

# From Johnny Football to Johnny Manziel: Making of an NFL quarterback

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Photo: Houston Chronicle

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Former Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel walks toward the ocean to train in the water while working out on Mission Beach in preparation for the National Football League draft Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014, in San ... [more](#)

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**SAN DIEGO** — A wicked wind whips the waves on to an almost-deserted Mission Beach still shrouded by the early-morning fog. It's 55 degrees on the shore but colder in the Pacific Ocean when Johnny Manziel wades into waist-deep water.

It's the beginning of another nine-hour day for Manziel, working with quarterback guru George Whitfield Jr., for a third consecutive year. Manziel has a bigger purpose this year. He wants to send a message to the NFL, in particular the Houston Texans, who have the first overall pick in the May draft.

Manziel — flamboyant on and off the field — is determined to show the Texans he's more than just a Heisman Trophy winner with a trademark nickname and more than a prospect whose natural ability can border on brilliance. He wants to demonstrate a laser-like focus and an endless drive for perfection.

Perhaps even more important, Johnny Manziel wants to distance himself from Johnny Football.

That is why he's in the cold ocean water with Whitfield shouting commands, looking more like he's training for the Navy SEALs than the NFL draft.

“I want them to say absolutely, without a doubt, with 100 percent certainty, that I'm who they want,” Manziel says later to reporters from the Houston Chronicle and Fort Worth Star-Telegram who are watching his workouts with Whitfield.

“I want everybody from the janitor at Reliant Stadium to the front-office executive assistant all the way up to (owner) Bob McNair to say, 'This kid is 100 percent, can't miss. This is who we want being the face of our program. We want the Texas kid staying in Texas and leading the Texans.'”

The “Texas kid” was born in Tyler, but he developed into a Friday night sensation at Kerrville Tivy High. After a redshirt season with the Aggies, Manziel was catapulted into the national consciousness when he engineered an upset victory at No. 1-ranked Alabama and became the first freshman in NCAA history to win the Heisman in 2012.

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## MORE INFORMATION

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### NFL draft

**When:** May 8-10

**Where:** New York

**TV:** ESPN

### Top five picks:

1. Texans, 2. Rams,
3. Jaguars, 4. Browns, 5. Raiders

**Cowboys' first-round pick:** No. 16 or 17, pending coin flip with Ravens

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Manziel hasn't tried to hide his ambition to play for the Texans, and he has a warning if they pass him up and he falls to a team such as Jacksonville, an AFC South rival with the third overall pick and a desperate need for a quarterback.

“It would be the worst decision they've ever made,” he says, smiling. “I'd be in the same division playing against them twice a year. Sorry, but you just turned that chip on my shoulder from a Frito into a Dorito.”

Back in the ocean, waves are knocking Manziel off balance as he struggles to deliver passes to Whitfield, who says the quarterback has never worked harder. Manziel has a lot to prove to potential NFL employers that he has matured from his checkered past highlighted by social media mistakes, underage drinking and run-ins with the NCAA over his famous signature.

“I was a kid who made some goofball decisions,” he says. “That's been part of my journey. Maybe it's part of the whole Johnny Football deal that I'm trying to get away from. I'm trying to show people I've grown up, and I've learned from my experiences. I feel like you're a stupid person if you continue to make the same wrong decisions.

“I don't want to hear, 'Oh, anybody in his situation would have been doing the same thing.' I'm 100 percent responsible for my actions.”

To convince McNair, general manager Rick Smith and coach Bill O'Brien he's worth the top pick and is willing to undergo a life-altering metamorphosis, Manziel is determined to endure

Whitfield's unorthodox training methods.

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Whitfield, who says when Manziel is measured and weighed at the combine he'll be a solid 6-foot, 210 pounds, gets the quarterback out of the frigid water and has him put on a blindfold for a Zorro drill.

Whitfield stands behind the quarterback. Three of Whitfield's assistants are spread out on the beach 10 to 15 yards away. When Manziel drops back three steps, Whitfield points to a receiver, who claps three times. The ball comes out, and it's almost always on target.

Manziel later throws with one of Whitfield's assistants poking him with a broom. Whitfield has another drill in which Manziel gets bean bags thrown at him as he drops back, plants and throws.

“When you show them what to do and explain why they're doing it, and then they play and see how much it helps, they come back and want to do more,” Whitfield says as Manziel does agility drills in the sand. “They're always more attendant.”

Whitfield has an impressive list of clients, including Ben Roethlisberger, Cam Newton and Andrew Luck. None has been with him longer than Manziel.

“Johnny's a hard worker, and he wants to learn,” Whitfield says. “He's fluid, resourceful, smart.”

“And everything matters to him.”

## **Manziel's team**

Manziel slices his steak during dinner at an upscale San Diego restaurant with his agent Erik Burkhardt and attorney Brad Beckworth.

Burkhardt of Select Sports Group and Beckworth and Maverick Carter of LRMR are part of Manziel's management team. They run things for him off the field while Whitfield prepares him to excel on the next level.

Manziel's team makes sure he works nine hours a day, five days a week. On his two days off from training, he usually takes care of business. One day, he heads to Portland, Ore., to meet with Nike. Another day, it's with Under Armour.

When Manziel came to Houston for a recent charity event on an off day, he brought along his trainer so he didn't miss a workout.

“People can call me crazy, and it's not cockiness (but), I'm going to put myself in (position) to win the Super Bowl every single year,” he says. “A 5-10 guy (Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson) just won the Super Bowl in his second year in the NFL. That's unreal. I want to be the first rookie to win the Super Bowl.”

