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NFL's not rocket science

Rookie Jones picks up position quickly

By [Tom Silverstein](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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Green Bay — If there are words to best describe Brad Jones' journey to the National Football League - from playing soccer and the viola as a kid in East Lansing, Mich., to taking courses in astrophysics at the University of Colorado, and going from injured seventh-round pick to rookie Green Bay Packers starter in a matter of months - it would be these two:

Why not?

Who says you can't play all kinds of sports and still want to be a football player? Who says you can't accept a football scholarship and take education seriously? Who says you can't replace a player like Aaron Kampman during a critical playoff run and play linebacker like the game isn't too big for you?

It probably would be the same people who'd say you're crazy for wanting to travel to outer space, which is exactly what Jones has thought about doing.

"The plan was to be an astronaut coming out of high school," Jones said after a recent practice. "I didn't think it was that deep. Why not? I don't understand. If you want to do it, why not? I never once thought there was anything unattainable.

"From the time when I was little, I think I've had the same kind of mentality: Why couldn't I do that?"

It's the kind of outlook that explains why Jones will be starting at left outside linebacker Sunday against the Chicago Bears at Soldier Field. By almost any measure, there's no way a player who was that close to not being drafted (taken 218th overall) should be starting for a team making a heated run for the playoffs.

Last week against Baltimore, Jones went from a guy playing his position solidly to a guy capable of making a play when it counts. He is not an elite athlete by NFL standards, but as he showed when he beat first-round pick Michael Oher for a sack Monday night, he plays a lot faster in pads than he runs 40-yard dashes.

Physically, Jones has more flexibility than Kampman, a former defensive lineman, and he can contort himself so he can get under or around blocks. But he is still developing.

"There's something about starting on the bottom rung and having to fight every step of the way," Packers defensive coordinator Dom Capers said. "We saw some things at training camp that we liked; you never know when a guy is a late-round draft pick, you hope that you see some redeeming qualities, is what you hope. And then you take and build on that.

"He's one of those guys that's taken advantage of his opportunity. Fortunately for us, he's been able to go in and play well."

Clearly, Jones is no ordinary guy. Never has been, never will be.

Just ask his college roommate, wide receiver Pat Williams, a fellow rookie and member of the Packers' practice squad.

"You kind of group people together - (this guy is) kind of reserved or he's kind of outgoing," Williams said. "Brad has his own group. His first year, his major was aerospace or aeroscience or something like that.

"&ensp'What are you going to do with that?'

"&ensp'I want to be an astronaut.'

"You'd be laughing and he'd say, 'I'm serious.'

"He's so smart. You come out of a conversation with him and you think he's crazy, he's nuts. But then you sit down with him and he's intellectual. He's a good person. I don't know how to explain it. I wish you could be around some of the moments we had."

To understand how Jones has become the person he is, you have to consider his upbringing.

His grandfather lived in St. Louis and owned several businesses in rough and tumble East St. Louis, Ill. Rather than let his son, Don, attend school closer to home, he sent him to public school in East St. Louis so he would get a sense of how less fortunate people lived.

Don became a star linebacker in East St. Louis, attended Indiana University (1974-'78) on a football scholarship and tried out with the Detroit Lions before becoming a school administrator. He regretted his decision not to further pursue an NFL career, but to say he has lived through the athletic pursuits of his children would not be accurate.

He and his wife, Fawn, merely became guidance counselors. Whatever their six children wanted to do, they helped them pursue it. Not that Don didn't do a little bit of steering.

Brad was about 8 years old when Don tried to quantify what great linebacker play was with a snippet of an NFL game he had taped from TV. Brad and his older brother, Preston, were shown the same play over and over.

"It was just a piece of film I had of Ray Nitschke against the Baltimore Colts tackling Lenny Moore near the sideline," Don Jones said. "Nitschke's in the middle and then all of a sudden out of nowhere he shows up in the frame. But he doesn't just get there, he makes the tackle.

"That's a pretty good player he's tackling, and he doesn't gain a yard. I think it's a prime example of how

to play linebacker."

Despite making his sons watch that tape, he did not allow them to play football until they were older. They played soccer first. He would not let them lift weights until they were 14 or 15, and if they did lift, they had to go swimming afterward to stretch out their muscles.

All six of the Jones children - ranging from a sister in her 30s (she attended USC) and a sister who is 6 - take their education seriously. Preston played football at Arizona State - and like Brad, got his degree - and younger brother Cameron attends Wisconsin.

Since he was young, Brad's athletic ability was evident. But what impressed his parents was how he handled the adulation. He wasn't disrespectful, didn't get a big head, didn't get in trouble.

Don Jones remembers the day a woman with tears in her eyes stopped him in the grocery store and thanked him for Brad being so kind to her son, who was developmentally disabled and a target of other kids' cruelty.

Don had absolutely no idea that Brad, who was a star athlete at the school, had taken the boy under his wing and made the others let him hang around.

"People look at Brad and see an athlete and a scholar, but he's a good person, too," Don Jones said.

Brad's high school coach, Jeff Smith, is a legend in Michigan. Retired now, he is a member of the Michigan High School Football Coaches' Hall of Fame. In 39 years, he had a record of 293-93-2. He also coached track at East Lansing High, and his star performer in the 110 high hurdles was Brad Jones.

One day during football practice, he was particularly perturbed by the lack of effort by one of his linemen, a 6-foot-4, 300-pound kid with tons of potential. He grabbed him and started yelling at him.

"I told him, 'You know what's going to happen?'" said Smith, a native of Kohler, Wis. "'Someday, you're going to be lying on the couch watching TV and you're going to see Brad Jones playing in the NFL. Right now, you can't carry his jock.'"

It was no surprise then that Jones was starting at outside linebacker when Smith attended the Packers-Lions game on Thanksgiving at Ford Field. What did strike Smith as he focused in on Jones every single play was that at 6-3 and 239 pounds, he was doing what he had done since high school: adapt to his surroundings.

"I looked at what he did when he attacked someone," Smith said. "He went low and piled it up. I'm sure Capers told him to do that. That was impressive. I was impressed with how he was following the scheme."

One of the big mysteries surrounding Jones is how he lasted until the seventh round of the draft. His father said he talked to various agents and found out that the coaching staff at Colorado was not promoting Brad as a draftable player. Brad was recruited by Gary Barnett, but Barnett quit under fire after Brad's second year and was replaced by former Boise State coach Dan Hawkins.

Don Jones actually had encouraged Brad to go pro after his junior season, but Brad chose to stay in school and earned a degree in economics. An NFL scout confirmed Jones was not one of the players Colorado listed as a draftable player and that probably resulted in him lasting until the seventh round.

It did not deter him from thinking he could play in the NFL, however, just as a back injury suffered the first day of training camp didn't. Jones attended every practice, studied his playbook, studied film and then studied both some more.

"You have to make sure you hit the ground running when you come back," Jones said. "I can't have a misstep. I can't make it look like it was my first day. I can't be where they were on the first day. I knew I had to be at or beyond where the team was."

When he came back, he played well.

"I was making a ton of plays, I think that's why I wasn't too nervous," Jones said. "I can play football. And our team was good. If I'm doing good against them - I mean, we've got a great quarterback. If I'm tipping his passes and picking his passes off, what am I going to do with other quarterbacks? I was always like, 'I can transfer this over to the game.'"

Now a starter, and possibly the long-term answer at his position, the only question is whether he can develop into a premier player.

As Jones would say, why not?

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