

The Truth About Braylon Edwards

Interview by Tom Ryan

The pro-bowl wide receiver, picked third overall by the Cleveland Browns in 2005, found his home with the Seattle Seahawks this year by beating veteran wideout Terrell Owens for the contested spot. Coach Pete Carroll attributed this decision to Braylon's diligence, determination and leadership in what many consider a young football team.

Photograph by Jed Share

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Off the field, Edwards is known for motivating young students to value the opportunity of education and rewarding those who step up to the challenge with financial support to achieve their academic dreams.

Amid the controversy, expectations and team changes, one centerpiece sticks out glaringly. Braylon Edwards is very entrenched in social issues, and cares deeply about the youth, not only in his home town of Detroit but in the other cities he has spent his time in during his career. If one peels back the layer of negativity the media has coated him with, they see that Braylon Edwards is a generous man, raised well by a caring family and more than willing to give back to the communities that have helped him achieve the success he has enjoyed in his life. Perhaps his mobile history with numerous teams is a function of fate; to expose as many cities to his appreciation of civic duty as possible.

Before the 2012 season, Braylon Edwards offers insight into what this enigmatic player is all about, where his philanthropic tendencies come from and what his career has been like, from his perspective.

EXCLUSIVE

Q You have established the Braylon Edwards Foundation, whose mission statement says that it is dedicated to meeting the needs of under-served youth in the concentrated area of education. What motivated you to create this foundation?

A My mom, my father and I wanted to give back in a way that we could really relate to and be passionate about. The high school graduation rate in Detroit at the time was the worst in the country. I was drafted to the Cleveland Browns, and their city had the third worst in the country. Improving that became our recurring message, and where we wanted to stake our claim.

Q You were drafted by the Cleveland Browns in 2005 as the third overall pick in the NFL draft. Two years later, you gave 'The Gift Worth A Million Dollars' to 100 high school kids, which was a \$10,000 donation towards their college education. How did you come up with this idea for your 'Advance 100 Program', and why did you want to help these young adults get a college education?

A Attending public high school, I saw so many kids that had the potential and the ability to succeed, but they just didn't have the support at home. A lot of those kids fell by the wayside, and a lot of them wound up dropping out of high school. I had the support of my family, and I saw what it did for me and for my sisters. That is what we wanted to do, we wanted to help these kids that needed the support, that wanted to achieve that college degree or that high school diploma but did not have the extra support they needed to do so.

Q The program was more than just giving them money, though. You required them to maintain at least a 2.5 GPA and do 15 hours of community service each year. Why was it important to you to set some standards rather than just give each student a \$10,000 gift?

A I thought it was important to do something for more than just the sake of doing it. We really wanted to get after these kids, to challenge them to be the best that they could be. Let's show them what's out there for them if they want to work hard. All kids received four college credits before they even left high school, and we had them do charitable work on the weekends to teach them how to give back to the community. They also took courses on etiquette, things like how to properly shake a man's hand, how to tie a tie, teaching a young lady to wear a dress at the dinner table and what knives to use when eating a salad versus eating a steak. These things get taken for granted. I didn't even realize how big a deal these things were until I saw the change from when I first met these kids to when they graduated. The way they looked at me and talked to me, the goals they had; it was a huge jump.

Q How has the program worked since its inception, and how many students have gone on to college with your help?

A The program has ended, but we had a 78% graduation rate. We did not necessarily lose contact with the other 22 kids, but some of them moved out of the state and things like that, though that does not mean they lost the \$10,000 towards their college education. Fourteen kids from the program graduated

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It's dedicated to addressing the immediate needs of underserved youth in the concentrated area of education.

early, and all of them had over a 4.0 GPA. The highest, I can't remember the young lady's name, but she had a 4.6 GPA. The average GPA that we had in the program was 3.1, which I think for 78 kids is pretty phenomenal. We had kids go to Harvard, Cal Berkeley. Too many went to Ohio State in my opinion [laughs], but you know, it's a great institution and we'll take it as well.

Q Are there any particular students you are most proud of in terms of what they have done with your gift?

A Well first and foremost, I'm proud of all of them. Not only did they take the initiative to fill out the essay just hoping for a chance to be in the program, but they also took the program to a new height. They made me, my mother, my father and everyone else who worked in the organization very happy with how it turned out. There are, however, two kids that stand out for me, and who I still keep in contact with. Michael Grundich who went to Ohio State, to a design school. I don't think they had ever accepted a freshman until him, but he was accepted and now he is in L.A., freelancing. Every time I talk to him, he is somewhere else, all over the country, trying to meet people, trying to improve his skills and learn from people. So I am very proud of him and the continuing work he is doing. Also, there was a young kid, William, who told me when he was 14 that he was going to Harvard, and at 18, he fulfilled that goal and got a full scholarship there. He said he was going to do it and he did it, so that definitely says something about him and about his family.

