

FLORIDA FOOTBALL

Desmond Watson





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By: Thomas Goldkamp

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‘Literally a 4D player’: Desmond Watson’s knowledge impressing teammates

By: Graham Hall

Swamp247

August 11, 2023

Throughout his time in Gainesville, much of the discussion involving third-year defensive lineman Desmond Watson has been of the Plant City native's stature, in particular his weight.

Standing at 6-foot-5 and listed at 439 pounds on Florida's roster, Watson is a towering figure along the defensive line, and justifiably there have been questions as to whether or not he's capable of playing a consistent role, considering his physical status.

Unlike fall camp in 2022, Watson hasn't been observed participating in additional conditioning drills – a sign his physical development has continued to improve under the new coaching staff's observation as he prepares to play an even larger role after starting 10 games for the team as a sophomore.

“Des works with the trainers, and the nutritionists every day to keep chipping away,” sophomore defensive lineman Chris McClellan said of Watson, “but he’s getting very well, he’s going down, so it’s good.”

Watson's towering status, though readily apparent and certainly beneficial to the defense, arguably isn't the junior's most impressive attribute, however.

Ahead of his first season as an upperclassmen, Watson has earned praise for his broad, extensive knowledge of the team's defense, earning him the label of a four-dimensional player from his defensive teammates.

Meanwhile, Watson's physical attributes, which include improved footwork, hands and in-practice technique, continue to earn accolades in the same breath.

"That guy is literally a 4D football player. He can see the football field from all four angles. He understands what is going on," defensive lineman Tyreek Sapp said Wednesday of Watson. "He understands what the receivers are doing, he understands the sets and he sees it. He has a whole lot of knowledge, and people might try to knock him for his physical abilities, but the big guy can move. And when he gets rolling, that's a hard person to stop."

As Watson's role gradually expanded throughout the 2022 campaign at Florida, McClellan, looking to carve out a role for himself as a first-year player, bore witness to Watson's gradually improving knowledge of the game, saying the imposing defensive lineman was unafraid to gesticulate the offense's presumed play call to the Gators' defense.

"Des, he's a very smart player. He just knows the game of football very well," McClellan said. "More often than not – if you watch our games from last year – you can see 21 (Watson) calling out run or pass, his hand signals for a linebacker. So, Des, his overall knowledge of the game of football is very wide." It's not just returning players who are cognizant of Watson's football acumen.

While many of the transfers, in particular the post-spring additions to the program, haven't witnessed what Watson can bring to the Gators from an in-game perspective, many have already witnessed his intelligence throughout the offseason program and the start of UF's fall camp.



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"He's just like, I mean y'all have seen him like he's ginormous," fourth-year safety R.J. Moten, who transferred to Florida from Michigan in early May, said. "(His footwork), it's top-notch."

His exact role may be uncertain as of now, as a result of the additions in the room largely via the transfer portal, though Watson's knowledge of the game undoubtedly has him in position to pick up where he left off in 2022: playing a vital role within the interior of the defensive line while providing critical instruction to his fellow teammates.

"He's a big key in the defense. Coach Armstrong actually told him today, he's a big key in the defense," Moten said of Watson. "He's definitely a big part of this defense and when he's going, he's going."



Gators' 435-pound Des Watson grows into folk hero after near-TD goes viral

By: Edgar Thompson

Orlando Sentinel

November 18, 2022

In Florida sophomore Desmond Watson's mind, he's a running back stuck in the body of the biggest player in Power 5 football.

The Gators' 6-foot-5, 435-pound man child also has become a folk hero.

When he seized the football from the clutches of South Carolina's Jaheim Bell, Watson's instincts kicked in.

"I just ripped it and thought 6," he said Wednesday.

Watson didn't reach the end zone during a 38-6 win, but his attempt has run on loop ever since for the 19-year-old from Plant City.

"Every time I open my phone, I at least see it two or three times," the soft-spoken, Teddy bear of a nose tackle said.

Mount Watson stands out but also has a penchant for creating viral moments.

Watson body-slammed USF quarterback Gerry Bohanon to the turf at the Swamp on Sept. 17 for a critical fourth-quarter stop during Florida's 31-28 win.

Other impactful moments had been few until Watson's tore away the football from South Carolina's Bell and turned south toward pay dirt.

"I was like 'touchdown,'" Watson said. "I knew it was a touchdown, ain't gonna lie."

Touchdown dreams ended when Gamecocks quarterback Spencer Rattler corralled Watson despite ceding 4 inches and 220 pounds.

From his Pop Warner days at fullback, Watson learned ball security comes first.

"He punched the ball and I felt the ball coming out," Watson explained. "It was more important to try to get possession than keep fighting. So I just grabbed the ball and fell down."

Watson's teammates gave him a ribbing for allowing Rattler to tackle him, but not before a wild celebration on the Gators' sideline.

"Just seeing somebody that big with the ball in his hands — that's something you rarely see," safety Rashad Torrence II said. "So we had to take advantage of it and enjoy the moment."

The Gators are confident bigger moments are ahead.

"The potential with Des is through the roof," center Kingsley Eguakun said. "Not too many people are that size."



A less-massive version would be OK with coach Billy Napier — and Watson himself.

A 4-star recruit from powerhouse Seffner Armwood, he only recently tapped his potential.

“Wasn’t the best offseason in the world truth be known, but during training camp he changed gears,” Napier said. “He worked hard to earn the spot that he has, and he’s really garnered some respect because he’s developed some habits that have led to improvement.

“He has more discipline in his life than he’s probably ever had. He’s experiencing some success. The guy has way more room to grow.”

