



Behind the Mask: Tackling the enigma of Jesse Lumsden

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There is not a single football picture hanging on the wall in Jesse Lumsden's living room. There are, however, three Justin Bua prints.

Justin who?

"He's an urban artist," Lumsden explains. He saw Bua's work one day, funky takes on city life. Liked it.

What, you expected a photo collage of him in Ticat black and gold racing to the top of the heap of CFL running backs, or shattering rushing records at McMaster University?

That would fit one mould for a football star's home decor. But Jesse Lumsden does not fit moulds -- he breaks them, on the field and off. Try to pin him down and you will be left like so many defenders who assume they can catch him, but feel nothing but the breeze as he runs by.

Look at another work in the living room, a painting on white canvas, swirls of cool colours, purple, maroon. What does it mean?

Lumsden, who is 6-foot-2 and about 220 pounds, looks lean and hulking at the same time, sits on his couch in denim shorts, barefoot, knees up high. He wears a black T-shirt and when he stretches his arms behind his head, dark bruise blotches show on the inside of his biceps. The hair is clipped tight, his goatee light brown. For all Lumsden's size, and beard, if anything he looks younger than his 25 years.

He listens to the question. The blue eyes -- his girlfriend, Erin, says they are actually blue-green, so let's defer to her -- look upward at you, as though peering over a pair of glasses, with a sleepy expression that seems to say, "Well? What now?"

So what about the painting? What does it represent? Lumsden waits for you to take a guess, a trace of a grin on his face. Nobody ever gets it at first glance.

Spotlights illuminate the playing field at Nelson High School in Burlington, students cheer in the stands, the grandly named Lords football team readies in the locker room. It is the fall of 1999. For the boys who play for Nelson -- such as running back Jesse Lumsden and his buddy and quarterback Jonnie Behie -- it is a unique experience wearing the red and gold under the Friday night lights.

They will never forget it. The best of times.

Retching. Vomiting. Hear the guttural sounds coming from the players' bathroom. It is Jesse, in his football pants and cleats, bent over a toilet, heaving.

Some Nelson players joke about it, and expect it. Jess is sick before every game. Every one.

Night games were the worst for his nerves. For day games, at least Jesse could keep his mind occupied in class, then it was straight to the locker room, suit up. Still got sick, but there wasn't the same drawn out pressure of a night game, when you made it through classes but had to wait around several hours for kickoff, the anxiety building inside Jesse Lumsden with every tick of the clock.

Where did that come from? He is not the first athlete to get sick before games.

NBA legend Bill Russell vomited before games, so did NHL goalie Glenn Hall. But why so much anxiety for a teenager -- especially a tall, handsome, athletic boy whose world should be his oyster?

Jesse Everett James Lumsden was born on Aug. 3, 1982, in Edmonton, the first child of Neil and Donna Lumsden.

