



MOTHER'S TEARS PROVIDE MOTIVATION, NFL PROVIDES OPPORTUNITY

SHAUN SMITH

WHY CREATE A FOUNDATION

"I wanted to give back to the community. I got tired of helping everybody else's organizations. The teams I played on, we were always making the organization look good, but they didn't do a lot with the players' foundations, so I decided to start my own organization."

HOW DO YOU GET KIDS TO READ

"The first thing is this: find something they like. Maybe it's fiction or a mystery, but you have to find something that interests them."

"Once you find something that they like, start out by giving them small books on the subject. You don't give them a 500-word book at the beginning because they might get discouraged because they can't handle it."

"But they start building their confidence up with the small book, then they start reading books with longer chapters. And the next thing you know they're asking you for books to read."

"You start small and set goals for them. When you lose weight, you don't say I need to lose 100 pounds. You say, I need to lose five pounds. Then five more. It's the same way with reading."

"I just try to be a support system for kids."

A HISTORIC GAME

Smith is one of only a few players to ever record a sack and a touchdown in the same game.

He did it in 2010 in a 42-24 win over Seattle.

Smith scored on a one-yard run in the second quarter, giving the Chiefs a 14-7 lead.

"(Assistant coach) Mo Carthon told me in practice that if we get down there I'm gonna give it to you," Smith said. "They gave it to me, and I kept my feet pumping and ran over somebody in the hole."

The sack occurred in the third quarter with Kansas City leading, 21-17.

PLAYING IN THE NFL

"I'd give my NFL career a B overall because I had to prove myself. I worked hard and grinded it out over 10 years. A lot of guys don't know what it was like playing for a Hall of Fame coach like Bill Parcells or playing for Hall of Fame owner like Jerry Jones or practicing against a guy like Flozell Adams every day and Larry Allen."



Shaun Smith stood in the counselor's office at Millwood (NY) High School dismayed by the tears rapidly rolling down his mother's cheeks.

He was embarrassed. And disappointed. And mad at himself because he had let down the person who loved him most in the world.

It's a moment Smith, then a high school freshman, has never forgotten. It's a moment that motivated him to change his life.

And by changing his life, Smith has changed hundreds of lives through the Shaun Smith 91 Ways Foundation, which focuses on reading and literacy for elementary school children.

"I was hanging at my girlfriend's house instead of going to school or I'd be in the lunch room playing dominoes with some of the older kids – I always hung out with older people – and I got behind," Smith said. "I'll never forget, when they called my mom and told her that I was gonna be ineligible, if I didn't pass certain classes and my mom cried."

"I'll never forget my mom crying in front of those white people. I was just like I gotta get my shit together – and I did."

Smith moved to Wichita, Kansas after his sophomore year because his step-father found a better job and his mother had retired from the police department. The move turned out to be the best thing for him, athletically and academically.

New York is known for its legendary NBA players such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar; It's not known for producing NFL stars.

So Smith, who played basketball well enough to earn a Division II offer, started as a high school running back and defensive end.

He committed to Oklahoma State, but couldn't overcome his poor freshman year in New York and didn't have the grades to enroll. Instead, he enrolled at Butler Community College and became a star.



As a freshman, he helped Butler win a national championship, and he was the No.2 JUCO defensive tackle in the nation as a sophomore after getting 128 tackles and 20 sacks, and he committed to South Carolina.

That's where Smith first started thinking about creating a foundation devoted to fighting literacy. As a student-athlete at South Carolina, he'd go to schools and read to youngsters.

He always found it rewarding.

It reminded Smith of the days when his mom encouraged him to read by finding him books she thought he might like. Nothing interested him until the day she brought home a book on Dave Winfield, who was drafted in the NFL, NBA and MLB and wound up with a Hall of Fame baseball career.

"When I was in college I would say when I get older – if I do make it – I wanna start my own organization to promote reading 'cause I used to like to go on Fridays with my jersey on and read to the kids."

"I loved how the kids flocked to me. I'm a big teddy bear. It's just cool and I always thought that it would be cool to always go back when I made it."

Smith arrived in the NFL as an undrafted free agent and joined the Dallas Cowboys' practice squad. The Cowboys released Smith after a year, but he forged out a 10-year career with five different teams.

He started 43 of 102 games and finished with 245 tackles, four sacks, two fumble recoveries and a touchdown.

But that's no comparison to the lives he's impacted through the reading programs his foundation has established during and after his career.

"One out of four kids by the time they reach the third grade can't read, so I'm big on that," he said, "I started my own organization because I had a big heart on literacy especially child literacy."

Not bad for man, who once made his mom cry because he didn't take his education seriously.