

Decorah to Denver: Josey Jewell's unglamorous path to the NFL

By Ben Swanson
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Kirk Ferentz stared at the clock and knew he had a decision to make.

Iowa's undefeated season, and a College Football Playoff berth, hung in the balance with Michigan State pushing the ball steadily downfield and time winding down.

The fourth-ranked Hawkeyes owned a four-point lead in the 2015 Big Ten Championship Game and had managed to hold the Spartans to no more than field goals on their previous scoring possessions. But on this drive, Iowa's defense was worn down; before Michigan State reached first-and-goal at the 3-yard line, the Spartans converted four third downs and one fourth down on what was a nearly 20-play drive.

Now, a go-ahead touchdown seemed somewhere between likely and certain. And so the moment forced Ferentz to consider the unpalatable idea of letting the Spartans walk into the end zone to provide his offense with ample time to operate.

But doing so would require him to approach sophomore linebacker Josey Jewell, who would become known as one of Iowa's best players in school history, and tell him to essentially stop playing when there still was a chance for a game-winning goal-line stand.

"I don't mind telling you one of my thoughts was, OK, Josey comes over, and I'm going to tell him that we're going to let them score intentionally?" Ferentz recalls now. "I just had a vision of being the first head coach ever in a college football game to get dropped on the sideline, get knocked out by a player. Because that's probably what would have happened if I told Josey we were going to surrender. That thought got quickly dismissed and we played it out the way it was."

Iowa ultimately fell to Michigan State in that game, but the moment stands out to Ferentz more than five years later because of what he says about Jewell, who became Iowa's first-ever three-time captain, a consensus All-American and a stalwart at the center of the Broncos' defense.

But at no time before those achievements did all that seem destined for Jewell, the often-underestimated linebacker from the biggest little town in northeastern Iowa.

'It is God's Country'

It's not easy to get to Decorah, which may be either fortunate or unfortunate, depending on your perspective.

If it was a shorter trip from a major airport, it wouldn't feel as isolated as it does and wouldn't be as overlooked as it is.

The truth is that in spite of Iowa's reputation as a seemingly endless expanse of flat farmland, Decorah has plenty of natural beauty. The town is nestled in the rolling hills against the Upper Iowa River, which winds gently around the local college, the high school and then the downtown area. Over some untold centuries, the river has carved through the area, leaving imposing limestone bluffs that tower over the residents tubing with the current as a reprieve on a hot day.

And because of that isolation, Decorah can sometimes feel timeless, and that goes double when that's your hometown.

Driving through Decorah in late June, Jewell was struck by how it feels like he's been transported back a decade.

"Kind of reminds me of [like] you're back in the good ol' days," Jewell says. "... Just like it was in high school."

Sometimes, though, it can feel like even longer. On the main drag where storefronts and restaurants line West Water Street, there's a pair of vending machines; the one hawking sodas also serves as an advertisement for 1999's "Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace."

"The only thing that changes are the small, little coffee shops that pop up every other year," Jewell says. "I'll be like, Oh, that must have just popped up while we were playing football. Small things like that change, but nothing major in this town."

So he didn't grow up in the most bustling metropolis in the world, but Jewell says he didn't really care too much. Sure, sometimes he wished the movie theater was bigger or that they had some of the other entertainment venues that cities often have, but he and other Decorah residents fill their time with all the land offered.

Jewell's father calls it "God's Country," and plenty of others there do too.

"It is God's Country," Jewell says. "The rolling hills, the river, the animals. Beautiful. The sights up here are quite amazing. You don't catch it in all of Iowa ... or in Nebraska or surrounding states. But the rolling hills and the bluffs and the river really give it off. It's a cool country to be around."

'The rougher, the better'

The Jewells' land offers much more than just recreation, though.

All the Jewells understand this, as they have owned and operated a family farm for almost 150 years. Five generations of Jewells have worked on the farm, and five have grown up on it, understanding that hard work was simply part of daily life.

"Couldn't be better," Jewell's father, Bobby, says. "You certainly learn the value of responsibility and work ethic. Great place to raise a family. I wouldn't have wanted it any different, and we are very blessed."

Over the last 75 years, the farm's most significant export has been turkeys. They typically raise about 26,000 a year, sometimes more, but the Jewells also raise cattle and grow crops like corn, soybeans, alfalfa and oats. Josey was part of the operation during his childhood and adolescence on the farm.

“We asked them to do things on the farm that they didn’t necessarily like at the time,” Bobby says. “But it was the right thing to do. That’s what growing up on a farm is all about, and you’ve got to help out. I think with all our children, it’s paid big dividends in their adult life, the way they get after things and they’re not afraid to get their hands dirty and work hard.”

