

Jackson Destine

One young man turns his life around—and wins the High School Heisman

At 5 years old, Jackson Destine was selling drugs for his uncles. At 12, he witnessed a drive-by shooting in the crime-infested neighborhood where he lived with his grandmother.

Before he had finished the eighth grade, he'd been suspended dozens of times and kicked out of a middle school. The odds of him succeeding in life were slim, but Destine not only beat the odds—he crushed them.

Now a senior at Atlantic High School, Destine is a straight-A student, president of the senior class, an outstanding member of the wrestling team and a lieutenant in the school's Criminal Justice Academy.

"Jackson always amazes me," says Nickoletta Loulis, one of his teachers and a mentor. "He sets the bar high for himself, and he always delivers."

In addition to working on weekends at a retail shop, he is also an entrepreneur who sold candy to earn money to play sports and now sells branded T-shirts, jackets and hoodies as part of "a movement" to encourage other students to persevere. He's also a musician who uses rap to share his story with others.

In December, Destine received national recognition as the winner of the Wendy's High School Heisman Award, a program that recognized his outstanding academic achievements, leadership and success as an athlete who set several school records while wrestling and competing in both football and track and field. The award, which comes with a \$10,000 scholarship, was presented to Destine during a ceremony in New York City, where he stood with four other young male finalists from across the country and five female finalists, chosen from more than 30,000 applicants.

"I was so nervous, I couldn't speak," he recalls. "I'm not used to winning."

Joining him on the trip, along with his grandmother and a nephew, was Loulis, Atlantic's AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) elective teacher and coordinator. "We didn't realize what a big deal it was until we got there," she says, adding that Destine will be invited to Heisman Trophy ceremonies from now on.

The trip to New York to receive the award was in some ways a metaphor for how far Destine has traveled in life since his days as a street kid. New York was the farthest away from home he'd ever been. It also marked the first time Destine had been out of South Florida and the first time on a plane.

Going far is something few expected of Destine.

"I was told I would never amount to much," he says. "I was told I would just be another black man who would die in the street."

The grandson of Haitian immigrants, Destine was raised by his grandmother, with his mother never really in the picture. "My grandma was my mom," he says.

His role models were two uncles who survived by selling drugs. There was no doorknob on the front door of their apartment—apparently lost when police kicked in the door during a raid—and no electricity.

"Instead of being inside watching TV, I was outside watching the streets," he says. "That was my entertainment. I'd be there under a tree until I fell asleep."

In school, Destine was a terror, getting into fights, talking back to teachers and refusing to listen to anyone. "It wasn't my intention to be bad," he says. "It's just what happened."

Still, there was something about Destine that set him apart. He was smart, getting A's and B's.

Then there was this.

"I had a dream that I was going to be successful," Destine says. "I woke up from that dream and said, 'Let's chase it.'"

He says there was no one single turning point that led to his metamorphosis from a long shot to a leader, but his behavior began to change once he reached Atlantic High School and discovered there were people who cared about him and wanted to help him.

"No one in my family ever told each other 'We love you,'" he says.

He doesn't know why, but during his first semester at Atlantic, he was enrolled by the school in the Criminal Justice Academy as an elective. "I didn't even know what it was," he says.

He knew, however, that he didn't want to be there as soon as he realized the program was run

by police officers from Delray Beach. Police officers, after all, were the enemy.

He acted out, and one of the officers running the program was ready to give him the boot, but another was willing to give him a chance. "He saw something in me," Destine says. "He knew I was going to be somebody."

Eventually, the officer who wanted him out would become one of his greatest allies. "She cared about me. She had genuine love for me," he says. "She gave me a watch and said it was my time to be successful."

In addition to being enrolled in the AVID program, which prepares students from low-income families for college, he is also receiving after-school help in the nonprofit Delray Students First program, which provides ACT and SAT test preparation.

Already assured of a four-year scholarship to Florida State University, Destine is still exploring the possibility of attending an out-of-state school. His hope is to eventually return to Delray Beach and perhaps start a nonprofit, maybe even run for mayor.

For Destine, the life he's living now is one that few who knew him in middle school would have expected.

"It's a dream come true, but the dream's not over yet," he says. 🌟

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