

Winners Circle: a new path for young athletes

BYDAN WEBER 13 hours ago



Jordan Campbell, former USC and NFL player with 13-year-old Aydin Breland, a 6-foot-3, 266-pound seventh-grader. (Photo: 247Sports)

(Second of a two-part series. Part 1: Jordan Campbell: From USC to Winners Circle)

CORONA -- **Aydin Breland** came here as a lacrosse guy. "It's a new CIF sport," the 13-year-old from Corona's Cavaliers travel team says. But it's not exactly where the seventh-grader's athletic focus is now that he's at the Winners Circle Academy.

That's because he already has a college football scholarship offer from Arizona State. And it will be more than a year-and-a-half before he sees his first high school action.

When Aydin arrived at Winners Circle as an oversized grade-schooler last year, he carried 185 pounds on his 6-foot-3 frame. In the time he's been here,

he's dropped 10 percent of his body fat, gotten his bench press up to 195, his squat to 255, his 40-yard dash time down to 5.25 and his body weight up to 266 pounds.

Which is how he got the chance to play -- "both guard and tackle," he says -- for Winners Circle's age group national champion football team. The Corona academy won it all in both the 14- and 12-year-old divisions this fall.

"What do the other teams say when you break the huddle and roll up to the line of scrimmage?" we asked Aydin? He just grinned. But WCA founder and former USC football player **Jordan Campbell** answered quickly: "They ask for his birth certificate."

Just a guess here: When they discover he's only 13, it's even harder to believe.

But ask Aydin his favorite thing about going to a sports academy that, much like a school for performing arts, focuses strongly on preparing fourth-through-eighth-grade athletes, and his answer may surprise you.

Sure, all the weight training, nutrition, conditioning and movement work is the foundation for his being here. But his favorite part of the day: "I like English," Aydin says. "I'm a pretty good writer." And he proudly talks about the vocabulary book his mom got him. "I really like writing essays."

Which should come in handy if he ever has to do one of those college essays. Although that may not be an issue with the ASU offer coming already. "There would probably be a few more," Jordan says, "if they weren't scared of offering a seventh-grader."

The academics are pretty straightforward in the on-line education here for 171 students (150 boys, 21 girls) in classes with teachers where they do much of

the work on their laptops. "It's real results-oriented," Jordan says, "all digital. You can't fall between the cracks."

You'd better not. Drop below 3.0 in the four core areas (math, science, English and history) and you get special attention until you bring it up. But that's just half of what they do here with two teachers for every 25-student class.

The other half is preparing them to move on in sports -- or for some, just to learn how to live with their big, or small, bodies at a time in their lives when it's awfully important to begin feeling comfortable and confident. All of the 40 staffers have a sports background, Jordan says, with a physical therapist, trainer and a full recovery center offering cryogenics along with individual biometrics every two weeks.

"The nutrition part of it is huge for these kids at 10, 11, 12 and 13," Jordan says.

To a former high school teacher and coach watching these kids -- and their coaches, many drawn from athletes who grew up in Corona, Norco and Riverside and have come home to teach what they know -- this looks like a different place. The students move quietly without supervision with smiles on their faces from one of the buildings on the 65,000-square-foot campus in a Corona business park to the other.

"They really don't want to leave at the end of the day," says Jordan, the essential promoter and marketer since his days of peddling t-shirts and giving the football and Compliance staffs heartburn in his three years at USC before transferring to Louisville then New Mexico Highlands and then practice squad stops in the NFL at Cincinnati, Kansas City and Washington.

They teach these kids how to eat, what to eat, why it matters, how to work the state-of-the-art weight room (designed by former USC strength and conditioning boss **Aaron Ausmus** for the Sorinex equipment brand he represents and partners with WCA) in addition to sports specific work with an indoor batting cage, gym, an outdoor artificial turf field with enough sleds and stations to compete with most college facilities.

You know that drill USC does with a tackling dummy placed inside a tire that a manager or grad assistant pulls with a rope. WCA has two of the \$12,000 hi-tech robot versions that can be programmed to move the direction and speed you want them to.

Tuition for the 10-month academic year for the CIF-approved and California charter school is \$10,000 and there are scholarships available with donors very much encouraged. For staffers just out of college, Jordan can offer a \$55,000 starting salary.

The word is getting out. Safety **Liona Lefau**, just turned 14, is an eighth-grader from Kaluku, Hawai'i. It looks like he'll have to choose from Mater Dei, Centennial, JSerra or St. John Bosco as he gets to experience one of the real pluses for WCA students -- they get the chance to go through the whole recruiting experience before they get to high school. So when colleges come calling, it won't be something completely foreign to them and their families. One of the Oregon coaches who stopped by told the 14-year-old Liona that he was "recruiting an 18-year-old who looks just like you."

From not quite as far away is Calabasas 12-year-old **Tee Bartlett**, who is a 6-foot-3, 190-pounder who plans to follow his brother, **Brian Hightower**, a Miami freshman wide receiver after two years at IMG Academy in Florida. He and his mother moved to Corona so Tee could have a couple of years preparing himself for IMG.

