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THANK YOU, VONTAZE BURFICT



In Week 1 of the 2016 season, I hurt my shoulder.

It was a perfect day for football in Philly—75 degrees and sunny—and the crowd was raucous. It was the first pro start for our rookie first-round draft pick Carson Wentz, a quarterback from North Dakota State, and our first game with a brand-new head coach in Doug Pederson. Hopes were high. There was a 9/11 tribute before the game, and soldiers rolled out a giant American flag on the field.

As was the case before every game early in my career, I felt such excitement and anxiety that I was almost physically ill. Life in the NFL is fun, but it's also the most stressful, pressure-filled thing I've ever done. Carson and I walked out onto the field together. My gloves were right, my armbands were right, and the green number 86 jersey felt perfect. We were just getting to know each other then, but now he's one of my best friends.

Our coaches called a great first series to get everyone comfortable playing again. We started with a couple of runs to get Carson acclimated. On



our first play, running back Ryan Matthews ran for six yards right behind me. My job was to step inside and collide with Cleveland's defensive end. I was supposed to shoot my play-side hand into his armpit and get my hat in front of his. On the snap, I stepped, and bang! There was a tiny explosion

It takes a village to raise an NFL player.

in my helmet, meaning I'd done my job. The first play of 2016 was in the books, and it was a good one.

Playing tight end in the NFL means that on some plays, I'm blocking guys who are much bigger than me, and on

other plays, I might be running a pass pattern or lining up wide in the formation. Later in the series, Carson saw a matchup we both liked. I was lined up wide against a smaller Cleveland safety. Carson threw a fade to my outside shoulder, and I had to swing my body around and adjust to grab it. I snatched the ball out of the air with one hand and crashed to the ground. A catch. My first of the season.

Plays like that allow me to use some of my old basketball skills. Going up against someone to catch a ball is a lot like boxing a guy out down low for a rebound. I use my big body and then let my instincts take over. When I was in middle school and high school, I dreamed about playing in the NBA. I was going to be the next Adam Morrison (more on that later)—until I met a former NFL tight end named Brent Jones, who won some Super Bowls as a member of the San Francisco 49ers. Brent told me that if I worked hard, I could play on Sundays in the NFL. I wouldn't be in the league without him, and my mom, and about 100 other people. It takes a village to raise an NFL player—but more on that later as well. I'm getting ahead of myself!

Something you should know about Carson Wentz is that he never played like a rookie. Even on that first drive, he was cool in the huddle and calmly changed plays at the line of scrimmage. It was like playing in front of 70,000

people on national television didn't even faze him despite never performing on that kind of stage. One of Carson's heroes is Brett Favre, who was a really similar player—a big, athletic dude with a huge arm and no fear, who smiled a lot and had fun playing the game.

EVERYTHING CHANGES

Later in the drive, something happened, and everything changed. We ran one of my favorite plays: I go in motion across the formation, and the receiver to my side runs a slant. I'm supposed to leak out into the flat underneath him, where I'll be wide open with space to run after the catch.

The play worked just like Doug and the staff drew it up. I started moving forward into my route just before the snap, and before I knew it, Carson put the ball right into my hands. I turned upfield and ran for about 13 yards before I slammed into Cleveland's safety Ibrahiem Campbell, whose job was to fly up, crash into my left shoulder, and drive me out of bounds.

He did his job perfectly. As soon as I got up, I knew something wasn't right with my shoulder, but there was no time to deal with it. We went right back to the huddle and then into our next play. I had to get down into my stance and block Cleveland's outside linebacker Joe Schobert—at the time, a rookie out of Wisconsin playing in his first NFL game. I managed to get my hands on Schobert and move my body in front of him, but my shoulder was on fire.

"Something doesn't feel right in my shoulder."

That first series was perfect for Carson. He hit our receiver Jordan Matthews on a fade route in the end zone, but before I could get my shoulder checked out, I had to stand in as the left-side wing in the field goal unit. My job was to stick my foot in the ground and get a punch on their outside rusher. The extra point is one of those plays that most NFL fans ignore, but

in order to get it right, everybody on the field has to do their job. Thankfully, I was able to get a hand on the rusher, and we made the kick.

After the field goal, I jogged over to the sideline and found the trainers. “Something doesn’t feel right in my shoulder,” I said, and they started lifting my pads and feeling around my arm. In the NFL, there’s a lot of adrenaline and caffeine pumping through your body during a game, and you don’t necessarily feel all the pain of an injury right away. The trainers thought it was a sprain, so I kept playing.