Watson wants to build on his success, beginning with his eighth consecutive start Saturday at Vanderbilt.

Last week, he led all FBS defenders with a 96.9 run defense grade from Pro Football Focus.

“I’ve never really doubted my athletic ability,” Watson said. “I know what I want to be in the future. So there’s things I had to do in order to get on the field and make plays. As long as I keep doing that, like getting my weight down and working more ... the sky’s the limit for me.”

The Gators have lacked a game-changer in the middle since Jon Bullard, Dominique Easley and Sharif Floyd anchored some of the nation’s best defenses.

Back then, Watson was a running back playing Pop Warner who struck fear in opponents.

“Everybody wanted the bigger kid to be running back because no one wanted to tackle him,” Watson recalled.

But Watson quickly grew and soon found a home in the trenches. While he never lost his appetite for reaching the end zone, Watson accepted who he had become.

“My high school coach always used to ask me if I wanted a goal-line package,” he said. “I always told him I’d rather play D-line. I’m not much of a spotlight guy.”

These days, there is nowhere for Watson to hide.

The athletic department’s creative team turned his near-touchdown into a 17-second video Tuesday drawing nearly 300,000 views in two days. Watson said he most enjoyed the moment he and Forrest Gump were running side by side.

“I knew it was going to be something, but I didn’t expect that,” Watson said with a sheepish grin. “If I had to guess, I wouldn’t have guessed that. I enjoyed the video.

“I feel a lot of people enjoyed it, too.”



Desmond Watson now recognized for his size and hard work: He's set to start for Florida

By: Kevin Brockway
Gainesville Sun
September 24, 2022

Florida football 6-foot-5, 415-pound nose tackle Desmond Watson went viral on social media this week when he body-slammed USF quarterback Gerry Bohanon to the turf at The Swamp last Saturday for a big fourth-quarter stop.

But another social media post caught the attention of fans of both Florida and USF the following day.

Watson posted a picture of himself on Twitter grabbing USF running back Brian Battie for a tackle with the title "Wasted Scholarship." Some interpreted it as a slight against Battie, but Watson offered a different explanation this week.

"People thought I was talking about the running back," Watson said. "It's not that. He did good. I can't say anything bad about him."

"Mostly it was when I first got here people were saying they had wasted a scholarship on me because of my weight and stuff like that, but I always knew my ability, so I felt like once I made some plays I'd post it out about a wasted scholarship. In the future if I'm an All-American or something like that I want to be able to show people you can do it."

Desmond Watson set to make first college start

Watson is in line to make his first career start on Saturday when the No. 22 Gators (2-1) face the No. 12 Tennessee Volunteers (3-0) at Neyland Stadium in Knoxville, Tenn. (3:30 p.m., CBS).

"It's really exciting, something I looked forward to coming up as a kid," Watson said. "Exciting to get my first start away, in a hostile environment. I feel like that's going to be a test for me, but I feel like I'm ready for it."

It's been an up and down journey for Watson. Out of Armwood High in Plant City, Watson, a second-team Class 7A all-state standout, chose Florida over offers from Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi State and Florida State.

Watson appeared in 13 games for the Gators as a freshman last season, finishing with seven tackles and half a sack. But weight issues limited Watson's effectiveness, and when he ballooned to close to 450 pounds in the offseason, it appeared his future at UF was limited.

Tackle Desmond Watson making gains with weight loss

The transformation began at the start of fall camp. Watson has lost close to 40 pounds since the beginning of August, according to Florida coach Billy Napier.

"It's a wholesale change in terms of habits, discipline," Napier said. "We're talking about nutrition, sleep, overall approach. I couldn't be more proud of the guy. I'm gonna tell you something. There's a lot more. It's scary to think where this guy could go if he continues to lose weight at the rate he is."

Side work sessions for Watson in camp included him towing a weighted sled in the August heat and humidity.



“My coaches knew it was going to be a challenge,” Watson said. “So during certain periods of practice, when I didn’t have to be in or something like that, they would have me do extra conditioning and stuff like that, try to get ready for whatever it was upcoming whether it be a game or another like tempo period or something like that. It’s trying to get me in better condition for things to come.” ‘

Another facet to Watson’s weight loss was his eating habits, and for that, he turned to Florida director of sports nutrition Kelsee Gomes. A new favorite snack is trail mix, but Watson has steered clear of any sweets.

“Everything I eat I try to get it from her and make sure I got her special approval,” Watson said.

The results showed the field. Watson has managed to stay in games for more snaps. Against USF, Watson posted a season-high three tackles, including the tackle for loss in which he picked Bohanon up and threw him down like a rag doll.

“It was cool because I was actually watching it on the field because I didn’t know he was going to do that,” Florida defensive end Brenton Cox Jr. said. “I thought he was going to drag him to the ground. When I saw him lift him up, I thought he could have lifted him up a little higher.”

Cox said Watson has the potential to be a force up front because of his size, strength and ability to occupy blockers. In the weight room, Watson said his maximum bench press is 520 pounds and max squat is 720 pounds.

“That guy going forward, he’s just a wrecking ball,” Cox said.

In addition to Watson’s size and strength, Cox said he’s surprisingly nimble as well.

“He’s really quick,” Cox said. “People wouldn’t think that. He walks around a little slow, but he’s really quick on the field. His first two steps are amazing.”

Watson said he didn’t expect the tackle of Bohanon to blow up as much as it did on Twitter.

“When I looked at the replay, I was even more excited,” Watson said. “That’s probably a play that all kids dream of, making a big play in front of thousands of people.”

For now, though, Watson is focused on his continued improvement in his play and conditioning in order to hold the starting job for as long as possible.

