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How Vernon Davis went from Pro Bowl tight end to movie and TV action star

The request was innocent enough. Former Washington tight end Vernon Davis was on "SportsCenter" in 2020, days after retiring from the NFL and discussed his future Hollywood aspirations. The host asked Davis, decked out in suit and tie, to reenact a couple of lines from his upcoming movie "Red Winter."

That's when things got a little weird.

Davis instantly furrowed his brow, squeezed his eyes shut and went into a lip-quivering, chest-heaving fake cry. The full ugly cry lasted just 11 seconds before Davis straightened up and went back to his usual smiling self. There were mixed reactions to the moment, though it was just one example of how the former Pro Bowl selection and Super Bowl champ has attacked his post-football career.

Davis is now set to be all over the screen just two years later. He has a role in the movie "Gasoline Alley" with Bruce Willis and Luke Wilson that debuted Friday. In March, it's "A Day to Die" with Willis and Kevin Dillon, and Davis will serve as a judge on the Fox show "Domino Masters." "Dear Best Friend" is already airing on BET Plus, and "Chariot" with John Malkovich is scheduled to release this year.

All of this started in 2013 when Davis appeared on an episode of "The League" while he was a star for the San Francisco 49ers. Actor Danny Glover suggested acting classes at the Shelton Theatre in San Francisco, which he has been taking ever since. Davis bypassed several offers from "Dancing with the Stars" before accepting shortly after retiring.

Transitioning into the entertainment business is easier said than done, even for those who are already recognizable celebrities. At one point, Davis had spent thousands of dollars on classes and sent out hundreds of video reads and wasn't receiving much feedback, let alone a gig.

Former sports journalist Nick Creegan recently traversed the same road. He got his first job out of the blue on "David Meets Man" that finished shooting in 2018. Creegan went 20 months without even getting a callback for his many, many auditions. Things fell into place in 2021 when the entire year was booked and he received starring roles in "Law & Order: Organized Crime" and "Batwoman."



"When you decide to be an actor, it's kind of just like you're deciding to deal with rejection," Creegan said. "You kind of form a relationship with that rejection. It's like a love-hate kind of situation."

"Vulnerability is the main key to acting. ... At first, it was very hard for me. I'm not going to lie. It was hard to kind of just open up."

Creegan pointed to acting classes as the key — the same approach Davis has taken. But that's far from all that's on the former tight end's plate. He's one of the lead investors in the construction of a soundstage in Fitzgerald, Ga., that costs seven figures. That's where "Gasoline Alley" was filmed. The portfolio includes five Jamba Juice franchises, RASA Indian restaurant in D.C., Plucked Chicken and Beer in the Bay Area and real estate properties.

The latest endeavor goes back to his football roots with the Q Collar, a lightweight device that wraps around the neck to reduce the risk of concussions. Davis, who was always dedicated to health and fitness during his career, saw linebacker Luke Kuechly wearing one, and he began researching and getting involved with the company. Concussions are what ultimately ended Davis's 14-year career. The device is the only FDA approved sports equipment geared to protect the brain.

Oh, Davis is also working on an album under the name Vern D, a nickname he received from former Washington tight end Jordan Reed.

"I think the ultimate goal here is just to be the best at whatever it is that I'm doing," Davis said. "Always put your best foot forward. Whatever you're doing, just strive to be the best, and don't really think about the money."

That same mind-set has been present in Davis's efforts away from the workplace. His philanthropy in D.C. led Mayor Muriel E. Bowser to declare March 12 "Vernon Davis Day" three years ago. He is still based in the area and is helping his son through the football recruiting process.

"I'm successful, then I give hope and inspiration to those who are behind me and those who want to do it," Davis said. "It's always bigger than us."

Writer, producer and director DeShon Hardy believes Davis's relentless approach will be why he's ultimately successful in the entertainment realm. He noted that Davis works with multiple acting coaches and on multiple projects at the same time. Other celebrities may have certain expectations or want to put on a certain public face because of their status, but Hardy said that's not how Davis operates.

"His willingness to be vulnerable," Hardy said. "A lot of celebrities or high-profile athletes can't show a weakness. They can't show a vulnerability that they have. He's willing to cry. He's willing to do all these things to step outside the box of just not being a star ballplayer. And that's the biggest thing. ■"