NATE JACKSON
Focusing on the Present

by Trent Sillanpaa, Media Relations and Game Event Manager of Athletics

It could have ended much sooner, Nate Jackson’s football career. He could have picked his fantasy football team instead of being on yours. The aches and bruises that showed when he woke up to begin another day of training camp with the Cleveland Browns would still be there, but they would be below the surface and you wouldn’t see them. Nate Jackson is more than a football player, but it is because of his determination as much as his ability that he still is a football player—the greatest Menlo College has ever produced.

Recurring themes are a part of every life, and at each step of Nate Jackson’s football life he has had a chance to let it end. So was the case when Jackson was released by the Denver Broncos, a team he had spent the previous six years with, last February and remained unsigned until late August. He was an overachiever already and nobody would have blamed him for walking away having accomplished more than anyone expected as he took each step up the ladder. But that isn’t how an athlete cut from the team as a sophomore at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo learned to excel. It isn’t how he became a record-setting wide receiver at Menlo College from 1999-2001 and one of just a handful of former Division III players to make an NFL roster in recent years. That’s not Nate Jackson.

“It was difficult,” Nate Jackson said about his six-month wait for a new team to come calling. “I felt like I had a lot of good football left in me and when I was released it left a bad taste in my mouth. I knew being cut is part of the NFL, but it didn’t sit well with me. I had a chip on my shoulder and used that as motivation. I was anxious and antsy and ready for something to happen.”

It was after being cut at Cal Poly that Jackson first saw his football career flash before his eyes. Returning home to San Jose to attend his alma mater Pioneer High’s homecoming game, Jackson asked high school coach Myron Zaccheo where he could play football and what he had to do to make it happen. Zaccheo suggested Menlo College, and thanks in large part to current Oaks Head Coach Fred Guidici, who was an assistant coach and recruiting coordinator at the time, Jackson made his gridiron return in Atherton.

“When I was cut at Cal Poly it was a life-changing experience for the better because it led to my decision to go to Menlo, which was the best decision I ever made,” said Jackson. “Everything changed for the better for me. It turned me from a boy into a man and there’s nothing I could have done better than go to Menlo.”

Jackson’s on-field exploits personified his experiences at Menlo during his three years on campus. Teaming with standout quarterback Zamir Amin, Jackson caught 261 passes for 3,976 yards and 43 touchdowns while being named a two-time First Team All-American. In both 2000 and 2001 he led all NCAA Div. III players in receptions per game and receiving yards per game. Jackson remains among the leaders in five career receiving categories and appears six times in three single-season lists at the Div. III level while ranking seventh all-time in career receptions per game (9.0) and sixth in career receiving yards per game (137.1) among the NCAA as a whole.

Both Jackson and Amin were inducted into the Menlo College Athletics Hall of Fame on Oct. 2 as part of the Oaks homecoming festivities. It was the first Menlo homecoming during which Guidici was in charge of the Menlo football program, a point on which Jackson effervesces.

“It’s about time Fred has the job,” said Jackson. “Nobody is more qualified. Nobody will do a better job. Nobody has more integrity. Nobody will work better with the players. He’s been (at Menlo) so long, and he understands the game and the Division III level. He understands the kids and how to relate to them better than anybody. I think he’s going to do a great job and he absolutely deserves it.”

Even though Jackson doesn’t find himself suiting up for the Browns on Sundays this fall, he will find a way to determine his future and his fate. On the football field he should have an opportunity to play in the upstart United Football League for the Las Vegas Locomotives, who own Jackson’s league rights, when he returns from a recurring leg injury. Off the field he is the same person that has willed his way to success on it.

“There is a fine line and it’s a delicate process,” said Jackson of balancing his focus on the present versus the future. “You don’t want to get too far ahead of the next step. You work hard to get where you want to be, but you can’t let things get too far into the future. But I do have a lot of interests outside of football that I’m excited about and would like to pursue.”

But for now Jackson knows where his focus is.

“I want to keep playing and know I can help a team,” Jackson added. “As long as my body feels good I’ll keep playing.”

Yes, Nate Jackson will keep playing.