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GRIZZLY GAME DAY

Missoulian

DRIVEN

Grizzlies OL Jack
D'Ambra inspired
by late father

D'AMBRA

BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Q&A WITH SAFETY CHRIS JOHNSON II, PAGE 3 • SPELTZ PICKS THE BIG SKY, PAGE 4 • ROSTERS, PAGE 5

Montana's Jack D'Ambra (72) blocks against Utah Tech on Sept. 12. D'Ambra has been the starting center in his first season with the Grizzlies.

BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN



'I know I made him proud'

D'Ambra overcomes injury, father's death to be starting center

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

Jack D'Ambra gathered his fellow offensive linemen before the Montana football team's season opener in late August.

He had been in Missoula for barely three months after he transferred in, but he quickly rose up to earn the starting job at center.

He was also the most veteran player in the position group of five new starters in terms of college playing experience as he is in his fifth and final season.

In that moment, as he prepared to play in his first game since his father's death

that summer and since his second consecutive season-ending injury, he had a message to share with his teammates.

"If you don't have anybody to play for, play for me, play for my dad, play for the people that introduced you to football because I think it's the best game on Earth and it teaches you so many life lessons," he said. "It taught me to be a better man, a better boyfriend, a better son and a better brother."

D'Ambra helped UM pull out a 28-21 win over Southern Utah that night at Washington-Grizzly Stadium. Playing at a powerhouse school was the dream, but his father, Mike D'Ambra, wasn't around to see it fully come to fruition.

That game was Jack's first time in college playing without his father in attendance or watching on TV. It also meant there would be no film breakdown together over the computer in the days after.

Mike had come with his son on the official visit to UM after Jack entered the

transfer portal in December. He had been amazed with everything UM had to offer after he had taken out loans to help pay for his son to live the NCAA Division I dream the past four seasons at a non-scholarship school, Jack said.

It was Mike who tried to convince Jack to transfer to a bigger school after being an All-Pioneer Football League honorable mention as a sophomore at San Diego. He had more confidence in him than Jack saw in himself then.

Another push this past season led Jack to hit the portal, where he chose the Griz out of seven scholarship offers. Just about three weeks after he moved to Missoula, he got the call the night of June 18 his father had died.

"It was really hard because he was the guy that put me into football," he said. "I had a really good relationship with him. He was not just a father to me. He was one of my best friends. It was hard to deal with, but football was definitely an outlet for me."

The 23-year-old flew home to Temecula, California, the day after he found out his father died. He spent about two weeks with his family as he put competing for a starting job on the back burner.

Some things were bigger than football even though he was already behind the eight ball because he didn't join the team in January like the other transfers. He had instead waited to make the move until he graduated in the spring with his bachelor's degree in business administration and real estate.

While back home, he saw how hard his father's death was sitting with his mother, Gabby. She told him he didn't have to return and play this season if the situation was too much for him, he said.

He knew getting back to football and being around his teammates would take his mind off of things. Yet, his father would still be on his mind because he saw the return to the gridiron as a way to honor him.

Please see D'AMBRA, Page 6

Johnson grateful for opportunity

Cornerback returns to field after nearly 1,000 days sidelined

CARSON CASHION
406 MT Sports

Montana Grizzlies cornerback Chris Johnson II has championship DNA in his veins.

His father, fellow cornerback Chris Johnson, won Super Bowl XLVII with the Baltimore Ravens after a college career with the Louisville Cardinals. He finished his NFL career with eight interceptions, 178 solo tackles and four forced fumbles.

Now, the champion's son has begun to make a name for himself in Missoula. After spending his first two collegiate seasons at Arizona State, and going to the College Football Playoff in 2024 during his redshirt season, Johnson II transferred to Montana this offseason and was named a starting cornerback.

Since beginning the 2026 season, the 6-foot-1, 190-pound cornerback has generated 10 total tackles, two forced fumbles and one pass breakup.

Johnson II sat down with 406 MT Sports ahead of Montana's homecoming game against Northern Colorado at 2 p.m. MT Saturday at Washington-Grizzly Stadium. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q: You've got a few former NFL athletes sharing your name, do you ever hear anyone call you CJ2K as well?