“I’m getting rewarded, as far as, you know, getting play time,” Watson said. “So getting down, getting in the right condition, I feel like that’s motivation for me to get the weight down and keep it going.”



Desmond Watson Discusses Year One, Goals With Gators and Coaching Changes

By: Zach Goodall
Fan Nation (SI)
December 14, 2021

Desmond Watson has become a fan favorite in Gainesville, perhaps not so much for his play quite yet, but for his brand.

"Big Meat," so the listed-400 pound defensive lineman is called, exceeded expectations during his first season with the Florida Gators. Watson arrived at UF in January and immediately got to work with strength and conditioning coach Nick Savage to reduce his 432-pound frame upon enrollment.

Although he is still a physically intimidating football player to line up against at his size, his determination to get into better shape paid off. Watson appeared in every game for Florida during the 2021 season, consistently a member of special teams units with eight games played defensively, burning his redshirt year en route to seven tackles and half a sack across over 150 snaps.

"I feel like I used this year to get a little bit of experience, in the coming years I'll be good and ready to go," Watson told AllGators.

His first handful of snaps came in Week 1, taking the field against the Florida Atlantic Owls in The Swamp, Ben Hill Griffin Stadium. Watson was quick to make an impact, plugging a gap against the run and securing his first career tackle on his very first play.

Desmond Watson

"I had never been in front of a crowd like that, even though it wasn't a conference game, nothing like that," Watson explained. "But yeah, it was good. First tackle. It got me a little bit comfortable in the game, that was a good experience."

What led to that moment was months of dedication to Savage's plan for his development, something Watson says he will be "forever grateful for." It also required attention to detail within the Gators' defensive playbook, as Watson admits he struggled with the complexity of a college scheme before growing comfortable within it as the year went on.

"The playbook that we had was a little bit difficult. You know, in high school, nobody really has that, like, complex defense," Watson said. "That was a struggle for me at first but once I got it, I had it locked down."

"I made a lot of progress, but I've still got a ways to go for sure," Watson continued, regarding his work with Savage. "He always pushed me, gave me the same energy every day so I knew what to expect. I can tell that he wants the best of me. If I want the best for myself, he wants the best for me, all I've got to do is listen and I know I'm gonna get there."



Watson's drive and work ethic is bound to take him places. It will be tested in the near future, though, due to the nature of the college football business.

Savage, all but officially, will not return to UF next season amid the Gators' coaching changes. Following the firing of former head coach Dan Mullen and the hiring of Billy Napier to fill the role, Florida has brought in a new strength and conditioning coach who will also serve as associate head coach, that being Mark Hocke.

Losing Savage after enduring the dismissal of his defensive coordinator, Todd Grantham, which preceded Mullen's firing by two weeks, was naturally tough for Watson to deal with in his first year of college. But Watson understands the nature of the game and the changes won't deter him from continuing to make progress.

"I hate to see anybody lose their job, but at the same time, I didn't commit to the coaches, I committed to the school," Watson said. "As I had seen throughout my recruitment, coaching changes happen all the time. So, that's something that you've got to be ready for, sometimes you can see it coming.

"I was disappointed that my coaches got fired, but it just comes with business so you've got to let it roll, keep going."

Considering that Napier has been on the job for just over one week, Watson has not had enough of an opportunity to bond with his new head coach. He trusts Napier's vision for the program, however, as his cousin, Kendre' Gant, played for Napier at Louisiana this past season after transferring from Independence Community College.

"I asked [Kendre'] about [Napier] and he said he's a good dude," Watson said. "I'm excited, I'm definitely excited. I'm always gonna put my trust in my coaches."

As Napier begins to rebuild the foundation of Florida's football program before spring practice, Watson, in the meantime, is redirecting some of his focus on Name, Image, and Likeness opportunities, looking to take advantage of the "Big Meat" brand that he's built over the last year.

Watson recently signed with Choice1 Management and is working with representative Chris Green, who he was referred to by a teammate. With Green's help, Watson is looking forward to becoming a household name at Florida and around the college football landscape.

That will not only require the expertise of an agent, but, as Watson emphasized, continual development in the strength and conditioning program and on the field.

With all of those factors in mind, Watson has a clear goal as he approaches his sophomore season: Earning a starting role, ideally next to rising junior defensive tackle Gervon Dexter, a tandem that Watson envisions as "something serious" along the Gators' defensive line.



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"I just plan to keep progressing, get physically, mentally ready for next season. I plan on being a starter, I've got to work to be the starter at my spot," Watson said. "So, once I get there, after that just dominate and get my name out there for the future."



Players and coaches want Watson to see his potential

By: Bob Redman

Swamp 247

August 12, 2021

He already does things that others can't do with his immense size, power, and surprising quickness for his size. But freshman defensive tackle Desmond Watson has much more ahead in his development and the Florida staff and his teammates are pushing him to be the best he can be.

Watson knows what it is going to take, so does everyone else around him. At 400 pounds, he's too big to be a player that stays on the field and dominates. But that's exactly what those around him want him to do and expect at some point that he will do.

In the meantime he'll make a play here and a play there and his teammates will shake their heads in disbelief. They really do see the capabilities and want the best of their new teammate.

The running backs find themselves confronting a wall that can throw them around when having to face Watson in practice.

"That's a big boy. That is a big boy," fourth-year junior running back Dameon Pierce said this week when asked about Watson. "Yeah of course he big, you know like horizontally, like he wide, but he's big vertically like he stand by some of the d-linemen, he taller than them. We pull an Ethan White on him, he gonna be a monster. He's working, we working him every day. He's getting in shape. We want him to get better and he wanna get better himself. So we got both forces moving in the right way."

