



- Speaker 1: This is the Thank You, 72 podcast, brought to you by the Wisconsin Alumni Association. This podcast salutes outstanding Badgers from every one of Wisconsin's 72 counties. Here is your host, Tod Pritchard.
- Tod P.: Thank you, Waukesha County, for J. J. Watt, the former Wisconsin Badger football standout who is now with the Houston Texans, and is one of the best defensive players in the NFL. Watt is a dynamic combination of charisma and commitment. His energy and passion are on display as he steps out of the locker room, through the tunnel, and onto the football field.
- Tod P.: The motto of J. J. Watt's foundation, which he created in 2010 when he was still an undergrad here at UW–Madison to provide after-school athletic opportunities for kids, is, "Dream big, play hard." Justin James Watt was born on March 22, 1989, and he grew up in Pewaukee. His middle name, James, that's the second J in J. J., is for his paternal grandfather who passed away a few years ago. James was a huge part of J. J.'s life, and is still the man J. J. strives to honor.
- Tod P.: Watt was a Pewaukee High School football standout when he contracted mono in the summer before his senior year. That illness stopped him from being able to show off his talents to the one place he really wanted to go, the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Instead, he took a scholarship offer from Central Michigan, but after his very first game, he decided Central Michigan wasn't the right place for him. He asked his parents if they would support his decision to leave his scholarship behind and become a walk-on at Wisconsin.
- Tod P.: Watt would later say that he was taking a massive gamble, and a whole lot of people thought he was going to lose that bet. He didn't. Watt became a star defensive back for the Badgers. He went on to become the 11th overall pick in the 2011 NFL Draft.
- Tod P.: Sports Illustrated has called Watt the best defensive player of his generation, and named him the 2017 Sportsman of the Year. He recently served as Grand Marshall for the Daytona 500, and will be the

spring commencement speaker for the UW–Madison class of 2019.

- Tod P.: The 2019 senior class officers selected Watt to be their spring commencement speaker, and those class officers are here with me now, so Ron, why don't you start by introducing yourself? We'll go around the room.
- Ron S.: Hey, man. This is Ron Steinhoff. I'm from Eden Prairie, Minnesota, and I'm studying political science and Spanish.
- Mara: Hi, J. J. This is Mara. I'm from Franklin, Wisconsin, and I'm studying political science and communication arts.
- Caroline: Hey, J. J. This is Caroline. I'm from Milwaukee, and I'm studying community and nonprofit leadership.
- Mackenzie: Hi, this is Mackenzie. I am from Germantown, Wisconsin, and I am studying neurobiology.
- Zach: Hi, this is Zach Clayman. I'm from Bethesda, Maryland, and I'm studying finance.
- Tod P.: And joining us on the phone is J. J. Watt. J. J., thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.
- J. J. Watt: My pleasure. J. J. Watt, Pewaukee, Wisconsin. I study opposing offenses.
- Tod P.: We are going to start with a question from Zach. Zach, go ahead.
- Zach: Hey, J. J. Who is the most inspiring person in your life?
- J. J. Watt: It would definitely be both of my parents. My dad was a firefighter for his whole life, and my mom started as a secretary at her company and worked her way up to being a vice president. So, just both of them, my whole life, taught me what it means to work hard, what it means to have a dream. Don't be afraid to make it a big dream. Go out there and accomplish it. As long as you're willing to put in the work and make the sacrifices. My whole life, they've always taught me that you can do whatever you want to do as long as you're willing to put in the work and put in the time, and the effort, and energy. So, I'm thankful and I'm very fortunate that I have two parents who really led the way for me, and gave me every opportunity, and taught me to believe in myself.
- Ron S.: So, J. J., we're right near the Terrace right now. This is Ron talking. I'm curious what your favorite memory from your time at UW is.

J. J. Watt: Oh, man. A lot of my favorite memories come on the football, obviously. From when we beat Ohio State when they were number one, to beating Northwestern at home in my last ever game at Camp Randall, to go to the Rose Bowl. But, like you said, you're there at the Terrace. Days at the Terrace, hanging out with the guys, just looking out over the water. Really, the relationships you build and the friends you make. You know, walking around campus, that's really some of the memories outside of football that I remember the most, is just being with my teammates, meeting new friends, and just enjoying the beauty that is Madison.

Ron S.: For sure. Well, hopefully you get time to check out the Terrace after your commencement address.

J. J. Watt: Hopefully so. I'm going to hopefully get to run over there before everybody else gets there, because I have a feeling it's going to be a pretty packed place after graduation.