Q Your commitment to education has not been limited to Cleveland. You also have given an endowment of \$500,000 to your alma mater, the University of Michigan, for football scholarships. Why was giving this gift so important to you?

A Well that's two-fold. Michigan gave me a chance to be in a top 10 school but, first and foremost, the chance to receive an education. An education is priceless, and to be given the opportunity to be on that stage, to be around those kids at that program, the University of Michigan is an esteemed program. You meet so many different people from so many different

realms of life that have gone to a university and that have done well in life and are educated. Two, the football stage. The University of Michigan has always been one of the prominent schools for football in NCAA history. When you look in terms of wins, we have the highest win percentage in history. So to be part of that, I definitely felt as though I should give back, and actually I did give back academically as well, with two \$10,000 academic scholarships each year.

Q So often, young people are attracted to the flash and success that comes with professional sports, but you once said, "the fundamentals of success can only be achieved through quality education." How did you come to understand this important truth about life?

A My stepfather was very influential. He is a graduate of Western Michigan University and has his PhD from Wayne State University and he was in the teaching field for 20 years. He just really embedded in me and my sister what the importance of an education was, and what an education would allow you to do later on in life. An education will pretty much allow you to achieve all things possible, and will definitely let you help out whoever you want to help out, in whatever walks of life. I met my stepfather when I was four years old, so I always had that influence in my life, and that influence carried over to our foundation as well.

Q During your time at the University of Michigan, what parts of your education most affected you, and what parts do you feel will help you the most in your post NFL career?

A I liked the different walks of life. You have the different classes, and the seminars, but I just liked being around the different perspectives, the different ethnicities and backgrounds. The education was great, obviously, but I just thought it was cool, coming from an inner city high school that was predominantly black to being in a world environment where everyone was so different from me. You see a lot on TV and you can read a lot about it too, but to see it and to be around these different people and see that maybe you are not so different in a lot of ways—that, to me, was the best part of the college experience.

Q In addition to the charitable work of your foundation, you have also challenged young people to get involved with their communities. You challenged students at 20 Cleveland schools to collect canned food for the Cleveland Food Bank in the Holiday Great Exchange Citywide Canned Food Drive. Why is it so important for to get students involved in this community food drive?

A Being from Detroit, we had a place called Focus Hope. They provide for the needy, as well as the homeless. They do a lot of food drives, and one summer in Detroit when it was extremely hot, they provided fans to people who needed them. The founder and COO of Focus Hope taught my mom, my friends and me what it means to give back to people, and she taught us at a very young age. My friends and I were all in our early twenties. So we wanted to teach these kids in Cleveland how to give back as well, and we were able to partner up with the Salvation Army and Focus Hope. A little goes a long way; people don't realize how much one can of food can provide for a family. We started off small and got bigger each year. One classroom raised upwards of 800 pounds of food.

Q You have a nice play on words as part of your charitable work, 'receiving means giving.' Why is giving back so important to you?

A A lot of people gave me the things along the way to help me get to this point. I didn't get to the NFL by myself. I was given peoples' time, efforts, experiences, and stories. I was able to take that knowledge from the time people gave me and I was able to go to college. From college I was able to go to the NFL which has made me able to provide charitably to these cities. My mom beats it into me and is always reminding me when she thinks I may have forgotten that the most important thing is giving. People don't always realize that giving is the thing that is most important. When you leave the game of football or basketball or IBM or Microsoft, when you leave these corporate worlds, it's not about the money you've made; it's about the friendships and the things you give. So I want my legacy to be a lot more than 'he caught this many touchdowns.' I want it to be that he was a great guy that allowed people to share in what he did.

Q Not only have you reached out to the kids in Cleveland where you played most of your career but you have also reached out to the kids in Detroit. One of the things you did in Detroit was create a program called Helmets for High School, which provides 400 top of the line helmets to improve the safety of high school football players. Why was it so important to give back to the kids in your hometown of Detroit?

A Detroit is the city where I was born and raised, and it's the city I love and the one I will always claim and represent. One of my coaches in Detroit was talking to my dad about the poor quality of their helmets. We are going through this whole concussion issue in the NFL, and our helmets are much higher quality than the ones they have in high school, so we said, 'Let's

see if we can partner with somebody.' Schutt was the first helmet brand to come back and say 'We will gladly help you,' so we did that initiative, and every team in the Public School League in Detroit received helmets that year.

Q On your website for your Braylon Edwards Foundation, you have a quote from an unnamed source, "it is in our service to others that we achieve true greatness." Who influenced you the most in shaping the community values you hold so dear?

A I would have to go with my mom, my dad, my stepdad and my stepmom. I was blessed to have four parents, and four graduates of high school, as well as college. They were always talking about giving back, so growing up it was just in my nature. Being in sports and different outlets, and seeing the difference in a household with two parents, a household with one parent, a household where the parents were never there or one where it was the grandmother raising the kids and she maybe doesn't have as much energy. In my heart, it stems from seeing the difference, and from wanting to help.

