

New call at UNI: I love Jalen Rima!

Written by Jim Ecker

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Jalen Rima has been attending football games at the University of Northern Iowa for as long as he can remember. He's got as many purple-and-gold caps and shirts as you could need, but he's about to get more.

Rima plans to sign his national letter-of-intent with the Northern Iowa football program Wednesday morning during a ceremony in the Cedar Rapids Prairie library, further cementing the Rima family's strong ties to the university.

"I've been a UNI Panther since I've been a little boy," he said. "I've gone to multiple games for multiple years since I've been in elementary school."

Rima starred for the Prairie football team last season as a receiver, runner and kick returner to the tune of 1,638 yards and 15 touchdowns despite a few injuries along the way. He proved he's one of the fastest high school athletes in Iowa by winning the 200 and 400 meter dashes at the Class 4A state track meet last May and now he'll be taking all those skills to Cedar Falls.

His father, Todd Rima, played baseball at the University of Northern Iowa and is the head baseball coach at Prairie and Kirkwood Community College. His grandfather, Gary Rima, is the enthusiastic radio voice of Northern Iowa and one of Jalen's biggest fans.

If you've ever listened to a UNI football game on the radio, you've heard Gary Rima express his love for the Panthers with one of his favorite catch-phrases.

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"I LOVE David Johnson, and I LOVE this team!," he'd exclaim after the star running back made a big play during his college career before graduating to the NFL this season.

"I LOVE Eric Sanders!," he exclaimed a few years ago when Sanders was UNI's star quarterback and tossing game-winning touchdowns.

"I LOVE Wes Washpun!," he crooned when the UNI men's basketball team upset Iowa State this season and Washpun had a big game.

Now comes Jalen Rima, who is sure to get his hands on the football once he starts playing at Northern Iowa. What will the play-by-play man in the radio booth have to say about that?

"I might say, 'That's my grandson, and yes, I LOVE Jalen Rima!,'" the voice of the Panthers remarked, laughing. "I mean, I REALLY love him."

Jalen Rima knows all about his grandfather's signature calls.

"I've listened to him a ton of times," he said. "He's great. I love him."

"He's a really good grandfather. He comes to as many events as he can. He loves watching us (all the grand-children). It's always good to see him in the stands. He's a firecracker, and you can hear him yelling half the time."

Rima had other options for college. Hawaii, Iowa State and Missouri Valley Conference schools

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besides UNI were interested in him for football and track, and he was especially intrigued by Hawaii.

"They were my original choice, just because Hawaii is so nice and I'm not a big cold-weather fan," he said. "That's why UNI was the second option, because they play in the Dome. So that worked out pretty well."

Gary Rima is a big UNI fan, but he's also a solid journalist who reports the good and the bad. And he's seen more than enough during his long career in the broadcast booth to recognize talent when he sees it.

Rima thinks his grand-son is going to the right place, and not just for selfish reasons.

"I'm really excited, knowing I'll be able to see him play every game and won't have to miss his college games," he said. "It's just great on a personal basis."

"I think he could have a really good career at UNI. I think it will be a great fit. I think Jalen is a really quality player, and not just because he's my grandson. I'm really excited to know he's going to be wearing purple and gold."

"Jalen is coming to UNI on his own merits and that makes Grandpa pretty proud."

Rima picked Northern Iowa because of the football program and not because of his grandfather, although that's definitely a bonus.

"I picked Northern Iowa because the coaching staff made me feel at home, and they showed that they really wanted me on their team," he said. "It's just a great feeling knowing that someone wants you to come to their school and play."

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Rima said he has not decided whether he'll run track at UNI or not. His first love is football and he wants to make sure he succeeds on the field more than anything else.