"IMG finds them and recruits them," Jordan says of the Florida powerhouse with players from more than a dozen states, "we develop them." It worked for his brother who scored a TD in his first game this fall against LSU on a reception. He'd spent two years at IMG after a big sophomore season at Calabasas.

"If you're not ready for IMG, this is the place for you," Tee says.

But it's not all football here. Although the numbers favor it of course, with some 85 of the 150 boys focusing on football. But there's also baseball, basketball, lacrosse, volleyball and Olympic sports. Girls focus on softball, volleyball, lacrosse, tennis and soccer.

And while Jordan estimates that 75 percent of WCA's students will get some sort of scholarship offer, that's not the only goal. "We offer them a Plan B," Jordan says. Many of them will need it. He certainly did. The NFL is for the very few.

But for all of them, there will be the chance to work in an environment where star Seattle Seahawks linebacker **Bobby Wagner**, out of Ontario, might be working out right next to them. Or in January, the 19 college players preparing for the NFL Combine will be arrive for a 12-week course.

That's one of the blessings of integrating all of this in one place at one time. For those who wonder how do you keep the egos in check for grade school athletes -- there have been 15 -- with college scholarship offers already.

No way that can happen when the guy working next to you -- or running your weight session -- is an NFL or Pac-12 player of some note.

"They learn how to conduct themselves, how you do it by watching and listening to those who have done it -- and many who still are," Jordan says.

"You can't get big-headed with all these NFL and college guys around -- it's humbling to be here . . . you can be the next one up," if you pay attention and work at it and you're just enough lucky.

Never one guilty of understatement, Jordan finishes off his assessment of how this has taken off the way it has in four short years. "We're trying to create the perfect environment."

And yes, Jordan says, "I'm surprised at how fast we got here looking at what we had to go through," he says of this concept that started with his \$5,000 Bengals practice squad signing bonus.

Jordan Campbell: from USC to Winners Circle?

BYDAN WEBER Dec 23, 2:02 PM



Jordan Campbell has his Winners Circle Academy off to a flying start. (Photo: 247Sports)

Part 1 in a two-part series

CORONA -- "What the heck are you doing here?" Seattle Seahawks coach **Pete Carroll** wanted to know when he ran into his former Trojan player **Jordan Campbell** a few years back at the NFL Combine in Indianapolis.

For someone who remembers Jordan from his USC years, that same question flashes through your mind touring the one-of-a-kind Winners Circle charter school campus that fills 65,000 square feet over two action-packed buildings in a business park in Corona.

What is Jordan Campbell doing here -- the Jordan Campbell whose USC fame came more as a business-developing party-planner riding shotgun with the likes of 21-year-old NFL agent **Teague Egan**, who gave **Dillon**

Baxter that infamous NCAA-penalized golf cart ride when he represented a Jordan-founded 1st Round Enterprises. Or joined **Everson Griffen** on that memorable trip to Nantucket for the Trojan teammates. Or the guy who threw an off-to-the-NFL party for **Sedrick Ellis** that drew 5,000 attendees. "All that crazy stuff happened," Jordan says looking back. "I wasn't mature enough to handle USC."

As to the party, "social media," Jordan laughs about the gigantic turnout. He got there first a decade ago. "For good and bad," he says.

But what exactly is he doing here now? How did that Jordan Campbell make this journey from man-about-campus entrepreneur to academy founder and in many ways, a school principal developing a program like no other in the nation?

In answer to the first question, Jordan was in Indy with players he was training for the Combine, putting to good use his major in exercise science from New Mexico Highlands University, the second of his two college stops after he left USC following the 2009 season. And where he ended up after three NFL stops as a practice squad fullback and linebacker for Cincinnati, Washington and Kansas City.

"They were actually really happy to see me," Jordan says of his reunion with his USC coaches now in the NFL -- **Ken Norton, Pat Ruel** and **Rockie Seto**. As to the second question, Jordan is building a comprehensive program that has NFL players, college stars, Combine preparers and 171 fourth-through-eighth graders working out together here at Winners Circle Academy, a charter school with a staff of 40 -- all with a sports backgrounds -- who aim to prepare young athletes for what comes next. For many that's a high school scholarship to one of the Trinity League schools.

"We had 32 kids go to the Trinity League on scholarship last year," Jordan says, "and that's at \$32,000 each . . . that's a million dollars a year."

They also have grade schoolers getting college offers from the likes of Arizona State, Oregon and USC. New Colorado coach **Mel Tucker** has already stopped by -- to look at grade schoolers. And they are here. A total of 15 Winners Circle students have been offered Division I scholarships before they've played a minute of high school ball.

But more about the school and its student-athletes (150 boys, 21 girls) and just plain students in the second part of the series. The focus here will be on how exactly Jordan pulled off an \$11 million debt-free operation like this by the time he was 30. He kids that at USC, he had the bad luck to arrive as a linebacker behind "four first-round NFL draft picks in the same class," he says of that legendary 2008 **Rey Mauluga, Brian Cushing, Clay Matthews** and **Kaluka Maiava** group.

