



FAVORITE SON

FORMER SOONER FOOTBALL WALK-ON FOLLOWED HIS FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS TO CREATE A LEGACY OF HIS OWN.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH

Several hours after the 62,000-plus fans in attendance had departed Miami Gardens Hard Rock Stadium and the post-game hysteria and wild celebrations had faded into the early morning light, James Winchester finally found a moment to post something on his Twitter page.

It was 9:52 a.m. on Feb. 3, 2020, and it simply read:

“This one’s for you, Dad #SuperBowlLIV #ChiefsKingdom”.

Winchester’s feet still weren’t touching the ground at that point as he waited for the team bus ride to the airport. He tried to wrap his head around the fact that Kansas City had just won its first Super Bowl title in 50 years and he had delivered seven perfect snaps – two on punts, one on a field goal and four on point-after kicks – on the biggest stage in all of sports.

The Chiefs were Super Bowl champions and Winchester, the team’s long snapper, found himself retracing all the steps that had brought him to that point in his life.

A football journey that started in tiny Washington, Okla., and included stops at the University of Oklahoma, a few

post-college destinations, and, ultimately, Kansas City – had one prevailing denominator at every turn – his father, Mike Winchester.

“When the final seconds of that game ticked off and you realize you just won the Super Bowl, it was an incredible feeling, very emotional,” says Winchester, a second-generation Sooner football player. “I remember looking up and thanking the Lord, but also thanking my dad for everything he did to help get me there.”

In the weeks leading up to Super Bowl LIV, Winchester had managed to round up 23 game tickets, one for basically every immediate family member and closest friends who had shared in his struggles and successes along the way. That group included his wife, Emily, and their son, Jase; his mother and stepfather; grandparents; two uncles; and his three sisters, Carolyn, Rebecca and Emily.

“That’s a lot of tickets, but honestly, I felt like all of those people had a hand in me being where I am today, so I was more than happy to help them out with tickets so they could share in that experience,” says Winchester. “To me, you treat something like playing in the Super Bowl as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so it was important to have them there and be a part of it.”

Unfortunately, Mike Winchester was not in attendance that evening.

The patriarch of the Winchester family was only 52 when he was tragically killed in 2016 by a disgruntled Southwest Airlines coworker at Oklahoma City’s Will Rogers Airport,

Even though his dad could not be with him for the celebration after Super Bowl LIV, James Winchester took comfort that his own son, Jace, and wife, Emily, could join him on the field at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens, Fla. Winchester credits his dad, Mike, as the inspiration for his successful path to the NFL.

just 15 months after his son had won the Chiefs' starting long-snapper job.

Since that time, James Winchester has developed into one of the top NFL players at his position, something he says has more to do with the work ethic and passion his father instilled in him than anything else.

"There's not a day that goes by that I don't think of my dad and what he meant to me and our family," says Winchester, who turns 31 in August. "I know he was smiling down that night, but it was still bittersweet getting the opportunity to play in the Super Bowl and not having him there with us. He's the reason why I love the game. He's the reason why I'm still playing."

"You think about all of the years growing up and having him teach you and instill in you so many things that helped make you successful – obviously I wish more than anything he could have shared in the whole Super Bowl experience with us."

Winchester admits that being able to reflect on all the time that he and his siblings did get to share with their father – all of the Little League games and teaching moments and occasional tough love lessons – helps ease the sense of loss they feel in his absence.

"Looking back, I'm very thankful for what my dad did get to see while he was with us, especially my sisters and the success they had at OU and me getting to follow in his footsteps there with the football program. That's so special to all of us," he says. "Dad helped instill faith in us and a resiliency that has helped guide us in our younger days and as adults. You choose to look at the blessings and all of the great memories we made together as a family and not dwell on what might have been or things like that."

Mike Winchester arrived at OU by way of Marietta, Okla., in the fall of 1983. The following year, he won the starting punter job and was a member of the Sooners' 1985 national championship squad.

He married fellow OU student Pam McCarthy in 1987 and, after graduating, they started a family – never straying too far from Norman and eventually settling down in Washington, located just 20 minutes south of the OU campus.

All four of Mike's children wound up taking similar paths, with three of them earning athletic scholarships during their



Twenty miles south of the OU campus, James Winchester played wide receiver at Washington High School.

time at OU – Carolyn in women's basketball and track and field, James in football and Rebecca in rowing. Emily did not letter in sports, but like her three older siblings, she earned an OU degree.

