

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 295: JESSE IWUJI

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of Learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. This week, I'm excited to share a portion of one of my recent LinkedIn live sessions. If you follow me on LinkedIn, you know that I love having casual and fun conversations there with inspiring people. One of those people is Jesse Iwuji, a first-generation Nigerian American, US Navy Reserve officer, college football star, and, if that's not enough, an accomplished and beloved professional NASCAR driver. How did he become a racing star? He just wanted it, and one day he decided to go for it. Obviously, there's more to the story. So, if you're looking for your daily dose of inspiration, Jesse's got it for you right now.

Whitney Johnson: Jesse, hello.

Jesse Iwuji: Hey, how's it going? Thanks for having me on the show.

Whitney Johnson: My very first question for you, Jesse, is for those who are international. Can you tell us what NASCAR is, first of all, and how you got interested in becoming a NASCAR racer?

Jesse Iwuji: Yeah, So NASCAR is the biggest motorsport in the United States of America. I believe around the world. Formula One is the biggest motorsport, but in the US, NASCAR is the biggest motorsport. And in NASCAR, we have multiple series and multiple levels. Just like in anything, let's say if you're looking to become a top-ranked type soccer player, or football player, depending on what you call it from wherever you're at. You know, you work your way up different levels, multiple levels of soccer, before you finally get to the Premier League, before you finally get to the Olympics, before you finally get to competing internationally. So, in NASCAR, we have multiple levels and in the top three levels of NASCAR. That's the NASCAR Truck Series, the NASCAR Xfinity Series, and the NASCAR Cup Series. The Cup Series is the one where most people have probably seen on TV. If you've ever seen anything about NASCAR, you've seen it on there. So, we race, we race cars, we race trucks, we race them on oval tracks, and we race them really fast at anywhere between 180 to 200 miles per hour. And for those

who are international, who use kilometers per hour, that's about the equivalent of, I would say, racing at 300 to 350 kilometers per hour.

Whitney Johnson: I love it! Fast, fast, fast. How did you get interested in this sport? Because you didn't grow up doing it and grow up around it. So, tell us how you got interested, how you wanted to jump to this S Curve.

Jesse Iwuji: Yes. So, I got interested in NASCAR way late in life. I don't have the typical racecar driver journey. Most racing drivers start racing go-karts at age five or six years old, and then from there, they work their way up to different levels of racing to the point where they eventually start racing in NASCAR by their early twenties or so. For me, I did not get interested in NASCAR that early. Both of my parents are originally from Nigeria. They immigrated from Nigeria to the US back in the eighties. My dad came over here first because he wanted to provide a better opportunity for his family. When he first got here to the US. So, he got his education, went back to Nigeria, married my mom, brought her back to the US, and then decided to settle in Dallas, Texas. And being from Dallas, Texas, you know, for those who are here in the US, they understand that Texas football, American football is the biggest sport in Texas. So, naturally, I gravitated towards playing football and I worked really hard to get better and better at football so that I could eventually get recruited by some universities so that I could go to universities for free and play football and get my education. The university that recruited me at first was the Naval Academy, and I looked at it as a really good opportunity to go to a great school, get a great education, and be able to play sports for teams that were winning a lot of games.

Jesse Iwuji: So, I took that opportunity and went to the US Naval Academy. I got there in 2006, and I played football for all four years, and I also ran track and field while there for all four years. I graduated in 2010 and became a Surface Warfare Officer in the Navy. So, as a Surface Warfare Officer in the Navy, what we do is, we operate the ships, and as a ship driver, I've driven multiple ships. The two ships that I was on were one was a minesweeper and the other one was an amphib minesweeper is about a 224-foot-long ship. And all we do is hunt for mines in the water and explosive mines. And then on the amphib, it's a, it's a big ship that we use for any time we want to do any kind of landings on the beach. We carry all the equipment on that ship. It's over 600 feet long with over 800 people on board and a lot of stuff going on. I went on multiple deployments with those ships. But when I came back from those deployments while still being on active duty in the Navy, I was looking for the next sport that I wanted to compete in. I wanted to compete in something that was fun. Football was over for me because I wasn't playing it anymore in college. I was out of college, so I was looking for the next thing. And I had always liked cars, I had always liked racing. And finally, I was sitting in my room one night, and I just made a decision.