The rest of the game was a blur. At that time in my life, before I knew Christ, I was living for the stat sheet. If I caught seven balls and a touch-

down or two, it meant I had a good day, and I could feel good about myself. If not, there was a lot of anxiety and fear and paranoia. I was living and dying by these performances.

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WHEN THE ADRENALINE WEARS OFF

After an NFL game, you go back to the locker room, the coach says a few words, and then you shower and meet with the media at your locker. Finally, you get to find your family. That night, I was looking for my girlfriend (now my wife), Julie, who is a professional soccer player, and my mom.

It should have been a celebratory night, since we got our first win with a new quarterback and a new coach—and wins of any kind are hard to come by in the NFL. But as the adrenaline wore off, I could barely move my shoulder. I called the team doctor and asked him to check me out the next morning.

For an introverted West Coast kid, adjusting to Philly was really tough. It was a cold, gray, tough East Coast city, and in my early days in the league, I was away from my family and my girlfriend for the first time. People

envision NFL rookies living an amazing life, floating on a cloud of money and going from city to city and party to party, but it's really like having any other job. You go to the office (in my case, the team facility), put in long hours, try to take care of your body, and try to figure out whom to trust.

Obviously, I play a sport that is very taxing on the body. I usually play on Sundays, but I don't feel the real effects until later on. An ankle sprain feels way worse the next morning. Having to get on a flight to get to the next stadium is painful—everything swells up because of the altitude. After my games, I take an inventory of my body. I start with my

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ankles: "Are you guys good?" Then I ask, "Knees, how are you guys feeling?" I move on to my groin, hips, hamstrings, shoulders, and neck. If something's not right, I have to figure out how I'm going to fix it before taking the field in a few days.

FINDING A ROUTINE

I stick to the same routine every week.

Monday means a two-hour massage. I get acupuncture, where they stick little needles just under my skin. After that, I lift weights and then take an Epsom salt bath.

Tuesday is a complete "off day"—at least physically. I go to the facility with the rest of my teammates for five hours to review the previous game's film and go over a light install for the upcoming week. In the training room, I get my hips worked on and sometimes run on our underwater treadmill.

On Wednesdays, the team has a tough practice where we work on installs

for the coming week. Afterward, I stretch and go right into the cold tub, then work with the trainers to make sure my hips are moving well.

Thursday I might get “scraped,” which is a Chinese technique that involves scraping muscle tissue to stimulate blood flow. The practice has been used for centuries to promote healing.

“Zach, you need a routine of greatness.”

Friday is a short day at the facility. After that, I go to yoga to decompress mentally and physically. I have another massage, and then I meet up with Julie either at home or someplace in the city for a date night. Needless to say, this is my favorite part of the week!

Saturday means another massage to make sure everything is moving right.

Keeping up with my health and training is truly a weeklong process. Early in my career, I spoke with former NFL tight end (and future Hall of Famer) Tony Gonzalez. Tony played in 14 Pro Bowls and had more than 15,000 career receiving yards. He said, “Zach, you need a routine of greatness. Our routines are not all gonna be the same, but find out what works for you and commit to it. You’re not gonna last in this league without a routine.”

FEELING USELESS

At the start of my career in Philly, I didn’t open up to a lot of people. In football culture, if you’re walking down the hall and somebody asks how you’re doing, you feel like you have to say “Great!” even if your arm is hanging off and blood is shooting out of an artery. Every conversation is a referendum on your toughness and manhood. It’s not like I was going to go up to an NFL legend like Michael Vick and tell him my deepest, darkest fears—I mean, he would have been cool about it, but it’s not like we were on that level. Honestly, I was afraid to try to be!

After the Cleveland game in 2016, the team doctors discovered I had a

displaced rib that was pressing on a nerve in my shoulder. They said if the rib moved any farther, it could sever the nerve, and I would lose the use of my arm for the rest of my life. I also had a separated shoulder and a torn pectoral muscle. Kind of a big deal.

That injury diagnosis set off one of the toughest years of my life emotionally. Every day I would drive into the facility, park my car, and head to treatment while the rest of the guys went to team meetings, positional meetings, and film review. Even lifting was hard (if not impossible) with my injury, so I felt like the body I had built for football was starting to shrink. Meanwhile, it looked like everyone else was only getting stronger.

While I was injured, people still treated me like a friend and talked to me, but it was different. The year before was my breakout season—I had pulled in more than 70 balls—but in the NFL, it’s not “What did you do last year?” but rather “What are you going to do this week?”

