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Ex-Bronco transforming the game plan

Lepsis goes from NFL and social insecurities to
foundation of faith

By Terry Frei
The Denver Post

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Matt Lepsis, who will be honored on the Broncos' 50th anniversary team, walks to class at Dallas Theological Seminary. (Mark Reis, The Gazette)

SOUTHLAKE, Texas — Matt Lepsis waved as he approached. That gave him away. Otherwise, the lanky, 6-foot-4 Lepsis wasn't immediately recognizable as the tackle listed at 290 pounds in his 11-season Broncos career.

"I'm about 245," said Lepsis, who will be honored

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today at Invesco Field at Mile High as a member of the Broncos' 50th anniversary team. "I got down to about 235 a month ago, but once I got back to school, I was busier. In the summer, I ran every day, 3 miles a day, and that really helped me to lose weight."

Among the returning Broncos' players today, Lepsis, 35, has one of the more dramatic stories. He is not proud of his reliance on recreational drugs during part of his final season in the NFL two years ago. He is proud of his life since, however. He and his wife, Shana, and their two children moved last year from Castle Rock to the Dallas area, where Matt was raised in the suburb of Frisco. He enrolled in the nondenominational Dallas Theological Seminary and hopes to receive a Th.M. degree — a master's in theology — in 2012 or 2013.

"I sit in class, and every day I'm in there, at some point I stop and I just kind of laugh to myself," he said. "I'm in a seminary! I just can't believe it."

Ex-teammates are proud of him.

"Matt was kind of the last person you'd expect to go the direction he has," said former Broncos kicker Jason Elam, now with the Atlanta Falcons. "You felt like he wanted nothing to do with God. He wanted to do what he wanted to do. Since I'm a Christian, it's always exciting to see someone step away from the things they were doing and see things the way we really think they are. I'm really excited for him."

Said Broncos guard Ben Hamilton, "He's made a

life change, and he's sticking with it."

John Hessler, who roomed with Lepsis at the University of Colorado, said: "He's made a great turn in his life."

Starts on downward spiral

Lepsis played tight end at CU, where he and Hessler shared an apartment with linebacker Matt Russell, now the Broncos' director of college scouting, and quarterback Koy Detmer. "He was very laid-back," Hessler recalled.

The future NFL tackle had a beat-up little blue car his CU roommates made fun of, and they went to Hessler's parents' home in Brighton to get their laundry done. Upon leaving CU, Lepsis went to the Broncos' 1997 training camp as a free agent. He made the team but sat out that season, the first of Denver's two consecutive Super Bowl titles, with a knee injury. He was a backup on the second title team. From 1999 on, he started all but one game until he suffered another season-ending knee injury in the sixth week of the 2006 season.

His life then began spiraling downward.

"I had taken painkillers and I had done other drugs, but this was different this time," he said. "I'd always used alcohol in any kind of social setting to allow me to relax. That turned into popping a few Vicodin and then drinking, and then popping more Vicodin and drinking, but it all stemmed from my insecurities in social settings."

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As the 2007 season approached, he started using what he calls "other stuff."

"I found that it really, really helped me with (insecurities). I thought I had found the answer to all my problems," he said.

Lepis wouldn't specify what drugs he took, but did say he played "high" in the first three games of the 2007 regular season —



Former Broncos offensive tackle Matt Lepis studies in the library for his Greek class at the Dallas-area seminary. (Photos by Mark Reis, The Gazette)

against Buffalo, Oakland and Jacksonville.

"I would like this to help people who are going through this, but what happens with people who do drugs, it's, 'Oh, he's doing that, he's not doing this,' " he said. "I would rather just not say, not because I'm embarrassed to say it, but because I think it would have a negative effect on some people I would like to help through my story."

Lepis said he first got high before meetings on

days the Broncos didn't practice. He got away with it, then soon got high every day.

"I loved what it was doing for me socially. I loved what I thought it was doing even for my marriage. I was able to communicate with my wife a lot better. I thought, 'Well, maybe it will make me play better.'"

"It had totally taken over my life, in a short period of time."

Lepis convinced himself his drug use didn't affect his play. His opinion changed during a loss to Jacksonville in the third game.

"I started thinking about a million things at once right before the snap," he said. He didn't stop using drugs, however, except on game day.

Lepis is adamant that none of his teammates were aware he was practicing and playing high. He said he knew of no teammate doing drugs. The only people who knew, he said, were his wife and "one or two close friends" who weren't teammates. His line coach, Rick Dennison, is still with the team. The Broncos' football operations department wouldn't allow Dennison, or Matt Russell, to be interviewed for this story.

