

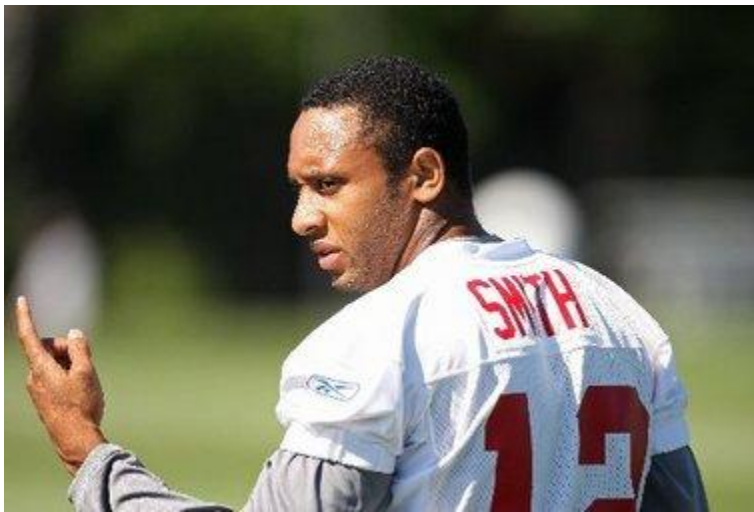
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Giants WR Steve Smith is staying busy with family, knee rehab

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INDIANAPOLIS — Steve Smith is doing just fine right now, thank you very much.

His knee injury, his status as a free agent and the looming lockout? Yeah, all that stuff is still there. But so is Carter Smith, born Feb. 18 — Steve's first child, and a welcome reason to smile in otherwise hard times.

"Oh man, it kind of takes your mind away from all the injury and the uncertainty and stuff like that," the Giants wide receiver said of his son by phone from California tonight. "It gives you peace of mind and happiness. ... It was amazing. It was up there with winning a Super Bowl."

Smith was an integral part of the Giants' run to Super Bowl XLII a few years ago with 14 catches for 152 yards in the postseason, including clutch grabs against the Cowboys and Patriots. Two years later, he became integral to everything the Giants did on offense when his franchise-record 107 receptions helped the team offset the loss of Plaxico Burress.

That should have been when Smith cashed in on a nice contract worth nearly \$10 million per season. But the labor dispute hampered the Giants' ability to work out an extension for Smith, which meant he made only \$550,000 in base salary last season, the last one of his rookie deal.

And then, he got hurt. Twice.

Smith missed four games after tearing a pectoral muscle and then suffered a far worse injury in his first game back on Dec. 13 against the Vikings. He tore the articular cartilage in his left knee and underwent microfracture surgery.

The procedure is more certain than in years past, but it still requires a long, slow rehab. Though Smith only started walking a few weeks ago, he believes he'll be full strength by next season.

If and when that season begins. And when he gets a new contract — with the Giants or elsewhere.

"The doctors said it's going to be a full recovery, but at the same time you don't really know until I'm up and running again," Smith said in his first extensive interview discussing his injury. "Things are on schedule, things are looking good, but we'll see when that time comes."

In the meantime, Smith is catching passes from a JUGS gun the company sent him to make sure his hands remain in top form. He'll soon have a follow-up visit with team physician Russ Warren that will include an MRI to check his progress. He'll then work his way back to running again, though a microfracture patient must make sure the new joint surface created by the procedure heals properly.

So maybe a lockout won't be such a bad thing. After all, Smith won't be rushing to get on the field.

"When it first happened, it was really hard just dealing with being injured and stuff," Smith said. "But I'm optimistic things are going to get resolved. The doctors said I'll be fine. It's just a matter of getting back out there and doing it."

In the event of a lockout, Smith won't be able to have any direct communication with any members of the Giants' staff. He'll still be able to talk to Warren and said his physical therapist could serve as an intermediary between him and the team.

Of course, once everything with the collective bargaining agreement is resolved, Smith will have conversations with the Giants about a new contract. So far, he said he's heard nothing from the team and declined comment on whether he believes his injury will affect his value.

But like many players, Smith is finding ways to generate income in the event of a lockout. He's secured a few endorsement deals, including one with House Foods America tofu.

"Business is going good," he said, "which is another blessing, not knowing really what's going to happen with my contract and this work stoppage and stuff like that."

And with his rehab. It's early, but from the moment doctors decided a second procedure (mosaicplasty) wasn't necessary up through now, the progress has been solid. Plus, he doesn't have any other operations on the docket.

"No I don't," he said. "And hopefully it'll stay like that."

So I had to ask Smith: why tofu? That certainly is an interesting product for an NFL player to endorse, especially considering he hadn't eaten much of it in the past.

"Not always, no," he said. "I actually got into it a few years ago when I was training for the draft and looking to eat healthier. The best part about it is that it fills you up without making you feel full."

Smith said eating healthy foods is a key part of his recovery from surgery.

"It's definitely important because the past few months I haven't been able to work out the way I'm used to, so eating healthy has become my No. 1 priority," he said. "Tofu has become my go to food and I also eat something called 'The Fresh Diet' that delivers all my meals to my house every morning, which is also healthy. I'm just trying to do the little things to improve while I'm injured, and my diet is the best way for me to do that."

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