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Bring it on: as NFL teams scatter to their summer campsites, Emmitt Smith's pains and gains, Steve Spurrier's loose reign, Dungy's `D' and Ricky are among the sizzling story lines - NFL: training camp preview

Paul Attner

Emmitt Smith spent part of the offseason in searing pain. And loved it.

Smith voluntarily subjected his 33-year-old body to 10 sessions of "structural integration," a highly specialized massage and manipulation treatment that concentrates on smoothing out the fascia that coats muscles. Structural Integration advocates, who now include Smith, believe their discipline realigns and balances the body by lengthening and repositioning the fascia. And that, in turn, gives someone like Smith a better opportunity to excel. But to get to that point, it can really hurt.

Yet Smith, in his quest to break Walter Payton's career rushing record this season, isn't about to let a little discomfort block his single-minded determination to stall the aging process and turn himself into a sleeker, more powerful, quicker version of his former self.

Of all the players who will report soon for the start of NFL training camps, Smith will be the most scrutinized. He is convinced people will be surprised by what they see--so surprised that he already has decided he won't retire even after he gains 540 yards this season to surpass Payton's mark of 16,726 yards.

"I have three years left, and it feels good to know that my skill set has not dropped off that much, that I still can play this game," he says. "Will I play another three, four year? It depends on a lot of things, so I am taking it year by year. But I want to keep playing."

Smith has become fanatical about offseason preparation, a process that took on a warp-speed tempo the past few months, now that the Payton mark is so close. Smith hates to rise early, so he purposely scheduled conditioning sessions in February and March for 5:30 a.m.--just to give himself a challenge.

"I am beating everyone else up in the morning to work out," he says. "It creates an early discipline for me." He also took fast-twitch instruction designed to increase his reaction and acceleration ability off the snap.

Structural Integration is the bonus card. Michael Solberg, his instructor, is convinced the sessions he had with Smith will yield impressive results this fall.

"When he walked in, his hips were facing one way and his shoulders another and his head was cocked to the side," says Solberg. "I loved to see it, because I knew he would be delighted with the results."

Structural integration backers think an athlete like Smith has taken so much pounding over the years that his fascia tightens and his body locks up, restricting his range of motion. But smoothing out the fascia, which is like a three-dimensional spider web spread throughout the body, produces improved symmetry--and potential elevated performance.

With all parts in alignment, Solberg believes his patient "now is better balanced around his core. He should demonstrate improved quickness, speed and power, certainly better agility. He will be much more fluid; he should be able to change directions better. One of his strengths is his vision. Now when he sees something, his body is more capable of doing what he asks."

Smith already visits a chiropractor who specializes in muscle interactive therapy, which helps form and maintains muscles properly so they function as designed. "I swear by him," says Smith. "He helps me to eliminate the effects of the little bitsy things that start taking a toll on your body. It protects me from muscle pulls, those types of things."

He also is eating better--more fish, fruits and vegetables and less breads. "Nothing can preclude me from major injuries, but all this helps stop some of the minor things that keep people out," he says.

Anything to keep Walter Payton within sight.--Paul Attner

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