A: Yeah, we've got the same birthday.

Q: I've heard so many stories about high school football in Texas. Just how crazy is it down there?

A: It's different to be honest. When I came to Missoula, Missoula fans, the town and just the energy and love for football kind of reminds me a bunch of Texas high school football. People's love for the game,



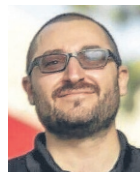
SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana cornerback Chris Johnson II (6) leaps over players during the college football game against Southern Utah on Aug. 29 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. Johnson is in his first season with the Grizzlies after he transferred from Arizona State.

HOW WE SEE THE BIG SKY

BILL SPELTZ 406 MT SPORTS

Since landing a fortuitous spot in the Big Sky Conference two decades ago, the Northern Colorado football team has never had a winning season in league play.



FRANK
GOGOLA

The Bears have finished 4-4 and they even beat the Grizzlies in 2016. But success has proven elusive for the Greeley-based program.

The good news for Bears fans is their beloved team is on the upswing. They'll take a two-game win streak into Washington-Grizzly Stadium.

Granted, the competition hasn't really been noteworthy. Two weeks ago, UNC was pushed to overtime before outlasting NCAA Division II Northeastern State. They built on that with their first win over an FCS foe last Saturday, a 37-13 triumph over winless Utah Tech.

A victory over the mighty Grizzlies seems highly unlikely this week. But that's why they play the game.

Just for fun, let's look back on that day in 2016 when Northern Colorado handed the Grizzlies a 28-25 loss in Greeley: Bob Stitt's Montana squad entered the game with a 6-3 record, with dual-threat Chad Chalich under center. Northern Colorado was 5-4 and under the direction of Earnest Collins Jr.

Montana took a 25-21 lead on a Chalich 2-yard burst with 7:18 left. Northern Colorado responded with a game-winning 5-yard TD pass from Kyle Slotter to Theron Verna with 3:35 remaining.

It's not just that game that could give Northern Colorado belief entering Saturday's duel in Zootown. Last year, the Bears went to Moscow, Idaho, and stunned the then-11th-ranked Vandals in the Kibbie Dome, 49-33.

Ed Lamb was the UNC head coach that day and he's still at the helm. You may recall he guided Southern Utah to a Big Sky Conference title in 2015 before moving on to BYU, where he served as an assistant coach for seven seasons.

Could Saturday be considered a trap game for Montana? I suppose, but deep down I'm not sure the Bears can beat the Grizzlies even if they come out flat as a pancake.

Northern Colorado (1-1, 2-3) at No. 3 Montana (2-0, 4-1), 2 p.m. TV: Scripps Sports. Grizzly pride is oozing and the swagger is back for the FCS powerhouse. The buzz surrounding Montana following last Saturday's blowout win at then-10th-ranked UC Davis is going

to be loud on homecoming. In fact, probably the loudest it's been since last year prior to the Grizzlies' home loss in the Brawl of the Wild. As good as the offense was against the Aggies, scoring 31 points in the first half, it was the defense that really had me impressed. Davis couldn't get anything going early and failed to score at all until the final play of the first half. By then, it was too late for the Aggies. Saturday is in the rearview mirror now and the Grizzlies need to get back to serious business with the upset-minded Bears coming to town. Covering college football for over four decades, one thing I've come to expect is every team in the country is going to have at least one game where the players come out flat. Montana State came out a little flat and almost lost at home to Central Connecticut State two weeks go. Will this be the week for the Grizzlies? Only time will tell. But with the combination of momentum garnered last week at UC Davis and the crowd noise that's sure to rattle Northern Colorado, it's hard to pick against the maroon and silver. **Bill Speltz:** Griz 49, Bears 21. **Frank Gogola:** Montana 56, Northern Colorado 7. **Victor Flores:** Griz 45, UNC 17. **Carson Cashion:** Montana 45, Northern Colorado 13.

