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Former NFL star Ricky Williams now pitching same drug that got him banned

BY JENNIFER KAPLAN The Washington Post Mar 20, 2018 Updated Mar 20, 2018



Former NFL football player Ricky Williams, who played for the New Orleans Saints and the Miami Dolphins among other teams, addresses an audience during a conference on medical marijuana at Harvard Medical School, Tuesday, April 11, 2017, in Boston. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

AP file / Steven Senne

Marijuana derailed running back Ricky Williams' NFL career, but now the same drug may help launch the next phase of his business career.

Williams, 40, is launching a cannabis brand called Real Wellness by Ricky Williams. The line will cater to health-conscious consumers, particularly women, who are interested in using alternative medicine to boost wellness, he said.

Williams is serving as brand ambassador and using his studies of herbs and ancient medicine to create formulations for products.

"We're taking the idea of medicinal marijuana to the next step," he said. "Cannabis is real and it's here, and a lot of people have no idea what they're doing. I have a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge from my experiences and my studies to share."

A former Heisman Trophy winner at the University of Texas, Williams played 12 seasons in the National Football League, mostly for the Miami Dolphins and New Orleans Saints. He retired in 2004 after testing positive for marijuana and returned the following year, only to fail another drug test and get suspended for the entire 2006 season. He played on and off before retiring for good after the 2011 season.

Williams isn't the first celebrity with a stoner reputation to join the newly legal cannabis industry. Country music legend Willie Nelson, comic duo Cheech & Chong and rapper Snoop Dogg have all launched brands. The legal industry is slated to reach \$50 billion by 2026, up from \$6 billion in 2016, according to investment bank Cowen & Co.

After retiring, Williams said he distanced himself from marijuana, finding that people didn't want to work with him because of his reputation. Then in late 2015, he was persuaded to speak on a panel with other former football players at a cannabis conference in Phoenix.

"The reception I got there opened my eyes to, 'I don't have to keep my marijuana life so private,'" he said in an interview.

Williams says his decision was reinforced by the evolving public perception of marijuana. Sixty-four percent of the U.S. population now wants to make pot legal, according to a Gallup poll released in October.

Still, it took time to find a partner he was comfortable with. Williams wanted to use his training as an herbalist and healer to develop better medicinal products, and he didn't just want to put his name on a product he didn't care about. He wanted to leave those types of endorsements behind with his football career.

"For the most part, it's Pepsi or Nike or a big company courts you and then says, 'We want you to support our brand,'" he said. "That never felt very good to me."

When he met Lincoln Fish, the chief executive officer of OutCo, a cannabis company in the San Diego area, Fish offered to pair Williams with scientists at OutCo to develop targeted herbal formulations, Williams said.

Together they created six products in three categories: Solutions, Everyday and Sport. The vape cartridges, salves and tonics were scheduled to go on shelves in five dispensaries on Tuesday at an exact time chosen by Williams based on his study of astrology, according to a statement.

Williams is hoping to use cannabis to bridge the gap between his former life as an athlete and the career he now wants as a healer, he said. He has studied ancient Indian medicine, yoga, massage, pranic healing and craniosacral therapy. He is currently learning Chinese medicine in Santa Monica, California.

"The whole purpose of this for me is to help facilitate my public persona transitioning from being a former football player to being a healer," he said.

"It's been difficult for people to appreciate who I am as a healer because of the success I had as a football player."