

Jermichael Finley runs a new route in life

By Michael Cohen, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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ALEDO, Texas — The new Jermichael Finley rumbles into the parking lot with windows down and music blaring, his white Ford Super Duty dwarfing cars and SUVs alike. He exits the vehicle all sunglasses and smiles, a bucket hat hanging loosely around his neck. On this beautiful spring evening in early April, it's time to go to work.

Finley's office is the turf field at Aledo Middle School, where two high school football players are waiting for his instruction. He dons a pair of black Nike cleats customized with the number he wore as a tight end for the Green Bay Packers, 88, and removes from his pocket a Louis Vuitton wallet customized with his initials, JDF. He pinches a wad from his tin of Skoal Xtra, and the second workout of the day begins.

"You've got some Aledo in you now," says Logan Peterson, a 17-year-old tight end, referencing Finley's dip. "That's like an Aledo tradition."

At 29, Finley is less than three years removed from the shoulder-on-neck collision that, after a brief comeback attempt, ended his career as he entered his prime. The impact with Cleveland Browns safety Tashaun Gipson left a bruise on Finley's spinal cord that never fully healed. Coupled with an unsuccessful procedure to fuse two vertebrae in his neck, medical clearance became all but impossible, with few teams — if any — willing to take the risk on a player who flirted with paralysis.

As the potential for a comeback faded, Finley and his family relocated to the small town of Aledo, Texas, an hour west of Dallas and a few hours from his hometown of Diboll. Here, in an affluent and overwhelmingly white community, chosen for the schools and proximity to his in-laws, Finley began adjusting to the idea of retirement before the age of 30.

Finley made his decision official in the fall of 2015 and thanked the Packers on Twitter for a brief but enjoyable six years. With the game behind him, Finley collected the \$10 million insurance policy drawn up well before his injury, and in doing so he accomplished his primary goal since entering the league as a third-round pick in 2008: He set up his family for life.

But with so much life left to live, Finley needed something to do.

"I'm still not at peace," Finley said, "but what got me comfortable is where I live at now. It's a family-based town. It's a town where I can still branch off and take care of the kids. My thing is about kids now, getting them to the peak where I was at."

In Aledo, a town of fewer than 3,000 people, Finley cuts a benevolent figure recognizable everywhere. He is financially stable, so Finley offers football lessons for free. His neck feels normal, so Finley took up CrossFit and works out five days a week. He invested in a local barbecue joint. He plans to open a training facility geared toward kids. He's in the process of building a dream home — 10,000 square feet, pool with lazy river, man cave — and his first football camp recently attracted more than 200 kids.

Those close to Finley say he's made significant strides in maturity, a trait Finley admits he lacked for a large portion of his career in Green Bay. Once chastised by fans, Finley said the tide has shifted toward appreciation, especially as the Packers have struggled to find a comparable replacement at tight end. Recently, Finley took steps to improve his relationship with quarterback Aaron Rodgers, and within the last year the two became friends.

“During the course of the NFL, (people) see me as a screw-up, a loudmouth, a guy that didn't care what he said,” Finley explained. “But at the end of the day, they see after the game that I'm a guy that just really cared about the game. I'm a guy that embraced every second that I played in the NFL, and they see that now.”

This is the new Jermichael Finley: part-time coach, full-time Texan, burgeoning adult.

Building a new life

The history of Aledo traces back to 1879, when the Texas and Pacific Railway Company built a line through the region to connect Fort Worth and Weatherford as the tracks extended west. An agricultural town, Aledo consists of fenced-in neighborhoods speckled across rolling hills. The architecture is brick-based and modern. The population has grown by more than 80% in the last 15 years.

Finley's latest obsession occupies a hangar-like building sandwiched between a housing development and Aledo High School. His truck thunders into the parking lot of CrossFit Aledo, and the rap music pulsing through his speakers causes the pavement to shake.

“It's a good time to be in the great state of Texas,” Finley says through an iridescent smile.

Aside from his camouflage hat, which is inscribed with the phrase “Shut up and hunt,” Finley is decked from head to toe in Nike apparel — neon green sneakers, camouflage leggings, black tank top. He's lost about 20 pounds since the injury, slimming down from his playing weight (260-265) to a more comfortable one (240-245), and his quality of sleep has improved.

Finley joined the gym in January at the behest of Ryan Miller, a friend-turned-training partner who met Finley through Aledo's youth football program. Miller, who is also a coach at CrossFit Aledo, prods Finley into working out five days per week. He sends a reminder each morning, and Finley often responds with the biceps emoji.

“It’s interesting because I’m short and fat, and he’s tall and muscular,” Miller said with a smile. “It works out pretty good. We do a lot of partner stuff in here.”

