

# UW-Whitewater's Quinn Meinerz hopes to become latest D3 success story in NFL

By Matt Reynoldson

WFRV

April 28, 2021

If you play DIII college sports, you truly love the game. And it's easy to see just how much football is in the heart of Quinn Meinerz. The former UW-Whitewater offensive lineman has been training for a career in the NFL, and can't wait for the college draft begin on Thursday night.

"It's unbelievable. I mean like you said, we all have the dream but when you go Division III, kind of the reality sets in a little bit that when you get to your junior and senior year, that there's not really an opportunity," said Meinerz. "But it's cool that I've been able to have this opportunity and take Warhawk football, Division III and Wisconsin athletics, and carry all those things on my shoulder and hopefully I can carry it to the NFL. Not too long ago it was 'Am I going to get drafted?' Now it's just kind of a matter of when."

Meinerz doesn't lack confidence, but he also isn't cocky and his performance at the Senior Bowl against D1 competition gave him confidence in knowing he belongs.

"After like the first couple snaps, when I was finally going against the live competition, I'm not sure whether it was one on one or stuff like that, but I realized really quickly that 'hey I can really handle myself,' said Meinerz. "I was going to practice like I was going to be fighting for my life every play, but I'm not fighting for my life, I'm handling and sometimes dominating my opponent, so it was really a big confidence booster early on day one."

Meinerz put together a video montage of him working out in a remote part of Canada where his family owns a fishery, and put it online to help market himself. The highlight reel includes everything from chopping wood, curling water jugs, lifting propane tanks and multiple 2 x 8 lumber over his shoulder, snapping a football into a garbage can and even knocking down trees in the woods.

"It's just being creative, and the ability to not settle for less. I was trying to use everything that I had to make sure I was prepared and ready for my moment and when it was time to happen," said Meinerz. "If I wasn't practicing all summer to play center, the senior bowl wouldn't have gone as well for me. So I was really trying to be prepared in all facets of anything that could happen. To be ready for my opportunity, because you never know when it's going to happen and like the senior bowl, it was two weeks out that I got the invite. So you just really got to make sure you're always ready. Don't get ready, stay ready."

The numbers Meinerz put up at his pro they are eye-popping regardless of what level competition you are looking at. He ran a 4.92 40 yard dash, and did 33 reps on the 225 pound bench test.

"For interior offensive lineman, I'm pretty sure that's pretty close to the top, so I'm really happy with it. I think I could have had more, if I didn't break my hand at the senior bowl because there were eight weeks of time where I wasn't able to put my hand underneath a bar," said Meinerz. "so I only had two weeks to prepare for that benchpress but I hit 33, and my internal goal was 32 to 35, so they hitting 33 was definitely something I was pleased with."

Meinerz knew that versatility could only help him after being called to play in the senior bowl, and even though the left guard is his normal position, he is willing to do anything to be on someone's roster.

"It doesn't really matter to me, though I think in my opinion, on the interior offensive line, you have to be versatile and play all three of them," said Meinerz. "Look at Elgton Jenkins. He's playing all five of them. Do you know how valuable that is to hold down that? It's incredible that he's able to do that, so I want to be those kinds of players where you can trust me at all three of the interior positions."

Growing up in Hartford, Wisconsin, playing college football in his home state was great, but he's one of the few guys on the gridiron that did not grow up being a Packers fan.

"It would be really cool, but unfortunately a lot of people aren't gonna like it, but I'm a Tom Brady and Patriots fan. It would be cool because a lot of my entire family is Packers fans," said Meinerz. "I know a lot of them would really enjoy that moment of having a Meinerz Packers jersey, which will be really cool."

# How a small-school lineman turned himself from ‘the guy with the gut’ into an NFL prospect

By Adam Kilgore  
Washington Post  
April 27, 2021

In the summer of 2018, Denver Broncos scout Scott DiStefano stood on the sideline at Wisconsin Whitewater’s first full-pads practice of the year. DiStefano had traveled to the Division III powerhouse to study a senior offensive lineman named Nate Trewyn. Almost every team had sent a scout to evaluate Trewyn, and Whitewater Coach Kevin Bullis had grown used to the routine. A scout would come, watch Trewyn and then ask him if there was anybody else worth keeping tabs on.

After practice, DiStefano walked up to Bullis and dispensed with the usual question. He had already identified another player he wanted to know more about.

“Hey,” DiStefano asked. “How about the guy with the gut?”

Mac McCain, grandson of a civil rights icon, wants to take his family legacy to the NFL

DiStefano pointed to Quinn Meinerz, a guard who had spent practice mauling defensive teammates with his jersey rolled up and tucked underneath his shoulder pads, revealing a belly that resembled a furry beach ball.

“That thing looks like stone,” DiStefano said to Bullis.

“It is a stone,” Bullis replied. “If you went and knocked on it, it would sound like a melon.”

“Damn, what year is he?” DiStefano asked.

“Sophomore,” Bullis said. “As good as Nate is, I think two years from now you’re going to be here and say, ‘Whoa, this guy may be better.’ He’s going to develop in a manner that is going to be bizarre.”

In the two years since the NFL noticed Meinerz, Bullis’s words have proved prophetic and Meinerz has proved himself more than just a guy with a gut. Meinerz has become one of the most fascinating figures of the NFL draft. A prospect from Division III, where the coronavirus pandemic canceled fall seasons, Meinerz improved his draft stock despite — or maybe, in retrospect, because of — not playing football for more than a year. He turned into a spring revelation after a dominant Senior Bowl performance, charmingly accompanied by viral photos of his stomach, boosted his draft position.

