

**“NFL Quarterback Jeff George,” Arab Indianapolis, January 5, 2021,
ArabIndianapolis.Com.**

By Edward E. Curtis IV

In 1984, junior Jeff George led the Warren Central High School football team to a state championship. Credit: Warren High School yearbook.

Born to David George and Judith Smith George on December 8, 1967, Jeff George is perhaps the most important professional Arab American athlete in Indianapolis sports history.

In 1984 and 1985, he quarterbacked the Warren Central High School football team to consecutive state championships. His high school trophy shelf was graced by every award imaginable—national male high school athlete of the year, national football player of the year, and Nicola award for most outstanding football player in the nation.

He was the pride of Indianapolis, and especially of the Arab American community in which he was raised.

On his father’s side, part of his family traces its roots to the city of Saidnaya, located less than twenty miles north of Damascus, the capital of Syria. It is a mountain town about 5,000 feet in elevation. Snowy in the winter, warm in the summer, Saidnaya has been a center of Christian religious life in the Middle East for more than a thousand years. To this day, there are dozens of chapels and monasteries from various Orthodox, Catholic, and Syriac religious communities, and Christians from around the world undertake pilgrimages to this sacred site. Many venerate its ancient icon of the Virgin Mary, seeking blessings or help when they wish to conceive a child. Muslims also visit the shrine—in this part of the world, the children of Abraham have a long history of sharing religious figures and sacred sites. Despite the news headlines, there is a history in the Arab world of inter-religious cooperation as well as conflict.

There was a whole group of Christians from Saidnaya and the greater Damascus area that arrived in Indiana at the beginning of the 1900s. They were among the most important figures in the establishment of St. George Syrian Orthodox Church.

Jeff George’s great-grandfather, Sam Risk Corey, was one of them. Like many other Syrian immigrants to Indianapolis, he became a grocer, operating Corey’s Food Market at 2128 North Olney with his wife, Mary.

Jeff George’s other Arab grandparents were John and Rose (Ramsa) Khalil George. They also operated a grocery store, located at 521 East 21st Street in today’s Kennedy King neighborhood. When they first arrived, they were sometimes known by a different last name, Ozman.

The Corey and George families came together in the marriage of their American-born children, Joe George and Ruth Corey, who were the grandparents of the future NFL quarterback. Joe was the owner of the Panda Restaurant on 12 West Ohio. Ruth, who became one of her grandson’s

biggest fans, was a force at St. George church, where among her many other activities, she starred in a revue celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the congregation in 1982.

St. George, like many other religious congregations in Indianapolis and the United States, supported youth sports, including a successful church basketball team. Sports were not seen as a contradiction of the church's mission but as a way to keep young people involved in the life of the congregation and maybe teach some important lessons along the way. Jeff George always kept a part of his church with him, even on the field, where he wore an Orthodox cross given to him by his grandmother.

For young Jeff George, sports became a devotion. He played baseball and basketball, competing with and against his two brothers, but it was on the gridiron where he made his mark on Indianapolis history. After graduating from Warren Central, George played in college for Purdue and the University of Illinois, and then in 1990, he was the very first person selected in the National Football League draft.

His hometown team, the Indianapolis Colts, signed him to a contract worth about \$15 million, reportedly the most money ever offered to a rookie at the time. The Colts, who played during that era at the Hoosier Dome, had a 7-9 record that year, but George threw for 16 touchdowns and 2,152 yards, enough to earn him honors as the quarterback on the NFL's all-rookie team. He spent four seasons with the Colts, but they did not make the playoffs during his tenure. Some fans were critical of him.

In twelve seasons, Jeff George played for five NFL teams. In 1995, he led the Atlanta Falcons to the playoffs, throwing for a total of 4,143 yards during the regular season. In 1997, as a member of the Oakland Raiders, George threw more yards than any other quarterback in the league. He also tossed 29 touchdown passes—the most in his career. Two years later, George began the season as the backup quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings' Randall Cunningham, but he took over as starter with ten games left in the regular season. Under George's leadership the Vikings went 8-2 and George won his first ever NFL playoff game.

Today, the George legacy continues. Arab Americans and others in Indianapolis watched with delight as Jeff George, Jr. inherited his father's mantle. He, too, attended Warren Central High School and led his team to a state football championship as quarterback. He also followed in his father's footsteps by playing college football at University of Illinois, but then transferred to the University of Pittsburgh.

The George family is one of several Arab American families who have made their mark on the history of football. Just consider this list of Arab American NFL players, coaches, and owners: Abe Gibron, Bill George, Joe Robbie, Rich Kotite, John Elway, Doug Flutie, Brian Habib, Drew Haddad, Robert Saleh, Gibran Hamdan, Ryan Kalil, Matt Kalil, and Oday Aboushi.

In the George family, Arab Indianapolis has a claim on that rich history, too.