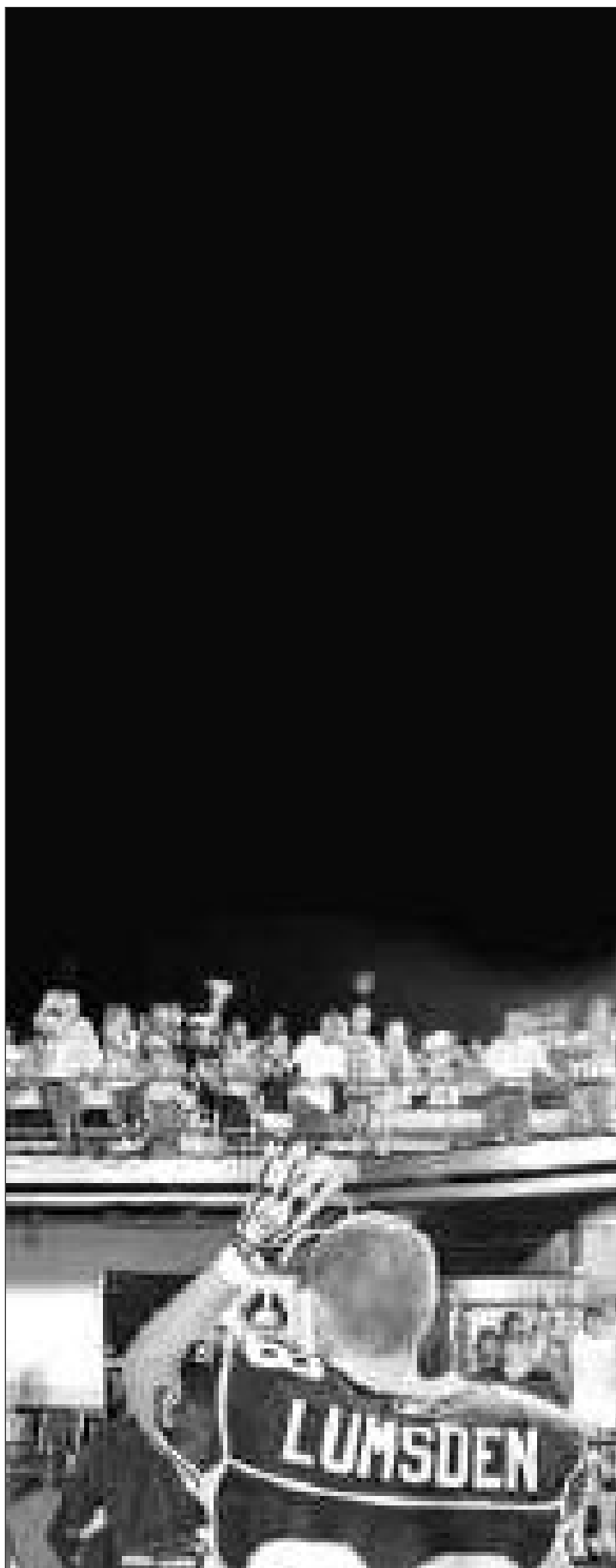
It was a typical childhood in some ways, in others, not so typical. As it happened, he was born right around the time the Edmonton Eskimos turned around a sloppy 3-5 start into a winning season and ultimately their fifth straight Grey Cup.

That baby having his picture taken while sitting inside the hallowed silver chalice? Jesse. His father, Neil, played fullback for the Eskimos.

AT FOUR YEARS OLD, Jesse posed for photos standing beside the Stanley Cup -- the cup and the boy were about the same height -- when Edmonton Oilers greats Wayne Gretzky and Mark Messier dropped by an Eskimos practice to show off the hardware.

He played tyke football when Neil moved the family to Ottawa -- played on the same team as his sister, Kristin. He lined-up at running back, the only position he has ever played. But Neil pulled Jesse out of football to give the slim boy a chance to fill out more.

Hockey was Jesse's boyhood passion, playing right-wing on competitive rep teams when the Lumsdens moved to Burlington. Never took hockey too seriously, though. Football would be



another matter. Jesse played junior ball, and when a provincewide teacher's strike killed Nelson's football season, he played his Grade 11 year at private Trinity College in Port Hope.

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Jesse Lumsden

Spectator File Photo

It was at Trinity when reporters started latching on to Jesse as a story both for his ability and because he was Neil's son -- a former Canadian collegiate football star who won three Grey Cups with Edmonton.

So here was 16-year old Jesse quoted in the Toronto Star, already playing down great expectations: "Sure I'd like to be as successful as my dad," he said. "But that doesn't happen overnight."

Is that where the anxiety came from? In football, expectations have always been in wait for him. And yet that's not quite the answer, either, and here lies just one of the paradoxes of Jesse Lumsden.

Expectations, yes, while at the same time, others -- even football people who should know better -- have always, to this day, even as he stars in the CFL, underestimated him.

It is November 1999, the high school Metro Bowl championship in the SkyDome. Nelson plays Toronto powerhouse Central Tech, a school with bigger, more mature players, who talked trash prior to the game about how they will whip the plodding Lords. Jesse, in Nelson's red and gold for his Grade 12 season, has a growing reputation locally -- but in Toronto? Jesse who?

First play of the game for Nelson.

"Thirty-eight toss," says quarterback Jon Behie in the huddle. That means the three back running into the eight hole. Jonnie takes the snap, pivots, tosses the ball to Jesse, who starts outside, dodges a tackler.

"I knew they didn't respect his speed," Behie says. "And there he went." Bolting for the right sideline, his short strides a blur, the Central Tech players reduced to looking like kids chasing a man, he races 75 yards to the end zone.