Ron S.: We'll save you a table.

J. J. Watt: Thank you.

Mara: Going off of that, I'm sure football played a big role in your time here, but is there any specific part of UW you miss the most? Probably not the cold weather, compared to Houston, but anything specific?

J. J. Watt: Surprisingly, I actually do miss the cold weather a little bit because we don't get nearly as much of it down in Houston, so I miss a good snow every now and then. But I would say ... I mean, the Terrace was huge. I loved going up to Observation Hill, and kind of going to sit up on that high hill and look over the lake, and look over the campus a little bit. Going up towards the capitol, whether it's the Old Fashioned or it's just walking around in the square. There's so much to do, and there's so many things. You have State Street, of course, but I mean, 95 percent of time was spent at Camp Randall, working and getting ready for the season. Whenever I got a chance to go out and enjoy some time on the campus, I enjoyed.

Mara: Obviously, we've established that Camp Randall and game days were pretty important to you, and they're also pretty important to me as well, as a member of the marching band. I play trumpet, and we're very aware of our presence and enjoyment that we bring to the game-day experience. Do you have any memories when the band helped to make a game day more enjoyable?

J. J. Watt: Oh, they always make the game more enjoyable. That's the one thing in the NFL that we don't get, that I love, is the marching bands in college and the atmosphere that they bring with it. Mike Leckrone is obviously an absolute legend, and I loved being able to watch him work and see him go to town. But one of my favorites with the band was hockey games. I loved going to hockey games at UW, and seeing the band there, and getting into the swing of things. That was always my favorite, because on game day I couldn't really experience the band a ton because I was obviously playing. So, when I would go to hockey games or basketball games, I loved being able to watch, being able to listen to the band, and really take it all in.

Mara: Hockey games, as well as basketball games, are also super fun for me to play in the pep band, so I enjoy those a lot, too.

Caroline: Awesome. Hey, J. J. This is Caroline. I will actually be introducing you at the ceremony, so very excited for that. My question is do you have any pregame traditions?

J. J. Watt: I have one pregame tradition that I always do. It started in the NFL. I go around the entire stadium and play catch with the fans. I used to have, whether it was a certain music I had to listen to or a certain way I had to get taped, and a certain time I had to put my cleats on and all that. But over the years, I realized that just being free and being loose and having fun and enjoying myself, that's how I best prepare for a game. I go out there, I play catch with all the fans an hour and a half before the game. Just loosen up, feel free, enjoy it all, and take it all in, and then I go out there and I play. The most nervous I get is when I'm not prepared, so I try and just keep myself loose because I know I've done everything I can to get ready for the game.

Tod P.: Hey, J. J. It's Tod again, and I've seen film of you doing that warm-up with people, and they love it when you're throwing the ball into the stands. You've been mic'd up for a couple of NFL games, and we're going to play a little clip here of you playing with Houston versus the New Orleans Saints.

J. J. Watt: I'd have a tough time talking trash if I had 28 yards of total offense. I'm just saying. That's an interesting strategy. Quarterback getting smoked back there. I like Drew. I don't like hitting him like that.

Tod P.: You're of course talking about Drew Brees in that sound clip. You really get in the heads of your opponents. Tell us more about that.

J. J. Watt: There's obviously a lot of talk that goes on on the field. I would say I don't talk nearly as much anymore as I did when I was younger. I think

that more times than not I talk when I'm not playing well, as opposed to when I am playing well. When I'm playing really well, I don't say a lot because it's pretty much known. The guy crossing me knows. You don't need to let him know because you're letting him get inside of his own head a bit. Sometimes when I get frustrated or I'm having a rough game, that's talking ... I pretend that it makes me feel better about myself, when in reality, it doesn't. It's fun. There's some guys that do it all the time, and they do it every single game, and some are better at it than others. For the most part, I try and let my game do the speaking. Then every now and then, if a good line comes to mind, you let it loose.

Speaker 1: You're listening to the Thank You, 72 podcast. The Wisconsin Alumni Association is honoring amazing Badgers from Wisconsin's 72 counties. For more amazing stories, visit thankyou72.org. That's thankyou72.org. Now, back to our interview with Waukesha County native and former Badger football standout, J. J. Watt. Here's Tod Prichard from the Wisconsin Alumni Association, along with the 2019 UW Madison senior class officers.