His defensive teammates certainly like working with him and know what he's able to do.

"He's massive," sixth-year linebacker Jeremiah Moon said. "For sure he's been working hard to drop his weight. He's actually, if you were able to come to practice, he's pretty light on his feet for a big guy. I know as he continues to progress in his training he's going to be great."

Even other freaks on the team think Watson has abilities you just don't see in a guy that size.

"Yeah, Des, man he's like huge, freaky, and can move," returning freshman defensive tackle Gervon Dexter said. "It's crazy. He's almost just like me. He's just scratching the surface."

This college thing is for the long haul and for Watson who needs to rebuild himself a bit to make a huge difference, it is going to take some work. He's on his way after weighing in at 432 pounds when he first arrived on campus. He's dropped the weight to 400 by the time fall drill started this week.

"He does (occupy some space), he's a big guy," linebacker coach Christian Robinson said. "A lot of these guys that came in, we're trying to help them adapt to what college football's all about. A lot of guys are the best players at their individual high school, and when you come here you've got guys that have been in this league for a long time like Zach Carter and Red (Daquan) Newkirk, we've got guys who have been in this league for awhile and they know how hard it is in October to go play in some of them environments, so having those guys get in here and learn the ropes, in order to be a great player it takes time. And I'm excited about him because he has a great opportunity in front of him, and he's got a bunch of brothers and teammates in front of him that want him to reach his full potential and we're excited to see that happen."



Defensive line coach David Turner has coached some great ones in his time and Watson isn't at that point yet. He knows he's going to have to work with the young man on and off the field. But the 'P' word gets thrown around a lot with young guys.

"Well, first of all potential is a fancy word of saying you ain't done it yet," Turner said Wednesday. "You're right. He has a lot of potential as do the other freshmen too. You know he's still a work in progress. He's got to get his weight under control. It's been the same from day one; he's got a lot of ability. He's got to be able to, first of all, get his weight down and get a playing weight plan so his ability can come out. So you're not talking about a guy that's worried about his conditioning and those type things. But he's coming along. I've seen some small steps he's made last couple of days and we just got to continue to keep working."

In the end, Watson has the tools to be a great one. Those tools have to be used in the right way and Turner, the staff, and his teammates have to be able to get them out of him. It's just going to take more work like the kind that saw him lose the first 32 pounds.

"He's got abilities, he's got twitch," Turner said about things he saw when recruiting Watson. "He's strong. He's athletic for a man his size; those are the things that you look for when you start talking about defensive linemen. He's got good feet, incredibly good feet for a guy his size. And he's big. You know, you can coach a lot of things but you can't coach big... he's just got to get his weight under control, get it down where his ability can take over, and allow him to be the player that he can be."



How the ‘Big Meat’ jerky-maker struck a deal with massive Gators freshman Desmond Watson

By: G. Allan Taylor
The Athletic
July 19, 2021

Spencer Paul McDonald is a former cross-country runner who weighs 140 pounds. Desmond Watson is a University of Florida nose tackle who recently enrolled at 430-plus.

McDonald is a Gators fan trying to grow his business of selling made-to-order beef jerky. Watson is an NCAA athlete trying to capitalize on name, image and likeness sponsorships.

McDonald’s jerky has adopted the advertising catchphrase “Big Meat.” And Watson, well, you don’t have to be Don Draper to see how that tagline sort of writes itself.

“Big Des, he’s a helluva billboard,” said the 32-year-old McDonald, who grew up in Orlando and now resides in Sterling, Va.

Watson wasn’t at SEC Media Days in Hoover, but the “Big Meat” T-shirt was. McDonald says all sales proceeds are going to Watson.

“First time I saw that, I thought it was great for Big Des,” said Gators defensive lineman Zach Carter, who’s still getting used to the idea of playing beside such a massive teammate. “I’ve never really seen a 430-pounder who can play football, but if you come out and see him at practice — like, in action — you’d be impressed. He’s actually got a great skill set.”

McDonald was impressed when social media clips showed Watson in spring practice drills. “I saw him hitting the sled and making Gervon Dexter look skinny.” On the eve of the NIL floodgates opening July 1, McDonald half-jokingly tweeted that his brand of Spencer’s Jerkin’ Jerky should strike up a deal with Watson.

Within hours, the player sent a DM: “If you guys are serious, I’m down.”

McDonald replied: “I’m being dead serious. Let’s work.”

As a distance runner at Jersey City University, McDonald recalls traveling to meets and getting \$2 for breakfast and \$3 for lunch, so he’s all about athletes marketing themselves. His passion for Gators football never dissipated. Two older brothers attended Florida, and McDonald was at The Swamp in 2008 when Tim Tebow, Percy Harvin and Brandon Spikes put a 51-21 hurting on No. 4 LSU.

He plans to be in Gainesville for the game against Alabama on Sept. 18 — bringing jerky and T-shirts, of course.

An idea to chew on



An infomercial changed McDonald's life, but only because he kept watching to the end.

The scene transpired inside his favorite local dive bar in Sterling. These were pre-COVID-19 days, when he was allowed to work remotely one day a week as a customer experience trainer for a home security company. So he'd haul his laptop to the bar and finish out his shift enjoying half-price burger Wednesdays.

He had just clocked out Wednesday in February 2018 when an infomercial for a power air fryer oven appeared on one of the flat-screens. "They had a discount Guy Fieri character as the pitchman, but I'm getting hooked and thinking: 'I might order this thing. I mean, it's only three or four easy payments of like \$40, right?' I thought I could buy it and air fry all the stuff I'm eating at the bar for much less."