But early in those years, Bobby somehow had a vision that Josey may be destined for a career in football and not farming. There really wasn’t much reason to it, Bobby admits; Josey had been walking for maybe only a year when the thought occurred to him.

“At about 2 years of age, and I don’t know why,” Bobby says with a note of resignation, understanding that the idea must sound absurd. “It was just his rugged, rough mentality. The rougher, the better, my dad used to say, and [he’d] laugh at him when he would tussle with the other kids.”

Still, Josey wasn’t exempt from helping out on the farm as he grew up just because of a wild thought that his father had. He helped with the turkeys and the rest of the farm, just like his brother, his father, his father’s father and so on had done.

As it would turn out, those chores and other experiences on the farm would help mold him into the person and player he’d become on the football field.

“Definitely the day-in and day-out stuff that we used to do and how consistent it was every day was definitely a lot of hard work,” Josey says. “There’s summers where you want to go play or be with your friends — even though there was some times I’d leave and maybe sneak out a little early or not show up that day and go play with my friends — but yeah a lot of consistent work, hard work that you learn you have to deal with when you’re that age, which I think moved on into my college football and still stays with me today, of that persistent work, work ethic and just keep going even maybe when you don’t want to do it.”

‘He belonged right away’

Josey’s first major injury didn’t come on a football field, Bobby recalls in one of his favorite stories.

“On a farm,” Bobby says, “there’s a lot of ways to get hurt.”

Josey found one particularly painful way when he was almost 4 years old and trying to help Bobby move a two-wheeled auger. In essence, the wheels served as a fulcrum for the auger column, so moving it required lifting one end before pushing. Bobby would, of course, be the one lifting, so he told Josey he could push a tire.

“I just turned my head away for a split-second,” Bobby says, “and he had laid against the tire and it took him over the top and fell. Awkwardly, the wheel ran over his hand at a bad angle. He broke two bones in his hand and it required surgery. It was not a good day.”

It wasn’t a good day for Josey or the Jewells, but it certainly was a good day for Kirk Ferentz, whom Iowa had just hired to be the Hawkeyes’ head football coach.

Bobby saw the news at the hospital, and though he also worried that Josey’s injury would perhaps preclude him from ever playing football, he says another thought crossed his mind.

“It happened to be the day that Iowa hired Kirk Ferentz,” Bobby says. “I remember thinking — and remember, Josey’s like 3 years old — Maybe everything will work out all right and maybe Josey could play for this man someday.’ I got a shiver saying that just now, but it’s a fact. That’s the way it worked.”

Years later, in high school, it didn’t take long for Josey to emerge as a remarkable player, at least to his coaches. As a sophomore, he was called up to the varsity team, which was a decision Bill Post, Decorah’s head coach at the time, didn’t typically make.

“He was such a good player and we did need a linebacker at that particular time, so we brought him up,” Post says. “... He stepped in and took over command there. He was a fun guy. To me, he was quiet, didn’t say a whole lot. He’s not a real big talker, rah-rah guy, pat you on the back, hug you and that kind of stuff. But when he’s on the field, he’s all business. And he’ll put the pads on you. It was fun to watch him play, because a lot of teams, when they knew they had to play him, they didn’t like that because they knew they were gonna get popped pretty good.”

In his time at Decorah, Josey helped push Decorah to back-to-back state championship game appearances, including a victory to cap an undefeated season in his senior year. During the championship season, he also made an impact on offense as a running back with 1,314 yards and 21 touchdowns and on defense as a linebacker with 100 total tackles.

And yet, the attention he received from college programs was largely tepid. There was some interest from Iowa, Iowa State and Northern Iowa, but each school appeared to have some concerns about his size or speed. He considered staying in Decorah at Luther College and playing with his brother.

Then, with just a week or two left before signing day, Josey got an offer from Iowa and made the decision to be a Hawkeye.

“To say Josey was recruited a little bit later would be an understatement,” Ferentz says. “It’s interesting. When he was in high school, he was a really good athlete, played on a championship team and did a lot of things for them — offensively and defensively, obviously, special teams as well. ... Reese Morgan was the recruiting coach; Reese got to know the family, got to know Josey really well. I learned over time Reese is a little bit understated in recruiting. One thing I have learned: When Reese kept bringing up a name, you need to pay attention. It took me a while. But anyway, we ended up offering Josey a scholarship roughly a week before signing. During the entire process, he just kept looking at us like we were stupid. In retrospect, he was exactly right; he knew exactly what was going to pan out.”

