

NFL Athletes Receive Rolfing® for Career Longevity

By Wayne and Sandy Henningsgaard, Certified Advanced Rolfers™

We are going to share with you our experience of seventeen years of working with professional football players, but first we would like to explain our perspective on Rolfing® and the perspective of this article about working with professional football players.

For us, in our hearts, the core of our Rolfing practice seeks to assist each person to release the body as much as possible from physical suffering, and to facilitate the body to think with its heart. This perspective, for Wayne, was the result of an instantaneous experience where the internal movement of his thought came to an end. This began the perspective of having an inner silence in his mind and a quickening of his ability to think with his heart.

Practically, we keep learning from our practice and classes. Our most recent step in the learning process was attending Don Hazen's classes in the Neurology of Posture last year. We think that there is tremendous potential still open for exploration in the possibilities of this work. We are very grateful to Don Hazen.

What we will do in this article is present some suggestions from what we have learned in helping professional football players with their bodies.

When Wayne finished the Rolfing training, he frequently mentioned that he would like to work with the Minnesota Viking football team. Although we advertised in all the "right" places, including the phone book, we did nothing to promote our presence with them. But, Sandy remembers the day we got our first call from a professional football player. Remember the old tape answering machines? Sandy went into the Minneapolis office and listened to the recent calls. There was an odd sounding name, along with a deep voice (the kind that comes with a well-muscled, large body) asking for a return call. Sandy told Wayne



Wayne and Sandy Henningsgaard

that she thought a football player was on the machine. Wayne said that Sandy should call him back, as he was too busy for new clients. Sandy said no, this was his dream, he would have to make the call. That began a long-term association with not only Qadry Ismail, but also other Vikings who have joined the team since that time.

Qadry Ismail was a wide receiver for the Minnesota Vikings football team. He is now retired, but we are happy to say that he does have a Super Bowl ring. He was an athlete who had a very astute sensing and feeling ability with his own body. The key to working with this type of athlete was that Wayne was willing to work with him for as many hours as it took to resolve his physical injuries and athletic performance desires. We worked with him over many years, and he once had a very rare injury that we were able to resolve for him. He had taken a tackle which resulted in a neck injury that even after working with his neck, head and shoulders and medical analysis, with no injury diagnosed, he was still dizzy whenever he looked down. We resolved this injury by freeing up his carotid artery, which had gotten adhered in inflamed tissue from the cervical nerves. When we got this free, he never had this symptom again.

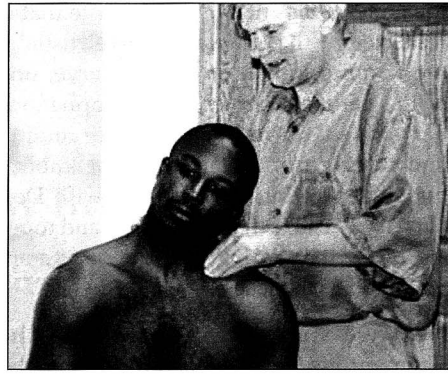
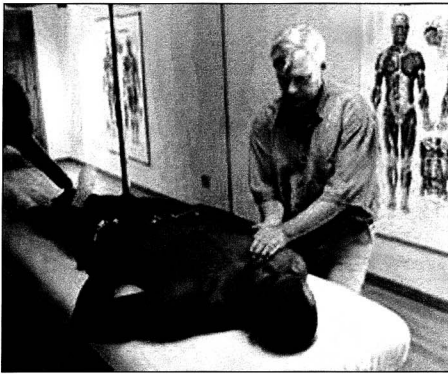
This was Sandy's first exposure to sessions that were much more than the one to one and one half hours that were part of our

normal routine. Every Friday evening, Wayne would work as long as it took to help Qadry. Sandy wondered what was going on in the office upstairs all that time, and Wayne would try to explain in detail what he was up to. Then Qadry would play on Sunday and we would try to watch his performance on our tiny television set. And another week would start.

The players refer to the games as a "train wreck." Each week, Qadry would be back on Friday night for his next session, all the time raving about how good he felt. Qadry's major in college was communication, and he talked to his teammates. Eventually, Wayne had many of the "stars" of the Viking team coming to see him. Sandy remembers that one Sunday before the season started, she went to the co-op for something, and upon her return there were three Vikings in the backyard playing football with about a half-dozen eight-year-old boys. And all the while, Wayne was in the office, working on legs, legs, legs and backs. He really dedicated himself to the resolution of problems in the body, giving him a unique vision of the Rolfing work.

