



Following is a transcript of an interview I conducted with Browns' Safety TJ Ward via cell phone on Tuesday, September 20.

Chris: TJ, at what age did you start playing football? What positions?

**TJ: I started playing when I was 8 years old. The first team I played for was the Antioch Bobcats. I played Running Back and Linebacker.**

What was your favorite college and pro team growing up?

**I grew up in the Bay area, so even though they weren't very good at the time, Cal was my favorite team, but I also liked Florida State and Florida, I don't know for some reason I was fond of the Florida teams. I'm a big Niner fan, not so much Raider fan, but I'm a huge Niner fan. My family's from San Francisco, and we're all diehard Niner fans.**

Do you still root for the 49'ers a little bit to this day?

***A little bit. Not so much. I've got a couple pals that play for them right now, so a little bit.***

You went to De La Salle High School during their (record-setting) 151 game winning streak. What was that like?

***It was unlike any thing or any team I've ever been a part of so far. First off, we weren't the most athletic team, we didn't have the biggest guys, but we all worked with determination and just sheer will to win.***

***Along with our great coach, Coach Bob Ladouceur, he's one of the most famous high school coaches of all time.***

***He's a great leader, a great teacher, and a great mentor.***

***He helped a lot of students in class do a lot of stuff off the field as well as on the field, and our discipline I think was one of the big things that helped us win.***

Did they lose when you were there?

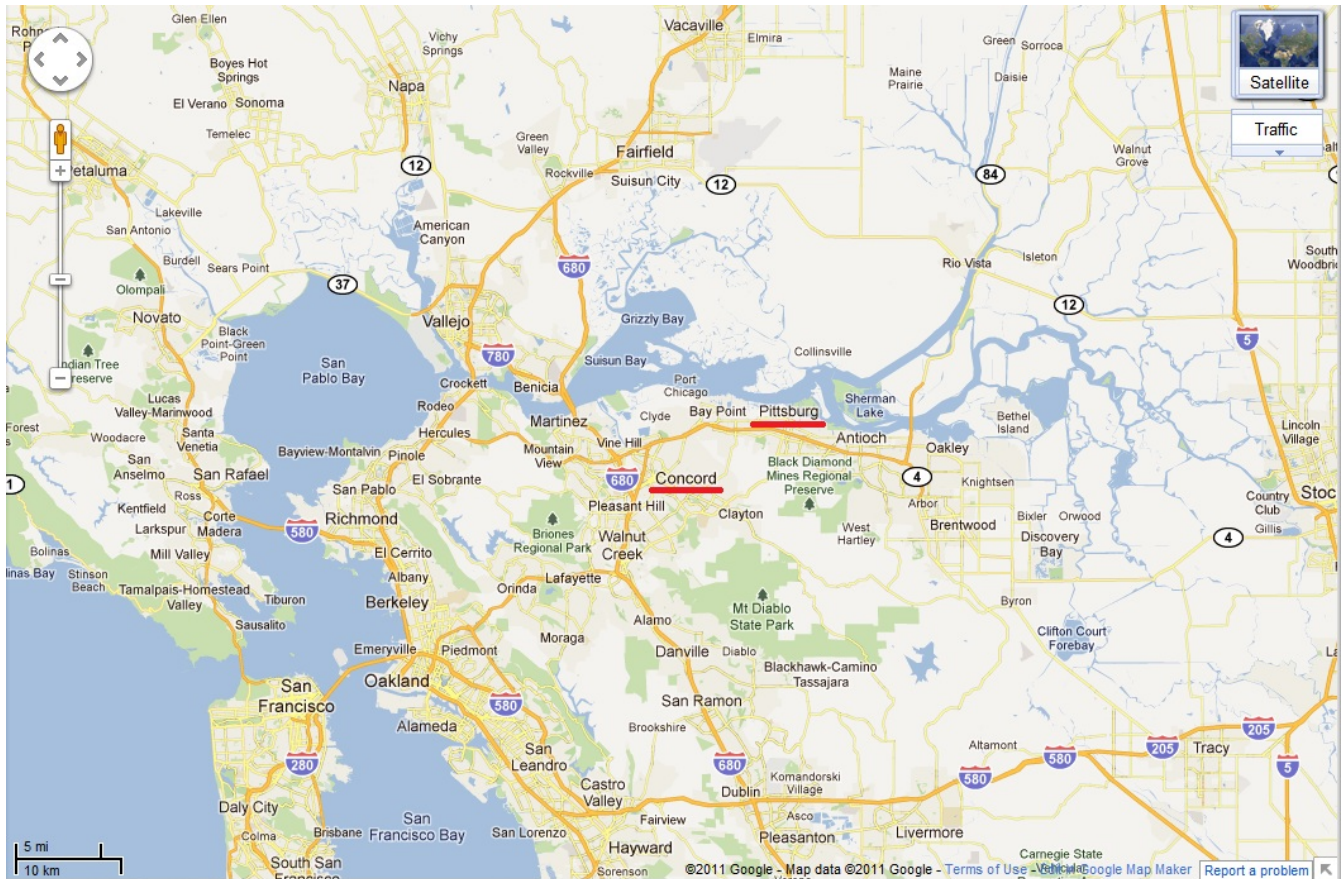
***No, I didn't lose a game in high school.***

