

# RETURN SPECIALIST

SOME SAY DESEAN JACKSON NEEDS TO SEVER HIS ROOTS TO SUCCEED IN THE NFL. BUT THAT'S JUST NOT AN OPTION.

WRITTEN BY CORD JEFFERSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE PUGLIESE

## STRAIGHT OUTTA PHILLY







DeSean Jackson has an interesting linguistic tic that surfaces whenever he talks about things of the “illegal” or “unsavory” or “criminal” variety. After parking his lengthy two-tone Rolls-Royce outside an East Hollywood café one day in late May, Jackson ambles in and begins speaking about his relationships with “certain people” who do “certain things.” People presumably involved in potentially illegal or dangerous activity are “certain people.” Things that may be done outside the parameters of the law are “certain things.” Combined with his habit of speaking softly, as if to avoid the prying of eavesdroppers, this intentionally vague use of “certain” makes clear that

It's maybe not the most unique sentiment for someone in high-level sports, in which sweat and hustle through hardship are professional obligations. But Jackson is more familiar with struggle than most. Earlier this year, after coming off the most successful season of his professional career, with 82 catches for

When Byron finally broke it to his father that he was abandoning his attempts to play professional football in 1994,

To protect his son, Bill would often wait outside the train station for DeSean in the evenings. “His dad was like white on rice with that boy,” Gayle says. “Buddy, you had best believe





Bill Jackson's two-decades-long effort to get his son to the NFL was realized on the first day of the 2008 draft, which DeSean celebrated with Team Jackson.



when it was time to get off that train his dad was right there.”

It’s easy to read about Jackson’s upbringing and make assumptions about his involvement in a gang. But according to Jackson and those closest to him, life in the neighborhood was more complex than many care to understand.

“When I was young, I hung out with and knew certain people who were involved in certain things,” says Jackson at the lunch table, that tic rising to the surface again. “But at the same time, they knew I played sports, so they supported me in playing sports.”

“It’s the same story with most kids growing up in the inner city,” Byron says. “There’s that one kid who’s athletic as heck and everybody sees he’s destined to be great. So the guys involved in mischievous things want to stay cool with him, but at the same time they don’t want to derail him.”

In Jackson’s interactions with “certain people” who did “certain things” during

his childhood, there was an unwritten agreement: DeSean was going places, and so he had their blessing to avoid the paths they’d chosen. In return, he would not look down on them or turn his back on them. In fact, if you ask Gayle Jackson, she’ll tell you DeSean’s loyalty is one of his most frustrating qualities.

“Those guys gravitated toward him because he had structure in his life,” she says. “A lot of time I was trying to chase these cats away. I told him it would catch up with him and that people don’t understand, so he should leave those guys alone. He told me, ‘Mom, you can’t treat people like that.’”

**HERE IS WHAT** DeSean Jackson will say about the gang rumors: Does he know people in gangs? Yes. Does he associate with “certain people” from time to time? Yes. Is he in a gang himself? No, nor has he ever been. The “troubling associations” described in an NJ.com article on March 28, the day Jackson was released, centered largely on his relationship with

Theron Shakir, a rapper signed to Jackson’s Jaccpot Records music label. (Jackson raps as a hobby.) In 2010, Shakir and a man named Marques Binns were arrested and charged with a gang-related homicide. Shakir was acquitted of the crime in 2013, and Binns, who was convicted and is now serving 15 years to life, told NJ.com that he does not know DeSean Jackson.

The site also pointed to a 2012 incident in which someone was shot and killed after a party at a South LA building leased by a member of Jackson’s family. Jackson was nowhere near the building at the time of the shooting, but a search of the premises turned up some receipts, a gun permit and other documents belonging to him—hardly incriminating evidence of his involvement. (Eagles coach Chip Kelly told reporters Jackson was cut only for football reasons.)

The other thing that’s bound to arise in any discussion of Jackson’s back-ground is that he throws up gang signs in pictures on social media, in his rap videos and during games. “Those were neighborhood Crip gang signs,” an LA police detective told NJ.com, referencing some hand movements he’d seen Jackson make once in a game against the Redskins. While Jackson won’t call them gang signs, he will admit to throwing up “hand gestures” in a display of that stubborn loyalty his mother describes. “If I score a touchdown or make a play and my boys at home can see me throwing up the area we’re from, that’s me showing them love,” he says. “They weren’t fortunate enough to make it where I’m at. All my friends wanted to be in the NFL growing up, but they weren’t able to do that and I was. That doesn’t mean I forgot about them. They’re my boys, I grew up with them, and I’m going to give them love.”

He’s been dogged by other “maturity

questions”—reports of missed meetings, his occasional trolling of LeBron James on social media and a grievance filed by agent Drew Rosenhaus alleging Jackson failed to repay \$400,000 in loans. (Jackson alleges the payments were illegal bribes.) But if everyone agrees that he never broke any laws or NFL regulations, then the overriding concern surrounding Jackson boils down to some people’s discomfort with his ongoing connections to his roots. Rather than taking Instagram photos with the likes of Theron Shakir, the thinking seems to go, Jackson should be distancing himself from his past, not broadcasting it. Never mind that Shakir was acquitted of any

## COMEBACK VS. COMEBACK



MICHAEL VICK VS. PEYTON MANNING

MICHAEL VICK  
100.2

When his 21-month prison stint ended in 2009, the debate was whether the NFL should welcome Vick back at all. That he would enjoy his best year—a QB rating of 100.2, ranking behind only Brady, Rivers and Rodgers—made the NFL’s most notorious comeback one of its most remarkable as well. While some seethed that a man who ran a dogfighting operation could regain glory, Vick, as an Eagle in 2010, set bests for completion percentage [62.6], TDs vs. INTs [21 to 6] and yards per attempt [8.1].

