

29. Post-Career Playbook

My question was the same when I texted the retired players in my phone book.

“I know you’re good, but how do you feel?”

I felt like killing myself...

Like ~~shit~~...

Like, this can't be life...

I don't know. I'm scared though...

Like I need to do something or else...

Mad all the time...

I hate football...

There had to be something to this. Every player, regardless of the tenure in the league, size of the contract, or if that person was currently employed, felt the same way.

When I asked two follow up questions, it was more of the same.

“What do you need? What needs to be done?”

Help...

Football...

Guidance...

Money...

Mentor...

Information. The only information I get, is from you...

Playbook for when we get done...

We needed a playbook for the NFL afterlife. I wanted to create a position for college students transitioning but I didn't think NFL players would have the same need. Financially they should be okay. They should also have enough connections where they can get into another career fairly quickly. Then I thought about my own transition. I needed guidance as well. To attain guidance, one must seek guidance. That's what I set out to do. I started with myself. I booked a consultation with a psychologist to see if they could help me understand what was going on.

“Good afternoon, Hamza, how are you?”

“I'm doing well.”

“Good. You look well.”

“Thank you.”

“So what brings you in today?”

“I don't know, just trying to see what's going on.”

“What's going on?”

“Yeah, I'm starting to feel a little more emotional.”

“When do you feel emotional?”

“Lately? All the time it seems.”

“Are there any events that trigger it?”

“I’m not really sure...I was watching football the other day...”

“And...”

“And I got mad at some of the players...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I was at my trainer’s house watching the game, and got mad at some players.”

“What happened?”

“One of the players didn’t react right away to a play and cost his team a touchdown.”

“So what did you do?”

“I grabbed the remote and explained to everyone what the player’s job was...”

“You grabbed the remote?”

“Yeah. I stopped the game, rewound it, and explained the play to everyone.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Worthless.”

“Why worthless?”

“Because they didn’t care. I was the only one that cared, and I was wasting my time.”

“Do you feel like you’re wasting your time now?”

“No.”

“What other times have you felt like you were wasting your time?”

“Well, all the time.”

“All the time?”

“Yeah.”

“Give me an example.”

“Well, like when I take my children to school.”

“You feel like you’re wasting your time?”

“Yes, because I take them to school, they stay there all day, then when I pick them up...”

“When you pick them up, what?”

“When I pick them up and ask how their day was and what they learned, they say the same thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“Nothing!”

“And that upsets you?”

“Yes, it upsets me.”

“Why does it upset you?”

“Because I’m not doing anything, my children aren’t doing anything, it’s a life of nothing.”

“And what will make you have a life of something?”

“I don’t know, but this isn’t it.”

“I want you to think of something you have coming up. A date, an event, something to look forward to.”

“Well, I’m getting inducted into my high school hall of fame.”

“See, that’s a big deal. That’s a something. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you think they put people who do nothing in the hall of fame?”

“No, they don’t.”

“What else? Any other upcoming events?”

“Well, I’m going to watch my brother play in the NFL for the first time.”

“Isn’t that exciting? That’s something.”

“Yes, it is...it’s just weird.”

“Why is it weird?”

“Because I know I could be playing too, but I’m not.”

“That’s understandable. But you are there to support your brother.”

“Yes, I am. I just don’t want to be jealous or envious.”

“Have you been jealous of him?”

“I want to say no, but I don’t know. I always try to offer advice and pray for him.”

“Well, that’s what good big brothers do.”

“I know, but it’s different now. This is the first time he’s playing and I’m not.”

“Well, you’ll have to remember why you’re there. You’re there for a reason.”

“I know.”

“And what reason is that?”

“To support my brother.”

“He would do it for you, wouldn’t he?”

“He has done it for me.”

“Exactly. Hamza, I see a lot of something in your life. Do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Remember, if you ever find yourself getting upset, think about why you’re upset and how you got there.”

“Okay I will. Thank you, Doc.”

“Thanks for coming.”

The walls weren’t closing in on me. I did have good things going for me in my life. I just needed to expand my vision. It was tough to see it while I was looking at what others had and I didn’t. I needed to continue my therapy sessions, but I also needed to keep in touch with the other players and continue doing research. I’m fortunate to have someone to talk to, but how many other guys aren’t so lucky?

30. CTE

On my flight to Kansas City to watch Husain's game, I bought the *League of Denial*. An exposé of the NFL's attempts to hide the long term effects of head trauma in NFL players. The book was written by two investigative reporters for ESPN. Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada came together to unsheathe the NFL's dirty little secret.

