

Browns rookie in midst of unlikely journey



By Les Carpenter, Yahoo! Sports *May 24, 7:11 am EDT*

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BEREA, Ohio – He cannot bear to leave the practice field, almost as if doing so would nullify the dream he has lived these past two weeks. And so defensive tackle Kwaku Danso(notes), perhaps the unlikeliest Cleveland Brown ever, finds reasons to stay after a springtime workout even as his new teammates head for the locker room. He pushes against a blocking sled. He runs sprints. Then he lags behind the last group of players signing autographs for some children until, at last, he is alone on the wide green prairie behind the Browns offices.

“I can’t believe this,” he says, laughing into the afternoon sun. “Look at me.”

Who could have imagined? Rarely is there such a thing as a 28-year-old rookie in the NFL – let alone one raised in Ghana who learned to play the game just three years earlier, after walking into the head coach’s office at East Carolina and saying he wanted to join the team, then never once making a tackle. Sometimes he must wonder if one of the Browns coaches will run onto the field and pull him off, saying it is all a mistake.



But there is no error. The

Browns have indeed signed an undrafted free agent whose entire college career consists of three brief appearances at the end of ECU blowouts. And they did so because a few weeks earlier, defensive coordinator Rob Ryan – observing on East Carolina’s pro day – noticed Danso step through a door at 6-foot-5, 336 pounds and gasped “Who the hell is that?” to the Cleveland scouts standing beside him.

Unfazed by the information that Danso had never advanced beyond a brief appearance at second string on the East Carolina depth charts, Ryan was

transfixed as the player bench-pressed 225 pounds 39 times. So much so that even after Ryan continued to scout players with much better pedigrees at more important schools, Danso was the one he kept remembering. And when Browns head coach Eric Mangini told him he could have one player to bring in with the intent of keeping around for most of the year to develop, Ryan knew immediately whom he wanted.

“I like the look in his eye,” Ryan says. “You have to root for a guy like that.”

Standing alone on the practice field, Danso can only giggle, almost speechless about his good fortune. He starts to say something, then stops. It’s all too overwhelming. So many times he thought of quitting football at East Carolina, figuring he was wasting his time. Now he is here? In the NFL? Finally he begins again, his words sometimes hard to decipher through a thick accent.

“This is a blessing,” he says. “This right here is a blessing. This tells you that life is what you make it.”

Then he shakes his head and laughs again.

“It’s taken a lot of hard work,” he says.

He came to the U.S. in 2002, from Kumasi, which is Ghana’s second-largest city, with the hopes of playing basketball at an American college. Most of his family was already here. But a brief trial at tiny Wilkes University in Pennsylvania didn’t work, he ran out of money and he was forced to move in with his brother Kojo in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C.

To raise money for school he took on three jobs: working days as a butcher at Sam’s Club, stocking shelves overnight at Target and cooking at Burger King. On the weekends, Kojo – who stands 5-foot-11 – brought his much bigger, younger brother to his part-time job as a bouncer at a D.C. nightclub.

Kwaku soon drew the notice of Redskins players who came into the club and suggested he might make a fine football player. This was also the opinion of a track coach who was working with Kojo, then a graduate student and aspiring track athlete at nearby Bowie State. They pushed Kwaku to get into shape, directing him toward weekend flag-football leagues to let him get a feel for the game. By 2005, he had saved enough money to go back to school, this time with a new athletic dream.

He chose East Carolina because an uncle taught chemistry at the college. After dropping out for a year to again raise money for his schooling, he finally walked into the office of the head football coach Skip Holtz, saying he was from Ghana and wanting to walk onto the football team.

“You mean soccer?” he remembers Holtz asking.

“No, no, football,” Danso said. “I want to play the game where you put things on and hit.”

At first, the East Carolina coaches didn’t know what to do with Danso.

“If you put the football on the ground he could kick it through the goal like a soccer ball better than anybody, but getting into a stance and playing football, he couldn’t do it,” remembers Greg Hudson, who was the defensive coordinator at ECU before taking a job as Florida State’s linebackers coach this year. “Football to him was Chinese arithmetic.”

For a time they worked him on the offensive line, partly because he was so big, but Danso had no grasp of the stunts and the traps and the play calls that the others had learned from playing their whole lives. Even after he was switched to the more instinctive position of defensive tackle, he was bewildered when the coaches started talking about filling gaps.