"The difficulty is coming"

Early in the 2007 season, Lepis was in his yard, playing with his son, Hayden, then 5, and daughter, Jordan, then 2. "I was on top of the world," he recalled. "I felt like this (drug use) was the answer to a lot of my problems. I was having

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a great time and starting to open up to people."

His cellphone rang. He discovered nobody was calling him, but his phone was playing a Dave Matthews song, "#41." "It was the part of the song that said, 'the difficulty is coming,' " Lepsis said. He had the song in his extensive collection on his phone, but he would have had to get past a keyguard to play it. It struck him as weird, nothing more.

"Then a couple of days later, we're getting ready to play a game, and I'm in my locker and listening to music," he said. He went to have his ankles taped and came back and heard music coming from his earphones, which surprised him because he believed he had turned his player off. He said he put on the earphones and heard: "The difficulty is coming."

He said he was high at the time.

The next week, Lepsis and his wife were on the way to attend a friend's 30th birthday party. His phone vibrated. It wasn't a call. It was music. The same song. The same line. "The difficulty is coming."

"Not only is it playing the music," he said, "but on the cover of my phone is the album 'Crash.' So it says 'Crash' on the screen and I'm freaked out. Someone's trying to tell me I'm going to die in a crash."

At the birthday party, he told the small group of his concerns. The birthday girl told him to stop worrying, that it was "silly." He said she told him:

"God's in control of everything. If it's your day to die, it's your day to die. If you're going to die in a plane crash, you're going to die in a plane crash. If not, you're going to die some other way. Stop worrying about it."

Lepsis said, "It was the first time I started to even put God into the equation."

He told teammates he was starting to think about God. On the flight to Indianapolis for the next game, he told Elam he had decided that God was "trying to get my attention." He didn't mention his drug use. Elam suggested that Lepsis attend the team chapel on Sunday morning. A local pastor sermonized about fear. "It was like the guy was sent there for me," Lepsis said. "Everything he was saying was happening in my life."

The next week, he said, he told Elam about the drugs and explained why using drugs made him a better person.

"He was trying to justify it," Elam said. "But I have to say it didn't take much, just a few questions, and he was, 'You know what? You're right.' "

At home, Lepsis talked to his wife and they prayed, asking God for help.

He said the next day was the first time in a month when he hadn't gotten high in the morning. He went out and had a horrible practice. Coach Mike Shanahan told him not to give up, and he prayed again. He felt awful again

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the next day, and a couple of younger linemen sat next to him and asked him why he was talking so much with Elam.

"In the middle of sharing with these guys what I felt God was doing in my life, it was like God right at that moment answered my prayers," Lepsis said. "I was thinking this is how God is going to help me to get over the drugs, to get over the issues — all the issues."

Sharing his story was a natural high.

In the next few weeks, he read several books Elam recommended and stopped his drug use.

Time to hang 'em up

Lepsis, by his own admission, had an awful 2007 season.

"I was feeling my age (and) two knee surgeries," he said. "I got called out three times by Shanahan. I'd never been called out by him before in 11 years. Never. . . . I was trying my hardest. I just couldn't do it."

The day after the final game, against Minnesota, he thanked Shan- ahan for all he and the organization had done for him but said he was retiring.

"He wasn't shocked," Lepsis said.

Soon after, he decided to attend a seminary. He had heard about Dallas Theological Seminary. Shana also had become a Christian and

supported the move to Lepsis' native area. They bought a home in Southlake. Lepsis enrolled a year ago and started passing along his message in isolated public appearances.

"The number one thing, obviously, is their salvation through faith in Christ," he said. "But it's also that God can help you through things."

He tries to avoid saying his stance now excuses everything in his past.

"A lot of people will share their testimony in church and say, 'I was in a Harley gang and killed people for a living and I found Jesus and now I'm perfect,' " he said. "That's not the case at all, obviously. I still struggle every day."

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About Lepsis

Born : Jan. 13, 1974, in Conroe, Texas.

High school : At Frisco High, in the Dallas area, was Southwest Texas' 3A defensive player of the year as a senior and was a two-time state discus champion.

College : At CU, had 45 receptions for 519 yards as a tight end. Two- time All-American in the discus.

Pro : Undrafted, joined Broncos in 1997 but missed the entire season with knee injury. Reserve tackle in 1998, starter from 1999 until

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his retirement after the 2007 season.

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