And he would love to win a Super Bowl with the Texans.

“They're a team I've watched every year since I was a kid,” he says. “I want to be the No. 1 pick. It's something I've dreamed about. With the pieces they already have in place, I could fit in.

“I'm a Texas kid. The state means a lot to me.”

Manziel is so sincere, so believable, that no one at his table disputes his notion that he could help the Texans win the Super Bowl next season.

“Absolutely,” he says. “If that's the situation, I'm going to go in there and be the first guy learning with Bill O'Brien. The best thing about me over the past couple of years is I've had great relationships with my position coaches and with my head coach.”

Manziel knows there's a chance Houston will pass him up in the draft.

Like the Texans and Jaguars, Cleveland also needs a quarterback, and the Browns have the fourth overall pick.

“If something happens, and it's the Cleveland Browns, I'm going to pour my heart out for the Dawg Pound and try to win a Super Bowl for Cleveland,” he says. “I don't care if they've had 20 starting quarterbacks since 1999. I'm going to be the 21st and the guy that brought them the Super Bowl.”

### **Looking forward to combine**

Manziel is excited to be interviewed at this week's scouting combine in Indianapolis.

“I want them to know who I really am,” he says. “I'm going to try to let people know who I really am deep down in my core and that I'm not the guy who does whatever is portrayed on the Internet.”

He wants them to explain to them the difference between Johnny Manziel and Johnny Football.

“Johnny Football is the stuff you see on TMZ,” he says. “There's part of that folktale that goes

along with it and tries to twist me into somebody I'm not all the time. I feel like now there's kind of like this frozen food package — a pre-wrapped, pre-cooked package of who I am.

“Johnny Manziel is the guy that — whether it's Houston, Jacksonville, Cleveland or Oakland — you'll have to drag off that field before I stop playing for those guys. Those are my teammates. Those are my brothers from now on. I'm going to fight until there's no time left on the clock. That's Johnny Manziel.

“Football and family will always be the most important things in my life. The main thing for me is to play the game with a certain type of passion and a certain type of respect that football deserves. It's a humbling game. It can come and go at the drop of a hat.”

Manziel worked out in San Diego and passed up a \$350,000 guarantee to promote a product on radio row at the Super Bowl earlier this month.

“It's not about the money to me,” he says. “I don't even know what the monetary value of the first 10 picks in the draft is.

“I'm in a position where I can play a game I love more than anything for a living. I'm ready to be in a position that no matter where I go in this draft that I'm there to win Super Bowls.”

## **Interview studying**

Prolific Athletes, founded by Ryan Flaherty, is in Carlsbad, which borders San Diego to the north. Flaherty is Manziel's strength and speed coach. They spend hours together five days a week.

Manziel works indoors with Flaherty. On this day, his weightlifting includes a 650-pound power lift. He also throws indoors or outdoors with Whitfield.

“If you want to be the greatest, you have to prepare like it,” Manziel says. “That's why I'm out here trying to be the best player possible. Whether it's in the film room or the weight room, there are days where it's hard, though, when it's a struggle.”

A favorite part of Manziel's training is his film sessions with Kevin O'Connell, the former San

Diego State quarterback who was New England's third-round pick in 2008 — Manziel and O'Connell are in an office at Prolific Athletes watching film of the 2011 season when O'Brien was the Patriots' offensive coordinator and play-caller. They reached the Super Bowl and lost to the New York Giants.

“I get the best of both worlds — to learn from one of the greatest (quarterbacks) of all time, and at the same time, see and learn what the coach I want to be playing for is doing in certain situations,” Manziel says about Tom Brady and O'Brien.

At the scouting combine, Manziel will be among the prospects interviewed by O'Brien.

“In Indianapolis,” Manziel says, “I want to be able to sit there and him draw a play on the board and be like, 'Coach, that was your third-and-12 play from the Super Bowl. You called that on the right hash from the 42-yard line driving in to score to win the game.'”

“I want to blow his lid off when I'm in that situation.”

During a film session, Manziel takes notes and answers O'Connell's questions. He's inquisitive and isn't shy about making observations or asking questions.

O'Connell mentions the possibility of Manziel being drafted by O'Brien.

“Johnny will have to convince Bill that he can be his guy and he can build his team around,” O'Connell says. “I think he fits like a glove in that offense as long as he understands protections and can get the ball to his playmakers and not always have to be the playmaker.”

“Johnny knows that even if you have all the talent in the world when you come into the NFL, you've got to learn the NFL game. This is the Heisman Trophy winner, and he knows he doesn't have all the answers. Johnny's excited to show them he has the capacity to learn.”

Listening to O'Connell discuss O'Brien and Manziel, it's clear he believes they have similar characteristics.

“Bill is extremely competitive, and he's extremely smart,” O'Connell says. “I think he's going to be able to see all the things that we've been able to see over the course of the years with

Johnny — the playmaking ability, the charisma, the guy that can make everybody on the field better.

“But he's also, hopefully, going to learn the side of Johnny that I've gotten to learn. The ability to want to learn and embrace and take an offense to its maximum level by learning every aspect of it.”

Manziel grins and sounds almost embarrassed when asked about all the celebrities he's met through that TMZ lifestyle.

LeBron James, Drake, Justin Timberlake, Vince Vaughn and Nolan Ryan are just a few of those who impressed him.

He's eager to add two more to his list.

“Bob McNair and Bill O'Brien,” he says.

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