Meinerz has visited remotely with every NFL franchise at least twice, and NFL Network draft analyst Daniel Jeremiah predicted Meinerz will be selected as early as the second round. But he is not just a pop-up sensation. Meinerz built himself into an NFL prospect through unconventional and consuming work, which not long ago included working out at a great-uncle’s Canadian fishing resort and lifting propane tanks and logs.

After high school, Meinerz received no big-school scholarship offers and wondered how many more years of football he had left. In the early spring, he hoped he would be drafted in the sixth or seventh round, just so he could hear his name called. By the fall, he might be your favorite team's starting center.

"This whole entire thing has been insane," Meinerz said. "It's been really insane."

'He would block three people'

How Meinerz ended up in Division III remains something of a mystery. Coaches uniformly vouch for his character, describing him as humble and charismatic. He is not the classic late bloomer who lands at a small school and suddenly sprouts — he weighed about 280 pounds in high school. He was not a raw athlete who had yet to show football acumen.

"He literally mauled guys on every single rep," said Aaron Rusch, a former Whitewater player and an assistant coach at Hartford Union High when Meinerz attended. "We put him in the backfield in one of our jumbo packages, and I just felt bad for some of these outside 'backers and cornerbacks. He'd take out two or three guys and let our running back walk into the end zone."

When Bullis watched Meinerz's high school film at Rusch's urging, he could not believe Meinerz had yet to be offered a scholarship. He sent his offensive line coach to Hartford to watch Meinerz wrestle, and the attributes he showed resulted in a two-word report to Bullis: "He's special." Whitewater immediately offered Meinerz a roster spot.

Kyle Pitts, 'unicorn' of the draft, is the best tight end to enter the NFL in years

Bullis thought it would prove to be moot and eventually a Division I program would find Meinerz, because prospects like him did not go undiscovered. Meinerz did not use social media in high school or upload videos to recruiting services, and he now believes his lack of self-promotion led to him being missed.

"I was always under the impression that if they're going to find you, they're going to find you," Meinerz said. "I never got found, so I was just kind of, 'I guess I wasn't good enough.' "

Meinerz played sparingly on a championship contender as a freshman, but Bullis says he was good enough to start. After the season, Meinerz retreated to Canada, where he stayed at a fishing camp his great-uncle owned. He would perform exercises with water jugs rather than barbells or plates. Bullis worried that Meinerz would lose muscle, but he returned 20 pounds heavier, all lean muscle.

"When you're thinking about an island in the middle of nowhere and only my great-uncle is there and a couple guests, literally no one can see what I'm doing or know if I am or am not working out," Meinerz said. "I really enjoy doing it, and then on top of that, it showed how creative I could be with using propane tanks, water jugs or whatever it took to get the work done."

The unconventional workouts also enhanced Meinerz's functional strength. He couldn't lift as much weight in traditional exercises, but he felt stronger on the field. He was sturdier in awkward positions, and his wrists and forearms could push defenders.

"There's like the grown-man strength," Meinerz said. "There's a huge difference."

Meinerz earned a starting job as a sophomore and immediately became one of Whitewater's best players.

"The way he would hit people and the crazy things that would happen — I mean, spinning people like a helicopter," Bullis said. "His speed down the field, his ability to block — and this sounds goofy. He would block three people. He would combo the D-tackle on the line, bounce him in. He would work up to the linebacker, kill the linebacker, work to the safety. It was like his mission was to block three human beings on one play. You don't draw up plays that way. Finding that third guy? Are you kidding me?"

Meinerz could execute those plays because of an unusual attribute. He could crouch into a low stance and still run fast, giving him leverage against defenders without sacrificing speed. One day at practice during Meinerz's sophomore year, Whitewater special teams coach John O'Grady sidled next to Bullis. O'Grady has coached at Wisconsin colleges for three decades.

"I've been around a lot of NFL guys," O'Grady told Bullis. "His ability to bend is so much better than what those guys' were. It's bizarre, his athleticism."

Before his junior season, Meinerz overhauled his training. He took a holistic approach to football. Rather than hope he slept eight hours per night, he made certain he slept for nine. He had bloodwork done and took supplements to eliminate deficiencies. He studied physical education so he could understand his body like a strength and conditioning coach.

"Every little 1 percent matters to me," Meinerz said. "In college, what I get all the time is, 'How much do you drink?' Or, 'Do you go out on the weekends?' No. I'm a very boring, not-a-typical-college student. I just don't do that, because I understand how each of those little percentages matter over a long period of time. So a lot of the people that want to be in my position aren't willing to sacrifice those moments. Maybe they do work hard in the weight room. But they're not eating right, they're not sleeping, and they're drinking on the weekends. And that's where I can just soar right past everybody."

### Backyard football

Meinerz could not have known his junior season would be his last. In the spring of 2020, as lockdowns began and the football season became a question, he realized he had three choices: transfer to a Division I school, stay at Whitewater for another season or make the unusual jump of leaving early for the NFL from Division III.

He didn't want to transfer, to learn a new playbook and new teammates. And he worried if one fall season could be canceled, then the 2021 season might not be a certainty, either. Knowing from a summer Zoom call with NFL scouts that teams were interested, Meinerz chose to leave for the pros.

But with no season, Meinerz faced an unusual challenge: how to become a better football player without playing football. He had a weight set in his basement, and he used it every day. To prepare for teams wanting him to play all three interior positions, he did footwork drills and snapped footballs into trees.

"I tried to learn how to play center on my own in my backyard," Meinerz said.

Trey Lance is one of the draft's bigger mysteries, but he has been well prepared for the NFL

When gyms opened up, Meinerz trained at NX Level with Brad Arnett, a Whitewater alum who trains many NFL players, including the Watt brothers, Wisconsin natives. They started with a “postural assessment,” Arnett said, strengthening and stretching his ankles and hips.

