

STAYING

MACK STRONG

Talks about life off the gridiron

By John Kinmonth

The average American switches jobs every two years between the ages of 18 and 37. The average NFL career lasts three and a half seasons.

Fortunately, Mack Strong isn't average. Snubbed in the NFL college draft, the longtime Seattle Seahawk and Bellevue Club member flew out to Seattle after graduating from the University of Georgia with borrowed luggage and a garbage bag full of shoes—and he never left.

While many idealize professional athletics as an easy career path for those with exceptional talent or physical prowess, Mack's football career—both on and off the field—was characterized by hard hits and small, yet crucial, gains.

It took years before Mack was recognized as a top fullback in the league. His first season in 1993 was humbly spent on Seattle's practice squad, never even donning a Seahawks uniform. The next year, Mack unceremoniously earned a spot on the regular team, but didn't get to play until halfway through the season. Incredibly, he scored the game-winning touchdown in his first NFL outing. If life were a movie plot, stardom would have surely followed.

In reality, Mack had to wait two more years until he started his first game with the Seahawks. Despite increased playing time, his position on the team was hardly secure.

Even after he became an established starter, he still had to deal with coaching changes, agonizing contract negotiations and younger players brought in to take his hard-earned spot.

"Because things happened the way they did, it always made me hungry," he says. "I think I learned early in my career that nothing's going to be handed to me, nothing's going to come without a price, and I needed to be willing to pay that price if I wanted to be a part of football for one year, let alone 15."

It wasn't until late in his career that Mack finally earned recognition throughout the league. Thirteen years after signing with the Seahawks for a relatively meager \$8,000 bonus and long past the average football player's NFL lifespan, Mack held a pivotal role in the Seahawks' 2005 Super Bowl run. He also earned a coveted Pro Bowl spot in both the 2005 and 2006 seasons for his efforts. Many fans saw this as vindication for his long service to the team while other players grabbed the headlines.

However, the 2007 season spelled an abrupt end for Mack's lengthy career when he suffered a much-publicized injury to the vertebrae in his neck, threatening paralysis if he continued to play.

"I'm glad I got out before it got really serious, it could have para-



Photo by Corky Trewin/Seattle Seahawks

lyzed me," he says. "It gave me a definitive answer to the question if I should continue to play another year. It really just closed the book on it, and I have a lot of peace in that."

Now, nearly a year and a half after the injury, Mack has transferred his love for football to the broadcast booth with Fox Sports Northwest, hosting his own weekly television show called "Mack Strong: Seahawks Insider."

"It was very therapeutic for me," he says. "There was a bit of a grieving process, but I feel like I'm enjoying my life because I have other things that really bring me great joy."

Strong Ties

Throughout the years, Mack and his wife Zoe have been heavily involved in several organizations, including Childhaven—a program that helps abused children—and the Seattle Church of Christ where they served as youth leaders for a number of years.

POWER

But the program where they put most of their effort focuses on an often-overlooked segment of the population—Washington’s native reservations.

“My wife is part Native American from the Nez Perce tribe out of Idaho,” he says. “She was very familiar with the culture and lifestyle, especially living on a reservation.”

Seven years ago, in partnership with HOPE Worldwide, Mack and Zoe decided to start TEAM-WORKS Academy, a tutoring and mentoring program for Native American youth.

“Native Americans are among the most underserved and underprivileged people in our community. There are a lot of needs going unmet,” he says. “The on-time high-school graduation rate for Native Americans is about 11 percent.”

Currently, Mack and a team of volunteers host three popular eight-week Saturday academies on the Muckleshoot and Tulalip reservations, corresponding to the school-year calendar. They also host a regular after-school program in Tulalip.

Not content to simply work with local tribes, Mack says he and his wife hope to establish similar programs on reservations throughout the Pacific Northwest and Alaska.

“Native Americans have been taken advantage of so much in the past by different groups or the government, so you have to really build trust that you’re coming in to be part of the solution and not part of the problem,” he says.

Last year, TEAM-WORKS hosted a charity golf tournament with more than 110 golfers, and they’re hoping to make it an annual fundraising event. This year’s event is taking place at Echo Falls on July 8. For more information, contact Erica Richey at erica_richey@hopeww.org.

Since retiring from the Seahawks, Mack most enjoys the time he’s able to spend with his family, especially his two young sons, Isaiah and Evan.

“This may sound strange, but I really enjoy the mundane simple things that I’ve missed out on. I get the kids up every morning, get them ready for school, feed them and drop them off,” he says. “It takes up a lot of time, but I’ve missed out on that since they’ve been born.

“I spend a lot of my time driving between my house and school, but I really enjoy that,” he says.

Mack says the career-ending injury hasn’t held him back physically after a successful surgery:

“I can do just about everything I could do before, with the exception of running into people with my head.”

FROM L-R Mack, Zoe, Isaiah and Evan.

FIVE REFLECTIONS

Favorite Food

Fried Chicken—it’s probably going to be the death of me. My mom’s fried chicken is the best on the planet.

Best Advice

Work hard.

First job

Delta Airlines in Atlanta—loading and unloading luggage in the bulk bin. I had to take a long bus ride and then walk a mile at midnight from the bus stop back to my sister’s house. I thought, I don’t know if I want to do this for the rest of my life.

Hero/Greatest Influence

Jesus, my wife and my mom.

Favorite Activity at the Bellevue Club

Pilates with Elizabeth (Hartpence)—even though she kills me when I go in there.

