

CHANGING THE GAME

Keynote speaker Jordy Nelson addressed attendees at the 137th Angus Annual Meeting.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

Some things have stayed the same — the stretch of green laid out before him, the work needed behind the scenes, the excitement of success, the passion within.

Other elements of the game have changed. The fans in the crowd are much quieter, the daily uniform has been altered and the game strategy has shifted.

While the rest of the world might know him as a former Green Bay Packers player and Super Bowl champion, Jordy Nelson told the 137th Angus Annual Meeting attendees in Kansas City, Mo., he more often labels himself as a farmer and rancher than a professional athlete.

First and agriculture

Nelson's career in the National Football League (NFL) might have made him a household name, particularly on Sunday nights, but the 35-year-old said it was a childhood spent on his family's farm that led him to succeed on the field.

"It's how I made a living, how my family made a living," the keynote speaker said of the farming and ranching operation started in Riley County, Kan., by his grandfather. "It's all I knew."

Angus cattle were not a part of the original farm plans, however. Nelson said his grandfather began with a focus on crops before bringing home a few Angus heifers as a hobby. That hobby quickly grew into a herd of 100 cows.

"Now, it's not so much of a hobby, and more of a daily grind and a lifestyle," Nelson explained.

Nelson said his time on the farm interacting with the livestock is a key part of what helped prepare him for a future as an NFL player. He said the dedication and work ethic required on the farm were mirrored in what was expected of him as a football player.

After a high school career spent balancing work at home with time

on the field, Nelson chose to attend Kansas State University (K-State). In addition to having grown up a Wildcat fan, Nelson said he knew attending this college would serve as the best opportunity for him to excel in the future.

In 2003, Nelson walked onto the K-State team as a safety. Despite his love and dedication for the game, Nelson did not see any actual time on the field until his third year.

He recalls being called into his coach's office and being asked to switch from safety to receiver. With the same success-driven mindset he had cultured growing up in the agriculture industry, Nelson said he took the chance to elevate his game.

"The switch was the break I needed," he said. "It was what allowed me to become the player I always wanted to be."

The break did not come easy. Nelson said he had to drastically change the way he prepared for games. The time and effort he dedicated towards training himself to be a receiver were well worth the effort, as Nelson was an All-American his senior year.

After college Nelson was drafted to the Green Bay Packers team in 2008. Though a professional athlete, Nelson once again found himself spending his first two years on the sidelines. Instead of being discouraged by this, Nelson said he took it as an opportunity to grow by watching others.



"THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY ELEVATED ME AS AN ATHLETE AND A PERSON." — JORDY NELSON

“Another way to become a better player and raise the level of success I wanted to have was to sit back and watch,” he explains. “I think you can learn things from other people.”

Nelson believes this applies in all industries, and the lesson was one he saw first in the agriculture industry. As farmers and ranchers, he and his family were always looking for ways to become better, and he brought that attitude to the field.

Touchdowns on all fields

Nelson’s patience, persistence and practice paid off during his third year in the NFL. After another player was injured, the opportunity arose for Nelson to see more time on the field.

He describes his time playing as exciting and challenging, saying there was never a day he was not learning something, whether it be a new route or new skill.

Overall, Nelson said he worked to approach each day with the same goal: improvement.

“You’re going to make mistakes — no one lives a perfect life,” Nelson said. “It’s up to you to make sure that you’re trying to not make the same mistake twice. I believe our minds are a powerful muscle.

What you think controls a lot of what you do.”

In the offseason, Nelson said this mindset did not disappear. In fact, he dedicated some of his time away from the team to helping share the story of agriculture with his teammates.

The easiest way to help them understand? Firsthand experience, of course, Nelson said.

Some of Nelson’s favorite memories with his fellow athletes occurred when he took them home to Kansas. There the men were able to experience all sides of production agriculture, including the artificial insemination (AI) of cattle, Nelson said with a laugh.

“They realized it was a different lifestyle, but it taught them about the peace and quiet and true enjoyment of the industry,” he added.

It was shared moments and experiences like this that helped the team come together to find success on all fields. Nelson might treasure these memories, but he said one of the biggest highlights of his career was his Super Bowl win.

Years of practice and dedication to the sport came to a peak in the 2010 season, when Nelson and the Packers won Super Bowl XLV.

Drafting the next generation

Nowadays, one can find Nelson in a field of crops rather than the green turf of a football field. He spent 10 seasons with the Packers and one with the Oakland Raiders before retiring and coming home to the family operation in Kansas.

Nelson works for his father and brother, helping with the soybeans, corn and cattle.

“Somehow I think I work more hours now at home than I ever did playing football,” he joked. The hours may be long, and the work may be difficult, but Nelson said he wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Nelson said this work is what he loves. It’s the industry that set him up for success, teaching him about the importance of working for your dreams, taking responsibility for all your actions and always having pride in the work you do.

Like in the NFL, Nelson said he has to think about the big picture every day. The plays he makes today are no longer an attempt for a touchdown, but rather to help benefit a team built around his family members and the cattle herd they own.

“The agriculture industry elevated me as an athlete and a person,” he said. The lessons of his youth are so valuable to Nelson that he said he has every intention of bringing up his own children in the same environment.

“It’s what I love to do,” he said of the agriculture industry. “I’m proud to be a farmer, and I look forward to raising my family that way.”

Editor’s note: Jordy Nelson’s keynote presentation was sponsored by Neogen. 