No. 1 Montana State (2-0, 5-0) at Idaho (0-1, 0-4), Friday 8:30 p.m. TV: ESPN. This game is a little harder to pick since Bobcats star quarterback Justin Lamson probably won't play for the second straight week. But the Pride of Florence, Pat Duchien, is certainly capable of filling in. Idaho's fans will be rabid, putting on a show for the ESPN audience. The Vandals nearly knocked off then-nationally ranked Abilene Christian in the Kibbie Dome two weeks ago and they'll be well rested coming off a bye week. But the Bobcats showed last weekend their program is about more than just a star quarterback or receiver. They've got a vaunted defense, strong special teams and of course strong backups like Duchien, a class act who played for his dad at Florence-Carlton. The question is, will the fact that Duchien has a game under his belt help the Bobcats or will it help the Vandals, who have some valuable film to scout? This is where it gets interesting, schematically. I have a hunch the MSU coaching staff will open up the playbook a little bit more for Duchien this week and the Cats will stay undefeated. But it is not going to be a cakewalk. **Speltz:** Cats 31, Vandals 24. **Gogola:** Montana State 31, Idaho 17. **Flores:** Cats 31, Vandals 17. **Cashion:** Montana State 28, Idaho 7.

Eastern Washington (0-2, 1-4) at No. 16 UC Davis (1-1, 3-2), 8:30 p.m. TV: ESPN+ The Aggies were shockingly anemic early against the Grizzlies last Saturday. To be fair, sophomore quarterback Treynor Cleeland lacked big-game experience and it showed. He was 0-for-5 passing in the first quarter and his team managed just 29 rushing yards in spotting UM a 17-0 lead. Cleeland will be better this week. Take away last Saturday and he's been almost as effective as Grizzly quarterback Keali'i Ah Yat. In fact, Cleeland has 10 touchdown passes this season and Ah Yat has nine. Eastern Washington has lost three games in a row, although the team did show signs of life in last weekend's 31-27 loss to Cal Poly on the red turf. The Eagles did give 19th-ranked Northern Arizona a good game in Flagstaff on opening day, losing 34-27, but they haven't been the same since. They may put up a good fight Saturday, but Davis will prevail. **Speltz:** Aggies 38, Eagles 24.

Gogola: UC Davis 30, Eastern Washington 21. **Flores:** Eagles 35, Aggies 31. **Cashion:** UC Davis 31, Eastern Washington 17.

No. 19 Northern Arizona (1-1, 3-2) at No. 12 Idaho State (1-0, 4-0), 6 p.m. TV: ESPN+. This is the second leg of the Lumberjacks' brutal three-game stretch. Last weekend, they put up a good fight and had their chances before losing at injury-depleted Montana State. This week, it's the resurgent Bengals in a dome game that promises to be a barnburner. Idaho State's defense has been magnificent, allowing an average of 17 points per game. That's second only to the defending national champion MSU Bobcats, who are allowing 15 per game on average. Idaho State had its hands full last weekend at 1-4 Southern Utah, escaping with a 28-24 win. But the Bengals have been impressive at home this season, and that will continue Saturday, with a close win over NAU. **Speltz:** Bengals 27, Jacks 24. **Gogola:** Idaho State 35, Northern Arizona 23. **Flores:** ISU 31, NAU 24. **Cashion:** Idaho State 31, Northern Arizona 21.

Weber State (1-1, 2-3) at Cal Poly (2-0, 3-0), 6 p.m. TV: ESPN+. The Wildcats burned all four 406 MT Sports prognosticators last weekend when they lost at home to Portland State. Now comes a road game against the surprise team of the Big Sky. The Mustangs had their one clunker home game two weeks ago, but that was a non-conference matchup against San Diego. They've had two wins in league play, over Idaho and Eastern Washington, and they look like a good bet to beat Weber State at home. Anthony Grigsby Jr. has been solid at quarterback for Cal Poly this season with a league-high 13 touchdown passes. **Speltz:** Mustangs 27, Wildcats 21. **Gogola:** Cal Poly 34, Weber State 28. **Flores:** Cal Poly 38, Weber 24. **Cashion:** Cal Poly 24, Weber State 21.

