

# Dirty jobs: Quinn Meinerz's NFL path and how the Broncos found him

By Ben Swanson  
DenverBroncos.com  
April 9, 2022

Quinn Meinerz's resume is full of dirty jobs.

As a 15-year-old, Meinerz spent nights and weekends beneath the artificial lights in the back of the Ponderosa Steakhouse on East Sumner Street not far from his home in Hartford, Wisconsin, scrubbing dried bits of food from plates and cookware. The kind of work wasn't very fun, and being stuck indoors for most of his weekends ate at him.

His second job was better. A farm on the edge of town was looking for an extra farmhand, and he was happy enough to work outdoors and wear cutoffs. There were some not-so-fun parts, like picking rocks, but he largely enjoyed the work. The main problem was that it didn't provide enough consistent work.

Job No. 3 was outside too, thankfully. His technology and engineering teacher told him a construction company was looking for "a big, strong guy," and if he was interested, he could put them in contact. Meinerz, who was about 300 pounds in high school, felt it would be a natural fit.

"I was like, Hey, I'm a big, strong guy!" Meinerz says. "And construction stuff is outside. Let's see what it's about."

Meinerz handled mostly menial tasks — setting up tools at job sites, removing debris during demolition work and moving liquid concrete from the truck to, say, where the new patio was going in at someone's home.

The concrete work could be some of the most dangerous work, both physically and financially. If it tipped over, not only could the weight of the wheelbarrow shatter a metatarsal bone in your foot or your ankle, but there also was an informal understanding that whoever dropped it had to pay for a case of beer for the crew. In particular, that side of the high stakes sometimes encouraged some gamesmanship. Instead of leaving a few inches between the concrete and the top of the wheelbarrow, the driver once filled it to the very top, hoping to get some free beer out of it and maybe see just how strong this kid was.

"I'm trying to move this wheelbarrow through wire, rebar and all these other things," Meinerz says. "So when I went to go lift it to go move it, it just started tipping. And usually when it tips, you get out of the way, because the main thing that can happen is it'll swing down and break your ankle. ... They started laughing, as it started ... slowly tipping, because I was trying to stop it. They were all laughing and then I just got mad because they were laughing, and I knew what the result was if I [dropped it]. ... And so I grabbed it and I managed to lift it back up. And they all just looked at me with wide eyes."

He and his dad later estimated that a construction wheelbarrow full of liquid concrete could weigh about 400 pounds.

“They said they’d never seen anybody do that,” Meinerz says. “Even the truck driver. Everybody was like stunned. I pulled the wheelbarrow over and dumped it and I told them, Eff you guys for thinking I’m paying for a case of beer, and everybody started laughing.”

About five years later, Meinerz has yet another dirty job. They pay is much better and the work is more challenging, but it fits him all the same. As an offensive lineman for the Broncos, he fights in the trenches, helping create even the slightest daylight for running backs and keeping pass rushers at bay for every crucial second necessary for the quarterback to survey the field.

It’s the kind of work Meinerz has always wanted to do, and growing up in Hartford, Wisconsin, it’s what he was made for.

“Quinn didn’t grow up on a farm, but that work ethic is in our community, very strong,” Meinerz’s high school coach, John Redders, says. “They pride themselves on how hard they can work, and that is Quinn, 100 percent. He always wanted to better himself and better other people wherever he had a chance to do that.”

That, in essence, is “the mantra of this area,” Meinerz says — one that he also abides. “We pride ourselves in working very hard.”

I. ‘Somebody is going to find out about him’

Quinn Meinerz appeared to be the prototypical Division-I offensive line prospect. All he was missing was interest from any Division-I schools.

At Gib Mahr Field, where Hartford Union High School’s football team plays its home games, young children often watch from the grass on the other side of the chain link fence that lies just beyond north end zone.

That’s where Meinerz was when he was about 5 years old, probably thinking the same wish that most of the other children had: Man, I can’t wait to play.

“That patch of grass back there, that was where all the youth football kids would show up to the varsity games and we’d play little backyard football games back there,” Meinerz says. “So we would be playing football while watching this game. When you’re a young kid, you can’t wait to play varsity football, so that was always a fun little area. I always get nostalgia looking at that area because it was where we used to wear our little Hartford jerseys.”

Meinerz played several sports growing up — baseball, soccer, track and field, wrestling among them — but football was always king, though playing offensive line wasn’t his first inclination.

