

Not of This World

GREEN BAY PACKERS WIDE RECEIVER JORDY NELSON TOTALED A CAREER-HIGH NINE CATCHES IN SUPER BOWL XLV TO LEAD THE 'GREEN AND GOLD' TO A WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP, BUT HE KNOWS THAT ALTHOUGH HE'S TASTED THE PINNACLE OF FOOTBALL SUCCESS, THERE'S FAR MORE TO LIFE

■ **BY JENNA SAMPSON**

If there's anyone who is the perfect blend of faith, family and football, it's Green Bay Packers wide receiver Jordy Nelson. When you first meet Nelson and his wife Emily, you quickly realize that they're some of the kindest, most down-to-earth people you'll ever know. (They grew up together in a small town in Kansas, where his family raised cattle and grew crops on their farm, and where the couple still spends the offseason.)

In February, Jordy Nelson was the breakout star of Super Bowl XLV in the Packers 31-25 victory against the Pittsburgh Steelers, snagging a career-high nine catches for 140 yards and a touchdown. On this particular day, he is speaking at a youth outreach event called Night of Champions at Azusa Pacific University just outside Los Angeles, with more than 4,000 inner-city teens in attendance. The event theme was "Stand Up! Stand Out!"



Photo courtesy of the Nelson Family



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UNUSUAL RISE TO THE TOP: Eight years ago, Jordy Nelson was just a walk-on at Kansas State University, unexpected to make an impact on the college level or professional level, for that matter. However, after his coach switched him from safety to receiver, well, his football future kinda changed.



Photo courtesy of the Nelson Family

FAMILY FIRST: Jordy and Emily married in 2007 and have a 13-month-old son named Royal.

"This is definitely new," he admits. "I've talked at local high schools, but no events of this size."

The biggest question Nelson is getting these days is about how the Super Bowl has changed his life. His answer may surprise you.

"The Super Bowl is the pinnacle of football, and it's a great honor this being my third season, but there's more to life," he reveals. "I'll probably be done with football in six years, so if that was the pinnacle of my life, my life wouldn't stand for much. (Football) gives you a platform, but it's a question of what you'll do with it."

PATH TO FAITH AND THE NFL

If you consider the 25-year-old's perspective on success unique, you may find his path to the NFL even more unusual. The high school quarterback was a walk-on at Kansas State, where he struggled to find playing time as a safety his first two seasons. It wasn't until he switched positions with a receiver that he became successful.

"We both went on to have good careers there," he grins. In 2007, he had the greatest single season in school history, posting 122 receptions for 1,606 yards. "Everything happens for a reason, and it's great to look back and see the changes that took place. It's all in His hands."

And unlike those who can pinpoint when they gave Jesus the steering wheel of their life, for Nelson, it's been a gradual process. "Growing up we went to church as a family, and in college Emily

and I went to church. It was more of a it's Sunday, so we have to go to church type thing. My last couple of years at K-State is when I changed the way I lived my life. I wasn't a crazy kid, it was just learning more about my perspective on why I do things, not just doing them."

Jordy and Emily, who began dating in high school (they've known each other since grade school), have been married since 2007 and have a son, Royal. "We go to Bible study together," Emily says, "and I go to the women's Bible study too. He goes to chapel and he'll come home and tell me what it was about and we'll discuss it. Any important decisions that come up, we talk it out together and make the decision based on our faith."

And while Nelson's wife has played a pivotal part in his growth as a Christian, so have his Green Bay teammates. "There are a lot of Christian guys on the team, and seeing the way they live their life and the Bible studies we do with Troy (Murphy), it's been a great bond to have," he says.

"(Jordy has grown) more confident about talking about his faith," Murphy shares, "but he doesn't want to be up front like tonight (at Night of Champions). He doesn't want the attention. He has strong character and integrity. What you see is his life and how he lives it."

EXAMPLES OF CHRIST

That value system and work ethic seems to be a common thread throughout the entire receiving corps, as well as with quarterback Aaron Rodgers. "They aren't going to go out and start preaching to people, but what they will do is start sharing by how they make decisions and live their lives," explains Murphy. "You won't see these guys out late at night at clubs and asking for attention and interviews. They're blue-collar Christians and football players."

For Nelson, becoming a dad has had perhaps the largest affect on his walk with the Lord. Late at night, rather than hitting the night clubs, the new dad is hitting his knees in prayer. "I have a 13-month-old boy, so I pray a lot for guidance to make sure I don't screw things up as a dad," he says wryly.

In fact, it's through prayer that Nelson connects with God on a daily basis. "A lot of praying—and just putting thought into my daily decisions. Knowing that people are watching, even if I'm not out speaking all the time, people will recognize the way I live my life. There are so many athletes that are eager to get up and talk, who memorize Scripture, and then go out and party and have affairs. The two don't go together."

"With our Bible study, we made a big point of (with the Super Bowl), what are you going to do with the opportunities that come your way? That's what I try to tell kids when I speak," he explains. "I could be done next year. If sports and football is all you live for and stand for, what am I going to do the rest of my life?"

And while the Super Bowl has put the Packers in the spotlight, guys like Jordy Nelson are using that spotlight for God's glory. The 4,000 teens who heard him share his testimony were given a lot to think about as they were bussed back to their inner-city neighborhoods: the hope of salvation — and a rare glimpse inside the life of a star athlete who is living in this world, but not of it (1 John 2:16).

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FAITHFUL RECEIVERS

Packers team chaplain Troy Murphy, who is also the lead teaching pastor at Green Bay Community Church, is encouraged by the spiritual growth on the team. He leads a team Bible study on Wednesday nights and a Saturday night chapel at the hotel before games.

Murphy offers a unique perspective on the biggest challenge of being a Christian in the NFL. "I think the lie the evil one tells these guys is that they have to isolate themselves from relationships," he says. "What these guys get taught early is: don't trust your family, don't trust anybody, so they isolate. As we know, anyone isolated will probably implode. It's not healthy. That's the biggest danger I see. It's not the money or wealth — I think God can use those things. It's the isolation."

Murphy also challenges the players when it comes to accountability. "If you think you can handle your spiritual journey on your own, you've got another thing coming," he says. "What is your weakness and who knows about it? The whole game of football is don't show your weakness. The whole idea of spirituality and following Jesus is the exact opposite. He says, you're weak, I make you strong."

-Jenna Sampson