Reaching the End Zone: The Jacque Lewis Story

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Fury, disappointment and shame can only begin to describe how the Carolina football team felt at the closing of their season. With five minutes left in the game, there he sat, legs shaking and arms crossed. He could not believe their season finale was a defeat by Duke, who after all these years had become a guaranteed win for the Tar Heels.

When the clock expired, bringing the brawl to an end, Jacque Lewis swung his arms forcefully in the air and verbalized his frustrations to an unseen opponent. Instead of calmly walking off the field last as he normally does, he sprinted to the tunnel because he could not bear to be on that field a second longer.

After scoring a touchdown and having the highest receiving yards in the game, he was livid! He was mad at the coaches, mad at his teammates, and mad at himself!

But as he watches the film to see where he and his teammates went wrong this season, our tape rewinds further than this game. Even past this season. We come to a stop and push play at the beginning of his life to see where Jacque Lewis went right.

**Kickoff**

The game began in Winston-Salem, North Carolina on March 10, 1982. After nine hard months, a special day for Ms. Melanie Lewis had finally arrived. No one could have imagined what was in store for this newborn and the many lives that he would eventually touch.

With help from a family friend, who was also the employer of the baby’s father, the powerful French name Jacque Marquette Lewis was given to this blossoming baby boy, a name so profound it plants seeds of expectations of effortless success and greatness.
Unfortunately, the opening kick for Jacque’s life is caught by the wind, sending the ball soaring over the end zone. The referee throws a yellow flag and a penalty has Jacque starting his season opener in the worst field position imaginable. His father was absent during this time and his mother was incarcerated five days after his birth. But this was just the beginning of the tumultuous childhood of this rambunctious little boy.

Because of the lack of support from his biological parents, young Lewis was raised by a guardian who took care of many children in the neighborhood. He had no idea who or where his father was and had no relationship with his mother, who was in and out of jail his entire life.

Young Lewis tried to stay on top of the rough streets of Winston-Salem, but found this difficult. At the line of scrimmage, our player began facing off with crime, drugs and ever-present violence. He experienced traumatizing disturbances, such as witnessing his uncle’s murder, and was constantly mischievous.

“I was suspended from school almost every other week, and I did stuff to get in trouble,” Lewis said with a chuckle. “I was the bully that beat the other kids up for their lunch money.”

In addition to his love for trouble-making, Lewis also loved sports. But it was basketball, not football, that caught his eye at an early age. His mother can recall late summer nights at the age of 7, when he used to play at a nearby basketball court with teenagers and older men.

Nevertheless, he did not learn the rules of organized athletics until Anzell Harrell stepped up and made a big play by taking his position in Jacque’s life. Lewis was gaining yardage and had received a first down.
First and Ten

Even though Lewis had met some of his paternal relatives at an earlier age, his life did not dramatically change until he moved to live with his father, Anzell Harrell, during the third grade.

“When he came into my life, I gave him direction and let him know what was important in life,” Harrell said. “He took heed real well and has progressed from that day to this one.”

Today Lewis feels that if he had not left Winston-Salem, he might have been a drug dealer, in jail, or even dead. But his upbringing is one of the many things that have inspired him.

The country roads of Laurinburg, North Carolina brought a new place, with a new family, and gave Lewis a new start. His grandparents, aunts and other close relatives became an integral part of his life and are his biggest supporters today. Their love will be evident towards the end of our highlight reel as Lewis’s entourage sports their trendy #20 Carolina jerseys to every home and away football game.

His grandparents played an active role in adolescent Lewis’s upbringing. His grandfather, who took him to all of his practices and is a member of the omnipresent entourage, is who Lewis considers his role model. His grandmother inspired him by teaching him the importance of believing in himself and provides a constant source of motivation throughout each of her caring acts, such as her weekly game-day greeting cards and frequent, uplifting phone calls.

Mr. Harrell said his fondest memory from his son’s childhood was when youthful Lewis received straight A’s on his report card for the first time. Lewis was so excited that
he was “just like a little kid in a candy store.” He immediately placed the card on his grandmother’s refrigerator, providing the first “trophy” in the voluminous collection of awards now displayed at her home.

The feisty Ms. Ida Malloy Jones, who Lewis describes as another mother, can vividly recall the first time she met her five-year-old nephew.

“He was the cutest little thing. He had on navy blue short pants, a white shirt, white shoes, and white socks. I fell in love with him from day one, and we will always remain close,” Ms. Jones said.

Although Lewis was overwhelmed by love and nurture, it took some time for him to get used to his new lifestyle. Eventually, it was football that brought him and his father, who was a football coach, closer together. They began to relate and developed a strong bond through a common interest.

The bond will soon develop into a relationship that they both describe as brotherly. They can talk about anything, and enjoy some of the same activities, such as playing video games.

Finally, Lewis has earned some hard fought yardage and the game continues. He then moves to Elizabeth City, North Carolina for his next drive.