Q Why is it important for NFL players like you to get involved and make a difference in their communities?

A I think the best part about us doing it, people in the NFL or NBA or actors, is that kids look up to us. Teachers can sit there until they're blue in the face and tell them, 'If you study this or if you do this the right way, and if you do well in college you will be able to go on to riches, fame and glory.' Kids are like, 'Well this guy gets paid to do that, and I don't want to hear that; I don't even really like this person anyway.' The people these kids hold dear are their favorite athletes, or their favorite actors or musicians. When you get those guys saying this same stuff, then the kids will believe it. I'm not sure if that's right or wrong, but that's why it's so important for us as athletes or entertainers to give back and start foundations in the community, to go speak at schools when we have the time.

Q You have now played for 4 teams; the Cleveland Browns, the New York Jets, the San Francisco 49ers, and this year the Seattle Seahawks. What's the most difficult challenge you face when moving on to a new team?

A Building relationships. Over time, you will build relationships, and they will be good relationships, but then you have to start over. Luckily, the league is overlapping, so you'll wind up running into someone that you know: a coach, a trainer or some players. But it's just the relationships. I was in Cleveland for five years, and to have to just up and one day leave and go to New York, you're thinking, 'Aww, man what's this going to be like? Are they going to welcome me? Are we going to be good? Are they going to be mad that I'm taking someone's job?' And then two years' of relationships there, and now you are in San Francisco. Now I am in Seattle. I like it here. I like the coach Pete Carroll; I like his message. The team

is young and hungry, and the guys work hard every day, so hopefully this situation sticks. That is really the difference from team to team: it's the relationships that you lose, and then trying to gain new ones when you don't know how it's going to go.

Q You have had some serious injuries in your football career. What's the biggest challenge in coming back from a major injury?

A It depends. The more serious the injury, the more it wears on the mental aspect. As most people know, football is 5% physical and 95% mental. Getting through a season, training yourself, dealing with family issues if you have them, dealing with injuries...the thing with injuries is, you start asking yourself, 'Am I going to be 100%? Am I going to make it back on time? Okay I got hurt, I see they drafted somebody at my position, a young guy. Is he here to replace me? How is this going to work? Am I starting to look older to them?' Your mind starts playing tricks on you. You just have to go out there every day and go after it, and let everything take care of itself, which is easier said than done.

Q In competing with another star veteran player in Terrell Owens for a roster spot that you eventually won, how did you prepare yourself physically, mentally and emotionally for the challenge?

A I think the biggest thing with him and I is that I didn't prepare as if I was going against T.O., it wasn't Braylon against T.O.: it was me against the other wide receivers. I'm not coming out here just to get a spot on the team. I came out here to be *the* guy. I came out here to be the guy the Seahawks could trust as their number one receiver. I think in having that mind set, it had me looking far past Terrell Owens, who is a Hall of Fame receiver. I mean, I liked his game a lot when I was in high school, and in college, I respected and admired him. I still do. But it was bigger than that—it wasn't about Terrell Owens—it was about me and what I wanted to do for the Seahawks.

Q As you have grown older as an athlete, how has your workout and preparation regiment changed with your changing needs, and what advice would you give to younger players in the league for maintaining a long and productive football career?

A Take care of your body. Your body is your temple. I've been told that forever and I didn't always listen. I am the biggest fast food eater that there is that's a wide receiver. Over time, though, I've gotten better. I've been on a healthier diet for the past year or so. You have to make sure you get massages; they keep your muscles loose and allow you to play at that high level. Every little thing you do affects your body's adjustment pattern, so if I'm sitting watching TV for a couple hours, now my body is naturally out of line, because I've allowed my spine to go one way at a bent angle, and when you get hit or fall over... You don't realize these things when you're younger. When you're 22, you can just roll out of bed and go to practice. When you're 29, 30, 31, 33, it's like, 'Okay I gotta stretch, make sure I'm eating the right things, make sure I'm getting my massages...' I'm starting to pay attention to these things. I'm eating my food and checking out the calories now. Start early, paying attention so that when you're older, it's easier to transition.

Q Your new coach Pete Carroll praised your football skills as the big physical receiver that the Seahawks need for their pass oriented offense. What are you looking forward to the most in your first season with the Seahawks?

A I'm looking to have fun. Every season you put some kind of expectation on. I've worked so hard to get back to this point, through injuries and through disbelief, so to have the great opportunity to contribute to this team...I'm just looking to go out there and have fun. I think if I go out there and do that, I'll know my game plan, I'll study my game plan, I'll have fun, and I will be able to do the best that I can as a player for the Seattle Seahawks and for Braylon Edwards. *BT*

AP Photo/Rick Scuteri



Seattle Seahawks wide receiver Braylon Edwards (17) pulls in a pass as Arizona Cardinals' William Gay (23) defends during the first half of an NFL football game, Sunday, Sept. 9, 2012, in Glendale, Ariz.

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