

August 29, 2009

Perry a leaner man, more player

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Brandon Perry is a 280-pounder who can do a back-flip and dunk a basketball.

But a year ago, he could do neither, and that told Perry it was time to drop some weight.

"I could do a back-flip since I was a little boy, but I got to where I couldn't until I lost the weight," said Perry, an MTSU senior defensive tackle. "Now I can do it again, and I can dunk a ball, too. I guess that hard work paid off."

Perry lost 54 pounds in the offseason, dropping from 334 pounds to his current weight of 280 in MTSU's fall camp.

So what's his dieting secret?

Perry said a combination of extra conditioning, healthy eating habits and treatment for sleep apnea all aided in his dramatic weight loss.

But he said attitude was the biggest change.

"I've been hearing this for three or four years now (about needing to lose weight)," Perry said. "The coaches were always staying on me, but it was all up to me. I had to set my mind to doing it, and I did."

MTSU strength and conditioning coach Russell Patterson worked long hours with Perry in the offseason, adding calisthenics and cardiovascular elements to his workout.

As a result, Perry has become more athletic in all facets of football.

Perry's 40-yard dash time has been cut from 5.64 seconds last season to below 5.3 seconds now. He also added 3.5 inches to his vertical jump and five inches to his broad jump in the last year.

"We just did things to keep his heart rate going, and he responded with outstanding effort," Patterson said. "This summer he became one of our leaders in conditioning tests, where he commands respect from the other guys."

Perry's late-night lifestyle also changed, so to speak.

Perry was one of 16 MTSU football players who participated in an eight-month sleep apnea research study last year, one of the first such projects done on college athletes in the country.

Sleep Centers of Middle Tennessee in both Murfreesboro and Smyrna took 16 MTSU linemen showing physical characteristics common to sleep apnea patients, including thick necks and overweight — both of which Perry had.

All were tested, and those players with severe cases were treated for sleep apnea, which is a breathing disorder during sleep involving a decrease or halt in airflow despite an ongoing effort to breathe.

Perry, who had one of the more severe cases on MTSU's team, wears a CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure) mask at night to help him breathe and therefore sleep much better. He said it has increased his level of energy during the day and aided his weight loss.

"It has helped me on the field and in the classroom," Perry said. "I'm not as tired or sleepy and I don't have all that nausea I used to have. I'm ready to play now when I get to practice. I'm ready to go."

Dr. William Noah, the Sleep Centers medical director, conducted last year's sleep apnea study on MTSU's football players.

Noah cannot comment on Perry's situation per doctor-patient confidentiality law, but he said extensive weight loss is common for apnea patients.

"I'm working with women now, who will lose about 100 pounds over the next six to 12 months because they are being treated," Noah said. "It's difficult to put into short general terms, but there are about 15 pathways through which apnea and weight gain are directly linked.

"... Snoring leads to weight gain, and weight gain leads to more snoring. It's just a vicious cycle."

Noah said apnea is linked to changes in metabolism, altered hormones which control hunger and elevation of cortisol, which diverts weight from the extremities to the belly.

Perry said his treatment helped immensely.

"It's made a huge difference in everything I do," Perry said.

On the field, Perry has never looked better — and that's not just his physique.

Perry is listed as a starting defensive lineman for the first time in his career. He appears to have shed not only one-sixth of his body weight, but also four years of football frustration.

Perry was signed by former MTSU coach Andy McCollum as a highlight to the 2005 recruiting class. He recorded only 14 tackles in his first three seasons (21 games) from 2005-07, and he suffered a broken foot twice (2006 and 2007). He drew a medical redshirt in 2007.

Last season, Perry had his best year with 14 tackles, 1.5 tackles for loss, one fumble recovery and even one interception while playing a career-high 326 snaps.

MTSU defensive line coach Les Herrin loves Perry's dedication, but he said the weight loss is helping the senior tackle elsewhere.

"I'm sure the girls are looking at Brandon even more now," Herrin said. "I think he's more of a player-type outside of football now because he looks a lot better. I think all the women are liking what Brandon has done for the football part of things."

Regardless of the numerous factors, Patterson said Perry deserves the bulk of the credit for his weight loss.

Perry lost 17 pounds during winter break and nearly 15 pounds in late spring, both times when he was not under the MTSU conditioning staff's supervision.

"That's when he did it on his own," Patterson said. "He talks about a lot of people helping him, but Brandon ultimately made the decision to change his lifestyle.

"I hope he has a great season because he's one of the best stories around."