**Second and Seven**

Over the years, Lewis’s family feels he has become more focused and knows what he wants out of life. They watched him grow from the hyperactive, troublesome little boy to a very respectful, loving, athletic, young man.
“From guidance he’s received earlier, he’s matured into the person I want him to be, but more than necessary, he’s matured into the person that he wants to be,” Mr. Harrell said.

While attending school in Elizabeth City, Lewis met one of his current closest friends, Desmond Davis.

“We met at basketball tryouts, but we weren’t friends at first. We were both too competitive and were going out for the same position.”

Davis remembers walking down the street one day during the summer, when Lewis was driving by and stopped to talk. Since that day, the two tell each other everything and are always there for each other.

Besides developing lasting friendships and a talent for the trumpet, Lewis began to play many sports, such as basketball, baseball, track and football. The competitiveness Davis spoke of is an aspect of Lewis that comes out all of his endeavors.

His athletic ability began to soar. Although he had been playing football for many years, it was not until the 11th grade that he truly loved football, the position of running back and the number 20.

During his junior year at Northeastern High School, Jacque Lewis began to make a name for himself. He did not originally want the number 20 because he feared he would not fill the shoes of the previous running back with that number. Not only did he fill those shoes, but he also increased their size and received a new pair. Now, Lewis and the number 20 are synonymous, which is apparent by the large gold 20 Lewis models around his neck.
His tenacity and fortitude move Lewis down the field with great speed. The vigorous young man put his energy towards a goal and set numerous records. Lewis rushed 5,077 yards on 568 carries and scored 76 touchdowns, mostly during his junior and senior year.

Coincidentally, he was ranked as the 20th best running back in the country, received the Big East Conference Player of the Year award, made All-American his senior year and was chosen to play in the North Carolina Shrine Bowl.

“The circumstances of Jacque’s childhood caused him to want more out of life and to become the best that he can be,” Lewis’s mother said. “They have made him the strong and determined person that he is and gives him his driving force in his life.”

With this powerful force and his achievements thus far, Lewis was one step closer to his next first down.

**Third and Three**

As a child, Lewis knew he wanted to play for the Tar Heels. So when he was offered a scholarship, he committed two weeks later.

Throughout high school, this superstar athlete did not have to undergo the intense training and workouts that he was introduced to at Carolina, but he was ready for the challenge. Little did he know, the struggle of college athletics was just beginning.

The summer before beginning his freshmen year, Lewis became acquainted with a fellow teammate named Chris Hawkins. Their paths had actually crossed earlier during a regional championship basketball game, but neither knew that they would have the friendship that they have today.
He and Hawk, as Hawkins is affectionately referred to by his teammates, were introduced in Lewis’s home away from home—the weight room. So they began to workout together. Hawk said Lewis is a true motivator, whose determination has inspired him throughout the years.

Hawkins recollected upon a time when he and Lewis had to perform a speed circuit with numerous older players. The circuit consisted of several sprints and hops while they were tortured by wearing enormous weight vests.

“We kept looking at each other like ‘man let’s quit’, but nobody wanted to quit first, so we kept going,” Hawkins said. “Finally, we both just stopped, but while walking away Jacque said, ‘man let’s go back’, and we did.”

Lewis had a desire to excel and his perseverance is indescribable.

In 2001, Lewis made his debut in Kenan Stadium as one of only seven true freshmen. With a lot of hard work and willpower, Lewis finished his freshmen season with 56 carries for 241 yards.

During the 2002 season, he played in 12 games and started nine at tailback. He led the team in rushing with an impressive 574 yards on 130 carries.

After spending many hours in the weight room and picking up some pounds during a strenuous summer, Lewis, with a muscular athletic build of 5’10” and 195 pounds, felt he was ready for a big season.

He was no longer the timid running back from Northeastern High School that mainly did a lot of running, but had matured into an elusive athlete that could not be stopped. Mr. Harrell, who was once a running back coach, felt Lewis had adapted well to college football.
“He had become a complete player now because he can block, run and catch. That makes him a very big threat because he can do all three,” Harrell said.

Hawkins called him “a receiver in the backfield” because he has great hands for a running back.

With his dark, beady eyes and thick hair, that he would one day like to grow into dreadlocks, Lewis is tough and intimidating.

His coach, Andre Powell said another one of Lewis’s strengths is that he actually likes football because not all of the players do.

“College football is harder than pro football because pros don’t have to go to school,” Powell said.

Lewis likes Carolina football so much that a tattoo with a flaming football and the slogan “UNC HOT BOY” adorns his Hershey chocolate left arm.

But his love for Carolina football may not be as evident after this disappointing season.

After all Lewis endured to make it to Carolina football, it seemed as though the plays would never go in his favor. With the new four back rotation Coach John Bunting employed, Lewis found himself with fewer and fewer carries each game.

