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## NEW JERSEY WEEKLY DESK

## IN PERSON; When the Cheers Aren't Enough

By **BILL FINLEY (NYT)** 1538 words

Published: February 12, 2006

JASON PETER does not seem to have much these days. His money is largely gone, wasted on crack cocaine and heroin. He has no job. More than four years after he played his last game in the National Football League, his fame has faded.

The thunderous cheers he used to hear on Saturday and Sunday afternoons are a memory. About all he has is a fresh start and about 18 months of sobriety. And, after what he has been through, he could not have asked for much more.

"I am able to look my mom, my dad, my brothers and sister in the eye and say I am fine," said Peter, a former football star at Middletown South High School, who these days is living in Huntington Beach, Calif., trying to put his life back together.

"This time, I am able to mean it," he said. "That's it for me."

Peter, who grew up in the Locust section of Middletown and played at Middletown South before moving on to the University of Nebraska and then to the Carolina Panthers, saw his life crumble. His decline started with an addiction to pain pills he was prescribed for football injuries. That led to a crack addiction. Crack led to heroin.

Peter, often too high to bother eating, lost more than 60 pounds. He was in and out of rehabilitation. He attempted suicide.

"There was a point where there was no hope at all," he said.

Before he had nothing, Peter had everything. He was born into affluence, growing up in one of New Jersey's most exclusive neighborhoods. His family owns the Fromagerie in Rumson, an elegant restaurant. He was handsome, personable and blessed with tremendous athletic ability, as was much of his family.

His older brother, Christian, preceded him at Nebraska and went on to play for the New York Giants, the Indianapolis Colts and the Chicago Bears. His younger brother, Damian, was to play at Notre Dame, but he suffered a football-ending injury in a swimming pool accident during his senior year in high school. Peter also has a younger sister, Ashley.

At Middletown South, Jason Peter was an all-state defensive tackle and led his team to the 1990 state championship and, according to his coach, Bob Generelli, was a solid citizen.

"It surprised me when I heard about his problems," said Generelli, the head coach at Middletown South when Peter played there. "I always knew him to be a very conscientious, hard-working individual. He was also sensitive."

After a year at Milford Academy, a prep school in Connecticut, he moved on to Nebraska, where he played from

1994 to 1997. There, he grew into a 6-foot-7, 275-pound giant who was named an All-American defensive lineman in 1997 and played on three national championship teams.

It was during his freshman year at Nebraska that he took his first painkillers, given to him by a team trainer.

"I took them for legitimate reasons, for a knee injury," he said. "That was the first taste I ever had of these things. I knew at that point that I liked them. I liked the way they made me feel. But I didn't have any money to go and get them and I didn't know how to go about scamming doctors to get them."

The N.F.L. thirsts for a player with the size and talent of a Jason Peter. Indeed, the Panthers drafted him in the first round in 1998 and gave him a \$7.4 million signing bonus. He was an immediate success, starting 11 games his rookie season.

He was a good player on the professional level, but there was one problem: he could not stay healthy. Peter, who is 31, had seven surgeries during his four years with the Panthers, most of them to correct neck and shoulder problems. With each operation there was another prescription for powerful pain pills like Vicodin. He became an addict.

"I'm having two major surgeries every year," he said. "It's not like I was sitting there healthy and dandy and popping all these pills. There was a reason why I got hooked. I had a lot of major surgeries and part of the rehabilitation is pain medicine. It doesn't tickle when you get your shoulder rebuilt. But did I take it too another level? You bet I did."

His substance-abuse problems were not the first in the Peter family. Christian Peter, now an insurance broker, has admitted to having a drinking problem while at Nebraska, where he was also accused of sexual harassment and assault in the early 1990's.

Jason Peter, by 2001, was forced to retire, unable to come back yet again from the succession of injuries. Bored, depressed that his football career was over and with too much time on his hands and too much money at his disposal, he found that the pain medication was no longer enough. It led him to crack, then heroin.

"I never thought I would be hooked on cocaine, on crack," he said. "That stuff is for the weak. I was never going to do that stuff. One day, that's me, I'm an addict. I came from a good family. How could this happen to me? That's the thing: Drugs don't care how big you are or how good an athlete you are."

Not long after retiring, he was back home in New Jersey and living with his parents, where he attempted suicide for the first time. He recalls taking 60 to 70 Vicodin and 20 Ambien and writing a remorseful suicide letter to his family.

"The doctors told me I was used to taking so many pills that I had a high tolerance to them, and that's the only reason I didn't keel over and die," he said. "I took enough to kill a horse."

After his suicide attempt, he finally sought help. He went from one rehabilitation facility to another. Nothing worked. Staying at his parents' home in Locust in the summer of 2004 while they were on vacation, he was strung out on drugs and trying to figure out a way to get his hands on a gun to end his life. An aunt happened to stop by and saw that he was in serious trouble.

She stayed at his side before making arrangements to get more help for him, this time in Southern California. But he still was not ready to change. His first stay at a treatment center in California was another failure.

He tried again, this time at the exclusive Beau Monde in Newport Beach, which caters to celebrities and Hollywood power brokers. For the first time since drugs took control of his life, he mustered the fortitude to fight back.

"He just got fed up with things this last time," said Christian Peter. "I think he hit rock bottom. I pray to God that's what happened and we don't have to go through this again. It's not a done deal. It is a battle and it's a battle he's going to have for the rest of his life. This is the longest he's been sober. We as a family couldn't be more proud of him."

Jason Peter says there are no magic formulas: he simply had had enough.

"It was my time," said Peter, who has remained in Southern California since entering Beau Monde in 2004. "I am the one who did it. I could have gone back to any one of those facilities and gotten clean. For any addict, it has to be their time. They've got to want it."

Yet wanting to be clean and becoming clean are two different things. Staying off drugs has become a full-time job for Peter, and he tries not to underestimate the challenge.

He tries to stay as occupied as he can and spends much of his day working out, believing in the sound body, sound mind philosophy. He is being treated by a therapist and he meets with a life coach. He even got back into football last year, working as a volunteer high school coach at Edison High School in Huntington Beach.

Peter won't play football again, and may never again have a job with a seven-figure salary, but those are problems he says he can deal with. What he needs now is normalcy, a routine life, a career path -- the sort of simple pleasures that get overlooked when you are a rich football star.

"I don't count how many days I've been clean," he said. "That's not the way I do it. I got my life back together. That's what matters."

Photo: Jason Peter, who played at Middletown South High School and eventually landed in the N.F.L., at home in California with his dog Hank. (Photo by J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times)