Later, another play, one that will come to be known to those who saw it as The Run. Nimble Behie rolls to his left, dumps it off to Jesse, who starts up the middle, then to the left side, breaks one tackle, a second and third.

"Lumsden at the 35," says the play-by-play announcer, Hamilton's Clint (Bubba) O'Neil. "At the 40, breaking tackles, he's at midfield -- Lumsden! Look at him go!"

HE PICKS UP speed toward the sideline then reverses his field, cuts back to the middle, breaks a fourth tackle, dodges a fifth and sixth with speed and power and agility. Bubba goes crazy as the romp continues -- "Lumsden! Lumsden! Lumsden!" -- and Jesse, surely exhausted, finds yet another gear, sprints downfield -- "Lumsden! Lumsden!" -- 90 yards in all before he's tripped up.

"Arguably, the best single play I've seen -- ever," says Nelson coach Bob Stacey.

It was a Welcome-To-Jesse- Lumsden moment, the first of many. And for Jesse, it was that game that focused his mind: he would play football for a living.

The dream was playing college football in the United States, and then the NFL. But other than his family, he told almost no one about it.

He started off-season training with his father, building his speed and strength. Neil Lumsden never pushed his son, unless Jesse showed he hungered for more -- and he did.

He eventually received letters of interest from American schools. But there was a catch. Jesse did not fit their running back mould. Too tall. Upright running style. In fact, he was similar in size and style to one of his heroes, former NFL star Eric Dickerson.

That he was lightning fast, had moves and was developing power did not seem to matter. Most of all, Jesse was too Canadian -- even in the Canadian Football League, Canadian-born running backs are shunned.

What he did seem to fit for American college recruiters was the prototype for a safety or linebacker.

What should he do?

Canadian universities coast to coast recruited him as a running back.

"Do you want to be a running back, or does it not matter to you?" his father asked Jesse.

"I want to be a running back."

"Then you've answered your own question."

Jesse was excited about playing Canadian college ball, too, but on the final day when he needed to have signed a letter of intent with a U.S. college, he sat alone in his bedroom, holding the letters of interest he had collected, but shown almost no one, even teammates he was close to.

It was tough to take. They were from schools such as Wake Forest, Ill., Buffalo. Interest, yes, but no concrete offers for Jesse Lumsden to carry the ball.

The one emblazoned with the famed Notre Dame Fighting Irish seal was the coolest -- the recruiter had written him free hand. Jesse sat there, staring at the letters, knowing they would forever be keepsakes, but little more.

He was recruited by McMaster Marauders head coach Greg Marshall, who had first met Jesse as a baby when he was a teammate of Neil's in Edmonton.

At Mac, once Jesse became the team's go-to back, he shredded defences, smashed school and national records, all the while saying as little as possible about it.

"What Jesse Lumsden will fail to tell you," wrote a sportswriter for Mac's student newspaper, "is that he is an absolute menace, a force to be reckoned with, an unstoppable Mac truck that always delivers."

He found a new weapon at Mac -- his power.

He got bigger, stronger and started looking for contact rather than avoiding tacklers.

In this, he had graduated to the form of NFL backs he had long admired, Dickerson, Eddie George, the late Walter Payton -- backs who took as much joy running over defenders as around them.

"I didn't know he could find that depth, that inner toughness so I'm proud of him for that," says Nelson's Stacey.

The old high school coach says Jesse's increased size and physicality meant he got the odd question about whether Jesse was "on the juice" -- steroids.

"I CHALLENGED THAT and said absolutely not, because every year he got bigger, he didn't just explode. And he got bigger because he worked so damn hard."

Lumsden says he was never even tempted.

"No, never. Never thought about it. The negative effects of it are just way too large to even think about it.

"I made some sacrifices not going out (to parties, bars), stuff like that. It's much more satisfying if you work hard."

When it became apparent at Mac that he was the best football player in the country, perhaps the best Canadian college running back ever, the national media descended, press conferences held.

Jesse instinctively disliked the attention, deferred accolades to teammates, would rather have stayed cloistered in the weight room than have to talk about himself. His linemen loved him for it. One said it was "an honour" to block for Jesse.

Where did that come from, his instinct to praise his linemen, his teammates, refusing to bask even for a moment in the notion -- which he surely knew inside -- that he was a special talent? Did his father coach him in media relations?

