

# Spotlight on Spaulding Science

News from the Schoen Adams Research Institute at Spaulding Rehabilitation



## Spotlight Q&A with Julius Thomas

An elite athlete throughout his life, Julius Thomas played professional football in the National Football League (NFL) for the Denver Broncos, Jacksonville Jaguars, and Miami Dolphins over the course of his seven-year career. Now pursuing his doctorate in clinical health psychology at Nova Southeastern University, Thomas serves as a Player Advisor on the Football Players Health Study at Harvard University. His passion is helping others reach their individual peak performance, personally and professionally.

**Q.** Why did you decide to follow a new career path in psychology after pro-football and how does it compare?

**A.** For me, the decision to study psychology came from my passion to help others. As a pro-football player, I knew some of my strengths, but I hadn't discovered my passion. My passion is to help people live better, feel better, and be better. I have always been interested in the mental aspect of life and that led me to psychology. Comparing the two disciplines is a little challenging, but I would say becoming clinically trained is as difficult as becoming a great athlete in some ways. The time and effort required to get a clinical doctorate degree shocked me. I actually had more free time as a pro-athlete.

**Q.** What has been most meaningful to you in your involvement in the Football Players Health Study?

**A.** The most meaningful result of my involvement in the FPHS study is the education I have received. When I joined as an advisor, I was in search of better understanding my own health risks. Over the last five years, I have learned comprehensively about the health conditions most prevalent in former NFL player populations, the long-term effect on the brain and body when health conditions are not treated, and most importantly, the modifiable nature of many health conditions. Learning that I can reduce the risk and morbidity of health conditions common in former player populations provides me with a lot of hope and agency for improving my healthspan.

**Q.** How do your multiple perspectives make this type of science more robust?

**A.** I believe my multiple perspectives allow me to integrate research results and the dissemination of those results through multiple lenses. Research shows that shared experience is powerful for creating meaning. My emic perspective of pro football, research, and health allows me to understand the interests and challenges that each population has. Research is about making inferences on observational data, and at times, the interpretation of data can be assisted by knowledgeable expertise of the game and culture of football. The reality is science and football are two different cultures that speak different languages and being bilingual in a way helps the communication between and to individuals on both sides.

**Q.** What do you think was the most important result of this particular study on chronic pain?

**A.** I often have a different perspective on what is the most important result than others because the research data is applicable to me personally. What stands out most for me is pain interference. The prevalence of chronic pain in former NFL player populations is very high and chronic pain is an extremely challenging condition to live with. As a doctoral trainee in psychology, I understand the burden of chronic pain and how difficult it is as a healthcare provider to work with patients suffering from chronic pain. Chronic pain is hard to treat and prevents individuals from experiencing life in ways that bring enjoyment. Chronic pain decreases physical activity, is a risk factor for mental health conditions, disrupts one's ability to work, and even has deleterious effects on cognitive abilities. To me, pain interference is more than just statistical numbers—it is an indication that former players are having difficulty engaging with life in the ways they would like to. I continue to think about the prevalence of chronic pain in former players and what that means for their quality of life.