On several instances, he made big drives, which brought the Tar Heels closer to the end zone. But before Lewis could set up to finish the play and score his touchdown, he was pulled out of the game.

Is there a personal vendetta between Coach Bunting and Lewis, or did he honestly feel that someone else had a better chance at finishing the play? To Lewis and many others, this just was not realistic.
As he voiced his opinion about this new formation, the scar on Lewis’s forehead wrinkled with the anger and frustration one could see spreading across his face.

“I don’t think it’s fair that I do the hard work and then the glory is given to someone else, but I don’t pout or be selfish about it,” Lewis said. “I just block for them and help them score, and tell myself ‘I’m going to get mine!’”

Whether on the practice field or at Kenan Stadium, when Lewis puts on pads, he returns to his hyper and excited childhood self. He is in his own world, and becomes one of the most animated characters on the field.

“He doesn’t act the same on the streets. He’s out of control, running up and down the field screaming,” Hawkins said.

But Lewis is willing to do whatever it takes to get himself and his teammates enthusiastic and ready to play.

He performs the same rituals the night before and the day of the game each weekend. Before bed, Lewis goes to the snack room and gets four or five oatmeal cookies and two Gatorades. After his pre-game meal the next morning, he finds two pieces of his favorite grape or cherry bubble gum and gets dressed on the second floor alone.

Everyone else is relaxing as a mode of mental preparation for the upcoming game, but not Lewis. He is at his home in the weight room doing a few repetitions while listening to his favorite rap music before kickoff.

While lifting his last set, he peers into his own reflection in the full size mirror before him and becomes mesmerized. He sees nothing and is bothered by no one because it’s game time. To get himself pumped, the listening ear notices that Lewis has changed the lyrics of the music he is playing and incorporated his own nickname into the songs.
“If you’re JLew then go’ on and brush your shoulders off,” Lewis flowed with the rapper Jay-Z that was blasting through his headphones.

He lifts the weights to the beat of the music and becomes entranced by the sight of his body going to work.

But besides two pieces of gum and Jay-Z, Lewis has other motivators. He and a close friend, Freddie Aughtry-Lindsay, a linebacker for NC State, enter the field on game day identically. Lewis is the last to dash out of the tunnel with his arms extended in a flying motion, greeting the cheers and applause of the 65,000 people filling Kenan Stadium.

“I always tell myself that I can only stop myself. I can’t be stopped,” he said.

“When I go out there, I just try to win the battle!”

Although Lewis and his teammates often put up a brutal fight, Carolina football was not very victorious.

After a long sigh, Lewis expresses his sorrow after the depressing season.

“It hurts because I know we’re much better than what our record shows! A lot of people don’t know it, and a lot of people doubt us, but in the future Carolina football is going to be on top,” Lewis said in a solemn yet hopeful voice.

Lewis, who plays each game as if it’s the beginning of the season, says that he and his team are constantly improving, and there is no doubt that the Tar Heels will have a better season next year.

His mother and father are both overjoyed when they think of the achievements their son has made and the future that this young man has in store.
Melanie Lewis said she drifts into a state of ecstasy because her pride for her son is a feeling beyond description. Her heart skips a beat, her throat becomes choked up and her eyes swell up with tears when she thinks about her son’s accomplishments. She only hopes that she will always be the mother he has wanted her to be.

“He chose a different path in life, not letting anything hold him back, but reached the top of the ladder and is still climbing,” Ms. Lewis proudly said.

When Lewis cannot see the top of that ladder, he is often inspired by a gospel song from the duet Mary Mary, titled “Can’t Give Up Now.”

“There will be mountains that I will have to climb. And there will be battles that I will have to fight. But victory or defeat, it’s up to me to decide. But how can I expect to win, if I never try...I just can’t give up now. I’ve come too far from where I started from. Nobody told me, the road would be easy, and I don’t believe He’s brought me this far, to leave me.”

As the words ring through his head, Lewis knows that he is not alone. His journey is just beginning and he will not give up now!

**First and Goal**

After breaking through the tackles of childhood and the adversity of Carolina football, Lewis has continued to remain triumphant. With time dwindling on the game clock, he has become closer to scoring the touchdown of his life.

Although Lewis has only seen his mother about five times in the past three years, he wishes his circumstances could have been different but is not mad at her for the way his game has been called. He just hopes that one day he can provide for her and take care
of his older sister and younger brother that still reside in Winston-Salem. Along with
caring for his family members, Lewis also aspires to one day give back to his community
by working with handicapped children.

His childhood dreams of playing in the NFL and having a family of his own are
now becoming a reality. This carefree little boy, who was once an elementary school
bully, has transformed into a meek, compassionate man who loves to laugh and strives to
improve the lives of others.

With inches to the end zone, Lewis is ready to take on any defender. As he steps
up to his new line of scrimmage, he knows that his glorious touchdown is just an arm’s
length away.