The sale was clinched when McDonald saw how the oven dehydrated meat for making jerky. Within days he had his air fryer at home and began poring over the recipe book, making a few fateful modifications. "Theirs called for garlic powder, but I want to use real garlic and real produce," he said.

His first few stabs at jerky turned out strong, and he stashed some in a brown paper lunch bag for his next trip to the bar. That's where he became an accidental entrepreneur.

Some guys fresh off the golf course were a little drunk and only getting drunker as they played Golden Tee. Upon noticing McDonald, they came over and asked, "What the hell are you eating out of a bag?"

When he offered up a piece of jerky, they asked to buy some. His yet-to-be-named company had its first order.

By the end of his first week, he had sold \$650 worth of beef jerky. Three years later, Spencer's Jerkin' Jerky could claim to be the unofficial jerky of Gator Nation.

He sources the steak from local butchers — typically top round or eye of round — and slices it himself. McDonald handcrafts five marinade flavors, pulling ingredients from farmers markets, to give the meat at least a 24-hour soaking before the cooking starts. His personal favorite is the Habanero Bourbon, which uses Jim Beam and habanero-infused wildflower honey.

From that original air fryer, McDonald has upgraded to three dehydrators, increasing his cooking capacity from 6 pounds at a time to 30. That's a necessity to keep up with orders after he launched a website and began connecting with two of his favorite Florida college football podcasts, "Big 3 Rollup" and "Stadium and Gale."

The "Big Meat" revelation began when he sponsored a segment on "Big 3 Rollup" and needed an easy-to-remember promo code for the listener discount.

"The ad reads have gotten more and more ridiculous over a couple of years," McDonald says. "It has really grown legs. Now I've got grown men who will just yell 'Big Meat' at me."



With sales exceeding 700 pounds this year, Spencer's Jerkin' Jerky might not remain a side gig much longer. Currently renting commercial kitchen space that suffices for the direct-to-consumer business, McDonald will need an FDA facility to become a wholesaler. He has scheduled a September factory visit, the next step if he intends to get on the shelves at Wawa or Publix.

"That's the goal: to make this my only full-time job," he said. "I used to call the whole thing a series of mistakes, but are they mistakes if it winds up being successful?"

The marketing relationship with Watson has room to expand. McDonald envisions Big Des showing off his engaging personality through videos of him eating jerky on campus. For a freshman, there's potentially a career's worth of upside.

"I have this perfect-storm pipe dream for when he gets to the NFL, where the players name their school on 'Monday Night Football,'" McDonald said. "Maybe he says, 'I'm Desmond Watson, from Big Meat University.' I'm not sure how the rest of Gator Nation would feel about that, but I'd think it was cool."



Five Play Prospect: Florida Gators DT Desmond Watson

By: Demetrius Harvey

Fan Nation

May 22, 2021

For the Florida Gators, the size of its defensive line has been one of its calling cards for years, particularly under head coach Dan Mullen and defensive coordinator Todd Grantham.

In the 2021 recruiting class, Florida upgraded its defensive line in a big way - literally and figuratively -, landing mammoth defensive tackle Desmond Watson out of Armwood (Seffner, Fla).

Watson, 6-foot-5, entered the Florida football program at a massive 432 pounds, enrolling early to take advantage of Florida's spring practices. Though he is not expected to contribute right away, his size and athleticism at the defensive tackle position are part of what makes his potential that much more intriguing.

According to MaxPreps.com, Watson accounted for 113 solo tackles during his time at Armwood. He added 79 tackles for loss, 24 sacks and nine quarterback hurries. Showing off his athleticism, Watson was able to get his hands on the football five times with five pass breakups. He would cause four fumbles.

The productivity is apparent on film as he was simply bigger than his competition a lot of times, and more athletic and quick at others. The combination of the two allowed him to dominate the competition leading him to receive an offer from one of the most prestigious football programs in the nation.

Mountain-Of-A-Man

While it's easy to see just how massive Watson is by looking at his measurables in a vacuum, it's even easier to see on film as he towers over the majority of his competition. In this first clip, Watson asserts his dominance and quickly is able to manhandle the opposing offensive lineman.

The Gators would be happy to see this happen at the collegiate level, but it should be noted that simply having size doesn't always mean a player will be able to do the same thing at the next level up. In essence, everyone is big in college, but it's still humorous to see just how much of a step up Watson is from the rest.

In the clip below, Watson not only shows off his size but also his ability to affect the quarterback via a bull rush. While he has other moves, his ability to simply run over people is the one most will get excited about moving forward.

Run-Stuffing Machine

Watson had a knack for getting after the running back during his time at Armwood. Of course, even in the above clip regarding his size that can be seen, but Watson also was able to finish off



his block, mauling through offensive linemen with ease. An eye for the football is key for any defensive tackle, and Watson certainly has that.

Hands On the Football

As noted above, Watson has the ability to get his hands up in passing lanes, preventing the quarterback from completing a pass. An impressive ability that will certainly go a long way if he can continue to perform at that level moving forward with Florida.

While it is typically something defensive backs are known for, having a defensive lineman with the ability can set up plenty of plays for the defense moving forward.

Athletic for a Big Man

Though he isn't the fastest human on earth, Watson is not simply a big rock in the middle of the gridiron. He has plenty of athleticism to go along with his size and showcases that on tape routinely. He has the ability to track down rushers when they bounce the football outside.

His knack for getting after a ball carrier has been noted plenty, but having the size and athleticism without having been put into strength and conditioning coach Nick Savage's factory is a fantastic sign.

