

For the Love of Lavar

by MARK GREY

10/01/2008As I turned into The Capital Center Blvd shopping center at eight in the morning on a bright and sunny Tuesday, all I could see were empty parking spaces and closed restaurants set to the back drop of FedEx Field, home of the Washington Redskins. Once in the shopping center, I made one more turn before I reached my destination, a huge 7,500 square foot restaurant with burgundy and gold awnings known as "The Sideline" or as what everyone in the Largo, Maryland area calls it, "Lavar's Spot." I am here first thing in the morning to meet three-time pro bowl linebacker Lavar Arrington and spend the day with him. Ever since Arrington arrived in the Washington D.C. Area over eight years ago, the city and its fans have had an undying love for him no matter what he does and I'm hoping today I can figure out why.

Being that I am meeting a professional football player who has made countless millions over his career, it is no surprise that there is a convertible Bentley parked in front of the restaurant. What is surprising however, is that Lavar is sitting in a Volkswagen Jetta parked next to it. As I hop out of my car and into the back seat of the Jetta, Lavar greets me with that million dollar smile, says, "Morning Bro," and asks me if I am ready for the day. After I assure him that I am good to go, he looks at his assistant and says, "Let's go." As I sit in the back seat I think to myself that I'm not sure what the folks at VW had in mind when they designed the Jetta, but I am pretty sure it wasn't built with the idea of 6 foot 3", 260 pound linebackers sitting in the front seat. His dreadlocks are less than an inch from the roof of the car, and I think there was an armrest buried under his arm somewhere. As I am staring at one of the biggest dudes I have ever seen in person, and trying to figure out how in the world he fit into this car, he turns around and ask me if I am ok or do I need more room. Being that I am sitting in the seat behind his assistant who might be 5 foot 3, I have more leg room than most first class passengers on a plane. I laugh and tell him "I'm fine. I then asked Lavar, "aren't you uncomfortable up there?" He replies, "I'm good bro, I am comfortable in anything. Don't worry about me." This turned out to slightly foreshadow how the rest of the day would go. After developing a reputation as the most feared football player in the nation while at Penn State, the Redskins made Arrington the number two pick overall in the 2000 draft. Arrington arrived in Washington with great fanfare. Scouts all across the league were impressed with his unbelievable athletic ability. Arrington weighed over 250 pounds but still had been clocked running as fast as a 4.4 forty, a time that would make any running back or receiver proud. While many people across the country were shocked to see a linebacker running those times, those in his hometown of Pittsburgh were well aware of his speed. After all, he finished his high school career as the second leading rusher in Pennsylvania 4A football history with over 4,000 yards and 72 touchdowns. With nothing left to prove at the college level, Lavar entered the NFL draft after his Jr year. Labeled as the next Lawrence Taylor, there was no wonder why Redskins fans were excited about his arrival. It's now eight years later, Lavar is coming up on his second year out of football, and Redskins fans still get excited when they see him. As soon as we turn out of the shopping center at the first light, Lavar sees an older woman in her car, winds down the window and calls the lady by name. He tells her good morning, shares a quick laugh with her and as the light changes color, tells her to have a great day. As we drive away, Lavar has a big smile on his face and says, "she is such a sweet lady." As we make our way onto the beltway, Lavar turns and ask me if I know how to ice skate. Before I can even answer he quickly says, "That's right, you're a Florida boy ... you don't know anything about that" and begins to laughs. Lavar never misses a chance to brag about his home state of Pennsylvania. Without me even getting to ask where that question came from, he tells me we are on our way to the Washington Capitals training facility where he was going to meet the team and do a little skating. I in turn ask him if he had ever ice skated before, to which he replied he had once when he was a kid. His assistant and I began to laugh as we envisioned the show we were about to see. Just the thought of seeing Lavar fall on the ice was enough to make us laugh. Lavar quickly told us, "laugh all you want; I'm a great athlete so I will be fine, you'll see." After driving around in circles, his assistant finally admits that we are lost so she stops to ask a cop which way we need to be headed. The two male cops seemed rather annoyed by the young lady and the fact that she has just stopped along side of them and asked to talk. Before the two officers can even speak, Lavar leans across the car flashing that huge smile of his and waves and says, "good morning gentlemen." The two policemen perk up as if they had just seen Santa Clause. They look at each other and say, "Hey, that's Lavar Arrington," and smile from ear to ear. The cops quickly tell us which way to go, as one of them jokes, "I would give you an escort there but I am Cowboys fan." Lavar shoots a joke back and everyone laughs as the cops wish Lavar good luck and we go on our way. As we pull up to the Caps facility, there is a Comcast television crew waiting there for Lavar. Comcast is there to film Lavar's meeting with the team and obtain some film of him on the ice. They have a segment that they air each week before every Redskins game called "Life on the Sidelines with Lavar Arrington." The segment follows Lavar around the D.C. area as he meets different people. After they mic Lavar up, a Capitals' official leads us to the team's locker room where Lavar shakes hands and makes small talk with a couple of the players. When we first arrive in the dressing room, there are about four or five players in there. As word spread that Lavar was in the building, players and members of the organization begin to come in groups. After about 10 minutes, the young phenom Alexander Ovechkin even comes from the trainer's room to meet Lavar. As I stand outside the locker room, I hear them all leave and say, "that dude is huge." Once the locker room clears out, we walk to the ice where a

