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IT'S AN AIR OF REPAIR

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Zach Thomas strips down to his shorts, rolls a newspaper in one hand, holds a portable DVD player in the other and still finds enough dexterity to grab a knife that has quite an intimidating blade. Now, he's ready to extend his NFL career and perhaps his life.

He goes to the space in his home he used to call the Deco Room because it's filled with artsy furniture and lit by a Martini glass-shaped lamp, and then he focuses on the big bag in the middle of the floor.

Soon, the Dolphins' star middle linebacker will be lying inside that bag, filling it with so much **air** it will start to resemble a 12-foot-long, four-foot wide Tootsie Roll.

Welcome to Zach Thomas' hyperbaric chamber.

"I get in there and read the paper or watch a DVD," Thomas says. "I definitely don't want to fall asleep, so I try to have something to stay awake. You don't want to be in there too long. I zip myself in, and stay in there for about 45 minutes to an hour. Then I decompress and zip myself out.

"I'm not claustrophobic, but I don't want to get stuck in there. Having the knife to cut myself out if something goes wrong makes me feel more comfortable."

Thomas practices this ritual about three times a week, lying flat on a pad the entire time, a plastic porthole serving as his only view of the outside world. When the treatment is done, he says he feels "refreshed" and his mind is "clear."

"It helps in my recovery and that's big for me, my body recovering from games, injuries, whatever," Thomas says. "You recover a lot faster because you get something like 10 times the oxygen you get when you're not in there."

Hyperbaric-oxygen therapy allows a person to breathe pure oxygen while pressurized inside a specially equipped medical device (the hyperbaric chamber). The therapy has, among other things, been proven to stimulate the healing of wounds.

Medicare has 15 indications under which it covers hyperbaric oxygen therapy, from the well-known treatment of decompression illness and skin-graft preservation, to lesser-known applications such as the treatment of diabetic wounds of the lower extremities.

Thomas obviously doesn't concern himself with the therapy's effects on diabetic or burn wounds. But he knows that football-related injuries, although not recognized for treatment by any studies or the government, feel a lot better once they're exposed to hyperbaric therapy.

"I haven't had concussions lately, but I did go through that period of time four years ago when I got concussions, and I thought it was going to end my career," Thomas says. "I remember missing a week-and-a-half or two weeks of two-a-days. I didn't have the hyperbaric then. But I got a concussion [two seasons ago], and I felt like the recovery was a lot quicker. I got in the hyperbaric and I still felt a little out of it, but not as much. And I was fine the next week."

FEELING OF CLARITY

Even when Thomas is not in collisions so violent they rattle his brain, he believes the hyperbaric chamber helps his head.

"Late at night, I feel like my tension's pretty bad and I can't really concentrate," he says. "But when I get out of there I feel great. I feel clear. It's pretty crazy. I just wish I had it when I was at school."

“It could have helped me with my grades.”

Dr. Ivan Montoya, an emergency medicine, hyperbaric medicine and diving medicine specialist at Mercy Hospital, says there is no medical study that proves hyperbaric therapy helps treat concussions or clears the mind.

But he has seen anecdotal information that suggests Thomas isn't imagining things.

“Recently, I treated a lawyer who went diving on a Sunday and went to trial on Monday and said he didn't know what he was doing in the courtroom,” Montoya said. “The same with a stock broker whose secretary called because she said her boss went diving one day and the next didn't know how to use his computer. We know from the anecdotal information that those people get treated with hyperbaric oxygen and get better.”

The advantages of hyperbaric therapy might not end there. Marc Kaiser, the director of the Hyperbaric and Problem Wound Center at Mercy Hospital, says studies were done in Europe in the mid-1990s in which trainers assessed soccer players who suffered ankle sprains and similar injuries.

Athletes suffering those injuries were treated in hyperbaric chambers and, over a period of a couple of years, were found to return to competition at a faster rate than players who did not use hyperbaric therapy.

“So when Zach Thomas says he benefits,” Kaiser says, “that doesn't surprise me.”

Dr. Montoya says the hyperbaric therapy won't cure sprains but will shrink the swelling brought on by the sprain. “By decreasing the edema [swelling], the athlete will be able to play a lot sooner,” he says.

QUICKER HEALING

Thomas is also convinced the “nasty scrapes and cuts” that decorate his body after every game played on Pro Player Stadium's dirt infield, heal quicker with hyperbaric therapy.

“They use the hyperbaric for burn victims in hospitals, so it's got to be about the same thing,” he says.

Hyperbaric therapy isn't new to professional athletes. The Dallas Cowboys had a chamber at their training facility for a couple of years, according to Cowboys spokesman Rich Dalrymple. That was around 1992-94 - when, coincidentally, the team won consecutive Super Bowls.

Several Miami Heat players, particularly center Rony Seikaly, used the chamber at Mercy Hospital during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Even former Dolphins defensive end Trace Armstrong purchased his own chamber a few years ago, and that is what convinced Thomas to get his.

PASSING THE WORD

Thomas has, in turn, recommended hyperbaric therapy to some of his teammates. When receiver Oronde Gadsden dislocated his ankle during the past preseason, he visited Thomas at home and used the chamber.

“He said it helped his swelling,” Thomas says. “Some guys, I mention it to them. But some guys don't want to hear it. When they get home, they want to get away from football. That's fine.”

Thomas spent about \$20,000 on his hyperbaric chamber. That price pales compared with the \$26 million unit recently installed at a Texas **Air** Force base. But whatever the cost, Thomas believes he is making a wise investment.

“Twenty grand is nothing when you consider what I can get out of it,” he says. “. . . If I get one extra year out of using this, I think it was worth it. And who knows? Maybe I'm even prolonging my life.”

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