

# Sports as a sanctuary

By Joe Pratt

When Josh Ehambe walked onto the University of Kansas campus, into the athletics facilities and football stadium, he envisioned himself fulfilling a lifelong goal of earning a spot on a college football team. It was all part of a long, tumultuous process that solidified another step in Ehambe's quest to make the NFL. But making the Kansas team was the continuation of a trend set by his brother, cousins and family members before.

"My brother played in the NBA a little bit and went overseas...I had a close family friend of mine back in the day that I grew up and played basketball with and football with, Emmanuel Mudiay... the No. 7 draft pick to the Denver Nuggets in 2014. So, sports was something that was like secondhand nature."

Early on, Ehambe showed signs that he would later attempt to follow his friend Emmanuel to the NBA. "I grew up playing basketball," he said, "My family told me that when I was a kid, when I was a baby, I used to crawl out the crib and go get 'Space Jam' and put it in a cassette player."

Despite his love for basketball even to this day, Josh decided in eighth grade that he was better-suited for a career in football as a linebacker than running point like Mudiay. From there, Josh and Emmanuel kicked off their high school careers, hopeful to stick by each others' sides throughout college, and into the pros.

Throughout this process of growing up, realizing his football future and navigating high school, struggles in the background remained. Ehambe recalled how on the weekends, his family would "go to church and everything [would] be fine. But when we got home, there was a lot of

yelling, arguing,” he said. “Father used to put his hands on us ... this discipline that's really, really, really hard.”

His father felt the pressure of supporting his seven children, with Josh being the youngest. Originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Josh’s father provided for the family while his mom remained at home to aid her children. With parents in and out of the house and relying on his older siblings for guidance, Josh, like his siblings and cousins that came before him, pursued sports as a sanctuary away from the Ehambes’ complex home life.

“I feel like an outlet for me was sports. I feel like honestly, if I wasn't playing sports or if it wasn't for the YMCA or Lifetime Fitness, God knows what I would have been involved with,” Josh remarked.

Sports were able to elevate himself and close friend Emmanuel through the ranks of high school sports, even to the point where Mudiay was “the No. 1 point guard in the country and committed to SMU,” Ehambe said.

After his sister signed off on two different high school transfers, Josh and Emmanuel found themselves at Prime Prep Academy in Dallas for their final year before college. While this unconventional style of schooling funded by NFL and MLB veteran Deion Sanders was surely enjoyable to be around their teammates all the time, it fell short of the general standard that would allow the NCAA to accept the school’s transcripts.

“The NCAA came and basically said it was a non-accredited school,” Ehambe said. The members of the school then hung back for summer to complete educational packets which would eventually be presented to the NCAA at its headquarters in Indianapolis.

Despite the NCAA accepting these packets and allowing Josh to join the Kansas football team, he had to watch his first season, partly because “everybody [who] went through Primary Academy...none of us received a high school diploma.”

After sitting out in year one, Josh was able to go on to play three seasons for the Jayhawks before medically being disqualified.

“I was always taught like, have faith and work hard and God will do whatever it is that you want him to do to take you to the NFL, he'll go do these things for you. But no one ever taught me what faith was like if things didn't go my way, If I didn't go to the NFL,” Josh said.

Josh heard a calling to remain in the sports industry and to accept a position as an intern with Kansas Athletics. It was not long until Josh's generosity, intelligence and relatability were utilized at Baylor. From offering guidance through talking with the Baylor basketball program and offering an accurate insight into some struggles that student-athletes can relate to, Ehambe was brought on to the basketball team's staff full-time. Now as the Director of Mission Impact and Enrichment for Baylor Athletics, he works directly with student-athletes, keeping it “real and honest,” and talking to athletes about anything, not just competition.

From forging connections with student-athletes at Baylor, Josh has carved out his place within Baylor Athletics and looks to continue his impact through education.

“My desire is to open up a K through 12, charter or private school, kind of what I went through; I would love to do it back home in the DFW area,” Ehambe said. “And also of course, they'll be involved in student-athletes, not only student-athletes, but professional athletes.”

Until the day his charter school opens its doors, though, Ehambe looks to maintain Baylor on its enriched path to academic and athletic achievement.

