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The No-pain, No-gain Kid

San Francisco running back Roger Craig takes a terrible pounding, and he goes to great lengths to stay healthy

Jill Lieber

Every week Roger Craig adds another tattoo. Thick red and brown stripes—imprints of opponents' face masks—crisscross his broad back and muscled rib-cage. Deep, dark gouges from turf burns cover his elbows, knees and forearms; scratches from being stepped on in pile-ups scar his hands.

"After a game, I look like I've been locked in a cage with a tiger," says Craig, the San Francisco 49er running back. "I can sense there's internal bleeding from all the blows and bruises, because for several hours my body temperature is very warm. I'll ice myself if I'm seriously injured. But regardless of the severity, I can't eat that night, and I have difficulty sleeping."

The chore of getting Craig back on the field falls to two chiropractors and a **massage** therapist. Craig may be the only player in the NFL with a private medical staff. He spends about \$300 a week to keep his body more or less healthy.

"I'm hit from all kinds of directions," says Craig. "My bones get knocked out of whack with every tackle. By keeping my body tuned, by stripping out all the lactic acid and blood clogs [bruises], I'm always running at my best."

On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, Craig visits Dr. Nick Athens, a San Carlos, Calif., chiropractor. The 10-minute sessions begin with Craig lying facedown on a padded table. "How do you feel?" Athens asks. Craig groans.

"My lower back is awfully tight," he mutters. Athens determines that Craig's left leg is a half-inch shorter than his right one, the result of Sunday's jarring blows. He pops Craig's spine and hips into alignment—the joints loudly snap and crackle—and then adjusts the knees, ankles, toes and neck.

"Roger knows how he's supposed to feel," says Athens. "He'll say, 'Ah, Nick, you missed a rib.' I'll tell him he's mistaken. But he'll persist, and, of course, he's right."

Maintaining Craig's muscle flexibility is Jennie Winter's job. She sets up her portable **massage** table in the middle of the Craigs' master bedroom on Monday. Tuesday and Thursday evenings. He is so relaxed during these two-hour sessions that he often falls asleep. Winter smooths his spasms and strokes his bruises. "I use my fingers, knuckles, hands, forearms and elbows," says Winter. "If I didn't, working on somebody that big, I'd be an arthritic cripple."

To treat his hamstrings, she walks up and down the backs of his legs on her knees. "The bruises that Roger gets are not like those of the average person who bumps into a chair and turns black-

and-blue," she says. "These are major contusions. Because the hits he takes are so deep and so traumatic, it often takes two or three weeks for the bruises to come to the surface."

Once a week, Craig sees Dr. Don Sanchez, who identifies himself as a chiropractor, **osteomasseur** and **herbalist**. Sanchez coats Craig with special healing oils concocted from the approximately 275 herbs grown in his Rocklin, Calif., garden. Then he digs his large hands into Craig's muscles, kneading and driving all the way to the bone. The ordeal, which lasts from half an hour to three hours, can be so painful that sometimes three men are needed to hold Craig down. "Whenever I work on Roger, he likes to say, 'No pain, no gain,' " says Sanchez.

What's the benefit of being yanked, stretched and mashed? Well, since the fourth week of his rookie season, in 1983, Craig has started all but one game, including playoffs and a Super Bowl. Unlike most running backs, who try to rest their legs during practice, Craig works out with a vengeance. On the day after a game, he jogs four laps around the 49er practice fields and does five to eight 100-yard dashes at three-quarter speed. When the team runs through plays later in the week, Craig sprints to the end zone every time he touches the ball.

Craig attributes much of his durability and resilience to the warm, human touches of his therapy. "The body is a whole, not the sum of parts," says Winter. "Modern technology is wonderful, but we can do a lot with our hands that a machine can't. Being touched is a form of nurturing and caring. If you're going to take the body out and get it beat up once a week, you need tender loving care. That's a nice balance. And Roger is a balanced person."

Two years ago Craig was plagued by a strained hip and bruised ribs, not to mention an ulcer caused by the anti-inflammatory drugs he was taking. Last year he had difficulty making the transition from fullback to halfback. Consequently, Craig entered this season facing the possibility of splitting time with second-year backs Terrence Flagler and Doug DuBose. According to the Bay Area scuttlebutt, Craig had lost a step.

Forget it.

Today Craig is a leading candidate for the MVP award. Going into this weekend's games, he ranked second in the NFL in rushing, with 1,071 yards, and fourth in receptions, with 57. No running back had caught as many passes. He is enjoying his best season since 1985, when he became the first player in history to surpass 1,000 yards in both rushing and receiving.

