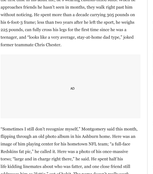
D.C. Sports Bog

After losing more than 80 pounds, former Redskin's 'not scary anymore.'



Former Redskins lineman Will Montgomery in 2005, left, and 2007. (Photo by Alex Brandon/AP and Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA)

By Dan Steinberg
Dec. 30, 2021 at 1:59 p.m. EST

The Red Cross came a few weeks ago and took away Will Montgomery's wardrobe. The size 42 pants. The XXXL sweatpants. The blue gear he accumulated during a six-year NFL career, pants and shirts that used to fit but now hang absurdly off his body.

"Bags upon bags upon bags," Montgomery said. "At least five homecomings, over-sized jumbo trash bags — like the big contractor bags — just filled to the brim."

Those were among the last vestiges of what already feels like a bygone life, lived in a foreign body. Montgomery now shops for size 34 jeans. For the first time in his adult life, he's wearing custom-fitted suits. When he approaches friends he hasn't seen in months, they walk right past him without noticing. He spent more time in a dressing room trying on pants in his 6-foot-9 frame; lost three times as many after he left the sport, he weighs 225 pounds, can fully cross his legs for the first time since he was a teenager, and "looks like a very average, stay-at-home dad type," joked former teammate Chris Chester.

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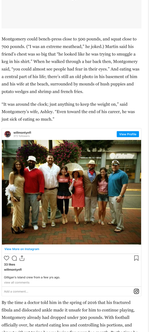
"Sometimes I still don't recognize myself," Montgomery said this month, flipping through an old photo album in his Ashburn home. Here was an image of him playing center for his hometown NFL team, "a full-face Redskins tat pic," he called it. Here was a photo of his once-massive torso, "large and in charge right there," he said. He spent half his life kidding linemates about who was fatter, and one close friend still addresses him as "fattie," out of habit. The name doesn't really work.

"Now I'm kind of sized out of that fat club. Now I'm in the skinny club," Montgomery said. "It's interesting to imagine that I even had this 50-year NFL career. That's basically a time warp."

Add Montgomery's transformation to that list of retired o-linemen who have shrunk beyond recognition in recent years. Jordan Gross, Montgomery's former teammate in Carolina, who dropped from 305 to 235 pounds in the first year of his retirement. Alan Faneca lost more than 100 pounds after he retired and became a fitness trainer. Matt Birk went from 320 to 225 and auditioned as a fitness model. Nick Hardwick dropped 85 pounds in four months. Many of these men, like Montgomery, said they knew they would shed pounds as soon as they quit the sport, a promise that seems common in this era of swollen 300-pounders.

"Oh, I have the diet plan already written out," said current Redskins Trent Williams, who plans to drop at least 45 of his 385 pounds as soon as he retires. "Offensive linemen go one of two ways: You either balloon up or you shrink to nothing. I'd rather shrink to nothing. Three months later, you'll see a whole different person. I'll come walking in and you'll be like, I don't know who that is."



Will Montgomery during Redskins training camp in 2003. (Photo by John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

For Montgomery, that process meant dipping to a weight he hadn't seen since he was in high school. During his freshman year at Gonzaville High, he was told to add 30 pounds to his 185-pound body. By his senior year, he weighed about 230. And by the time he was starting at Virginia Tech, he had entered what he calls his "all-you-can-eat" phase.

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The Hokies linemen store held a year-long contest to see who could eat the most dinner rolls at a local restaurant; "I would probably eat six to 12 rolls at one sitting," said Jimmy Martin, Montgomery's former teammate. When they got a Weber grill as a gift before a bowl game, they wheeled it into their meeting room, opened the window and started grilling hamburgers and hot dogs. They told each other every day how fat they were, and they knew every meal deal in Blacksburg.

"That was our big bonding: the eating," Martin said. "You share that interest in sports, but linemen really bond around the lunch and dinner table."

