

## No Average Joe

Written by {ga=jta1975}

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Every once in a while a player comes along that is as refreshing as a Lake Erie breeze on a hot, summer day. Joe Haden seems to be one of those players. I say this not simply because of his All-Rookie performance on the field but also because he seems to be one of the rare breed who adopts Cleveland as his home and actually **lives** there. Not just resides there, but embraces all the area has to offer a wealthy, successful young man.

Haden combines an engaging personality with the ability to be the fun loving “life of the party” but he’s yet to cross the line of being reckless and out of control. He gives the impression that he does not necessarily need to be the center of attention but more times than not his outgoing personality makes him that guy anyway and he also seems to get just how much of an effect he can have on kids in the community.

I have actually respected the character of Haden since this past winter when my sister-in-law told me the about him attending a charity basketball game at the high school where she works. She could not stop raving about how he went above and beyond what the normal athletes give for such events. It had nothing to do with giving expensive things away, but everything to do with spending his time.

She praised him for not only staying and signing as many autographs as people wanted but actually playing and interacting with the kids without being pushed, poked or begged. Haden

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treated everyone as if he was just some guy. He even took it to another level by taking a group of people out to dinner after the event.

The fact that he actually took the time to hang out with the group is a big indicator to me that he really is a genuine dude. He could have taken the easy way out by showing up, letting the kids see him and signing a few autographs before slipping out a side door because that would be really easy to do. And let's be honest; a lot of guys do exactly that. But Haden didn't just bail when the first opportunity popped up. He stayed and truly interacted with the group, showing that he didn't consider himself to be much different or any better than them.

Over the years a lot of athletes have done things like this in her school district but my sister-in-law has only really raved about two: Josh Cribbs and Joe Haden. For me, stories like this go a long way in forming a true opinion on someone that you've never met in person.

I think his immersing himself in the community is the thing that impresses me the most about Haden off the field. I was blown away the first time I saw him at a Cavs game in full Cavalier uniform and wearing an Anderson Varejao wig. I mean, to me it is a rare breed of person who can be one of the best athletes in an aggressive game like football, be a millionaire at the age of 21 and to not take himself so seriously that he has any trouble or is too self-conscious to have a good time.

If the Cavs were the hot ticket that they were when they were winning then it wouldn't be as big of a deal to me because athletes show up at some events just because it is the "place to be". Haden simply wanted to go to a game and have fun with his family and friends just like most any normal fan would.

Haden took it to another level when showed up at an Indians game in full uniform showing all of us in this city that he is more like us than not despite being from Maryland originally and not likely a Cleveland sports fan.

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Sports fans will grant icon status to players they feel connected to in some way. That comes from either winning games or forming some other bond. By embracing the city and its people the way Joe Haden has, he is forming a bond that goes beyond his ties to the Browns and makes him (more importantly to casual and hardcore fans) part of the community.

Look at LeBron James if you want to see the other side of the coin in Cleveland. If you think about the attitude and message James sent to the city of Cleveland every time he had an chance then maybe you can better understand what I mean by Haden embracing this community as opposed to mocking it.

James would go to the Indians game only when they played the Yankees while wearing a Yankees hat. Now, LeBron can be a fan of whoever he wants to and he shouldn't be ridiculed about it but it was as if he ***needed or wanted*** to flaunt his love for another city right in front of a city that held him on a pedestal. James wearing the hat was just to let us know that he wasn't like us. He felt the same need to let us know he wasn't like us when he showed up at the Browns game wearing Dallas gear. He was basically saying, "I don't care if you guys like me or not".

Haden's appeal isn't confined only to the community though. He expresses the same humility, work effort and good sense on the field and in front of the media.

In this day and age we are pounded with countless stories of athletes making all the wrong decisions and that makes it all the nicer to see a young person get "it" right from the start. I remember an early training camp interview where Haden was saying that his job was to learn the ropes from the veterans while trying to get better every day. He said he was going to compete as hard as he could and trust that his coaches would play him when they thought he was ready. Now, this in itself is not an earth shattering statement, and all of these things are the simple and classic "cliche" things to say as a rookie, but when Haden said it he was sincere.

Haden did start camp in the nickel package, learned how to practice and prepare from the veterans and then soon took over as a cornerback in the base defenses.

Joe Haden is a terrific football player. Just as inspiring as his play on the field though, Joe

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Haden has chosen to be an ambassador to the city of Cleveland and its people. He spends a ton of time creating relationships that will live well beyond his time on the field.

No matter if it is wearing a Cavs and Indians uniform, escorting Dan Gilbert to the NBA lottery, signing autographs at charity events, spending the day at Cedar Point with the local radio station, Tweeting people to meet him at a sushi bar and picking up the tab (yes he really did that), or simply **getting a local company** to print his Lockdown Joe T-shirts, it is nice to have someone with the character and personality that he possesses not only embracing the city but truly making an effort to weave himself into its fabric.

That's something that will live beyond Haden's playing days and will endear him to people here for decades.

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