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The physical and mental development of freshman quarterback Jayden Daniels



By Doug Haller (/author/doug-haller/) Feb 21, 2019

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On Feb. 5, the first day of Arizona State spring football practice, Jayden Daniels was the topic of sideline conversation. It wasn't so much his skills, impressive as they were, but more so his size. Daniels looked so thin it was hard to see him playing anytime soon.

The roster listed the freshman quarterback at 6 feet 3, 180 pounds. *"Maybe with his helmet on,"* one observer remarked. *"Full pads,"* said another.

Through three weeks of practice, it hasn't made much difference. Offensive coordinator Rob Likens said this week that he's starting to see separation in ASU's four-man quarterback competition. Although Likens wouldn't name names, Daniels and junior Dillon Sterling-Cole appear to be the leaders. If that's true, Daniels over the offseason will need to make up ground on the more experienced Sterling-Cole, both in the film and weight rooms.

No one seems concerned about the latter. Joe Connolly, the program's head coach of sports performance, said Wednesday that Daniels already has put on seven pounds since he arrived on campus last month. A lot of that just comes from eating better, Connolly said. Daniels eats each day at training tables and then takes a to-go box home for an extra meal later that day.

But is he really 180 pounds? Even Likens sort of questioned it — “you know how rosters are,” he said this week — but Connolly said Daniels' listed weight is legit. As a senior last season at San Bernardino Cajon High, the quarterback played at 172. It's possible he could add another 10 to 15 pounds over the summer. No Pac-12 full-time starting quarterback last season weighed less than 200.

“Really, you can only gain one pound of muscle per week,” Connolly said. “If you're gaining two and three pounds a week, a lot of that's not going to be great. But with him, he's so lean, he can stand that. Initially, that seven was quick and he's done a really good job, so we'll see how he adapts.”

Daniels wasn't supposed to look this way; he wasn't supposed to be this tall. As a high school freshman, he was 5-11, 135 pounds. In fact, when Daniels was first called up to play varsity football, a doctor initially refused to clear him out of concerns about his size. Daniels' dad, Jay, stands just 6-feet. Daniels' maternal grandfather was 6-1. A couple of cousins top out at 6-2. This is why Jay Daniels initially wanted his son to play cornerback, like he did at Iowa State. He figured Daniels would grow to about 6-1, the perfect size for the position.

But Daniels insisted on playing quarterback, and he showed an early knack for the position. Then in high school — between his sophomore and junior years — Daniels hit a growth spurt, passing everyone in the family.

In some ways, the quarterback's body still is catching up.

“He consistently puts on 10 pounds every single year,” said Jay Daniels, in town to watch ASU practice. “He just has that frame where, until he puts on a massive amount of weight, people are going (to question his size). Unfortunately, he has like a basketball frame.”



To make a point, Jay Daniels, a San Francisco 49ers fan, recently showed his son a high school photo of former quarterback Colin Kaepernick.

“They looked the same,” Jay Daniels said. “If you go back and look at him, they look the same as far as being really lanky, no weight. I just said, ‘Dude, you haven’t gotten your man body yet.’”

While Daniels has a ways to go physically, he’s advanced in other areas, particularly with his mental makeup. This isn’t an accident. Early in Wednesday’s practice, Daniels took a snap and fired a pass across the middle to redshirt-freshman receiver Tyrell Baldonado-Kaeiupu. The quarterback’s timing was perfect, right on the money. But his pass was long, falling incomplete.

On the sideline, Jay Daniels clapped his hands once over the missed big-play opportunity. His son showed no emotion. This is his game face. Since Daniels first decided he wanted to be a quarterback, Jay Daniels — his offensive coordinator in high school — has coached him on the mental challenges of playing the game’s most demanding position.

When Jayden was 10, his dad gave him a list of qualities that all good quarterbacks share. Intelligence. A cool temperament. Most important, mental toughness. Never too high, never too low. Over the years, this has given Daniels an inner confidence that already is showing at ASU.

While most of the program's 2019 recruiting class finishes up high school, Daniels seems comfortable in his environment, immune to the pressure.

"I've always tried to gear him for the moment," Jay Daniels said. "You can tell people about it, but it's up to them to seize it, and for whatever reason, man, he's just kind of had that in him. He played in a lot of big games as a kid, and he always had the same demeanor. You don't ever really see him smile, but you never see him panic."

Daniels — who sees himself more as a pocket passer than a dual-threat quarterback — tries to model his game after Tennessee Titans quarterback Marcus Mariota. A Heisman Trophy winner at Oregon, Mariota stood 6-4, 185 pounds coming out of high school. Los Angeles Rams quarterback Jared Goff was 6-4, 190 at the same time. Former ASU quarterback Manny Wilkins was 6-2, 180 his first year in Tempe. Last season he played near 210.

Daniels is leaner than Wilkins, but there's no reason to think he won't follow a similar progression, Connolly said. Daniels wants to be around 190 in the fall. The strength coach thinks that's realistic.

"If you try to rush strength and you try to rush change, you're going to get in trouble," Connolly said, speaking of all three freshman quarterbacks, Ethan Long and Joey Yellen included. "It's a slow-cooking process, and that will be the same for them until they're seniors."

(Photo of Daniels in the Under Armor All-America Game on Jan. 3: Kim Klement / USA Today Sports)

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Doug Haller (/author/doug-haller/) covers Arizona State football and basketball for The Athletic Arizona. He previously worked 13 years at The Arizona Republic, where he covered three Final Fours and four football national championship games. He twice has been named Arizona Sports Writer of the Year. Follow Doug on Twitter [@DougHaller](https://twitter.com/DougHaller) (<https://twitter.com/DougHaller>).

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Great article as always Doug. I can't get enough reading about this new battle of ASU QB's. Very intriguing as to how it will turn out not only this year but in years to come. Wouldn't be surprised if one of two left in the coming years.

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