



# *The Jermaine Lewis Story for the 62nd Induction Banquet Program*

*The 62nd induction banquet was held on November 9, 2023. Story written by Chris Zang.*

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Jermaine Lewis' decision to go to the movies on April 21, 1996, set up an Academy Award performance by him nearly five years later. And Baltimore Ravens' fans couldn't be more appreciative.

Lewis, a four-year starter at the University of Maryland who still holds Terps records for receptions, receiving yards, and touchdown catches, expected to be selected on the first day of the 1996 NFL draft. When he didn't, Lewis sulked on day two and decided to go to the movies "to clear my mind." So when the Pittsburgh Steelers called to tell him he was their third-round choice, Lewis didn't answer. The Steelers chose someone else. Two rounds later, Lewis became a Raven.

"Yeah, my Mom was upset about the call, but it worked out great for me," says Lewis, a Lanham, Md., native who lives in Reisterstown. "I was ecstatic to stay playing in my hometown. That's why I went to Maryland. The Ravens were new in town, too. So, you know, it was like a new buzz in the city."

In fact, Lewis was the first Raven to handle the ball, returning the opening kickoff against the Oakland Raiders at Memorial Stadium in 1996. After 42 receptions in 1997 and 41 in 1998 as a wide receiver, Lewis saw his role diminish into a full-time punt and kickoff man ... and he wasn't happy. "You fight to get off special teams because it's so violent," he recalls. "You can't avoid the collisions. The tacklers had a 40-yard running head start back then, and you're running full speed right at them. So, it's no avoiding it."

But, as always, Lewis could rely on his saving grace: his speed. "I was always fast. Even in little league football at age 6. Then in high school and college, I could turn a little catch into a big catch, before you know it, I'm 20, 30 yards downfield."

In fact, Lewis was so fast, his track coach at Eleanor Roosevelt High School, Larry Colbert, thought Jermaine might have been better in track than football. After he set the national indoor record in the 200 meters (20.8 seconds) and clocked the second-fastest time in the 100 (10.3), *Track & Field News* named Lewis its 1991 Athlete of the Year.

But Lewis preferred football, despite being just 5 feet 7 and 180 pounds. "Before the draft, they said 'he's diminutive.' I didn't even know what that word meant, but I had a big heart. My father used to always say as long as you've got a big heart, you're OK."

Lewis was more than OK; the nine-year veteran and two-time Pro Bowler remains eighth all-time for punt return yards in the NFL with 3,282 and six touchdowns.

The new Ravens had never been above .500 in their first four seasons, but they went into 2000 with growing confidence, Lewis, 49, remembers. “We got Shannon Sharpe after Rod Woodson came and then some other guys.” Drafting Jamal Lewis helped, too. “We were building, the defense was great, but I didn’t see us winning the Super Bowl,” Lewis says.

Especially when they went five games without scoring a touchdown. “Yeah, Ray and the guys on defense were getting a little chippy,” Lewis says. “But then we went on a seven- or eight-game winning streak. That’s when I was like, oh, man, we can go all the way.”

The excitement of the season turned to devastation in December when Lewis and his wife Imara’s son Geronimo was born stillborn. The infant’s death still “tears up” Lewis 23 years later.

He took off 11 days to grieve, then returned for the Ravens’ regular-season finale against the New York Jets. Without working out, Lewis returned two punts (89 and 54 yards) for touchdowns for the second time in his career. “That’s where God was working in my life,” says Lewis. “I was just numb, saying to myself just hit the hole.”

He pointed again to the heavens weeks later in the Super Bowl, following Ron Dixon’s kick return for a New York Giants touchdown with one of his own in a 34-7 Ravens’ victory. What was No. 84 thinking before his 84-yard return? “I was pissed,” Lewis says with a laugh. Not only because it ruined the shutout. To Lewis it was personal. “I wanted to be the best returner on the field, in the world. That’s what I used to say. Somebody’s got to be No. 1. That was my goal and he scored before me. I just thought ‘I’m going to do something.’ And I did.”

After retirement in 2004, Lewis faced some challenges. The effects of 18 concussions led to some poor decisions, including alcohol. “When you win the Super Bowl, there’s only one way to go, down, honestly,” says Lewis, who has been sober for seven years.

Now, after working with NFL Cares, coaching two of his three sons at Saint Frances Academy, and doing Under Armour camps, Lewis has again found his calling — giving motivational speeches. “I made so many mistakes,” he says. “Now every time I tell my story, someone in the crowd, usually a parent, comes and says ‘you really inspire me.’ I love that, giving back.”

He also does that through the Geronimo Lewis Foundation, which provides assistance to programs that support at-risk youth in D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, and the Jermaine Lewis Foundation, which awards college scholarships.

And he’s looking forward to tonight’s speech when he goes into the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame. “I just want to thank people who helped me on my journey, and I don’t want to leave anyone out,” Lewis says with a laugh. “My father was there the whole time. My mother helped. My wife helped through the latter part, and I’m just thankful. I just don’t want to forget anybody.”