

Why NFL's Jonathan Stewart Expects God's Goodness to Overwhelm Him on Super Bowl Sunday

When Carolina Panthers running back Jonathan Stewart awakens Sunday morning to the day of his dreams—the day he'll play in his first Super Bowl—he expects to be overwhelmed by the Lord's goodness.

"What will be on my mind is just remembering all the things that God has brought me through and being thankful for His faithfulness," Stewart said this week as he and the Panthers prepared for their 2016 Super Bowl matchup against the Denver Broncos in Santa Clara, California.

Stewart anticipates reflecting on how the Lord helped him overcome the heartache of his parents' divorce when he was in the fourth grade and sustained him through numerous injuries that have interrupted his pro career.

"Whatever it was that haunted me, God didn't let it get me," Stewart said. "I'm so grateful for His hedge of protection and His grace and mercy in my life.

"I'll take time out to remember who's in control and be thankful for the opportunity to go out there and play with that mindset."

Stewart, 5-foot-10, 235 pounds, is a fierce, determined runner. He doesn't shy away from contact and uses his powerful legs to drive through defenders and break tackles.

Teammate Jerricho Cotchery calls Stewart "Hulk in a helmet."

"My mentality is I really sacrifice my body for my guys, for

my team," Stewart said. "I'm a firm believer that you can't let one man take you down."

Most of all, Stewart wants to be a good steward of the gift God has given him.

"When you're blessed with something, you've got to give it your all," he said.

That'll be especially true Sunday.

"Not everyone gets to be in a Super Bowl," he said. "We have something special, and we have to cherish that."

Stewart, 28, was named to the Pro Bowl this season for the first time in his eight-year career. He finished the regular season as the NFL's eighth-leading rusher with 989 yards despite sitting out the final three games nursing a sprained ankle. He's the league's top-post season ground-gainer with 189 yards.

Stewart credits his mother, Lora Faison, with introducing him to Christ through her own conversion and transformation. Faison has said that she was so distraught after her divorce that she contemplated suicide before accepting Jesus as her Lord and Savior while watching an evangelistic program on television.

Stewart, who received Christ and was baptized while in fifth grade, calls Jesus "my centerpiece, my backbone."

"Life is all about balance," he said. "If you don't have God in your life, this world can get ahold of you and choke you out. In our position (as pro athletes), a lot of people depend on us, not just to win games but to be role models and to be an inspiration."

Stewart runs a youth football camp during the off-season in his hometown of Lacey, Washington. He's keenly aware that the kids he's tutored are watching him closely, especially now. He

hopes his legacy will be lived out through them never settling for anything less than their God-given destiny.

Stewart wears jersey No. 28 and holds to the truth of Romans 8:28—that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

“You have to learn to train your eyes to see things from that view, that no matter what you’re going through, God is going to work it out,” he said.

Stewart believes that principle has helped the Panthers to have the most successful season in team history. They’re 17-1 heading into the Super Bowl—roughly one year after coach Ron Rivera’s house caught fire and quarterback Cam Newton survived an auto accident.

“I think those things were a blessings, even though they were something bad, because it taught a lot of our guys that football is only a game and there’s an actual life out here that we have to live.”

Stewart is well acquainted with the fragility of life. For the first several years of his NFL career, he prayed intensely for the safe return home of his brother, Corey, who was stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq with the U.S. Army.

Those prayers were answered.

Corey is now stationed in Virginia and is scheduled to attend the Super Bowl on Sunday with their mother—yet another reason to be thankful.