

Paying with Pain

by Jack Rhodes, Staff writer for Pioneer Press

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Most of the elite warriors who will battle Sunday in Super Bowl XXVI can expect lifelong physical problems as testament to their grueling careers in the National Football League. They need only look at the players of yesteryear to see what awaits them.

A *Pioneer Press* survey of 100 retired NFL players found that 82 percent are experiencing ailments they believe are linked to their pro football careers. Some can't run. Some can't play backyard football with their kids. Some have impaired hearing or vision. Some face imminent surgery to replace joints that don't work anymore. Others just ache a lot.

They are paying for the pounding they took as professional football players. And unfortunately, the odds of getting injured in the NFL seem only to have increased, indication that today's players may face even more disabilities when they retire.

The rate of major injuries among NFL players rose 77 percent from the 1960s to the 1980s despite efforts to make the game safer with better equipment and tougher rules, the investigation revealed.

The Pioneer Press surveyed retired players about their experiences with injuries and lingering troubles. Those surveyed were chosen randomly from a list of all NFL players during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The survey is believed to be the first such study based on a random sample of everyone who played during that era. Because of the sampling method, the results are likely to reflect the experiences of all retired NFL players.

The telephone survey followed a 1991 NFL season that produced a rash of highly publicized injuries, including the spinal-cord injury that paralyzed Detroit guard Mike Utley.

Without question, some current players will copy the charmed example of Babe Parilli, 61, who escaped with no physical problems after 19 seasons as a pro quarterback. "I have to say I was lucky," said Parilli, now head coach of the Denver Dynamite in the Arena Football League.

But most players won't be so lucky, the survey indicates. Many of them will end up with medical records reflecting the arthritic conditions that grip 65 percent of those surveyed.

"If I didn't have that arthritis medicine, I'd be a basket case," said Fred Arbanas, an all-pro tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs when they played in Super Bowl I. "My neck bothers me. My shoulder aches, my right hand. I have a hell of a time getting moving in the morning...."

"If I didn't have my own business, I couldn't hold a decent job," said Arbanas, an advertising executive in the Kansas City area.

The 10-year pro football veteran embodies the ethos of a battered but proud bunch: 83 percent of those surveyed said the gain of playing pro football was worth the pain. "I have never wanted sympathy," said Arbanas, 53. "I'd do it again. I guess a lot of us are just dumb that way."

For most NFL players, the pain was just beginning when they left the cheers behind. Among players who played mostly in the 1970s, the newspaper survey found a staggering 94.7 percent with physical problems they connect to pro football. The figure for 1960s players was 75.7 percent, and for 1980s players, 72 percent.

Fifty-one percent of the ailing players have had problems since the day they retired from football, according to the survey. But 12 percent said 10 years or more passed before they had problems -- usually from degenerative arthritis.

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Name a body part and, chances are, some retired player will be hurting there. Knees were the most common problem, cited by 43 percent of surveyed players with football-related ailments, followed by shoulders, backs and lower arms and hands, all around 25 percent.

Activities are limited

Some guys just hurt all over.

"I've got pain in my elbows and hand, and my one knee has three big bumps on it. It's from calcium," said Joe Rutgens, a defensive tackle for the Washington Redskins from 1961 to 1970.

"And my fingers. I've broken every one of them. They've got big knots, and you can't bend them. It seems like anywhere I've broken a bone, the arthritis is getting worse."

Rutgens, 51, a car dealer in Peru, Illinois, has days when it's hard to walk, let alone run. Like other players in the survey, he's limited in physical activities.

In all, 52 percent of the former players said pro football injuries have limited their ability to do physical work, and 48 percent agreed that injuries have limited their participation in recreational sports.

Among those surveyed, 21 percent have had surgery for football-related problems since retiring from the game. And others see operating rooms on the horizon.

"I'm looking at a hip replacement down the line," said retired tackle Mike McCoy, whose 11-year career ended in 1980 after stints with Green Bay, Oakland, the New York Giants and Detroit. "I have a hard time playing with my kids."

