



# New York Jets: No obstacle Faneca can't move

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John O'Boyle/The Star-Ledger

*Alan Faneca, at the Jets training facility in Florham Park, had his first seizure at 15. He takes six pills a day to control the condition.*

At the weekend bonfire parties, Bobby Yates palled around with the football team, blasting his car stereo and flirting with girls in the open fields of Rosenberg, Texas.

A few feet away, the big kid who played with Yates on the offensive line at the local high school bounced from conversation to conversation, blending in with the preppies, cowboys and jocks.

In this football-crazed town about 30 miles southwest of Houston, everyone knew Alan Faneca.

He was funny, but not a prankster. He was the best football player at Lamar Consolidated High, but never bragged.

And he had epilepsy.

Long before the Jets signed Faneca to a 5-year, \$40 million contract last March -- the biggest free-agent deal in franchise history -- the kid with a neurological disorder that produces seizures refused to hide behind the stigma of it.

"My friends needed to know if something happened to me," Faneca said. "So many kids with epilepsy don't tell anyone because of that fear of what people will think."

Faneca experienced his first seizure as a 15-year-old on Christmas Eve. He awoke in the middle of the night at his great-grandparents' home in the countryside, overcome by a strange desire to go somewhere. He wandered through the house, crying and screaming.

Faneca dismissed it as a nightmare. But it happened again.

And again.

He told his friends everything.

"None of us knew what we were doing growing up, but we tried to be as best prepared as we could," Yates said. "We had questions, and he was willing to answer any of them, so we could figure things out together. We genuinely cared, and we wanted to look out for him."

Faneca underwent a battery of tests before doctors diagnosed him with a form of epilepsy, a brain disorder that afflicts more than three million Americans, according to the Epilepsy Foundation of America. About 200,000 new cases of seizure disorders and epilepsy are diagnosed each year.

Faneca's seizures, caused by brief electrical disturbances in the brain, were characterized as "petit mal," much milder than the convulsions often depicted on television.

"We worried about his ability to continue and have a normal life," said Faneca's mother, Liane. "Everything about a diagnosis of epilepsy is scary."

The exact cause of Faneca's disorder was unknown, but doctors believed that it may have been brought on by either one of two concussions he suffered playing basketball as a child or the head trauma from falling off a homemade bouncing toy on springs.

Faneca, who takes six pills every day to control the condition, hasn't had a seizure since he was a teenager. But when his neurologist first gave him the green light to continue to play football all those years ago, he needed to double-check.

"He said it so fast that I had to ask him, 'You know what football is, right?'" Faneca remembered with a laugh. "But he was sure that it was something I could do. So I did it."

## **A LEGEND ON THE BLOCK**

Don Carter was hauling hay and working cows on his Rosenberg farm last week when he decided to check his answering machine.

"I don't usually even look at these messages," Carter said in a Southern drawl. "I usually let my wife do it. But I'll tell you what, I wouldn't want to miss talking about Alan Faneca for anything."

The retired high school football coach has a catalogue of memories to share about the biggest, baddest, toughest lineman that ever put on a Lamar uniform.

"Alan wasn't just blocking those guys, he was dominating them," said Carter, who coached the offensive line. "He was one of those guys who could make you look like a real good coach, I guarantee you. Oh, and he wasn't a prima donna."

Faneca was a giant for the smallest Class 5A school in the state, a 6-foot, 5-inch, 300-pound bulldozer, who became the only offensive lineman to win the coveted Houston Touchdown Club's Player of the Year award.

He shined under the Friday night lights, carving out his legend one pancake block at a time.

"It was like being part of a brick wall," Yates said. "Even if the kids were expecting it, they just got waylaid! It was crazy. He would knock people down with just a swing of an arm."

Thanks to support from his friends, Faneca battled through several epileptic episodes like the time he awoke early one morning with an urge to walk to school. When his buddies spotted him wandering the halls in an old pair of shorts and T-shirt he had worn to bed the night before, Faneca snapped out of it and went back home to change.

It never affected him on the field.

"He had it. He knew it," Carter said. "But it didn't slow him down a minute. The epilepsy was not a factor."

There was more to Faneca than brute strength, size and speed. He was a natural with near-perfect blocking technique. He had "a sixth sense for knowing how long to stay on a block and when to release and get on another one," Carter admitted.

