

SPIRIT QUEST

Peace Through the Storm

By KEITH MITCHELL
As Told To GINI SIKES

Retired NFL player Keith Mitchell discovered calm through the use of yoga after an injury ended the only career he knew. Now, the renowned Yogi helps others find peace within.

I got ready to play the Buffalo Bills and felt the cold sensation of fear crawl up my spine on Sept. 14, 2003. Fear was something I didn't know. I was an all-pro player in my seventh year; I'd played linebacker for the New Orleans Saints and was now [playing for] the Jacksonville Jaguars. What was I afraid of? I couldn't shake it, and I asked my mother and sister to pray for me with my father leading us over the phone. Prayer was part of my family's fabric. My dad's father was a minister in the Church of God in Christ. My faith was forced. We were made to memorize Scripture, and if we got it wrong, my grandmother whipped us. Brutally. You have to track that mentality to slavery; [it is similar to] the master beating the slaves to believe in Christianity. My father was an unaffectionate disciplinarian. I turned to football as my outlet for pain. He believed the odds were against me because so few make it to the top, so I did everything to prove him wrong. The violence of the game and the idea of prayer confused me. Coaches are conditioned like everyone else to believe God will protect us and give our team the edge. We'd say seven or eight prayers before a game! I'd think, 'Wait, the other team is praying, too. Is God going to help us because we pray harder?'

After my family prayed before that Buffalo Bills game, during the first half, I made a tackle I'd done a millions times. I fell backwards. Cymbals clanged in my ears. I was telling myself to get up, but nothing moved. Doctors said I suffered a "spinal contusion" and didn't know if I'd ever move again. For six months, my body remained numb. A therapist began teaching me meditation. I couldn't raise one finger, but my breathing I could control. Focusing on my breathing, my body started to respond, and I began to heal myself. Three months later I could walk, but I couldn't write. My coach came to me with a choice: You can try to play again or retire. I was a trained warrior. I played one game, ran down a kickoff and made the tackle.



Keith Mitchell once released pain on the field in the NFL (at left, he's No. 59 in 1999). Today, (above) he exhales as a top Yogi whose clients include Paris Hilton.



But I knew it was over. I couldn't fight anymore, and it tore me apart. I had to face my truth. I'd built my career on frustration and anger. I started reading and re-examining the faith instilled in me since childhood. People would say, "Read this Scripture. It will bring you joy." And I'd think, "But it doesn't bring you joy." I wanted to break free of the barriers I'd placed around me. I committed completely to meditation, then yoga. Meditation helped with the fears and the mental healing. After my mother cared for me, she suffered a stroke. Through mediation, I kept my sanity to support her. I studied with master Yogis, among them Ganga White, who is a 60-year-old philosopher with an athlete's physique. You can't hide when you're a 6-foot 3-inch, 223-pound Black man, so I went to the front of his class to absorb all the energy. That was the tipping point, and it turned me into who I am now. I've [since wondered,] 'If I hadn't prayed before I got hurt, would I be walking today?' Yoga is my proactive prayer. To excel in sports, you alienate yourself. My purpose now is to serve others. I help ex-players make the transition into life after the NFL, sharing how to heal physically, emotionally and spiritually with diet, meditation, yoga, self-compassion. I also work with inner-city kids who cling to sports to rise above the chaos. Sports was my salvation. After I lost my sport, I lost myself. I found myself again through yoga.



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