

Brotherly Love

Written by Christian McCollum
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John Onwualu's mother is sometimes asked whether he ever gets jealous of the attention his younger brother, [James Onwualu](#), has received as a high-profile recruit.

"My mom always responds, 'It's the exact opposite feeling,'" John says.

"That's totally true. I've never been jealous of my brother. I've been nothing but proud. Everything that I work for and do is to try and help him out. James and I have always been very close. All growing up, we've stuck together. We competed as younger kids in sports against each other. We've grown to become very close best friends."

John is four years older than James, so once he left Cretin-Derham Hall in Saint Paul, Minn., to go to college at the University of Pennsylvania, James was starting the ninth grade.

John played receiver and safety at Cretin-Derham. He was a year behind former Irish wide receiver Michael Floyd and a year ahead of five-star offensive line prospect Seantrel Henderson. Cretin never claimed a state championship during John's career, but he played in the Metrodome four times and played on a team that won 34 times in 37 chances over three seasons.

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The Raiders did capture the state title the year after he left, but John managed to grab Ivy League titles in his first two years at Penn.

“It was a very fulfilling career,” he said. “I played wide receiver and safety and ended up playing safety in college.”

Surrounded by stars on his school squad, John could see the potential of his younger brother. James stood out as a young running back and by the time he was in fifth grade, he was switched from his school’s team to a city team so he could play with seventh and eighth-graders.

“That’s really when we kind of started noticing that he had some pretty serious talent,” remembers John. “Something that’s always stood out for him ever since he was in third or fourth grade was his vision of the field. Even when he was a young kid playing, he was always able to find holes, always able to get to the outside and get to the open field and never look back.

“He’s had a knack for scoring ever since he was young and I think that’s carried through his entire career. He’s always able to find the end zone. When he was in fifth and sixth grade and scoring three or four touchdowns a game against seventh and eighth-graders, I knew there was something to it and he was going to be special.”

James was also a talented basketball player and played on a year-long travel team until he decided to focus on football the summer before he started ninth grade. He began working out with his brother’s trainer, Ted Johnson.

“Michael would come back in the summer and all three of us would work out together,” says John. “I was able to go to Penn and James was training for Cretin.

“James set out a goal fairly early on when he started working out with Ted that he wanted to play big-time ball. He wanted to go all of the way and the first step to that was having a successful high school career.”

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That was also the summer when James would impress a lot of people by snagging a high pass from Brady Quinn with one hand during a camp put on by former Notre Dame and Cretin-Derham standout Ryan Harris.

“It shocked everybody, including myself,” says John. “I never really knew he had that in him to catch a difficult ball like that. After seeing that and seeing him grow up and find the end zone, I knew he had something special.”

Once James got his chance as a high-schooler, he didn't disappoint. In his first varsity game as a sophomore, he put up 220 yards and two touchdowns and John realized his brother had a great chance to accomplish his goal of earning a Division-I scholarship.

“We knew that was possible,” says John. “The next step after high school, is getting to college. We started out early on that. If he's set a goal to play at that level, I was going to do nothing but help him do that.

“Having gone through the recruiting a bit myself, I felt like I had a good idea of what it would take to be able to market him and get his name out in the best light. I thought it was only appropriate to help him achieve his goals.”

Mostly a role player throughout his own career, John has enjoyed watching his brother become a standout.

“There's not really a comparison between me and James to be honest,” he acknowledges. “My offensive exposure was mostly inside wide receiver, kind of the flex tight end position or what we call the Y at Cretin.

“James has been the star growing up. My career was much more of a consistent player. On defense, I played strong safety and that was where I got most of my playing time. Seeing him be the star and be successful throughout his seasons, is fulfilling in my life and makes me

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nothing but happy.

“James has always been the leader on the team, the highest scorer and has always been the leader, which is something I really value living vicariously through his career. It’s awesome.”

Going to school in Philadelphia prevented John from seeing James play live for Cretin-Derham much, but the brothers would stay up until early morning hours on Saturday waiting for the Raider staff to post Friday night’s games on Hudl to watch the film together.

“We would go over the entire game,” says John. “That was something that brought me and James closer together. It’s been very fulfilling.”

After suffering a couple concussions in college, John decided to hang up the cleats and focus on his education at Penn. But as soon as he realized the opportunities James would be afforded at the college level, he did everything he could to help his young brother get as much exposure and see as many different college campuses as he could.

It became clear right away that Notre Dame was a school that would get a serious look.

“I always was a Notre Dame fan, I saw Michael go there,” says John. “When he got the offer, we kind of knew – at least I knew that I really wanted him to go there. We’ve always been Notre Dame fans and we have nothing but love for the University as a whole.

“When James was making his decision, he wanted the academics as well as the community and athletics. Notre Dame has the number one academics and the football community and now they are the number one football team in the country. I couldn’t be any more proud of James. I think he’s walking into the best position possible and couldn’t have put himself in a better situation to start his college career.”

James, who made his commitment to the Irish in March, has a goal of getting on the field early

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and he'll enroll next month hoping that will give him a better chance to do just that. Irish head coach Brian Kelly and offensive coordinator Chuck Martin are ready to give him the opportunity to do so.

"They all think he has a lot of potential to play early on," says John. "With the current receiver situation and how they like to rotate through receivers, I'm excited to see James play early on and I think that him going early to school is going to help.

"I think with his physical ability and understanding of the game and putting himself in the right situation – being the right kinda guy as Brian Kelly says – he's going to fit in perfectly with the program. I'm excited to see his success level start early."

After being a high-value recruit, Onwualu has proved to be a valued recruiter, helping to strengthen the bonds between the commits and getting the word out to uncommitted prospects about the class the Irish are building.

"Some people are afraid of having other players commit around them who might be as good or potentially even better," says John. "The way that James looks at it is he wants as many players who are good to commit. The better the team is, the better you can be and the better players that you surround yourself with are only going to push you to be the best."

John is extremely proud to see what his brother has accomplished.

"I haven't really experienced anything else like this in my life in terms of seeing somebody start from the beginning, through hard work, be very successful and work his way up. I couldn't be anything but happy for him."