“I was always watching Brett Favre and that kind of stuff,” Meinerz says. “I wanted to play quarterback, but my body type changed and made me into an offensive lineman. I was always overweight. If you were over a certain weight limit, you were just stuck on the offensive line. But I’ve grown to really love the position.”

His size and talent also regularly placed him into older classes, which served him well until he finally got to high school, hoping to realize those kindergarten dreams.

“When I got into freshman year, I was expecting to move up to play on JV, but I actually got sent back down to the freshman and they said, Hey, we don’t need you, we’re good,” Meinerz says. “And that was actually one of the first times I sat on the bench for an entire game and didn’t play. That motivated me a lot. So I came back the next year and was starting right tackle for the varsity football team at 6-2, 260 [pounds]. So I went from 180 to 260 [pounds] and put on three, four inches of height. ... The coaches didn’t even recognize who I was when I walked into the building.”

Behind Meinerz — and his newfound bulk, which he and his friends affectionately called “The Gut” — and other talented linemen, Hartford Union’s head football coach implemented a smashmouth style of offense that fit their team.

“We even took it a step further,” Redders says. “We had a package in our program called Jumbo, and guess who got to go into the backfield? We did hand the ball off to Quinn once, but his job was to basically run at linebacker and safeties and de-cleat them as quick as you can. We had a tremendous year his senior year. Our running back ended up being our number two all-time running back with the yardage he had. Most of those were behind Quinn, Quinn leading the way.”

However, recruiters from larger college programs still overlooked him.

“Nothing really came of it,” Meinerz says. “When I got to my senior year, I thought, OK, now I’m finally the prototype D-I guy. I’m 6-3, I’m 315 pounds. I’m almost every snap pancaking somebody. I have my own package where I’m in the backfield. I’m, like, the highlight offensive lineman. But no one really came through. It was all the really small schools.”

So while Meinerz’s dream of being recruited by the Wisconsin Badgers didn’t materialize, the premiere Division III program in the state, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Warhawks, did show interest — but only after Hartford Union assistant coach Aaron Rusch, a former Warhawk himself, reached out to Whitewater head coach Kevin Bullis.

“Aaron shot me a text one day that said, Hey, you’ve got to take a look at this young man. He’s not getting a lot of attention in the recruiting aspect,” Bullis says. “I looked at the film once and sent it to my O-line coach and our O-line coach went to his wrestling match that night.”

Knowing that the coach was in attendance, Meinerz felt nervous. Wrestling, Meinerz says, is like the reversal of playing offensive line. In football, most people aren’t watching the offensive line, but in wrestling, you’re completely in the spotlight. And to add to it, now there was more pressure in hoping to impress the Whitewater coach.

“In wrestling, everyone’s watching you at that moment,” Meinerz says. “He was going to be there, and I was super excited to wrestle in front of him and try to get that offer that people always talk about. ... I was so amped up I ended up going out there and pinning the guy in 30 seconds.”

The coach returned to Whitewater and delivered a brief report to Bullis.

“He came back the next day,” Bullis says, “and he goes, My god.”

Whitewater eagerly hosted Meinerz for a visit and extended an offer, which he signed.

“It’s hard to believe that at a minimum FCS [the NCAA’s Football Championship Subdivision] isn’t on him, that schools are not on him,” Bullis says. “And ... FBS [Football Bowl Subdivision], for sure, should be. So we recruited him. We kept on waiting for the other shoe to drop. Even after he committed, we were like, Well, somebody is going to find out about him. And he ended up here.”

II. ‘He came off the ball and just dominated’

At Wisconsin-Whitewater, it didn’t take long for Quinn Meinerz to emerge as the school’s next NFL prospect — perhaps its best in almost two decades.

One afternoon in August before the 2018 season, Whitewater special teams coach John O’Grady walked into Bullis’ office with purpose.

“Hey, pull up the inside drill,” O’Grady told Bullis, directing him to a particular rep.

After Bullis opened the clip and started watching, O’Grady had him pause it midway through. Something had caught his eye on a run play, and the former Badgers offensive line coach with 30-plus years of coaching experience had to show Bullis.

“I paused the film, and it was Quinn pulling on a play,” Bullis said. “His pad level and how fast he was and how low he was, was something that he had never seen. Coach O’Grady had coached Paul Gruber, one of the first left tackles to ever make seven figures. And he goes, I’ve never seen somebody run so fast, so low and play the game with such speed and yet at that pad level.

“That was really kind of the moment where, like, Wow, we truly do have somebody who’s special.”