“You’ve got to dot your I’s and cross your T’s with him, because whatever you tell him he’s going to do,” Arnett said. “He’s very inquisitive. He asks great questions. He’s what makes this job easy. Ninety percent of what you deal with guys is effort. That was never a problem for Quinn.”

In the summer, Meinerz traveled to Texas to train with offensive line coach Duke Manyweather and work out at an Exos facility. He became convinced an invitation to the Senior Bowl would be crucial for his draft chances, and he started using his social media feeds and sending out clips — he wouldn’t miss a chance because of a lack of self-promotion again.

After a workout one day, Meinerz checked his phone. He saw two missed calls and a text message from his agent, Ron Slavin, that read, “Hey, answer that Arizona number.” He called back and heard a voice on the other end.

“You ready to put that Warhawk helmet on one last time?”

It was Jim Nagy, the executive director of the Senior Bowl, and he had just invited Meinerz to the game. The Exos facility housed a basketball court next to the weight room, and Meinerz walked to the far corner. He didn’t want his buddies to see him crying.

‘I’ve earned myself a couple more years’

When Meinerz arrived at the Senior Bowl, he expected Day 1 to be rough. He was going to play football, which he hadn’t done in more than a year, and he learned the night before he was going to play center, which he had never done. He thought he would be fighting for his life on every snap.

He wasn’t. He looked across the line at defensive linemen wearing helmets from teams such as Washington and Texas, and Meinerz pushed them around. He realized he was as good as, if not better than, the players from bigger schools.

Others noticed, too. Photos of his stomach hanging from under his rolled-up jersey gained traction on social media. “To have the whole belly-out thing kind of freak everybody was hilarious,” Meinerz said. “That’s something I’ve been doing since high school.” If he had been a sleeper among the NFL scouting community, the Senior Bowl ended that. He went from perhaps a late-round pick to a possible second-rounder.

During the week’s final practice, Meinerz broke his hand. He had already done enough to boost his draft position, but he petitioned the Miami Dolphins’ Brian Flores, his coach for the week, to let him play in the game anyway.

“He wants to show everybody that he’s special,” Bullis said. “I don’t say that as he’s arrogant. ... He is humble as all get-out. But he knows that he’s talented, and he knows he was missed in high school. He’s not going to be missed with his opportunity here.”

Meinerz has been back in Wisconsin training at NX Level, and he has seen the Watt brothers in recent weeks. Out of respect, he has avoided interrupting their work with an introduction. When reminded that next season he might have to block them, he offered a clarification. “I get to,” Meinerz said.

In an interview last month, Meinerz reflected on landing at a Division III school. He remembered thinking he had four more years to play football. History suggested his odds of leaping from Division III to the NFL were bleak. He remembered what it felt like to take off his high school jersey for the last time, and he figured he would have the same feeling, with extra permanence, after his college career — he would turn in his pads and be done with the sport he loved.

“Now,” Meinerz said, “it’s looking like I’ve earned myself a couple more years.”

# NFL Draft prospect Quinn Meinerz from D-III UW-Whitewater looking to overcome the ‘impossible’

By Bob McGinn

The Athletic

April 12, 2021

Whitewater: Adventure rafting, helmets strongly encouraged. Or the political probe of real-estate investments made by Bill and Hillary Clinton.

La Crosse: Old Style beer, the Wrigley Field favorite that’s still brewed in western Wisconsin. Or the stick-and-ball team sport invented by Native Americans that has made remarkable inroads across the U.S.

On fall Saturdays, the universities at Whitewater and La Crosse play football under the NCAA Division III umbrella. They’ve been doing it since 1913 as members of the State Normal Conference, then the Wisconsin State University Conference and now the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference.

Wisconsin-Milwaukee and Wisconsin-Superior dropped the sport years ago, but eight members all dating to World War I soldier on. Picturesque Carson Park in Eau Claire and venerable Goerke Field in Stevens Point were erected in the mid-1930s, but monolithic Perkins Stadium in Whitewater, with its jumbotron scoreboard and almost 14,000 seats, sets the standard for the WIAC and perhaps all of Division III.

It was at Perkins Stadium that Quinn Meinerz played guard for three seasons. Thirty-five years earlier, Tom Newberry played three seasons as a guard for Wisconsin-La Crosse not far from the Mississippi River at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

In 1986, Newberry was the 50th player selected by the Los Angeles Rams late in the second round. In the 85-year history of the NFL draft, Newberry is the only player from the conference to be selected in the first three rounds. (La Crosse running back Willie Berzinski, the 46th overall pick in 1956, is the earliest choice in conference history, but it was in the fourth round.)

Much like Newberry entered the NFL consciousness with a standout showing at the old Blue-Gray Game in Montgomery, Ala., followed by an exceptional combine workout, Meinerz made a name for himself at the Senior Bowl in January followed by an outstanding pro day.

Newberry, a native of Onalaska, Wis., who now operates a forestry company in Big Sky, Mont., reads alumni newsletters from his alma mater, but other than that doesn’t keep tabs on his old conference. He wasn’t aware of Meinerz, but pledged to follow the NFL Draft to see if predictions of a second-day (second or third round) placement come true.

“Oh, wow, good for him,” Newberry said. “I hope he does (go before No. 50). For him, I’d say just put your head down and don’t get caught up in any of the activities off the field and study the crap out of your playbook and listen to your coaches. There are no bad coaches in the NFL.”