Because of my performance the previous year, I had just signed a contract extension. There were high expectations for me now, and I was paranoid. When you’re injured in the NFL, you feel useless, and you think, “Are they gonna release me? Am I ever gonna feel right again?”

TREY OF LIGHT

One of the guys I started getting close to on the team was a tight end named Trey Burton, an undrafted rookie free agent out of Florida. Trey is freakishly athletic and fast, as the world would discover a few years later in our Super Bowl win. He can do anything on a football field. But something I noticed about Trey was that the normal ups and downs every NFL player goes through didn’t seem to faze him.

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Life in the NFL was tough for Trey initially. He played on the scout team, which means that during practice, he would run the opposing team's plays. He was also expected to be a stud on special teams and ready for his number to be

called on offense. It's the lowest rung on the NFL ladder, but he didn't let his situation get to him.

When you're on a football team—traveling together, eating together, and going to meetings together—you really get to know each other. I knew Trey had a peace and a joy about him that I desperately needed. I was envious of it.

I started to confide in him on the sidelines. I even started calling him “my therapist” because he always had a wise word to help me get my head right.

Ironically, when I hurt my shoulder, it was Trey who replaced me in the lineup. We still had a legendary Philadelphia tight end in Brent Celek, and with Trey in the lineup, we were in good hands. He was ready for his opportunity and deserved it.

I returned to the game after a few weeks, but by then, the Eagles were mired in a losing streak. Even though I was better, I was protecting my shoulder and not playing as freely as I used to. On top of that, there was a lot of pressure to win. Philly is the greatest place in the world to play on a successful team, but it's a tough hang when you're not doing well. And even though most NFL players have thick skin, reading negative things in the media and feeling the backlash from fans still really hurts.

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A BURFICT STORM

I felt lost and anxious and desolate that season, even though statistically I was doing well and would finish the season with more catches on fewer targets than the year before. It all came to a head in Week 13, when we traveled to Cincinnati to play the Bengals. We pride ourselves on being a physical team—all NFL teams do—but the Bengals were *extra* physical. We knew they played through the whistle, and they were led defensively by a guy named Vontaze Burfict, who is a six foot two, 255-pound wrecking ball. I played against him in college, and I knew he'd try to get in my head. It's part of his game.

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Let me be clear: I don't mind trash talk, and I don't mind playing against physical guys. In the league, there are new challenges every week, and every guy I'm supposed to block is a tough guy. But the situation with Burfict would come to define that season and, in fact, my life.

The play happened in the first quarter. In our game plan, Doug had me all over the formation, but I usually started either in the slot or lined up wide. In the back of my mind that whole season, I was thinking, "If I get hit the wrong way, I could lose the use of my arm forever."

On a third and eight, I was in the slot, and the play had me out on a pass route. Carson took some pressure and ended up scrambling toward the sideline, where he eventually ran out of bounds without taking a hit. The problem was that Burfict was in pursuit, and I had a chance to put a block on him. If I had, Carson would have run out of bounds anyway—but I didn't touch Burfict, and fans and the media lost their minds. If we had won the game, the play would have been forgotten. Unfortunately, we lost 32–14, and my life would never be the same.

Media pundits said I made a half-hearted attempt and that I was a “toreador” with Burfict. (Toreadors are those guys in Spain who get out of the way of bulls.) They were telling Doug to bench me and calling me soft. And it destroyed me. For the first time in my life, my identity as a tough guy—a football player—was called into question. I felt like I was done with football. I didn’t think I could ever repair my reputation, and I wasn’t sure I even wanted to try.

RELINQUISHING CONTROL

Growing up, my identity was based on football. I felt like if I worked hard enough or gave something up, football would reward me. It became my theology. Not going out on Friday or Saturday nights in college meant I should get more in return because I had invested in the sport. I was living and dying with every practice rep and every stat sheet at the end of every game.

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I still felt that way in my early days in the NFL. I was lying in bed replaying the Bengals game over and over in my head. I had no peace—none.

Before then, football was something I felt I controlled. In the aftermath, I just surrendered everything. I said, “Jesus, I’m done...I submit everything to You.” So as it turns out, that play was the best thing that ever happened to me.

The Burfict play happened when Julie and I were engaged, and I got baptized the day before my wedding. Since then, we’ve grown a lot together in our walk. We are very blessed to have each other because we understand the physical demands and the stress that come with being an athlete. Being married to Julie means having someone who will (a) be in my corner and (b)

show me a different viewpoint. It meant so much to have her there through the whole Burfict ordeal.

“It’s going to pass,” she told me. “It doesn’t define who you are as an athlete or as a person.” Eventually I believed her.