From Watching to Watched: DJ Vonnahme's New Expectations as Iowa Tight End Leader
By Brendan Schnoebelen, University of Iowa

The New Year's Eve sun beats down on Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Florida. Iowa tight end DJ Vonnahme works through a sideline of congratulatory teammates and sits on the Hawkeyes' team bench after hauling in a touchdown on a trick play. By football standards, it was a typical scoring play. However, the catch meant far more than six points to the people who prepped the second-year talent for the moment.

Vonnahme posted a career day of seven catches for 146 yards and the trick play touchdown catch in the ReliaQuest Bowl, capping a surprise breakout season. After starting week one absent from the team depth chart, the Kuemper Catholic product finished the year as Iowa's leader in receptions, receiving yards and receiving touchdowns, earning him freshman All-American status.

"It just brought tears to our eyes," DJ's mother, Becky, said about his record-setting performance.

Vonnahme's journey began on a family farm in tiny Breda, Iowa, a town of around 500 residents. He gravitated to sports as a toddler, and later decided to pursue football, basketball and track in high school.

"He just never wanted to be 'the guy,'" Becky recalled from Vonnahme's youth sports. "He was so humble."

Head football coach at Kuemper, Ryan Steinkamp, remembered an instance when an official flagged one of Vonnahme's teammates for taunting in one of his games. DJ would be there to calm things down.

"I remember thinking like, okay, this guy's a dude. He's a good leader. He's a great kid," Steinkamp said about Vonnahme's leadership skills.

Despite plenty of success, Vonnahme's high school athletic career wasn't without its hurdles.

During a basketball game, Vonnahme got undercut attempting to block a shot. He landed awkwardly on his head and neck, knocking him out. The gym quieted from squeaking shoes and screaming fans to a muffled hush. Paramedics placed him on a stretcher and took him to the emergency room. His athletic career as he knew it could end forever.

"The whole gymnasium was just praying for him at that point," Becky said.

Amazingly, the injury was nothing more than a concussion. Vonnahme made his return four weeks later, training harder than he ever had before.

Both in, and out of the weight room.

“During track when we had snacks and stuff for the kids, he’d be reading the nutrition labels,” Steinkamp said.

By his senior year, Vonnahme committed to football. He earned a preferred walk-on spot with the Hawkeyes and decided it was time to make Iowa City his home.

However, it wasn’t long after Vonnahme enrolled at Iowa that adversity would rear its ugly head again.

In June 2025, Judge Claudia Wilken officially approved the landmark $2.8 billion House v. NCAA settlement. Part of the settlement included a slimmed-down football roster limit with scholarship changes. Iowa, like every other collegiate program, had to make roster adjustments before the 2025 season. This forced many walk-ons within the program to find a new home. The same could happen to Vonnahme.

Bill, DJ’s father, wanted to purchase DJ’s NIL jersey while the settlement was in litigation. Becky warned against it.

“I just kept saying, we need to make sure he’s safe. This could be our only season at Iowa,” she said.

After DJ met with coaches, Becky got the peace of mind she needed when her phone rang. It was DJ.

He was safe.

“I was fortunate they said that they still had a spot for me,” Vonnahme said about the process. “I was good friends with a lot of the guys in my class, the walk-ons, but a majority of them got cut.”

Head coach Kirk Ferentz honored Vonnahme with a full-ride scholarship in July 2025 after impressing in spring practice three months prior.

Vonnahme’s ascension up the depth chart began in Ames, Iowa, against Iowa State in a highly-anticipated rivalry game. Starting tight end Addison Ostrenga exited the game with an Achilles injury, opening the door for Vonnahme to gain more playing time.

His impact wasn’t immediate, totaling just 29 yards on a pair of catches against UMass and Rutgers. However, against the Scarlet Knights, Becky noticed something different about DJ that she hadn’t yet in his time at Iowa.

His athleticism.

DJ caught a tunnel screen pass behind the line of scrimmage and quickly rumbled for 21 yards in the open field with help from blockers.

“That was the first time people really saw his speed,” Becky said about the play.

Vonnahme parlayed that play into four more catches the following week against Indiana and three more at Wisconsin. It wasn’t just his mom getting his attention now. It was offensive coordinator Tim Lester, too.

“The one game that stuck out to me is when we played Oregon,” Lester recalled. “He had to stick his hand in the dirt and block that defensive end from Oregon, which isn’t an easy task. My man rolled his hips and walked that dude right out of there a couple of times. I was, like -- I can't say what I said, but this little guy is tough.”

The 6-4, 240-pound Vonnahme tussled with Oregon’s 6-5, 272-pound Matayo Uiagalelei in blocking battles throughout the game. It was against the Ducks where Vonnahme caught his first career touchdown pass.

Fast-forward to 2026, Vonnahme is no longer a player working to get his name out of the shadows. Now, he’s setting the standard with a program known for cranking out NFL stars at his position. Instead of focusing on following in their footsteps, Vonnahme is building his own brand through the pressure of leading the Hawkeyes’ tight end room.

“You can’t really compare yourself to other people cause that’ll do you no good,” Vonnahme said after the Hawkeyes’ 2026 open spring practice. “I’m just trying to be the best version of myself and go to sleep proud of what I did.”

Kittle. Hockenson. LaPorta. Vonnahme?

Perhaps the answer comes sooner rather than later.