Meinerz didn’t know much about Newberry but vowed to do his research. He’ll discover that Newberry became an immediate starter at left guard for coach John Robinson’s Rams, for whom he made All-Pro in 1988 and ’89 and started for playoff teams three times in his first four seasons. After eight years at guard

and another at center, Newberry started at left guard for the Pittsburgh Steelers in Super Bowl XXX before calling it a 10-year career.

When Newberry came out, the draft consisted of 12 rounds. It went to eight rounds in 1993, then to the current seven-round format in '94.

The WIAC hasn't had anyone drafted since 2007. The last offensive lineman selected was Pete Lucas of Wisconsin-Stevens Point in the 10th round 30 years ago. Terry Strouf of La Crosse, a one-time roommate of Newberry's, went in the seventh round in 1990. Newberry himself was the first player from the conference drafted in 13 years.

"Yeah, it's pretty impossible when you sign up to go D-III," Meinerz said, pausing to reflect on his draft possibilities. "It made it even harder not having a season (in 2020). Where I'm at now is pretty extreme."

Rich Roberts, the pithy Rams beat reporter for the Los Angeles Times, greeted the choice of Newberry as a player from "Division III, college football's version of the five and dime store."

On draft matters, Robinson deferred to the late John Math, the team's veteran director of player personnel. Ken Herock, one of the Raiders' lead scouts under owner Al Davis, happened to be traveling with Math when their scouting schedule sent them to see Newberry in La Crosse.

"I was never there before in my life," Herock said recently. "I forget where the hell we flew into. Went to the school. I think we were doing some stuff in a gymnasium if I remember.

"Naïve kid. Just a raw piece of material is what he was. This kid was an extremely gifted athlete. You were taking an athlete to see if you could mold him into a real player in the NFL. He turned into a hell of a player. Later, I said to John, 'Great pick.' I didn't like taking chances on those small schools like that until the third or fourth round."

Shortly before departing for the Rams' training camp at Cal State Fullerton, Newberry met with Roger Harring, the coach at La Crosse from 1969 through '99 and for whom the field there is now named.

"He just said, 'Hey, don't let anybody push you around,'" remembered Newberry. "'Don't be scared to act like you act here.'"

A 190-pound running back in high school, Newberry's first love was track and field. Although he didn't play football as a collegiate freshman, that's when he became an avid weightlifter. Mike Sanders coached the La Crosse weightmen as well as the offensive line for the football team. Newberry credited Sanders for convincing him the NFL could be in his future if he joined the football team, which Newberry did as a sophomore.

Besides winning the Division III championship in both shot put and discus in 1984 and '85 — his 63-foot, 4-inch throw in the shot ranked eighth in the world in 1985 — Newberry also found a way to earn a few extra bucks. In March 1985, he won four straight bouts to win a Toughest Man contest at an auditorium in downtown La Crosse.

Perhaps then it shouldn't come as a surprise what happened at training camp.

“Maybe two weeks in, I got called up out of my room to John Robinson’s office,” Newberry said. “I went up there and he said, ‘All right, Tom, you have to make a deal with me. One fight a day in training camp, not three or four.’”

“If somebody pushed me in the back or something, I was quick to come to blows. Just silly stuff, but I had to make a stand. I got thrown out of a game my second year in preseason for the same thing. Coach said, ‘Great uppercut, but don’t do it during the regular season.’”

Newberry’s ability to pull and run “probably was the reason they won that national championship (NAIA Division II in 1985),” Green Bay Packers scout Red Cochran said not long before the draft. He added: “He’s strong as an ox. He’s already pumped up. Runs well.”

Jerry Reichow, director of football operations for the Minnesota Vikings, was mildly disappointed that Newberry blew out the combine with a stunning time of 4.66 seconds in the 40-yard dash and 29 reps on the bench press.

“We were hoping no one knew about him,” Reichow said semi-jokingly in April 1986. “Everybody knows about him now. He will probably go much earlier than all of us expect. Second round? I’m talking at a minimum. His only negative, if it’s a negative, is you don’t get to see him play against major competition.”

Unlike Newberry, Meinerz already was at his near-optimal weight of 300 pounds as a high school right tackle and nose guard at Hartford Union in a rural area just northwest of Milwaukee. Like Newberry, he competed in other sports, placing fifth at the state wrestling tournament as a senior and surpassing 55 feet in the shot put. Although recruiting has become far more sophisticated now than it was in the mid-1980s, Meinerz attracted zero interest from big schools.

“No Division I, not even a piece of mail, not a text message, not a call,” he said. “One D-II offer from St. Cloud State. Other than that, it was only D-III in Wisconsin.”

By committing to Whitewater, Meinerz joined a football dynasty that had won seven Division III national championships in the span of eight years from 2007 to 2014. In their past 15 seasons, the Warhawks are 193-17.

Meinerz played sparingly as a freshman before becoming a starter in 2018. Even as dominant as Whitewater is, not every team sends a scout to its campus every year. What helped Meinerz get on the NFL radar was the presence of center Nate Trewyn, an undrafted NFL free agent in 2019 who was good enough to spend four games on the Buccaneers’ 53-man roster as a rookie. In 2019, Meinerz was voted most valuable player on a 13-1 team that lost in the national finals.

“Even when Nate was getting looked at in 2018, almost every scout asked us about Quinn,” Whitewater coach Kevin Bullis said. “We ask ourselves every day how we got him. Heck of a story. During the summer, he goes up to an island in Canada and trains up in the woods all by himself. He is a grinding maniac.”

With the 2020 season canceled because of COVID-19, Meinerz decided immediately to declare for the draft in 2021. Having admittedly become a “little sloppy-looking” late in the 2019 season at 335 pounds, he has spent the last six months improving his diet, sleep patterns and workout routines.