Jesse Iwuji: I was like, I'm going to go after professional racing. I'm going to become a professional race car driver and I'm going to do it while still being active duty in the Navy. And at this point, when I made that decision, I wasn't on the ships anymore. I was on land, so I had a little bit more free time. But this is what kind of got me towards wanting to be a driver. And then, from there, I just had to be resourceful. I had to figure out where do I even find a team to race with? How do I find the money to do it? I had to ask myself these questions, and when I asked myself these questions, I had to go research and find the answers. Just because I didn't know how to at that time doesn't mean I can't achieve it. In order to achieve what you want in life; you have to get up and take action every single day. You have to ask the right questions. And continue to ask the questions and continue to seek the answers. If one person doesn't give it to you. You go to the next person. If they don't give it to you, you go to the next. Use all resources available, find the answers, solve the problems, and you achieve what you want. And that's what I did to start working my way up the professional racing ladder. And now I'm racing on national TV in NASCAR.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. All right. You were just blowing my mind. Sitting in your room and you say, I want to become a NASCAR racer. Take us from 30,000 feet down a little bit more. Give us a little bit more of that detail.

Jesse Iwuji: Yeah. Okay. So, going into some more details on that. So, when I was sitting in my room that night, I had this clear vision, seeing myself become a professional race car driver, because prior to that I wasn't completely new to cars. I had a Corvette, and I had a Dodge Challenger, and I would take these cars to local road course tracks and local drag strips, and I would do open track days, which are anyone could bring their vehicle to. So, here in the US, different tracks will open up on weekends where any amateur can come and bring their car and test it and drive it and have fun. And I did that for a few years on my off weekends and after a few years of that I finally just sitting there, I was like, I like this, but I want to take it to the next level. So, when I was sitting in my room, it was January

2014, and I had a clear vision seeing myself become a professional race car driver. So, I just made the decision that I wanted to be one. I pulled my white board off my wall. I erased whatever was on that whiteboard and wrote one big goal to become a pro driver. From there I had to, like I said, ask those questions on how do I find a race team? How do I learn how to drive a race car? How do I find the funding? How do I do all this stuff? Because these are the questions that I was seeing.

Jesse Iwuji: Immediately, the first thing I did was try to be resourceful. So, I went on Google because Google, you can get a lot of questions answered on there. I literally type in a question how to become a professional race car driver. Immediately, I was met with a lot of negativity because I went on to some forums and everyone said, You can't do it unless you come from a wealthy family because you need a lot of money to do it. You can't do it unless you come from a racing background because you need connections. You can't do it because you don't look like everybody else. You're African American, African Americans. We don't race motorsports and all that stuff. That's all the stuff that I was seeing online. So, I was like, you know what? I'm not going to let that stop me. I'm not going to let that end my journey. Just because people said that doesn't mean it's going to have to happen. Never let someone's opinion of you become your reality. Something I heard from Les Brown, and that stayed with me for a while.

Jesse Iwuji: So, from there I was like, okay, they mentioned money, right? You've got to find money because tires, fuel, race cars, people transport all that cost money. So, what I did was, okay, I'm going to solve that problem by trying to find some sponsorship to help me get into a race car. Well immediately, I was met with a lot of no's because no company wanted to sponsor this new guy who was in the Navy. And they're like, This is never going to happen. You're never going to make it. So, nobody wanted to sponsor me, but just because they didn't want to sponsor me doesn't mean my journey is over. When we all are given that vision, seeing where our goal clearly is and who we're supposed to become, what we're supposed to do, that means that the goal, the dream, whatever it is, is done. It's already done in the future. So, why, why, why would we ever quit along the way, no matter what happens. Just because everyone told me, No. It doesn't matter. I already saw it. That means it's there. Just keep pivoting. So, what I did was I was like, okay, if I don't have the money right now and I'm not finding sponsorship, does that mean I quit? No.

Jesse Iwuji: What's the next thing? I go make the money myself. How do I make the money? I start a business on the side of being active duty in the Navy and trying to pursue this racing thing. And the business I started was I rented out drag strips here like tracks near me, and I would rent, rent out, pay the rental fee, and then I would invite a lot of people to come to the track, bring their own personal cars, race them all night, and I'd invite spectators and I would sell food and shirts and do everything I could to make money that day. And I would make money. And there was a lot of those days, I made a lot of money, and I would use that money that I made to sponsor myself because every other company didn't want to sponsor me. I was going to figure out myself and I did that. And that's what got me into the race car. And then I got some crowdfunding campaigns going on, which helped get me through a few races. And I, I had money saved up from deployments that got me through the first few races. So, I did that to get myself in the race car. But while getting myself in a race car, I had to figure out how to even drive one.

