NFL's Medical Chief: Playing for KC, and Now Also an MD

By Erik Lief — May 30, 2018

While there's (obviously) no eligibility requirement for NFL players to be academically accomplished in order to enter the league, there have been many intelligent players over the years who earned graduate degrees after retiring from the game.

Quarterback Pat Haden, a Rhodes Scholar who studied at Oxford while playing for the Los Angeles Rams, completed his law degree at Loyola Law after retiring. Then there was the esteemed Alan Page, the Minnesota Vikings star and future Hall-of-Famer, who not only transformed himself from a feared defensive tackle to a lawyer – but then later into a justice on the Minnesota Supreme Court.

Yet while impressive, those players achieved their advanced degrees only after hanging up their cleats.

All of which places Laurent Duvernay-Tardif, following yesterday's uniquely amazing accomplishment, truly in a football league of his own.
On Tuesday, the Kansas City offensive lineman graduated from McGill University's medical school in Montreal while an active NFL player for the Chiefs. And he's not just a back-up who rarely gets in the game; Duvernay-Tardif is a key member of the team who started 38 games over the last three seasons. In football's modern era – if not the entire history of the NFL – his accomplishment, the first active player to hold a medical degree, appears to be unprecedented.

"Since the day I got drafted, I promised myself I was going to finish my studies while I was still playing," he said, quoted by the Associated Press. "This is, for sure, something that's quite special."

The Canadian-born Duvernay-Tardif began med school in 2010, and when drafting him in 2014 the Chiefs knew his intention to graduate and to become a doctor, despite his emergence as the best college player in Canada. So, the Chiefs, in rare deference by any NFL team to a player's off-field needs, coordinated with Duvernay-Tardif on his graduate school schedule, which helped clear conflicts on the way to graduation day.

Based on his own experience, Andy Reid, the Chiefs head coach, showed uncommon support for Duvernay-Tardif in allowing the 6-foot-5 lineman to pursue both of his passions simultaneously. As it turned out, Reid had a unique perspective: his mother also attended medical school at McGill. And Reid never questioned Duvernay-Tardif's dedication to football.

"With him, it's always been, 'We know you want to play football because you're here.' He trusts me," said Duvernay-Tardif, talking to ESPN.com. "That's one thing I respect and admire about him. He told me that he was going to do anything he could to help me succeed. It's been four years now, and Coach Reid has stood by that plan."

While one recent NFL player, John Urschel [2], was working towards his math doctorate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when he abruptly retired last summer, there are very few NFL players who have even attempted to juggle both football and medical training.

Myron Rolle, a neurosurgery resident at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, had aspirations of simultaneously succeeding at both professions. A one-time star safety at Florida State, Rolle was drafted by Tennessee. But Rolle lasted only a year and a half with the Titans, and only a pre-season stint with Pittsburgh before being cut by the Steelers in 2012 without ever having appeared in an NFL game. In the fall of 2013 he enrolled at FSU Medical School.

Growing up in New Jersey, one of Rolle's role models was Princeton University's Bill Bradley, a Rhodes Scholar who went on to become a basketball star with the New York Knicks in the 1970s before serving in the U.S. Senate.

As for Duvernay-Tardif, along with his unique accomplishment he has something else
unprecedented in mind when he takes the field in the fall: adding two special letters to the end of his name.

“I want to put Duvernay-Tardif M.D. on my jersey,” he said a few months ago, telling the Kansas City Star [3]. “I’ve already started a conversation with the league office and they say that anything is possible.”

Looking ahead, the next step in his medical career is tackling a residency program, which will hopefully lead to him becoming an emergency-department physician. But that endeavor could take between two and five years – complete with demanding hours and plenty of overnight training. So Duvernay-Tardif is going to put that on hold for the time being and instead concentrate on his NFL skill set.

And just like the true trailblazer that he is, when it comes to medical school debt he’s also an extreme rarity: He will have none.

Last February, Duvernay-Tardif signed a five-year contract with the Chiefs worth more than $43 million.

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(Correction: After stating previously that quarterback Steve Young, part of three Super Bowl winning teams with San Francisco, returned to his alma mater at BYU after his Hall-of-Fame career to obtain a law degree, a reader pointed out [4] that Young actually graduated law school in 1994 prior to leaving the NFL after the 1999 season. We appreciate receiving the correct information and sourcing, and regret the mistake.)