Block-Shedding Ability

His best trait, getting after the running back doesn't simply rely on what he does with his body, but also what he does with his hands and having the ability to shed blocks with a quickness. Watson displays this routinely and is able to get away from blocks with his hands and technique.

It is typically uncommon for a defensive tackle in high school to understand the small aspects of the game, but it appears that Watson already has some of the fundamentals on his side. Due to this, don't be surprised to see Watson contribute as a run-stuffing defender on goal-line packages in the near future during his freshman season at Florida.

Final Thoughts

Though Watson has plenty of work to do in the strength and conditioning program - head coach Dan Mullen stated the team would work to get his weight down -, his raw traits are impressive on tape, and it gives everyone something to look forward to.

Watson is everything one would want in a nose tackle. A player who not only is able to shed blocks due to his pure size, but is able to use his athleticism and technique to overmatch his opposition.

He sometimes needs to get a better handle of where he may throw his weight around as to not get off balance, but with time that can become second nature to how he plays. The Gators could have



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landed a diamond in the rough with Watson, and to have a player with such an upside is going to pay dividends in the future.



Big Dez made his presence known this spring for Gators

By: Bob Redman

Swamp 247

March 28, 2021

You cannot mistake him on the practice field in Gainesville. He's just a freshman and the largest person on a squad with a lot of large football players. Defensive tackle Desmond Watson, on the hoof, doesn't look like he could do very much except take up space, a lot of space. But the young man has made a lot of believers out of coaches and teammates early in his first few months on campus at Florida.

He certainly takes up the space, which in itself is a big thing when playing against interior running teams. He's listed at 6-foot-5 and 432 pounds. That is a lot of man to move around up front when he doesn't want to be moved.

He certainly has to lose some weight to reach his optimum potential at this level and hopefully beyond, but there is a lot to work with.

"Man Desmond is impressive man, he's pretty impressive for his size," redshirt junior teammate Zachary Carter said this spring. "I know he'll continue to, you know, he'll continue to trim up and stuff but he has a lot of potential."

It's really beyond just potential right now. He can make plays in a small space. He can take up the space and take on a couple of offensive linemen. But Watson could do so much more and then do it for more plays on the field than he is currently capable of doing because he just doesn't have the endurance to play a lot of snaps and be effective at this point.

But that's where the strength and conditioning program comes in. They have to get Watson into shape in order to make him a multi-down player and then we will see the potential that was mentioned above.

"First of all, he's obviously a big human," Florida defensive coordinator Todd Grantham said this spring. "The thing that impresses me about him for his size and where he is, he's really a good athlete. He's really got quick feet, he's got ability to change direction; he's obviously going to be a guy that can hold the point, do those things. But I think if he works to get in the kind of shape he wants to be-- that we want him to be--you're going to see a guy that will be able to make some range plays, and maybe get from point A to point B, a little bit better than you may anticipate right now."

So the bottom line right now is that Watson is a project in the sense of getting him to where they want him to be to play extended snaps, but he's also a guy that can be truly effective playing minimal snaps right now. We will see him in 2021, but it's up to him how much he plays.



Whitley: 'Project Des' underway for Florida football program

By: David Whitley

Gainesville Sun

March 26, 2021

Florida's spring practice has wrapped up, and one number generated more curiosity, conversation, anticipation and speculation than any other:

432.

That's what the scale showed when freshman Desmond Watson stepped on it. Visions of dominant, space-eating defensive tackles like William "The Refrigerator" Perry started dancing in fans' heads.

The Fridge was a mere 330 pounds. Watson is an entirely different appliance.

The early enrollee might be the heaviest player in Division 1 history, which could be good or not so good. Good if he drops down to a svelte 375 or so and harnesses some crazy skills for a guy that size. Not so good if the Project Des doesn't pan out.

"Our first goal is for him to lead a healthy lifestyle," Florida strength coach Nick Savage said.

Project Des is a nutrition and conditioning program that could create a monster of a football player. Success will ultimately depend on the player, which is where another number comes in:

21.

Those are the strange digits on Watson's jersey. Strange because Deion Sanders wore No. 21. Cris Collinsworth wore 21.

Florida freshman defensive lineman Desmond Watson during a drill at the Sanders football practice fields on campus.

Why Desmond Watson wears No. 21

Defensive tackles are not supposed to wear flashy numbers like 21.

Watson's mother wore it when she played basketball. Her son wears it partially in her honor, but primarily for his 9-year-old brother, Dyson. He suffered a stroke four years ago that permanently altered his life.

Desmond Watson with his younger brother Dyson.

"He can't run. He can't walk. He can't talk," said Deonzia Woullard, the boys' mother. "He's on a feeding tube, but he still has a whole personality."

Dyson loves to watch football, especially when his big brother's playing it.'

Did we say big?

With all due respect to Steve Spurrier, there's probably never been a bigger man on campus. But be not deceived by the digits 4-3-2.



"People see that number and think 'My 600-lb. Life,'" said Evan Davis, Watson's coach at Armwood High.

Like Watson, the stars of that show hope to get in better shape. But it's doubtful any of them are weight-room legends for their ability to squat hundreds of pounds.

"His ass was six inches off the floor," Davis said. "He has flexibility and hip movement you don't see in a guy that size. He's a stupid athlete for how big he is."

Project Des is designed to excavate that athlete. What's the first goal?

"We'd like to get him under 400 pounds," Savage said.

Coaches don't know what Watson's ideal playing weight will be. His thighs are bigger than the average lineman was when Spurrier was in school. His rear end could qualify for its own zip code.

