

Story of why Saints have adopted yoga: 'Little things...lead to bigger and better things'



New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees (9) stretches during training camp at the Sports Performance Center in Metairie, La., Thursday, Aug. 3, 2017.
Advocate Staff photo by SOPHIA GERMER

The New Orleans Saints have spent the better part of the past few years trying to figure out how to better monitor their players and avoid injuries.

The team started using tracking data three years ago to get a better idea of how to identify when players were starting to reach dangerous levels of usage. They've paid better attention to nutrition. And, last year, the team added yoga to its workout repertoire to help players better recover from the rigors of the week of practice and add flexibility.

"Last season on Fridays we had certain recovery elements, and that's one of them for flexibility," coach Sean Payton said. "The idea is that it's a little different program on a Friday in season than it is after a practice like we had here. It's a little bit more of a worn-down exercise where you're really working on your flexibility, and you're stretching."

It's no secret the Saints have experienced bad luck with injuries. And even the best technology, analytics, training staff, and workout program can't prevent all bad things from happening. There's nothing besides better luck that could prevent Sheldon Rankins, Josh Hill and Delvin Breaux from suffering broken fibulas last season, nor was there a way for P.J. Williams to avoid a season-ending concussion in Week 2 other than to be elsewhere on the field when it happened.

But other injuries can be avoided, and yoga can help with that. The other benefit of the exercise is that it can also help players gain more flexibility.

That's something Rankins realized after being introduced to it last year leading up to the draft. His goal is to be a player who never comes off the field, which is how he was used in college at Louisville, and he believes yoga can play a part in helping him achieve the goal.

"Your body can move certain ways and kind of get you out of certain weird positions," he said. "I think rest, flexibility, obviously conditioning. ... Making sure you're stretching every night, stretching every morning, rolling out the muscles, getting that soreness out. It's always little things that lead to bigger and better things."

Yoga is becoming more common among NFL teams. The Philadelphia Eagles and Seattle Seahawks do it on a regular basis, and the New York Giants have been known to use it as part of their rehabilitation program.

The Seahawks' players missed 153 combined games due to injury last season, while the Eagles checked in at 75. The Saints' ranked in the NFL with 301 games lost.

For those who do it, not doing it after being exposed to it wouldn't make sense.

“Getting that lactic acid out of your muscles after practice,” Williams said. “Just moving around, stretching, flexibility, for all the pulls and tears. It really just makes you durable throughout the year.”

But the expand beyond just preventing injuries. Think about how often a receiver needs to get low to catch a ball. Now picture a defensive end rushing around the edge and how he contorts his body and travels low to the ground.

Yoga can help with all of that.

That's why pass rusher Hau'oli Kikaha is a believer in doing it. He missed last season with a torn ACL, but has been in sessions since and can feel a difference when he steps on the field.

“It gives you more explosive potential in our bodies. ... I think being as flexible as possible is good,” Kikaha said. “But mobility, (being) stable throughout all of those movements is just as important if not more than just flexibility.”

Some players seem to be buying in more than others. Right or wrong, yoga is often associated with a Zen-like state or the act of meditation.

And, it seems that fullback John Kuhn has embraced that aspect of the exercise as much as the exercise itself.

“I just imagine myself being really flexible and really focusing my brain on positive thoughts and what I want to happen this season,” Kuhn said. “Now, I can’t tell you. It’s kind of like blowing out the candles on a cake. But I really enjoy it.”

One thing the Saints would certainly like to happen this year is fewer injuries and having a team full of explosive, flexible players. Yoga can help with both.