sack, forcing a fumble and defending three passes after moving from safety/linebacker hybrid to playing safety this season.

Johnson and the rest of the Hoosiers' defense will have the task of stopping one of the top offenses in the country, under the direction of Coach Lane Kiffin.

"They have a great team, the No. 1 offense in the country I think, averaging 40-some points," Johnson said via zoom conference call. "They have great receivers. They're fast. They can catch in space. They have a good running back, a good quarterback."

However, Johnson's knowledge of playing both sides of the ball — in the defensive backfield and at wide receiver — gives him an edge. "We just have to play our game and everything should be good," he said. Johnson played two seasons at Booker High before moving over to Riverview High, where he played football and competed in track and field in the hurdles and long and triple jump.

"The thing that stands out to me the most — and a lot of times it's not evident until they leave — his ability to make people around him better was tremendous," said Josh Smithers, Johnson's coach at Riverview. "It was just naturally, just the intensity he had, the respect he had.

"When things weren't going well, he would rally the troops on defense, get on them a little bit. The next thing you know the defense was flying around. That's just the effect: He just made people around him better."

There also was off the field leadership.

"He would go sit with underclassmen at lunch if he saw someone sitting alone," Smithers said. "He was a teacher's assistant for a period and would help kids in science. When you first meet him, he's not real boisterous, but once you get to know him, he's a great young man and pretty personable."

Johnson will have to be on his game today. Indiana has not won a bowl since blanking Baylor 24-0 in the 1991 Copper Bowl.

It has dropped the past three bowls by a combined six points, including a 44-41 setback to Duke in the 2015 Pinstripe Bowl.

The past two losses were just as heartbreaking — a 26-24 loss to Utah in the 2016 Foster Farms Bowl and last year's Gator Bowl 23-22 defeat to Tennessee, a game the Hoosiers led 22-9 in the fourth quarter. "We made it a big emphasis this year, we are going to learn how to finish," Johnson said. "I have a big chip on my shoulder. Indiana is always close here and there. We have to make sure we finish the game at the end.

"We know what's at stake."

Johnson also knows about steak ... and not just because he is playing in the Outback Bowl.

Learning from his grandmother, Johnson became very handy around the kitchen at a very young age.

"Any holiday she would cook a lot of food for the whole family. She showed me the way," he said. Johnson said he learned how to cook eggs when he was 5 years old and now his specialty is anything on the grill.

"Chicken, BBQ chicken, chicken and rice, chicken and shrimp," he said. "I don't see anything I can't make, really."

During the summer, he would cook a bunch of food by the pool and text his Indiana teammates the menu. "Do you want to come over and get some?" he would ask. "Whatever everybody brings me, I just cook it.

We would have a little team get together."

Johnson will also have a get together in Tampa.

Rams coach Josh Smithers took a couple of players and coaches to Johnson's practice Thursday at Tampa Jesuit High School.

"They love him so much up there, they offered (scholarships to) two of our kids," — junior wide receiver Jaron Glover and freshman defensive back Charles Lester III.

"You talk about another effect Jamar has. He has impressed them so much, they want to come back to Riverview and recruit."

Johnson also expects a number of people in attendance at Raymond James Stadium for the game.

"I have a lot of fans coming, maybe like 30," he said. "And people from my city that I don't even know. It's going to be a big one. I'm real excited. I'm gonna have a lot of representation from the 941 in there."

IU football is ready to unleash a 'monster' in the defensive backfield

By Jon Blau
Bloomington Herald-Times
October 8, 2020

Unable to see Devon “Monster” Matthews spin his wheels in the flesh, new Indiana safeties coach Jason Jones could at least see them turning from a distance.

During their regular Zoom calls in the spring and summer, Jones would test the junior “rover” on his knowledge of the Hoosiers’ 4-2-5 scheme.

“He can tell me exactly what he’s supposed to be doing ... what the free safety is supposed to be doing ... and also the husky and the two corners,” said Jones, who came over from Florida Atlantic in January. “He knows the responsibilities of all five guys on the field.”

