

Proud Jackson brings D3 Nation to Coe

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 09 April 2015 17:16 -



Fred Jackson is getting ready for his 10th year as a running back with the Buffalo Bills in the NFL, but he'll always cherish his years as an NCAA Division III student-athlete at Coe.

That's why Jackson and his wife, Danielle, started the D3 Nation organization about six months ago. Danielle is also a former student-athlete at Coe and they wanted to promote Division III athletics on a national scale.

They appeared at Coe Thursday along with their four children and Patrick Jackson, Fred's twin brother who also played football at Coe and is involved with D3 Nation.

"You've got to remember where you came from," Fred Jackson said during a press conference at Eby Fieldhouse. "The whole point of starting D3 Nation is how proud I am of being a Division III athlete. I'll never forget that."

"Coming here (from Texas) is where I got started," he said. "I love to tell that story, and this is a great week to be able to tell it."

This is the fourth annual Division III week, intended to promote the non-scholarship level of

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NCAA athletics. Jackson beat stiff odds by reaching the NFL after playing at the D3 level in college and he wants all Division III athletes to follow their dream.

Some people have a negative image of Division III athletes, Jackson noted.

"We are the bottom of the barrel and only scrubs go play Division III," he said, mimicking critics. "There are a lot of talented athletes in Division III. We just have to have the opportunity to get in the limelight, sort to speak."

Jackson played with the Sioux City Bandits in the United Indoor Football League in 2004 and 2005 after graduating from Coe. His brother played on that team as well and that's where the idea for D3 Nation began.

"Everybody in the locker room talked about how proud they were to be coming from the Clemsons and the TCUs and things like that," he said. "We felt we were just as proud to be Division III athletes and that we would always represent what we came from."

"I said, 'Why not make it something that everybody who played Division III can be proud of?' That was the whole reason for starting D3 Nation."

The Jacksons have a website for D3 Nation at D3-Nation.com and will be offering financial grants to Division III athletes. They are selling D3 Nation merchandise on the website, and all three Jacksons were wearing handsome D3 Nation sweatshirts and sweatpants Thursday at Coe. They also distributed D3 Nation T-shirts to all the Coe students who attended the gathering at Eby Fieldhouse.

Jackson got the break he needed when former Coe football coach Marv Levy invited him to try out with the Buffalo Bills. Jackson made Buffalo's practice squad in 2006 and began appearing in games in 2007. He's still

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going strong and looking forward to another season.



"I know when I got to the NFL, I wasn't planning on having a 10-year career," he remarked. "I think as long as you keep chasing that dream, once you get that opportunity, you take advantage of it.

"A lot can happen. That was the case with myself. I want these guys (Coe students) to know, if you do have that dream of going professional, chase it. You never know what's going to happen."

Jackson is one of only five non-drafted players in NFL history who have rushed for 5,000 yards in his career. And he's one of only two players in Buffalo Bills history who have rushed for 5,000 yards and caught passes for 2,500 yards. The other is former NFL great Thurman Thomas.

All told, Jackson has accumulated 9,744 yards and scored 37 touchdowns in his career. That includes his work as a rusher (5,646 yards), receiver (2,640 yards), kick returner (1,241 yards), punt returner (190 yards) and passer (one completion for 27 yards).

He never imagined he would accomplish so much in the NFL after his humble start on the practice squad.

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"Not at all," he said. "It was, let's see if I can squeeze two or three years out of this. That was the goal. And once I got there I said, 'I'm not letting this go.' I got there and I got a taste of what it's like to be in the NFL and it was something I wanted to hang onto as long as possible."

Jackson said he's the oldest running back in the NFL at 34. He'd like to play another two or three years.

"I'm still motivated. I still love to get out there and compete," he said. "It's what I love to do. I want to be out there and play as long as I can. That's what I'm trying to accomplish."

Jackson thanked his coaches at Coe for giving him a chance in college. Very few Division III athletes end up playing at the professional level, but it can happen. And he lauded the value of a small college education.

"We come in, we work hard," he said. "We have an opportunity to get to know our professors, where they can interact with us and tell us the job skills we'll need."

"I think a lot of that has to do with the intimacy of being Division III. The schools are a lot smaller, the classes are a lot smaller."

Jackson's family lives in Buffalo the year-round and he's active in the Buffalo community. He twice has been named the Buffalo Bills' Walter Payton Man of the Year for his community service. He donates 20 tickets and food vouchers to every Buffalo home game to members of Carly's Club, an organization that helps support children with cancer.

"As professional athletes, we owe it to our community and our fans in our home town to show them what they mean to our game," he said. "Without them, we wouldn't have the game of football to go out and play, and I love

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to play football.

"To be able to get paid and play football is something that I'm really proud of. I want to give back to those guys.

"I had tremendous coaches at Coe," he said. "They taught us that the game was bigger than us, and if we had an opportunity to make somebody's day, go out and do it."