

For Jason Talley, playing for Jesuit is a matter of learning to learn with ADD



PORTLAND, OREGON - Jesuit senior Jason Talley breaks to the outside and turns the football upfield against Aloha at Jesuit High School.

By Mike Tokito | The Oregonian

on November 25, 2015 2:09 PM, updated November 25, 2015 6:04 PM

On Saturday at Providence Park, Jason Talley will be a main center of attention as the tailback for the Jesuit Crusaders, who play Sheldon in a Class 6A semifinal game.

Five years ago, he would not have imagined being, or even wanting to be, in that spot.

The 6-foot-3, 215-pound senior is one of the state's star players, a powerful, deceptively fast runner whose physical style embodies the Crusaders' smash-mouth philosophy. In 12 games this season, all wins, Talley has rushed for 2,232 yards and 41 touchdowns, including 675 yards and 13 scores in three playoff games.

Talley is following in the footsteps of his brother, Jordan Talley, who as a Jesuit senior in 2010 rushed for 2,660 yards and 34 touchdowns. But Jason Talley didn't think of being a second Talley tailback for the Crusaders.

Instead, he thought he would be competing for Sunset, his neighborhood high school, after years of playing in the Apollos feeder program through his time at Cedar Park Middle School.

"Most of his friends were going to Sunset," his father, Wendell Talley, said. "He wanted to stay with Sunset football and be with that group of friends at Sunset."

Jason Talley ended up playing for Jesuit not because he was seeking football glory, but rather, because his parents wanted to give him a better chance at dealing with a learning disability, attention deficit disorder. Wendell and Phyllis Talley enrolled Jason, the youngest of their four children, in Edison High School, which is located on Jesuit's Southwest Portland campus, but operates independently and specializes in teaching children with learning challenges.

Jason's ADD caused him to struggle to focus academically through elementary and middle school, where he took a mixture of regular and special education classes.

"As a kid, it wasn't learning stuff or initially figuring how things work, like if someone said A squared plus B squared equals C squared, that still made sense," Jason Talley said. "But the problem would be while you're in class and while you're learning, what else seems more interesting or is bigger and attracts your attention. It's having your brain, while you're trying to learn this, it thinks this thing's more fun, so it becomes a battle mentally trying to stay focused."

While Wendell Talley says repeatedly that there's nothing wrong with the programs at the public schools, he and Phyllis believed Jason could use more focused help.

"With all the public schools, with 45 kids to a class, and you're trying to get your kid through and making sure he understands what's going on, it just wasn't a right fit for us," he said.

The lifeline came from a friend of Jordan Talley, who in his senior year had a teammate who attended Edison. The Talleys did not know Edison even existed, but they learned about it through conversations with the player and his mother.

Edison, which opened in 1973, specializes in serving high school students with learning disabilities. Typically, according to development director Jennifer Hogan, students have average or above average IQs but have such learning disabilities as dysgraphia, dyscalculia, nonverbal learning disorders, Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia, which the school's namesake, Thomas Edison, had.

Especially attractive to the Talleys was the size of the classes at Edison, which has a total of 90 students.

"A Jesuit class might be 22 kids, the Edison class would be 10 kids," Wendell Talley said. "You get a little more help figuring out what you need to figure out and how you need to study. They help you figure out how to study in the learning pattern that you learn at. It's been successful for us with Jason."

Edison students are allowed use of Jesuit's library, cafeteria, parking and other parts of campus, and can take Jesuit classes and participate in Jesuit's extracurricular activities. Jesuit football coach Ken Potter says he has had players who attended Edison play for him in the past, but Talley is the highest-profile.

"You haven't heard about it a lot because Jason Talley is the first one that's a big contributor," Potter said. "We've had some players, but not one who has had that kind of athletic prowess. It's a good fit for Jason, and has helped him in his academic progress tremendously."

Jason Talley says he had a lot of trepidation about making the move to Edison and Jesuit. Even though Jordan went to school at Jesuit, Jason said he really didn't know the school well, other than for its reputation.

"Going to a public school, especially around this area, you don't hear the best things about Jesuit," he said. "They tend to not like us and say stuff like we recruit, or we pay people to come here, which obviously isn't true. But being in eighth grade you don't know what to believe when you've never seen the other side of things."