The class is a cross-section of life in Aledo, with middle-aged men and women — mostly women — downing shakes they’ve brought from home. Outside, the parking lot reflects the community’s wealth: Lexus, Range Rover, Infiniti, Jaguar. Inside, hip-hop classics offer a surprising soundtrack: Warren G, DMX, The Notorious B.I.G., Coolio.

“I’m a stay-at-home mom and I listen to rap music,” one woman says with pride.

The workout of the day is a five-round circuit to be completed in pairs. Finley and Miller navigate goblet squats, box jumps, seated rows and toes-to-bar touches, a devilish exercise in which participants invert their bodies to make their toes tap a monkey bar.

Healthy and pain-free, Finley has no restrictions when it comes to exercise. He chooses to avoid overhead lifts as a precaution because, he says, without football it’s no longer worth the risk.

“I feel the best I’ve ever felt right now,” Finley said. “Physically, mentally — I’m in the best shape of my life probably right now, too.”

It’s a striking turnaround from the shape he took on Oct. 20, 2013, when Gipson closed quickly after Finley caught a slant, ramming his shoulder into Finley’s head and neck. The collision arrested Finley’s breathing and stripped away feeling above his waist. He stared up at teammate Andrew Quarless and pleaded softly for help.

Finley spent the night in the intensive care unit of a Green Bay hospital, where a battery of tests revealed a 2-centimeter bruise on his spinal cord. The severest of injuries had been avoided, and Finley planned his return to the NFL.

“Based on the feedback I’ve received from doctors at this point, the question is not if I’ll play again, but when,” Finley wrote a week after his injury in a first-person account for The MMQB.

He underwent surgery to fuse the C3 and C4 vertebrae in his neck, a procedure designed to be proactive but that wound up contributing to his retirement. The bones in Finley’s neck did not fuse properly, according to his agent, Blake Baratz, which all but eliminated his chance for medical clearance.

Had the fusion succeeded, Baratz said, there were eight to 10 teams in aggressive pursuit of Finley, who had become an unrestricted free agent.

“If you took an X-ray of Jermichael’s neck back then before he had the fusion, and right now, it looks 100%,” Baratz said. “You’d never know anything different. If you saw him

go work out, he looks like he could play football. If you CT scan Jermichael, you would see a small clear space where you can see the bones in his neck didn't fuse 100%."

Finley's fallback was the disability insurance policy he purchased well before the injury. For the last few years of his career, Finley bought policies of increasing amounts to reflect his uptick in earnings, a concept recommended by Baratz. By the time Finley collided with Gipson, the policy had maxed out at \$10 million tax-free.

"I think without it I would have been fine, too," said Finley, whose career earnings with the Packers totaled about \$14 million, according to Spotrac. "But it just put a blanket to secure me 1,000%."

Those close to Finley were relieved when he made the decision to retire. This included his son Kaydon, now 8 years old, who Finley said placed a call to the hospital the night of his injury. He never forgot his son's words, even as he attempted to return.

Said Kaydon: "I don't want you to play no more football Daddy."

Coach Finley

Coach Jermichael Finley spends the majority of his evenings on the turf at Aledo Middle School, where in the span of two days in early April he trains five players of all ages. For free.

For the two high school students, both of whom will play some level of college football, Finley creates a circuit workout with sled pulls, agility slides and a weighted jump rope. He asks them to catch passes after reacting to different cadences. They ask him for tips on how to fight through slumps.

Off to the side, Kaydon and Casen Miller, the son of Finley's training partner from CrossFit, go through a modified workout that is, quite honestly, not much easier. With Ryan Miller at quarterback, Kaydon and Casen, who is also 8, run one-on-one routes for the better part of an hour. They pull the sled some 80 yards, down the field and back, repeatedly, albeit with a lesser weight.

"It's a big pat on the butt out here," Finley said. "I'm in a privileged town, so I want to come here and show them what it's going to take to get to the next level."

On the second day, Finley works with a new and promising student. In many ways, M.J. McFarland is a Jermichael Finley clone. He stands 6 feet 5 inches tall, weighs 254 pounds and ran the 40-yard dash in 4.70 seconds. Six years ago, as a senior at El Dorado High School in El Paso, McFarland signed with the University of Texas as a receiver/tight end hybrid. He was recruited by Mack Brown to be Finley 2.0.

But where Finley took the express route from Texas to the NFL — redshirt, two years of playing time, entered the draft early — McFarland's career veered toward flameout, with

a confluence of factors to blame: coaching changes, a failed drug test and the loss of his senior season.

McFarland moved to a suburb of Dallas and spent the better part of a year training for a shot at the NFL. He drove more than an hour to work out with Finley, a player he idolized for years.

“You can tell he would do anything to get back out there,” said McFarland, who has since signed as an undrafted free agent with the Philadelphia Eagles. “You can feel it. You can feel the passion, you can feel the energy out there. I had a great time, especially being able to pick his brain and know what I’m going to be up against, give me certain tools and skill sets that can help me become a successful tight end in the NFL.”