Ferentz’s concerns were largely with Josey’s speed, but he says that when they made the offer, he figured that even if Josey couldn’t play linebacker, they’d have a solid fullback.

That summer, when Ferentz got his first in-person look at Josey playing linebacker he says he “got corrected on that real quickly.”

“I don’t know if he rose to the level of everybody else, but he belonged right away,” Ferentz says. “It wasn’t like, This is going to be a developmental project. He belonged right away.”

‘As long as he’s in there, he’s going’

Jewell’s first award at Iowa was not exactly glamorous.

In the photo where he's seen accepting 2015 TaxSlayer Bowl team MVP honors, it looks more like he's being confronted for stealing the trophy than being presented with it. Jewell appears slightly defiant, Ferentz looks perhaps a bit disappointed with his hand on his hips, and the other personnel look none too thrilled either.

It's all understandable, though, considering Iowa had lost the game 45-28.

"I didn't really feel like I should be getting any award at the end of the day, but it was a nice little present," Jewell says with a laugh now. "... I was not very ecstatic about it. It was like, We just got our butts [kicked]."

For Ferentz, who of course has had many better moments leading Iowa's football team, there still is something important that he takes away from watching Jewell's performance in that game.

"Josey plays one way, and that's one thing if you look at his career at least at Iowa, there was a consistency all the way through it, regardless of what the score might be or where we're playing," Ferentz says. "That's what you talk to your athletes about all the time. You're going to be in games that go your way sometimes, and sometimes go your way easily. And the converse of that can happen as well. But it's just about a standard of operation: How do you choose to play? That's a good example. It's just the way he operates. He goes full speed. He plays, and he's going to play to the end of the game, and as long as he's in there, he's going. That's the just the way Josey is and operates and practices and prepares the same way."

Over the three years that followed, Jewell became a bona fide star for the Hawkeyes. He was a captain each of those years, a second-team all-conference selection twice and a first-team selection once. In 2017, he was Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year and won the Jack Lambert Trophy, which is given to the top linebacker in college football.

"He ended up being the first three-time captain in the history of our program," Ferentz says. "I always use that as a good example for recruits. It's really more about the quality of your entire career, not just how you start out or how fast you start. So Josey got here on an unconventional path, if you will. And then what he did once he got here really distinguished himself. It became really apparent shortly into his time here that A) he was a really good football player, and then B) a guy that was extremely respected by everyone on the team. Even at a young age, he really just kind of commanded that respect. So I certainly learned real quickly never to underestimate Josey Jewell."

And yet, with Jewell entering the NFL Draft, they were hearing all the same chatter that he'd gotten before entering college football. Too small or too slow. He'd always countered that with immaculate preparation through film study and by taking sure first steps after a snap, but the doubt was pervasive.

"You can always be a step ahead of everybody, whether it be pre-snap or seeing a play really early in its development," Jewell says. "You can catch two steps right there. That's been my progression of the game, is trying to stay ahead of it. ... I just try to keep that one second or two seconds ahead of everybody else, and that helps the whole game flow."

The Broncos saw enough to like that they picked him in the fourth round in 2018, and through two coaching changes, Jewell has carved out a niche for himself. In 2020, Jewell started all 16 games and recorded 113 total tackles. A year later, he appeared poised for another career season, but it ended barely after it began when he tore a pectoral muscle during a Week 2 game against the Jaguars.

Then, in March, the Broncos and Jewell's representation agreed on a new two-year deal.

He'd have to fly back into Denver to put pen to paper, but before that could happen, he first had to be told about the contract. "The Outlaw" was out fishing on the Mississippi River.

Getting his hands dirty

There can't be many farms in Decorah or northeastern Iowa like the Jewells', which Josey recognizes.

"Either the farms that old have been sold off or something else has happened where their family has all died out or there's no more of the name left," Jewell says. "A lot of consistency, a lot of hard work, which should hold some truth to your name or some hard work to your name, that your family's been in it for that long."

Bobby says he'd would love to have Josey back working the farm with his brother to help ensure family ownership for another generation, if not longer, and Josey certainly understands that challenge.

"I think he just understands how many people have come before him, whether it be his grandpa or his dad and how much work they put in to keep it in the name and how much it's going to be to be able to keep it in our name after this," Jewell says. "It's hard. Farming's a tough lifestyle. It's nonstop. ... You wake up, you go to sleep and you live it, you breathe it. He takes pride in it."

The decision to join the family business doesn't have to be made just yet, though. Jewell has years ahead of him on the football field, but the thought's been percolating in his head for many years.

