

Jason Avant Lifted Up on Eagles' Wings

Jason Avant knows a thing or two about conversions.

Last year, the Philadelphia Eagle wide receiver set a career high in receptions (41), averaging over 14 yards per catch. Nearly two-thirds of those catches went for a first down.

During his four year career, the Chicago native and ex-Michigan Wolverine has caught 37 balls on third down. A remarkable 32 of them- 87%- were converted into first downs.

Avant does not have the cartoonish speed of teammate DeSean Jackson (then again, does anybody?). Nor does he have a 255 pound frame like Eagle tight end Brent Celek.

Instead, Avant is gifted with the great hands, smarts and toughness needed to play slot receiver. He has the ability to get open over the middle, take a vicious lick, and still convert a pass into a first down again...and again...and again.

So Jason Avant knows a thing or two about conversions. Converting a pass into a first down. And more importantly, converting a life into a vessel used to glorify his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Little Jason Avant came into this earth facing third down and very, very, very long.

He was born and reared in a violent, drug-infested and poverty stricken neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. His mother abandoned Jason when he was a baby. His father was in and out of jail.

Fortunately for Jason, his grandmother Lillie was a godly woman who “prayed without ceasing” for him. “Lord, let Jason be different,” went her daily supplication.

She told Jason about Jesus. She dragged him to church. And while Avant would not come to a personal relationship with the Lord until much later in his life, seeds were planted early.

Unfortunately for Jason, Lillie was just one island in a sea of ugly. As many as a dozen other family members lived with Avant and his grandmother- many of them cousins, aunts and uncles who pushed drugs. Jason himself began dealing drugs in the sixth grade.

Jason saw cousins get shot and friends killed. He saw people close to him get incarcerated. Finally, after Chicago police led a second drug-related raid on his home, he saw his grandmother forced to sell the house.

Avant moved to Decatur, Illinois to live with his father- and promptly moved back to Chicago one year later when his father returned to prison. Jason enrolled in Carver High...where he attracted notice as a basketball talent.

"The Carver basketball coach- who doubled as the football coach- said you have to play football for me," Avant recalls. "I was a sophomore linebacker who weighed 155 pounds." In his first practice, the coach ran about 10 fullback dives in a row right into Avant's gut. Beat up and frustrated, Avant quit the team on his first day.

With some prodding from friends and family, Avant apologized to his coach the next day and was re-instated. He was switched to running back, then to wide receiver. By the time his senior year rolled around, some sources ranked Avant as the top wideout in the state of Illinois.

Avant frequently "thinks about what the Lord has brought me from and all of the doors He has opened." One of those doors flew open wide during his recruiting process.

Avant earned failing grades during his freshman year- his one year at MacArthur High in Decatur. College recruiters began asking for his scholastic transcripts. If they ever saw his records from MacArthur, Avant would likely have been forced to repeat a year in high school; he most certainly would have been challenged to receive a football scholarship, no matter how talented he was on the field.

But MacArthur never had any record of Avant's attendance. This isn't something Avant is proud of, "but if I didn't have that break, I'd be right back in my neighborhood shot or in prison. This is not fair, but favor is not fair," Avant believes.

"God opened a door for me. I gave Him praise, but I still wasn't ready to live for Him," Avant remembers. That would soon change.

As a freshman at the University of Michigan, Avant roomed with a preacher's son who kept insisting that Avant attend church. Finally, on May 4th, 2003 Avant's life did change forever at a church service. He describes, "God was dealing with me. The Lord began to replay what he had done for me. Protecting me from getting shot. Helping me to get out of poverty. Getting me to college. I heard Him say, 'After all I've done for you Jason, you can't live your life for me?'"

With tears rolling down his cheeks, Avant answered the altar call, received Christ as his Savior and was baptized.

"I began to call on Jesus more. The Lord put a new tongue in me," said Avant. "Some family and friends did leave me but God says 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"

As a senior, Avant snagged 82 catches for over 1,000 yards and was a finalist for the Biletnikoff Award given to the nation's top receiver. The Eagles selected him in the fourth round of the 2006 draft.

Avant also achieved something significant four months before the NFL Draft: a selection to *ESPN The Magazine's* Academic All-American second team. He received Michigan's Academic Athletic Achievement Award three times, marking a pretty dramatic conversion from Avant's year at MacArthur.

In the NFL, YAC- Yards After Catch- has become a trendy stat. But Avant is more concerned with PAC- Praise After Catch. Avant's trademark is lifting his arms up to the Lord after every completion. "I thank the Lord for not letting me forget what he has done for me," he humbly states.

Avant continues, "We idolize actors, actresses and athletes and give them an opportunity to speak. But who are we really? We're nothing without Jesus Christ."

"Jason is a disciple of Jesus Christ hiding in a football uniform," observed South Jersey FCA head Kevin Harvey. "I don't know if I've ever met someone who loves Jesus more."

Now blessed with a new contract extension and a new family - wife Stacy gave birth to daughter Jala in March - Avant is conscientious of using his platform as a rising NFL star to bring glory to God and to tell people about Jesus.