—MIKE SANDO, ESPN INSIDER

PEYTON MANNING  
1.5%

The word “comeback” hardly does justice to Manning’s performance the past two years. He fought through four neck surgeries by age 37 and did the seemingly impossible: He got better. Everyone knows about last season’s NFL records for touchdown passes [55] and passing yards [5,477], but these numbers were actually matched by a reduction in errors. Manning’s 1.5 percent interception rate in 2013 was the best of his career. That ain’t no comeback. It’s a resurrection.

—KC JOYNER, ESPN INSIDER

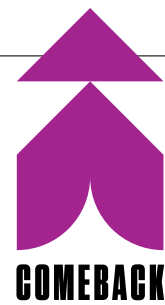
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wrongdoing. Never mind that this thinking requires Jackson to behave as if the first 18 years of his life were void of real relationships and authentic experiences. Long-standing connections, normal and healthy for everyone else, are “troubling” when it comes to Jackson.

**IT DOESN'T HELP** Jackson's case that since June of last year, prosecutors have handed down two separate murder indictments against former Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez, who is rumored to be affiliated with the Bloods. But according to Harry Edwards, a professor emeritus of sociology at UC Berkeley who also serves as a consultant for the 49ers, the NFL's gang worries are just beginning.

To explain why, Edwards points to a shift in player demographics—two-thirds of current NFL players are black, compared with 12 percent in 1959. He thinks that shift is only going to escalate, in part because of the epidemic of brain injuries that already has wealthier white families shuffling their sons away from the sport's risks. An HBO *Real Sports*/Marist poll from October of last year showed that 66 per-

cent of Americans with a household income of \$50,000 or more had heard a great deal or a good amount about football head injuries, compared with just 47 percent earning less. The same poll showed that 20 percent of nonwhites had heard nothing about football-related concussions, compared with 12 percent of whites. “In a decade, the only people who are still playing football will be African-Americans and working-class people,” says Edwards.

Edwards predicts that as the talent pool skews even more black and working class, the “baggage” that comes with these players will only become more prevalent. So, he says, the NFL needs to find ways to better understand players' struggles to balance career and background. “What the Eagles were dealing with in terms of trying to come to grips with DeSean is what the whole league should be preparing for,” he says. “Because that's who's going to be playing football. To think you're not going to find anybody in football with baggage is preposterous.”

Today, Gayle Jackson says that what she finds most hurtful about the rumors hanging over her son is that they insult the memory of Bill Jackson, who died of pancreatic cancer in 2009. “Now, you're talking about a father who went to his grave making sure he was keeping this kid out of trouble,” she says.

At lunch, when Jackson's train of thought brings him back to memories of his dad, he opens up a bit, his voice reflecting an admiration and respect the way a proud soldier's might when talking about his time in the military. He says that after his father died, it was those “certain” people from his childhood who helped him navigate his grief. “As far as having certain people around me,” he says, “people who in the middle of that whole time helped me get past that and get to where I'm at. Once I get here, I'm supposed to forget that they helped me?”

He shakes his head. “That doesn't make sense. I'm a firm believer that when someone helps you get to where you're at, you show your appreciation.”

Jackson says the best lesson he has learned over the past few months is that “your private time is your private time, and you don't always have to show people what you're doing” on Instagram and the like. Otherwise, he's going to stick to the formula that's been working for him for years, ever since Team Jackson came together like Voltron to build him into the man he is today, ever since Bill Jackson looked at a 5-year-old no heavier than a sack of flour and told him he was going to be an NFL star.

When I ask Jackson if he feels pressure to prove himself in Washington this year, a burden to silence his doubters—from those who say he's too small to those who say he's a diva to those who say he's a gang-affiliated liability—he smiles. “I don't feel no pressure, man,” he says. “I been feeling pressure since I was a little kid, since I was walking down the street in Crenshaw, Calif. The pressure on this side is a little better.”

Of that, DeSean Jackson seems quite certain. **E**

## 143-1 ODDS

### NFL'S BIGGEST COMEBACK SINCE 2004

Ravens @ Broncos, Jan. 12, 2013, AFC divisional playoff game:  
Weak and weary, the Ravens claw back from an 0.7 percent win probability.

**1**] Down 35-28 with 3:16 left, Joe Flacco fails on fourth and five from the Denver 31. Broncos burn two minutes and punt to the Ravens' 23. Baltimore's win probability is 0.7 percent. **2**] Flacco's 70-yard TD to Jacoby

Jones ties it with 31 seconds to go. **3**] With 55 seconds left in the first OT, Corey Graham picks Peyton Manning at the Denver 45 (win probability at 68.5 percent). **4**] Ray Rice's 11-yard burst ends the first OT with Ravens in field goal

range, raising win probability from 62 percent to 77 percent. **5**] Three stacked-up runs leave Justin Tucker with a 47-yard FG attempt (and 59 percent probability) to win the game. The snap, the hold, it's up, it's good! Ravens win!