Qadry eventually left the Vikings for Baltimore. His off-season home was and is in Florida, so one winter/spring when we were going to an Upledger class down there, we combined the class with a side trip to visit and work with Qadry. When Sandy first saw him on that trip, she wondered if they could help him. His psoas was noticeably shortened. His lumbar were so tight and stuck, there appeared to be no movement in them, period. His abdominal wall was as hard as a rock. We persisted and eventually Qadry could move and had no glitches or pain. This was the beginning of our work as a team on clients. We now call this kind of work "doubles," but it is also known as four-handed work.

One of the greatest stories we can tell you about the power of Rolfing® was when the Vikings were going to the playoffs and the quarterback suffered a high ankle sprain. It was so severe that he had to be put in a leg brace. The team changed their game plan to have him play in this brace because he did not respond to any treatment to bring doriflexion or plantar flexion back into his foot. We had left town on a winter vacation (which we liked to take over the Christmas holidays), so Wayne was not available to help him right away. When we got back into town, the captain of the team called Wayne and brought the quarterback



Certified Advanced Rolfer Wayne Henningsgaard and former NFL Player, Qadry Ismail

down to the office. Wayne used joint play to evaluate that the talus was held fixed into the tibia because of a restriction at the level of the deep posterior compartment of the leg involving the tibial nerve. He released the gastrocnemius and then the soleus compartment of the leg to reach this inflamed and extremely sensitive injured compartment. This is what a Rolfer would do that other professionals did not know how to do, so Wayne could mobilize the joint. The quarterback got up off the table and began to walk around normally. Wayne finished the session and called the captain and told him that the quarterback could now walk normally. The caption said "I know you are a miracle worker but I do not believe this." The next day the captain called Wayne from the practice field and said the quarterback was running around normally without the brace and everyone was amazed. This was a very fun moment for Wayne and the team flew us out to New York first class to work with players before the championship game.

Over the past seventeen years, we have worked on a regular weekly basis with as many as fifteen Minnesota Vikings players. Also, we have worked with some of these players to extend their careers, even when they have moved on to other teams. What stands out for these players is best stated by Qadry Ismail, who was the first player Wayne worked with and the first of many that we continue to work with even when they leave the Vikings. As he looked back on his sports career and using Rolfing services to work with his injuries, he recently wrote to us:

Well, [in my field] soft tissue injuries are not treated as well with other medical treatments. ...Massage wasn't complete enough for me. But with Rolfing® I found the healing time

was cut down significantly!! Weeks [of healing] turned into days, even a few hours. With Wayne and Sandy Henningsgaard working on [the injuries] there was no need for the trainers or anti-inflammatory pills!!

Qadry also told me for the first time a story about his career, something that we have also heard from other players in terms of their careers: "When I was with the [New Orleans] Saints I injured my hamstring, I was in danger of not making the team. I went to Wayne during this time and he fixed me with only three hours of work. I know without him working on me I wouldn't have made the football team. He saved my career!"

Every year in August the football season starts. Every year in August begins our work with the Vikings. For extra sessions during the week, players drive to Stillwater, or sometimes we go to the hotel where they stay and work on them the night before the game.

As the players move out of state to other teams, some of them have asked us to follow them. We currently fly to Tampa once a month to work on one former Viking and his teammates. We also fly to St. Louis once a month to work on Todd Steussie and teammates. When Sandy first met Todd, she saw a six-foot-six or so man who weighs about 325 pounds and has the grace of a gazelle. He had been a client of Wayne's for four or five years, and had perfectly balanced ankles. "Wayne did that to this giant of a man," she thought, then she knew what Wayne had been doing with these guys, and her respect for her partner in life went up a couple of notches. We asked Todd to write a statement for this article:

This is the general background that brought me to you guys. I was at

about six years in the league. I [had] spent the first five years feeling really good. I would have the occasional injury moderate to minor (that is my perspective..things like second-degree MCL and PCL in my left knee and dislocating my left shoulder. There is a saying that every NFL player gets hurt but you want to not get injured. Hurt means you still play and injured means that you are hurt to the point that you cannot continue to play!!). I tended to be able to fight through the injury events to that point, but I started having problems with my knees that were not associated with any injury event. I was beginning to feel the culmination of playing, catching up with me.