"I always thought in high school I'd come back and farm, and then I might still come back and do some small stuff," Jewell says. "But ever since then, college happened, and then the football kept on going. I kind of put it in the back of the brain. I might come back to it, maybe help out when I'm back. But probably not do a full-time farming thing. Maybe a little hobby farm myself or maybe work with my brother and dad and see how that goes. But who knows."

Regardless, Jewell's not going to be leaving Decorah. Just like he grew up loving the area, his children will probably do the same

Jewell and his wife, Micole, are building their own house in the area, and they've started their own business in Decorah, though it isn't a commercial farming enterprise. Inspired by their college years and their time in Denver, the couple wanted to open something similar to the healthy smoothie shops like those in Iowa City or Colorado. So the Root 43 juicery — a nod to his collegiate number — was born, opening in Decorah's The Landing Market in 2021.

"We wanted to put it all together," Jewell says. "And then my mom helped us out with the juices and her granola, her recipe. ... Just kind of a cool vibe that we picked up as we were going along with our college football and now being with the Broncos. Just trying to pick up things and bring them back here."

Root 43 sells fresh-pressed juices, smoothies, acai bowls and bags of Jewell's mother's granola, and in the beginning, you probably could have gotten your acai bowl made by the NFL linebacker, too.

“The first two weeks when we opened up, I think it was last February, it was pretty rough,” Jewell says. “It was just us two working the whole time. ... I think it was 8 to like 5 almost every single day for those first two weeks.”

These days, Root 43 has other workers running the stand, but if there’s one thing that’s clear, it’s that no matter what he’s doing, whether it’s on the farm, on the field or at the blender, Josey Jewell is not afraid to get his hands dirty.

Here's how staying in sight and around his Broncos teammates helped Josey Jewell

By Andrew Mason

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Sometimes, when an NFL player knows that an injury will end his season, he doesn't stay around his teammates. He'll do his rehab work, but will do so on his own time, sometimes at the facility when active players are practicing or in meetings, or sometimes away from team headquarters altogether.

That wasn't what Josey Jewell did after he tore his pectoral muscle at Jacksonville in Week 2 of the 2021 season.

Not only was Jewell still around, he would sometimes be seen at practice, working out with teammates who had short-term injuries on the side field. Despite the season-concluding prognosis and the expiring contract beyond that, Jewell was anything but out of sight and out of mind.

So, when it came time for the Broncos to choose which of their inside linebackers with expiring contracts would return, the nod went to Jewell, whose steady improvement over his career appeared to be elevating him to top-shelf status early last season before the injury.

"It meant a lot," Jewell said. "I wanted to help as much as I could after the injury.

"I'm glad I stayed around for almost every practice, all those games, helping guys out, staying around the team — and really staying around the guys. That was the biggest thing, just to keep on getting to know the guys on the team, and whether the coaches left or not, I just wanted to keep on getting to know everybody."

Vic Fangio and most of his staff did leave; they were dismissed after the 7-10 finish. But the hiring of defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero offered a lifeboat; his scheme shares many common traits with that of Fangio, with whom he worked on Jim Harbaugh's San Francisco staff from 2011 through 2014.

"It's just building on the knowledge that you already had of the game," Jewell said. "It's not a huge, huge change of just totally changing the script on you. You can definitely feel more comfortable at the start of it. You still have to stay in the playbook; you've still got to watch film and know certain checks and things like that."

Still, it helps with younger, newer teammates such as free-agent pickup Alex Singleton and Jonas Griffith, who joined the Broncos as a special-teams contributor via a roster-deadline-day trade last August.

Even Jewell's time on injured reserve helped the communication with Griffith and his fellow returning defensive players, because the process of building cohesion in that aspect of game play doesn't just happen on the field.

"The communication gets even better — whether you're just screwing around at the hotel or on the bus, or doing stuff — all of the communication, all of the talk on and off the field adds up," Jewell said.

With Griffith in particular, the effect is pronounced. Injuries to some linebackers and struggles of others had Griffith in the starting lineup by the end of the doomed 2021 season, and Jewell can see the impact on his progress.

“The guy is good. He has a lot of talent. The guy can run — smart kid,” Jewell said. “He’s come a long way, especially from last year. From the beginning of it when he was just playing special teams and then he came into a defensive role playing linebacker, and now communicating with me out there with other guys. It really shows his football I.Q. really increasing.”

And if anyone knows about football I.Q., it’s Jewell, who knows that even a season-ending injury doesn’t mean a halt to one’s progress.

“This is probably the most fun I’ve had in the last four years playing,” he said. “I’ve enjoyed it, and I can’t wait to see where it goes.”