"Dad never pushed any of us to go to OU. It was just something we all gravitated toward," says Carolyn Winchester Baker. "We were all raised watching the Sooners. And knowing what our dad's history was there, it seemed natural that we all wanted to play sports there and represent the Sooners."

"It was especially fun to see James make it as a walk-on and then earn a scholarship as a senior, and enjoy the success at OU that he did."

James Winchester could have attended a smaller state school on scholarship and thrived at his natural position, which was wide receiver. He possessed good hands, above-average speed and "was just a naturally talented athlete," according to former OU assistant coach and director of football operations Merv Johnson.

"James definitely could have gone somewhere else and potentially played receiver, but I knew that he wanted to come to OU," says Johnson. "His dad had played here and he was someone that I really respected, so I talked to Coach (Bob) Stoops and told him I thought James would be a great fit for us."

Johnson pulled some strings that allowed young Winchester to arrive at camp with the scholarship players in June 2008, and he was able to work out with the receivers and as a potential long snapper.

"Regular long snapper Derek Shaw had partially torn his Achilles tendon in the spring and OU really didn't have a backup on the roster, so they had me work out in that spot when I wasn't running with the receivers," says Winchester,



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Just when he thought his window on playing professional football was closing, Winchester was snapped up by the Kansas City Chiefs and has played in Kansas City for the past five seasons.

who ended up serving as the team's long snapper the first three games of the 2008 season.

Although he sailed the first snap of his collegiate career over the punter's head and through the end zone for a safety, Winchester settled in nicely and held down the fort until Shaw was healthy enough to return and finish out the season. In 2009, Winchester won the job outright and worked his final three seasons as OU's main long snapper.

"Even though my first snap wasn't good, I believe those first three games my freshman season gave me a chance to prove to Coach Stoops that I could do the job. So, I guess my timing was good and I can't forget everything that Coach Merv did to help that process along," he says.

Prior to his senior season, Winchester was awarded a scholarship that helped validate all of the hard work and hurdles he experienced as a young walk-on player. He finished his human relations degree in the spring of 2012 but wasn't sure what his next move would be.

"I never really dreamed of playing in the NFL. My goal, my dream was to play football at Oklahoma. That was it for me. Growing up, that's all I wanted to do," says Winchester.

"After I earned my degree, I ended up working as a landman in the oil and gas business for a while because it was a good job that paid the bills."

But his thoughts kept coming back to football and the chance to play at the next level. Mike Winchester was always there, not to push his son, but to offer encouragement and advice.

Eventually, James Winchester's love for the game won out. He spent the next three years chasing long-snapper jobs in the NFL, earning tryouts in Green Bay, Buffalo, Philadelphia and Cleveland.

Along the way, Winchester worked with trainer Pete Martinelli, who helped him put on weight – bulking up from 210 to 245 pounds – and building a physique that would hold up better against the strong competition he would face in the pros.

But by 2015, Winchester felt like his football window was closing. He was engaged to Emily Bowles and, with the wedding planned for spring, he was torn between giving the NFL one more shot or finding a "real job" to support his new family.

"I had attended Gary Zauner's special-teams camps for kickers, punters and snappers in 2013 and 2014, but it cost \$400 and I started thinking that I probably needed to in-