His combination of high career rushing (5,140) and receiving (3,611) yards is a rarity in the NFL. In fact, with 415 receptions in five-plus seasons, Craig already ranks third among running backs in career catches. Walter Payton, who is No. 1, had 492 catches in 13 years, and Tony Galbreath had 490 in 12 with the New Orleans Saints, Minnesota Vikings and New York Giants.

This year 49er running-back coach Sherm Lewis has altered Craig's style. He still has that remarkably high knee lift, a trait he picked up as a high school hurdler. Now, however, Craig lowers his upper body in traffic. That way he provides a smaller target for potential tacklers and is in position to initiate a hit rather than just receive one.

"To stop him, you've got to bring your lunch money, hit him with everything you've got," says Dave McGinnis, the linebacker coach of the Chicago Bears, who faced Craig earlier this season. "He'll run through arm tackles and dead legs. You can't bring him down with one guy; you've got to swarm around him, keep a fever pitch throughout the game. That's hard to do for 60 minutes."

Craig's relentlessness was a sight to behold in San Francisco's 24-21 victory over the Los Angeles Rams on Oct. 16. He mowed down linebackers and defensive backs left and right in 95° heat at Anaheim Stadium en route to 190 rushing yards. On a breathtaking 46-yard touchdown run, he bulldozed through five different tacklers. Afterward, Ram coach John Robinson called Craig "the best back in the league."

"When we watch film, there's comedy and tragedy," says Bears defensive end Dan Hampton. "Comedy is when somebody gets upended and he flips upside down. Tragedy is when somebody gets his leg torn off. Awe is when we watched Roger Craig against the Rams."

Still, at the start of the season the 49ers didn't plan to depend quite so much on Craig. He has had to take up the slack for a passing game that has been weakened by injuries to quarterback Joe Montana. San Francisco, which before this weekend led the league in rushing, ranked 16th in passing offense. So Craig is not only carrying the ball more than he ever has, but he's also catching more passes than any of the team's wide receivers, including All-Pro Jerry Rice. In fact, Craig has accounted for one-third of the 49ers' total yardage so far this season. Craig's performance has been a blessing for San Francisco, but it has meant a terrible pounding for him. It has also been a test of his fitness regimen.

Thanks to a stepped-up training program in the off-season, Craig has the endurance of a cross-country runner. Three times a week, starting at 6:30 a.m., he ran a winding four-to eight-mile route along a horse trail through Huddart Park in Woodside, Calif. He churned up the steep incline at a remarkable seven-minute-mile pace, and he descended at less than six minutes per mile.

"When it got hot, Roger wanted to run in the afternoons," says Dr. Art Ting, 35, a marathon runner who trained with Craig. "He wanted to inflict as much adversity on himself as he could."

On three other days Craig sprinted. First he did 15 100-yard dashes—all uphill. That was followed by interval training—220-yard sprints separated by 30-second rest periods—at the College of San Mateo. "Some afternoons I thought I was going to blow out my hamstrings," says Craig, laughing.

"Roger never knows when he's done too much," says 49er defensive back Eric Wright, another of Craig's training partners. "Once he starts he doesn't stop. He's a machine."

Also in the off-season, Craig went on a strict diet, consuming only 2,500 calories a day. No red meat—just chicken, fish and lots of fruits and vegetables. At bedtime he ate popcorn. In the good old days, Craig would put away six oatmeal-raisin cookies, a couple of scoops of vanilla ice cream and several glasses of milk in one sitting. It's no wonder that he lopped off 16 pounds and showed up at training camp weighing a trim 210.

Craig, 28, turns the key in the front-door lock of his rustic, two-story home in Portola Valley, Calif., 40 miles south of San Francisco, and issues a warning: "Look out! It's a zoo." His three children are waiting inside, ready with hugs, kisses, giggles and squeals. Damesha, 9, shares her daddy's charismatic smile. She's a fourth-grader with a passion for reading; sometimes she has three books going at a time. "She's as crazy about reading as I am about working out," Craig says.

Rometra, 6, is a first-grader and a quick study. In recent months she has taught herself to play songs on the piano. But, like her father, she doesn't know when enough's enough. "I have to tell her to stop," says Roger. "She's too self-motivated. It's scary. She's just like me."

Then there's Rogdrick, who's almost three and very unpredictable. One moment he's emulating Michael Jackson, kicking his leg, twirling, moonwalking in his tiny hightop sneakers. The next he's shyly hiding his big brown eyes in his dad's chest.

The Craigs' five-bedroom redwood home is situated on two acres among spruce, maples and oaks deep in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. At first glance it resembles an adult-sized treehouse, towering over the driveway, with decks extending in every direction. Craig loves to sit on the patio outside the master bedroom and soak up the moonlight.