Jesse Iwuji: So, I was like, okay, how am I going to train for this? Since I can't just go practice every single day in a race car. So, what I did was I was like, okay, on the ship, in order to practice driving a ship, we use a ship simulator back home in San Diego. So, is there a racing simulator out there? I looked online. Are there racing simulators? Yes. You can buy one for a few hundred dollars, up to \$1,000, \$5,000. However much you want to spend on it. I found what was within my price range. I bought a racing simulator with a racing seat, steering wheels, pedals, shifter. I bought it, brought it home, put it in my room, and I trained on the racing simulator using a software called *iRacing*, and it simulates real life racing. It looks like a video game, but it's very realistic and I use that to train myself how to be a race car driver. So, I train myself at home. I found the money through my business. I put it together and then use networking by going to the track and meeting teams and find teams to start racing with. And then from there I started at a really, really low level of racing and started working my way up.

Whitney Johnson: Jesse, I am practically crying. I am so happy and hearing tears of joy, not sadness. So, So, just recapping for a second. So, you, followed your passion. This is something that you love doing and it sounds like you would also steer the ship. And then you said, I'm going to do this. You couldn't get the sponsors immediately. So, you said, I will figure out how to make the money to make it work. And then you said, All right, I don't have an easy

way to do this, so, I don't I can't do it the traditional way. So, I'm going to do it the disruptive way and get a simulator in my house. I have a question for you. You said you could already see it in your mind. I just heard you talk about Les Brown. So, you've done a lot of visualization work. Question for you, did you have some type of picture or action board as you were doing? What did that visualization look like for you?

Jesse Iwuji: So, for me, even growing up as a kid, I've always been a very imaginative type of person. And I always tell people like, never lose that like inner child in you, because that inner child, when we're all growing up, like kids are really, really powerful. And they can do so much and achieve so much. What happens is the reason why some go off to just not ever do anything in life is because, like either parents, their environment, older people, whatever, TV, media, whatever it is, starts putting things in their mind and like limit them. Like if we don't limit kids that they can be anything they want to be because their imaginations are huge. So, I've always kept that imagination. I still have a very kid-like imagination in my head. I see a lot of lofty things. I see a lot of just stuff and it's in my head and I keep that going and flowing all the time because this is what allows me to clearly see my goals. So, like I mentioned before, I was going to these tracks and doing these open track days, you know, from 2010 to 2014, 2015. And as I was doing those, I've really, really enjoyed this this race, this driving my car fast and the track.

Jesse Iwuji: So, then eventually I started seeing myself become a professional race car driver. Like it just kept coming to me. And it's always going to be a natural vision when we have a goal and you want to achieve something big, it's going to be a natural vision. Is it going to be something where one day you're just going to sit down and be like, You know what? Let me think of something I just want to go do or whatever, because that's like, it's not natural. You're like forcing it on. And so, I can sit here and think about being an astronaut, but that's not a natural vision that came to me. Like I wasn't like, yearning for this. It's not something that continuously hits me every single day. But the racing thing was. So, when I when I got that vision, that's when I knew, okay, this is the beginning of the journey because there's a few steps to really achieving success in life. First is getting your mindset in the right place where you're willing to give it all, lose it all, and figure out a way to get it back again. Like you got to get yourself into that position. But once you do, you've got to have the vision because you've got to clearly see it.

Jesse Iwuji: And what happens is a lot of times we'll have a vision like you'll see where your goal is, what you're supposed to accomplish. But a lot of people will sometimes doubt it, and sometimes those people who doubt it are the closest people to you. It could be family; it could be friends. But like, don't let that be something that deters you. Like, the reason they doubt it is because they want to protect you. They want to keep you in a very safe, secure place. When you're going after a big goal and dream, you're taking a lot of risk. You're leaving that safe and secure nest like there's no way to grow if you stay there. Like, if you want that million-dollar dream, you're going have to put in \$1,000,000 effort. And when you do that, you're getting out of this safe, secure net. People are going to doubt you. But guess what? Only you were given that vision. They can't see it. God that not put it in their head. He put it in your head and your head only. So, if they can't see it for you, you're going to have to see it for yourself. That's what I had to do.