How is it that you came to go to De La Salle?

***My dad, growing up - we grew up in San Francisco - he heard about this school that was pretty good and it was a Catholic school... I moved from San Fran to Antioch, but ended up going to high school in Concord... I guess it was his goal for us to go there, me and my brother and my sister. It was his dream or mission for me to go there.***

What was the Concord area like growing up?

***Concord to me is a middle class suburb, nothing too wowing about it or anything, just a bunch of hard-working people. It's a nice area though.***



There is a Pittsburg near Concord, right?

***Yeah, Pittsburg, California, they were our high school rivals.***

So when you came to the Browns, it was natural for you to hate Pittsburgh?

***(Laughing) Oh yeah, it was natural. It came easy.***

After De La Salle, you walked on at Oregon. What made you choose that school?

***We had some ties... our Dean [Joe Aliotti] at De La Salle, his brother [Nick Aliotti] was Defensive Coordinator up at Oregon, and along with that, 4 of my best friends got scholarships and were heavily recruited, so I thought it would be the best place for me to go and the best positioning and the best opportunity for me to get on the field as soon as possible.***

You had a knee injury at De La Salle and then one in Oregon that needed 2 surgeries, correct?

***At high school my senior year I ruptured my patella tendon. I had a meniscus up at Oregon, I tore my meniscus.***

After all these major knee surgeries, did you ever consider hanging 'em up?

***It was brief thought, in and out, but I never wanted to give up on my dream and what I wanted to do, so as long as I could walk, I was gonna be able to play football.***

When did you seriously consider professional football as a career?

***I thought I could play in the NFL after my freshman year at Oregon, just competing with some players that were NFL bound on my own team and then coming in and playing pretty well against players on other teams that were projected to get drafted. But when I held my own or did pretty well against them, I knew then I could definitely play.***

How often do you keep in contact with your Oregon teammates?

***I call some of the younger guys every once in a while just to see how they're doing and right before a game just to wish them good luck and then guys that I played with like Pat Chung [NE], Walter Thurmond [SEA], Jairus Byrd [BUF], John Stewart [CAR], we talk every few weeks just to see how they're doing. I've got a couple friends out of the NFL right now that are just working that I played with, so every few weeks.***

Do you get a chance to go out with them when they're in town?

***Not yet. During the offseason, I hung out with the guys I mentioned earlier. Not during the season so much. I haven't really had the opportunity to go out and hang out yet, I more save it for the offseason.***

Where do you usually live in the offseason?

***I live in California. In Antioch, the Concord area. Back home.***

Were you surprised to hear your name called that early in the 2nd round of the NFL Draft?

***It was a surprise based on where I was projected to go, but it wasn't such a surprise coming from the teams that said they would take me in the second round if they had the opportunity. The Browns were one of them that said they would take me in the second round, so it wasn't surprising, but I was kind of shocked because of all the negative things I had heard.***

Were they injury related, these negative things you heard?

***Yeah, they were mainly injury related because I had knee injuries and I missed half my senior season with the high ankle sprain. So, of course there were questions, but I just knew I'd be cool and ready to play whenever they'd call me, and thankfully the Browns***

***did and I was blessed to play my rookie year all 16 games, and hopefully I'll do the same this year.***

You made an impact right away with the Browns. After the hit last year on Jordan Shipley that got you fined, did you find yourself holding back a little when you made a hit, maybe thinking too much about where to hit rather than acting instinctively?

