'My Goal is to Spread Positivity'

Navy Reserve Lt. Cmdr. and VFW member Jesse Iwuji is the only veteran currently driving in NASCAR's national series and hopes to one day race at the top level of the association

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One day in January 2014, VFW Department of California member Jesse Iwuji decided he wanted to take his career in a new direction. The Navy officer was fresh off a deployment and about to go on another to the Persian Gulf later that year.

While sitting in his room that morning, Iwuji said he wrote on a whiteboard, "Jesse, become a professional race car driver."

And, that's exactly what he did.

Iwuji, a lieutenant commander in the Navy Reserve, currently is a driver in NASCAR's Truck Series, which is at the association's national level — two steps below the more well-known NASCAR Cup Series. Assigned to Naval Beach Group 1 in Coronado, Calif., Iwuji is the only current national-level NASCAR driver who is a current service member or military veteran. He said he is "thankful" to be where he is in NASCAR.

"The ultimate goal is for me to get to the top level of NASCAR," Iwuji said. "Right now, being on the national stage of NASCAR is awesome, but being a top contender in the Cup Series is my goal."

The NASCAR Truck Series isn't the first time Iwuji has competed on the national stage. He also was a free safety for the Naval Academy Midshipmen football team from 2005 to 2009.

An Opportunity to Serve
Iwuji grew up in Carrollton, Texas, about 20 miles north of Dallas. He said his parents, Sebastian and Enderline, immigrated from Nigeria to the U.S. in the 1980s. Growing up in Texas, Iwuji said football was always a "big" part of his life.

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"Everyone knows that Texas high school football is pretty much king," Iwuji said. "I really made it a goal to play college football at the highest level that I could and also get a good education that could launch me into a good career."

During his junior year at Hebron High School in Carrollton, Texas, Iwuji said the Naval Academy started showing interest in recruiting him for the Midshipmen. When offered a spot on the team, Iwuji said he knew that was where he wanted to be.

"I looked at the Naval Academy as an opportunity to play for a Division I-A college football team that was winning games, and I knew it had a great education system," Iwuji said. "And, I knew when I graduated I would be an officer in the U.S. Navy."

During his senior year of high school, Iwuji attended the Naval Academy Preparatory School in Newport, R.I. He started attending the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., the following year. He said he was the first in his family to not only attend a military academy but to join the military.

"Both of my parents immigrated from Nigeria, so a tradition of serving in the military wasn't a part of my family," Iwuji said. "But, my dad had a huge respect for people who serve in the military.

"My dad was the general of the household," Iwuji said, while laughing. "He loved it when the Naval Academy started recruiting me for football, because it was an opportunity for me to do something he wasn't able to do."

Focusing on Being an Officer

While he enjoyed his football career, Iwuji said he is "glad" it's over.

"After finishing with football my senior year, I just wanted to focus on being an officer in the Navy," Iwuji said. "When I was in high school, I did have those aspirations to make it to the NFL. But, after going through the Academy — having to finish all my academic and military requirements, and play football — I was burned out and done with football."

After becoming an ensign in 2010, Iwuji made his way to the fleet. He served as the first lieutenant with Mine Countermeasures Crew Exultant. Iwuji deployed with the crew to Bahrain and the Persian Gulf in 2012 for 10 months.

"Everything I learned playing football, I applied that to me being an officer in the Navy," Iwuji said. "From teamwork to handling situations under pressure, my football career prepared me for life in the Navy."

After his first deployment, Iwuji was transferred to the San Diego-based dock landing ship USS Comstock, where he served as the force protection officer. He deployed back to the

Persian Gulf with the ship for five months in 2014.

NASCAR Aspirations

Around this time, Iwuji said he started becoming very interested in auto racing. He said he purchased a Chevrolet Corvette that he took to different tracks in southern California for practice and time trial events.

"I always had a really good time doing those events," Iwuji said. "I would always place in the top five or top 10 every time I went. Just a few months into it, I thought that I had some skill doing this. So, I thought, 'I should become a professional driver one day.'"

After earning his license to professionally race, Iwuji eventually started driving for a sponsored team.

"I had to come up with $5,000 for each race to race," Iwuji said. "I took a little from the money I saved from deployment and a lot of it was from crowdfunding campaigns. A lot of people from the Naval Academy and my hometown of Carrollton helped me with that."

His dedication and the attention he received paid off in 2015. That year, Iwuji acquired sponsors, such as The Red List Group and The Sports Agency, and began racing in NASCAR's regional league, Pro Series West.

A 'Leg Up' on the Competition

While NASCAR is known to be a very patriotic sport, there have not been many veterans who've competed at the top levels of the circuit. Iwuji believes that has to do with the fact that auto racing is "very" costly.

"It's not like how someone can just go pick up a football or basketball, start playing and then get better," Iwuji said. "NASCAR is expensive. You can't just go out and buy a race car anywhere. Getting on the track costs a lot of money."

Iwuji explained that even prize money from winning a race doesn't cover the overall cost of professional racing.

"To be competitive, a driver has to bring in some type of funding, whether it's out of their own pocket or a sponsor, or even a really wealthy family," Iwuji said. "That's a lot of what you see in it today. I didn't come from a wealthy family, so I had to get sponsors. I've been doing it the old-school way, and it's been very challenging."

But, Iwuji credits his military service as a "leg up" over other drivers. He believes his experience on warships gave him the tools he needed to be successful, even on the marketing side of the sport.

"Being able to present myself in a professional manner has helped me get sponsors," Iwuji said. "Having to publicly speak in the Navy during training or ship operation briefs also has helped.

"A lot of drivers have never had to stand in front of a group of people and be knowledgeable about something they were not familiar with a short time ago. Being in the Navy and learning things fast has transferred over to NASCAR for me."

During the Camping World 225 on June 28 at Chicagoland Speedway in Joliet, Ill., Iwuji dedicated his race to Pfc. Aaron Toppen. The soldier died on June 9, 2014, while serving with 2nd Bn., 12th Inf. Regt., 4th Inf. BCT, 4th Inf. Div., in Gaza Village, Afghanistan. Iwuji placed 22nd in his Chevrolet after starting the race in the 28th position.

This wasn't the first event Iwuji dedicated to Toppen. The previous year, Iwuji honored the fallen soldier at the Automobile Racing Club of America Series race at the Chicagoland Speedway. Iwuji had met Toppen's mother, Pam, and even presented her with the hood of his stock car, which had a decal emblazoned with Toppen's name.

"It's pretty great having this big platform in NASCAR and being able to utilize it to help with military initiatives," Iwuji said.

"I love doing it. I want to use my platform to help honor service members and help people change their lives. That's what I've been doing these past few years, and it's worked in a lot of
different ways."

Iwuji said that being a national NASCAR driver has helped him promote the idea that military members can do "a lot more" than most people think.

"I want to show people around the world that we are more than just military members," Iwuji said. "We have the skills to branch out and accomplish a lot. My goal is to spread positivity. I hope to continue to do it. One of those ways is being the official ambassador for Chicagoland Speedway for the race."

At the race, Iwuji drove a pickup truck with about 700-horsepower. He said that while driving a NASCAR truck is a little different than a stock car, it was a "pretty easy" transition.

"At the end of the day, it's still a race chassis," Iwuji said. "It's not like it's a full-sized truck. It's a little longer, but it's not that much bigger."

Iwuji said he wouldn't be where he is today without people helping him along the way.

"My family is supportive of me and my NASCAR career, even though they probably wish I

was doing something a little safer," Iwuji said, while laughing. "They just want me to stay safe and be smart is all."

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