Whitney Johnson: I love it. So, you had this vision. You knew what you were going to do. You could see it in your head. It was going to happen. Do you remember one discrete event where you realize if someone else had finally seen the vision too? Maybe it was your first sponsor, but there was someone else that like, Oh, they're starting to see it too. They were willing to sponsor you. Something happened. Do you remember one of those events?

Jesse Iwuji: Yeah, there's a, there's a few of those. And yes, I did eventually find some sponsorship, which helped, and I've gotten more and more over the years. But honestly, one I would say my agent, my agent, Matt Casto, in 2017, about two and a half years into me grinding along this journey and figuring things out, I was able to meet him through a mutual friend. And he saw the vision and he clearly saw it and he saw exactly where I was going to go, what I was going to become. Somehow, some way, we were aligned. And that happens. It's called like the Law of Vibration, where we finally get aligned. So, people get aligned on the same wavelength because they feel the same energy. And he was like, I see what you see and we're going to go there. So, by him coming along, he's been able to help me a lot. I would say my trajectory was like it was going up. And then he came along, and it started going up a lot higher. And what I tell people is, once again, it's not going to be easy for everyone to jump on board your journey.

Jesse Iwuji: Some people are going to believe in it. Some people aren't. Some people will like maybe they can't see it, but they say, you know what? Knowing you, you'll probably achieve it. So, they kind of believe in it. You know, a lot of times it just takes you being able to cast your vision on people if you need someone to be on board with it. You've got to be great at casting that vision on someone so that they can, they can see it, too, if they can't see it. It's very hard for them to believe it. I mean, it's just like walking into a dark room. If you can't see where the light switch is, half the time, people won't go look for it. Even though everyone knows that the light switch is in the room. How many rooms in the world are there out there that there's no light switch? It always is. But if you're watching a pitch-black room, you have to have faith that it's going to be there no matter what.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And you also made a really good point that sometimes it's the people closest to us, that it's the hardest for the people closest to us to see the vision because they're they want to protect you. And I think that's a really important point so that when people aren't buying into it, to not get angry with them, just to understand like they want to protect you. So, I think that that was very valid. I want to give a shout out to the very first sponsor, who was the very first sponsor for you.

Jesse Iwuji: Yeah. So, my very first major sponsor was a fellow who he wanted to remain anonymous, but he what he did was this. It was really great. It's super cool. And this helped me learn a lot of different things. What he did was instead of just directly just sponsoring me and being like, Hey, here's X amount of money so that you can go race the rest of your season. Because at that point I had ran out of money like I was at this tipping point where I was like, I'm doing the business thing, and the business thing is making money. But like the next event that I'm putting on isn't for like a few months. So, like, you know, is this journey going to really pan out the way it's supposed to pan out, all that stuff. I was in this really tough spot. I didn't have any extra money. I had races coming up and I didn't know what to do. And he came out of nowhere and like, saved the day. But this is what he did. Instead of just giving me directly the money and being like, Hey, go race. He was like, That's what I'm going to do. He donated it to a charity and he's like, Look, I'm going donate this to charity. They're going to use it to sponsor you, like giving you some of the funds to sponsor you and some of the funds to bring veterans and their families, wounded veterans and their families to the track. What you're all going to do is you're going to figure out some way to give these wounded vets a huge VIP experience. You have them in a suite at the track, have their names plastered on the race car, bring their families there, be able to get down on a track, do all that stuff.

Jesse Iwuji: And that's what we did. So, it was a way where I got to race. We got to bring these wounded vets and give them a time of their life. You know something that because a lot of these wounded vets are going through a lot of things, going through a lot of issues, some of them depressed, you know, not feeling like their life is worth anything. You know, they're going through a lot. So, to get the opportunity for a race car driver to put them on a race car, bring them to the track them in their family, give them this crazy VIP experience for the weekend, being a suite, watching the races, having a good time and just honor them for that weekend. Like that's huge. And that's what we did for multiple races that year. It was a really, really cool opportunity. I got to meet a lot of cool people, hear a lot of cool stories, and honor them through what I was doing and racing. And it was cool for them too, because I was a guy who was still serving. So, they're like, okay, you know, if I'm going to root for anybody, it's going to be this guy who who knows where I came from, you know? So, that was my first big one in 2015. And then since then, I've had multiple sponsors jump on board who have wanted to leverage my story of this guy who went from driving naval warships to racing professionally in the number one motorsport in the United States of America.

Whitney Johnson: When you're on the track and you're going over 200 miles an hour, I want to hear a little bit about what's going on in your head. How do you know when you're under confident in what's happening and how do you know when you're overconfident and how do you correct for that? And what does it feel like when you're completely in the sweet spot? You're completely in the flow.