***Yeah. Whenever you get fined that amount of money and you're just out there doing your job, the next opportunity you have those thoughts are gonna run through your head, and it's unfortunate that we're being forced to aim lower, I guess, and I don't think that's going to prevent any injuries. You saw that Jordan Shipley tore his ACL this year because instead of getting hit around the shoulder pads or his head, he got chopped, took his knee out, and tore his ACL. So you ask any Receiver if they'd rather get hit in the upper body or the lower body in that situation, I'm pretty sure about 95% of them would say 'Hit me up high, because I don't want you to tear my knee.'***

Tell me about your primary responsibilities in the new 4-3 scheme.

***I'm playing Strong Safety this year, whereas last year it wasn't really defined. It was pretty much just a Safety that played wherever the game plan wants you to be. So far this year, I'm pretty much in the box, even though last game I was out of the box a lot because their game plan forced me over the deep middle. But I don't think it's much of a difference at my position, from a 3-4 to a 4-3, in my role as much as the Linebackers and D Line changed.***

Do you find yourself in coverage more often this year?

***With Coach Jauron's Defense, he plays a lot more man coverage than we did last year, so he says I'm probably going to end up covering up more than I did, but I don't think that's a difference between a 3-4 to 4-3, I think that's just Coach Jauron's scheme.***

When you make a tackle, I usually know it's you before I even see your number. Are there any tricks hard hitters like yourself use when tackling someone?

***My coaches say that I leave my feet a little bit, a lot of my tackles you'll see me lunging or throwing my body or just jumping into a player. I like to use my ability to explode, use my legs to make my tackle, make sure I get the runner down.***

So if you were to teach someone to tackle, what would be your advice? Launch yourself at them?

***(Laughing) Yeah. And wrap up.***

Who are the vocal leaders of the Defense on the field and in the locker room?

***I'm going to have to start with D'Qwell Jackson, our Middle Linebacker. Sheldon Brown is a true leader. A  
htyba Rubin, he's more a leader by example, he doesn't say too much.  
I consider myself a leader, vocally and by example. Joe [Haden] has become a leader as well.  
I think we have a bunch of leaders in our own right on the Defensive side.***

(Writer Note - It was good to hear TJ say that he considered himself a leader, thus nullifying questions I had pressing to see if he wanted to become one.)

As a player, whose game do you admire?

***Oh, two Safeties in our own division, Troy Polamalu and Ed Reed They've been doing this for 10 years now, and they're definitely two of the best - if not THE two best - Safeties in the league. I  
definitely admire their game and work ethic.***

Speak about what seems to be the vast difference between Dick Jauron and Rob Ryan.

***Their personalities are completely different. Coach Rob was really outgoing, vocal, speak-his-mind type coach, and Coach Jauron is more laid back, he doesn't say too much, just expects you to do what you're asked to do. He's a very quiet person, but he's strong at the same time.***

Do you think it matters if players like their coach or not?

***I think it definitely does matter. I think that if you have a coach you admire and like, respect a lot... I personally don't need that much incentive to play, but I think that a coach will make you play that much harder if you like him.***

So you think that players actually play harder for certain types of coaches?

***They definitely do.***

(Writer Note - Todd Haley, beware.)

What do you consider the strongest part of your game?

***I'd say my instincts and my tackling ability. I think once I see something I go at it full speed and that helps me a lot.***

What do you need to work on the most?

***Reading the ball, watching it come off the Quarterback's hand, and tracking it all the way.***

Do you think there is a disconnect between the common fan and professional athletes? How much attention do you pay to media and fan critique?

***I listen to it with an open ear, but I don't take it to heart at all. I know fans are fans, they speak from the heart usually because they love the team so much, they want to see them do well. But I tell you with a grain of salt that there are some things I can learn a lot from just listening to the opinions of fans and the media and there are some things that are taken overboard.***

Do you think the new social media like Twitter has opened players up to a whole new level of criticism?

***I think it makes players more reachable, and they can speak their mind as well as the media can say what they want about players. Everyone is in tune to it whether you're a VP or just somebody working down at your local store, we're all in the same place as far as the media and getting your thoughts out there. But I think it has some negatives and some positives. If it's used in the right way, it can be all positive, but I think some players abuse it, some people abuse it - media as well - and it becomes negative.***

