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THE COUNT

The Shrinking Shelf Life of NFL Players

The careers of pro football players are decreasing at an unprecedented rate



California quarterback Jared Goff throws during a drill at the NFL scouting combine in Indianapolis. PHOTO: MICHAEL CONROY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Rob Arthur

Updated Feb. 29, 2016 12:42 a.m. ET

It would be no surprise if 39-year-old Peyton Manning decides to retire from the NFL after a pro career that began in 1998. But the recent retirements of Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch and Patriots linebacker Jerod Mayo at the age of 29 came as a bit of a shock. Reports that Lions receiver Calvin Johnson at age 30 is also considering stepping away raises a question: Are NFL players having shorter careers?

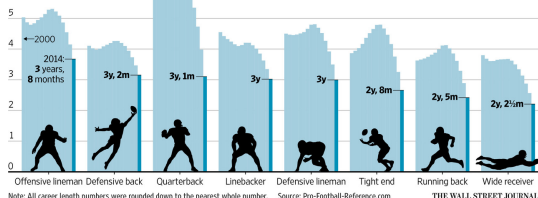
According to data from Pro-Football-Reference.com, NFL careers are shrinking at an unprecedented rate. From 2008 to 2014, the average NFL career dropped in length by about two and a half years.

The decrease in career lengths is a historical abnormality. From 1991 to about 2008, career lengths were mostly consistent. But since 2008, players have been exiting the league earlier.

Time in the NFL

The average length of an NFL career has seen a sharp drop since 2000. A look at the average number of years played before retirement, sorted by position.

6 years played before retirement



While the decrease is occurring across all positions, some have seen a sharper drop.

Quarterbacks have seen their career lengths fall by almost three years during this span, with the average career across all positions falling from 4.99 years to 2.66.

Concerns about the effects of

concussions and head injuries have prompted some players to retire early. Several recent retirees, including Chris Borland and Adrian Coxson, expressed concerns about their long-term health when discussing their reasons for leaving the game.

But NFL teams are also using more players than ever before, which could be connected to the increased health awareness. In 2015, 1,973 players played at least one snap in the league, compared with 1,894 in 2007, according to Stats LLC. Still, even if all of these additional players

only lasted in the NFL for one season, it would still explain less than half of the decline in career length.

Of course, players are also earning more during this span. But in other sports, like baseball, career lengths haven't declined when salaries spiked.

As the NFL scouting combine in Indianapolis wraps on Monday, hundreds of prospects are hoping it is the start of a long career in professional football. But if they make it into the league at all, it will likely be a shorter stay than it used to be.

Appeared in the February 29, 2016, print edition as 'The Shrinking Shelf Life of Pro Football Players.'

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