It was the same story in the NFL, where Montgomery started 75 games over six seasons for five franchises, totalling 23 straight starts for the Redskins during the Mike Shanahan regime. Offensive linemen went out for group dinners on Thursday nights, and when they saw the upcoming list, "we'd probably get two of everything," Chester said. They would eat massive breakfasts and lunches, and then would sometimes order pizza and wings to the practice facility, a mid-afternoon snack while watching film. If that didn't happen, "I would literally stop and order some woodfire pizza on the way home," Montgomery said. And that was before dinner.

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Montgomery could bench-press close to 500 pounds, and squat close to 700 pounds. ("I was an extreme meathead," he joked.) Martin said his friend's chest was so big that "he looked like he was trying to smuggle a keg in his shirt." When he walked through a bar back then, Montgomery said, "you could almost see people bad fear in their eyes." And eating was a central part of his life; there's still an old photo in his basement of him and his wife at the beach, surrounded by mounds of bath poupons and potato wedges and shrimp and french fries.

"It was around the clock; just anything to keep the weight on," said Montgomery's wife, Ashley. "Even toward the end of his career, he was just sick of eating so much."

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By the time a doctor told him in the spring of 2008 that his fractured fibula and dislocated ankle made it unsafe for him to continue playing, Montgomery already had dropped under 300 pounds. With football officially over, he started eating less and controlling his portions, and almost without trying he was losing five pounds a month. By the time he reached 250 pounds, he tried to do a TV appearance, and "he looked like a kid wearing his dad's suit," Ashley said.

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Around the same time, first Ashley and then Will took an interest in nutrition. Will began listening to nutrition podcasts — "literally hundreds of podcasts" — buying the relevant books, reading articles about paleo and gluten-free and ancestral lifestyles. He replaced his morning toast with oatmeal, his afternoon granola bars with fruit or nuts. He started cooking with coconut oil. He cut down on sugars, stopped eating pasta and bread, switched out beer in favor of red wine, experimented with probiotics and Himalayan pink salt, sought out grass-fed meat and free-range eggs — and kept losing weight, past the point where many ex-teammates stopped. He started doing push-ups and pull-ups and jumping rope in his garage instead of lifting at the gym. He shared all his gains, which had "kind of covered up my double chin," he said. The largester in his basement now seems like the group offensive line photos and jerseys hanging from the walls, a historical relic.

"And diving into this health world even back then," Montgomery said. "It's like you're part of that tribe or that cult, and if you learn that tribe of fast food and heavy every day and IPAs, then you're not cool. . . . I'm getting made fun of now for actually being the guy who's healthy — 'Oh, you don't want to eat the cupcake or the pizza?'"

Whether they asked him to or not, Montgomery began sending nutritional stories and tips to friends and family members. Gifts, too. "It's like, Merry Christmas, here's a paleo book, don't take it too personally," he said. He bought an entire new wardrobe, finally donating the old one to Hurricane relief.

Montgomery began making regular appearances on Fox 5's NFL pregame show as an analyst this fall, and if his name hadn't appeared under his feed, most viewers might have mistaken him for a random, in-shape stranger. Additional People stopped getting out of his way in restaurants. Flight attendants no longer had to squeeze around him. "Bodies I hadn't seen in over a year, high school friends, would walk right past me," he said. For the first time in 20 years, he could wash the mid-section of his back.

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"It's pretty incredible," said Martin, the Virginia Tech teammate, who jokingly told Montgomery that he looks "dead sexy" in this year's Christmas card.

"It's mind-blowing to see the change," Ashley said.

"None of us were really OQ models, but he was just a big, really strong man," said Chester, the former Washington guard. "And now, he could kind of blend in anywhere."

Montgomery, 34, isn't sure what his next career will be. In addition to radio and television gigs, he has been grading offensive linemen Pro Football Focus, and is considering work as a trainer. (He also has two kids under the age of 5.) Former teammates now tell him he's too small to defend his family, although he isn't concerned about that. And when he walks through bars now, he feels "kind of invisible."

"If you see a 300-pound dude with a goatee who looks like he can bench 500, I think you look at somebody like that differently than a clean-shaven, 225-pound guy," he said. "I'm not scary anymore. Now I'm just a guy."

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