Southern Utah (0-2, 1-4) at Utah Tech (0-2, 0-5), 6 p.m. TV: ESPN+. The Thunderbirds have lost three games in a row and the Trailblazers five in a row. Something has to give. It's going to be hot in St. George on Saturday night, with temperatures in the upper 80s. That may help Utah Tech a little bit. But Southern Utah has been much more competitive in league play, with nail-biter losses to Montana and Idaho State to go along with its home win over Weber State. Utah Tech has been outscored 91-13 in two league games. **Speltz:** Thunderbirds 41, Trailblazers 28. **Gogola:** Southern Utah 42, Utah Tech 20. **Flores:** SUU 28, Utah Tech 17. **Cashion:** Southern Utah 35, Utah Tech 14.

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No.	Name	Year	Pos	Ht	Wt	Hometown	21	Tyrone Smiley	Fr.	RB	5-9	180	Aurora, Colo.	52	Colton Patterson	Jr.	OL	6-4	300	Lakewood, Colo.
0	Derrick Jones	Sr.	CB	6-1	185	Houston, Texas	22	Zach Pekarek	5th	RB	6-1	205	Burlington, Colo.	53	Dominic Butts	Sr.	DL	6-5	260	Johnstown, Colo.
1	Evann Morris	Jr.	WR	6-2	195	Sherwood, Ore.	23	Jordan Herron	Jr.	WR	5-10	160	Aurora, Colo.	54	Dane Gray	So.	DL	6-5	245	Berthoud, Colo.
2	Dylan Evans	Sr.	WR	6-1	190	Little Elm, Texas	23	Ayden Moreno	Jr.	DB	6-3	195	Bakersfield, Calif.	55	Brooks Maile	5th	DL	6-2	300	Saint George, Utah
2	Nathaniel Gillis	5th	S	6-1	200	San Diego, Calif.	24	Marquis Jamison	So.	CB	6-1	195	Aurora, Colo.	56	Ibraheem Musallet	So.	OL	6-4	300	Chino Hills, Calif.
3	Ezra Ekuban	5th	DL	6-3	245	Parker, Colo.	25	Evan Harrell	Sr.	CB	5-10	185	Aurora, Colo.	57	Houston Boyce	Fr.	OL	6-7	310	Longmont, Colo.
3	Keegan Patterson	5th	QB	6-0	200	Longmont, Colo.	25	James Strong	Fr.	RB	5-11	180	Rancho Cucamonga, Calif.	58	AJ Burton	Jr.	OL	6-5	315	Englewood, Colo.
4	Brennen Acosta	Sr.	DL	6-5	265	Lake Forest, Calif.	26	Landon Richardson	Jr.	K/P	6-3	210	Antelope, Calif.	59	Zimeon Sauvao	So.	DL	6-4	305	Fagatogo, Am. Samoa
4	Cleve Johnson IV	So.	WR	5-9	170	Beaumont, Calif.	27	Zion Wallace	Fr.	DB	6-2	200	San Bernardino, Calif.	62	Ian Bonneau	Jr.	OL	6-5	305	Minneapolis, Minn.
5	Makur Abram	Jr.	DL	6-4	255	Denver, Colo.	28	Brandon Lambert Jr.	So.	RB	5-11	190	Sacramento, Calif.	63	Jack Ziebell	Sr.	OL	6-3	330	Austin, Texas
5	Mathias Price	Jr.	RB	6-2	220	Colorado Springs, Colo.	28	Cody Lease	Sr.	S	6-3	200	Loveland, Colo.	68	Brooks Hamlett	Fr.	OL	6-6	240	Highlands Ranch, Colo.
6	Justin Guin	Gr.	RB	5-10	205	Novato, Calif.	29	Alfred Smith	5th	S	5-8	175	Phoenix, Ariz.	70	Levi Johnson	Sr.	OL	6-6	310	Colorado Springs, Colo.
6	Franky Morales	5th	S	5-8	195	Chandler, Ariz.	30	Silas Kemp	So.	WR	5-10	165	Simi Valley, Calif.	71	Asher Gardzelewski	Fr.	OL	6-5	300	Lakewood, Colo.
7	Levi Durrell	Gr.	QB	6-3	215	Newberg, Ore.	30	Cadence Turner	So.	CB	5-10	180	Torrance, Calif.	72	Lincoln Fa'apouli	Jr.	OL	6-5	330	Fountain, Colo.
7	Blake Palladino	Jr.	LB	6-3	225	Littleton, Colo.	31	Zion Parker	Sr.	CB	6-2	185	Broward County, Fla.	73	Asher Bancroft	Fr.	OL	6-2	305	Temecula, Calif.
8	Keenan Campbell	Jr.	WR	6-2	205	Colorado Springs, Colo.	32	James Coddington	Jr.	CB	6-0	180	Murrieta, Calif.	74	Montrey Strickland	Jr.	OL	6-6	340	Arvada, Colo.
