

Las Vegas Raiders offensive lineman Jackson Powers-Johnson, who starred at Corner Canyon High School in Draper, runs during an NFL rookie minicamp practice on May 10 in Henderson, Nev. JOHN LOCKER / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

From Corner Canyon to the NFL

By VIC TAFUR

The phone rang, and Jackson Powers-Johnson was in trouble.

"He was in the second grade, and I got a call from the principal," his mother, Jennifer, said in a phone interview. "She had Jackson in her office and she said that Jackson doesn't let any of the other kids win at sports at recess."

Jennifer was at a loss. Had he hit someone or was someone hurt?

No, the principal said. He just shouldn't always need to win. Jennifer explained that Jackson was raised to always do his best.

"I didn't know what they wanted me to say to him," she said.

Jackson ended up sitting out recess the rest of the second grade, and the family switched schools.

"We didn't want to talk him out of that competitive spirit," she said.

Fast forward to today and Las Vegas Raiders coach Antonio Pierce would like to give Mom a hug. Her son is now a 6-foot-3, 334-pound guard whom the Raiders selected in the second round of the NFL draft last month. Pierce has said he is looking for players with an edge, and at Oregon, Powers-Jackson definitely played with a mean streak.

"I saw a guy that was gritty, that finished, that strained, that loved the physicality of the game," Pierce said.

Powers-Jackson had found football as a way to channel his negative energy, and the sport has brought out the best in him.

"It means everything to me," Powers-Jackson said at the team's rookie camp two weeks ago. "I got into this game for pretty much my mental health. I was a big chubby kid growing up and I got bullied and my baseball coach was like, 'You know you can hit those guys and not get in trouble; and that's kind of how I got into it.'"

He was a year-round baseball player who didn't want toys or video games. But Powers-Jackson was having a hard time fitting in until he was about 9 years old.

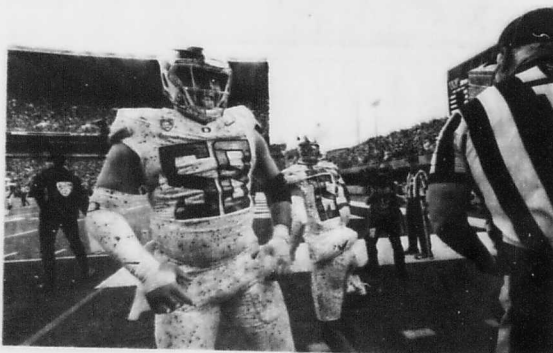
"From the time he was little, he was always bigger than everybody else," Jennifer said. "It was hard for others to be friends with someone who was always physically dominating you, and so they would say very mean things to him and exclude him."

That's when the baseball coach suggested football.

The first day in pads was tough and Powers-Jackson hated it. That's when his parents told him he needed to hit the other players before they hit him.

After that, he was a monster," Jennifer said, laughing. "He

Jackson Powers-Johnson, the youngest of four kids, was raised in Draper. He helped Corner Canyon High to three straight undefeated seasons and state football championships before signing with Oregon.



Oregon offensive lineman Jackson Powers-Johnson reacts after Ducks wide receiver Ter Johnson (15) made a 2-point conversion catch against Washington during a game on Oct. 14, 2023, in Seattle. LINSEY WASSON / ASSOCIATED PRESS

was like, 'I can hit these kids and it's just part of the game and I don't get in trouble and everybody is happy when I do it.' And he was really good at it."

The youngest of four children, Powers-Johnson was raised in Draper. He helped Corner Canyon High to three straight undefeated seasons and state championships before signing with Oregon.

His name was actually Jackson Light growing up. He changed his name legally when he was 18 years old.

"My stepdad came into my life when I was 3 years old, raised me my entire life," he said. "I look like him, talk like him, and he's the one that got me into sports. ... My mom wasn't really a huge sports fan, now she's probably one of the biggest. But I kind of made that decision when I was 7, 8 years old. I was like, 'All right, he's my dad,' and I knew when I was 18, I was going to change my name. So, Powers is my mom's maiden name and Johnson is my stepdad's last name."

First, he had to make his stepdad, James, sweat a little bit. Jackson had been excused from practice at Oregon to make the legal change, and Facetimed his parents to tell them he was in court. James couldn't believe he had only been at school a month before getting into trouble.

That's when the son told his dad and mom his new name, and there wasn't a dry eye on their phones. "It's just really cool and it means

everything to me," Jackson said.

