

MEMORIAL HERMANN-TEXAS MEDICAL CENTER CAMPUS

GATEWAYS

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HOUSTON FOOTBALL

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BACK TO LIFE after spine surgery

“With a herniated disc, you can be fine one day and in terrible pain the next. It was the most pain I’ve ever had in my life.”

The words “can’t” and “won’t” aren’t in Zach Faires’ vocabulary. In May, he graduated from the University of Houston. Now, he’s reflecting on his college football career and the mistakes he’s hoping to help other young athletes avoid.

“My advice to other athletes is to always make your personal health the most important thing you care about. You should care about it as much as you do competing,” said Faires.

A few months into his senior year, Faires injured himself doing power lifts with heavy weights. Fortunately, he found the right doctor – Dr. Mark Prasarn, who specializes in complex spinal disorders and orthopedic trauma. Through his affiliation with Memorial Hermann IRONMAN Sports Medicine Institute, Dr. Prasarn is the spine surgery consultant for the Houston Texans and all University of Houston athletic teams.

Faires first started having back problems in his early teens while lifting weights in his hometown of Edinburg, Texas. A local chiropractor ordered an MRI that identified disc compression as the cause of Faires’ leg pain, which is often associated with problems in the lower back. The MRI results suggested that the injury was not severe, and the doctor recommended avoiding exercises that caused it to flare up.

Throughout high school, Faires avoided squats and power lifts and had no problems. His first two years of college brought him to Houston, where he played football at Texas Southern University on a full athletic scholarship. After transferring to Oklahoma State University as a walk-on, he sat out a year and then transferred to the University of Houston, where he was back on the field during his senior year.

“A lot of the required lifts for training were squats,” the 6’2”, 235-pound former long snapper for the Houston Cougars said. “I did them and got a lot stronger. Everything was going great, then in the spring of 2016, the tingling and numbness in my leg came back after a workout.” When physical therapy provided no significant benefit, a team doctor ordered an MRI and referred him to Dr. Prasarn.

“Between May and July, I was getting only about two to four hours of sleep a night,” Faires said. “With a herniated disc, you can be fine one day and in terrible pain the next. It was the most pain I’ve ever had in my life.”

When a conservative course of cortisone injections failed to provide relief and Faires began to develop weakness in his right leg, Dr. Prasarn talked to him about the risks and benefits of microdiscectomy, a minimally invasive surgical procedure performed on patients with a herniated lumbar disc. The procedure involves removal of portions of the disc to relieve pressure on the spinal nerves.

“Minimally invasive spine surgery has been developed to effectively treat disorders of the spine with minimal scarring, decreased pain, less blood loss and shorter patient recovery time,” said Dr. Prasarn, who is dual fellowship-trained in orthopedic trauma and spinal surgery and holds a faculty position as associate professor at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth. “Much of the surgery is done using a microscope and



Zach Faires is pictured on his graduation day from the University of Houston.

sometimes special surgical instruments and implants. We customize the surgery to the patient.”

Dr. Prasarn performed Faires’ microdiscectomy at Memorial Hermann Orthopedic & Spine Hospital in Bellaire in August 2016. The outpatient procedure took about 45 minutes.

“It was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made,” Faires said. “How I feel now is the polar opposite of how I felt before the surgery. I’ve had a few other athletic surgeries unrelated to my back, and Dr. Prasarn is one of the best surgeons I’ve ever had. He made me feel very comfortable with the procedure and gave me time to talk with my parents to find a comfortable solution. He’s very passionate about helping his patients.”

Since the surgery, Faires has been running and doing core work to stay in shape. “I enjoy being physically fit and moving around a lot,” he said. “Eventually I’ll be able to go back to heavy lifting, but not exceeding the level at which I trained with the football team.”

As a member of the National Football League Physician Society, Dr. Prasarn enjoys taking care of athletes. “Zach was an ideal patient – a fit, healthy and motivated guy,” he said. “He was a pleasure to take care of. I enjoy helping athletes so they can get back to play. It’s a rewarding practice well-suited to my training and experience.”

Faires is now preparing for life after college.

“I love football and I loved playing the game. But after coming through spinal surgery with the help of my physicians and family’s support, I’m looking at life in a new way. Although I’m hanging up my cleats, I want other young athletes to know that they have to live life after the games are over. For me, that means being able to walk and stand without pain. I’m thankful for being able to do that. It’s a blessing that I don’t take for granted,” said Faires. ❖