

Finding life after the game

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BLAINVILLE - It seemed so defined for Ed Phillion through 13 seasons as a defensive tackle, the final eight spent with the Alouettes. Get in shape, make the team and get to the quarterback. Do that, and he would continue earning more than \$100,000 annually - not bad for six months' work and a 4½-hour daily shift.

And then, somewhat suddenly and without much subtlety from the organization, it was taken away - Phillion's identity and purpose to life.

He announced his retirement in May 2007, not long before the start of training camp, although he had been preparing some two months for the inevitable. He still had a year and an option remaining on his contract and wanted to continue playing. But when he was told by management to take a significant pay cut, combined with a job in community relations that opened at Oxycair Technologies, a now-defunct wastewater treatment company, Phillion figured the time was right to walk away from the game, albeit grudgingly.

The transition has been filled with curves, pitfalls and obstacles, Phillion admits, the road to everyday life not nearly as glamorous as he had imagined, the struggles numerous and onerous at times.

"The farther you get away from the game, the less relevant you become," said Phillion, who turns 42 on Tuesday. "It's gradual, but it picks away at you and you wonder, 'how the hell did I get here?' You've got to pick yourself up and keep going. You've got to believe in yourself and keep going, because there's going to be people who tell you you can't do it."

"There were some desperate times. If not for my family, I don't know what would have happened," an emotional Phillion added. "It's like you're looking over the edge of a cliff and (your family) keeps you from jumping. It has been a struggle but my wife (Ann) has been my backbone and has had my back. She was there to give me a kick in the ass or a hug."

It's only within the last few months that Phillion has



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Former Alouette Ed Philion explains routines of fitness at a new football equipment sports store in Blainville.

involved in Game Ready, a football-related fitness and game-ready program operated out of Collège Boisbriand. Three nights each week, Philion guides 30 students through speed and agility routines, weight training and other drills and techniques. And as of Sunday's opening, he has become a partner in Footbest Inc., a Blainville-based football store that sells equipment and novelty items. The 5,000-square foot store is the brainchild of Pascal Seguin and Nathalie Allard. Philion will assist in publicity and marketing, along with some sales. As he expands his football academy, he hopes the store will serve as each school's supplier.

Those who are closest to Philion say they've never seen him happier, but it has taken nearly five years to get to this juncture. And he's hardly the first former jock to experience similar hardships.

"It's something rarely talked about. The athlete leaves and people in general don't care. They move on to the next rookie," said former Als safety Matthieu Proulx, one of a handful of current or former Montreal players who attended the store's opening.

"It's difficult. We identify with who we are, and then you lose it. You lose your job and identity. We put our eggs in the same basket and don't think. All the emphasis is on playing."

Proulx considers himself lucky, but he also prepared for the future. He studied and graduated with a law degree. What he didn't plan on, upon retiring after the 2010 season, was working in the media, becoming a pregame and sideline commentator at Als home games for RDS. For now, Proulx has tucked his degree in the back pocket, knowing he can practise law when the mood strikes him.

"Not to be pretentious, but I had a plan. Then I had the option of working in the media," he said. "I'm lucky. I had a plan in place."

So, too, did Philion.

His community relations position was going to lead to other avenues, he figured, be it broadcasting, coaching or sales.

He auditioned for TSN, but the only broadcasting Philion does is on radio, serving as the colour commentator during games on CJAD - hardly enough to pay the bills. Philion would love to coach and,

last June, went to training camp with the Calgary Stampeders, serving as a guest coach. But the hours are long and he doesn't want to be separated from his family, especially with three boys at home between the ages of 9 and 13, not to mention the nomadic existence most coaches lead.

Philion contemplated moving back to Buffalo, his NFL home during the 1994-95 seasons and the city where he met his wife. At least no language issues would exist there. When Oxycair closed, he worked in sales for a sports outfitter.

"I had 12 interviews at Bombardier," Philion claimed. "They all told me I had no experience. In every field, I was told I had no experience. If I can play five years in the NFL and eight in the CFL, you're telling me I can't do this job?"

"The hardest thing is the value you have for yourself," he added. "You take it for granted because you did this and that. You think you're finished, washed up. You don't value yourself. It took me a long time. My identity was gone. That's how I survived and played for as long as I did. You need that identity."

"You finish playing. Who am I? You have to reinvent

and recreate yourself."

Both Philion and Proulx said the CFL's Players' Association needs to work with its athletes, preparing them for life after football, instituting programs, locating and working with employers who might be in a position to offer jobs to retired players, knowing the marquee value such a move would create.

"It has been a huge learning curve, and it doesn't replace football," Philion said. "Only in the last three or four months have I seen something I do that fills the void and makes me happy."

"We're not rich, but I get my kids on and off the bus daily. How much is that worth?"

Footbest, open daily, is at 65 de la Seigneurie Blvd. E. in Blainville. Call 450-434-FOOT.

For more information on Game Ready, visit www.gamereadyfitness.ca. Philion can be reached at 514-567-4157 or via email at aandephilion@videotron.ca

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