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Fitness gains importance in retirement



Former Titan Jason Mathews says NFL players deserve benefits for longer than the five years they currently get. STEVEN S. HARMAN / THE TENNESSEAN

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For *The Tennessean*

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Throughout my NFL career and my college days at Texas A&M, keeping my body in playing shape was extremely important to me. Now that I've retired, I still pay a great amount of attention to my weight and overall wellness. In fact, it may be more of a priority now than when I was in the NFL.

During the 2004 Titans season, which was my final season, I hurt my back going against Warren Sapp in the Oakland game. In addition to two other surgeries and many other lingering injuries, I had a history of back problems throughout my career.

During our Super Bowl run, I blew out my back and had to get surgery following the season, which took nine months to rehab.

I knew as soon as my career was over I needed to do something about my weight. I wanted to get that extra weight off in order to relieve my joints and help my general fitness. I had read that athletes who don't lose their extra playing weight within their first year out never lose it.

The day after I retired, I started cardio exercising twice a day and eating more sensibly. I'm now down to 235 pounds from my playing weight of 295.

Prior to retiring, I would go play golf and my back would be extremely sore the next day. Since retiring, I can go play golf and feel great the next morning. Even though my score has been terrible both before and since I've retired, my back and body have felt a dramatic difference.

Mike Munchak and Brad Hopkins are perfect examples of former players who have made the transition from their NFL days and work even harder in their post careers to stay fit.

Even though I feel great right now, I know that I need to be careful to stay in good shape. The real test will be in a few years as the aches and pains become more prevalent.

Unfortunately, I've seen many former NFL colleagues struggle with their health from the wear and tear over the years.

The NFL does a good job of compensating NFL veterans with 401(k) plans, severance packages and other benefits.

The one frustration for many is that the NFL veterans are only given health insurance for five years after their retirement. That leaves many NFL veterans in a precarious position considering so many deal with major health issues years after retirement. The day-in and day-out hitting at practices and

games takes a toll years later, even though some say I was just a practice dummy the latter half of my career.

Hope for the future

For right now, my medical bills are taken care of since I retired less than five years ago. I am hoping that the NFL Players Association will work to improve the health benefits for those that have retired years ago.

They have worked hard to get better revenue sharing and protect the players in other ways. Now it is time for the retired players to get the "life-long benefits" that they have claimed to provide.

As a football player, I felt so fortunate to have made a career out of playing the game I love. Now as a former football player, I'm doing what I can to make sure that I don't have to feel the effects for the rest of my life. I hope the NFLPA will also fight for our futures.

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