That same camp, the Broncos’ Midwest area scout, Scott DiStefano, visited a sweltering August practice to get a glimpse at senior lineman Nate Trewyn, who had won the Rimington Award as Division III’s best center. But before practice began, Meinerz caught his attention.

“You had to walk like 300 yards to get to where they were going to practice, and just walking over there, immediately I saw size,” DiStefano says. “They had a lot of good size players there, but this kid — Quinn — really stood out.”

Later in the day, DiStefano approached Bullis with a question: “Who’s the guy with the belly?”

Bullis told him, but more important was the message he left him with.

“I said, You’ll be back to look at him,” Bullis says. “His athleticism. His physicality — he loves to hit. His intelligence. I go, No, this guy is, I think, better than the guy I think you’re looking at right now, possibly. And Nate was really good.”

Over that season and the next, Meinerz established himself as the next pro hope for the Warhawks. He was a behemoth, and few players at that level could match his combination of speed, size and ferocity.

When DiStefano watched the tape, the talent was unquestionable.

“Physicality. Tough. Size. Very explosive and strong. Powerful,” DiStefano says. “And Whitewater has always had a good team. They’ve been to playoffs and won some national championships, so they have good players there. But this kid really stood out. He came off the ball and just dominated. When you get Division III, you have to be able to dominate.”

Jordan Brand, a Whitewater defensive end, would sometimes get calls from other defensive linemen he knew at other schools for advice. There wasn’t much to tell them, though, because he knew what it was like to face him.

“To play against him, it sucks,” Brand says. “He is fundamentally great at everything — technique and everything. So you know you have to come with your ‘A’ game. You have to come with your ‘A’ game every time you play Quinn because you know he’s going to give you 110 percent each time. So, you know you’ve got to bring that same energy and same passion to have a chance, maybe, of beating him. ... [I’d tell them,] Hey, he’s comin’. I know you’re kind of worried, but he’s coming. He’s the real deal.”

III. ‘A lot of scouting is what you feel in your heart, too’

With his NFL dreams hanging in the balance, all Meinerz needed was just the slightest opening to find an opportunity to increase his Draft stock.

After his junior season, Meinerz watched the tape and wasn’t happy.

He may have been a first-team selection to the Associated Press’ Division III All-America team, but he thought he could have been better. His body could have been better.

Meinerz desperately wanted to make the leap to the NFL after college, and he knew there’d be little room for error.

He was impressive at this level, but to show scouts, coaches and general managers that he was as talented as players from Division I programs like Georgia, he couldn’t be or even appear “sloppy.”

Over the course of the first months of the offseason, he returned to the weight room, intent on proving he’d be a worthy NFL prospect.

And then sports shut down. The world shut down.

In the summer of 2020, as universities’ athletics programs considered a potential return, the NCAA issued COVID-19 guidelines for protocols to conduct fall sports, which included consistent testing, among other protocols.

The Wisconsin Intercollegiate Athletic Conference couldn’t facilitate those protocols. Before the pandemic, Meinerz had once gone door to door selling raffle tickets to support Whitewater’s athletics program. The WIAC simply didn’t have the same ability as FBS conferences to provide the necessary testing framework to function.

Bullis delivered the news to his team via Zoom: There would be no 2020 season.

“That was very heart-wrenching,” Bullis says. “Not a fun day to communicate that to our kids. ...

“For all of our seniors, Quinn being one of them, that was [tough]. And you talk about hurdles that he’s overcome, was not having a senior year of film, especially coming from D-III. The evaluation that was done for the senior combine and those types of thing was done off of junior film.”

With his sights set on the NFL, Meinerz pondered an uncertain future.

Back Home: Photos from Quinn Meinerz takes us on a tour of his hometown in Hartford, Wisconsin  
In March, Quinn Meinerz returned to his hometown of Hartford, Wisconsin to visit with his high school alma mater and his childhood home, and to take us on a brief tour of Main Street.

“There was a whole bunch of questions,” Meinerz says. “Do I transfer? Do I just train this next year and come back? Or do I declare? So there was a lot of stress happening. But one thing that I knew, and that’s why I always fell in love with the weight room, is that the hard work is never going to leave. So I was just like, All right, I guess I’m just going to be training now and stay in shape and keep improving at other things.”

That meant teaching himself how to play center and shotgun snap — which he did by putting a metal pizza paddle into the handle of their garbage can. If he heard the ball hit the metal, it meant he hit the bull’s-eye. In the NFL, teams typically carry about eight offensive linemen on the active roster; by learning another position, Meinerz would increase his odds of making a roster.

