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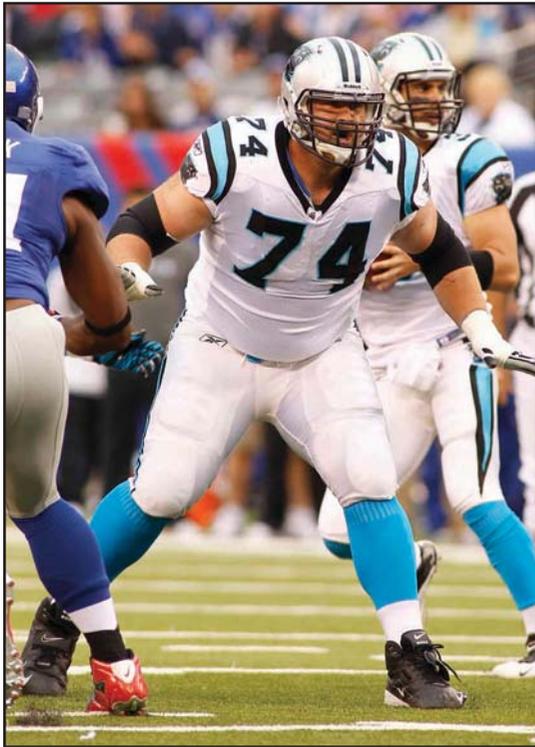
Panthers' Geoff Schwartz Still Holds Tight to His Jewish Heritage

By Steve Goldberg

If you're ever on Jeopardy and the answer under College Football for \$800 is "He holds the PAC 10 record for rushing by a right tackle," trust me when I tell you that the correct response is "Who is Geoff Schwartz?"

For the past two seasons, Schwartz has been blocking for former University of Oregon teammate Jonathan Stewart as an offensive lineman for the Carolina Panthers. But for one glorious October day three years ago in Eugene when the Ducks beat the mighty Trojans of Southern Cal, it was the other way around. Stewart and Schwartz would combine for 1,725 rushing yards in 2007. Of those, Stewart had 1,722.

But Schwartz's three yards are the stuff of legend. He had already blocked his man outside and was looking for someone else to hit when the Ducks quarterback mistakenly pitched him the ball. Though astonished to see it coming his way, Schwartz is one who takes things in stride, so he nonetheless gathered it in and gained his three yards on the play, one that may have helped him garner the All-PAC 10 honors he received that season. With the Panthers tepid offense this year, perhaps they could engage what's now known in the Pacific Northwest as the Jumbo Option Sweep.



Geoff Schwartz in action for the Panthers.
Photo courtesy Carolina Panthers.

That's but part of the Geoff Schwartz story immortalized on the World Wide Web.

On various internet sites, it's claimed that the Rabbi of the Adat Shalom congregation in West Los Angeles had to stand on a stool when next to 13 year old though 6'1" Schwartz during his Bar Mitzvah. Now 6'6" and tipping 335 pounds, Schwartz doesn't remember that part but doesn't deny it either.

What Schwartz does recall is that being Jewish has always been

an important part of who he is.

His parents met as students at UCLA and brought up their kids just a few miles from the Westwood campus. Father Lee Schwartz, a business consultant to manufacturing companies, and mother Olivia Goodkin, an attorney, raised Geoff and his younger brother Mitchell, currently a lineman at the University of California in Berkeley, in a conservative Jewish home. They celebrated Shabbat, ate deli at Junior's and Jerry's Famous, and guided the boys' Hebrew education through high school.

At Oregon, Schwartz attended high holiday services at the local Chabad House and tried diligently to navigate the demands of being a

scholarship athlete in a fall sport with his faith. If fasting for Yom Kippur conflicted with a game, he would attend services but fast on another day.

It's a situation that he still wrestles with as a professional athlete. "It's tough to do both. I have a job to do. I've committed to the team to be here. I've tried to make up for it in any way possible."

"I've always made time for the high holidays," says Schwartz, "but I'd like to make more time in the future for Saturday morning services, for Sukkot and more things like that." Now 24, he hopes to experience the Taglit-Birthright Israel program.

