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Boise State's Kaiserman ready to face life without football

Concussions sidelined running back Matt Kaiserman, but his future is still bright academically

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Matt Kaiserman did everything he could to prepare for life after football.

He just wasn't ready for that life to begin.

Kaiserman agreed to retire from the Boise State football team this winter after suffering the second serious concussion of his college career in the MAACO Bowl Las Vegas in December.

"As long as I stay busy and keep my mind off it, I do well," said Kaiserman, who had two years of eligibility remaining. "But I think that I don't quite know how much this has affected me yet. Watching spring ball and hearing about it, it hurts. Being in class with some of the guys on the team, hearing about the workouts, it does sting you a little bit not to be there. That'll fade, I'm sure."

Kaiserman joined the Broncos as a running back in January 2008 after a stellar career at Skyview High in Nampa.

He missed six games in 2009 because of a concussion and another four games with a broken leg. He rushed for 122 yards that year at Hawaii and likely would have been the Broncos' No. 3 tailback in 2011.

His latest concussion affected him for so long that he wasn't cleared to begin exercising until late April — four months after he absorbed a helmet-to-helmet hit while covering a kickoff in the fourth quarter against Utah.

Boise State announced in early March, before spring practice, that Kaiserman wouldn't return.

"The hard thing about concussions is it's not cut and dried, black and white, that, 'Yeah, you're done,'" coach Chris Petersen said. "It could be OK. It might not if you take another shot. When you start having those discussions, it's usually not a good proposition."

Athletic trainer Marc Paul made the final decision. He called Kaiserman to tell him he wasn't going to clear him to return to the football team — about a week after Kaiserman, his wife Kierra and his parents met with Petersen and the Broncos' medical staff with no resolution.

"They couldn't technically tell me I was done medically," Kaiserman said, "but I think everyone was in agreement it was probably the best thing to do. ... When I heard the news, it took a while to get a hold of me, to hit me, but I didn't necessarily argue. I kind of came to that realization a while ago."

Not that he was ready to make that decision himself.

Even his family members wavered — torn between the urge to protect him and the temptation to let him fulfill his dream.

"I think ultimately, if I was going to be rational, I would have had to arrive at that conclusion," Kaiserman said. "But that's just not something I like to think about."

The recent nationwide scrutiny of concussions — and the potential for long-term effects — weighed on everyone in the decision-making process. The worry was that Kaiserman would be more susceptible to concussions and the symptoms would last even longer.

At least four other Football Bowl Subdivision players have retired for similar reasons in the past year, including Arizona State quarterback Steven Threet.

"I think five years ago, he's still playing and probably not for the better," Petersen said.

Kaiserman was injured while pursuing the Utes' kickoff returner. Defensive back Greg Bird, who was upfield from the returner, peeled back to take out Kaiserman. Kaiserman never saw him — and Bird drilled him in the earhole with his helmet.

Bird wasn't penalized or disciplined for the hit, which was so vicious that it broke Kaiserman's new titanium facemask and sent his helmet flying. Kaiserman was unconscious for several minutes, he said.

Kaiserman considers the hit a cheap shot.

"It was pretty ugly on the replay," he said. "... He led with his head and speared me. It was very evident."

The hit ended Kaiserman's football career but shouldn't derail his future. He wasn't an NFL prospect. He is a future businessman or possibly a politician.

He earned his bachelor's degree in political science in May 2010, took undergraduate business classes for the past year and will begin pursuit of a master's of business administration this fall.

He also will help special teams coach Jeff Choate break down video during the 2011 season to keep his scholarship through December.

"My whole future is right here in my head with my academics," Kaiserman, 22, said. "I had that to keep in mind. I had to keep in mind my wife and our future. That's a main reason why I'm probably OK with that decision right now. It is what it is and it hurts — but at the same time I've got a lot to look forward to."

He already has plans to share his story.

He'd like to talk to local high school teams and he's speaking at a medical conference in June.

He has two lessons to share:

- Take concussions seriously. In retrospect, he believes he had an undiagnosed concussion in high school.
- And don't count on a future in athletics.

"I'm the perfect example of having a Plan B," he said. "I was able to define myself in other terms other than athletics."

Of course, there was one sports label he did enjoy.

"Everybody likes that recognition of being a Bronco," he said. "It's a very neat experience in Idaho."

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