It may seem like a small thing, but it was a clue for Jones about what was coming this fall. A 6-foot-2, 202-pound safety with the frame and athleticism to span one sideline to the other — and with a nickname that hints at how that combo can play on the field — was tapping into something that elevates football players.

When the Hoosiers returned to campus, Jones was fielding texts and calls about Play 16 from practice two days earlier. Matthews was still watching his film, wanting to know how to be better. And when it was time to hit the field, Matthews showed his new coach that what was percolating mentally wasn’t just book smarts.

“He’s making the checks, he’s making the adjustments, and he sees the routes developing, and he sees the runs, and he’s playing a lot faster,” Jones said.

“I could see it in the Zoom meetings. And now, being in-person, it’s really starting to show.”

Matthews is just one poignant example of a young athlete coming closer to fulfilling his promise for IU’s defense. The unit, as a whole, from junior free safety Jamar Johnson, to junior linebackers Micah McFadden and Cam Jones, to corners Jaylin Williams, Reese Taylor, and Taiwan Mullen, has a litany of players who seem primed to take another step on the field in 2020.

By all accounts, they are flying to the ball faster. They are anticipating what is coming more regularly. And not just on the first play.

“So early in the game, they went to this. What’s next, right? We spent a lot of time as a defense talking about what is next,” IU defensive coordinator Kane Wommack said. “If there are about eight to 10 to 15 plays in a game that determine the outcome of the game, if we, in those eight to 15 plays, can anticipate and react a little bit faster, right, we can significantly influence the outcome of the game. We just got more players on the field that can do that.

“But we have to execute and actually show up in about two and a half weeks here.”

Soon enough, the Hoosiers will kick off with No. 9 Penn State at Memorial Stadium, and how much the defense has improved will be put to the test. But there have at least been encouraging signs.

In last Saturday's first intrasquad scrimmage, IU's defense had just four missed tackles, leading to seven yards gained after contact. Wommack, who hasn't forgotten last season's opener with Ball State, noted a contrast with the 23 missed tackles for 168 yards after contact the Cardinals had that day.

Up front, Wommack feels the Hoosiers are more physical, better able to win with their hands. On the backend with Matthews and Johnson, the Hoosiers hope to have two playmakers who can affect both the run and pass.

Both Matthews and Johnson were able to play significant snaps as freshmen and sophomores.

"Everybody's freshman year, everybody nervous, everybody not understanding it," Matthews said. "But now going into two years ... everybody knows the defense, everybody understands different formations and stuff like that."

In the Gator Bowl versus Tennessee — played back in Matthews' hometown of Jacksonville, Fla. — the IU coaching staff saw their two safeties playing at a high level. Johnson, still working primarily at the hybrid "husky" position, had a 63-yard interception for a touchdown. Matthews nearly came up with an interception of his own, settling instead for two pass breakups.

In an unconventional offseason, Matthews continued to make strides, and it's in the small details where he seems more engaged on the field. For instance, Wommack raised a hypothetical where Matthews may have been posted up 10 yards off the line of scrimmage on a third-and-5.

"That's not going to do anything if they pull up and throw one that's a six-yard hitch route, right?" Wommack said. "Things like that, understanding situational defense ... but the biggest thing is he has such a rep base of offensive recognition. He knows what's coming. And, better yet, we can teach guys to know what is coming, but what is the answer off of that play?"

In those offseason Zoom meetings, Matthews seemed to know the answer. And when he returned to the field, he still had them. He's moved at a speed Jones thought was coming.

Wommack hopes that speed will show up during the eight to 15 plays that can change the course of a game. And if it does, Matthews becomes exactly the kind of Monster the Hoosiers have hoped for in the secondary.

"Shoot, it's going into my third year, so I definitely got to understand (the defense) more," Matthews said. "That's really helping me a lot, the experience. I feel a great year coming."