The creaky condition of ex-players isn't surprising when you consider the pounding they took in the NFL.

The newspaper survey found that 56 percent of the players left professional football because of injuries they felt had compromised their playing abilities.

In all, 67 percent of the players in the survey experienced a major injury -- that is, one causing them to miss three or more consecutive games. Further, 34 percent suffered two or more major injuries.

Small wonder that playing NFL football ranks as the fifth-most stressful job among 250 occupations, falling between police officer and surgeon, according to "The Jobs Rated Almanac."

The increase in the injury rate -- 77 percent in the 1980s over the 1960s, according to the survey -- suggests explanations ranging from playing surfaces to the use of drugs.

Jan Van Duser, the NFL's director of game operations, said it also could reflect more conservative medical treatment that keeps injured players sidelined longer, pushing them into the "major injury" category.

Beyond that, he said, it gets down to speculation about how such variables as artificial turf, changes in game strategy, and the increased size and speed of players might affect injury rates.

'Slightly upward trend'

John Powell, a University of Iowa professor, has collected and analyzed NFL injury data since 1980 under a contract with the league. That data show a "slight upward trend" in major injuries during the past decade, he said.

Many players are convinced that artificial turf is the biggest culprit, but Powell's data don't show a significant increase in major injuries that can be linked to artificial turf or any other single factor.

"So far, I haven't been able to isolate anything that would give me what I call 'the ah-ha syndrome,'" he said.

However, Fred Zamberletti, the Minnesota Vikings' trainer since 1960, is pretty sure that bigger, faster players -- combined with the speed of artificial turf -- are making for more damaging collisions.

Big paychecks figure in, too, as players seek to extend their careers by sitting out longer with injuries, Zamberletti said. The average salary in the NFL is around \$425,000.

Players in the survey suggested that drugs also might factor into the injury rate. Forty-two percent believe steroids or other drugs contributed to some players' injuries during their playing days. But 43 percent didn't see drugs as a factor, and 15 percent weren't sure.

Only 24 percent of the 1960s players linked drugs to injuries, citing "uppers" or "bennies" as the common stimulants. But 47.4 percent of 1970s players saw a connections between drugs and injuries, and 60 percent of 1980s players. The figures reflect an increased use of anabolic steroids, substances that promote heightened stamina, muscle and weight.

"Steroids tend to make the muscle tissue thinner and make the bone tissue brittle," said Jeff Barnes, a linebacker with the Raiders from 1977 to 1987. "A lot of guys got hurt that way."

The NFL, which began suspending players for steroid use in 1989, started year-round drug testing in 1990, finding only three positives out of about 6,000 tests.

But Russ Bolinger, a guard who completed his 10-year career in 1985 with the Rams, thinks steroids are still in vogue.

"The guys who feel they need steroids to compete, they're going to find a way to beat the test," said Bolinger, who says he used the drug in the latter years of his career.

Bolinger's view is rejected by Dean Kleinschmidt, trainer of the New Orleans Saints and president of the Professional Football Athletic Trainers Society.

"I think a guy would have to go to extraordinary lengths and cost to avoid detection," he said.

Besides attacking drugs, the NFL is moving to crack down on another source of injuries -- unnecessary violence, said Jim Finks, president of the Saints and chairman of the league's Competition Committee. Finks recently asked all NFL clubs to submit ideas to the committee on curbing cheap shots, such as late hits and chop blocks.

"I'm concerned not only for the health and welfare of the players," he said. "I'm concerned that the public, even though they like hard-fought, tough hits, don't like to see violence. They don't like to see knees blown out when it's not necessary. I think that turns people off."

The league works hard to reduce injuries, Van Duser said. At the same time, it wants to keep NFL football as "the rough and tumble contact sport that it is."

"There are a lot of things you could do to eliminate injuries rather dramatically that would drastically change the game as we know it," Van Duser said.

When retired players look back on their careers, most of them have vivid recollections of injuries serious enough to require surgery.