His break came when center Landon Dickerson of Alabama blew out his knee in the SEC Championship Game. Senior Bowl scouts had Meinerz on their list all season, but it wasn't until they examined one of his workout videos with offensive line coach Duke Manyweather in Dallas that they could see the changes in his body definition. Meinerz gained the invaluable invitation less than a week before the reporting date.

A left guard at Whitewater, Meinerz practiced at both guard and center in Mobile. After Zoom calls or interviews at the Senior Bowl, he has had contact with all 32 teams. Meinerz said 75 percent of the clubs rank him as a center and 25 percent as a guard.

Meinerz had an impressive week but couldn't play in the game because of a broken right hand that he suffered early in the week's final practice in pads.

"If I didn't get into the Senior Bowl (workouts), I'm probably still looking at being undrafted or maybe sixth/seventh round," said Meinerz. "A lot of things have changed since then. Any team that gets me, I'm going to be a long-time player."

Newberry measured 6-foot-1½ and weighed 281 pounds at the combine. At pro day, Meinerz was 6-foot-3 and 320 pounds. Their vertical jumps and broad jumps were comparable, as were their scores on the 12-minute, 50-second Wonderlic test (34 for Newberry, 25 for Meinerz). Newberry's 4.66 40 was one of the best of all time by a guard. Meinerz clocked in at 4.99.

In 1986, Hudson Houck was entering his fourth season as the Rams' offensive line coach when Newberry arrived. He remained on Robinson's staff through 1991 before going on to coach lines for four more teams in an NFL career that lasted 29 seasons.

Retired in Palm Springs, Calif., Houck agreed to watch tape of Meinerz, a player he had no previous knowledge of, while harkening back to his six seasons as Newberry's position coach. The football staff at Whitewater sent him highlight tapes of Meinerz from the 2018 and '19 campaigns (obviously that presents a somewhat different picture than watching full game tapes).

"Guy looks like a heck of a player to me," Houck said. "I don't know the conference very well, but even if it was not a very good conference, he did a lot of things like Larry Allen did (at D-II Sonoma State) when he came out against teams that weren't up to the caliber that he played.

"(Meinerz) had great balance. He could run. Looked like he could strike people. He's very aggressive, which I liked a lot. He's a fine prospect, in my opinion."

Allen, the Hall of Fame guard, played under Houck during his first eight seasons for the Dallas Cowboys.

"His effort level is outstanding ... very similar to Allen," said Houck. "Larry Allen would hit a guy and knock him down, then go get another guy. This guy will hit a guy down and make sure he's down. Really, if a guy's got a good effort level, he'll react to what he has to do, I think. All of a sudden the effort level doesn't stop. You can measure toughness and ability to run and balance. I don't care who you play against."

Newberry, continued Houck, was "shorter but very, very explosive and very fast. Tom was a great runner. He was a perfect guard because he could run. Extremely strong. Great leg strength. He also was one of the smarter players that I ever coached.

“He could finish blocks because he had such great speed. He would stay on a block for a long period of time. His height, or lack thereof, probably was an advantage in some instances because he could get under the defender.”

Barring injury, what are the chances that Meinerz might have an NFL career approximating Newberry’s?

“I would think he’d play like Newberry or even better,” replied Houck. “I would just guess, off-hand, this guy won’t go past the second round. He may be a first-rounder, I don’t know. The only thing that would bring him down was the conference he played in.”

Which brings us back to the state conference in Wisconsin, where Wisconsin-Eau Claire hasn’t had a player drafted since 1966, Wisconsin-River Falls since ’68, Wisconsin-Oshkosh and Wisconsin-Platteville since ’71, Wisconsin-La Crosse since ’94, Wisconsin-Stevens Point since ’99, Wisconsin-Stout since ’02 and Wisconsin-Whitewater since ’07.

A total of 41 conference players have been selected since the draft began in 1936. Newberry easily enjoyed the best career, followed by defensive tackle Doug Sutherland of Superior, wide receiver Bill Schroeder of La Crosse and linebacker Clint Kriewaldt of Stevens Point.

Ryan Ramczyk, the top-notch right tackle for the Saints, started for two seasons at Stevens Point before transferring to Wisconsin. He played one season for the Badgers before becoming a first-round draft choice in 2017. Guard Joe Panos spent a year at Whitewater and then four at Wisconsin, was drafted in the third round in 1994 and became a four-year starter in the NFL.

NFL free agent Mike Reinfeldt was an all-pro safety for the Oilers after a career at Wisconsin-Milwaukee. During Reinfeldt’s collegiate career in the early 1970s, however, the school played an independent schedule after leaving the conference for football in 1964.

Some of the WIAC players that had the most success as pros weren’t drafted. The free-agent list includes punter Matt Turk of Whitewater, linebacker Joel Williams of La Crosse, fullback Ted Fritsch of Stevens Point and tight end Dan Arnold of Platteville.

Last year, just one player from Division III was drafted. That was tackle Ben Bartch of St. John’s (Minn.), who started one game for the Jaguars while logging 220 snaps.

How did Berzinski’s career play out? A four-year letterman, he helped La Crosse tie Missouri Valley, 12-12, in the 1954 Cigar Bowl in Tampa. Life Magazine featured him as one of five small-college players sought by the pros. After being drafted and then cut by the Rams, he started three of four games for the Eagles in 1956, rushing 15 times for 72 yards, before ending his career playing one game in the CFL.

A generation ago, players weren’t as familiar with one another because they weren’t working out together in the offseason. When the clock struck :00 on game day, more times than not those traditional greetings at midfield were between players from the same school.

