__PUBLIC__By TOM WITHERS

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BEREA — During the Browns' much-needed bye last week, wide receiver Greg Little spent two hours having lunch in Miami with former NBA star Alonzo Mourning.

The meal was fine.

The message was far more satisfying.

Little came away inspired from his first-time meeting with Mourning, who explained to him that if he wanted to develop as a player, and that if he wanted to help his team win, the only way to reach any goals was through personal sacrifice.

The talk stirred Little, who didn't waste a moment after returning to Cleveland and shared Mourning's wisdom with his teammates before practice Monday.

"The same message he gave to me is just find something that you can sacrifice," Little said. "That's kind of the message I kind of relayed to our team, 'What are you willing to give up? What are you willing to sacrifice to finish this season out like we really want to.'"

The Browns (2-7) returned from their week off refreshed and recharged for the final seven games, a daunting stretch that begins Sunday at Dallas and includes two games against the rival Pittsburgh Steelers. The playoffs are essentially out of reach, but the Browns believe they can still make something of the season.

“We want to establish ourselves as a team that can win games,” said cornerback Joe Haden. “We just need to start winning. We feel like it’s the same thing every week. We lose and it’s like, ‘Oh, we’re going to focus on this week and we really have to start winning.’ There’s nothing else that can be said but to win games.”

Little is hoping to channel some of the motivation he got form Mourning into helping the Browns win.

The second-year receiver was a lightning rod of controversy earlier this season as his dropped passes led to a war of words with some fans on Twitter. Little exacerbated his situation by posing after making first downs and dancing in the end zone after a touchdown.

He has since toned down his antics, sworn off social media and become a more polished player. His speech to the team was another sign of his maturity, though some of his teammates wondered what he was up to when he asked to talk.

“Usually I’m more the joker on the team, so anytime I get up and say something it’s a serious message,” he said. “I think the guys were really shocked at the beginning and I think they took it well.”

Little and Mourning were introduced by a mutual friend. Little had never met the seven-time All-Star center before and was unaware of Mourning’s solid pro career because “when he was playing, I was in the yard playing in the neighborhood.”

However, when the two began talking Little said that Mourning, who played 16 seasons in the NBA despite enduring a kidney transplant, was able to connect with him because of their shared experiences.

“It was like he could relate right to me because of the same situation he’s seen or been in,” Little said.

As Mourning spoke, Little said the conversation became very one-sided.

“Usually I’m a talkative person,” Little said. “But when he was speaking to me, I was just lost in what he was saying and really trying to soak in 100 percent what he was saying. I was lost with really how powerful the message was and I was just thinking to myself for an hour.

“I didn’t even say anything and I was riding with my friend home and I was just lost. I was still thinking about what he was saying.”

Mourning gave Little two prime examples of athletes who gained by surrendering.

He relayed how Heat superstar LeBron James abstained from social media during his run to his first NBA title last season and how golfer Tiger Woods forced himself to make 500 straight putts from five feet to reinforce muscle memory.

Mourning explained to Little that it’s the little things that make the biggest difference. So before the Browns took the field for practice, Little passed along his new knowledge.

“We needed that,” wide receiver Josh Cribbs said. “It was refreshing to hear that from a younger player and I feel like he’s on the path to getting better and being a top receiver in this league.”

Haden, too, found motivation in Little’s words. If the Browns are indeed to begin winning, it will take extra effort from all of them.

“We feel like our team is good but nobody else is going to recognize that or realize that until we start getting ‘Ws’ and not ‘Ls.’ Everybody has to come in and just do a little bit more. So if it’s another hour of film study, if it’s another workout, if it’s a little more conditioning, if it’s meeting with your coaches, if it’s anything like that, take that next step because obviously what we’ve been doing for the first nine weeks hasn’t been working.”

Maybe the Browns will get on a roll, finish strong and save coach Pat Shurmur’s job.

And if they do, maybe they’ll look back at Little’s unexpected lunch with Mourning as a turning point.

Little already sees it as a new start, a place to begin again.

“We can come back with a fresh slate,” he said. “It’s a unique opportunity. It came right in the middle of the season where we still can make a pretty good run for everything we want to accomplish this season.”

NOTES: DT Ahtyba Rubin returned to practice after missing three games with a calf injury and expects to play against the Cowboys. With DT Phil Taylor back for his second game, the Browns are as healthy as they’ve been all season. “I was out there for the walk-through and I saw my boys in front of me,” Haden said, “Just having that week to get everyone healthy, get that energy back going and when I saw them I was crazy excited.” ... K Phil Dawson, who grew up in the Dallas area, has already bought 27 tickets for family and friends for Sunday’s game. ... The Browns practiced indoors because of rain.