And as they cope with the lingering pains of their gridiron days, they recall the mindset that often drove them back onto the playing field before they were entirely recovered from operations or other physical trauma.

Knee injuries were the single biggest reason that 60 percent of players in the survey required at least one surgery during their careers, and 29 percent required two or more.

New surgery techniques

The use of invasive surgery, which involves large surgical incisions, appears to have declined with the increased use of arthroscopic procedures, which require small incisions and generally hasten recovery.

The survey found that 77.6 percent of players from the 1960s required one or more invasive surgeries during their pro careers; arthroscopic surgery was not available at the time. Among players in the 1980s, only 44 percent had invasive surgery, but 20 percent underwent arthroscopic procedures.

Knee surgeries were most frequent, mentioned by 39 percent of players who had surgery during their careers.

E.J. Holub, a linebacker and center with Dallas and Kansas City between 1961 and 1972, underwent 15 invasive surgeries as a pro, plus one in high school, two in college and one after retiring from the game. "I would injure my knees and manage to get through the season, and afterward it was just kind of customary to get operated on, get rehabbed, and go back to playing football the following year," said Holub, another veteran of Super Bowl I.

Getting banged up and playing with injuries, he said, were part of the game. "I just accepted it," said Holub, 54, who manages a ranch in Oklahoma.

And if you didn't embrace the idea of playing with pain, what then? Chances are you would play anyway because of pressures from coaches or team doctors or teammates or yourself, many players said.

Larry Morris, 58, who played linebacker with the Chicago bears under legendary coach George Halas, knows all about pressure from coaches.

"He wouldn't allow us to get hurt," said Morris, who played 12 years in the NFL. "I dislocated my thumb once in a game and raised my hand to tell coach Halas it was hurt. He waived back at me."

Policy was to 'play hurt'

It was no different under George Allen's Washington Redskins during the 1970s, said Ray Schoenke, an offensive guard and tackle for 12 seasons.

"Our rule was you came out when you were carried out," said Schoenke, 50. "You played hurt. The special teams guys were a wreck by the end of the season, a complete wreck."

Some team doctors didn't discourage the play-no-matter-what code, players said. Of those surveyed, 42 percent believed their best health interests had been compromised by a team physician.

Bob Wade, 47, a defensive back whose four-year career ended in 1970, blames a team doctor for letting him play in five games after he fractured his wrist, which now has limited mobility.

"They would give me pain pills before the game and after the game," he said. "They talked me back onto the field before I was ready."

Other players told similar stories, but it's noteworthy that most of those surveyed felt their best health interests hadn't been compromised. That suggests many team doctors have managed to diagnose and treat injuries appropriately despite pressures from team managements and players to keep players on the field.

"The doctor is in a very difficult situation," said Schoenke, "and the very good ones know when to tell a player when to get out, and when it's OK to play."

Sometimes, it's practically impossible to keep injured players on the bench, said Jim Ridlon, a defensive back for San Francisco and Dallas between 1957 and 1964.

"That's a biological thing that's inbred in athletes and allows them to be high achievers. They're going to live with pain and play with pain, and not ask anyone to keep them out of a ball game," said Ridlon, now an acclaimed artist and a professor at Syracuse University.

Bolinger, 37, said he learned to thrive on injury and pain.

"The more I was hurt, the more I enjoyed the game. It was a red badge of courage. It made me even more competitive. There is something in the male ego that says, 'Not only am I playing, but I'm playing hurt, so I must be pretty good.'

It's one of those things that make you go, "Hmmm."

On one hand, 82 percent of retired players say they have physical problems from playing in the NFL.

On the other hand, 83 percent say the benefits of playing outweighed the risk of physical problems later on.

Take Ed Breeding, for example. He played two seasons as a Washington linebacker in the late '60s -- not enough time to earn a pension, just long enough to bang up an ankle, a knee and a shoulder and break his nose a few times. "The trainer and the team physician would straighten it out, which would kind of bring tears to your eyes," Breeding said. Nowadays, his sense of smell is out of whack, and his achy joints warn him when a snowstorm will be blowing over his Montana cattle ranch.

