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JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS NEWS SPORTS

With 150th NFL game, Mercedes Lewis sets down roots with Jaguars



By **STEPHEN RUIZ**
ORLANDO SENTINEL | OCT 22, 2016



Jacksonville Jaguars tight end Mercedes Lewis fights for more yardage during the first half of an NFL game against the San Diego Chargers on Sept. 18, 2016.(Ryan Kang/Associated Press)

When the 2015 NFL season ended, Mercedes Lewis was not sure whether he would wear a Jacksonville Jaguars uniform again.

He was a free agent, and although the Jags were open to bringing him back, other teams were interested. Lewis came to Jacksonville as the 28th overall selection in the 2006 draft, and after 10 seasons, it was difficult for him to envision himself playing anywhere else.

"It got kind of close," Lewis said. "I didn't know what they wanted to do, but I had four or five offer sheets. The Rams were the last team to offer me. It was pretty close. I was just glad that we got the deal done. It's where I want to be."

Lewis, the run-blocking tight end built to last, is set to play his 150th NFL game — all representing North Florida's team — when the Jags (2-3) host the Oakland Raiders (4-2) at 1 p.m. Sunday at Everbank Field in Jacksonville. The game will not be televised in the Central Florida market.

The Raiders are coached by Jack Del Rio, the Jags' coach for Lewis' first six pro seasons.

"The first thing that has come to mind is, [Mercedes] has brought great strength," said Jacksonville's current coach, Gus Bradley. "I know he is someone I have leaned on as a head coach. He has been here, four years together, and he is someone I can always go to and count on, and he will speak the truth."

Only former offensive lineman Brad Meester (14 seasons) has played more seasons for Jacksonville than Lewis. Former wide receiver Jimmy Smith, former running back Fred Taylor and former kicker Josh Scobee also spent 11 seasons with the franchise, which entered the NFL in 1995.

None of those players was as unlikely to spread roots in Jacksonville as Lewis, 32. He went to high school on the other side of the continent, in Long Beach, Calif., and played at UCLA.

Then the Jags brought him east.

"I didn't know where Jacksonville was," Lewis said. "All I remember is Fred Taylor and Mark Brunell. Growing up as a kid, I was a Miami Dolphins fan, so that was weird. I found out real quick.

"Just the way they embraced me when I first got here ... I was homesick for the first three, three-and-a-half years. It was tough, but as the years grew, the love grew for me. I am in the community as much as I can. I love being here. The people have been amazing toward me. I wouldn't have it any other way."

Running back-wide receiver Denard Robinson said the respect that Lewis (6-6, 280) has earned in the locker room is as large as the former high-school and college power forward's frame.

"He is always doing extra stuff to work on his craft," Robinson said. "A lot of wisdom comes from him. It is always cool to get [advice] from a player who has played at a high level. He is still playing at a high level."

Lewis, who has eight catches for 97 yards and a touchdown, has appeared in all five of Jacksonville's games in 2016. During his career, he has played in at least 15 games eight times.

Lewis ranks third in franchise history in the following categories: 339 receptions, 4,112 receiving yards and 28 receiving TDs. He needs three receiving scores to pass Keenan McCardell for second all time with Jacksonville. Smith is first with 67.

"There's not many tight ends in this league left who can run routes, catch balls and block," said Tampa Bay Bucs linebacker Daryl Smith, Lewis' teammate in Jacksonville for seven seasons. "When he is covered, he is open because he played basketball. He understands how to use his body, how to block guys.

"You could be tight on him, and [when] the quarterback puts it in the right spot, you can't defend it."

Defensive lineman Tyson Alualu ranks second among active Jags in terms of service (seven years).

"Mercedes is a professional," Alualu said. "You see that in how he approaches his business. The biggest thing is showing younger players how you do things around here, how you study, watch film, how you prepare for Sundays. This league is all about the production. The more production you get, the more you stick around."

Lewis credits his longevity in Jacksonville to respecting others and cherishing the opportunity to wear a Jags jersey.

"Those are two things that are non-negotiable, and it can be easily taken for granted," Lewis said. "I live every day like it could be my last, give my all each day and live with the results.

"I never worried about anything else, outside of playing ball and giving my all to this organization, on and off the field. We're family now. I feel like I have been here long enough to where I can actually say that."

Lewis played quarterback on his freshman team in high school when coaches asked him to switch positions as a sophomore.

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The reason was simple. The varsity squad didn't have a tight end.

"I remember like, 'Nah, I am not about to play tight end. I'm not blocking anybody,'" Lewis said. "Sure enough, I played my first game, I had a huge game and I never looked back. I'm glad I switched."

So are the Jags.

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