



NFL interns plan for career after football

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By Larry Weisman, USA TODAY

Athletes don't live in the real world. Big money. Perks and privileges. No sense of what the little people endure as they try to make a living. Don't even suggest that to Jarvis Green. The New England Patriots backup defensive end has a wife in college, two children under seven and what amounts to a second full-time job at Rolls-Royce Naval Marine in Walpole, Mass.

In the offseason he might put in as many as 40 hours a week as a regular working stiff. Once the Patriots begin their quest to repeat as NFL champions, Green's day off from football (usually a Tuesday) melts into another shift at the plant, where Rolls-Royce designs and builds propellers for a variety of U.S. Navy craft.

"It's been hard, with football and the family," Green acknowledges while on his afternoon break. "But this will help me down the road. Coach (Bill) Belichick always says when you have a lot of free time and money, that's when trouble comes. I'm keeping busy."

Green, 25, landed this position handling a variety of administrative tasks at Rolls-Royce through an internship program run by the NFL's player development department. Some 200 players, current and retired, spend parts of the spring months in a variety of enterprises — such as banking, finance, hotel management and coaching — to help them prepare for when they must earn a living by dint of their wits and not their bodies.

"I majored in construction engineering at LSU, and my professors always told me to have a backup plan, that football wasn't going to last forever," says Green, who soon will begin his third season with the Patriots. "Hopefully, what I'm doing now will give me direction. This internship is a learning experience."

Direction. Experience. Those words resonate with Chris Stankovich, a sports psychologist whose consulting firm, Champion Athletics, deals with former players transitioning to the workaday world. The problems are many, and the athletes often lack two components critical for success in new ventures: direction and experience.

"Whether it's high school, college or pro, post-athletic life is difficult," he says. "We coddle them all the way through. And because they are so committed to their career, they don't have a need for a job. But when they are kicked out at 25 or 30, they don't have a job or the experience or confidence to go get one."

Which is exactly the point Mike Haynes makes as he pitches post-football planning to NFL players.



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A member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Haynes oversees the NFL's player development department and the internship program, which began in 1992 with 31 participants, expanded to 100 in 1996 and has doubled since.

The NFL also encourages players to continue and/or finish their education, offering an annual reimbursement up to \$15,000 for tuition, books and fees.

Eighteen veterans, with Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis the best known of this year's graduates, earned diplomas this spring, bringing the Continuing Education Program's total of graduates above 200 over the last five years.

Each team has a player development director (often a former player) who helps arrange local internships to get players into the business world.

"It serves to expose the guys to other things outside of football or at least off the playing field," says Haynes, 50. "If we can get them to take small steps in six to eight weeks and get them to focus on things other than being football players, it actually helps them be better football players. At least that's what our research shows.

"Maybe they play harder because they have a better appreciation of football or because they know if they don't stay in it a long time they're making great strides toward another (career) and don't feel insecure about their futures."

Getting a taste of the real world

Some don't wander too far from the game as they briefly step away.

New York Jets offensive tackle Kareem McKenzie, 25, interned in the league's player development department a year ago and in officiating in January and February, beginning his days at the club's Long Island facility, then taking the train into Manhattan like so many other commuters.

"It's a chance to experience a real-world situation and what it's like to make a regular salary working 9-to-5 while thinking on your feet," he says. "I want to take advantage of every opportunity I can have while I'm in the NFL. You never know when reality is going to knock on your door and tell you it's time to get a real job."



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Every player can be assured a knock awaits him. Acknowledgment and action often get buried in denial.

"You're fighting an animal with sharp teeth when you try to prepare an athlete for life after the game," Stankovich says. "There is such a culture of machismo that they are not ready to hear about life after. That's the beast."

How best to fight this beast? Live and learn.

Troy Barnett, a defensive end for the Patriots (1994-96), interned with Reebok, got caught up in computers and returned to the sports apparel company when his playing days ended. He's a senior business analyst.

"I fell in love with the management information systems department, and I came back every summer to hone my skills," says Barnett, 33.

He kicked around for a year after leaving the NFL, interned again with Reebok for eight months and then earned a full-time job on the help desk. Now he manages the North American sales force systems. He says he owes much of his success to the internship program.

"Not only did I get a chance to meet a lot of great people, I got a lot of training, all of it on the job. I probably bypassed going back to school for two years," says Barnett, who also assisted Reebok's human resources department in re-establishing an intern program.

The companies tying in with the NFL get willing (and large) workers who add to the atmosphere in several ways. Unlike other interns, they're not aspiring immediately, if at all, to corporate positions. And their backgrounds often differ wildly from the standard intern's.

"For us it's a nice change," says Esquire editorial assistant Peter Martin, who supervises Patriots linebacker Matt Chatham's stint as a writer and reporter.

"Obviously he has different experiences than the other interns — he tackled a streaker in the Super Bowl. He certainly has different ideas and different contacts and perspective."

Chatham, a four-year NFL veteran, helps research a column called "The Answer Fella" and is writing a two-page piece for September publication on his internship as he puts in two days a week at Esquire's New York City offices, commuting from Foxboro, Mass.



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“We get a fun story out of it, and we have a bigger intern than GQ,” says Martin, a Pittsburgh Steelers fan who loves to talk football with Chatham.

Chatham, 26, gets to explore and develop his writing skills and already has ideas about how he might apply them in the future. He majored in English and criminal justice at South Dakota with an emphasis on pre-law but also enjoyed an avocation — writing provocative letters to the college newspaper.

“I had kind of a following around school. I loved that, excelling at something,” he says.

In 20 years he sees himself with a law degree but perhaps working as a columnist where “you can condemn what you want to condemn from behind your keyboard. I love arguing. Writing is arguing ... with a pen.”

Discovering life skills

Some internships are paid, and some are not. Some are actual career development, and some are not.

Green, who began working at Rolls-Royce last October, might have set the all-time standard for being serious about the job when he showed up for work at 9 the morning after playing a Monday night game — in Denver.

“We did not expect him to be here. That’s dedication,” says Jorge Morales, Green’s boss and the company’s chief financial officer. “I think he’s a model for the next generation of football players, who think not only about the game but about after the game.”

To Haynes, there is no time like the present to consider the future. As a player, he interned in finance, later helped form a public relations agency in Los Angeles for sports figures and worked for seven years as a global licensing manager for Calloway Golf.

The NFL, in conjunction with the NFL Players Association, isn’t the only pro sports league to take the next step in arranging off-the-field employment, but it has the most players, and upward of 400 leave the league each season, many untrained and unready for what awaits them.

“If they don’t believe they can be successful, they won’t even make the effort,” Haynes says. “We’re trying to increase their self-efficacy, and they find in the trying process they do have the skill.”



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The average NFL career is about four years. Even for those who play into their 30s, another three or four decades in which to be productive lie ahead.

Being ready for that other world calls for constant preparation, says McKenzie, who earned his degree in management from Penn State in 3 1/2 years.

"Not everybody is going to make it in the NFL, and too often we look at that as the main goal in life," the four-year veteran says.

"We sometimes focus on that too much and not enough on the thing we have between our ears."

Green agrees. He juggles the Patriots' offseason training with his tasks at Rolls-Royce and a full family life, his sights fixed on a tomorrow that could begin at any time.

"This is the time to sacrifice," he says. "This keeps me grounded."

"In the back of my mind, I know football won't last forever."