
THE MORNING READ

Ex-USC star gains by losing

Anthony Davis takes
gastric bypass.

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IRVINE

The first flicker flashes from his pinky rings, those huge golden nuggets encrusted with diamonds in the shape of footballs.

Then light catches his perfectly polished charcoal shoes, the sparkle of his gold-knotted cuff links, the jewels in his Nike swoosh lapel pin and the sheen of the eggshell tie that cleanly slides inside his dark, pinstriped, cashmere suit.

“This is the new me,” announc-

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DAVIS: What he saw in mirror depressed and endangered him

FROM PAGE 1

es Anthony Davis, the legendary University of Southern California running back for two national championship teams in the early 1970s.

Davis, 54, runs a hand over the smooth line of three buttons fastening his coat. Trim is the stomach that he used to call "my big frog belly." Healthier is his body - "that shell," he called it - that had once swelled to almost 300 pounds and disguised his past as a fleet-footed athlete.

He shuffles his feet in a soft-soled Meringue, wiggles his slender hips wildly enough to flutter the bottoms of his pleated trousers, shakes his broad shoulders and smiles - Ta-dal Touchdown! - like a newly crowned champion.

"Actually it's the old me. It's me!" he celebrates. "How do I look?"

A year ago Davis wouldn't have been brave enough to ask that question, much less pry himself into one of the suits that had hung in the deepest parts of his closet like an old memory.

Imagine fear from the 5-foot-11 All-American who sprinted to touchdowns atop a racing blur of black Nike cleats, who made the cover of Sports Illustrated, who was so popular he'd forever be remembered by his No. 28, his initials "A.D." and a signature dance-on-his knees end-zone celebration in the Coliseum.

He built his reputation breaking tackles on College Football Saturdays like today. He used to be so unstoppable that fans of the Fighting Irish dubbed him the "Notre Dame Killer," and a nation of sports experts voted him runner-up to Archie Griffin for the 1974 Heisman Trophy.

But in the three decades since he played his last football game, Davis was getting tackled by his own unhealthy body. Mounting stresses from his real estate ventures and busted business deals led him to find comfort in food.

The extra weight burdened his back, knees and ankles, already worn down from the battering and bruising of his sport. Exercise became too painful, too uncomfortable and easily avoidable.

He had become the running back who couldn't run. Not even for a first down.

Autograph seekers stopped recognizing him. He disappeared beneath the girth he tried to hide in baggy sweaters and slacks. He didn't resemble the 185-pound rusher who became the subject of velvet paintings in the cardinal and gold 28.

He used to go to USC fanta-

sy football camps or make appearances where his name tag was necessary. He'd see disappointment in his fans' eyes, that half-sad, half-judgmental glance that seemed to say, "You let yourself go."

Davis knew those eyes. Until eight months ago, they belonged to him too. Every morning he used to be troubled by his reflection in the mirror at his Irvine home. He asked himself, really asked himself, "How do I look?"

His whispered answer sickened him enough to trigger the hardest run of his life: the sprint to save it.

On March 11, at Scripps Memorial Hospital La Jolla, Davis became the first notable athlete to undergo gastric-bypass surgery. Dr. Alan Wittgrove shrunk Davis' stomach to the size of a golf ball.

Davis talked about the surgery publicly, a bold move for a man who once symbolized fitness, strength and vitality.

He even allowed the 90-minute procedure to be broadcast live on the Internet (www.liteandhope.com).

His abdomen shone beneath the operating room's bright light, his face curtained off with surgical sheet.

Dr. Alan Wittgrove's scalpel sliced into Davis. The surgeon probed it with tubes that sucked out globules of fat, sutured tight a smaller stomach and then sealed him closed a soon-to-be-healthier man.

"I was trapped inside this heavy shell," says Davis, who will talk about his transformation on Nov. 29 at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange. "I wasn't me. I was dying like that."

Before the surgery, he used to feel death visiting him in the dark of night, waking him in a panic, choking him breathless. Sleep apnea had forced him to strap a plastic mask over his nose and mouth to push oxygen into his lungs at night.

"I sleep soundly now. No fears. No machine," he says.

Before the life change, he bordered on being morbidly obese and diabetic. His blood pressure was elevated, his joints swollen from gout, his body failing.

"My friends used to tell me 'Boy, you better step away from the table,' and I'd just laugh," he remembers. "But now that I'm healthy, I know I shouldn't have found that funny."

Before, Davis couldn't bring himself to diet, to bend over to wax his own car or lace up his own sneakers, to jog a hundred yards to flash the speed in his legs, to pick up a football and hurl it down a field to show off the strength he also had as a two-time national champion Trojan baseball player.



BEFORE: Former USC football star Anthony Davis before his March gastric bypass surgery.



PHOTOS: LEONARD ORTIZ, THE REGISTER

STANDING TALL: Davis has since lost 80 pounds.

"I threw the ball with my doctor at the park a couple months ago," says Davis, after playing catch with his dermatologist Vince Afsahi. "Perfect spirals. I had a great time."

In eight months, Davis has dropped 80 pounds to weigh in at 205, his playing size during

his injury-shortened NFL career 30 years ago with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Los Angeles Rams.

His waist size dropped from a 48 to a 36, his coat from a 55 to a 44 regular, his neck from a 22 to a 16 1/2. He reports these measurements while tighten-

ing the knot on his tie and flexing dimples deep enough to hide a pigskin.

He bought four new suits, including one for his August enshrinement into the College Football Hall of Fame. He exercises three times a week, eats small meals, supplements his

diet with vitamins and looks away from the TV during the fast-food commercials.

"I feel 25 years younger," Davis says. "The pounds are just pouring off. You know, I ran four miles today, and I felt like I could get back on the field."

The radical weight loss left Davis with excess skin on his face. Afsahi, who uses a new heat- and laser-powered skin-tightening method at his South Coast Dermatology Institute in Newport Beach, returned the definition of the cheekbones and the square of a rugged jaw to Davis.

"A.D. looks like he did during his playing years," says Afsahi, a USC medical school graduate and Trojan football fan. "What I see now is a man who got his life back."

Davis nods in agreement to his doctor's words. Then they slip into the Fox Sports Grill for a light dinner.

The server recognizes A.D. in the well-tailored suit. She politely introduces herself to the handsome Anthony Davis the sports world never forgot.

"I'll have a grapefruit juice," he says, closing the menu with his diamond knuckles and flashing his celebrity smile.

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