

THE TRANSITION

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Transition- movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, subject, concept, etc.

What does all that mean in the realm of everyday life for athletes, students, professionals, and politicians as well?

Transition is the one thing everyone will face in their lives. I chose to write about transition because I'm in the midst of the biggest transition I've faced since the birth of my children: professional transition. After fifteen years I have just retired from professional football.

It has been well documented many professional athletes struggle when they leave the game. What happens to these immortal men when the "lights have been turned off?" Quite honestly, it hasn't been a very pretty picture for a lot of athletes. I decided long before my "lights were turned off" I wasn't going to be one of those players who just couldn't let it go. I had overcome other transitions in my life and this would be no different.

There have been many transitions I had to endure. The first time I experienced transition was when we moved from Washington, D.C. to Maryland. Though only separated by about twenty miles, for a fourteen-year old it seemed like 200 miles. Being separated from lifelong friends for the first time was very tough and there were a few trying moments. However it wasn't long before I found a new set of friends and moved past those tense moments I experienced leaving D.C. Even at a young age I was able to accept change, turn the page, and move forward.

Another transition was the deaths of my mother and brother within a year and a half. I'm not sure if I handled either of those transitions very well, but I guess that is to be expected when you suddenly lose loved ones. Looking back, I believe I applied the same thought process I did when I was fourteen. I wasn't going to let my emotions take my mind to a place I wasn't prepared to be. I believe willing the mind to handle a situation is the first step in dealing with anything.

The transitions I've faced were hard to deal with on many levels. I tried to bring those same coping mechanisms to the National Football League (NFL).

If we polled most young boys who grew up playing or watching football, they would tell you playing in the NFL would be the ultimate dream. It was no different for me. Upon graduation from SHIP, I got the opportunity to make that dream a reality. I knew it would be a tough road coming from tiny Shippensburg University. SHIP had never had a player make it to the NFL.

In 1993 while working at Town Cleaners in downtown Shippensburg, I received a telephone call from the New York Jets offering me a contract and a chance to come tryout for their team. I can still recall the joy and excitement my family, as well as my SHIP family, felt when I got that call. I had enjoyed a very successful college career and this was a chance to test my skills on a much bigger stage. As I boarded an airplane for only the second time in my life, my first thought was I hope we make it to New York safely! My second thought was, do I have what it takes to play at the highest level? This was a big time transition staring me right in the face. I signed with the Jets with a \$2500 signing bonus. Most of my family and friends thought I was guaranteed ten years and millions of dollars. That wasn't the case as I was only guaranteed the chance to tryout.

Like most rookies in the NFL I came in like a little kid, looking around at all the players I had watched play for so many years. Boomer Esaison from the University of Maryland was the quarterback, I remembered watching him play when I was in high school. Now we shared the same locker room.

Players in the National Football League were a lot bigger and faster than what I was used to at Shippensburg, but I felt I was still up for the challenge. It didn't take long in training camp before I knew this journey wasn't

Rob Davis '92, a twelve-year National Football League veteran, retired in March after eleven seasons as the long snapper for the Green Bay Packers and was named director of player development. He assists players in acclimating to their roles both on and off the field. Rob is involved in his community and is sought after as a guest speaker.

going to be an easy one. At the end of training camp I was asked to bring my play book to the coach's office. I was told I wasn't going to make the team. Though it was a tough pill to swallow, I had been through several transitions before.

I would have to swallow a few more pills. I was fired three more times over the next four years. I was cut by the Jets again in 1994, the Chiefs in 1995, and the Bears in 1997. I did make the Chicago Bears team in 1996 only to lose my job a year later. As one can imagine, this wasn't the path I had envisioned. However, it was the "hand I was dealt" and I had every intention of playing it out.

Midway through the 1997 season, I was signed by the Green Bay Packers. I knew I was running out of chances to fulfill my dream of playing more than one year in the NFL. It was do or die time because I had already decided I would hang up my cleats for good the next time I was cut. I came to Green Bay with one goal: to make a career in the NFL.

When I arrived in Green Bay, just one year removed from their Super Bowl XXXI victory over the New England Patriots, the Packers had a very good team without a lot of missing links. However their long snapper got injured which opened the door for me to come in. I nailed that door shut and threw away the hammer.

I had finally made a team again and I was going to do everything in my power to make good on the promise I had made to myself: give it your all and let the chips fall where they fall. I was able to put together what is now the third longest consecutive games played streak in the history of this storied franchise. Imagine a player from tiny Shippensburg University being mentioned next to players like Brett Favre and Forrest Gregg, the only two players to play more consecutive games than me. I played 167 consecutive games in the Green and Gold, and 203 total games before I walked away. I had somehow played football from the age of 8 to 39.

That brings me to where I am today.

I ask myself why it is so difficult for people to handle life's transitions? I know there are a lot of different answers but here is how I have always looked at transition. I believe we all have a purpose and a passion in life, even if they are difficult to identify. As athletes I think it is important to know it is not a matter of IF the game will end, it's WHEN the game will end. Knowing that ahead of time, makes it important to start working on an exit plan early. This plan will help make those tough transitions easier.

Being financially prepared is only half of the battle. Most people outside professional sports think if an athlete has millions of dollars, the transition should be easy. That is NOT TRUE. It is those athletes with the most money who have probably done the least amount of post-career preparation. I had to prepare because from a salary stand point I knew I wasn't going to be "set for life." What does that mean anyway? I never knew when that next pink slip was coming.

Armed with those thoughts I spent the better part of the last fifteen years preparing for this past March. How would I like to be identified when the "lights have been turned off?" What am I going to do with the financial head start I had been given? Finally, was I able to find another PURPOSE or PASSION away from football?

It is those questions I ask my players as the director of player development with the Packers. In my new role, it is my job to help players with transition. I assist them when they come into the league, throughout their career, and when their careers near an end. The earlier a player starts working on his exit strategy, the more prepared he'll be when it comes. The NFL has a wide range of programs to help players achieve this and I have developed some additional programs as well.

I was able to see firsthand what happens when a player retires without a plan. Brett Favre and I retired three weeks apart. Brett has been one of the most popular athletes in the world over the last decade. I saw the struggle he had when he walked away from the game that he loved so much. Brett is financially "set for life." However, I don't know if he had a passion away from the game. This can make that transition difficult. Is why he continues to play because of not having anything to fill that void of not playing football? You have to love the game to play as long and as well as he has. But there comes a time when it will end. Then what? I feel if he had identified his purpose and passions away from football he would have been better off. As it was, he struggled with the transition and has been subject to criticism. However, I am glad it came to light because it shows that even the best of the best will struggle with that transition.

In closing, I think we should allow our minds to expand beyond our comfort zones. This will better prepare us when we are faced with life's transitions. Preparation doesn't have to take away from what you are currently doing. It will simply enhance it because the fear of tomorrow will not dominate today.