

Former NFL Lineman Eyes New Field, Swaps Playbook For Apprenticeship

It takes a lot of discipline to be an NFL player. According to retired offensive lineman Jeff Pahukoa, discipline is extremely important in the electrical construction industry as well.

“The football field and the electrical construction field have a lot in common,” Pahukoa said. “If you don’t have the discipline to do your job well, the team suffers. You’re accountable for your actions. I could not go out on the field and let down one guy, let alone 10 guys. Ultimately, it’s up to me, but I like that it’s a team sport on both fields.”

Pahukoa, 33, was on two NFL teams before signing up for an electrical apprenticeship program last year. He grew up in Maryville, Wash., where he played high school football and was aggressively recruited by all the major schools around the country.

Ultimately, he chose to stay close to home – at the University of Washington – where he studied psychology and education. His senior year he played in the Rose Bowl, and was drafted by the Los Angeles Rams.

“I thought the odds were stacked against me, but I ended up being a 12th round pick!” Pahukoa said excitedly.

He played four years for the LA Rams before becoming a free agent and signing a contract with the Atlanta Falcons in 1995. He retired two years later.

“I wasn’t supposed to make it for one year, so I felt blessed to make it as far as I did,” Pahukoa said of his seven years in the NFL. “I felt it was a good time in my life to leave the game.”

Pahukoa spent the next three years at home with his wife and three children. He went to school functions, town events and volunteered much of his time as a sports coach. He also spoke to high school students about his career and the choices one makes in life.

“I understand what I have accomplished in my life is a huge deal to young adults, so I took it as an opportunity to give something back,” Pahukoa said.

After three years, Pahukoa began looking for a more permanent job. He thought about using his education degree and becoming a high school guidance counselor, but he wanted to do something more labor intensive.

“I didn’t think I could enjoy being in an office-type setting eight hours a day, five days a week. To me, work isn’t really work unless I’m sweating,” he said.



Former NFL lineman Jeff Pahukoa is now training to be a commercial electrician.

Pahukoa looked into various jobs, including road construction and emergency services, but nothing stuck. It wasn’t until a neighbor told him about the National Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (NJATC) that he realized electrical construction was something he wanted to explore. He made a visit to the local training center and signed up for the program that day.

“I liked the idea that there is a definite schedule and system in place. I like to know what I’m doing in the course of a day. That’s how it was in football — it was all very organized. I also felt this would be a great challenge for me. I came into the apprenticeship not knowing anything about electricity except plugging the cord into an outlet and turning it on,” he says chuckling.

Pahukoa is now one of approximately 50,000 apprentices currently enrolled in the NJATC apprenticeship program, which is sponsored by the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW).

The nationwide program offers multi-year apprenticeships in four electrical career specialties, and provides participants with regular paychecks, as well as health and pension benefits. Depending on local pay rates, participants in the NJATC’s commercial electrician or lineman apprenticeships generally earn between \$80,000 and \$150,000 in total wages and benefits over their full apprenticeship period.

Pahukoa is currently enrolled in his third year of a five-year apprenticeship as an “inside wireman” or commercial/industrial electrician. He is working for a NECA electrical contractor in his area. Disconnects, terminations, and blueprint readings are just a few of the kinds of things he works on every day as part of his on-the-job training.

“Jeff is one of our best apprentices,” said Training Director Karen Carter of IBEW Local 191. “He works really well with the others in the program, and he’s extremely humble. This kind of work is really good for Jeff as it is both physical and mental.”

Pahukoa says he constantly draws on his team experiences from the NFL to be successful in the NJATC program.

“You get this feeling of camaraderie, like you’re playing a sport, and you get that same feeling in this field. We’re all skilled laborers working to do the same thing,” he said.

Pahukoa continues to speak to high school students about setting goals for themselves and alternatives to peer pressure. He tells kids that they’re not all athletes or superstars, and that there are other things out there to enjoy. He insists, however, that they have to go out and look for them.

“I feel quite lucky that I have found something that I like doing so much — and I found it twice in my life. I wanted to be able to wake up everyday and be excited about going to work. And this job gives me that.”