



Game Changer

FORMER CAROLINA PANTHERS RUNNING BACK JONATHAN STEWART
AND HIS FAMILY SAY GOODBYE TO THE GRIDIRON AND HELLO
TO A NEW HOME AND CAREERS AS ENTREPRENEURS.

BY CAROLINE PORTILLO PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL BLEVINS





Natalie Stewart wanted her home, recently built by Kingswood Custom Homes, to be a place where her family could truly relax and unwind — no stuffy furniture allowed.



NATALIE STEWART GETS GALA-READY IN 15 MINUTES.

About 90 minutes into an interview at the home she and her husband, former Carolina Panthers running back Jonathan Stewart, built off Carmel Road, a barefoot, makeup-less Natalie tugs her wet hair loose from the chignon at the nape of her neck and pads off to get ready for a fundraiser that evening.

Jonathan, or “Stew,” as Natalie calls him, picks up where she left off, describing what it was like when, in 2018, he was released from the Panthers — the only professional team he’d ever played for — after 10 seasons.

“Once I got released, I was like, ‘OK, well, this is it. What is next? Do I retire?’” Jonathan recalls, propping his sock-clad feet on a tufted leather ottoman. “But I knew God was telling me, ‘No, you’re not done yet.’”

And he wasn’t. As soon as Jonathan — the Panthers’ all-time leading rusher — was a free agent, the Detroit Lions, Seattle Seahawks and New York Giants called. He signed a deal with the Giants, a decision that meant moving the family to New Jersey.

One year later, the Stewart household is in a very different place. In April, Jonathan officially closed the door on the career that made him a household name in the Carolinas, and thanks to a one-day contract from the Panthers, he retired in the black, blue and white No. 28 uniform he loved so much.

After returning to Charlotte, he and Natalie and their 2-year-old daughter, Kaia, moved into the white brick showstopper they built with the help of Kingswood Custom Homes — a midcentury modern marvel with a California-chic vibe, a nod to Natalie’s upbringing in Laguna Beach.

And in January, Natalie and Jonathan announced they were buying local media platform Charlotte Lately. The company started as an Instagram handle in 2015 and expanded to networking and community events, as well as a print publication. The focus: using beautiful imagery to tell a story and support local businesses and nonprofits. Jonathan and Natalie’s goal for it: continue the platform’s legacy while also highlighting and connecting with communities that don’t get much publicity from life-



style publications. Sure, they'll cover the new hot restaurant in SouthPark. But what about the taco truck parked in a less affluent area that's nevertheless serving up some of the city's best Mexican food? They want to cover that, too.

A short 15 minutes later, Natalie emerges from their first-floor master bedroom with her shoulder-length hair dry, a light dusting of makeup applied flawlessly, and a yellow satin maxi dress skimming the floor. She pauses to buckle on a pair of nude, metal-studded strappy flats.

Glamorous yet low-maintenance. Disciplined yet laid-back. Accomplished yet humble. Those could be the calling cards of Natalie and Jonathan, both 32 and as diametrically different as you can imagine from the stereotypical NFL player and his wife.

'BACK IN MY LIFE FOR A REASON'

Jonathan grew up in Lacey, Wash., and spent three years at the University of Oregon before the Panthers drafted him in the first round, the 13th overall pick. Meanwhile, Natalie followed one of her best friends, a Columbia, S.C., native, from California to Wofford College in Spartanburg, S.C. She'd seen the film adaption of Nicholas Sparks' sappy-sweet novel *The Notebook*, and had all sorts of images of what life in small-town South Carolina would look like. "I just fell in love with the South," Natalie says.

She also fell in love with her college boyfriend and married him. The marriage didn't last long.





“It’s easy to give into the pressure that you’re supposed to get married,” Natalie says. “We just kind of dated too long and realized we weren’t meant to be together. It was a very amicable ‘let’s part ways.’”

Afterward, she was living in Los Angeles and traveling to New York for work. She focused on her career in finance, swore off dating. “I was like, ‘Maybe I’ll just be a 40-year-old who has had a really successful career, and I’ll just adopt kids and have cats and dogs,’” Natalie says.

She came to Charlotte to visit friends and go to a Panthers game. It was 2015, and the team was hot, on its way to a 15-1 season and Super Bowl 50. After the game, Natalie and her friends went to Slate Billiards and All American Pub in South End. That’s where she ran into Jonathan.

They’d gotten to know each other years earlier, thanks to mutual friends Panthers center Ryan Kalil (also from California, like Natalie) and his wife. When Jonathan asked Natalie how married life was treating her, she told him she was getting divorced.

“He said, ‘I knew you probably shouldn’t have married him,’” Natalie recalls. “And I was like, ‘Well, thanks, Jonathan.’ That’s not what you say to people when they’re going through a tough time.”