Tod P.: J. J., your impact on the world transcends the football field. After Hurricane Harvey devastated Houston in 2017, your foundation launched a goal of raising \$200,000, and in just a couple months you received \$41 million, including \$100,000 out of your own pocket. You were honored with the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award by the NFL. What did that award really mean to you?

J. J. Watt: It was an award that I felt like I share with so many other people, because it's not an award that I earned or deserved for myself, as an individual. There are hundreds and thousands of people around the country, around the world, who donated, who gave their time and effort, and energy, and money, during that cause. I feel like I was the voice piece for it all, and I was the coordinator of it all, but all I did was give people a chance to feel the good in humanity, and to show how much good and caring there is in the world. I appreciate the honors and everything that came with it after the hurricane and relief efforts, but I will always say that it was so much bigger than just me. There were so many people involved.

Caroline: What exactly was the inspiration behind starting your foundation?

J. J. Watt: I started my foundation my last year in Wisconsin, so my junior year at Wisconsin. My parents always taught me to give back. We grew up, and I wasn't poor, but I wasn't rich. We were middle class. My parents always taught me that we had dinner on the table, I

could play sports after school, and I could do ... There wasn't a lot we couldn't do. They taught me that not everybody else was as fortunate as we were, and always to give back.

J. J. Watt: Even in high school, my mom would take us and we would do little volunteer things to try and give back to the community. And then throughout college, I'd go visit schools. I'd visit elementary schools and middle schools. I started to realize that there are so many people out there in the world that didn't have the same simple opportunities I had, like the opportunity to play on a sports team after school.

J. J. Watt: So, I wanted to start that foundation, and we started with a goal of \$100,000 for the foundation. To date, we're at about \$5 million we've donated all over the country. It's been pretty crazy. It's been unbelievable to see the support that it's gotten from people, and to see the lives we've been able to play a small part in over the years. But, it all started back in Wisconsin, and I had help from a student in the law school that helped me set up the foundation and all the legal paperwork and everything, so it was really a team effort.

Zach: Awesome. J. J., if you didn't play football, what sport would you be playing professionally?

J. J. Watt: I was a hockey player growing up. I started skating when I was three years old. I loved hockey, but like I just said, we were a middle-class family, and I have two brothers, and hockey is an expensive sport. So, for all three of us to play, it got tough after a while, financially, for our family, so we couldn't keep doing it. But that was really my first love, so I would say probably hockey.

J. J. Watt: But then, even in high school, my sophomore year I had to choose between football and baseball, because I was a pitcher in baseball, and you can't really pitch and work out because you've got to protect your arm. I chose football, and thankfully it worked out. But I'm a huge believer in playing as many sports as you can for as long as you can is the way to go. I think it's huge, and I've been a big advocate against single-sport specialization in kids because I think there's a lot of dangers to it.

Zach: And if you did decide to play baseball, do you think you would be where you are now in your career.

J. J. Watt: I have no idea. I really don't know. It's interesting to think about. I like to think that I would be, just because whatever I choose to do, I try and put every ounce of effort I have into it. I'd like to say with the same work ethic and putting in all that time, that I would be

able to make it to the same point, but there's so many things throughout your career, throughout your life, that you don't know when the twists and turns are going to be. Whether it's you get lucky and you have a great coach, or you have a great strength staff or whatever it is, there's so many things that have to fall into place for everything to work out.

J. J. Watt: I've been lucky in my career for that to happen, and sometimes you just get good bounces along the way. If you're not doing the right things in your work ethic and in your dedication, those right bounces aren't going to help you. But if you are doing it all, it all lines up perfectly, and that's what happened with me and football.

Mackenzie: All right, J. J. As an athlete, we know that you obviously have to keep pretty fit, and I've noticed from my time on campus that Badgers are actually pretty fit and active themselves. So, do you have any workout suggestions or tips for the next time we hit the gym? Perhaps a J. J. Watt-approved routine, but modified for college students, of course.

J. J. Watt: In Madison, just walk to class every day. That will get you plenty of a workout. I had a moped when I was there, so I was fine. I didn't get much of a workout from walking. Workout tips. I would say do something every day. Just be active, go to the gym. Start small. I think the biggest thing for people is just the motivation to actually get to the gym, and there's always going to be an excuse. There's always a reason why you don't do something, or you can find ... maybe I should just lay in bed today, or oh darn, I have that meeting in two hours. I can't do a workout before.