"No," he says. "I say those things because I truly believe it."

Neil Lumsden thinks Jesse's personality was perhaps influenced by simply growing up around Neil's teammates in Edmonton, sportsmen who knew about team and sacrifice. "You put two and two together on that, and then down the road it's just the way you think," Neil says.

"You know that the game is not about how many yards or touchdowns you get, it's about winning."

As for the nerves, most of the time at Mac, Jesse still got sick before games. It worried Neil, who never got sick before games when he played.

As he had at Nelson, Neil gave Jesse words of encouragement in person before every game, and a hug.

Jesse turned to an old high school friend for help. Jon Behie's father, Norm, counselled Jesse, helped him examine the roots of the anxiety, talked him down from it.

Rather than listen to heart-pounding rock music before kickoff like other players seeking to get pumped up, Jesse put mellow jazz and blues on his iPod, trying to settle his nervous energy.

Friday night lights, Aug. 3, 2007. The fans in the stands of Ivor Wynne Stadium are pumped, Winnipeg is in town and Jesse Lumsden is the starting running back for the Hamilton Ticats. And it is his birthday.

His old Mac coach, Greg Marshall, pushed for the Ticats to draft him in 2005.

Marshall says he knew other CFL teams would underestimate Jesse, pass him over, at most see him as a project athlete they could turn into a defensive player. And so Canada's best collegiate running back was still available when the Ticats picked sixth.

In the dressing room before the game, Jesse listens to his iPod, the beat building, invoking combat. It is no longer easy listening, but a song called Tribal War from the Black Hawk Down action movie.

It is, he says, "pretty intense." Hans Zimmer composed it. Jesse likes his stuff.

There is still nervous energy, of course, but no vomiting. He no longer has to tone down his emotions. It has been this way ever since he started with the Ticats, he has found a balance between the physical and mental, he is in his element.

First play of the game for the Ticats. Quarterback Jason Maas hands off to Jesse, a stretch play, not unlike those he ran at Mac. A brief pause, waiting for blocks, picking a seam, racing through the opening, the crowd rising.

His father is up in the booth doing colour commentary for a Winnipeg radio broadcast. Neil jumps to his feet. "Oh, my God," he thinks. "There he goes." And his next thought is: What should I say?

Lumsden races past them all, 69 yards to the end zone. Later in the game, he rips another for 75 yards. A monster game, another coming-out party. Even his own coach, Charlie Taaffe, is taken aback. Hamilton Spectator football writer Ken Peters quotes Taaffe saying that he knew Jesse was a "big strong guy," but his speed surprised him. Surprised? How can anyone -- much less his coach -- still be surprised at what he can do?

Jesse knows that some players still don't respect his speed, just like in high school.

Does it bother him?

"No," he says. "I'll just run by them."

It is a flash of ego, something that Jesse has, but rarely shows. Those who don't know him well -- and that's most people -- assume he's shy, taciturn.

Close friends say he is quiet but definitely not shy. He is a straightlaced guy, but has a sharp sense of humour if he lets you in. He likes to go out with friends, walk to Hess Village, have a pint of his favoured Rickard's Red.

Jon Behie was out for dinner a few weeks ago at Jack Astor's with his girlfriend. He heard a text message buzz through on his cellphone.

"I can see you," it said, and before Behie could get truly creeped out, he saw who it was from. Jonnie looked across the room and saw Jess sitting with his mom, dad and sister, a big smile on his face.

His understated nature does not mesh well with the media. He dislikes dealing with reporters, mostly because he has never liked having attention drawn to himself and is instinctively private with everyone.

Coverage like the 2005 "Hamilton Hottie" headline in The Spectator has not helped his media relations. On the eve of Jesse's Ticat home debut in 2005, he was featured in a full-page sports section cover photo along with the offending caption.

The incident still irks him.

He was teased mercilessly for it by teammates at the time, and still gets the odd crack about it.

"I hated it," he says.

He has always wanted to blend in, be one of the boys, stay behind his linemen in the public eye like he runs behind them on the field. But his unique place in Hamilton ensures that this is unlikely to happen.

Jesse Lumsden's immediate football dream is winning a title. For all his Brobdingnagian feats at McMaster, his Marauders never won a national Vanier Cup.

