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Eagles' DeSean Jackson finds middle ground with students

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WELCOME TO Philly-style stardom, DeSean Jackson.

The Eagles' 2008 rookie wideout sensation was basking in adulation at E.T. Richardson School yesterday, after giving seventh-grader Jason Begley a limo ride to the Springfield, Delaware County, middle school, as part of the NFL's "Take a Player to School" promotion.

Jackson, 22 but looking only slightly older than the cheering students, had slapped a few hundred hands, bumped a bunch of fists, given a little speech about the importance of exercise. He was wearing an NFL "Play 60" T-shirt, reflecting the theme of asking kids to take at least an hour a day away from the video-game console for physical activity. Later, Jackson would lead a star-struck gym class through some "drills." But first he opened the auditorium floor to questions from the 260-some seventh-graders.

Jackson repeated the first question into the microphone, for anyone who might have missed it.

"Why did I drop the football?"

Ah, yes. A new generation of Eagles fans embraces its heritage. Kind of makes you misty-eyed.

The question had to do with Week 2 last season at Dallas, when Jackson was streaking toward the end zone and chucked the ball backward, just before he crossed the goal line, it turned out. Not a touchdown, after all, though since the refs were initially fooled and the whistle blew, the Eagles got the ball on the Cowboys' 1 and



Eagles' DeSean Jackson runs with the football during morning special teams drills at Lehigh University on Tuesday, July 22, 2008. (Yong Kim / Daily News)



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season were franchise rookie wideout records, wasn't perturbed, or even surprised, to be asked right away about his most embarrassing moment. He explained that he had been thinking about scoring his first NFL touchdown "since I was 6 years old" and got carried away with the moment.

"I couldn't have cared less about that football," Jackson confessed, ruefully. "I got overexcited, overanxious. I just wanted to get there and do my dance."

A follow-up questioner extracted details of the dance, which Jackson explained he calls "The Dirty Eagle," in tribute to "The Dirty Bird" dance popularized by former Falcons star Jamal Anderson.

Later, after the gym class, Jackson said he knew he would get the Dallas question yesterday, probably sooner rather than later.

"That question's never going to go away," Jackson said. "That's just something I have to live with . . . I've proved myself, did what I needed to do to get past that. It'll probably never be gone, never be left, but in my heart I know the meaning of it, and that's all that matters. I could care less what anybody else thinks of it."

He said it wasn't just a matter of Eagles fans dwelling on the negative.

"When I went back home to California [in the offseason], I got a hard time about it, from my little cousin, who's about 9 years old." Jackson said. "I'm like, 'Really, what does *he* know about dropping the ball?' The kids probably give me more of a hard time than the adults do."

Yesterday's other questions, however, were more than sufficiently adoring. The Richardson kids were thrilled to have an Eagles star in their midst, even if the jerseys they wore for the occasion tended to reflect allegiance to Brian Dawkins, Brian Westbrook or Donovan McNabb. Jackson, a former Cal standout from Long Beach, Calif., sits right on the cusp of becoming one of the faces of the franchise, but he is still introducing himself to the fan base.

Being tapped as the Eagles' representative for the local installment of the league promotion - in past years, McNabb has done the honors - was as big a deal for Jackson as it was for the school.

Asked about the importance of getting out in public, establishing an image, he said: "I feel that's the biggest thing, with me and the community. I feel a lot of people know what I do on the field. I just want [them] to get accustomed to what I do off the field . . . This is one one of the best things I've done so far, just because of the kids.

"You have to have a passion for it. If I was sitting here, just putting on a front, here just to be here, that wouldn't benefit [the students] at all. I'm here to deliver a message back to the kids . . . I definitely have a passion for giving back to the kids. It's something I like to do.

"A lot of things are coming to the table for me right now. The Philly market's been great to me . . . I'm a very blessed person. I'm just happy to be in the situation I'm in."

The Richardson kids learned that Jackson grew up a Steelers fan because his parents were from Pittsburgh; that Jerry Rice and Emmitt Smith were his favorite players when he was their age; that he moved his mom out to the Philadelphia area last season to help him cope; and that the teammate he hangs out with most is cornerback Asante Samuel.

Jackson said he didn't parade his rookie success when he returned to California after the NFC Championship Game loss, though it was his most extensive trip home since the Birds drafted him 49th overall last year, in the second round.

"I was just going back to chill . . . It was a tough year for me, being my first year in the NFL. I went