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Winborn takes unusual steps to stave off injury

By Roger Phillips, STAFF WRITER

SANTA CLARA -- Jamie Winborn, the San Francisco 49ers' oft-injured linebacker, received a \$1million signing bonus on his new contract this past off-season, and quickly decided to invest a portion of the money.

Winborn, 25, found an unusual but potentially profitable way to spend roughly \$24,000. He purchased an inflatable hyperbaric chamber, a device he hopes will enable him to mend faster from bumps and bruises, and recover more quickly from workouts.

Some mornings, Winborn gets out of bed, inflates the chamber, climbs in, puts on a mask, breathes deeply and drifts off for a couple of extra hours of sleep.

The purified air Winborn takes in through his breathing tube is pressurized, he said, to match the air at 11 feet below sea level. The purified air saturates the red blood cells with oxygen.

"Normally, the body takes in 17 percent oxygen," Winborn said with clinical precision.

"With the chamber, you take in 95 percent more."

Two years ago, Winborn missed most of his second NFL season with a knee injury. Last year, Winborn missed the final seven games after suffering a neck injury during practice.

It is not those types of injuries, however, that Winborn hopes to treat with his recent purchase. Rather, Winborn is trying to reap the same sorts of benefits that 49ers safety Tony Parrish, former 49ers receiver Terrell Owens and many other athletes believe they get from their hyperbaric chambers.

"If you have more oxygen in your red blood cells," Winborn said, "your recovery time is two to three times faster. By sitting in the chamber, it speeds up your recovery. It's like speeding up time."

Winborn decided that if established stars such as Parrish and Owens swore by their hyperbaric chambers, it was worth getting one of his own.

"If you look at their performance, and what kind of players they are, I'm trying to take my game to the next level and get over injuries faster," Winborn said.

Winborn said he is a believer.

"I can definitely notice a difference," he said. "I noticed it right away."

The hyperbaric chamber is not the only new weapon in Winborn's arsenal this season.

In his many meetings with doctors this off-season, the speedy Winborn said he discovered he tended to be pigeon-toed with his left foot. If he could correct this, he realized, he could be faster.

Winborn said he has been trying to train himself to keep the foot straight when he runs, and also purchased inserts for his shoes to add arch to his feet and to help his left ankle lock when he pushes off on it.

"I feel faster," Winborn said when asked if he is noticing a difference.

Most significantly, Winborn said he has put his frightening neck injury completely out of his mind.

was, Winborn underwent surgery in which two vertebrae were fused together, and he is wearing a heavy pad to protect his neck.

But Winborn has not shied away from contact in practice, most notably stopping running back Terry Jackson during a goal-line drill several days ago.

Asked what it was like to be back in action at training camp, Winborn said, "It's still football -- running, tackling, talking a little noise."

Of his neck, he said, "I never think about it like that. People were expecting me to shy away from hits. But not at all, not at all. Mentally, I've got to put it in my head to go all out when I'm out there."