But Breeding, 48, has no regrets. He left the game with memories of playing behind Sam Huff, and having Vince Lombardi as a coach, and now has great stories to tell his grandchildren.

Loyal to game

Player after player talked wistfully about the fraternity of professional football and their loyalty to it, regardless of the maladies that afflict them.

For Roger Kochman, however, the risk proved far greater than the benefits of his abbreviated NFL career.

It was October 20, 1963, the seventh game of his rookie year as a running back for Buffalo. They were playing at Houston, and he was carrying the ball on a trap play. He got hit on the knee, and when it was over, his skin was all that held his leg together. The rare injury even severed his artery, and he nearly died at the hospital. Gangrene set in, and half of one foot had to be amputated.

Today, Kochman, 50, still pays the price for his one season in the pros. "I've had constant pain since it happened," said Kochman, a telephone company executive in Philadelphia. "I've gotten used to it other than that."

Paying with Pain

Part 2: From just irritating to crippling, arthritis is plague of former NFL players

It was a misty, chilly day in Mobile, Alabama, and Bobby Jackson's voice was etched with the pain that screamed in his shoulders, toes, right wrist and left knee.

"I'm in constant pain, and it's worse on days like today when it's damp and cold," said Jackson, a defensive back for Philadelphia and Chicago for two seasons in the early 1960s.

"You can't roll over at night. You can only stay on one side for a short amount of time. You never sleep a complete night."

Jackson, 55 suffers from osteoarthritis, a disorder that causes pain, stiffness, swelling and tenderness in the affected joints. And he blames the condition on playing football in high school, college and the National Football League.

A Pioneer Press survey indicates that arthritis is the plague of former NFL players, causing problems ranging from nuisance-level achiness to debilitating pain and lack of mobility.

In all, 65 percent of retired NFL players surveyed by the Pioneer Press reported symptoms of arthritis, mostly osteoarthritis, also called degenerative arthritis. The incidence ranged from 52 percent among retirees who played mostly in the 1980s to 70.3 percent among 1960s players.

By comparison, about 11 percent of adult male in the United States report arthritis, according to a 1990 report by the Federal Centers for Disease Control.

To be sure, some ex-players who think they have arthritis could have bursitis, tendinitis or other maladies. But many of them have been diagnosed with arthritis, and most identified symptoms associated with the disorder. The ex-players said arthritis bothers them particularly in joints that were injured, and that's what doctors would expect with the fraying and wearing away of cartilage, the "shock absorbers" between the bones.

"Sports and exercise don't cause arthritis, but injuries do," said Dr. Peter Bruno, an internist for the New York Rangers hockey team and the New York Knicks basketball team.

And surgeries on injured knees and other joints make the prognosis worse.

"Once you start taking that cartilage out of there, you're predisposing the knee to arthritis 20 to 30 years down the line," Bruno said.

The newspaper survey found 67 percent of the players experienced a major injury, and 44 percent of them hurt a knee. Sixty percent of the players required at least one surgery during their careers, and 39 percent of them underwent knee surgery.

Dr. Robert Bielen, an orthopedic surgeon and team physician at the University of California-Irvine, said he wasn't surprised by the high incidence of arthritis among those surveyed. "Football is a dangerous game," he said, and once a player has seriously injured a joint, it's seldom going to be the same again. "It may feel that way for a few more years, and then it begins to deteriorate and the signs and symptoms of arthritis appear," Bielen said.

Players say AstroTurf boosts injuries, but studies are inconclusive

Nothing riles former professional football players like the topic of artificial turf.

"It's like playing football on the street with carpet on it," said Frank LeMaster, 39, a middle linebacker with Philadelphia for 10 seasons. "You're faster on AstroTurf, and there's no give. Guys get ready to make a fast cut, and they blow their knees right out."