"I just want to win a championship," he says.

He doesn't say which championship. A Grey Cup?

"I'd love to win a Grey Cup."

Are the unspoken two words "Super Bowl?"

Does he still dream of playing down south? He got a shot but did not stay with the Washington Redskins last year.

And he was, by his own reckoning, "shafted" for not getting a fairer shake in a tryout with the Seattle Seahawks in 2005. (In Seattle, they promised him a solid look in a Monday night game, but he never saw the field and was cut the next day.)

The other night, he was out for dinner at Turtle Jack's on the Mountain, and a Green Bay-Pittsburgh game was on the wall TV. A nothing game. Just an exhibition. He had a hard time keeping his eye on his dinner.

The average NFL salary is \$1.1 million US; the CFL average is \$50,000 Cdn. Will he get another shot at realizing what was once his dream? Does he still even want that shot?

"I have no idea. I don't know yet."

You might think Lumsden is being coy, that he views everything great he does with the Cats as another bullet on his NFL resume. More likely, though, at 25, Jesse Lumsden has learned to live in the moment and not fret about that which he cannot control.

"I'm happy just where I am. I'm in my house, a place I can call my home, have a lot of great friends, teammates, family close by ... I've had a real fun run so far."

Lumsden bought the old brick house in Hamilton's lower west end a few months ago, he's doing lots of work on it, his girlfriend is helping. He's been dating Erin for nine months. They were friends first, at McMaster. Dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, brown eyes, Erin is the girl next door who, in fact, lived in a house across the street from Jesse in Westdale when they were both at Mac.

During the Ticats recent week off, in addition to going to a friend's cottage in Honey Harbour, they went to Cirque de Soleil in Toronto, a birthday present from Erin.

They also hit Wonderland -- Jesse loves roller-coasters, is a self-professed adrenalin junkie, still searching for highs that can rival the mayhem on a football field. He is jumping from an airplane at the end of the season, his first attempt at skydiving, a present from his sister, Kristin.

He did some yard work on his time off, pulled weeds, went to Ikea with Erin for blinds. In his back yard Jesse has laid down some flagstone, has plans to build a deck. The house is modest but engaging, with a brick wall inside that stretches from the lower level to the loft. He bought it as an investment, he says housing prices will spike in that area in the near future.

With his granite-jawed looks and quiet, deliberate manner of speaking, you might assume that Lumsden is not the reflective type. He's a football player, right? Left Mac early and still has a course to finish to get his degree in geography. ("Which I will do, or else my mom will kill me.") He's smart enough to know that learning is just as much about what you do away from school, and success is about the people you meet, the networks you make and the experiences you pursue.

HE IS A SEEKER, wants to travel. He envies teammate Ray Mariuz who has travelled extensively. "He was in Africa this year for five weeks, he just goes on his own. Thailand, Costa Rica, Australia. I'd really like to go to Europe and Asia, Thailand, Vietnam."

He thinks about the future, knows football won't last forever. Would like to own a business, wonders what it would be like to pursue an acting career. (A movie lover, he cites Rain Man and The Sting as two of his all-time favourites.)

He reads a bit of everything, but his favourite is the Peaceful Warrior series by Dan Millman and has served both as entertainment and inspiration. In the story, he read about a star athlete who meets a mysterious 94-year-old stranger named Socrates at an all-night gas station, who turns into his mentor, offering cryptic bits of wisdom:

"Your mind is your predicament," Socrates counseled. "It wants to be free of change, free of pain, free of the obligations of life and death. But change is a law, and no amount of pretending will alter that reality."

"Socrates, if life is nothing but suffering, then why bother at all?"

"Life is not suffering; it's just that you will suffer it, rather than enjoy it, until you let go of your mind's attachments and just go for the ride freely, no matter what happens."

Return again to that painting hanging in his living room, the one on white canvas, the swirls of maroon and purple colours, all motion, like a mini tornado. So what does it mean? It was done by a Toronto artist named Scott Kish.

Jesse reveals the answer. And now, having been told what it is a painting of, it is as plain as day, so obvious, how could you have missed it?

"It's me," he says.

It is Jesse Lumsden in the maroon McMaster uniform, a blur of motion, and you could never look at the work the same way again.

"Nobody ever recognizes it until I tell them," he says. "Which is neat."

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