Williams, the speedy linebacker from La Crosse who started 102 of 137 NFL games from 1979-89, spent the final four seasons of his career with the Falcons. Because the Falcons were aligned with the Rams in the NFC West at the time, Williams and Newberry battled each other twice a year, then always warmly greeted each other afterward as proud products of the state conference.

“That was the only time I got to do that,” Newberry said amusedly. “That was the only guy I had to talk to after the game.”

It can be a lonely assignment, to be sure, attempting to secure a spot in the NFL for a player from the ranks of NCAA Division III. Quinn Meinerz, with so many parallels to the trail-blazing Tom Newberry, might have the talent, determination and confidence to follow in his footsteps.

# Fire in the belly: How D-III's Quinn Meinerz turned doubts into fuel for NFL draft

By Adam Rittenberg

ESPN

April 7, 2021

WHAT WILL BE the most famous gut in the 2021 NFL draft wasn't always an object of adulation, envy and wonderment.

Quinn Meinerz never forgot the scouting report an agent shared with him, the one that described his "sloppy midsection." Meinerz, a standout offensive lineman for Division III Wisconsin-Whitewater, had taken pride in his gut, baring it to the world. Not even Whitewater's 2XL jerseys could contain the belly.

"When I hear 'sloppy,' I hear 'lazy,' and that's something that's 100% not who I am," Meinerz said. "I really took offense to that and I wanted to prove him wrong. It's solid, man. It is big, but it is solid."

The truth is, Meinerz loves jabs like "sloppy midsection." Every word, phrase or sentence of doubt about what he can achieve is stored away, even now, as he has defied the odds to virtually secure a spot in this month's draft. "Free motivation," he called it.

Meinerz is hardly the first NFL prospect to seek criticism as kindling. But most prospects have more counter material: a strong recruiting ranking in high school, the backing of a big-name college program, a productive season leading into the pre-draft evaluation period.

Meinerz had none of that.

Since 1990, only 21 players from Division III have been drafted, according to NCAA.com. The man soon to become the 22nd has taken a path likely never to be replicated. Meinerz had his senior season canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic; he spurned the transfer portal to spend the summer and fall training; and he got his big break when the Senior Bowl needed a late fill-in at a position he had never played.

He's projected as a likely Day 2 pick in the draft later this month. ESPN's Mel Kiper now lists Meinerz as the No. 4 center prospect.

"I bet on myself," Meinerz said. "I know what I do. I know how hard I work every single day, and how dedicated I am to my goals."

As Meinerz rose from reserve to first-team All-American and team captain at Wisconsin-Whitewater, coach Kevin Bullis would ask the lineman: What's the fire in your belly?

"The motivation is to prove myself right and to prove others wrong," Meinerz said. "Those sweet victories."

Even though Division III Wisconsin-Whitewater didn't have a 2020 season, Quinn Meinerz found a way to significantly improve his draft stock. University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Athletics

JIM NAGY'S CALL came in mid-January.

Nagy, the executive director of the Senior Bowl, was inviting Meinerz to the premier pre-draft all-star game only after several centers -- Alabama's Landon Dickerson (knee), Ohio State's Josh Myers (toe) and Penn State's Michal Menet (hamstring) -- suffered injuries. Meinerz's game tape from 2019 wouldn't have earned him the invite, Nagy said, but his progress in training -- from flat-foot basketball dunks to a reconfigured body -- plus the positional need, sealed the deal.

"Quinn got choked up, there was a long pause at one point," Nagy said. "That was an emotional call. It was really, really cool. I'll never forget it."

Emotions again hit Meinerz on the first ride to the stadium.

"It was confidence and then not-so-confident, and then I'm excited to be here, and emotional, like, 'I can't believe I'm here,'" he said. "It was nice to have that 20-minute bus ride."

When Meinerz entered the locker room Jan. 26, put on his pads and grabbed the familiar winged Warhawk helmet, his nerves settled. He hadn't played meaningful football in 404 days, when Wisconsin-Whitewater lost to North Central in the 2019 Stagg Bowl, the Division III national championship.

As his cleats clapped the concrete on his way to the field, Meinerz put on his helmet and heard music playing in the stadium. All the feelings running through him coalesced into two.

"Just straight confidence, and I was a little angry, too," he said. "I was angry that whole week. To see all these D-I guys and to be counted out as a D-III player. I was a last-minute call, didn't have a football season.

"I just wanted to prove something so bad."

Meinerz started the week as an outsider. He saw other players look at his purple helmet with confusion - TCU? Kansas State? -- unable to pinpoint its origin. By the end of the week, most knew his name and his story.

The 6-foot-3, 320-pound Meinerz not only held up in workouts, but excelled, despite the competition jump and a new position. He faced players such as Washington's Levi Onwuzurike and UCLA's Osa Odighizuwa -- both included among Kiper's top-five draft-eligible defensive tackle prospects -- and often held the edge. The National Team's defensive linemen voted him as the top offensive lineman they faced.

"Those players, they're like, 'Man, he's one of the strongest guys we've ever gone up against. When he gets his hands and his body on you, he can really move people,'" Nagy said.

"They'll make it especially hard on the centers in this game. You'll get guys in one-on-ones, they'll shade themselves on the snap hand.

"For him to be able to do that says a lot."

It's not charity when Nagy distributes Senior Bowl invites, even for last-minute fill-ins. Everyone who comes to Mobile, Alabama, is a draftable player in his mind. But as a longtime scout, Nagy also knows the

pressure to place any draft grades on Division III players. "You're putting your neck on the line," he said. By the end of the practice week, Meinerz had eased all anxieties.