"I'm so into my profession that I need a place where I can concentrate," he says. "Here there's no pressure, no clutter. I can't even see my neighbors' houses. I'm by myself, with my family."

Roger's wife, Vernessia, rises with him at six each morning. That's when they discuss pressing issues—everything from how the kids are doing in school to the 49ers' game plan. Twice a day Roger phones home from the team's offices 30 minutes away, and he calls again from his jeep on the drive home. The night before games, he has to say good-night to the children by telephone from a hotel room. He won't leave for the stadium the next morning until he gives Vernessia a wake-up call. "I need to hear her voice," he says. "She's a part of me."

Even on Tuesday, his day off, Craig works. He likes to take Rogdrick with him on errands and business calls. On this day, however, he has too many places to go, too many people to see, so Rogdrick stays home. Craig's first stop is at Mizuno Sports, Inc., in Burlingame. He regularly consults with Mizuno's design staff about his football equipment. Today he reports on the performance of his special air-padded thigh guards, and then slips on a new pair of custom-made shoulder pads. "I'll need deltoid plates," he tells a Mizuno vice-president. "I'm hit a lot behind the shoulders."

He heads south to Cupertino for lunch at the Sports City Cafe, which he owns with five teammates. This is no ordinary sports bar. The menu features dishes like mesquite-grilled snapper with prawns, and fettucini smothered in smoked chicken and prosciutto. Original watercolors of athletes hang on the walls. Sports memorabilia—e.g., one of Peggy Fleming's skating costumes, a pair of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's goggles, Greg Louganis's swim trunks—are displayed in a trophy case.

The last stop of the day is a production studio in San Jose, where he is shooting a 30-second TV commercial for a car dealership. The advertising agency has written wordy, tongue-twisting copy. "Oh, man, my lips keep getting stuck," Craig says after botching a take. Several takes later he bolts out the back door. He's antsy to get home.

"My kids come first," he says. "They're what I live for. I play football for them. They are why I take the punishment. I want them to have the finer things in life, the things I didn't have as a child."

Craig, the third oldest of seven children, grew up in Davenport, Iowa. His father, Elijah, was a mechanic who repaired Wonder bread delivery trucks from two in the afternoon until 11 at night. His mother, Ernestine, worked the night shift as a machine operator, making replacement parts for tractors. She would arrive home at 7:30 a.m., in time to get her brood ready for school. "I didn't take a lot of sleep back then," she says. "I just kept going."

Elijah devoted what free time he had to his children and his electric guitar. He would gather the kids in the den for concerts, which usually included a bit of B.B. King and Chuck Berry, and some blues and gospel. The children would laugh at his elaborate fingering of the guitar, and they would dance around the room. "I kick myself in the butt all the time for not learning the guitar," Roger says.

One thing that he did learn from his father was the value of hard work. The lesson paid off early. In the opening football game of his junior year in high school, Roger broke his right leg. He knew he would miss the entire year, but he took an aggressive approach to his rehabilitation. He would throw down his crutches and walk back and forth across the living room. He would lift the sofa and various siblings using his bad leg. "Roger went through four or five casts," says Ernestine. "That boy scared me half to death."

After the last cast was removed, Elijah pestered his son to resume running. "Did you do your road work today?" he would ask after he got home from the garage. Elijah knew Nebraska had its eye on Roger.

In June 1978, before Roger's senior year at Davenport Central, Elijah was found to have lung cancer. Doctors advised him not to work while he underwent chemotherapy, but Elijah stayed on the job anyway. "I'd go by the garage on my way to work to make sure he was all right," says Ernestine. "For about four months he seemed real strong, though he was coughing a lot."

When Elijah suffered a dizzy spell one night in March 1979, the garage manager called Roger to come get his dad. Two months later, at age 45, Elijah died. "I'm still uncomfortable talking about him," says Craig. "He told my mother he knew I'd do well at Nebraska, but he never got to see me succeed and blossom. That's the thorn in my foot."

Craig phones his mother at least twice a week, and their conversations always seem to get around to Elijah. "I remind him that as long as there is a Craig on this earth, his father is still alive," says Ernestine. "His father is living through him and his children. I can see that every day."

During football season Ernestine frequently goes over to Oak Dale Cemetery to tell her husband how Roger is playing. "Of course he can't hear me, but it makes me feel better." she says.

Craig visits Elijah's grave whenever he returns to Iowa. "My father was an inspiration to me." he says. "He taught me that no amount of work was too much when you're reaching for a goal, and that nobody gives you anything for free. I'm in the best condition of my life. My pain tolerance is so high. I feel I can conquer anything.

"But in the end I train not so much for football as for character—for myself and for my life after I'm done playing. I want to be able to look into the mirror and go on with the rest of my life knowing I gave everything I've got."

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