

UNC DL Nazair Jones was nearly paralyzed five years ago



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[Nazair Jones](#) came home after his Roanoke Rapids (N.C.) High team lost in the state playoffs so wiped out from his exceptional performance that he fell asleep on the couch.

The next morning, he got up like normal. But when he tried to walk, Jones could not move. He screamed for his mother and sister to help him. Excruciating pain gripped his legs. They called an ambulance and he went to the hospital.

Doctors could not explain why a healthy, active 15-year-old boy suddenly felt paralyzed from the waist down. They gave him a shot for the pain and sent him home.

Yet the pain continued for weeks. Jones alternated between using crutches, a walker and a wheelchair to get around and started losing weight. He saw other doctors, but all of them were baffled.

"Seeing him walk with a walker, a teenager who is 6-foot-5, I thought I was losing my son," said his mother, Tammy.

At his lowest point, Jones got down to 215 pounds and spent weeks bedridden in a hospital. Months of rehab followed. Today, the junior weighs nearly 300 pounds and is the key player in the middle of a North Carolina defensive front that faces yet another huge test Saturday, against No. 12 Florida State and a resurgent [Dalvin Cook](#).

Considering the odds, Jones has made a remarkable turnaround. "I had to put my mind to it," Jones said. "I was not going to let that be the end of my career."



Nazair Jones needed the help of a walker or crutches to get around after he became afflicted with a chronic pain disorder. Courtesy of Tammy Jones

But nobody could say for certain whether Jones would play football again. North Carolina coach Larry Fedora had seen Jones on tape and immediately saw why the four-star recruit was one of the top defensive line prospects in the state. "He was phenomenal," Fedora said.

Fedora wanted to offer a scholarship, but word had gotten to him that Jones was struggling physically. Still, he went to the high school to meet Jones for the first time. During the visit, Jones tried to hide his discomfort and the crutches, knowing a football scholarship was on the line. But after about five minutes, Jones asked Fedora, "If you don't mind, could I sit down? I can't stand up I'm in so much pain."

Fedora did not see an imposing defensive lineman; he saw a thin young man who could hardly stand. He left that first meeting without offering a scholarship.

The Jones family kept searching for answers about his condition. As the pain escalated, Jones was referred to the University of North Carolina Children's Hospital, about two hours from his hometown. He was admitted on his 16th birthday.

Jones went through a series of exams, from ultrasounds on his legs to bloodwork to nerve tests. Even then, doctors looked at him, puzzled. His mother worried even more. If the best doctors at UNC could not answer this, who would?

At this point, Jones could not walk. His legs and feet swelled grotesque amounts and were so sensitive, any little touch produced unspeakable pain.

"I was still in shock because I had just played a great game, even though we lost, and now I can't walk and I don't know why, so I wasn't really focused on the pain even though that was the worst part," Nazair Jones recalled recently. "It didn't look human how swollen my legs were and the crazy thing is, I would be in the hospital bed and the swelling went from one leg to another. It alternates and does whatever it wants to do."

Finally, doctors came back with a diagnosis: complex regional pain syndrome, a chronic disease that affects the nervous system. To this day, nobody has been able to tell Jones why he suddenly became afflicted. His family asked the doctors what would happen to Jones' budding football career.

"The doctor said, 'Football? We need to see can we get you walking again,'" Tammy recalled.

Once the diagnosis was made, Jones moved into the nearby Ronald McDonald House to begin his extensive rehab. There is no cure for the disease, so doctors often focus on physical rehab and psychotherapy. To manage the pain and swelling, he took ibuprofen and other painkillers. Jones had to relearn how to walk, and spent time in the pool doing water aerobics.

The psychotherapy part was much harder to grasp.

"The weirdest thing I did was this exercise in the mirror," Jones said. "I sat on the ground, and they put this long mirror in between your legs. Because I was having so much pain in my legs, it was like my brain was sending pain signals to my feet and my legs, but there was no injury there. So basically, the therapy was me psyching myself into my legs working. I would literally look in the mirror and it would look like both of my legs and I was looking at my right leg, just getting movement and feeling back into my feet at the same time.

"Once I put my mind to it and started believing in the process, it began to work."

Jones stayed at the Ronald McDonald House for two months, then continued his therapy back home. When he returned to school, Jones still needed help walking. But he had a cadre of friends ready to help him out, and they carried his books and backpack for him whenever he needed. Jones began walking normally again in May, and was able to rejoin his travel basketball team for a tournament that summer.



Nazair Jones currently leads the Tar Heels in tackles for loss. Chris Rodier/Icon Sportswire

But Jones wanted to play football in college, and that remained up in the air. His high school coach, Russell Weinstein, suggested they go to the final North Carolina football camp of the summer, just to show the staff that he was on the road back.

Jones had regained the 40 pounds he lost, but he was not in the best shape. He got dehydrated and overheated and needed help from the training staff.

"He did not look like a D-I defensive lineman that day," Weinstein said. "That was right when he got clearance to resume football activities. Naz knew he had to show up and fight the best he could under the circumstances. Coach Fedora was the first one to take the leap of faith and roll the dice."

North Carolina offered him a scholarship that day. Weinstein and Jones pulled out of Chapel Hill and headed to Hardee's to get something to eat, but Jones could not contain his excitement. He called his mother and said, "Guess what! They offered me! Can I take it?"

Jones had been waiting on North Carolina, and felt it was meant to be, considering the university's children's hospital treated and diagnosed him. Weinstein turned the car around, and Jones went up to meet with Fedora.

"Coach," Jones said. "I'm a Tar Heel!"

"We went off faith, really, that he was going to be OK," Fedora said. "His junior year was phenomenal. It was a no-brainer. I remember just going and standing in that weight room with him thinking, 'Man, am I going to be able to recruit this kid?' His comeback, it's a heck of a story."

Jones still had to play his entire senior football season. His strength and endurance were off, but that did not deter him. Weinstein estimates Jones was at 80 percent -- not bad considering all the time he could not run or practice. Still, his mother fretted over him.

"His very first game, I was worried he may get hit the wrong way or he may hit somebody the wrong way and if he does he may be paralyzed," Tammy said. "I can't even describe how scared and afraid I was when they said he could play. I was down there yelling at the referee, 'He needs a break!'"

Jones played his entire senior season, then his entire senior basketball season. But he continued to have episodes with the disease. In 2013, his freshman season at North Carolina, he began taking weekly shots of Enbrel, used to treat inflammatory conditions. He still takes those shots and meets with a rheumatologist to help manage the disease.

Headed into this season, Fedora said Jones went through the best offseason he has ever had while at North Carolina. Keeping the symptoms at bay is part of everyday life for Jones, but so is working to improve the struggling Tar Heels' run defense.

That is the job he has wanted for years and years.

"I try to live in the moment because it can be taken away from you at any point," Jones said.

"Sometimes through the grind and the heat, you forget about how far you came, but I try to always bounce back on that. There was a point I couldn't even walk, so me being here to lead this group on the defensive line is a blessing."