member of the training staff hands Lavar a red long sleeve Caps jersey and points to a pair of skates leaning up against a wall. After Lavar laces the skates up, he walks over to me and says, "watch a real athlete" as he makes his way to the ice and I take my place to watch him fall flat on his face while I laugh. For the first two minutes, Lavar flirts with disaster as I have my camera in hand waiting to see him take that fall. After about five minutes I quickly realized he wasn't going to fall as he was getting better by the second. And before I knew it, he was skating backwards and had a stick in his hand. Everyone in the building had now found their way to the ice to watch the giant with dreadlocks skate and I was starting to get the feeling if we had stayed another 10 minutes, he might have made the team. As Lavar gets ready to come off the ice and notices my disappointment that he didn't fall, he pats me on the shoulder as he laughs and says, "told you I would be all right." While I was in complete shock that a 260 pound man had just stepped on the ice for the second time in his life without falling on his face once, I should have known better. Lavar has been a natural athlete his entire life. Aside from being one of the best running backs and linebackers to ever play high school football in the state of Pennsylvania, he was also recruited by powerhouses Georgetown, UNC, and UMass to play basketball, and was a high school stand out in Track and Field. With a resume like that, it's no surprise that skating comes easy to him. After all, it's a sport right? While Lavar has had his share of doubters over his career, one thing no one has ever doubted is his athletic ability. Tales of his athletic greatness have reached almost mythical proportions. You kind of get the feeling that in his prime there was no player a healthy Arrington couldn't make. Lavar's story of a player with freakish talents that had his career cut short by injury makes him somewhat of the Bo Jackson of linebackers. For years, people will be asking how great he could have been. Type in "Lavar's Leap" on YouTube and you will find unbelievable footage of him jumping over linemen to make tackles in the backfield. He comes over the top almost as if he is not even human. It appears as if he is some kind of super hero. With plays like that, the legend that is Lavar was born. When Lavar came into the NFL, he came with a great deal of hype and high expectations. A lot of people wondered if he was the real deal and it didn't take long for them to get their answer. By just his second season, Lavar became a pro bowler and by his third season, he led all linebackers in sacks. By Lavar's fourth season he had already been named an all-pro three times and developed the nickname "the quarterback killer" for the way he hit quarterbacks so hard. Arrington served notice to quarterbacks all over the league that he had arrived in 2000 when he hit Cowboys Quarterback Troy Aikman and ended his career. Arrington was regarded as one of the hardest hitters in the league, as well as the best pass rushing linebacker around. In just four years Lavar had not only lived up to the hype; he had added on to it. As we are getting ready to leave the Caps training facility, we make a quick detour for the gift shop. Once we're in the store, the man behind the counter looks up as if he has just seen a ghost. He says, "you're Lavar Arrington" to which Lavar replies, "yes I am." The salesman asks me to take a picture of the two of them and tells us that his neighbor is the biggest Redskins fan and he is not going to believe this. Two more young fans walk in and ask for autographs and pictures as Lavar says yes to them with a big smile. The salesman then asks Lavar if he would like him to put his name and number on the back of his Capitals Jersey for him. Lavar looks at me and says, "that would be cool." Before I could even agree, they were in the back printing it up. Once we leave the facility, we make a quick stop at the gas station. While Lavar is pumping gas wearing the world's only Lavar Arrington bright red hockey jersey, a grown man yells his name from across the street and Lavar turns and waves at the man as the fan yells, "we still love you." Lavar smiles and waves back. Just as he is done pumping the gas, two more men walked by with huge smiles on their faces and say, "hey Lavar" as they peep into the car. When Lavar says hey back to the men, I could hear one say to the other, "told you that was him." Lavar gets back in the car, looks at me and says, "I love the fans." It's now noon and we have once again found ourselves caught in D.C. Traffic. Lavar is on the phone and by the way he is talking you would never know he was an ex-football player. Instead, he sounds like the CEO of a fortune 500 company. We are on our way to the radio station WPGC where Lavar hosts an AM talk show. During the whole 20 minute car ride, he is on the phone talking business. At this point, Lavar couldn't look further away from the football field if he tried. He is talking about different projects, grand openings, expansions, buying and selling; It becomes clear to me that he is much more than just a figure head. Once off the phone, he explains that he is preparing to open another business venture in Atlanta right now. "The goal is to make it a successful brand that is recognized nationwide and even globally," Lavar tells me. When he speaks about his business projects, he has the look in his eyes as if he is talking about one of his kids, and he speaks like a proud parent. Right now, he sounds like playing football could not be further from his mind. Throughout the day, I asked him three different times if he would ever come back and play and he tells me everything but yes or no. I do get him to admit that at times when he is watching football he misses it. "The only time I think about coming back is when someone brings it up and asks me," he tells me. I ask him how often that is. He says, "everyday" then laughs. Lavar's radio show is about the community and what's going on with high schools as well as professional sports. The show has a big brother feel as he often speaks to high school athletes and offers tips about not just sports, but about life. Today Lavar talks about everything from gangster rap and gang violence to Monday night's football game. Once he leaves the station, he is back on the phone talking more business and back to the restaurant for a meeting. It's like the man never stops working, so I ask him about that. "I only know one speed and that's full speed. I only know how to work hard," he responds. I ask if he has any plans to coach and he replies, "nope, that takes way too much time," with a smile. Once back at the restaurant, Lavar takes a break which gives me a chance to ask him some questions and try and get a better feel for what makes this man the most loved Redskin in Washington, despite not playing for the Skins in over three years. I ask him about the highly publicized motorcycle accident that almost took his life a little over two years ago and what he learned from it. He tells me, "I learned that God has a plan and a purpose for me to be here, and I vowed that when I got out of that bed I was going to go harder than I had ever gone before with things I was trying to accomplish in my life." He goes on to say, "I really didn't realize the effect

