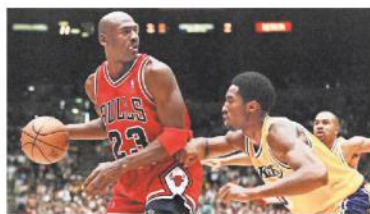


Sports



Following their second dreams



From left: Former NFL players Chaz Schilens, Mark Tucker, and Matt Shaughnessy sit for a portrait at Phoenix Fire Station 11. SEAN LOGAN/THE REPUBLIC

Retired NFL players now Phoenix firefighters

Dana Scott Arizona Republic | USA TODAY NETWORK

Some people establish life goals at an early age. Others struggle to find their life's calling, or never achieve a career doing what they love. ■ Chaz Schilens and Matt Shaughnessy are living the second part of two-act dreams: they are former NFL players who now work for the Phoenix Fire Department. ■ "All I ever wanted to do was play sports and be a firefighter," Schilens said. ■ Both men played three years together with the Oakland Raiders, and both knew since their formative years that football and public service were in their futures. ■ They're part of the collective of former pro athletes who became Valley-area firefighters in their second careers, such as Clay Bellinger, a former MLB player and father of 2019 NL MVP Cody Bellinger, and Roy Lewis, who won the Seattle Seahawks' Steve Largent Award in

Firefighters

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2010.

"There's a lot of guys on the job who are pro athletes. There's a lot of baseball players, NFL guys and military service workers who are special forces guys," Shaughnessy said.

"It was something that I was always interested ever since I was a kid," said Shaughnessy, who grew up in Norwich, Conn. "I lived right down the street from the Central (Fire) Station on Chestnut Street, walking by it to the YMCA with my mom and wanted to see what was going on at the fire station."

On a recent 100-degree morning, Schilens stood smiling with a relaxed disposition awaiting a new day in front of Fire Station 11 in central Phoenix.

Schilens and Shaughnessy were standing side by side, with imposing 6-foot-4 physiques and the same attire under the blazing sun: navy blue Phoenix Fire Department baseball caps and T-shirts, dark slim-fit pants and pitch-black firefighter boots.

A third former pro football player, Mark Tucker, arrived shortly thereafter, wearing similar garb over his 6-1 body-builder frame.

Tucker greeted them with an informal handshake and hugs as if all three were biological brothers who hadn't seen each other in months.

Within three minutes, Tucker received an incident alert.

"I gotta go, fellas. I'll be right back," Tucker said before returning to the fire truck, racing off to an incident nearby.

When Tucker came back 15 minutes later, he showed a short video to Schilens and Shaughnessy of himself helping extinguish two burning cars near the corner of McDowell Road and 31st Street.

Tucker explained the similarities between being firefighters and the gestalt of a football team.

"The station is nothing but a big locker room," Tucker said. "We joke around and some guys are practical jokers. It's a fellowship, a family. Everybody in the fire department, they're all sports fanatics. There's a lot of athletes, guys from different walks of life. The camaraderie, teamwork and unselfishness, all that goes into being a firefighter."

"Coming from an athlete background to this, it's probably the easiest transition. The Phoenix Fire Department is big on recruiting former athletes because they have those intangibles naturally in you."

"The one unique thing in sports, particularly football, is that we huddle every play. And in that huddle, you got 11 guys. That's 11 different personalities, 11 different backgrounds, 11 different religious beliefs, upbringings, everything. You're all in that huddle with the same uniform on and in there for one common goal."

How they joined Phoenix Fire Dept.

Phoenix Fire Captain and Public Information Officer Robert McDade explained why former pro athletes have an inherent advantage in the interview process.

"We've always looked at every avenue for our recruiting," McDade said. "Our recruiting goes vast and wide so we can get the best firefighters for the Phoenix Fire Department. We started to realize that we had a lot of former athletes that we really didn't recruit but they sort of ended up on our department. And we quickly identified as really excelling at this job as leaders, job proficiency and just all-around good people around the station."

"When you're working in a station, it's



Vince Netzel and Jarell Turner respond to a fire call on Thursday in Phoenix.

SEAN LOGAN/THE REPUBLIC

24 hours, on a fire truck training on call. Any different background, we're a diverse fire department. They have what it takes to be a great firefighter."

Schilens works the "B" shift that begins at 8 a.m., but he eagerly shows up an hour earlier to his Station 27 base to survey its trucks and load his protective gear.

"It's a lifestyle," Schilens said about working a 24-hour shift compared to most people's average eight-hour work day.

He also confers with his colleagues from the previous shift how their day unfolded and any incidents to follow up on -- there are generally about 13 incident calls per day.

It's similar to devising a game plan before taking the football field.

"However many calls you get, that's what you signed up for," Schilens said. "I work on a fire engine with four guys that show up to all incidents called in. You never know day-to-day what you're going to expect. It's like playing a different opponent. You don't know when the call is going to kick out, you don't know where you're going to be but you have to be ready for any situation."

"That makes it challenging and the fun part of the job, especially on the fireground. Figuring out, the best way to attack it with exactly what you're going to do to be successful and especially on the EMS call for COVID."

Schilens, 34, lives with his wife, Kelsey, a fellow Gilbert Highland High School graduate, raising their three children in Queen Creek. He always wanted to come back home and be an invaluable asset to his community.

In 2013, he returned home two days after he was cut by the Detroit Lions. One day when Schilens was with one of his friends, a fireman, at a barbecue, they discussed Chaz joining the fire department. It was the final day to register for the 2013 Phoenix firefighter exam.