8	KJ Smedley	Sr.	LB	6-3	230	Colorado Springs, Colo.	33	Myles McClarity	Jr.	S	6-0	185	Fountain, Colo.	76	Brady Collins	Fr.	OL	6-6	290	Aurora, Colo.
9	Cory Jackson Jr.	Jr.	S	6-1	195	Aurora, Colo.	34	Kaleb longi	So.	S	6-2	205	Bountiful, Utah	77	Zion Sauvao	So.	OL	6-6	320	Fagatogo, Am. Samoa
9	Gavin Lockett	So.	WR	6-0	195	Pueblo, Colo.	36	Joshua Gallien	Fr.	CB	6-0	185	Aurora, Colo.	78	Grant Gordon	So.	OL	6-3	295	Mead, Colo.
10	Mikhail Benner	So.	S	6-1	200	Thornton, Colo.	37	Darrell Ishman	So.	CB	6-2	185	Castle Rock, Colo.	79	Andrias Guillory	So.	OL	6-6	305	Lakewood, Colo.
10	Kieryus Boone	Sr.	RB	5-8	185	Saginaw, Mich.	38	Kamari Crawford	Fr.	CB	6-0	180	Mesa, Ariz.	80	Bennett Wilkes	So.	WR	6-1	205	Arvada, Colo.
11	Blake Weslin	Jr.	DL	6-4	260	Lakewood, Colo.	39	Owen Wind	Fr.	DB	6-3	195	Fort Collins, Colo.	81	Marcus Mozer	So.	WR	6-3	200	Fort Collins, Colo.
12	Kenny Lueth	5th	QB	6-4	235	Rockling, Calif.	40	Tyler Woods	So.	LB	6-2	225	Moorpark, Calif.	82	Collin Fasse	So.	WR	5-10	185	Santa Maria, Calif.
13	Trey Olsen	So.	WR	6-2	208	Loveland, Colo.	41	Carson Hageman	Fr.	LB	6-0	210	Erie, Colo.	83	Marwell Abram	Fr.	TE	6-7	250	Denver, Colo.
14	Kaleb Quammie	Sr.	CB	6-1	195	Brighton, Colo.	42	Landon Sefcovic	Fr.	LB	6-3	225	Windsor, Colo.	84	Noah Meurer	Fr.	WR	6-0	180	Arvada, Colo.
14	Caeden Reeder	Fr.	QB	6-4	215	Highlands Ranch, Colo.	43	Jackson Raguse	Fr.	LB	6-1	225	El Porto, Calif.	85	Nathan Meek	So.	TE	6-3	245	Yorba Linda, Calif.
15	Zeke Andrews	Fr.	QB	6-6	220	Arvada, Colo.	43	Tyton Slade	Fr.	WR	6-1	185	Gilbert, Ariz.	86	Decedric Stokes	So.	WR	5-11	160	Lauderdale Lakes, Fla.
15	George Patterson	Jr.	DL	6-5	260	Arvada, Colo.	44	Lincoln Hageman	Fr.	LB	6-3	200	Erie, Colo.	87	Brayden Welch	Jr.	TE	6-6	250	Oregon City, Ore.
16	Jackson Quammie	Jr.	CB	6-1	200	Brighton, Colo.	44	Kruse Redding	Jr.	TE	6-4	250	Peoria, Ariz.	88	Brody Judd	Jr.	TE	6-4	245	Westminster, Colo.
17	Benson Ashley	So.	K/P	6-3	200	Rogers, Ark.	45	Hudson Voggesser	Jr.	LB	6-3	230	Fort Collins, Colo.	89	Spensor Sharp	So.	TE	6-6	265	Castle Rock, Colo.
17	Jay Barry	Gr.	WR	6-2	190	Boulder, Colo.	46	Cade Kunz	Sr.	LB	6-1	225	Littleton, Colo.	90	Andres Rodriguez	Sr.	DL	6-1	300	Ranchgrobe, Calif.
18	Brayten Silbor	Sr.	QB	6-3	220	Scottsdale, Ariz.	47	Garrett Harstad	Jr.	WR	6-5	220	Loveland, Colo.	91	Nolan Gibbs	So.	DL	6-6	300	Cumming, Ga.
18	Jayden Spencer	Fr.	CB	6-0	175	Greenwood Village, Colo.	48	Kai Shelton	So.	LB	6-2	220	Denver, Colo.	94	Ayden Merrihew	5th	DL	6-4	285	Clovis, Calif.
19	Luke Womack	So.	WR	6-4	210	Happy Valley, Ore.	49	Maddox Broughton	Jr.	LS	6-0	230	Sedalia, Colo.	95	Kyle Nelson	Fr.	DL	6-4	225	Gilbert, Ariz.
20	Carson Keach	Jr.	DB	6-3	225	Parker, Colo.	49	Jaydon Wiseman	Fr.	DB	6-4	200	Lynnwood, Calif.	97	James Moore	Fr.	P	6-4	235	San Jose, Calif.
20	Jordan Niesent	Jr.	WR	5-10	180	Wellington, Colo.	50	Colby Olson	So.	LB	6-0	220	Cheyenne, Wyo.	99	Levi Little	Sr.	DL	6-3	295	Clovis, Calif.
21	Joshua Harvey	Sr.	S	6-1	190	Aurora, Colo.	51	Rylen Renton	Jr.	LB	6-2	220	Windsor, Colo.							