Jesse Iwuji: So, focus is definitely a big part of racing. It's the biggest part of racing. So, coming from the football world, you know, people ask me all the time, like before football game, what do you do? And I tell people before football game, I would try to get amped up as much as possible and try to really bring up my energy level, bring up everything, because you're about to step on a field where you're running all over the field with the ball or trying to get to somebody with the ball. And these are all other human beings who are all, most of the time, bigger or faster than you. And you have to throw your body through them as hard as you can multiple times in a two hour span. So, you've got to get really amped up to do this very unnatural thing. Now, for racing, it's different. You're not doing that.

You actually need to be able to drive and control a race car to the best of your ability for two, three, 4 hours at a time in extreme heat. And you have to be as calm as possible because you have to be smooth in order to be fast on a track. You've got to be smooth. Slow is smooth, smooth is fast. And this is something you can actually apply to anything in life. Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast. So, so applying that concept to it, you have to be very, very focused. And when you finally find that balance where you can put the race car on edge without ever going over the edge but not staying really too much under, that's when you're at that that best, that perfect moment. Where you are as fast as you can possibly be, and you make it look easy and everything looks smooth and you're and you're really good. Now, if you are not focused very well, it can go one or two ways. You can just be way slower, or you will be going over the edge too much and hitting a wall at 180 plus miles per hour. So, it takes a lot of focus. But slow is smooth. Smooth is fast.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts before we wrap up.

Jesse Iwuji: For all of those out there who are trying to go achieve big goals and big dreams, you know, they see the vision. They know where they're supposed to go. I would challenge everyone to do this. Once you have that vision and you clearly see where you're supposed to go, who you're supposed to become from then on, every single day, you need to have daily action every single day, execute on action every single day. Not just Monday, Tuesday, not just Saturday or Sunday, not just here and there, like every single day. Put energy towards it as you're putting this focused energy towards the goal on a daily basis, you will go through a dark tunnel. This path that you're going through to try to achieve something bigger is a very dark tunnel. It's pitch black. But once again, remember, you already clearly saw the vision. You already clearly saw the goal. That goal is at the end of the tunnel. That's that light at the end of the tunnel. But while you're going through the tunnel, it's pitch black and it's going to be pitch black all the way through. Even when you're two inches away from the end of the tunnel, it's still pitch black. But this is where faith comes into play.

Jesse Iwuji: You have to have faith that that vision you clearly saw that light at the end of the tunnel is there when you cannot see it because you will not be able to see it. That's life testing you. As you're pushing through, you're grinding through. Understand that you will go through these dark times in that tunnel, and you have to understand that you cannot quit because life does reward those who stay strong enough long enough. So, you've got to stay strong enough long enough in order to get to the end. And when you finally get to the end, understand that along that whole way, even when you achieve what you wanted to achieve in life, there will be people who will reach out for help. People who reach out for advice always give back, always help. Because I'm a firm believer that those who help others achieve their dreams will achieve theirs too. So, continue to give out, continue to help, continue to help people around you crying. Stay strong enough long enough, you'll make it to anything you want in life. And our minds are very powerful. So, remember that what you think about you bring about.

Whitney Johnson: What you think about, you bring about. And if you want to be an agent of disruption first, become its subject. Jesse Iwuji, thank you so much for being with us.

Jesse's story is so inspiring. But if you walk away from our conversation with only one thing, let it be this. Just because you don't know how to achieve something doesn't mean you can't. Jesse was sitting in his room one night and just decided that when football was done, he was going to jump to the S Curve of NASCAR driver. He had no idea how to do that, but he did know where to start. As Jesse explained, get up and take action every single day. Also, ask questions. If one person doesn't give you the info you need, go to the next one. And when people give you the wrong answer, don't listen. Everyone told Jesse, African Americans don't race in motorsports and you have to come from a wealthy family. Well, yes, it takes money to train for NASCAR, but Jesse found another way. Racing simulators, still expensive, but this was his access point. It's so easy to say, just don't give up and follow your dream. Jesse's advice is more tactical. Cast your net as wide as possible, then double down on what's working.

If you want more inspiration on taking action, listen to [Richie Norton Episode 286](#), [John Tesh Episode 239](#), and [Leena Nair Episode 235](#). Thank you again to Jesse for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman, audio editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel, and Production Coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.