

JONATHAN STEWART: MOVING THE CHAINS ONE YARD AT A TIME

In high school Jonathan Stewart seemed to be living a dream. He had led his football team to a league championship and then into the state playoffs. Big-time college programs had him on their speed dials. And scouts were comparing him to Reggie Bush and Adrian Peterson.

From the outside, everything seemed really good for Stewart, but he was reeling. For years his father had rarely called him, let alone made an effort to see him.

"My dad and I would talk on birthdays sometimes, and he would ask why I hadn't called more," says Stewart, the University of Oregon's star running back who many experts say will be the second running back taken in the 2008 NFL draft. "From my perspective, I was thinking *Why didn't he contact me more often?*"

His parents separated when he was in the fourth grade. Later, his father moved across country and the gap between father and son continued to widen.

"Was there pain? Yeah," admits Stewart. "Was I angry? Yeah, I was angry."

But today Stewart is working hard to get past the hurt. So much so that he is now embracing the situation with his father as an opportunity to make amends and make himself better.

In doing so, he hopes to become an even better and stronger man.

Built for life

Stewart's muscular frame, gigantic thighs and breakaway speed belie his gentle nature. Ask anyone who knows Stewart and they'll tell you a great deal of his inner strength and laid-back demeanor come from his mother, Lora Faison, who raised Stewart and his older brother, Corey.

"They have a special bond," says Kevin Young, Stewart's high school football coach. "She is a special person, and one of the reasons Jonathan is a special person."

Faison insisted her sons attend church every Sunday. The spiritual upbringing prepared Stewart in positive ways that would eventually impact his friends.

"He had most of the football team attending youth group," says Cecil Daniels, Stewart's youth pastor at New Life Baptist Church in Lacey, Wash. "People want to be around success, and that was so visible in Jonathan."

Stewart says he committed his life to Christ when he was 10 years old in part because he was "scared of going to hell." But a revival during his freshman year had a transformational effect on him and solidified the commitment he had made as a child.

At the revival meeting, former NBA star Terry Cummings preached and gave an altar call. Stewart went forward.

"Terry's mother was at the revival, and she prayed over me and my life," Stewart recalls. "I recommitted

MOVING THE CHAINS ONE YARD AT A TIME

my life to the Lord and saw the Holy Spirit work in a stronger way.”

With a plethora of colleges vying for his services, Stewart could have played just about anywhere. But he chose the University of Oregon.

“I just felt led there and it was close enough for my mom to make my games,” says Stewart.

And that’s the rub.

“Technically a woman can’t teach a boy to become a man like a father can,” says Daniels, “but anyone who knows Lora knows she’s the backbone for that family and is an example of balance and integrity for Jonathan. He doesn’t have to look far to see a role model.”

Made for football

Many experts rank Stewart as the No. 2 running back coming out of college behind Arkansas’ Darren McFadden.

Stewart’s 40-yard sprint has been hand-timed at 4.34 seconds. With Stewart’s size, athletic ability and speed, he can run by or over opponents.

He also has an “are you kidding me?” factor going for him. One of the most respected lifts at the combine is the power clean. It’s a full body lift that involves the legs, upper body and arms.

Jonathan Stewart REVEALED

Stewart shocked Oregon’s coaching staff by power cleaning 402 pounds. That’s the second-highest total in school history behind Haloti Ngata, who lifted 407 pounds before being chosen No. 12 overall in the 2006 draft by the Baltimore Ravens — Ngata is a defensive lineman who outweighs Stewart by more than 100 pounds.

The first time Stewart touched the ball at Oregon’s Autzen Stadium he took it 83 yards for a touchdown. Duck fans won’t forget the time his helmet popped off against Arizona State, but he kept on going and turned it into a 29-yard gain.

One of his personal highlights happened in front of a few thousand people after a minor-league baseball game when he shared his testimony.

“That was the biggest crowd I’ve ever spoken in front of,” he says. “My calling might be to speak to kids who don’t have a dad.”

Despite the challenges he’s faced reconnecting with his father, Stewart is bent on making wise decisions — even when they require more of him than he would like to give.

After a road win over Michigan last September, Stewart made his way over to the Ducks’ fan section to celebrate. As he did, he remembered his dad was in the stands.

Favorite food: Little Caesar’s Pepperoni Pizza because it’s only \$5.

Knicknames: J-Stew, Stew or Beef Stew.

A favorite verse: Phillipians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Pre-game music: Powerful Christian songs such as “You are Holy” by Lisa McClendon and “Resting Place” by Deitrick Haddon.

Two people I admire: My mom and Cecil Daniels

I play like: Bo Jackson

Hobbies: I like to play piano and compose my own music.

— Mike Ostrom

Immediately, Stewart searched out his father. When he spotted him, he jumped into the stands and gave him a hug and told him he loved him no matter what.

“God is teaching me forgiveness,” he says.

It marked another step in becoming closer to his dad. But it also moved Stewart toward becoming the stronger and better man he yearns to be.

For opponents, that’s just scary. But in real life, it’s an inspiration to be emulated. **tpe**

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Stewart (above) scampers for a touchdown against Fresno State last September.



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