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy or CTE.

CTE is a degenerative brain condition linked to repetitive hits to the head. The book detailed retired players' struggles with their finances, family life, and emotions after leaving the game. These players were struggling and begging for help, but the NFL turned its back on them. Upon further review, these players suffered from CTE.

The NFL is buying time because as of today, CTE can only be diagnosed posthumously. Time is ticking. Eventually that bomb will go off, and the NFL won't be able to hide.

"How many former players have to kill themselves before you guys ~~finally~~ realize, that they're pushing us to it?"

Zero. The answer *should* be zero. Instead we get the standard unceremonious statement from the NFL when a player dies by suicide:

"He was a member of our family for _____ years. He still had a lifetime in front of him. Right now all of our thoughts and prayers are with his family during this most difficult time. Thank you for all of your support and consideration."

And that's that.

They'll continue to deflect with disingenuous replies to those inquiring for a better understanding.

This is the way of the NFL. Deny, deny, deny, and when that doesn't work, deny again. I'm done with the denial. I need to know what's going on and try to help. That's going to take more research, acquiring more knowledge and applying that knowledge. I recently read about a former Major League Baseball Player who suffered from CTE at the time of his death. Like most individuals with CTE, he committed suicide.

Suicide.

I've read the CTE signs and symptoms, and I know I exhibit a few of them. Alexa would be the first to tell you I've experienced varying degrees of anxiety, depression, mood swings, and impulsive behavior during my NFL career. I'm not saying I definitely have it, nor do I want to check and see. I don't want to know because if I know I have CTE, I may think like all the other individuals who had it. That taking my own life was the only

way to make it better. I believe it will get better. I believe when I get into my routine where I can work every day and travel as I may, that I will be okay. While traveling to KC, I can't help but think about what occurred here less than a year ago.

On Saturday, December 1, 2012, the Kansas City Chiefs were preparing for their match against the Carolina Panthers. The Chiefs players awoke to the shocking news that one of their teammates, Jovan Belcher, had murdered his girlfriend Kasandra Perkins, drove to the practice facility, then turned the gun on himself.

Jovan Belcher would later be found to have CTE.

What a tragedy. An unspeakable tragedy. What was the NFL's response?

"The games must go on."

An active player commits murder then kills himself at the training facility, in front of the heads of the organization, and the NFL's response was to play on.

The level of distaste and dehumanizing of the players was never as apparent as it was at that moment. My heart immediately went to the families, the orphaned daughter, and the Chiefs players. I couldn't imagine playing in a football game after such a tragic event. I pray the families and players were able to seek professional help after an unimaginable tragedy. I ask myself, how can I help? How can I be a part of the solution?

Starting a non-profit organization for athletes, with an emphasis on transitioning athletes, can help. I'll call it Athletes Best Source. Empowering the athletes on and off the field will be the goal. Maintaining our identity as contributing members of society, I believe, can aid in the overall health of transitioning athletes.

I don't want anyone after me to feel the way I do. I don't want any other athlete to think that the only solace will come from holding a gun to his or her head or chest.

I have to be here to protect Alexa. To protect my daughters. To protect my son. I can't let anyone harm my children. I love them too much. My family needs me and I need my family. I have to stand up for them, which in turn, will be me standing up for myself.

31. Fit to Play Football

The weekend in Kansas City was a roller coaster of emotions. I was excited to be around the game again but irritated I was doing it next to a guy drinking beer and telling me the other players sucked. I was once one of those other players. I tuned the crowd out and focused on Husain. I wanted to watch him as a proud older brother instead of a coach critiquing his every move. It was enjoyable to watch as the Chiefs beat the Browns, pushing their record to 8-0. Husain was on a winning team and most likely a playoff team. I was excited for his future but unsure of mine.

While in the Midwest, I scheduled a doctor's appointment with a well-known orthopedist in Chicago. I wanted a comprehensive physical exam to see what kind of beating my body took while playing football. On the way to Chicago I sat next to a kind woman who kept looking over at my book. She would periodically ask me questions pertaining to the book then look away for a few minutes, then repeat the cycle. She was fascinated by the football helmet on the cover.

As our plane taxied on the runway, I removed my ticket from the pages and handed her the book.

"For me?"

"Yes, ma'am, it's yours."

"I couldn't...I just wanted to see what you were reading."

"It's okay. I'm done with it...It's *League of Denial*. A book about the NFL."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, God bless you."