But they started talking. Jonathan wouldn’t sit down — he worried he’d cramp up — so Natalie held a plate of chicken wings for him as he aggressively stripped them one by one. She should have known then that they’d be good together — she normally hates hearing people chew.

At the end of the night, Jonathan stepped out on faith: “It was really good to see you,” he said. “I know God put you back in my life for a reason.”

WHEN THE RITZ WON’T DO

After a few months of occasional texting and chatting over Instagram, Jonathan worked up the courage to ask Natalie: Would she visit Charlotte again so he could take her to dinner?

Their first date was at Block & Grinder in Cotswold. Then they hung out at Amelie’s, and finished the night watching a documentary. Something about a serial killer, Natalie recalls, laughing. For their second date, Jonathan invited her to church. They went to Elevation, the Charlotte megachurch led by Pastor Steven Furtick where Jonathan has been a member for nearly his entire time in Charlotte. Afterward, they went out to eat with Furtick and his wife, Holly.

As a Panther, Jonathan was outspoken about his faith. And not just with a simple finger in the air after a touchdown or a “glory to God” trope during the post-game presser. He was cognizant of how he appeared in public, how he acted in private, and how he faced down the series of hamstring, foot and knee injuries that riddled his record-setting professional career.

“I’ve always had the mindset that next year isn’t promised — next game isn’t promised,” he says. “I’ve never found myself being like, ‘I’m Jonathan Stewart, the NFL Panthers running back.’ I’m actually a Christian whose name is Jonathan Stewart who just so happens to play football.”

That’s one of the reasons Jonathan hasn’t created a namesake foundation that’s too closely associated with his persona and legacy.



Instead, he's taken on more of a behind-the-scenes role with Inspire the Fire, a local faith-based nonprofit established more than 15 years ago to provide creative outlets for kids interested in the arts, from dance and voice to spoken word and the visual arts. It's the perfect fit for Jonathan, a longtime pianist and music aficionado who's as comfortable in a production studio as he is on the gridiron.

It was Inspire the Fire that benefited when engaged Jonathan and Natalie called an audible and decided to forgo the blowout wedding they'd planned at the Ritz-Carlton, Charlotte.

"We had this moment of, 'We're not a 200-person, Ritz-Carlton wedding couple,'" Natalie says. "Us saying vows to each other was more important than celebrating with everyone else."

So they scrapped their plans — and tradition — and instead, in November 2017, they flew to Seattle during a Panthers' bye week and were married in a quiet, intimate ceremony. The only attendees were newborn Kaia, Natalie's pastor from Laguna and Jonathan's pastor from Seattle.

Because they'd already put down deposits for the big wedding, the hotel allowed them to apply that money toward a new event: Inspire the Fire's inaugural Fall Ball, held in November.

JUST BE

These days, a date night out for the Stewarts is dinner at Barrington's, Baku or another established Charlotte restaurant. But more often than not, they opt to stay in. "We do *Jeopardy!*, *Wheel of Fortune*, Sabor takeout, (play) cards and (drink) wine," Natalie says. "That's kind of our thing."

After spending a couple of hours in the Stewarts' new home, it's easy to see why a night in would be attractive: the high ceilings, the natural hues, the wall of windows in the

front looking out over a manicured lawn with old oak trees, and the wall of windows in the back, showcasing a pool with a lagoon-like feel and a black-galaxy finish. That's where you'll find Kaia, making a running leap into the water, her floatie armbands secure around her biceps. Natalie's parents cheer her along from the edge of the pool. The home includes a guest suite, where the longtime couple currently live.

"That house has a soul," says Louise Leeke, who started Kingswood Custom Homes with her husband, Peter Leeke, when they moved to the U.S. from Great Britain in 1996. "It's a brand-new home, and it has a lived-in feel."

Take, for example, the suspended loft over the kitchen. It features Jonathan's baby grand piano, and when he sits down to play and compose, the sounds can be heard in every corner of the seven-bedroom home.

Even the basement has a production studio, where Jonathan mixes beats and makes music. "I want to eventually get into soundtracks and (work with) some decent artists who are actually talented," he says.

No wall separates the kitchen, where Natalie loves to cook, from the living area, where deep couches beckon for visitors to sink in, and the tan-tufted ottoman displays some of Natalie's favorite coffee-table books. (Gray Malin's *Beaches* is another nod to her Laguna roots.)

But one of the more personal details is the bowl of matchbooks by the front door, each emblazoned with one of the Stewart family's guiding phrases: "Just be."

It's a reminder for them to stand firm in their faith. It's a reminder that football and titles and new entrepreneurial ventures don't have to make for a frenetic life. And sometimes, the "Just be" matchbooks are a reminder that prepping for a gala doesn't have to require professional makeup and a blowout. **SP**