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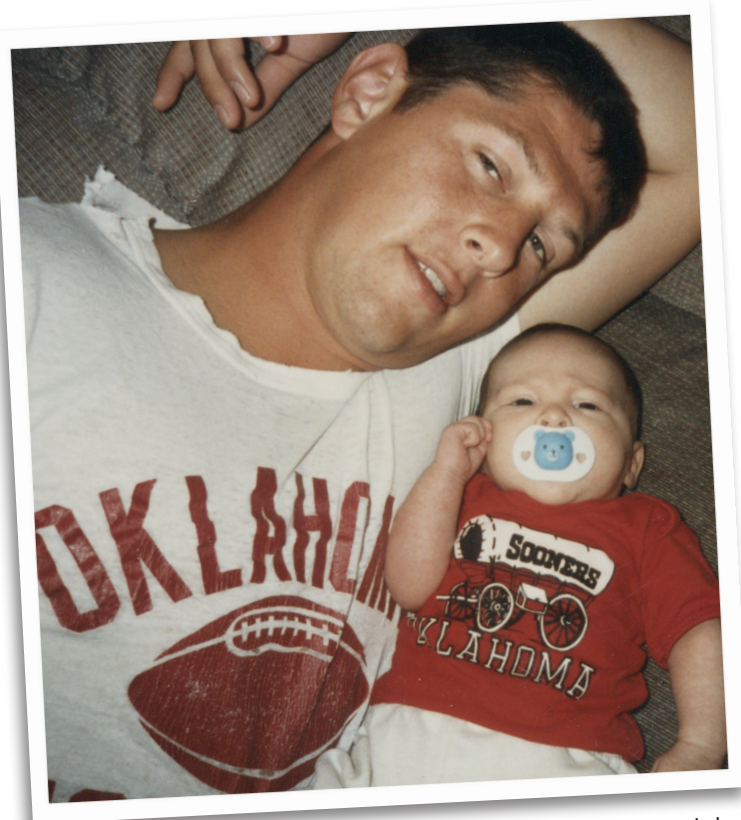
Winchester is joined by sisters, from left, Emily Rogan, Carolyn Baker and Rebecca George after Kansas City's 35-24 win over Tennessee in the AFC Championship game that earned the Chiefs a berth in Super Bowl 54. ▲

Mike Winchester was a punter for the Sooners and played on the 1985 national championship team for Barry Switzer. ►

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OU Athletics



Mike Winchester was both a dedicated Sooner and dedicated dad to James, shown here, and his three sisters.

vest that into my wedding and marriage,” says Winchester. “But he called me and talked me into attending in 2015 and I ended up having a really good camp where three teams showed interest in me – Kansas City, Chicago and St. Louis.”

Each team scheduled private workouts with Winchester, but the Chiefs immediately liked what they saw in the former Sooner and decided to sign him before he could go to Chicago or St. Louis. He has been the team’s starting long snapper for the past five seasons.

“I was fortunate to have an opportunity to play my college ball in Norman. And these days, it’s been great for me to have the chance to play in Kansas City because it’s so close to home in Oklahoma,” says Winchester.

Mike Winchester got the chance to attend games at Arrowhead Stadium during the 2015 and 2016 seasons and see his son develop into what longtime Kansas City punter Dustin Colquitt describes as a special-teams nightmare.

“James isn’t just a great long snapper, he’s a great coverage guy. He’s got athletic skill that

a lot of snappers don’t have,” says Colquitt. “He gets a lot of respect from opposing special teams because of the way he gets down the field and disrupts things. There are only a handful guys like that in this league, and James is at the top of that list.”

There have been plenty of emotion-filled moments since his father’s passing, but Winchester hasn’t missed a beat while pointing to the fact he’s always been able to count on his family for unconditional support. That support network has recently grown by two. In addition to son Jase, now 3, the couple welcomed their daughter, Rylee, the day after the Chiefs clinched a spot in the Super Bowl with a thrilling 35-24 win over Tennessee in January.

“After we won the AFC Championship game to earn a spot in the Super Bowl, the first thing that really hit me was knowing that my dad would not be there to watch. That was tough,” he says. “But it helped having my own son get to come down on the field with my wife after the game. Not only that, but having my sisters and so many members of my family there to watch and show their support.”

Another special aspect of Kansas City’s success in 2019 – at least where Winchester is concerned – is the fact that two of his teammates are also former Sooners. He was teammates with tight end Blake Bell at OU for two seasons and just missed playing collegiately with running back Damien Williams, who arrived in Norman in 2012.

“I think it’s very special to have three guys who played their college football at OU on this Kansas City team together. And to be a part of winning a Super Bowl, that’s a dream come true for each of us,” he says. “Blake, who is from Kansas and has family history with the Chiefs, made some great contributions. And Damien could have easily been the Super Bowl MVP.”

Former OU head coach Bob Stoops watched the game and kept close tabs on his former players all season long.

“Incredibly cool for those three guys – Blake, Damien and James – to play such important roles for a team that won the Super Bowl. It was fun to watch and it’s pretty safe to say they made a lot of folks down here in Oklahoma very proud,” says Stoops.

“I especially love it for James. He was so good for us. Did everything we ever asked him to do and really has made a career for himself through hard work and perseverance. You know his dad is looking down just beaming with pride at everything his son has accomplished as a football player and as a man.”

Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator and lives in Norman.