

PEOPLE WHO INSPIRE

PAYING IT BACK

by

PAYING IT FORWARD

A FOOTBALL PLAYER,
HIS COACH, AND HOW ONE
CONNECTION HAS THE POWER
TO CHANGE EVERYTHING.



STORY BY CRAIG CUNNINGHAM | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAVANNA BROWN

INKY RIPPED ACROSS THE OPEN FIELD LIKE A BOLT OF LIGHTNING. HE LOWERED HIS SHOULDER AND KNOCKED THE RUNNING BACK OUT OF BOUNDS, JUST AS HE HAD DONE A THOUSAND TIMES BEFORE. THE CROWD CHEERED. THE BAND PLAYED ON.

BUT INKY DIDN'T GET UP.

THAT SINGLE MOMENT CHANGED EVERYTHING ABOUT INKY'S LIFE. UNTIL THEN, HIS TRAJECTORY WAS SET: ANOTHER YEAR OF SEC FOOTBALL FOLLOWED BY THE NFL DRAFT. WITH THAT MONEY AND THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT CAME WITH IT, HE COULD LIFT HIS FAMILY OUT OF THE POVERTY THAT HAD HELD THEM FOR GENERATIONS.

WITH ONE BLOW, ONE UNEXPECTED CONNECTION, THE DREAM WAS GONE.



Inquoris “Inky” Johnson grew up in a two-bedroom apartment in the Atlanta projects shared by 14 family members. Cousins, brothers, aunts, and uncles flowed in and out as the Johnsons held on through the burden of poverty—and all the addiction, violence, and pain that surrounded them.

“We were dealing with a level of adversity and opposition in our living conditions,” Inky says. “But to us, it was normal. We were used to it.”

The kids played in the street, but there were no organized sports in the area. Even if such a league existed, it was unlikely Inky’s family could spare the funds to pay dues. His mother already worked two jobs. She didn’t have time to haul kids back and forth to practices and games.

That’s when a different kind of connection changed Inky’s life.

Coach Trae Hurst pulled up one day, knocked on the door, and invited 7-year-old Inky to join a football team he was putting together. He was a complete stranger. But something about his intentions felt pure, like he had no ulterior motives other than simply giving kids an opportunity to play some ball. They wouldn’t need money, and they wouldn’t need a ride. It was all taken care of. The family signed off on the invite, and Inky was off and running.

“We were trying to give the kids an opportunity to play organized sports instead of having to play in the streets and the playgrounds,” Coach Trae says, “to give them some structure and a little bit of discipline, attention, and teaching.”

In truth, Coach Trae had a deeper mission. He wanted to be a lifeline to kids who otherwise may not have had many opportunities. Coach Trae was one of a handful of men who supported a local football league, and they needed players to fill out the rosters. He went to the projects and extended invitations to families like the Johnsons.

“I told them, ‘If you give [Inky] the ball field, I’ll take care of him,’” Coach Trae says. And from that first meeting, he kept his word.

“I saw very quickly that he cared about me outside of the game,” Inky says. “He looked at all of us like his sons.”

Coach Trae recalls Inky as a kid who had natural gifts. “He was just an eager, energetic, polite, always smiling kid. I mean, he’s magnetic. He never argued and was ready every time you got there, sitting outside ready to go. And he was extremely athletic. He wasn’t real big, but he was like a little bobcat.”

The two built a unique friendship throughout Inky’s middle and high school years and became integrated into one another’s personal lives. Team dinners. Christmases. Celebrating life’s wins and mourning its losses. When the University of Tennessee offered Inky a scholarship to play football, the pair realized how far they had come since that day Coach Trae knocked on the door. For Inky, it was a dream come true. For Coach Trae, it was the joy of seeing a kid he had believed in realize his potential—not just as an athlete, but as a man.

On the night of Inky’s injury, Coach Trae was watching the Tennessee game with a group of student athletes. Inky hit the ground, and Coach Trae saw his friend carried off the field on a stretcher. He jumped in his car, drove the four hours to Knoxville, and waited at the hospital until the doctor came out with an update.

The collision busted the subclavian artery in Inky’s chest and caused internal bleeding. The surgery saved his life, but there was a caveat. His right arm was paralyzed.

Inky saw Coach Trae waiting among the visitors. “When I got injured, I apologized to him. I thought, *I’m supposed to pay him back because he did all this stuff for me.* And he’s like, ‘Man, I didn’t do what I did for you so you can make it to the NFL. I don’t care about that. You don’t owe me a thing. Just go out and be a blessing to other people.’”

Coach Trae fights back tears as he remembers those days following the injury and all the unknowns that came with it. “It’s just amazing how that injury changed his life,” he says. “I mean, he was stronger after that injury than me, his mom, his dad, or anybody. He kept us strong.”

In the years that followed, Inky took Coach Trae’s challenge to heart in a big way. He realized that a better dream than *making millions was impacting millions.*

Inky faced near death that night on the hospital bed, and the fight to live made him realize what a gift life truly was. Now he shares that message—that resounding cry to celebrate life and never give up—on stages around the world. Today, he’s one of the most sought-after inspirational speakers in the world and uses his story of resilience to help others overcome adversity. He paid it back by paying it forward.

These days, it’s often Coach Trae who calls up Inky for advice and encouragement. In some ways, the roles have reversed.

“You know, everybody thinks I did something for him,” Coach Trae says. “But he’s done a whole lot more for me than I ever did for him.”

PERSONAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF INKY JOHNSON