This past September, he went to Temple Beth El's services, which he enjoyed but were admittedly different from what he grew up with. Schwartz appreciates though that there are many ways for Jews to be observant.

"I think Judaism does provide that. There are so many avenues, reform, reconstructionist, conservative, orthodox. The core values are all the same but it does allow you to make Judaism a part of your life in the way that works best for you. I think going to temple is great because it reinforces all of those beliefs and just being in the synagogue you have this feeling of..."

He pauses while searching for the right words before admitting, "I don't know, it's just great to be there."

Schwartz also understands why his being Jewish might be a big deal for others.

In the yin and yang of Jewish identity, there have always been the polar opposites of nebbish and Maccabee. Schwartz with his strength, size and success at one of the toughest positions in the NFL, most definitively represents the latter and he's glad to do so.

"I think Jews are getting recognized more for athletics which is good for kids coming up now. When I was a kid, I didn't know of an offensive lineman who was Jewish."

The fact is that you wouldn't be able to make a minyan from the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob on NFL rosters but you could make a start. According to various reports, there are at least seven others besides Schwartz including the Dallas Cowboys Igor Olshansky, a defensive end and offensive lineman Kyle Kosier, Sage Rosenfels, a backup quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings, St. Louis Rams offensive lineman Adam Goldberg, San Francisco 49'ers safety Taylor Mays, Jacksonville Jaguars punter Adam Podlesh, and David Binn, a long snapper for the San Diego Chargers.

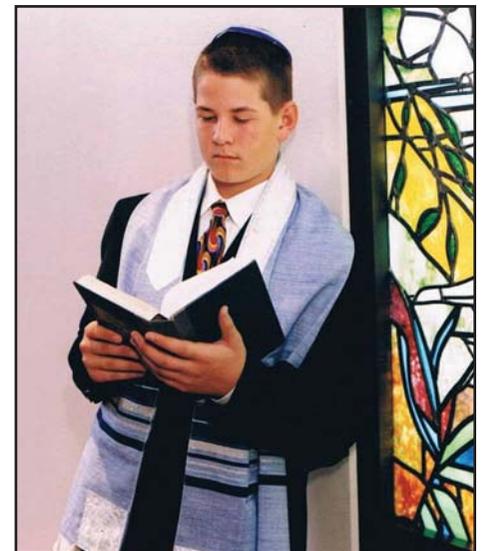
Bruce Snyder, who's also Jewish and the sports anchor for FOX Charlotte, agrees. "It proves you can do anything you want if you set your mind to it. If you want to be an NFL player it doesn't matter what your background is."

Schwartz was an all-around athlete at Palisades High School in Los Angeles, playing basketball and excelling in baseball as a pitcher with a good inside fastball. While it may seem sacrilegious for a southern California native to do, he cheered the San Francisco Giants on through their World Series run this fall. But that tracks to his father who's originally from Santa Rosa in the Bay Area.

Selected out of the University of Oregon in the seventh round of the 2008 NFL Draft, Schwartz

spent his first season on the practice team before filling in for Jeff Otah and later starting the last three games when Otah went down with a season ending injury. He helped DeAngelo Williams and Jonathan Stewart to become the first set of teammates in NFL history to each rush for more than 1,100 yards in the same season.

He considers Charlotte home now and looks towards the future on and off the field. A political science major at Oregon, Schwartz had originally thought about going into law but now sees his future in coaching. In the off-season he's been coaching baseball at Fort Mill High School for the past three years.



Geoff at his Bar Mitzvah.
Photo courtesy Olivia Goodkin and Lee Schwartz.

When asked by an Oregon interviewer about his adjustment to Charlotte, Schwartz answered, "Life is great here. It's such a different way of living - way more laid back than the west coast and people are so nice here. The food is great also, which is most important in my book."

Foremost though, his focus is on the Panthers. "It was fun at the end of last year. We were playing really well on offense. It's tough this year with the losing. We've all been working hard to correct some of the issues on offense and it just hasn't come together yet. We'll keep working at it."

This modern day Samson will carry the load, and the ball if he has to. ☆

Steve Goldberg, a left-handed child of the 60s, awaits the second coming of Koufax for the Dodgers.

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