"Thank you. Enjoy the book...God bless you as well."

She had that motherly worry on her face. She meant well, but she was worried about me. Worried about other players and worried about the NFL.

I was worried as well. I didn't know what the reports would say about my body, but I now worried about my brain as well.

October 28, 2013-Initial evaluation by XX D.C. CCSP.

The player presents on this day for headaches, neck pain, low back pain, bilateral shoulder pain, bilateral hand and wrist pain, bilateral hip pain, bilateral knee pain, bilateral ankle pain and bilateral foot pain.

He also complains of chronic headaches due to multiple concussions in the past with loss of consciousness.

Diagnosis given was joint pain, joint stiffness, myospasm, Achilles tendonitis, cervical radiculopathy, cervicgia, headache, lumbalgia, back pain, neck pain, lumbar radiculopathy, patellofemoral syndrome, plantar fasciitis, rotator cuff syndrome, tendinitis of the knee patella, and the notes are right upper extremity impairment as well as a left upper extremity impairment.

The right upper extremity impairment that was done for total upper extremity impairment of the right side was 15%, and a total whole person impairment of the the upper extremity right side was 9%.

Also, the left upper extremity impairment, total upper extremity impairment, left side is 18%. Total whole person impairment on the left side was 11%. Right lower extremity impairment and a total lower extremity impairment, right side is 32%. Total whole person impairment, lower extremity right side is 13%. Next is left lower extremity impairment. Total lower extremity impairment left side is 32% and total whole person impairment, lower extremity left side is 13%.

Next rating impairment due to cervical disorders was zero, as well as the thoracic spine injury. For lumbar spine injury it was 8%. So combined whole person impairment was 41%. Pain rating was a two and whole person impairment was that of 42%.

The doctor placed his hand on my knee, as I placed my head in my hands. He apologized, but it wasn't his fault. I was the one who wanted to know what was going on with my body.

We took physicals every year in the NFL--before the season and after. I always received an apple and a perfect score. I was "Fit to play Football." At what point were they going to tell me my body was breaking down? At what point were they going to treat me for my ailments?

At what point was I going to be looked at as a person and not a product? CTE wasn't the only thing the NFL was hiding. They're also hiding our medical histories. The team doctors have a responsibility to the teams that are employing them, not the pretend patients--the players. Our best interests are not at heart when we're thrown out onto the field time and time again. Each player has an expiration date on us and the NFL team and their physicians know exactly when that date is, unbeknownst to us. This isn't retirement, this is us walking the plank.

Retirement in the NFL is a joke. The NFL doesn't care about retired players and I'm calling them out on it. I'm not going to go soft and send a company email; I'm going full throttle. I'm about to blast the NFL. I just need to say the right things that will get them to feel me. To feel me they have to be able to listen to me. To listen to me, they have to hear me. Now, how am I going to get the NFL to hear me?

What am I upset about?

I'm upset that the NFL uses its players like a cheap plastic cup and throws us away without even caring if we make it into the recycle bin. I've heard about numerous million dollar funds going to former players, but I'm wondering which former players are getting these benefits. I'm wondering what, besides money, are the players getting? I've been a former player for over a year, and the only thing I've received is a notice that my insurance will run out in five years.

Some welcoming party.

I've called the NFLPA at least twice a month over the last four months, with different inquiries. Aside from the first phone call, the others have been horrendous. It seems as though I call the number and a woman says, "Hold, Please."

Then she goes and takes her turn in Foosball, then returns to the phone and says, "This is [Blank], How may I direct your call?" It's a never ending cycle. They're too busy doing news conferences to do what's best for the players. I know it may seem that I am exaggerating or overstating some things, but I just think it should be a lot easier. It's tough because I know the NFLPA is handcuffed by what the NFL's needs and wants are. The first three letters of the NFLPA are...

Yeah. Exactly.

The PA, as much as they may want to help, will always play second fiddle to the NFL's owners. As of today, when Players retire we need to unlock the DA Vinci Code before we can attain our benefits.

Benefits that are rightfully ours, but nonetheless, they are the needle thrown into a haystack. NFL Players are used to a schedule, and structure, but when we retire, that schedule and structure are no more. A simple Schedule of retirement "to-do's" would go a long way. I know they just formed the "Players Trust," but I feel as though that was a rushed attempt at combatting the issues I set forth on Twitter. Oh yeah, Twitter. Twitter had a rude awakening on the morning of October 31, 2013.

The day that I would be a Trending Topic.