

ZIGGY



Photo by Deanne Fitzmaurice

Up until a few months ago, the only Ziggy I knew was a persona created by David Bowie. Turns out the real Ziggy doesn't play guitar. He plays football.

In the latest issue of Sports Illustrated that hits the street today, I have a story about Ezekiel "Ziggy" Ansah, a defensive player for BYU.



[\(Click here or the image to read the full Sports Illustrated article\)](#)

Ziggy is from Africa. As recently as three years ago, he had never played football. He'd never even seen a football. Then the actuarial science major with a minor in mathematics walked on the football team. He literally didn't know how to put on his uniform. Someone had to help him strap on his helmet.

But seven weeks ago he started in his first college football game. Now he's projected to be a first-round pick in the upcoming NFL draft.

"When the [NFL] combines come," one NFL scout told me, "Ziggy will be one of those players where people will be saying, Who in the hell is this guy?"

But before I go any further, let me tell you how I stumbled across Ziggy.

As you know by now if you read this space, I've spent the past year working on a book about college football with my pal Armen Keteyian at CBS News. We've been in college towns from Tuscaloosa to Pullman to Ann Arbor. On an early stop in Provo to take in the season opener between BYU and Washington State, I was on the sideline, looking over BYU's roster before the kickoff. My index finger stopped when my eyes read: #47, Ezekiel Ansah, from Accra, Ghana.

I wondered if it was a misprint. Ghana is a small country on the west coast of Africa, between Liberia and Nigeria. Accra is its capital. I've spent time there as a journalist. So I knew firsthand that Ghanaians don't play American football. They don't even know what it is. They play soccer.

Naturally, I figured Ezekiel must be a kicker. But he was listed at 6' 6" and 250 pounds. Not exactly the build of a soccer player. None of this made sense.

As the Cougars took the field to warm up that night, I looked for number 47. He was easy to spot. Turns out he's 270 pounds, not 250. It appeared he didn't have an ounce of fat. I saw no one built like him during my travels to Ghana. Shoot, I saw no one built like him on the field that night.



Ziggy against Notre Dame. Photo by BYU.

I finally asked someone on the BYU sideline: "Who is that guy?"

"That's Ziggy," I was told. "He's got quite a story."

That didn't help me much. But it stoked my curiosity. I had never met a Ziggy.

When the game started I observed that Ziggy was not a starter. But he saw some action and made three tackles. He also terrorized the quarterback.

Two weeks later I was in Salt Lake City to see BYU play Utah. Again, Ziggy didn't start. But he made some tackles. Then destiny shined on Ziggy. A week later, one of BYU's best lineman got hurt and the coach called Ziggy's number. The opposing team had no scouting report on him. He dominated that night. And he started every game since and he has shot up the NFL draft boards.



Ziggy pressures Georgia Tech's quarterback. Photo by BYU.

“The combination of his height, weight and speed is probably unmatched,” one NFL scout told me. “Plus, he's so strong. He's got that Jason Pierre-Paul type of physical upside.”



Ziggy celebrates against Utah State. Photo by BYU.

BYU can thank a Mormon missionary for recruiting Ziggy. Five years ago Ken Frei was walking the dusty roads of Ghana's capitol city, looking for people interested in learning about Mormonism. On his off days, the 20-year-old BYU sophomore from Idaho Falls played pickup basketball with fellow missionaries at a private K-12 school

called Golden Sunbeam. The headmaster, a Mormon, let the missionaries play there.

Ziggy was an 18-year-old teaching assistant at the school. One day Frei invited him to play two-on-two. Although the 5' 9" former high school point guard was giving up nine inches and nearly 100 pounds, he figured he'd stick Ziggy. After all, Ghanaians aren't known for their basketball prowess.

When Ziggy got the ball, he put up a wild shot that bounced hard off the glass. Frei wasn't surprised ...until Ziggy elevated over him, snatched the rebound, and threw down a two-handed dunk. His elbows nearly hit the rim. Frei just admired. Ziggy smiled. "LeBron is my favorite," he said. "One day I hope to play in the league."

Basketball turned Frei and Ziggy into fast friends. They also talked a lot about religion. Despite strong opposition from his friends and family, Ziggy asked Frei to baptize him a member of the Mormon Church. That was a tall order. Mormons practice baptism by immersion.

"He is much bigger than me," Frei wrote in his journal hours after the baptism. "It was hard to get him under the water. He almost pulled me under. I managed to hang on."



Missionary Ken Frei (center) with Ezekiel "Ziggy" Ansah (left) in Ghana.

At the conclusion of his mission, Frei returned to BYU. But not before giving his new friend some advice – come to BYU and try walking on the basketball team. A few months later Frei got an unexpected phone call. Ziggy had just landed in Salt Lake City. He'd been accepted to BYU and needed a roommate.

Ziggy tried walking on the basketball team during his freshman and sophomore years. Despite his 39-inch vertical leap, he got cut twice. I can't help doubting that Ziggy wouldn't be a better asset than, say, the 12th man on BYU's bench.

But never mind about that. If he'd made the basketball team, he would have never walked on the football team. And he wouldn't be on the verge of NFL stardom.

Writing Ziggy's story for Sports Illustrated has been pure fun. He wears glasses – just rims, no lenses – in order to appear more intellectual.



Ziggy in class at BYU. Photo by Deanne Fitzmaurice.

Yesterday Ziggy and I taped an interview on NPR that will air across the country this weekend on "Only a Game." It was Ziggy's first time talking to a national audience.

But if you watch pro football I think you'll be hearing a lot more from him. His is an American story of opportunity, determination and hard work. It makes you want to cheer.



Ziggy in Provo. Photo by Deanne Fitzmaurice.