

Dante Fowler thinking big on, off field as he embarks on NFL draft journey

Tom Pelissero - USA TODAY Sports

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ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Dante Fowler Jr. says “I’m like the Shaq of football” with a deadpan stare, and his straight-laced father can’t help but belly laugh from across the table.

“That’s a new one right there,” Dante Sr. says, shaking his head.

Dinner is winding down at a steakhouse as the conversation turns to the white Versace suit Fowler plans to wear to the NFL draft, where he’s a virtual lock to be a high first-round pick.

Fowler also hopes to use the draft to launch a career in the fashion world, but his mother, Lanora, says he always thought her son would be an actor. Fowler says

that’s on his agenda, too. The former University of Florida star envisions himself as Lawrence Taylor on the field and Michael Strahan off it, a true pass rush-personality double threat.

“You going to be on Dancing with the Stars?” Lanora asks, egging Fowler on as half-sister Shaqualia Smith and little brother CamRon smile at the scene.

Fowler shrugs. “If they offer me ...”

“He’ll be all over the place,” Lanora says.

Don’t be fooled by the playful boasts, though. Behind the camera-ready persona and the glitter-tinged getup he’ll be wearing when he hugs Commissioner Roger Goodell on April 30 is a football player who can be great.

And Fowler wants to be.

If he didn’t, Fowler might’ve followed his initial instinct, quit football and gotten a job when he became a father before his senior year of high school. He might’ve let his ego win after being suspended from the team that fall, rather than returning more humble and coachable.

Four months shy of his 21st birthday, Fowler is still growing into the 6-3, 270-pound frame that possesses every trait NFL teams look for in edge rushers. And that’s just part of the reason he projects as a far better pro than the college player who recorded 14½ sacks over three seasons.

“He will accomplish whatever he wants to accomplish,” former Florida coach Will Muschamp tells USA TODAY Sports. “He is an explosive, fast-twitch, physical, tough competitor. If he continues to stay hungry — which there’s no signs that I saw ever that he won’t — he’ll be very successful.”

Football prodigy

Ask anyone who knows Fowler to describe him, and the list begins with his smile, his storytelling, his goofiness, his lust for life. He loves meeting new people, engaging with fans, signing autographs. He’s not shy about saying he wants to be marketable.

But spend a day with Fowler, in the place it all began, and his predictions of success beyond the gridiron seem less a sign he’ll be swallowed up by fame than evidence of how long he and those close to him have been planning to make the most of this opportunity.

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“Football’s always going to be my first priority,” Fowler says as he steers his blue Ford Mustang convertible along the streets of his hometown, St. Petersburg. “That’s where I want to make my name. I’ll let the other things take care of itself.”

His training began not long after cousin Travonta took a handoff from Dante Sr. and 3-year-old Dante Jr. leveled him.

“His eyes were rolling around like marbles,” Lanora Fowler says.

“It was a picture-perfect tackle, too,” Dante Sr. adds. “From right then and there, I knew.”