On the morning of the Senior Bowl, Meinerz called Paul Shelsta, his offensive line coach in high school. Meinerz said he would be wearing a helmet sticker honoring Shelsta's daughter, Alaina, who suffers from a form of GLUT1 deficiency syndrome, a rare metabolic disorder that often causes seizures and other neurological problems. Alaina, 14, receives complex treatment for the condition, which has been diagnosed in fewer than 300 people.

Meinerz wrote "Hugs 4 Alaina" on the sticker, noting the fundraiser to help find a treatment for her. He later launched "Belly of the Beast" apparel -- T-shirts, sweatshirts and hats -- with all profits going toward Alaina's family.

"It's right before the Senior Bowl, right before his morning meeting, and he's thinking of my daughter's situation," Shelsta said. "That was just an incredibly special moment for me. We showed her. She thought that was pretty cool."

A broken bone in Meinerz's hand prevented him from playing in the game -- he still suited up and lobbied Miami Dolphins coach Brian Flores for field time -- but the Wisconsin-Whitewater lineman with the exposed belly generated more discussion on the NFL Network broadcast than any other player.

"He took full advantage, he knew he belonged," Nagy said. "You don't invite players because of a potentially cool storyline, but when it happens organically like that, and a guy just blows up and has a great week, yeah, it's great."

MEINERZ DOESN'T COME from a long line of high-level football players. But the most significant ingredient to his NFL rise is part of his DNA.

"We all use it as motivation when somebody says we can't," said Meinerz's father, Aaron. "Then, we're definitely going to do it. From birth, that's a general trait. That's just ingrained into us. We're all kind of strong-minded, strong-willed. Sometimes I think he's looking for it. It's almost like, 'OK, good, somebody gave me something.'"

Quinn was born big -- "We were always getting the husky clothes," Aaron recalled with a laugh -- and gravitated toward sports, but didn't project as a top athlete. Growing up in Hartford, Wisconsin, about 30 miles northwest of Milwaukee, he came to high school as a 5-foot-8, 180-pound freshman. Meinerz was "just another guy," Paul Shelsta said, and not among the small group of freshmen promoted to junior varsity.

Then, between his freshman and sophomore years, Meinerz grew 6 inches and added 80 pounds. He began lifting weights in the basement with Aaron. As a sophomore, Quinn started at right tackle for the varsity squad and flashed his power against teams with Division I prospects. His development continued but, at 6-foot-2, he received no Division I offers and only one from Division II.

"He didn't have that height, but he was so strong, so powerful," Shelsta said. "In my head, I went, 'This is a D-I guy. No one's found him yet.' I couldn't believe nobody was taking a look."

After a former Wisconsin-Whitewater player from Hartford emailed Bullis about Meinerz, a Whitewater assistant soon watched Meinerz wrestle, reporting back, "This guy's a beast." Bullis worried about losing Meinerz to a scholarship program, but none stepped up and Meinerz picked Whitewater, a Division III powerhouse about an hour's drive from Hartford.

"We were really fortunate to get him," Bullis said.

Along with the football recruiting snubs, Meinerz found other provocations. Someone told him he had a limited ceiling in the shot put. As a senior, he made state. He also excelled in wrestling, where he would write "THE GUT" with a Sharpie on athletic tape and slap it onto his headgear.

"I've just got to hear one word or one sentence from someone that's doubting me, and I'll go away for a year or whatever it takes to prove them wrong," Meinerz said. "That's what I've done this past year, leading up to this draft. Alright, say everything you guys want to say. I'll take it in, save it, put it in my notes and I'll use it every day."

BEFORE THE 2018 SEASON, NFL scouts flocked to Whitewater to evaluate an offensive lineman. Warhawks center Nate Trewyn would go on to earn All-America honors that fall.

Scott DiStefano, a longtime Denver Broncos scout who covered the Midwest, was among the first to arrive. While watching Trewyn, he pivoted and asked Bullis, "Who's 77?"

"I said, 'That's Quinn Meinerz. He's a sophomore,'" Bullis said. "That was a pretty common question that fall: 'Who's 77?'"

By early 2020, regional scouts were visiting Whitewater for Meinerz. Then, the pandemic hit, shutting down college football at all levels. Meinerz returned to Hartford.

While many people struggled with being homebound, Meinerz utilized the basement (weightlifting), the backyard (snapping footballs into trash cans and pizza peels), the front yard (Olympic-style overhead lifts) and, of course, the kitchen.

Admittedly looking "a little sloppy" in the 2019 Division III championship game, he worked to slim down and tone up. An initial diet of chicken, vegetables and rice helped Meinerz shed about 10 pounds to reach his goal weight of 320. Then, he incorporated more ground beef. He dropped his body fat from 18.5% to 14% over the summer and fall.

He didn't have to quit drinking because he had never started.

"I've got the big belly and everyone thinks it's from beer," Meinerz said. "I'm like, 'No, it's from ground beef and rice.' It's the strongman belly."

Two key developments took place in the summer. In late July, the Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, where Whitewater plays, canceled the season. Around the same time, an NFL scout arranged a Zoom call so scouts and the Whitewater coaches could discuss Meinerz.

"We thought it was just going to be with a couple scouts," Bullis said. "When I popped on, there were 37 people on that Zoom and only four of them were our staff members. We knew then that there was probably a chance this could blow up."

The canceled season left Meinerz with three choices: Return to Whitewater in 2021, transfer to a higher-division college team with a fall season, or begin preparing for the NFL draft. The transfer portal was a nonstarter -- "It just sounds like a mess," Meinerz said -- and as the fall went along, the path became clearer.