As a coach, Finley remains an energetic novice. He draws on concepts gleaned from Bill Welle, a sports performance specialist Finley visited throughout his career, but his lessons feel disjointed because he plans them on the fly.

Still, his temperament is perfect, and Finley has the encouraging catchphrases to match. “Yezzzrrrr!” he yells after a quality rep. “Make the last one your best one,” he says near the end of every drill.

Finley, who plays quarterback during all his lessons, saves his greatest line for a lofted throw to McFarland on a double move into the wind. The ball drops in perfectly for an over-the-shoulder catch. Finley is pumped. “Just call me (expletive) Tom Brady,” he says.

Reconnecting with Rodgers

Were Finley still a member of the Packers, his comment about Brady would have spawned questions across Wisconsin.

Why didn’t Jermichael compare himself to Aaron Rodgers? Does he think higher of Brady than Rodgers? Is he upset about his number of targets?

As Rodgers prepared for his first season as the starter, general manager Ted Thompson selected Finley with the 91st overall pick in the 2008 draft. Examinations of the Rodgers-Finley partnership began immediately, and most people assumed a hyper-athletic tight end would thrive alongside a quarterback with preternatural skills.

Though he appeared in 14 games, Finley caught only six passes for 74 yards and one touchdown as a rookie. He lacked chemistry with Rodgers because, Finley said, he didn’t bother paying attention to the system. He chose to enjoy his first dose of fame instead.

Finley struggled with Rodgers’ impromptu tests covering signs, terms and indicators. He labels Rodgers the “quiz master.” He describes him as “a wizard.” To Finley, playing

alongside Rodgers felt like jumping from basic math to calculus, and every wrong answer diminished on-field trust.

“It’s tough playing with Aaron Rodgers,” Finley said. “That’s why I tell you it’s easy to say, ‘But Jared Cook is coming in.’ Good, I’m glad for it. I’m a big fan. But at the end of the day you’ve still got to get in that minicamp, OTAs and training camp to get that playbook down.”

Their bond improved when Rodgers and Finley held weekly meetings on Saturday nights in the team hotel, beginning with Finley’s third season. Home or away, Rodgers would find his way to Finley’s room for conversations that lasted up to two hours. They spent a portion of their time discussing life outside of football, and the rest was earmarked for an in-depth review of that week’s game plan.

Finley realized he was earning Rodgers’ trust.

“I think that really helped us out,” Rodgers said recently. “There was a time where I think he had some frustration about not being on the same page. With a guy that athletic and that dynamic, I just wanted to make sure there was zero doubt in his mind that I was looking at him and I wanted to throw the ball his way. So we started meeting more often.”

At its best, the connection between Rodgers and Finley was among the most dynamic quarterback-tight end pairings in the league. There were three seasons in which Finley stayed healthy and started the majority of games for the Packers, and each time he caught at least 55 passes for 667 yards, with an average of five touchdowns per year. Over his six seasons, Finley caught 223 passes for 2,785 yards and 20 touchdowns. The current Packers tight ends still use his film as a teaching tool.

“Once he got his hands on the ball, he was an alpha,” former Packers tight ends coach Jerry Fontenot said. “He was very hard to bring down.”

Still, Finley’s off-field demeanor complicated the relationship with Rodgers. On more than one occasion Finley expressed a desire to have more passes thrown his way. His agent, Baratz, said on social media that Rodgers was not a great leader. And last year, when the Packers lost wide receiver Jordy Nelson to a torn anterior cruciate ligament, Finley sent out a tweet that seemed to question Rodgers’ talent. (He later clarified and offered an alternate explanation.)

“It wasn’t good or bad,” Finley said of his relationship with Rodgers, “but I think it should have been different. ... I probably would have been a little more lenient to his needs being a star quarterback. You’ve got to go to him, not wait for him to come to you, because he’s touching the ball 100% of the time.

“I think I should have been in his back pocket a little more, which I’m preaching that about Cook. If you ain’t in Aaron Rodgers’ back pocket like Jordy or (Randall) Cobb, you may not touch that pigskin.”

Within the last year, the new Jermichael Finley reached out to Rodgers to make amends. He hoped to dissolve any of the real — or perhaps perceived — tension lingering from their time in Green Bay.

Peace was brokered, and Finley says he and Rodgers contact each other every few weeks. Rodgers has sent Finley signed memorabilia to auction off for charitable causes. Finley now considers Rodgers a legitimate friend. His buddies joke and label Finley a “groupie for Aaron.”

In March, Finley turned 29 and opened his Twitter account to find a birthday message from his old quarterback. Rodgers’ choice of hashtags captured how far they’ve come: #respect #love #goodmemories.