Jason Talley says he's a naturally social person and was able to adapt to the new surroundings. He said he was most surprised by the accountability demanded of students and athletes at Edison and Jesuit.

"I wasn't used to how much they expected from you, and how quickly they expected you to be an adult and be able to function efficiently with little instruction," he said.

The class material at Edison and Jesuit is similar, but Edison teachers tend to go at a pace that allows students to understand the material while they are in class, Talley said.

"They make sure you're more solid on it before they move on," he said. "They make sure they use class time differently to cement it in, whereas Jesuit sometime uses that class time to make more progress and leave the understanding part to you to get at home."

Wendell Talley said Jason's first two years at Edison were up-and-down, but by his junior year, he started to find his academic groove. Jason learned how to properly manage the time he needs to complete his classwork, a major focus for Edison students.

"That's where they really helped me out in prioritizing my time and making sure that if I have this deadline, I know how much work I need to do in each section to be done and have it completely correct in that time," he said.

During Talley's early time at Edison, he asked his parents about switching to Sunset, but they stuck to their guns, Wendell said.

"Our main deal was to put him in a situation that, when he was done, he'd be able to read and write and do math and do all the other things so that he could survive in the world," Wendell said. "Our bottom line for Jason is to have an education so that later in life, you can go do what you want. They can take football away from you tomorrow, and say we're not going to give you a scholarship or whatever, but they're not going to take your education away from you."

Jordan Talley served as a perfect example of how fleeting sports can be. He followed his Jesuit career by playing for Eastern Washington, alongside current Oregon quarterback Vernon Adams. But he sustained a concussion as a sophomore, then another this past spring. Although he has another year of eligibility remaining, Jordan Talley, who wants to be a doctor, decided it would be prudent for him to retire as a player.

"That was something that was really tough on him," Jason Talley said. "People think I'm a good athlete, and Jordan was just as good. It was smart for him because at the end of the day, he has to worry about other stuff, and worry about life after football. He had to step away from the game."

As Jason Talley has continued to post big numbers during the season, a common question has become: Where will he play collegiately? After all, he is a 215-pound running back who has run a 4.5-second 40-yard dash.

Wendell Talley said Jason has offers from Eastern Washington and Portland State, where Wendell, who grew up in Ohio, played basketball and was the Vikings' most valuable player in 1979-80. Oregon has offered Jason a preferred walk-on spot.

Wendell said he thinks Jason's grades from his freshman and sophomore years, when he was still learning to use the skills he was taught at Edison, probably hurt his prospects.

"If he was a 3.0 student, he probably would have had a lot more offers right out of the bag, but now, I hope, programs are seeing that he's brought his grades up, he's doing better school-wise, SAT-wise, he's put a lot of

time in on that and taken the SAT,” he said. “So I hope by the time this is all over, schools see that he’s figured the education stuff out a lot more, and that he can be a good student and good athlete for them.”

Jason Talley said he has received interest from other schools during the season, but at the moment, he’ll focus on finishing the season before turning his attention to colleges.

Talley’s season has been the culmination of four years of progress at Jesuit. While in the Sunset system, he was always bigger and faster than most players. At Jesuit, he entered a system where, for the first time, he wasn’t the star, but a cog in a football machine.

Talley said he remembered when he was a sophomore, and Jesuit had a standout running back/linebacker in Joey Alfieri (who now plays for Stanford).

“There was a big push behind our coaches making sure that he understood, and that we understood, that it’s not just because of him that we’re successful, it’s our whole team making it so that Joey can be as successful as he is,” Talley said.

Talley said he always believed he could become the player he has this season, but also knew that at Jesuit, he would have to wait his turn. As a junior, he spent much of his time at fullback, blocking for senior Chase Morrison, who rushed for 1,497 yards and 27 touchdowns. Talley got enough carries to gain 1,234 yards and 16 touchdowns, but was not in the featured role he is playing this season.

“For me I just understood that right now, they needed me at fullback, and that was going to help us win,” he said. “I always knew that I was this type of player, but I was just needed at different spots at the time.”

In interviews after games this season, Talley has been quick to credit the offensive line and team as a whole.

“Our team does a very good job of blocking and really being selfless,” he said. “If everybody does their job, you’ll win, which is the ultimate goal.”