"If I hadn't gotten cut by them, I never would've signed up that year and I would've missed two years of that list that I got hired off of."

Schilens barely passed the test but he decided to take an offer from the Canadian Football League's Saskatchewan Roughriders in 2014. PFD hired him the following year as a rover, a first-level firefighter who tracks and responds to incident calls taken on by various Phoenix stations.

The average salary of a Phoenix firefighter is \$60,000 per year, a fraction of the lucrative contracts Schilens earned during his five years playing for the Raiders, New York Jets and Lions from 2008-13. But money isn't his motivation; it's being an invaluable asset to the community.

"You're not going to get rich but it's a great job. We have a good pension, good

retirement (fund) and those are some of the positive aspects," Schilens said. "I'm a BLS (Basic Life Support) firefighter. I'm on the lower end, but it goes up from there. There's paramedic, engineer, captain, chiefs and other certifications over the years. There are guys making a good amount of money, but they have a ton of experience and years of knowledge."

Shaughnessy, 33, is a rover who lives in Chandler with his wife and three children. After he graduated from Wisconsin, he was drafted by the Raiders in 2009. Shaughnessy played for the Cardinals and New Orleans Saints before he retired in 2016 and ventured into his fire apprenticeship.

Tucker, 52, is a South Los Angeles native and USC graduate who was drafted by the Atlanta Falcons in 1991. An offensive lineman, Tucker spent several years on various NFL practice squads before getting game action with the Cardinals in 1994. He played for the indoor football Arizona Rattlers from 1997 to 2006. He also appeared on the TV competition show "American Gladiators" in 1993.

Tucker, now an offensive line coach at Chandler Hamilton High, was promoted to being an engineer in December. He explained how he became a firefighter eight years ago.

"A good friend of mine, Mike Robinson, played pro basketball overseas and came back home. All of a sudden out of nowhere, I looked and he's got the navy blue (Phoenix firefighter T-shirt) on," Tucker said. "Then we started talking about joining the fire department. So, I networked and I had a lot of connections that I tapped into and who spoke well of me, wanted to see this happen ..."

After Tucker ended his football career, he said the economic recession in 2008 caused a hiring freeze. He had to wait for three more years until he passed the firefighter exam and was hired in 2012.

McDade said the increased hiring of former athletes over the past decade led to the Phoenix Fire Department to focus on recruiting college and pro athletes.

"One of them came up with an idea -- he was a former ASU football player -- and talked about recruiting at ASU. He said, 'You guys like me because athletes understand discipline, the hierarchy if you're a rookie or freshman, you gotta pay your way into this system with hard work.' So, we tasked him," McDade said.

"He reached out along with a couple other people to ASU and last year we had its entire football team visit our training academy to talk to them about the historic numbers that, 'Hey, one or two of you are gonna make it to the pros. And if you think about it, what's your job plan after that?'"

"Once we identified that, we realized that some of them had already made it to the pros and we did have some pro athletes here. It's a little bit harder with the

pro players because they're really spread out (across the country), but an organization like ASU, if we could tap into that, it would work."

After the candidates enter the interview process, they take the written exam which cuts about half of them, McDade said. Then they are put through agility and fitness tests, approximately eliminating another half of the candidate pool before the oral interview stage.

"For our folks who select pro athletes, (they) really speak the answers right. They talk about discipline, training, getting along in a group, working in a locker room, the team bus, close quarters," McDade said.

Like a pre-draft workout, everything in their agility tests is timed, and required response times for incidents are three-to-four minutes.

Hardest part of the job

The love of being a firefighter is counterbalanced by high levels of stress.

Tucker said that downsides to being a firefighter are sleep deprivation and the internalization of the grave nature of some incidents, especially child-related ones.

"Probably the most difficult call for the firefighters is anything that involves a child," Tucker said. "At any level, because we're all husbands and fathers and anything your heart goes out to a parent when you walk into a house and it's a child that has any kind of distress. That's probably the thing that's maybe the most stressful."

The firefighters talk about their incidents together at the station as a form of group therapy to help clear their minds and emotions. But the COVID-19 pandemic has tremendously added to the Phoenix firefighters' workload.

"I've been on one call that was looking for a COVID person, it was a care facility and the entire second floor was all COVID patients," Tucker said.

Schilens lives in an area where there are a lot of elderly care homes and exponential rise of COVID-19 incidents.

"The symptoms are kind of what you read out there. The elevated temperature, difficulty with breathing, the extended high temperature and coughing. It does seem like it's affected our elderly patients a lot," Schilens said. "However old the people are in the area where I've worked at, I've seen it more. ... What we've done to deal with it, we've tried to take as many precautions as necessary."

The firefighters adhere to federal social distancing guidelines, no longer entering homes and maintaining a six-foot distance between themselves and the patients, unless vital organs need to be checked.

"The city and our union works really well together for relaying a plan of how we should do things," Shaughnessy said. "When I first started, there were mandates and things that were going out about what we need to do on certain calls. If it is a COVID-19 (call), make sure you wearing all your PPEs: gowns, mask, gloves, eye protection and making sure you're putting a mask on the patient so they can't spread it anymore. And when you transport them, make sure that you (decontaminate) everything so you're not bringing the virus into the station."

Each of the nine Phoenix battalions and EMS Resource Management stations transport patients to designated hospitals within their respective Central, North, South, East, West and Aviation districts.

"We were lucky living here because we got to see how (the coronavirus) worked on the West versus the East Coast. We got a lot of knowledge of how they did things there and for how we should do things here," Shaughnessy said.