Meinerz practiced with Whitewater, even working some at center. Sensing interest for pre-draft all-star games, he declared for the draft in November. Invitations to the College Gridiron Showcase, the Shrine Bowl and the NFLPA Collegiate Bowl soon followed.

His next stop was Dallas, where he began working with noted offensive line trainer Duke Manyweather. Meinerz brought his laptop to finish final exams.

For three weeks, he trained Monday through Saturday alongside Northwestern tackle Rashawn Slater, who opted out of the 2020 season and projects as a top draft pick (Slater appears at No. 9 in Mel Kiper's latest Big Board).

"I was like, 'Sweet, this is going to be my first real chance to see what it looks like and how someone like that, at that caliber, what does he do?'" Meinerz said. "To go down there and try to keep up as much as I could, and I feel like I was close, it was cool to have that experience."

Ron Slavin, Meinerz's agent, sent Nagy a stream of workout clips, from basketball dunks to drills. Nagy saw a lineman who was no longer top-heavy -- a twitchier, fitter athlete with more lower-body flexibility who looked quicker out of his stance.

Meinerz emerged from 2020 as a bona fide draft prospect.

"A lot of people were having a lot of mental struggles during the quarantine," he said. "I wasn't really having any. A year like this, I had almost an advantage because of how motivated I am intrinsically. Waking up every single day and going down to the basement during the pandemic and working out, I love it. Going out to the backyard and snapping into a garbage can, I loved every moment of it."

"To have all your dreams and goals come true -- get invited to the Senior Bowl, run a sub-5 40, do all these things -- I really don't know what to say. It really is crazy."

MEINERZ'S WORKOUTS IN Texas helped get him to the Senior Bowl. Another workout made him a darling of draft-stock watchers.

The YouTube clip begins with Meinerz lacing up black Nikes to run down a dirt road. Then, he's cross-stepping and lunging along a wooden walkway. Next, he's carrying a kerosene tank on his back as he lumbers uphill.

As The Fixx's "One Thing Leads to Another" plays, Meinerz bench-presses in the woods, then knocks down a tree. Now his shirt is off, as he carries long planks of wood on his back, while flashing a peace sign toward his brother, holding the camera. One moment, he's chopping wood. The next, he's applying blocking

techniques to a tree trunk. The clip ends with Meinerz curling water jugs and sledgehammering volcanic rock, native to an area known as the Canadian Shield.

"Everybody compares it to the 'Rocky [IV]' montage," Meinerz said.

Unlike Rocky, Meinerz wasn't in Siberia, but rather northwest Ontario, at a fishing camp on an island his great-uncle Tim owns near Hector Lake that is mostly accessed by floatplane. In 2018 and 2019, Quinn spent the entire summers on the island, which he has been visiting since he was about 10. He shed about 25 pounds the first summer, which didn't go over well with his Whitewater coaches. So in 2019, rather than flying in, he loaded Aaron's old weight rack onto a truck and drove north, navigating treacherous logging roads.

Quinn stayed in football shape while at his happy place. As a kid, he'd bike around Hartford with a fishing rod sticking out of his backpack, looking for ponds. In Canada, he had entire lakes and streams filled with walleye, lake trout, Northern pike and large and smallmouth bass. He'd help his great-uncle with tasks around the island: moving 400-pound generators, building wooden walkways, clearing off portages, fixing boat motors and cleaning fish.

"When it comes to moving something, he puts his back into it, and it moves," said Tim Meinerz, who bought the island in 1991. "All it takes is a strong back and a weak mind for the kind of work I put him through up in Canada, but that boy, he's smart. I'm sort of hoping the NFL drafts him and he buys an island from me."

Tim will miss Quinn this summer, as his grand-nephew will be in an NFL camp. But Quinn plans to return, ideally with some future teammates.

"I'm going to have to get heavier beds if they're all linemen," Tim joked. "One year, we almost had Larry Bird come up with some friends. How do I handle a 6-foot-9 guy in a bed? Quinn was bad enough."

Meinerz's pro day last month was a must-see for NFL teams. UW-Whitewater photo/Craig Schreiner  
ON THE AFTERNOON of March 9, the NFL came to Perkins Stadium. Twenty-nine teams sent representatives to watch Meinerz at Wisconsin-Whitewater's pro day.

Normally, Division III prospects participate in pro days at bigger schools nearby. Wisconsin also held its pro day March 9, but Meinerz became a big-enough draw that scouts made the 50-minute drive from Madison. Meinerz ran the 40-yard dash in 4.86 seconds, further solidifying his draft position.

"It was special," Meinerz said, "how many teams that are there, but even more to do it at my home field, where I was able to build myself up, at Whitewater, Wisconsin. To be able to have it come full circle ... was a cool moment."

In recent months, Meinerz has heard from many lower-division college players, asking how he reached this point. He replies to every message on social media, stressing priorities and goal-setting, and how moving toward a career in football means moving away from the typical college lifestyle.

"Just straight-up never did any of that," he said. "My priorities were, I wanted to be the best football player I could be."

Meinerz, who is healthy after being fully cleared from his hand injury Monday, projects himself as an interior swing player in the NFL. He's comfortable at guard but eager to learn more at center. Wherever he lines up this fall and whatever jersey he puts on, two things are certain: The gut will be out, and the fire will burn inside.

"That's always going to be there," he said. "There still is that underdog mentality. I don't think it will ever, ever go away. I enjoy it too much."

# **Fire in the belly: How D-III's Quinn Meinerz turned doubts into fuel for NFL draft**

By Adam Rittenberg

ESPN

April 7, 2021

WHAT WILL BE the most famous gut in the 2021 NFL draft wasn't always an object of adulation, envy and wonderment.