



## **New Atlanta Falcon Mykal Walker keeps getting back up**

Mykal Walker, a 2015 Vacaville High grad and football star, told family members he was hoping to be picked in the fourth round of the NFL draft, but that round five and six were more likely.

But because he believes in himself and wasn't taking any draft guru's projections too seriously, he wasn't surprised when he was selected as the 13th pick in the fourth round, No. 119 overall on Saturday.

"I wasn't shocked that I went as high as I did in the draft," Walker said. "I was shocked who took me."

Walker had participated in the NFL combine and had conversations with the Arizona Cardinals, New Orleans Saints, Indianapolis Colts, Detroit Lions, New York Giants, Las Vegas Raiders, Kansas City Chiefs, New England Patriots, San Francisco 49ers, Miami Dolphins and Cleveland Browns.

Ironically, the first person to pull aside the 6-foot-3, 230-pounder at the combine was the Falcons' linebacker coach. But after that he heard absolutely nothing from the Falcons until they called him on Saturday morning to let him know he was their pick.

He watched the first-ever virtual NFL draft at the home of teammate Pat Williams' parents in Fresno. He and Williams were teammates at Vacaville High and played and roomed together at Fresno State.

Walker explained how it felt to take the call.

"All your dreams that you've been dreaming about since you started playing football all came true in one moment," he said. "I didn't have any words. I just said 'Oh my God' about 150 times because I couldn't bring the feeling I had into words."

Walker had achieved another dream when he transferred from Division II Azusa Pacific to play football at Division I Fresno State his junior year. His father, Michael James Walker, had been a star defensive lineman for the Bulldogs. He had shown his Fresno State class ring to Mykal when he was 7. Mykal dreamed from then on of playing for the Bulldogs.

He cherished two pieces of advice from his father. The first was — “Don’t be average.”

“That’s meant the world to me,” Walker explained. “It’s not just football. Don’t be average is something that I carry through life. Football is not life. I’m not defined by being a football player. ‘Don’t be average’ is something I bring into my everyday life... Football stands out a little bit more because it’s all about your work ethic.”

That work ethic carried Walker to back-to-back All-Mountain West first-team defensive selections in 2018-19 at Fresno State. His junior season was capped by being named the 2018 MW Championship game defensive MVP, which was followed by a Las Vegas Bowl win. Walker was invited to participate in the 2020 Shrine Bowl as well as the 2020 NFL Combine leading up to draft day.

His dad’s other saying was, “It doesn’t matter how many times you get knocked down but how many times you continue to get back up.”

That helped Mykal to recover not only on the football field but in life, never more so than when his dad passed away at age 50 from colon cancer when Mykal was a freshman at Vacaville High.

Mykal had played football, not for his dad, but because of him, and with his dad gone, he didn’t feel like continuing. But he got up from that knockdown blow and became a three-sport athlete at Vacaville High in football, basketball and track.

He lettered three times in football as a free safety, linebacker, and running back for head coach Mike Papadopoulos. As a senior, he carried the ball 72 times for 577 yards and eight touchdowns. Defensively, he led the team in total tackles with 112, including 72 solo. He even returned a kick for a touchdown.

He got knocked down again heading out of high school to college. He had some offers from Division I schools but waited too long and ended up in Division II at Azusa Pacific. But he had two outstanding seasons there to set up his transfer to Fresno State.

Then came another blow, as he made the wise decision to redshirt as a Bulldog and found himself in a position he had never had to endure — not playing. But he used that season to study everything he needed to learn so that when he started his junior season he would be ready. He was, and the rest, especially this weekend’s selection in the NFL draft, is history.

Walker said that he and his twin brother Malyk both dreamed of playing in the NFL since they began playing football at age 6. They played all day long and also played every Madden NFL video game, always imagining what they would do when they made it to the big time.

Cam Newton is one of Walker’s favorite players, so he has been a Carolina Panthers fan since Newton’s first year, 2011. (Walker noted that his new favorite team is, of course, the Falcons). The two teams play in the same division, so Walker has seen the Falcons play numerous times and has always been impressed with their defense. And one of his other favorite players is Falcon wide receiver Julio Jones.

Walker said that his own style at linebacker is similar to that of Deion “Debo” Jones. The Falcons like fast linebackers, which is one of the reasons they grabbed Walker.

Jones has already reached out to Walker personally.

“The guys seem like they’re really eager to help,” Walker said. “Most of the linebackers are the same height and weight (as Walker). I think we complement each other and I think it’s going to be a really good fit.”

Walker just received the Falcons playbook in the form of an iPad that was delivered to him on Tuesday. He is already participating in virtual team meetings. He thinks Mercedes-Benz Stadium will be an awesome place to play and Atlanta a great place to live. He has already begun the housing search.

What if he doesn’t make the 53-man roster?

“Me and my guys always say, ‘My plan B is to make my plan A work.’ But at the end of the day, I have my degree (in criminal justice). If that does happen, I’m going to be OK.”

Walker has a very close relationship with Papadopolous.

“Coach Pop is like a father to me. And Mrs. Pop too. They’ve always looked out for me since eighth grade. He was my football coach, he was my track coach. But It’s more than just football.”

The coach talked about Walker’s “desire and his focus on maximizing all the gifts God has given him. He’s done that. We’re very, very happy for him and his family for this really special day and really excited to see what the future holds for him.”