Relationship with fans takes a turn

After his morning workouts, Finley often winds up at RailHead Smokehouse Barbeque, a popular restaurant and hangout in a place with few such options.

As Finley settles in to enjoy a beer and a plate of cheese fries — he can do this now that he’s retired — a steady flow of people approach his table near the middle of the dining area. Some of them, like waitresses, managers and patrons, recognize Finley as a regular customer. Others, like a mother-daughter combo, are simply nosy: They’re curious about the tall and muscular black man in a town that, as recently as six years ago, could count the number of African-American residents on one hand.

“I pegged you for soccer,” the mother says, jokingly.

Finley’s celebrity status facilitates an ease of conversation unseen during his time in Green Bay, where his relationship with fans and teammates was best described as uneasy. After never giving an interview during college at Texas — he says coach Mack Brown wouldn’t let him — Finley spoke liberally and was castigated for inflammatory comments. There were regular meetings with coaches and the public relations staff to clarify what he should and should not divulge, even though Finley thought he was simply telling the truth.

His unfiltered approach soured relationships with teammates, and Finley lists only one current or former Packer among his closest football friends. His comments incensed fans, and Finley took several hiatuses from Twitter to avoid the onslaught of negativity.

“During the course of the NFL, they didn’t like me,” Finley said of Packers fans. “That’s my opinion. I don’t know every Packer fan, but I felt like no one liked me just because I like to talk — and tell the truth.”

The fans' exasperation with Finley boiled over after a playoff loss to the New York Giants on Jan. 15, 2012. Finley, who struggled with drops throughout his career, had three passes bounce off his hands incomplete. Two of them certainly should have been caught.

After the game, a posse of disgruntled fans waited for Finley to leave the players' parking lot at Lambeau Field. A caravan of cars — he thinks there were six — followed Finley's vehicle, a Porsche, all the way to his house. They circled his neighborhood several times, and with each lap came a new wave of expletives. The worst included a crude sexual taunt projected through a megaphone.

"I'm still human, and that's what fans don't get about us players," Finley said. "We're still humans. Look at your son. Just imagine somebody talking to your son like that."

Finley's neck injury changed the tenor of his relationship with Packers fans as he became a more sympathetic figure. Once harassed, he was viewed as a player who dedicated his body to a violent sport. And by the end of last season, after the Packers still lacked a dynamic player at Finley's position, his Twitter feed was filled with messages wishing he could come back.

"That's one of them things that they miss you when you're gone," Finley said.

Finley finishes his second beer and asks for the check, only to be informed that another customer already paid his tab. He's the unofficial mayor of Aledo, and everyone is happy that he's here.

The football-obsessed kid

As the first Jermichael Finley Football Camp took place in Aledo in early June, more than 220 kids signed up to attend. Jettisoned by inclement weather, the campers, mostly between the ages of 7 and 11, crammed inside the practice facility at Aledo High School for two days of learning from an impressive staff.

Bill Welle, the sports performance specialist who trained Finley, Larry Fitzgerald and Greg Jennings, among others, ran the camp and organized the curriculum. Finley recruited the remainder of the coaches, and three former Packers flew in to help: Nick Barnett, Brandon Bostick and Desmond Bishop.

In hosting the camp, Finley partnered with the Aledo Youth Football and Cheer Association to raise money for new helmets. The goal is to make the event an annual occurrence, and Finley's publicist said he already received a grant from the NFL to host a camp at a second location, perhaps in his hometown of Diboll.

“The fact that he wants to now help these kids and do something along that line, that’s his personality,” Welle said. “He’s so engaging that it puts him in a great light. And people are going to be drawn to him just because of that.”

Among the campers was Finley’s son Kaydon, whose participation in football is an unnerving subject. Finley began to wrestle with the idea when the family lived in Green Bay. Kaydon, who carries himself like his father’s shadow, was frustrated when classmates wore their football jerseys to school while he wasn’t allowed to play. Finley told Kaydon to be patient and let his parents make a decision.

The pressure intensified after the move to Aledo, where the high school sells season-ticket packages to football games and residents tailgate on Friday afternoons. Finally, Finley relented.

“I don’t want to get to 10th grade and he’s still roasting about (not) playing football,” Finley said. “Get out there and do what you do.”

His plan is to pull Kaydon from football in fifth grade and keep him sidelined until high school. To Finley, who suffered four diagnosed concussions, a lapse from contact will “let his brain relax,” minimizing the number of hits Kaydon takes at an uncoordinated age. By high school, Kaydon will be allowed to make his own choice. He can read about his father to understand the sport’s inherent risks.

“I took him out to training camp for the (youth football) league and it was a no-brainer,” said Finley, who saw how naturally Kaydon took to the game. “And that’s when I went into coaching.”

Even the new Jermichael Finley can’t forget his past. He’ll always be a football-obsessed kid.