D'Ambra

From 2

"This whole season for me is really dedicated to him," he said. "When I went home, our quarterback, Keali'i (Ah Yat) texted me. He reached out, checked on me and I said I'm coming back. Don't worry, I'll be back and we're going to win a national championship for my dad."

His father has since remained in his heart, which was what had unfortunately given out for Mike. The cause of death was a heart attack for Mike, who was in his early 50s, Jack said.

It was a shock that came out of nowhere to Jon Pedersen, who coached Jack in youth football on the same staff with Mike while they both raised D-I athletes. He and Mike stayed friends, he said, and he admired how easily Mike got along with others to where he could fit in quickly with a variety of people.

He also saw how Mike was into fitness, going to the gym five to six days a week. Mike would lift weights, play racquetball and also play pick-up basketball against people in their 20s, Jon said. He had even heard from Mike at a backyard barbecue how great he felt just a few days before his death.

Pedersen made the trip to Missoula to be there for Jack in the Grizzlies' season debut on Aug. 29. It was just 72 days after Jack's father died. Perhaps nothing more than a coincidence, but Jack is wearing jersey No. 72 this season.

"He had to be there for his family, but it was also the season's coming and his dad would want him to be at that fall camp," Pedersen said. "He wouldn't want him to miss any of that. We had talked about that."

"I don't think it ever crossed Jack's mind to throw in the towel where someone else this would have crushed their spirit. His dad always told him what you do in life, do it with purpose. It just says a lot about Jack, about his resolve."

Jack had gotten into playing football around 7 years old because of his father. There was no flag football to ease into it. It was straight into tackle football.

It was also straight onto the O-line because he was too big to play any of the skill positions. He's stuck on the line every fall since then and has moved around between center, guard and tackle as he has played all five positions.

"The offensive line was really my calling," he said. "I have a protector's mindset. I'm very protective over my family and the people I love."

"That's just who I am deep down inside. I'm not going to let anybody push

me around or get to the people that I love."

That extends to the players on his team. It's why the job of protecting the quarterback makes the offensive line the perfect position for him.

