

KEITH MITCHELL

FROM NFL LINEBACKER TO MINDFULNESS COACH

BY VANESSA HARRIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEELU MORRIS



ONE MOMENT, KEITH MITCHELL IS A LINEBACKER on a football field, wearing a jersey emblazoned with the number 59. In the next moment, he’s taken the hardest hit of his career. One moment, he’s an alpha male gladiator playing for the Jacksonville Jaguars, in the next moment, he’s in a hospital bed with a spinal injury, paralyzed and helpless. This moment began the end of the professional career that he’d been in training for since growing up in Garland, Texas. Mitchell was an acclaimed player at Texas A & M before playing with the New Orleans Saints (where he was a Pro Bowl player in 2000), the Houston Texans, and then the Jacksonville Jaguars.

Mitchell has now tapped into the same discipline that brought him success on the football field and applied it to his present career as a nonprofit leader, mindfulness and yoga teacher, and inspirational speaker. He’s traveling the country sharing his story of a journey from paralysis to wellness. It resonates with Mitchell’s audiences that range from youth to veterans, senators and congresspeople, and professional athletes. While he no longer dons the 59 jersey to play coliseums as an NFL player, his next play involves taking his message to coliseums—this month specifically to the LA Memorial Coliseum. On January 31, where he is spearheading the Mindful Living Health Expo & AltaMed 5K. (He’s partnering with AltaMed, the nation’s largest community health center and his own nonprofit Light It Up Foundation.)

In addition to the Mindful Living event, Mitchell has partnered with the Wanderlust Festival in 2015. He’ll be speaking in multiple cities at Wanderlust festivals and for Wanderlust 108—one-day urban events throughout the country.

LA YOGA sat down with Keith Mitchell, 59, to discuss the realizations and confrontations that arose from his extraordinary transformation.

LA YOGA: What was your emotional experience when you were paralyzed?

KEITH MITCHELL: It was a tragedy mentally. I went from physically capable to helpless, instantly. It’s unheard of, especially as that alpha-male gladiator sports character. When you’re helpless and vulnerable, you need assistance to do everyday things. Asking for help was something I was not accustomed to. Naturally, you go through states of depression, anxiety, and think the weirdest thoughts. I was trying to understand why it happened, and certain things were just not adding up or making sense at the time.

LA YOGA: Is that when you were introduced to yoga and meditation?

KM: In the hospital, someone suggested “conscious breathing.” With conscious

breathing, I realized that we have to heal ourselves. I got into reading books like The Art of Loving by Erich Fromm and listening to Alan Watts, it was like a yoga practice of the mind. As these books expanded my mind, I started the process of healing which allowed me to go further into my yoga practice. I started studying with some amazing teachers and my yoga practice kept building. This period of my life was gearing me up for the work I am up to now, because I needed that time to heal physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

LA YOGA: Do you find similarities between yoga and meditation practice and your athletic career?

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KM: I think of meditation as being in the zone. I like to live life in the zone where there is no good or bad; it just is. When I played football, my most amazing games were when I was in the zone. To live life in the zone is when everything feels like you got the playbook right.

Your meditation is your playbook. Stillness nurtures the soul. I like to be in that zone when I’m focusing and then when I’m functioning in the world.

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LA YOGA: Who are your yoga influences?

KM: Well, my biggest nonliving influence is J. Krishnamurti; I’ve read a lot of his books. My living teachers are Tracey Rich, Ganga White, Chinook Wusdhu in Dallas, and Dana Baptiste, who is a good friend and teacher of mine.

LA YOGA: How do you approach teaching yoga to athletes?

KM: As an athlete, you’ve built up a lot of trauma within the body, often a traditional yoga practice is not going to be necessarily the best fit for a person who has all that trauma housed into their bodies. I really enjoy working with athletes and figuring out which style of yoga will be of most benefit. It’s important build them up instead of break them down.

LA YOGA: What have you learned teaching youth?

KM: Young people are going to be the next leaders of the world. We can get these guys into practices that create a more conscious flow in the development of our world. I had an opportunity to lead a group of kids ranging from ages five to 10 who were living in homeless shelters with their family. Later that night, I received a call from the teacher who was with them at dinner, and they told me that all the kids around the table were saying when I grow up I want to be this or that after I worked with them. I had goosebumps to hear them talk like that.

LA YOGA: What do you wish you knew as a youth that you know now as a result of yoga?

KM: If I knew then what I have learned from the practice of yoga, I feel I would have made me a better student and individual. Maybe I wouldn’t have made some of my mistakes so terribly; I would have made them gracefully.

LA YOGA: What can we expect at the Mindful Living Health Expo & 5K?

KM: We are going to take over the whole grounds of the LA Coliseum with the most amazing yoga teachers in the country. The Mayor, the City Council, and the LAPD is coming. We are going to have a whole day focused on what mindfulness feels like.

I want the day to be like first time I got on the yoga mat and came out of savasana thinking, “What the heck was that?” When we have that realization, we realize we want it more.

For more information on Keith Mitchell and his projects and teaching, visit: KeithMitchell59.com and follow Keith on Instagram: keithmitchell59; Facebook: keithmitchell59; Twitter: k_mitchell59

For more information about the Mindful Living Health Expo & 5K, visit: altamed.org/5K

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