

[Mike Manning Profile: From young pup to lead dawg](#)

DEVIN ABELL | STAFF REPORTER | dabell@butler.edu

Connor Reid was nervous.

He'd just transferred to Butler after two years out east, at the College of the Holy Cross. Then, he received a text from Mike Manning.

“He was one of the first teammates to text me and welcome me to the Butler family,” Reid said. “[He] showed me right away that he was a leader that I could rely on.”

This small but significant gesture represented the inherent leadership qualities Manning possesses. It is no wonder, then, that Manning was elected as the youngest captain in the head Butler football coach Jeff Voris' 15-year tenure.

Leadership was instilled in Manning at a young age. Growing up, he looked up to his older brother, wanting to emulate his every move.

To Manning, the way his older brother carries and represents himself has always been the standard that Manning has held himself to — and has pushed to go beyond.

“He was a great role model for me growing up,” Manning said. “I always wanted to be just like him but in my own way.”

Manning believes that he wouldn't be the man he is today without those who have guided him throughout his life. He attributes his leadership abilities to his parents and high school coaches that continued to push him to strive to be the best person he could be.

“They definitely taught me the right ways to do things,” Manning said. “To be on top of your stuff and be in the right place at the right time.”

Although his parents and coaches played a pivotal role instilling values into Manning, the most influential figure in his upbringing was his older brother Joe. Similar to Manning, Joe also played at a high level in football and track in high school and even had the opportunity to try out for the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign men's track team.

I GOTTA GO MY OWN WAY

As Manning began to pave his own path, he eventually made his way to wide receiver on his freshman football team at Lincoln-Way East High School.

Although Manning played throughout his whole freshman season at wide receiver, it would be another season before Manning found a position more natural to him.

During the summer between his freshman and sophomore years in high school, Manning participated on a 7-on-7 team where he made the switch to defensive back. One of his high school coaches helped him learn and hone his skills in the secondary.

“To me it felt like it came pretty natural,” Manning said. “I had a knack going for the ball and I love tackling — it kind of suited me well.”

This led Manning to the varsity team as a sophomore, where he went on to be a three-year starter for Lincoln-Way East in their secondary. Manning played cornerback for his sophomore and junior years, where he helped his team win an 8A class state title in 2017. In his senior year, Manning would find his permanent home at safety due to his experience.

“It was just kind of based on the team’s needs and just knowing the playbook,” Manning said. “Being a safety you’re the quarterback of the secondary, so you have to know everything. So it just kind of rotated me into that role.”

Even with unique ability to play anywhere in the secondary — and the accolade of state championship — Manning wasn’t heavily recruited by college scouts. He only received a few offers, most notably from [Truman State](#) and the [University of Central Arkansas](#).

Among those offers was Butler University, who approached Manning shortly after his performance during a skills combine.

“It was kind of early in the summer after a camp I got a text from a [Butler] coach,” Manning said. “Then they gave me a call and I got an offer from it, so I was pretty stoked.”

With Manning’s shortlist of offers, the choice for him was clear.

“I chose Butler because of the academics,” Manning said. “It’s setting you up for the next part of your life and that’s really important to me. I also really wanted to play at a high level, so it was the best of both worlds.”

WHERE MY DAWGS AT?

Following his graduation from Lincoln-Way East, Manning moved down to Indianapolis for the summer. This gave Manning a head start over other first-years, as they usually arrive in late July and August for summer camp.

“Besides school, football was my number one priority and still is,” Manning said. “I wanted to get acclimated with the team and get in the weight room.”

While some newcomers may feel some pressure to adapt and get accustomed to a new program, for Manning it came easy.

“It was a seamless process,” Manning said. “I came in and was just being myself... Once you’re with the guys you’ll be playing with it just feels normal. You’re playing football with a bunch of

your friends pretty much.”

Butler defensive coordinator and defensive backs coach Joe Cheshire played a tangible role in recruiting Manning to the program.

Cheshire has helped recruit dozens of players in his over 17 years in the program, but when he first met Manning, he knew he was different.

“I think the thing to me that always stood out to me about him is he seemed more mature and wiser than his years,” Cheshire said. “I think he’s a natural leader, he takes to that role very seamlessly.”

Manning’s eagerness to get started with the program, combined with his maturity as a player, proved successful for him as he was able to get playing time on the field as a true freshman.

During the [2019 season](#), Manning played in 10 of 12 games on special teams for the Bulldogs. Manning was even able to get some reps on defense as he managed to make 16 tackles, with a season-high of five tackles against Marist.

