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NFL quarterback Josh McCown reveals secret to late-career success: Brain training

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FLORHAM PARK, N.J. — Josh McCown’s typical Monday last season began with an early-morning session in the weight room, followed by a film review of the previous day’s game

and an early look at the next opponent. He capped his day with another round of strength and conditioning.

For his brain.

Unbeknownst to teammates and many in the organization, McCown participated in a program designed to help optimize cognitive performance. Throughout the season, he took a 30-mile Uber ride into Manhattan for weekly neuro feedback sessions that lasted 45 minutes to an hour. He passed the time in rush-hour traffic by studying game film on his tablet as he prepared for “my brain work,” as he calls it. He followed up with his personal consultants by phone – two conversations per week. The objective, in layman’s terms, was to create the best version of himself every Sunday.

McCown was skeptical the first time he wore the sensor-laden neuro cap, which resembles something out of a sci-fi movie, but it didn’t take long to make him a believer. At 38, he felt better than ever, and his performance on the field provided the evidence. He set career highs in touchdown passes (18), yards (2,926) and completions (267) as he became a galvanizing force in his first season with the New York Jets.

After 14 years of conventional training, McCown decided to get into his mind – and he played out of it.

“I believe it was a big reason why I played at the level I played at,” said McCown, who will continue the program this season as he attempts to fend off challengers Teddy Bridgewater and rookie Sam Darnold in a three-way quarterback battle that began with the first training-camp practice on Friday.

“Throughout the course of my career, I’ve been the in-between guy. I’ve been in several situations with a new head coach or they’re rebuilding, starting over with the young guys. When you’re in those situations, it’s tough because the outcomes might not be great.”

McCown kept it hush-hush last season because he didn’t feel comfortable discussing as he navigated uncharted territory, but he agreed to share his story with ESPN with the hope of raising awareness of the benefits of brain training. It’s a burgeoning field that has attracted many athletes, including fellow quarterbacks Tom Brady and Kirk Cousins.

For McCown, the idea was hatched two years ago, when he played for the Cleveland Browns and met Tommy Shavers at the team’s facility. Shavers, invited by Hue Jackson to address the coaching staff, is a behavior and performance consultant who works with NFL and NCAA

teams. He's the co-founder of NESTRE, which bills itself as a company that specializes in neurocognitive strength training.

McCown was fascinated by Shavers, and he hired him last spring after signing with the Jets, his seventh NFL team. McCown declined to reveal the cost, but it ran him about \$25,000, according to a person familiar with the process. He did it for two reasons: He wanted to do everything possible to maximize the twilight years of his career, and he did it for brain health. Even though he's had only one documented concussion, McCown is mindful of the potential long-term effects of head trauma.

"Quite honestly, when I first sat down to do it, I was sitting there, and I'm kind of like, 'What the heck? What is this really? What am I getting into?'" he said with a laugh.

The process began in Florida, where McCown visited Shavers at his office for baseline testing. After that, Shavers flew to McCown's home in Charlotte, North Carolina, where they conducted a three-day introductory session with four to five hours per day. Based on data, Shavers formulated a program to improve McCown's cognitive weaknesses and maintain his strengths. He did one session per week during training camp, then ratcheted up the frequency during the regular season.

Soon, people inside and outside the organization were marveling at his inspired play, calling it a classic fountain-of-youth discovery. In reality, the only thing he discovered was his inner Josh.



McCown, flanked by William Lambos (left) and Tommy Shavers (right) after a game last season. Both work closely with McCown in his cognitive training. Courtesy Josh McCown

“It just clicked for Josh. It just made sense,” Shavers said. “It took him into a freedom of really being able to play at a level that he’s known has always been in there, but having access to it and not being inhibited in real time was really the key. The game became fun for him to play the way he always wanted to play it.”

Basically, Shavers and his partner, William Lambos, got inside McCown’s head. In the brain business, they call it “popping the hood.” They analyzed his engine, so to speak, and categorized his performance personality as “high cerebral.” He got high marks for his memory and ability to process information, but he suffered from cognitive rigidity – i.e. overthinking.

Looking back on his career, McCown acknowledged a tendency to dwell on bad plays, bad games and bad practices. He believes that playing on so many losing teams (only one playoff season) has an impact on his psyche.