He learned the mindset from Pedersen, who was Jack's head coach and O-line coach in Rancho Panthers youth football in Southern California while Mike served as the offensive coordinator. He's also the father of Jack D'Ambra's best friend, Jack Pedersen, who plays tight end at Washington State.

"He was a really big impact in my life just coaching," D'Ambra said. "He was basically a second dad to me. I look up to him and everything that he's done for me."

Jon Pedersen knew what it took to excel on the line at a high level having been a center for the Nebraska Cornhuskers in the early 1990s. He played under head coach Tom Osborne when they won a national championship.

Jon saw how Jack D'Ambra desired to play O-line while others sought out the stardom of quarterback, running back or wide receiver. He also saw in his pupil the right attitude and skillset to excel, particularly his footwork.

Later, Jack would be named the "Dancing with the Broncos" winner at Vista Murrieta High School. He earned the nickname, "The Dancing Bear," he said. It's particularly fitting now that he's playing for the Grizzlies.

"He wanted to be an offensive lineman," Jon Pedersen said. "It was in his blood already at such a young age. He's always been a bigger guy, but he's got really good feet. I used to call him Fred Astaire. That wasn't picking on him. It was something even at 9 he had good feet and he's a will-ing blocker."

Jack has also been able to flip a switch from being a happy, smiling guy off the field to being a competitor on the field. His father ingrained in him the competition aspect from a young age.

Mike was a high school quarterback but instead played D-I baseball at Nevada-Reno. His middle son, Drew, followed his path playing baseball at Utah Tech and Cal Poly Pomona. His oldest son was more into the arts.

They were already a tight-knit family, Jon Pedersen said, before Mike's death.

"Now I have to take that and go into being a protector for my family because my dad's not here anymore," Jack said. "I am the youngest of three, but I always think that I'm the biggest guy (physically), so I got to be the biggest protector."

Jack is back to playing the football version of that protector role following his return to the field. That was a big accom-



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Montana offensive lineman Jack D'Ambra (72) transferred to the Grizzlies this past offseason after he played his first four seasons at San Diego.

plishment in itself after his previous two seasons ended with injuries.

He started nine games as a true freshman in 2023 and played 11 games as a sophomore, but he tore the meniscus in his knee as a junior and appeared in only seven games that season. He returned in 2025, dislocated his elbow in a game against Montana State and finished that year with five games played.

He leaned on his teammates, friends and family each time when he fought back from injuries. That included his father.

"He pushed me through that," he said. "He told me you just got to get in the training room and rehab it and get back. If I could, I would have played through all of them every single game that I could. I can't sit back and watch my own team without me out there."

Jack returned to Missoula for a final college season with his role yet to be determined. Things were still new to him given how briefly he had been with the Grizzlies in June before he went home.

A lot of things were still somewhat new in the football program. Montana got a new head coach and several new assistant coaches earlier that offseason.

That included Brent Myers, the fourth offensive line coach in as many seasons at UM. He had to rebuild an O-line that lost all six players who started a game in the 2025 season.

Jack was one of seven newcomers looking to blend with 11 returners to try to find the right combination of five starters. He

found not only his spot on the line but a place where he was welcomed.

"He has endeared himself to the group," Myers said. "He's got a great personality. He fits in with the guys and they all took him in, like most O-linemen, because you're an O-lineman, you're one of us. He just has the personality that is correct, No. 1, for the position, but correct for the camaraderie and the fellowship with the guys."

Jack first had to prove to himself he could rebound from another injury and still play at a high level. Jon Pedersen went through injuries himself in college, including a broken ankle, and knew Jack had what it took to push through.

Jack was working back into game form while also learning a new playbook at Montana. He went into fall camp on the second-team offensive line and rotated between all three interior positions.

Myers bumped him up to first-team center when Dylan Jemtegaard went down with an injury. He knew right away that he had found his guy. Jack hasn't given up the job since then, starting all five games so far this season.

"He's really intelligent and understands football, where to send protections, how to check protections, how to get us directed the correct way in our run game," Myers said. "I have just been more than fired up about who he is, how he handles himself, his work ethic, study habits when it comes to game plans. He's just really been an awesome, awesome kid."

Myers had liked how Jack played against Big Sky competition in previous seasons when he watched his film while recruiting players out of the transfer portal this past offseason.