I was always very proactive with diet, supplements, and training to be able to maximize my training and recovery. I tried to find supplements to help manage my "wear and tear" injuries. I had some success with this approach but I was still looking for something more. Cris Carter was talking to me about his success with a non-typical massage therapist. I decided to give it a try. I enjoyed massages but never considered them to make any significant changes. But I decided to drive out to Stillwater and give Rolfing a try.

My first session with Wayne was truly a life-changing event. I remember leaving your house and calling my wife, Erica, on my cell phone and telling her how different I felt. Describing to people how I felt taller and longer and more powerful after two hours on the table never seemed adequate in describing how big of a change I felt in my body. It might best describe the changes to say that it was addictive. I was excited to go to the next session to see what other changes they would be able to create in my body. That experience continues today, with looking forward to Wayne and Sandy being able to create changes in my body that allow me to feel like I am still able to compete and win against athletes almost twenty years younger than me.

I left the Vikings in the spring of 2001. I had signed with the Carolina Panthers. I had a young family and the move and related chaos kept me from

Rolfing for the first few months. I flew Wayne and Sandy to Charlotte once that fall and continued to benefit from their work. However, the distance of being away from Wayne and Sandy made it less accessible, and I did not get treated by them for the next two years. In these next two years my body began to “fall apart.” At first everything was fine. Then I started to have serious knee pain. I did not make the connection [between] this pain and [the fact that I was] no longer getting Rolfed. In 2003 I just came to the conclusion that my body was breaking down from the years in football and there was nothing that I could do. The 2003 season was the worst in terms of pain and performance. I then signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the spring of 2004. I was thinking that this would be my last season in the NFL. But out of desperation in how much constant pain I was feeling, I decided to see Wayne and Sandy during that off-season.

Todd has continued to see us every football season, and off season. He now has fourteen years as an offensive lineman – the guys in the midst of the pushing and shoving on the field whose job is to protect the quarterback. He still loves to play the game and is physically healthy enough to continue playing in a starting position. As of the last season, he is the 85th longest playing player in the league.

Now we want to share some tips. Our basic approach to an injury is to evaluate the player from the perspective of joint play and to bring the whole body into a state of balance each session. This means that most of the time we do four-handed Rolfing and take a minimum of a hour and a half with each player.

What joint play means is that we take the joint in question and bring our awareness to the ligamentous level of fascia. We then take the joint in hand and move it at a micro level of motion to determine if there is a problem at this level. To take the knee as an example, this means we are looking for a restriction to the micro motions of the tibia moving anterior to posterior on the femur, of the tibia side-tilting on the femur, and of the tibia rotating on the femur. Also, with the leg up and foot on the table, we evaluate the motion of the femur on the tibia. If we have a problem at this level, we will perceive a facial rope of restriction close to

the bones. This ends up to be nerve that is restricted by the fascia at this level, usually the femoral, tibial, or fibular nerve, one of the peroneal nerves, or the saphenous nerve. We used to think we were finding and freeing up fascial “ropes or knots,” but since we finished the class with Don Hazen we realize that these knots and ropes are really the areas where the nerves are restricted in the fascia.

Next we step out of evaluating the ligamentous bed of fascia encasing the joints and evaluate the fascia around the deep muscle layers. Continuing with our example of the knee, here there are generally three types of problems. The first involves a restriction at the level of the medial hamstrings down the deep posterior compartment of the leg. The second involves a shortening of the tensor fascia lata compartment, lateral hamstring, and a restriction of the peroneal compartment and the fibula. The third involves adhesion at the ASIS and the inguinal ligament and a shortening and gluing together of the quadriceps compartment restricting the patella. Working with these three areas resolves most knee problems.

Thirdly we evaluate the relationship of what is going on from the knee to the hip and ankle, and then the whole body. If there is not any work required at the deeper level of these joints, we work with any restrictions in the superficial fascia and ease them out to bring about structural integration.

We evaluate all of the joints with the method just outlined, and have stories to tell about all of the injuries we’ve worked with in each of these areas. Let us just leave you with a couple of tips. When you evaluate hamstrings, if, when feeling down a sore hamstring, your fingers fall into a cavern, then you have a serious injury that will take some time to heal. And when working with ankle problems on football players, make sure you work with the big toe, especially in terms of turf-injured toes, or you will not get the ankle to resolve.

To bring you up to the present, we continue to work with Vikings team players in the 2008 season, and for the past five years have flown out once a month to work with players from Tampa, and for the past two years we have done the same in St. Louis, as well. We would like to say that these men, to a man, are intelligent, kind and generous to both us and the community.