"Revelation 12:11 says 'They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony,'" Avant stated. Few better can attest to the power of God to overcome earthly obstacles than #81 for the Eagles. Which is why Avant is so eager to use the word of his personal testimony to share the Good News.

A Few Minutes With Jason Avant

By Don Leypoldt

Eagles WR Jason Avant graciously spent some time fielding questions on his walk, his faith, church family and what it means to be a Christ-like competitor in the NFL:

DL: *You recently signed a contract extension with the Eagles. In an interview, you said that some of the main reasons for staying in Philly were the Coaches, Players and your Church Family. Could you tell us a bit about your church and why you feel the Lord led you to that specific one?*

Jason Avant: The name of my church is Yesha Ministries, right in the heart of South Philadelphia. We have a heart for urban areas. I come from Chicago from a really rough neighborhood. Usually when people get a bigger income, they are quick to leave. This gives a kid an opportunity to see someone who is tangible. That they can touch, they can feel. That came from the same neighborhood that they did. My church family is very instrumental. We've been there for four years and we just love it there.

I was going out in South Philadelphia looking for people to witness too when I first got here and I saw a man going to that church with a Bible. I've been going to that church ever since. The Lord has really blessed it.

DL: *Do you have a Life verse or a favorite verse?*

JA: I try to be as much of a student as I can of the Word of God. The verse that really comes to mind is the verse of what I'm going through at that time. It differs. Usually in the realm that I'm in, fear is really (prevalent.) The Bible says 'In the last days men's hearts shall fail them for fear.' (Luke 21: 25-26) But my counter-act spiritually is 'The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?' Psalm 27:1. There are so many verses that I can hold on to at a time when people betray you but God says 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' (Hebrews 13:5) There are so many scriptures and whatever scripture is applicable in that season of my life, that is the one that is my favorite.

DL: *There have been two high profile NFL stars this week making headlines for the wrong reasons. With so many temptations out there, how do you stay accountable?*

JA: I think it's a love thing. I love Him. I truly do. I love Him from where He has brought me. I keep my mind on the battles that he has won for me already. I keep in mind the times I should have been killed and He had mercy on me. Those things are on the forefront of my mind.

Also, the Bible says that the spirit and the flesh war against each so that you won't do the things that you would. (Romans 7:15) I understand that you have to put in as much time being a Spirit Man as we do naturally with our flesh. So I'm up in the mornings for prayers. I'm in church pretty much every day of the week in the mornings and sometimes twice a day. I'm constantly trying to get my Spirit Man fed to the point of being in communion with God and that my flesh is dead; so when the opportunity for sin arises my Flesh Man is under so much spiritual subjection. Those are the things that you can do to really limit Satan's opportunity because he is a waiter. He has no power over us but he is an enticer. He puts it out in front of us.

Jesus says something else powerful. He said 'Satan is coming, but he has nothing in me.' (John 14:30) His flesh was totally dead at that moment so anything he could tempt Him with would be dead. That is what I'm trying to get to those guys (in the NFL) who go through so much.

I think the number one thing is your love for God and the more you are entwined with His Word, the more you desire spiritual things. Certain things don't even tickle your fancy anymore just because once you fall in love with God, certain things just go out the window.

DL: *What tips would you offer for being a Christ-like competitor?*

JA: I had accepted the Lord when I was very young but it wasn't until my freshman season when He saved me, baptized me and filled me with the Holy Spirit. It was a total transformation. He did it suddenly. Boom! And I was ready to quit football. I was just so totally in awe of Him that I was ready to throw it in. I didn't have any passion for it. I would go out to practice- and I was good- but I didn't have any zap or zest for football at all.

My pastor explained that the Lord can really use people in different arenas, and he began to show me that if the Lord didn't place certain people strategically in certain circumstances, then how could those people get the Gospel ministry to them? What happened is that God began to confirm those things, and he began to give me zap for football. He began to show me that there is a time. The Bible says in Ecclesiastes 3 that there is a time and a season for everything under the sun.

The biggest thing for me is giving God the glory. Everything you do should point towards Christ. So if playing on a football field, if my competitive edge is driven by scripture and driven by my love for Him because He has given me this opportunity, then let Your light shine through me. In a clean way, but as hard as I can, let me be an example to young kids and to anyone out there. I know that heaven is watching me and that God has given me the gift and the talent. He is expecting the best back from it. When I play, I play as hard as I can knowing that I have an opportunity to let the whole nation know about my competitive edge and who I serve. When I'm going out there, I'm quoting scriptures. When I'm going out there, I'm singing. When I'm out there, I'm playing as hard as I can- not for my coaches or my teammates but I'm playing hard for Him first. And that enables me to play as best as I can for my coaches and teammates.

When you're a Christian, it's not about going to the NFL to make money. I'm here to win souls. God has given me an anointing here because I have the opportunity to win souls. Anything that pertains to the game that I need He'll supply, because I'm doing what He wants me to do. When I'm playing as hard as I can for Him, it points to God. It's so much more competitive and it is so much more to another level than everyone else is. When the coaches make them mad, they're done. When their teammates are upset with them, their drive is gone. But God is with me all of the time so no matter what goes on, He is watching and I'm playing for Him.

Bible Reference:

Revelation 12



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