“What I learned the most is that I carried negativity and losses and the weight of these situations with me,” he said. “Throughout the course of my career, I’ve been the in-between guy. I’ve been in several situations with a new head coach or they’re rebuilding, starting over with the young guys. When you’re in those situations, it’s tough because the outcomes might not be great.

“I believe it had a negative effect on me to where I just allowed one negative thing to be bigger for me. It put me in a bad place. The ‘here-we-go-again’ mentality, over the course of a lot of years, can be harsh. Going into this last year, I wanted to go in with a clean slate. I don’t know if ‘reset my brain’ is the right [phrase], but I wanted to reframe everything that had happened in the previous 15 years and attack it in a different way.”

This might sound like psycho-babble – it does include an element of sports psychology – but McCown believes the neuro feedback sessions produced tangible results. Wearing a neuro cap, which measures electrical activity in the brain, he sat in front of a computer monitor as his brain subconsciously performed conditioning exercises. Yes, really.

Example: In one session, he watched the movie “Good Will Hunting.” When his brain was performing at an optimal level, the movie appeared in color. When he slipped below that level, it turned to black and white.

“It’s one of those things where you get up and you say to yourself, ‘What just happened other than I really enjoyed ‘Good Will Hunting?’” McCown said with a laugh.

When the brain meets the criteria close to the targeted state, Shavers said, the brain is rewarded – in this case, with Ben Affleck and Matt Damon showing up in color. That makes the brain desire to achieve the same activity, and it becomes easier with each reward. McCown used a weight-lifting analogy to describe the benefit. You might not get it on the first lift, but you build strength with each try.



Steve Orsini demonstrates the neurocognitive brain training that McCown undergoes during the season. Orsini was a captain at Notre Dame and a former athletic director at Central Florida and SMU. Photo courtesy Tommy Shavers

There's more to the protocol than brain sensors and various other gizmos. McCown relies on communication with Shavers and Lambos, who is a licensed psychologist with a postdoctoral certification in clinical neuropsychology. During the season, they talked Wednesday and Friday, discussing everything from McCown's mental state to the upcoming opponent. The conversations were specific, as they discussed plays from practice that worked and didn't work. They will follow the same routine this season.

Those are called framing sessions, and most occur by phone. Shavers won't forget the first one they shared.

On the eve of the Jets' preseason opener, McCown, expecting to play only one series, told Shavers exactly how he envisioned his night. He predicted an eight-play scoring drive against the Tennessee Titans, culminating with a touchdown pass. Sure enough, he did just that: eight plays, 78 yards, a 4-yard scoring pass to Charone Peake.

"I guess he's going to be good at this framing thing," Shavers thought to himself.

McCown said the framing sessions are invaluable as he prepares for each game. He believes they changed his in-game thinking process and improved his ability to overcome adversity. Case in point: He played one of his best games last season against the Atlanta Falcons, completing 26 of 33 passes with no fumbles and no interceptions in monsoon-like conditions. A big reason, he said, was a Saturday-night face-to-face session with Lambos in which they discussed environmental influences and their impact on outcomes.

Ever the team player, McCown doesn't want to take credit away from his coaches and teammates for his renaissance year, but he did make significant strides in the area of cognitive flexibility, Shavers said.

Now there's a new challenge: With Darnold lurking, McCown – listed as No. 1 on the current depth chart – will be replaced at some point by the first-round pick. It could happen sooner than later.

"It's one of the things we've addressed," said Shavers, who played safety at the University of Central Florida before concussions ended his career in 1999. "It's a new variable."

McCown is the ideal mentor for Darnold, but his competitive fire still burns at 39. He isn't ready to surrender his job, but he wants to help the rookie's development. It's a delicate balance that has become McCown's new narrative.

"When Tommy and I first sat down, the idea was, 'Let's go play better than before,'" McCown said. "Me playing the best football I ever played can only help Sam, and it helps our team win games. Sam's time will come at some point. Whenever that is, I'll be supportive, but I don't think anybody will be mad if we're winning games, no matter who it is.

"That's my mindset. For me, going back and working with Tommy is the best way to get that accomplished."

Credit: Rich Cimini ESPN Staff Writer

Original article: http://www.espn.com/blog/new-york-jets/post/_/id/76649/josh-mccown-reveals-secret-to-late-career-success-brain-training

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