But he's not that fat, he's quite athletic

The thing is, he's not that fat.

"His dad always said, 'How in the world did I get a son shaped like his mom?'" Woullard said.

His father is 6-foot-4 and 300 pounds. His mother weighs about 250, which she attributes to COVID-19 inactivity and having six kids.

Desmond was actually the smallest of her children at birth — 8 pounds, 1 ounce. The genetics quickly kicked in and he became Des the Giant of pee-wee football.

Woullard remembers one game where an opposing player ended up in her son's arms. Desmond lifted the kid up and the crowd yelled, "Nooo, Des!"

"They thought he was going to slam him down," she said. "But he laid him down like a baby in a cradle."

Watson wore No. 99 until four years ago. His brother was a healthy 5-year-old. There were no warnings he was about to suffer a stroke that would relegate him to life in a wheelchair.

Florida doesn't allow players to talk to the media until they've played, but you can imagine the impact Dyson's stroke had.

"You see your little brother being a normal kid," Woullard said. "Then he's trapped in a body that doesn't work."

She gave her son a speech:

"Be his arms. Be his legs. They can't move the way he wants them to. Let him do that through you."

The biggest obstacle Watson had in high school was finding size 17 shoes and a pair of sweatpants that would fit.

"We tried to get him in some triple XLs," Davis said. "They wouldn't even go over his thighs."



Finding gear isn't a problem at Florida, but the game is certainly more of a challenge. There was scrimmage video of Watson collapsing the offensive line, but there's no guarantee Project Des will produce a football monster.

"That's up to him," Savage said. "But there's enough there to be a dominant football player."

What Florida has right now is a freshman with one of the more unique football chassis anyone's ever seen. It's too early to tell if there's a motor to match, though there is a clue.

It's a tattoo that stretches down Watson's left forearm. It says "Dyson 21."

The number when he steps on the scale will always get the most attention. But if Watson truly makes it big, No. 21 is what will really have counted.



Meet Desmond Watson, AKA Florida's new 432-pound wrecking ball of a defensive tackle

By: Connor O'Gara
Saturday Down South
March 2021

Whether he's busting through a double team or front-squatting 375 pounds with ease, it doesn't take very long to spot Desmond Watson. Scroll through the program at whatever game he's playing in and he's sure to make one pause. Watch a routine practice of Watson's and you'll find yourself watching his every move.

After all, it's hard not to notice the dude who clocks in at 6-5, 432 pounds.

Well, he's up a bit from the 375-380 pounds he played at during his senior year at Armwood High School in suburban Tampa. Florida fans didn't take long to become familiar with the true freshman. The early enrollee already made quite the impression on his new team in spring practice, and not just because he's a fun-loving, 432-pound guy rocking No. 21 (he also wore that number in high school). Dan Mullen said "thankfully we have the equipment to even weigh (Watson) right there up at 440" and that Watson will need to lose a "12- or 13-year old" to get in the right type of playing shape (via the Gainesville Sun).

Watson could theoretically lose 75 pounds and still be heavier than Stewart Reese, who is the second-biggest player on Florida's roster at 350 pounds. Even against his fellow Florida linemen, Watson's size is impossible not to notice:

Florida defensive end Zachary Carter was asked if he had ever seen anyone as big as Watson, to which replied with a simple "no," but then added, "Hey but that's what we breed in Tampa. That's the kind of guys we breed in Tampa. But I'm really excited for Big Des. He's going to have a bright future. He's a thick kid, though. Thick kid. Dang."

They certainly don't breed them all like that in Tampa.

As Carter said, Watson is the definition of a thick kid. He's always had wide hips and a lower half unlike anyone he matches up against. Hence, the 375-pound front squats. Watson's Armwood High School coach, Evan Davis, confirmed that those front squats end in him getting in "full catcher's stance," too. There's also his back squats and bench, which are at well over 500 and 400 pounds, respectively.

"I don't think people understand. The number 440 (pounds) was thrown around, but if you stand next to him, he doesn't have this huge gut," Davis told SDS. "He's got a thick lower body. He's just a big human being. He's also strong ... I don't know if he'll be able to get down to 350. I don't know if biologically, it'll happen."

At Armwood, Watson became a force, and not at the 330 pounds he was listed as on MaxPreps. As a junior, he racked up 34 tackles for loss, 10 sacks and 3 pass breakups. That's what helped him garner offers from the likes of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Texas A&M and plenty of others (via Hudl).



“I never really saw anybody with 2 guys who could stop him,” Davis said. “You can try to double him mass-wise, but that means you’ve got to be able to put bodies on him. He’s so quick that it’s hard to get hands with 2 guys on him each time.”

That’s part of why Watson is so unique. A guy flirting with 400 pounds — at least like he was during high school — isn’t supposed to move like he does. As Davis said, “he puts on weight so fast, but it’s not like it’s anything crazy.” Watson isn’t from a super-sized family, though he clearly has good genes. He’s mom has an athletic build at roughly 5-11 (according to Davis), but go figure that Watson’s brother was Darrian McNeal, who was a 5-9, 163-pound slot receiver at Oregon.

In addition to being surprisingly light on his feet, Davis said Watson is the guy who knows what all 11 players on the defense are supposed to do at all times. He can point it out during a game, and he can break it down when he watches the film.

Football IQ isn’t lacking, and believe it or not, neither was the physical conditioning.

“He probably played 90-95% of the snaps for us,” Davis said. “People think he’s some sloppy, out of shape guy. He’s not. At all.”

