

# OTTO PLAYED IN PAIN THAT WON'T QUIT

By Bob Kravitz

From *The Pittsburgh Press*, Dec. 23, 1984

He hurts every minute of every day.

"They talk about how (former Oakland Raiders center) Jim Otto is a cripple and it's really a terrible shame," said Steelers coach Jon Kolb. "But what football does for a guy like him is give him an opportunity to find what's inside himself.

"He sucked it up. He knows. He knew when the time came to step or not step over the line, he stepped over the line. There are times in every season when you can quit and nobody can know. But Otto never did, and that's something they can't take away from him."

They can take away his knees, however. Later this year, Otto's artificial left knee will be replaced with a new artificial knee. A few months later, the mangled remains of his right knee will be replaced by another artificial knee. It will be the 10th and 11th times he has undergone surgery.

"And given a chance," Otto said proudly, "I would do it all over again."

He has no resentment.

"I was the one who played hurt," he said from his Yuba City, Calif., home. "I was the one who made sure I was there every Sunday."

And now he is hobbling more than ever.

Otto, who never missed a game in 15 years as a center with the Raiders, virtually has no knees.

"I hurt all day long, and I can't do much. But I don't want people feeling sorry for me. It was my choice to play."

The result: He is a cripple. Sometimes, he needs a cane to walk, and if he stands in one place for a time, he is bound to collapse. Exercise, like jogging or lifting weights, is out of the question.

It has interfered with work, too. He had to quit as the Raiders business manager and now has trouble running his walnut orchard and fast-food restaurants.

"It's been a struggle. All I'm trying to do is get healthy."

But the damage he did is irreparable. During his 15 years -- 12 of which saw him voted to the Pro Bowl -- Otto underwent nine knee operations. The wear and tear has left him arthritic.

"Jim never let anybody know how bad he hurt," said Gene Upshaw, who played beside Otto on the Raiders' offensive line. "But now he's living through all those aches and pains.

"There were games when he would tell me 'Just help me off the ground and I'll be all right,' and he'd come back."

## **THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 10, No. 1 (1988)**

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The last three years of his career were the most painful. Three days a week he had his knee injected with xylocaine, then had the fluid drained. Almost every Sunday he took aspirin and Darvon so he could play.

"I just endured. You've got to be tough. Nobody's going to beat me. It was part of my makeup. In 1970, I took Darvon and four muscle relaxants just so I could lean over and snap the ball.

"At the end of the season, I was hurting badly. We played Baltimore in the championship and lost. I came back home and was very let down over the loss. I didn't go out of the house for weeks.

"I don't know if it was withdrawal from the Darvon and relaxants – I don't think so – I think I was so depressed over the loss. But I couldn't go out. Either way, at that point, I said I'd never take it again, and I didn't.

"I don't do any pain medication now."

Upshaw remembered visiting Otto after the Raiders won the Super Bowl in 1981.

"I had hurt by back that year and when I saw Jim, he told me, 'Don't stay too long. Whatever you do, don't stay too long.' I thought that was pretty strange coming from a guy like him."

Otto will admit he stayed too long, but that hardly dulls his enthusiasm for the game. He bears no grudge against the league or his team, and enthusiastically supports his son, a freshman football player at Utah State.

"I still love football and I see him play every game. I just don't want him getting hurt like I did.

"I don't blame anybody. Every time you put on a helmet, you know ... I hate hearing these guys cry now.

You should know that whenever you tied on the jockstrap, you were going to get hurt. We knew the score."

Now, the price is being paid.