J. J. Watt: Just go. Just go commit to it, whether it's a half hour, whether it's an hour, do something. Whether it's walking on the treadmill or you're going to go do a full blown workout, just do something. And then as you go, learn about it, see how good you feel. I think that's the biggest part. Once you start to see results, then it becomes easy. It's that first part, committing to working out, committing to getting into it, that's difficult. But once you start to see results, then it becomes fun and you really enjoy it.

Mackenzie: Do you have a favorite workout you enjoy? Is that lifting weights, or doing yoga, going for a run?

J. J. Watt: It is 100 percent not yoga. I am way too big and way too impatient for yoga. My girlfriend loves yoga, so I've tried to do yoga a couple times. At Madison actually, one year when I was in Wisconsin, they had two yoga instructors come in for the football team. We went into the wrestling room, and they turned it up to 105 so it was that hot yoga stuff. They had the whole football team in this

tiny little room, and we were all doing yoga, and about five minutes in I think the teacher walked out because she was like, these guys can't do it. We had offensive lineman laying on the floor. But, for my favorite workout, my favorite workouts are honestly the ones that I hate. It's prowler pushes, it's squatting, it's the workouts that yield the most results. They suck, and they're brutal to do, and they're hard, and you hate them while you're doing them, but once you're done, you know that you got better and you know that you made progress. So, I would say that those are the ones that I like the most.

Ron S.: So, J. J., a common joke that you've been making about speaking at commencement is that you're going to provide Spotted Cow for all the graduates. I'm just curious, as a student, if you've ever considered maybe a more economical beer like Natural Light or Keystone. I want to hear your thoughts on that.

J. J. Watt: Well, yeah. Once I saw how many people show up to graduation, I had to reconsider my options. I'm just going to put a keg at the door.

Ron S.: I do think Natural Light would be a more economical option for you.

J. J. Watt: Yes, I agree.

Ron S.: And then finally, J. J., as senior class president, I deliver the student remarks, and I've seen around the news how maybe you were having a little trouble getting started about writing your speech. I just started writing mine this week, so if you want any help writing it, I'm more than happy to help you.

J. J. Watt: So, you're going to do double speeches. That's impressive. I guess that's why you're the class president. That makes sense. I'm excited about mine. I know people have a lot of fun, obviously, with the fact that I said I'm not going to write one, but I think that from my perspective, the way I look at it is when I did the Hurricane Harvey relief, I didn't write any of the scripts. That was just me and my phone talking to the people.

J. J. Watt: I think that, for me, the most natural and real way for me to get my message across is to just speak. I have some bullet points of things that I know I want to hit, also stories that I want to tell, which I'm excited about. But at the end of the day, I want the students and I want the people in attendance to know that this is coming from me. This is coming from my heart. These are the things that I think are important, not speeches that were written by somebody else, or had a bunch of outside help, because I think that the message should come directly from me. Hopefully, that's why they asked me to be the speaker. I hope that's why

you guys chose me, because you think I'm going to deliver a good message. I'm going to have something worthwhile to say.

J. J. Watt: I'm really looking forward to it. I'm so excited to get back in Camp Randall get back in front of the students, and deliver a message. And hopefully they can take some things away from it, and learn from it, and grow from it, because I've certainly had some life experiences that I believe can be helpful. At the end, we'll all head over to the Terrace and grab a beer together, and congratulate everybody on an unbelievable ... y'all having a great success.

Ron S.: That sounds wonderful, J. J., and yes, we are so excited to hear your address, and we really think being authentic is something all graduates can relate to. That is why we chose you.

J. J. Watt: How long is your speech?

Ron S.: It's currently five to seven minutes, so we're going to see. I haven't actually written the full thing yet, so I'm kind of in the same boat as you.

J. J. Watt: All right, sounds good, man. Good luck to you as well.

Ron S.: Thank you. Yeah, they're not as flexible for me as they are for you in writing a speech, though.

J. J. Watt: That's good.

Tod P.: Hey, J. J. Thank you so much for being on the podcast today. You once said that no matter what happens in your life, you're always going to be that kid from Pewaukee, and Wisconsin is so proud of you, and we're so proud you're one of us.

J. J. Watt: Thank you. I very much appreciate you guys having me. I cannot wait to get back there, and I will indeed always be that old Pewaukee kid, and a Wisconsin Badger forever. So, I can't wait to see you guys in a couple weeks here. Have a great day. On, Wisconsin.

Group: On, Wisconsin.

Speaker 1: Thanks for listening to the Thank You, 72 podcast. For more interviews with amazing UW alumni, visit thankyou72.org. That's thankyou72.org.