and the impact that me almost taking myself out of here would have on so many different people.” When I ask him how he feels about his career and if he feels satisfied with what he has accomplished despite his career being cut short, he confidently responds that “I feel like my football career is as storybook ready as any Hall of Famer’s.” Furthermore, he insists he has no regrets about his career, and assures me that he is where he is supposed to be in life right now. So after spending the entire day with Lavar, I still didn’t have the answer to my question. Why do the fans still love this man so much? Sure he was a great player, but the Redskins have had several great players. Sure he has an infectious smile, but a lot of people do. Is it because he ended Aikman’s career? Is it because when Joe Gibbs and the organization tried to bash him as a player by saying he didn’t know how to play the game, he chose to take the high road and say nothing? Was it the dinner he hosted for 1,000 underprivileged children in the area before his restaurant even opened or all the other donations he has made? Surely it couldn’t be because of all those Eastern Motors commercials. I wanted to know why the whole D.C. area is still wearing number 56 jerseys. Why is it that this man can’t pump gas without people yelling his name? Here it was almost time for me to leave, and finally with my last question of the day I got my answer. I ask Lavar what he wants his legacy to be. What does he want to be remembered for? Lavar breaks off into a three minute rant and doesn’t once mention football. “The legacy I would like to leave is as someone who really cared. Someone who really cared about his community, somebody who cared about the people. Being successful in business, being successful in life, it doesn’t mean much if people can’t enjoy it with you, and if you’re not able to give it back, and if you’re not able to be part of the betterment of the people who are coming after you, it doesn’t mean much. That is what I would want my legacy to be built upon. That is what I would want to be remembered for. I would just want people to know that I cared about people. For all the things I may have done or may have been; I may have been really great in business or really great in football, but what really means the world to me is to allot people, the opportunities that they might not have had if somebody didn’t care, and if I left here, that’s what I would want people to continue to do. Everything you do in life has to be geared towards you giving back, so that the people who do what you have already done after you do it are equipped and trained enough to do it better.” That’s when it all hit me. The reason the whole city loves him, the reason the children in the community love him, and the reason the fans will never forget him, is because he loves them. Back in 2000, the Redskins didn’t just get Lavar Arrington, the entire D.C. Metropolitan area got him. After the team used up all his pro bowl talent and thought he was done, then cut ties with him, Lavar never left the community. Long after he was no longer a Redskin, the charity work in the community still continued. Even after the team’s owner and legendary coach tried to embarrass him, he still can be seen every Sunday less than a quarter of a mile away from the stadium cheering the Redskins on amongst the fans. Lavar has become just as much a part of the community as any other public figure who has come before him. Anyone who knows Lavar knows he couldn’t be more proud of where he came from, but I don’t think Lavar could be any happier with where he is and the people in Washington couldn’t be happier to have him.