

## Sports

### Blackman overcomes obstacles

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On game weeks, Jerrod Blackman makes at least three round trips from Kansas City to Council Bluffs to play for the American Professional Football League champion Iowa Blackhawks.

At three hours each way, it's quite a journey for the 27-year-old rookie.

But it's nothing compared to the long path the 6-foot-4, 335-pound offensive lineman has taken to get to the APFL. The Chicago native has dodged mortar rounds in Iraq and overcome a serious fall that left him deaf in one ear to make it to the indoor gridiron.

Growing up, Blackman was inspired by the fame and fortune of professional football. Now that he's made it, albeit on a very low level, it means more to him than he could've ever imagined.

"When I was younger, it was a big dream for me," he said. "But after what I've went through, it's not about the money. It's strictly for the love of the game. That's what made me want to play again."

Blackman played prep football at Gordon Tech, a Catholic school in Chicago. He lived in a third-floor flat with his mom and brother, one floor above current Blackhawk teammate LaMain Rucker. By the time Blackman was in high school, the former Northern Illinois University standout had already been with the Miami Dolphins and the Barcelona Dragons of NFL Europe.

At the time, Rucker was playing semi-pro ball. His neighbor was preparing for college. They trained together and became close friends. Blackman was the best man in Rucker's wedding.

"LaMain was one of those guys I always looked up to," he said. "I followed him for a long time. I've always been a fan."

When Rucker moved to Nebraska in 2002, the two lost touch. Blackman went to Loras College in Dubuque, where he started on the offensive line as a freshman. He played his sophomore season near home at Joliet (Ill.) Junior College before joining the Army.

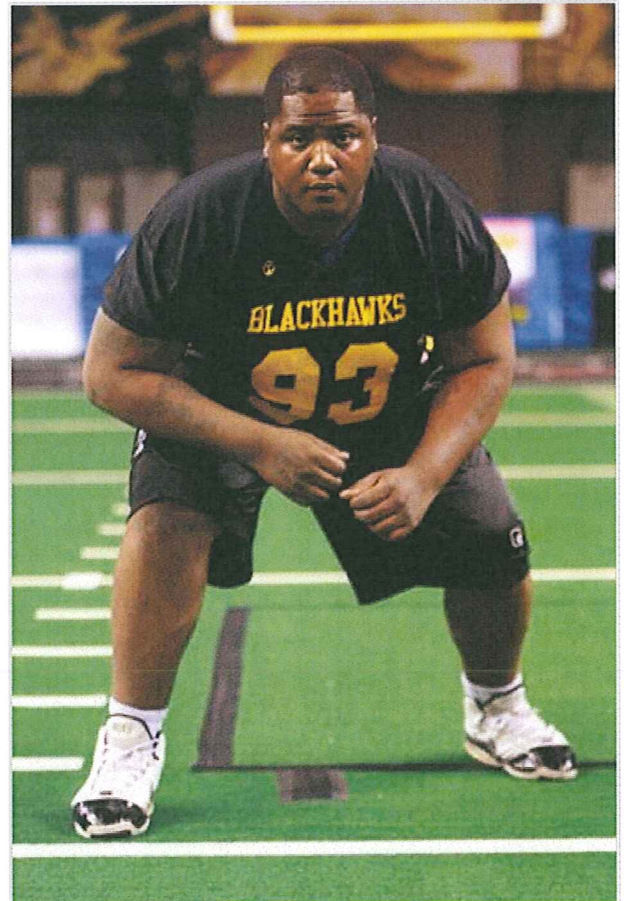
Blackman's unit was deployed to Iraq in early 2006. The private's C-RAM (Counter Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar) group, which used a gun from a naval ship to protect a base by destroying incoming enemy rounds in the air, fell under a mortar attack one day after arriving in Kuwait City. The entire unit piled into a 40-yard-long bunker that was 4 feet wide and 4 feet deep.

"We had 200 guys in there, but you could hear a pin drop in the sand," Blackman said. "That was a scary feeling."

It wouldn't be his last. A year ago, Blackman fell off a balcony while hanging out with friends in suburban Chicago. He leaned against a railing that collapsed, sending him 15 feet to the ground.

Blackman, who began working for the U.S. Postal Service after leaving the military, fractured two of his lumbar vertebrae (L3 and L4) and completely lost the hearing in his left ear. He had played semi-pro football for the Leyden Lions since Iraq, but a future in athletics seemed bleak.

"I actually thought I'd never play ball again," he said. "I couldn't walk for three days and was on a cane for two months. I thought football could be over with."



Staff photo/Cindy Christensen - Jerrod Blackman's long road to the Iowa Blackhawks includes injury, military service and endless miles of travel. The Chicago native doesn't play football for money, but rather for the joy of the sport.

Blackman said going through rehab was a rough time. Family and friends helped him through.

At the same time, the Postal Service was closing the building he worked in. Blackman had the option of relocating to Des Moines or Kansas City. He chose K.C., which led him back to Rucker.

They hadn't spoken in nearly eight years. Through Rucker's mother-in-law, they reconnected.

Iowa's star defensive lineman told his former training partner about the Blackhawks. One look at Rucker's APFL championship ring brought Blackman to Council Bluffs for team tryouts.

"I drove up, did my thing and the coaches were impressed," he said. "Coach (Mike) Wolff later told me he was excited to see me because LaMain had told him about me. I guess the rest is history."

Blackman is now Iowa's starter at left guard, a position that suits him well because it makes his deaf ear a nonfactor. Rucker said he's not at all surprised about his friend's success.

"He's still the player I thought he was 10 years ago," he said. "He isn't disappointing me. He came in and won a starting job on offense. And he's doing a really good job."

Blackman said it's "a great feeling" to be on the same team as the player he looked up to as a high schooler. Rucker shares that feeling.

"I'm glad to play with him, and I'm glad he's here," he said. "I love him just like my brother."

Blackman said his goals with the Blackhawks are simple -win the APFL championship this season and see how far football can take him. After signing autographs for some young fans following Iowa's home opener, his long drives from Kansas City on work days seem shorter.

"That was the best feeling ever," he said. "No one could ever equal the amount of joy I got from signing autographs for those kids. (Making that trip) is all part of the game. It's worth the drive."