As the restricted college football season rolled on elsewhere in the country, Meinerz’s hopes lived on the possibility of being invited to one of the college all-star games — the East-West Shrine Bowl, the NFLPA Collegiate Bowl or, if he was lucky, the Senior Bowl, which is the premiere postseason all-star game for NFL hopefuls.

When the Shrine Bowl and NFLPA Bowl were both canceled, Meinerz’s chances shrunk. But after Alabama’s Landon Dickerson and Ohio State’s Josh Myers both withdrew because of injuries, Meinerz got his invite to the Senior Bowl.

With his foot in the door, Meinerz took advantage of the opportunity. He “never miss[ed] an opportunity to bury his man,” The Athletic’s Dane Brugler wrote, adding that Meinerz probably improved his draft stock: “[I]t is a good bet he will secure day two status,” Brugler wrote.

“He wanted to prove something: that he could play,” DiStefano says. “And he dominated that league. If you really talk to him, he’s really full of confidence and self-assurance, and he’s a great teammate. He felt he was ready, and he got an opportunity to go to the Senior Bowl and really did a great job. He took a chance, but there was good film on him. And everything else just kind of played out in his favor and our favor.”

When draft day rolled around a few months later, DiStefano’s effort laid the groundwork for the Broncos to draft him in the third round with the 98th-overall pick.

In his fourth decade scouting for the Broncos, DiStefano has an established track record, but former Seahawks area scout and current Senior Bowl executive director Jim Nagy said in 2021 that scouts are “putting your reputation on the table” when they give Division III players draftable grades.

“It’s a projection, but a lot of scouting is what you feel in your heart, too,” DiStefano says. “You’ve got a feeling about a guy. Not only what he does on tape, but you have to look at everything as a whole, from off-field stuff to work ethic, how he does in school, the family. ... This kid seemed to have it all together.”

#### IV. Gone fishin’

The other “job” Meinerz had before becoming a Bronco is easily his most interesting.

Truth be told, there was one more job Meinerz held before he entered the NFL.

Technically, it wasn’t employment so much as volunteering because he had no work permit in Canada at his great-uncle Tim’s rustic fishing camp at an island on Hector Lake in Ontario.

Meinerz’ father, Aaron, had taken him there for family trips ever since Quinn was about 12, which was the same age Aaron started going there.

It’s incredibly remote, of course. Internet service is available when the generator is on, but that eats up diesel fuel, so it’s not on constantly. The closest road that has been mapped on Google Street View is more than 20 miles away. During the colder months, Tim harvests ice for the camp right off the lake and stores it in a shack.

The easiest way in and out to the camp is by float plane, which lands directly on the lake. The only other way — via winding gravel logging roads — is nerve-wracking, though also incredibly beautiful. Moose, lynx, black bears — it’s not uncommon to see wildlife out there. Generally, they’d only travel on it to go to town two-and-a-half hours away for supplies.

During the summer between college semesters, Meinerz spent time on Hector Lake and helped Tim operate the camp to earn his keep, and sometimes he traveled down those logging roads, white-knuckling it while constantly communicating his location and direction on radio with truckers to avoid any potential collisions.

It was grueling, of course. On those trips, he put equipment like propane tanks and other supplies in the truck. He drove the truck back to a turnoff point off the logging road and unloaded it onto an ATV, and would then drive the ATV to a boat. He would then schlepp the supplies onto the boat, which took it to the island to be unloaded once again. According to Quinn’s calculations, he once lifted 60,000 pounds over a 12-hour span, touching each item four times.

This was where he filmed his famous forest workout. Working there was a workout on its own, but Meinerz also formulated a plan with the strength and conditioning coach at Whitewater. He brought the family’s old weight set to the island, but he supplemented the video with more humorous elements, like coming out of his stance and pancaking a tree to the ground. (Not a live tree — “That literally would be impossible, to do that to a tree that’s alive,” Quinn says with a laugh.)

The video, set to ‘80s classic “One Thing Leads to Another” by The Fixx, became an instant classic.

When General Manager George Paton and the Broncos’ front office watched the Canadian workout on NFL Network’s Draft-night broadcast, someone proclaimed it the “best highlights of the draft.”

Someday, Quinn says, he hopes to return to his uncle's island. To avoid overfishing, Tim hasn't booked guests in years. That thought makes Quinn's eyes grow large. He wasn't able to visit last year as he settled into the NFL, and the next time he goes to Hector Lake, he knows the fish will practically be jumping out of the water. Beyond that, who knows. Maybe someday he could run it.

One thing's for sure: He's ready for any dirty job ahead of him.