Watson did have his limits. While Davis occasionally put him in for goal-line sets as a blocker, the goal was never to turn him into William “Refrigerator” Perry with the 1985 Chicago Bears. To Davis’ surprise, Watson never wanted to do that.

He also never wanted to be recruited as an offensive lineman. As tempting as it would’ve been for a college coach to look at Watson’s size and assume his future was at guard, he maintained that he wanted to stay on the defensive side of the ball to utilize those quick hands.

The 247sports comp for Watson, who was the No. 23 defensive tackle and No. 369 recruit in the 2021 class, was Terrence Cody. The similarities between the 2 are obvious. Both are from Southwest Florida, and both were fleet of foot despite the fact that they each weighed over 400 pounds at one point. Before he became known as “Mount Cody” as a 2-time All-American in Nick Saban’s defense at Alabama, Cody started at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. Watson, on the other hand, is hoping to play immediately as a true freshman in the SEC.

Florida would certainly welcome the idea of Watson making major strides this offseason and cracking the defensive tackle rotation. Gone are starting defensive tackles Marlon Dunlap and Kyree Campbell. If Watson can carve out a role that warrants 40-50 snaps as a game as a true freshman, that’ll be a major step in Year 1.

Of course, the best chance of that happening will be if he can shed some of that weight in the strength and conditioning program. That’s why Watson got to Florida in January as opposed to July. Even though he won’t get a spring game, Watson is still hoping to reap the benefits of getting that head start.

So how should the Florida staff manage him?



“Don’t be soft on him,” Davis said. “Be hard on him. He wants to be coached hard. He wants to be great. I think they’ll do that. I think they’ll push him and hold him to that standard because that’s what he wants.”

Eventually, Watson wouldn’t mind following in the NFL footsteps of Cody. Davis, who plans on taking his family up for plenty of Florida games this fall, said that Watson is working toward a much bigger picture goal, starting this offseason.

“We’ve talked and said that what he does for the next 4 years of his life will dictate what he does for the next 50-60 years,” Davis said. “If he does the right things at the University of Florida, the NFL will be in his future. I don’t think that’s a crazy thing to say.”

In the meantime, Watson will prepare to help out a Florida run defense that ranked No. 71 nationally with 170.5 rushing yards allowed per game. That was magnified in Florida’s 3-game losing streak to end the season, during which it surrendered 267 rushing yards per game. Granted, the Cotton Bowl skewed those numbers a bit when the Sooners went off for 435 rushing yards on 10.9 yards per carry.

Watson can help take care of an immediate need in 2021. If all goes according to plan, he’ll ultimately get to the snap share total he had playing in Davis’ defense at Armwood. Big Des has some big expectations.

Don’t be surprised if two guys aren’t enough to slow down No. 21.



Desmond Watson more athletic than his size would suggest

By: Thomas Goldkamp

Swamp 247

February 26, 2021

When Florida inked its 2021 signing class during the early signing period, most fans were interested in the stars in the class, like five-star cornerback Jason Marshall. But there was another guy that had coach Dan Mullen's eye.

With three seniors departing at defensive tackle, Mullen knew he needed to land some talented players there in the 2021 class.

"The defensive guys up front are guys to me that might have the opportunity, especially because we have some older guys, some seniors on the defensive line, so (Desmond) Watson and Chris Thomas, some of those bigger guys might have that opportunity to get in right away and make an immediate impact," Mullen said.

On his early signing period press conference via Zoom, Mullen joked that fans were going to be surprised by just how big Watson, in particular, was.

"I love big Des, he is an athlete," Mullen said back in mid-December. "He is a 385-pound athlete and that might be generous. I haven't seen him because of COVID. He has been talking about that he lost weight. He slimmed down to 385.

"I am going to tell you what... I don't want to get big Des upset, but if you had to pick, you put that 400 in the over/under, I know which one I'm taking in the over/under when he shows up here."

When Watson actually showed up and Florida released its spring roster, Watson tipped the scales at 432 pounds.

He's not the first mammoth athlete Mullen and his staff have signed, though. As Mullen pointed out, offensive lineman Ethan White weighed "about four bills" when he arrived on campus for the first time.

By the time the fall roster was released last season, White was all the way down to 335 pounds, illustrating what director of strength and conditioning Nick Savage can do once he's got guys in the college strength and conditioning program. Savage will have his work cut out for him again with Watson.

"Man, Desmond is impressive, man, he's pretty impressive for his size and I know he'll continue to trim up and stuff, but he has a lot of potential," defensive end Zachary Carter said. "He's going to look like a monster. Man, I'm telling you. Once you get a little Savage, it'll be a little different."

Florida's defensive line was undersized at times last year, particularly when senior Kyree Campbell was out for the first three games.

With Watson and some of the signees the last two years, it's unlikely the Gators are going to be undersized any time in the near future. And Florida believes as big as Watson is, he isn't in bad shape.

"First of all, he's obviously a big human," defensive coordinator Todd Grantham said. "The thing that impresses me about him for his size and where he is, he's really a good athlete. He's really got quick feet, he's got ability to change direction; he's obviously going to be a guy that can hold the point, do those



things. But I think if he works to get in the kind of shape he wants to be -- that we want him to be -- you're going to see a guy that that will be able to make some range plays, and maybe get from point A to point B a little bit better than you may anticipate right now."

That's a scary prospect for offensive linemen who are going to be tasked with moving Watson off his spot in the years to come.

Even if he doesn't contribute right away, everyone seems to expect big things from Watson down the road.

"Hey, but that's what we breed in Tampa," Carter said. "That's the kind of guys we breed in Tampa. I'm really excited for big Des. He's going to have a bright future. He's a big kid, though. Big kid. Dang."