Although his play time was limited, Manning still found this experience to be useful as he was able to put what he had practiced all summer to use and work out his nerves.

“It really just built the confidence of being out there for the first time,” Manning said. “It was like, ‘hey, all the jitters are out, now let’s just go play’.”

NO SOPHOMORE SLUMP HERE

Following his rather involved freshman season, Manning was hoping to make an even bigger impact in his sophomore year. However, like most athletes in 2020, those plans hit a bit of a hiccup with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the university and its facilities were shut down and unavailable to all athletic programs, causing the team to go virtual until their return to campus in August.

Unable to play together, Manning and his teammates prepared as best they could with the expectation of playing in the fall. The team continued regular meetings over Zoom and stayed connected with each other in any way they possibly could.

Upon returning for summer camp in August, Manning felt the team picked right back up where they left off in the spring.

“It didn’t feel like we lost an ounce of time,” Manning said. “It felt like we were all connected, even though we’re from all different parts of the country. I was very happy for that.”

Unfortunately for Manning and his teammates, they would face yet another set back, as the [PFL announced](#) on Aug. 7 the fall season was cancelled indefinitely.

This did not stop Manning from continuing to prepare and develop his skills for the next time his team hit the gridiron.

During autumn practices, while Manning was working to develop his own on-field play, he was unknowingly developing something else — his leadership. Cheshire saw how Manning's dedication to the program was impacting those around him.

“When you bring new classes in, they see a guy like [Mike] and they want to emulate him,” Cheshire said. “His work ethic tends to naturally bring out the best in those around him.”

As a coach, Cheshire has taken the most pride in watching Manning foster younger players in the program and help them grow as teammates.

“It's a joy as a coach to see him embrace that dynamic and take those young guys under his wing and teach them the way we do things here and what the expectations are,” Cheshire said.

Teammates, such as Joe Marra, redshirt sophomore defensive lineman, said Manning's impact to those around him rarely goes unnoticed.

“Mike has done a great job keeping us engaged and motivated, even though the season hasn't gone as planned,” Marra said. “[He's] helped us by keeping an upbeat attitude on and off the field.”

A month prior to the spring season, the team announced its captain for the spring and fall seasons. Manning was one of the four captains elected, making him the first sophomore ever to be selected as a captain in the 15 seasons under head coach Jeff Voris.

“It was a true honor and I owe it all to my teammates,” Manning said. “I can't take all the credit whatsoever, I'm just out there trying to do my best and put forth my best effort for everybody.”

On the football team, the captains are elected solely by the players' vote — meaning the coaches or athletic department has no say in who is chosen. While it usually takes players till their junior or senior years to gain that kind of confidence from the locker room, Manning was able to break the mold and do it in only two years.

“You can see the respect his teammates have for him,” Cheshire said. “We've had some really dynamic and awesome leaders in the program and to say he's the first sophomore to do it is an impressive feat.”

THIS IS BIGGER THAN FOOTBALL

Manning has also displayed his leadership skills off the field.

During the 2020 fall semester, Manning, along with other members of the football team and his roommates, organized a peaceful protest on Butler University's campus.

On Sept. 25, 2020, a protest in support of the Black Lives Matter Movement and justice for Breonna Taylor spearheaded by Manning and the [football team](#) brought together members of other athletic teams, Butler students and even President Danko.

The outpouring of support by the Butler community was a shock to Manning, as he didn't expect what was supposed to be a small demonstration to turn into a campus-wide event.

"All of our teammates helped in some form or fashion and it turned into something big. I didn't expect it to be that big, but it was a good thing to see." Manning said. "It was a great process of everyone just being understanding of what we were trying to get the message across as."

While Manning still has two more seasons left to play at Butler, he has already started to piece together his future following his collegiate career.

Manning is currently studying psychology and plans on using his education combined with his experience as an athlete to become a sports psychologist. After all the help he's received throughout his years, Manning wants to use his knowledge to give back to the next generation of athletes.

"I want to help athletes hone into their skills and get rid of the negative energy that is around them," Manning said. "The game is 90% mental and I don't believe that is trained enough in athletes."

For now, those aspirations will have to wait.

His team is in the midst of their spring season — and it's not going according to plan. Currently, the team sits at the bottom of the PFL with a winless record at 0-4. Even with all hope of the season being lost to an outsider's point of view, Manning still remains faithful that his team is still heading towards the right direction.

"Right now I feel like we have all the pieces there," Manning said. "We're on the way to becoming a great team."

For now, Manning knows the team has only one option — to take the season one day at a time. "It's helping us move forward from game to game, so we can win the day — then win on Saturdays."