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Browns LB McGinest at peace with decision to retire after 2008 season

Story Highlights

- McGinest will call it quits after 15th season
- Goal is to lead Browns to playoffs in final year
- Off-field business ventures keep McGinest busy

LONG BEACH, Calif. -- Looking at the faces around the table at a bowling alley nestled inside of a local GameWorks, **Willie McGinest's** decision seems natural, if not easy.

Sitting with his father, **Willie McGinest Sr.**; mother, **Joyce**; sisters, **Lisa** and **Tanisha**; fiancé, **Gloriana**; and daughters, **Rylie**, 3, and **Halie**, 1, celebrating the third annual Willie McGinest Day in his hometown of Long Beach, the veteran linebacker concedes this will likely be the last time he'll enjoy this day as an active player.

"This will be it," says McGinest, entering the final season of a three-year contract he signed with the Cleveland Browns in 2006. "This will be my 15th season. I've worked hard; I think I've done everything I set out to accomplish. The hard work, sacrifice, dedication -- I committed myself to doing it the right way and playing it the right way. I've been blessed to play with some of the best players in the world and play against some of the best in the world. I think 15 years going strong I've held my own."

While there have been players in the past who have retired only to end up regretting it soon after -- like **Junior Seau**, who retired after a 16-year career only to sign four days later with the New England Patriots -- McGinest says he won't have any regrets about his decision after this season is over.

"I won't, not at all," says McGinest. "The game's been good to me. It's been a lot of hard work but I understand that there comes a certain time when you have to go out with a bang and leave it like that."

McGinest hopes to provide that bang this season by finishing out his career with one last playoff run. It seemed like an impossible ending to a career highlighted by three Super Bowl rings with the Patriots when, two years ago, he signed with Cleveland for \$12 million to reunite with head coach **Romeo Crennel**, his former defensive coordinator at New England. The Browns were coming off a 6-10 season in Crennel's first year on the job and McGinest would languish through a 4-12 campaign in his first season with the team. Last season, however, the Browns went 10-6, their best record since 1994, and missed the playoffs on a mere tiebreaker.



Willie McGinest helped the Browns go from four wins in 2006 to 10 in 2007.
Robert E. Klein/Icon SMI

"The guys on the team finally started believing in the team concept that it's not about one guy, it's not about 2-3 guys, it's about the whole 53-man roster," says McGinest, who has recorded 85 sacks and been named two Pro Bowls during his career. "If we're going to be good, we have to be good together and pitch in and work hard. I think we started coming together as a team and getting really close [after Week 1] with guys from all sides -- offense, defense, special teams -- complementing each other and we started to jell. We saw what could happen if we work together and play together. That was just the start for us."

No matter what the Browns do this season, however, McGinest's career will forever be defined by his 12 seasons in New England, where he was the defensive cornerstone of three Super Bowl championship teams in four seasons.

"I have no regrets about my 12 years there," says McGinest, who holds the record for most postseason sacks with 16 and the single-game record with 4.5 sacks in a 2006 wild card win over Jacksonville in what would prove to be his last game as a Patriot at Gillette Stadium. "I played in some of the biggest games in the world and won them. I've done everything a football player can do in a uniform. Some of the people I met, the ties I had to the community, the fans, the players -- I think I became a man there playing under some of the best coaches ever in [Bill] Parcells, [Bill] Belichick and [Pete] Carroll."

Few players will have a more seamless transition into retirement than McGinest, whose portfolio of off-the-field endeavors is almost as impressive as his accomplishments on it. He is the CEO of 55 Entertainment, a "multifaceted entertainment company" which encompasses his charitable work, event planning and record label, 55 Records, which has a production deal with A&M/Interscope. He's a consultant with Premier Sports Management, where McGinest tries to "talk to cats and put them on the right road," a partner in Signature Collectibles, a sports memorabilia company where "we're trying to give players 50-50 memorabilia deals instead of 85-15," and has a franchise agreement to open three WingStop restaurants in Southern California.

"I'm happy to say that I've been involved in a lot of things and have kept myself busy," says McGinest, whose past experience as a commentator on The NFL Network and ESPN will likely land him a television gig as well when he retires. "I've tried to do a lot of little things and also tried to give back and create opportunities for other people in my community to do good."

McGinest commitment to his community was evident during his honorary day in Long Beach. While the day was meant as a tribute to McGinest, he used it as a vehicle for a day-long charitable tour funded by the Willie McGinest Foundation. He played video games with disabled children at Ability First, a hospital he's been visiting since high school when his mother worked there; donated three scholarships to college-bound students at his high school, Long Beach Poly; visited with kids at the Willie McGinest Freedom School, an educational program he started for the youth in his community; and took a group from a Boys and Girls Club as well as his Pop Warner team, the Long Beach Browns (formerly the Patriots), to GameWorks.

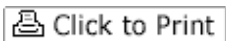
"The day was supposed to be about me, but me being me, I wanted to change it and make it about giving back to the kids," says McGinest. "You always have to remember your foundation and your roots and where you're from so when the city decided to make a day for me and give me the key to the city it was an honor but I wanted to use it as a way to give back."

As McGinest wraps up the end of his day, paper plates of chicken fingers and ravioli littered around the bowling alley like the remnants of a children's birthday party, he looks around the table at his family and the 50 or so children he's just unloaded on the nearby arcade and smiles contently. It's been a good day and an even better career.

"I have no regrets or no qualms about my career," he says. "I've done everything a football player can do and I've done it more than once."

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