Football factories like Penn State, Tennessee and Alabama took notice of Faneca's skills before he chose LSU.

"They were awed that he was 17 years old," Carter said. "They were really amazed."

Four years later, so was a strong-jawed NFL coach of a tradition-rich franchise.

## **SOLID AS A STEELER**

Bill Cowher trusted his eyes.

Every time the Steelers head coach watched Faneca on film or in person, he was blown away. Faneca, an All-American right guard as a senior at LSU, was almost too good to be true.

The Steelers, like the rest of the league, did their homework on Faneca's epilepsy.

"He really had come to grips with it and had it under control," said Cowher, who currently works as a CBS studio analyst. "When we talked to our medical people and knew it wasn't an issue throughout his college career, we weren't really concerned."

So, Pittsburgh selected him with the 26th overall pick of the 1998 NFL Draft, plugging him into left guard, where he flourished for a decade.

Faneca, a seven-time Pro Bowler, helped the Steelers win Super Bowl XL in 2005, providing a key block that sprung Willie Parker for a 75-yard touchdown, the longest run in Super Bowl history.

He quickly became one of Cowher's favorites.

"Alan was a gauge for me," Cowher said. "You have to have a few of those players who you can trust. He was a voice of reason. He was like E.F. Hutton -- when he spoke, everybody listened. He wasn't a guy that would talk to the team very often, but when he did, he was very impactful."

Faneca's relationship with team management slowly eroded when Cowher left after the 2006 season. When Faneca's desire to renegotiate his contract before the start of last season fell on deaf ears, the relationship fractured for good.

He also learned that his infant daughter Annabelle had Sturge-Weber Syndrome, a neurological disorder that caused seizures.

His professional and personal life at a crossroads, Faneca knew his days in Pittsburgh were coming to an end.

"Am I surprised? No," Cowher said of the Steelers' decision not to re-sign Faneca. "You've seen it before. I don't think it was a reflection of Alan as much as it was a philosophy that Pittsburgh has (with) players going for that third contract. I know that Pittsburgh really appreciated what Alan did for their team and their city. But it's a philosophy that Pittsburgh has had, and it's worked pretty well for them."

After the season, Rick Smith, Faneca's agent, explored his client's options. Three suitors emerged -- the Jets, 49ers and Rams.

When the clock struck midnight on March 1 - the official start of the free-agent signing period -- Smith's cell phone rang.

### **A BIG PIECE IN JET PUZZLE**

Mike Tannenbaum believed in his heart of hearts that he had a good story to tell.

The Jets may have been coming off a 4-12 season, but the general manager was convinced a change was coming.

He targeted the 31-year-old Faneca, an ideal fit to replace left guard Adrien Clarke, who struggled after the Jets traded Pete Kendall to the Redskins before the 2007 season after a bitter contract dispute.

"We knew there were a few spots where we had to be pretty aggressive with," Tannenbaum said. "Signing Alan was just part of a bigger picture plan. Once free agency started, we had to act quickly."

Tannenbaum wasted little time signing Faneca to the richest contract in NFL history for an offensive lineman (until the Dolphins signed No. 1 overall draft pick Jake Long a month later.) The Jets doled out \$21 million in guarantees for the durable Faneca before locking up free-agent right tackle Damien Woody and linebacker Calvin Pace to highlight their free-agent shopping spree.

Faneca's signing provided an added bonus months later when Tannenbaum was wooing Brett Favre. The 6-5, 307-pound lineman played an important role in landing the future Hall of Fame quarterback.

"When you get a guy of Alan's accomplishments on your team, it's a good referendum on what a really well-known, highly accomplished player thinks of us," Tannenbaum said. "Adding Alan just added to our credibility."

Faneca, who will make his 101st consecutive start today, has already made an impact with his new team. Playing between left tackle D'Brickshaw Ferguson and center Nick Mangold, the veteran has been happy to impart some wisdom.

"He's seen a ton of stuff in his 10 years," Mangold said. "He's able to share that knowledge with us and help out, which is fantastic."

The offensive linemen flood him with questions at practice, in the film room and even during their weekly Thursday night dinners.

"Just look at everything he does," Ferguson said. "It's very inspiring."

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