Many retired players interviewed by the Pioneer Press argued passionately that the best way to reduce injuries in the National Football League is to replace the turf with grass. Right now, 14 teams in the NFL play on natural grass, and 14 play on artificial turf, including seven with outdoor fields.

Of course, players will attest that natural grass can be nasty, too, and plenty of knee injuries have been caused by cleats getting stuck in the mud. Even so, the anecdotal evidence implicating AstroTurf as a factor in injuries is impressive. It's the scientific data that's lacking.

John Powell, a University of Iowa professor who analyzes injury data for the NFL, concluded that a team that played a hypothetical 20-game season on AstroTurf could expect one or two more significant knee or ankle-foot injuries than if it had played all of its games on grass. The results, he conceded, left "no clear-cut answer to the ongoing controversy."

That doesn't mean players aren't hurting because of worn-out legs, "turf toe," abrasions or other injuries associated with artificial turf, Powell said. "But does it make a difference on their playing on a regular basis? Probably not," he said in an interview.

The NFL Players Association couldn't disagree more.

A few years ago, the now-decertified union found a 20 percent higher injury rate for games on artificial turf, based on weekly injury lists released by the teams. But the study was incomplete because the union couldn't get access to the data Powell collects, said Michael Duberstein, the players association's research director.

The association is convinced that artificial turf is shortening players' careers, saying the average career length has dropped from 4.7 years to 3.2 years since 1970. The league, however, says the average

career length in the NFL is 4.2 years. As for artificial turf, the league hasn't seen solid evidence that it causes more major injuries, said Jim Finks, president of the New Orleans Saints.

Agency trying to get grip on NFL mortality

Thousands of retired National Football League players have been getting an ominous letter in the mail that basically asks them, "Are you dead yet?"

It's part of a federal agency's effort to determine whether pro football players really do live shorter lives than other people. No one knows for sure, but most men who played in the NFL think it's true, according to a Pioneer Press survey of 100 randomly selected ex-players from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Sixty-five percent of those surveyed said they agree with the theory that professional football players have a shorter life expectancy than the general population. Of the remaining players, 20 percent disagreed, and 15 percent weren't sure.

Among the explanations offered most frequently for players' untimely deaths:

Weight gain, and resulting health problems, after retirement. "I've seen a lot of guys go from a lean 290 to a fat 350," said Les Studdard, a center with Kansas City and Houston in the early 1980s.

The pounding that players take.

"Football is more physical than any other professional sport," said Noland Smith, a kick-return specialist and flanker in the late 1960s. "The wear and tear on your body takes its toll."

The psychological trauma of leaving football.

"When the game is over, the bottom falls out," said Ray Schoenke, an offensive lineman for Dallas and Washington from 1963 to 1975.

"Basically, their identities are tied up in being football players. It can evaporate because of a physical injury, or they can be cut."

What follows, Schoenke said, is a painful journey that can include job changes, divorce, drugs, alcohol, or even suicide.

The NFL Players Association has advanced the idea that retired players are dying prematurely, expressing concern that many retirees won't live long enough to draw full pensions at age 55. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was rumored for years that pro football players die in their mid-50s, on average. But that notion has been widely discredited.

A study of 1,800 players whose careers fell between 1921 and 1958 found an average age of death of 61.9 years as of 1974, according to Len Teeuws, a player trustee on the NFL retirement board and an actuary whose firm compiled the data.

"I'd say the mortality is going to be higher than 61.9, but it's going to be substantially lower than the U.S. average," Teeuws said. The average life expectancy for U.S. males is 72.1 years, with whites at 72.7 and blacks at 67.7, according to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics.

At the request of the Players Association, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health has undertaken a mortality study of everyone who has played football in the NFL since 1959. The institute sent out more than 9,000 letter to players, seeking to settle the life expectancy question once and for all. The study is a year or so from completion.

Meanwhile, some people are concerned that the theory of shortened lifespans could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. "If a guy believes football has cut years off his life, he'll probably check out early," said Russ Bolinger, a 10-year NFL veteran who retired in 1985.