"I got farther than all of them," Jordan says with a grin as he surveys the campus and the kids, all in their athletic uniforms of black shorts or warmup pants with red trim, grey tees and black jackets. And he did so on a shoestring to start, investing the \$5,000 he got from the Bengals as a practice squad signing bonus that he put into a small workout facility of some 3,000 square feet.

Then he kept re-investing. When he got hurt with the Redskins, he had a choice on the payout and took the year's salary of \$300,000 in one lump and invested it in Winners Circle.

"I stayed involved all my time with the NFL," Jordan says of his post-football career that started as a personal trainer based out of the StubHub Center.

But really, it started at USC where he says he learned a couple of very important lessons. "You've got to be always building your brand," he says of

the networking opportunities that started when he and Griffen were headed back to campus one night and were invited to stop in at Phi Kappa Psi for a rush party and ended up pledging.

"Those guys are still my friends," Jordan says of how he had help with "the three businesses I started at USC" while playing football.

"I know the coaches hated that," Jordan says. But he found it interesting and challenging to hang out with guys "who weren't always arguing the standard football lockerroom talk -- like who's better, **Michael Jordan** or **Kobe Bryant**, or which state has the best high school football?"

There was a price to pay, he says of his extra-curricular activities that made him a pain in the butt to both the coaches and the USC Compliance Department, which is where the second lesson came in. Don't let your setbacks stop you when you really want something.

What no one knew was that Jordan really was busy building a brand -- if mostly in his own mind then. It was the theme of of a recent column Jordan wrote for *Money, Inc.* where he's now a regular contributor on the confluence of sports, marketing, training and education for young athletes.

"You could see how they were marketing us," he said of his time at USC when he was told that after an ankle injury, he couldn't "spat up" his Nike cleats with extra tape over the shoes covering up the swoosh. They had a Nike guy checking for that, he says, as the tape was ripped off his game shoes. But that was also a lesson learned.

In fact, there were lots of lessons to be learned along the way, Jordan says when, after his first college start -- against Washington State, when he made eight tackles before fracturing his ankle. Then Pete Carroll left and **Lane Kiffin** came in and after recruiting him as a fullback, Kiffin wanted to move him back to offense.

Jordan said no. He was a linebacker and he was going to go where he could remain one. So he headed off to Louisville where he had a starting spot locked up when the NCAA ruled that since he'd left just before the sanctions came down on USC, he would have to sit out a year.

"I kept rolling with the punches," he says. But with his playing clock ticking, Jordan realized he needed to find a place to play right away. He'd have to drop down to Division II, he was told, to do that. And the nearest two Div. II schools were Humboldt State and New Mexico Highlands. He chose New Mexico, thinking it was closer to the California weather he was used to.

Not so, Jordan says. Las Vegas, N.M., "was about 7,000 feet in elevation (6,424 to be exact), with 4,000 people in the town, a McDonald's and a Wal-Mart, with maybe 1,000 in the school," of the small state university with an acceptance rate of 100 percent, according to its website. And an honest football coach who told him it was "the worst D-II program in the nation."

But it offered, along with the snow and a freshman roommate for the 22-year-old Jordan, opportunity galore. He was the top running back, the top defender and to boot, and the punter who hit one in the thin atmosphere for 99 yards from the back of one end zone to the other.

But when it came time for his NFL workout, Jordan found out he couldn't go home again as Kiffin nixed his coming back to USC where there would be scouts from every NFL team in attendance. He ended up getting the University of New Mexico to let him work there where just seven NFL scouts showed up.

"I didn't want to fade away so I kept re-inventing myself," Jordan says, although his first mistake came when Kansas City called him on draft day and

said **Andy Reid** was thinking about him as a fullback in the sixth round. "But I'm a linebacker," he said. Kansas City would draft a punter instead. Jordan learned that lesson the hard way. "I'm open to anything," he knows now, was the correct answer. It's that sort of hard-knocks wisdom that he can impart to his kids.

Indeed, from his actual time on the Bengals' fabled *Hard Knocks* HBO series from training camp, Jordan was the focus of one of the more famous incidents when in a scuffle during a drill, safety **George Iloka**, who had just earned a starting spot, got frustrated with Jordan and pounded him not once, not twice, but three times in the helmet, breaking his hand on the third punch and elevating former USC player **Taylor Mays** to his first starting role.

The lesson there is obvious, Jordan says with a laugh "Hand vs. helmet is bad for hand. For Iloka, there was a lesson as well. "Never hit a guy until you pull his helmet off."

So listen up, kids. When Jordan tells you what not to do, he knows what he's talking about.

Just as he does when he walks a visitor through a campus that's becoming a regular stop for college coaches who fly into Ontario Airport now, stop in Corona first, then head out to Centennial and all the Trinity League schools, as he brags on all his coaches in football, basketball, baseball, soccer and lacrosse as well as the strength and conditioning and nutrition people.

"**Adam Kennedy** (former Angels star from Riverside) heads our baseball program," Jordan says of a staff heavy on local talent from nearby schools like Norco, Centennial and those in Riverside.

(Part II of the series will focus on the academy and how it works for the mostly fourth-through-eighth-grade students.)