He learned quickly but it was tough to keep committing to the game. He bonded with ECU defensive line coach Donnie Thompson, but Thompson left in May 2007. And even as he improved, his progress was blocked by the two starting tackles Linval Joseph(notes) (a second-round pick last month of the New York Giants) and Jay Ross(notes) (who is with the New Orleans Saints). Plus, the coaches didn’t feel they could dedicate the time to him. He was taking an aggressive load of classes in pursuit of a construction management degree, hoping someday to return to Ghana and build buildings. And because he didn’t have a football scholarship, he had to work – often on Sundays, which was an important meeting day for the players.

“We didn’t know if he would be consistently around,” says Hudson. “He sometimes had to miss practices for work and he’s smarter than four or five players put together. He had a lot on his plate.”

Danso would constantly ask his coaches: “What can I do to get better?”

But ECU was a small school trying to take on bigger programs. It had to play big teams in nonconference games to build credibility, depriving Danso of the opportunity to play in blowout games against weak teams. Mostly his role on game days was to warm up in front of opposing team’s benches, looking as big as he could, hoping to intimidate the other teams.



“You could see every head turning and looking at him,” Hudson says. “We’d stand in the end zone and watch laughing. The other coaches would be looking

through their flip charts and saying, 'Who is this monster?' ”

Danso seemed to enjoy teasing the other teams. But he longed to play and the less that looked like a possibility, the more discouraged he got.

His salvation came in William Jennette, a onetime strength and conditioning coach at North Carolina who had worked with NFL star Julius Peppers(notes). Introduced by Thompson, Danso drove from Greenville, N.C., to Jennette's MBS Fitness gym in Durham for a meeting. Jennette still keeps a video from that first day. Danso seemed in shape but had no football fitness. Asked to do a simple routine with 10-pound dumbbells, Danso dropped his arms in exhaustion after only a minute.

Still, much like Rob Ryan, Jennette was charmed by his new protégé.

“He is like a big sponge,” Jennette says. “He was just trying to soak up as much knowledge as he can.”

Soon Danso was driving to Durham as much as he could. And Jennette, too, came to Greenville, sometimes as often as once a week to push Danso.

“You can make it,” he told him, urging him not to worry about his lack of playing time at East Carolina. An NFL team will see past that, he said. Somewhere, he added, a professional coach will fall in love with that size and desire.

This spring, Danso had enough credits to graduate. Holtz and his staff had moved on to South Florida. Even though he had another year of eligibility, Danso figured now was the time to try the NFL. When the school held its pro day for NFL scouts and coaches, he showed up.

Several of his former teammates laughed at him, he says. But then Ryan saw him and Jennette's words proved right: An NFL coach was indeed interested.

“What jumps out at you is his size and he's all muscle,” Ryan said. “Shoot, he can be a two-gapper. He's as strong as an ox.”

He immediately saw Danso as the perfect fit at nose tackle in Cleveland's 3-4 defense, which unlike ECU's 4-3, calls for a single, giant tackle to stand in the middle, be big and tackle ballcarriers.

“I like to think I know players,” says Ryan, who helped turn former Cardinals safeties Kwamie Lassiter and Brent Alexander and current Browns player Marcus Benard(notes) from undrafted free agents into NFL players. “I don't care what happened at East Carolina. That doesn't matter. This is the NFL and the only thing that matters is what happens between those white lines. They're going to see what kind of man you are when they snap the ball.”

Only Danso had no idea of Ryan's interest that day at East Carolina. That wasn't

clear until a few days before the draft, when the coach called him on his mobile phone.

“I said, ‘Hold on, someone is playing a joke on me,’ ” Danso says with a laugh.

But it was no joke. The Browns invited him to a tryout camp the week after the draft, just so Ryan could be sure Danso had the same strength and desire he saw that day at East Carolina. He did. A day after the camp, he was signed to a contract.

Back at East Carolina, a couple players who played ahead of Danso were stunned, he says. How was it possible that he had gotten this chance and they hadn't?

Standing on the Browns' empty practice field, he shrugs. Then laughs.

“Too many people said, ‘You're that kid from Africa, nobody gives a crap about you.’ But I'm glad I tried,” he says. “Now I'm here at Cleveland Browns Stadium. I can't believe it. My mother, she cries every time I talk about it. I don't have words to say it. It's like, ‘Who am I?’ I look around and say, ‘Why?’ ”

He shakes his head.

“I say, ‘If I quit, none of this would have happened.’ ”

Only it has.

And finally, more than half an hour after practice has ended and his NFL teammates have showered, Danso picks up his orange Browns helmet and slowly leaves the field of his impossible dream.

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