

## Two Muslim NFL stars QUIT and give up their million dollar paychecks to make a pilgrimage to Mecca

- **Brothers Hamza and Husain Abdullah took the 7,000-mile 'Hajj' in October after telling their coaches they would not be able to play in the 2012 season**
- **Hamza, 29, was a first-team starter for the Arizona Cardinals and Husain, 27, played safety for the Minnesota Vikings until the end of the 2011 season**
- **They want to use their status as high-profile sports stars to educate their fellow Americans in a bid to nurture a better understanding of their faith**
- **Hamza: 'We're playing football, America's number one game. We went on a road trip. What's more American than a road trip?'**

By [Matt Blake](#)

A pair of Muslim NFL stars have sacrificed their million-dollar paychecks and quit their top-flight American football teams - to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Brothers Hamza and Husain Abdullah are at the peak of their careers, playing every week in front of tens of thousands of cheering fans at the heart of two of America's top gridiron teams.

But in June this year, the pair broke the news to their respective coaches that they would not be available to play in the 2012 NFL season because they were taking their ailing parents on a 7,000-mile 'road trip' to Islam's spiritual heartland.

Lifelong Muslims Hamza, 29, a first-team starter for the Arizona Cardinals and Husain, 27, of the Minnesota Vikings, have enjoyed highly successful careers in American football, climbing the ranks from little leagues, to high school and college football to the NFL.



Faith: Hamza Abdullah (left), 29, left the Arizona Cardinals while his brother Husain (right), 27, quit the Minnesota Vikings to make the trip to Islam's religious heartland in October





High flyers: Hamza (left) and Husain (right) both earn around a million dollars a year as NFL players

But in a country so polarised by perceptions of faith, both say they have experienced Islamophobic abuse on and off the field.

Far from accept it as an inescapable byproduct of multiculturalism, however, it inspired them to use their high-profile status to educate fellow Americans in a bid to nurture a better understanding of their faith.

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- Good Samaritan NYPD officer credits his grandfather with inspiring him to give winter boots to barefoot homeless man

'You know,' Hamza told **NBC News**. 'We're playing football, America's number one game. We went on a road trip. What's more American than a road trip?'

Born and bred in tough South Central Los Angeles, the brothers say no amount of success could satisfy their aching desire to honour the most demanding of the five pillars of Islam - The Hajj.



On the flight: They swapped their gridirons for 'ihrams' as they made the 7,000-mile journey



Loyal: Brothers Hamza (far left) and Husain (far right) Abdullah took their ailing parents on the 7,000-mile trip to Islam's religious heartland in October after telling their coaches they would not be available to play in the 2012 NFL season



In the crowds: The brothers swapped their on-field body armour for traditional Islamic clothing designed to make it impossible to tell who is rich and who is poor

It is a journey all able-bodied Muslims are required to make at least once in their lifetime and is the largest spiritual pilgrimage in the world.

'We've been playing football since we were 8 years old,' Husain told [NBC News](#). 'And although we're knocking down all these barriers, doing things that people said you can't do, all of a sudden, it was like there's more to life than this. There's more. And we had to go for it.'

The brothers decided to take with them their mother, a teacher, and ailing father, a former carpenter whose chronic diabetes leaves him needing daily dialysis treatment.



Popular: The brothers in Mecca with a group of Saudi NFL fans



Celebrity: Even in Mecca the borthers were recognised by NFL fans (pictured: Hamza and a young fan)



The Kaaba: The Hajj is one of the largest spiritual pilgrimages in the world and is embraced by nearly two million people each year

But before they embarked on the mission, they spent 30 days travelling America, having 'Iftar' - the daily Ramadan fast-breaking meal - at a different mosque each night while giving talks on fasting and its impact on athletes.

The journey that followed was a far cry from the luxury they had become accustomed to as coveted sports stars in their homeland.

### **HAJJ: THE FIFTH PILLAR OF ISLAM**

The Hajj is one of the largest spiritual pilgrimages in the world and is embraced by nearly two million people each year.

Many make the journey to Mecca, in Saudi Arabia, as it is laid down in the Qu'ran that the journey is a duty that must be carried out at least once by every able bodied Muslim, provided they can afford it. It takes place during the last month of the Islamic year, known as Dhu'l Hijja and once there pilgrims are required to walk seven times around Mecca's most sacred site, the Kaaba, a cuboid shaped building in the centre of the holy city.

Although pilgrimages to Mecca are thought to date as far back as 2.000BC, it is believed that the first hajj, in which the prophet Muhammad led his followers from Medina to Mecca, was performed by Muslims alone in the 7th century.

Once there Muhammad is said to have cleansed the Kaaba and re-ordained the building as the house of God. From this point the hajj became one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

The other four pillars are Shahadah, a statement recited in Arabic, the Salat, five daily prayers, the ritual fasting of the Sawn of Ramadan and the Zakat, a charitable donation.

It involved travelling in packed buses for many hours on end, bustling through vast crowds and sleeping on the floors of makeshift accomodation erected to help house the two million pilgrims that visit Mecca every year.

First they traveled by plane to Saudi Arabia then made a series of long-haul bus journeys - some of which became stuck in traffic jams of up to 12 hours at a time - before completing their journey on foot.

They also swapped their on-field body armour for the requisite 'ihram', a garment of two sheets of white, unhemmed cloth worn by pilgrims to make it impossible to tell who is rich and who is poor.

Hamza said the trip shattered any preconceptions he had about negative foreign feeling towards the US.

He said the first thing he noticed was 'how much the other Muslims we met love Americans'.

He said he was ambushed by a surprising and overwhelming sense of pride at being American.

But it has not always been so.

Both men have found themselves victims of Islamophobic abuse both on and off the field, especially since 9/11 rocked the nation.

But far from roll over and accept the wave of anti-Muslim sentiment that swept the country in the wake of the attack, they saw it as an opportunity to use their status as high-profile sports stars to educate their fellow Americans in a bid to nurture a better understanding of their faith.

Hamza said he believes 9/11 was an 'educational opportunity' that 'opened the eyes of a lot of people' and forced many Americans to ask questions about a faith of which many knew next to nothing.

He said: '[People] would ask: "Can you guys kill people?" And I would ask them: "In what book does it say that

you can go and do acts of terrorism?" The Quran doesn't say that. Islam is a religion of peace.' Since taking their leave of absence, both brothers are now free agents, with no certainty of a future in the NFL. Indeed, in a country so polarised by perceptions of faith, would this overt celebration of their religious beliefs hinder their return to big league American football? They think not.

'A lot of the times [the concept of being Muslim and American] gets lost in translation,' Hamza said. 'Islam is our religion, yes. But our country is the United States of America.'



In action: Hamza (right) tackles Virgil Green of the Denver Broncos in a during the preseason NFL game at the University of Phoenix Stadium in September 2011



Early years: Hamza (left) and Husain (right) have enjoyed highly successful careers in American football, climbing the ranks from little leagues, to high school and college football to the NFL, but never forgot their roots



Happy family: Hamza and Husain (back center left and right) have ten brothers and sisters. Pictured with their mother and father, centre front

And their former clubs have been encouraging.

Vikings head coach Leslie Frazier said while 'a lot of things have to fall in place, the door is not closed'.

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