

December 14, 2011

Rick Bozich | The graduate: Famed NFL lineman Joe Jacoby returns for his degree

Jacoby will get his U of L degree Friday

Joe Jacoby arrived anonymously at the Washington Redskins' training camp as an undrafted offensive tackle from the University of Louisville in 1981. He didn't leave the Redskins until he had won three Super Bowls and played in four Pro Bowls. He's owned an automobile dealership, hosted a radio show and coached a college football team.

But there is one thing Jacoby did not achieve, and it troubled him as much as trying to block Lawrence Taylor:

Jacoby departed U of L after the 1980 season, skipped the spring semester and failed to finish the final 30 hours toward his degree.

"That bothered me because my wife (Irene) and I had always talked about the importance of education to our two daughters," Jacoby said. For the last three seasons, Jacoby had also lectured on that topic to the offensive linemen he coached at Shenandoah University, a Division III school in Winchester, Va.

"How could I keep saying that when I didn't have my degree?" Jacoby asked.

That changes Friday night. Look for a 6-foot-7, 280-pound guy who's 52 years old. He'll be walking on stage at the KFC Yum! Center to accept his bachelor of science degree in workforce leadership at the University of Louisville commencement.

In January 2010, Jacoby joined the Houston/Bridgeman Fellowship Degree Completion Program. Less than two years later, after countless hours completing correspondence courses on his laptop, Jacoby will add his name to Kenny Payne, Tony Stallings, Carwell Gardner and others in the group of 51 athletes who have benefitted from the program to finish their degree work since the program started in 2000.

"I wasn't sure this day would come," said Jacoby, who retired in Warrenton, Va., after 13 seasons with the Redskins. "I've got three Super Bowl rings and great memories of everything we achieved as a team.

"But this is a different feeling of achievement because it's an individual thing. There was nobody on the offensive line helping me through this. There were plenty of people encouraging me, especially my wife and daughters. Even (former Redskins coach Joe) Gibbs. But in the end I still had to get the work done."

"Joe's been very patient and persistent," said Marvin Mitchell, U of L senior associate athletic for academic services. "When guys leave and come back after such a long period of time, it's a complex thing. But Joe really wanted to finish this."

It's been a remarkable journey, one that Jacoby will share when he speaks to students at a reception in

the college of education and human development at 1 p.m. today. His father and younger brother died when Jacoby was a student at Western High School. He didn't ignore academics, but he wasn't obsessed with making the National Honor Society.

"Looking back at it now, I was an angry young man," he said. "If there were 300 students in my graduating class, I was probably No. 151. I put some effort into it, depending upon what day it was."

Same thing at U of L — until his senior season. Jacoby said he finished classes in the fall of 1980 but did not enroll for the spring semester of his senior year. He was convinced that he needed to train for the NFL draft. A degree? Maybe some day.

Guess what? Nobody drafted him.

"It could have easily turned out a lot different than it did," he said.

The Redskins invited him to training camp as a free agent. Washington had an offensive line coach with Kentucky connections named Joe Bugel. Jacoby impressed Bugel and Gibbs, the head coach. But Jacoby's mother died in August of his rookie camp. He returned to Louisville for the funeral and didn't want to go back to camp. His older brother, Charlie, talked (and talked) him into understanding that he belonged with the Redskins.

Jacoby started knocking people down and didn't stop. Playing left tackle, he became a signature member of The Hogs, an offensive line that became the most admired group of blockers in the game. Long before he raved about Brett Favre, pro football analyst John Madden howled about Jacoby, Russ Grimm, Mark May and the other Redskins offensive linemen.

Check the video and you'll see Jacoby leading the way for John Riggins' remarkable 43-yard touchdown run that sealed Washington's Super Bowl XVII victory over Miami in 1983 at the Rose Bowl.

Wonderful memories, certainly. But more than two years ago, Jacoby sold his automobile dealership in suburban Washington D.C. He started coaching at Shenandoah. If he told his guys to be serious about their degrees, how could he not have his?

"It was time," Jacoby said.

Time that will be confirmed when Jacoby accepts his degree Friday night.