He went on to start at center and both guard spots at Oregon, and became the first Duck and Pac-12 player to win the Rimington Trophy, awarded to the nation's best center. Powers-Johnson was never credited with allowing a sack in his three years, and he even played some defensive tackle in a bowl game vs. Oklahoma.

He also had a burger named after him at a local brewery. "The Big Jax" contains two patties, pulled pork, mac and cheese, bacon and queso on a brioche bun.

Powers-Johnson relished not only getting his anger out on the football field, but defending others.

"I think my physicality and violence has kind of turned into more protection," he said. "I think there's no better honor or privilege than to protect somebody. You think about police, you think about all of them protecting us. That's what we got to do on the field. So, it's a humbling thing for me to do, and it's exciting as well."

The Raiders did get to hit a little bit at the recent rookie camp and, during one drill, Powers-Johnson sent a young assistant coach flying.

"I mean, it's awesome. I'm going to be honest," he said. "I love physicality. I love violence. I think that's how the sport should be played. And putting on just the helmet and getting going, I mean it's exciting. We don't have the full pads on yet, but I'm excited for

that. It's been fun getting to hit a little bit, even if it's a bag."

"I'm sorry to that trainer, too. I'll take him out to dinner."

The coach/trainer was first-year offensive assistant DeAndre Pierce, the son of the head coach, who will be happy to buy them both dinner.

"I just loved (Powers-Jackson's) film," Pierce said. "I saw a leader. I saw a winner. I saw a guy that just loves football. And you want that identity up front. You always look at teams, the best teams it ain't the skill position. You want those gritty guys like we've got on our D-line, you want that on the offensive line."

"And the more of those bad boys we can bring in with Kolton Miller, (Thayer) Munford, and (Andre) James, that's going to be huge for us. But he has the attitude, man. I mean, talking to him on the phone was emotional even for me because of just how excited he was. And it was like, damn, we got it right."

"It's a match made in heaven."

Powers-Johnson was also emotional on that draft call, and promised Pierce that he would "whoop some ass" for him.

At his draft party, all of his family and friends had Post-It Notes — a homage to the movie "Draft Day," where the general manager played by Kevin Costner has a player's name written on a Post-It to remind him who to eventually draft. Instead of "Vontae Mack no matter what" like in the movie, these notes said "Jackson

Powers-Johnson no matter what."

"My mom just wanted everybody that came to my draft party to do it, just kind of signifying that everyone was behind me," he said.

"It's a very emotional moment for sure. I was dehydrated after those tears, but it was it was awesome."

It didn't matter where or when he was picked, Jennifer said. "We were behind him no matter what. He was our No. 1 pick."

He later said that he never let the long draft process get to him. "Blessed, never stressed," he said. "I mean, this is just a huge new opportunity for me. ... For all the hard work and preparation and dedication I've put in my entire life, now you get to actually go have fun and play football."

"The dream has been achieved, but now there's new dreams to get after."

And new positions. The Raiders had Powers-Johnson working at left guard — the home of Dylan Parham last season — during rookie camp.

"It felt great," he said. "I haven't played left guard in a bit, but it's a new challenge and that's exciting. When you kind of get to step out of your comfort zone or do something that you haven't done as much that's fun for me. That's what football is all about, that's what life's all about. You're not going to just do everything the same every day, and now I get to do something new."

"And yeah, it's been pretty seamless, but there's still I need to work on and that's really exciting to me."

Powers-Johnson grew up a Raiders fan — well practically. His stepdad was a Miami Dolphins fan, and then there was a J.J. Watt worship phase. But Powers-Johnson grew up in Oakland and her grandparents were Raiders season-ticket holders. And one family vacation, Powers-Johnson became a member of the San Francisco 49ers play the Raiders at the Oakland Coliseum in a preseason game in 2010.

"The first NFL game I ever went to was a Raiders game ... my parents were just kind of holding (onto) me because all the fans were all crazy. But I thought it was so cool that they're just like getting after it and cussing up a storm."

There's just so much rich history of just people who are just absolutely nuts and just want to get after it — and that's how I play."

Putting on the Raiders helmet and jersey for the first time was truly a dream come true.

"If you buy into the logo on the front, it's going to bless the name on the back," Powers-Johnson said. "So I'm just excited to play for the Raiders."

"The autumn wind is a pirate. I love it."

POOR