Jack finally got to show his potential at this level in that season opener against Southern Utah while playing with a heavy heart and his father on his mind.

Just like when he talked to his fellow linemen before his debut in maroon and silver that August night, he still regularly thinks back to who he plays for.

"It was hard going through a long fall camp dealing with that," he said. "I just felt his presence in me going to practice. Whenever I was tired and wanted to stop or sub myself out, I would think to him and I got to do this for my dad."

"He gave me the strength and I know he's looking out for me. I know I made him proud by becoming the center and earning the starting job. I needed to do it for him."

Frank Gogola is the Senior Sports Reporter at the Missoulian and 406 MT Sports. Follow him on X @FrankGogola or email him at frank.gogola@406mtsports.com.

Johnson

From 3

the drive, the energy for it, you can't really duplicate it. But it's real close here.

Q: What was going to the College Football Playoff like with Arizona State?

A: It was great. Being a freshman, especially when I committed there, my senior year, they went 3-9. To completely just flip the ship and go from 3-9 to the Big 12 Championship, picked dead last in the conference at the beginning of pre-season, I really don't take any of that for granted. You know, it just shows that if you've got a will, there's a way, and that's just a great experience to have under my belt.

Q: When you transferred, what stood out about Montana?

A: Korbin Hendrix was one of my teammates at ASU before he transferred here the year before I came, and he had a great season last year. And then I kept up with him, and then he texted me when I got in the portal and was like, "Would you be interested in Montana?" And I was like, "I'm interested in who-ever's interested in me." And (then)-coach (Bobby) Hauck reached out, and it was the only visit I went on. I committed on my visit.

Q: Who from Montana did you rely on as a leader in the early moments when you got to Missoula?

A: Well, to be honest, our group is very young. There's only two people in our room that played last year, they're still here, DeAnte (Gentry) and Brady Bean (Beaner). I really leaned on them when it comes to connection with (cornerbacks coach Kim)

McCloud and film, how they break down film and just watching film. I feel like we're very well bonded and glued as a unit. We all watch film, we all communicate in the group chat when we're off the field. We send each other our notes of the week, and so we're all just on our P's and Q's every week.

Q: What was that process like in the summer to learn the new system with the rest of the defense?

A: To be honest, I'm not gonna call it a blessing that Hauck or anyone left or retired, but it was kind of like a fresh start for everybody. No one's behind the eight ball, no one's known the defense and played in it for four years. Everyone, when (coach) E (Eric Sanders) and coach Jay (Jaylen Johnson) and BK (Bobby Kennedy) brought them in, we were like, all right, new unit, new defense. This is how it's gonna work. So spring ball, fall camp, I feel like it's paying off, come season.

Q: And then finally, it all kind of pays off with your first game at Wa-Griz. What was that experience like?

A: I can't even duplicate it. I never want it to be duplicated. I mean, I'm extremely blessed to be in the position I was. I've never cried before a game,

but after I ran out of the tunnel, staying down for how long I stayed down. Three years, 988 days and running out to a crowd like Wa-Griz and the energy and the intent behind the game, and the meaning of the game to everybody, how much it meant to everyone, it just can't be duplicated. I'm extremely blessed.

Q: What's stood out about Missoula since you got here?

A: I was never really an outdoors type of guy, even in Arizona. The thing about the 'M' that's kind of crazy, ASU has an 'A' right above their stadium, so that was kind of ironic. So I've never been an outside guy, but you know, I've gotten out here, I floated the river for the first time. I've never floated a river, even being from Texas. I saw snow a lot for the first time for a full winter, so that was pretty dope. It's just an experience I never really thought I would get.

Q: Does the jersey No. 6 for you come from anywhere?

A: My dad wore No. 3, so as the second, I just did three times two.

Carson Cashion is a sports writer for 406 MT Sports. Follow him on X @CarsonCashion or contact him at carson.cashion@406mtsports.com.



CARSON CASHION, MISSOULIAN

Montana cornerback Chris Johnson II poses for a photo after practice on Sept. 22 in Missoula. He leads the Grizzlies with two forced fumbles.

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