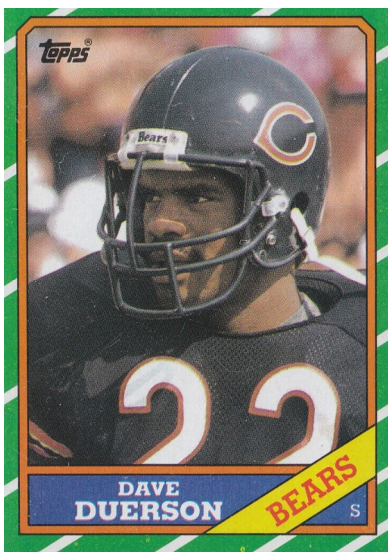


Dave Duerson

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

David Russell Duerson lived his life to the fullest, both on and off the gridiron. He led a successful professional football career, winning two Super Bowl championships in 11 seasons with the Chicago Bears, New York Giants, and Phoenix Cardinals.¹ Off the field, he earned a degree in economics from the University of Notre Dame that he used to become an entrepreneur after his football days.

Duerson was drafted in the third round of the 1983 NFL draft. He was one of a handful of players selected by Chicago that comprised its core talent on the 1985 “Super Bowl Shuffle” squad.² According to defensive tackle Steve McMichael, Duerson was, “the MVP of our defense.”³ The praise speaks volumes because the unit featured a plethora of stars including; McMichael, Mike Singletary, Richard Dent, William Perry, and Otis Wilson. Head coach Mike Ditka recalled, “We really liked him a lot. That was the year that Todd Bell and [Al] Harris held out. [Duerson] stepped right in and became a starter at the strong safety position and was outstanding. Did a great, great job.”⁴



In his seven seasons with the Bears, Duerson was elected to four consecutive Pro Bowls (1985-1988), named a second-team All-Pro by the Associated Press two times (1986, 1987), and was a first-team All-Conference choice by *Pro Football Weekly* in 1986 and 1988.⁵ Meanwhile, during that four year span, the Bears' defense ranked in the top five annually in total defense. They were the stingiest, leading the league in fewest points allowed three times (1985, 1986, 1988), while winning 52 games and four NFC Central



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Division titles in that span.⁶ It included a 15-1 record in 1985 that led to a dominant 46-10 victory in Super Bowl XX over the New England Patriots.⁷

Duerson was not a star overnight. He saw only minimal playing time his first two seasons in the NFL while making only six starts. In 1985, he earned the full-time starting role at safety. Incumbent starter Todd Bell held out due to a contract dispute, missing the entire campaign.⁸ Duerson stepped right in, earning the respect of his teammates, with a hard-hitting playing style coupled with a high football intelligence.

Among the players Duerson admired most was former safety Jack Tatum.⁹ Before games he would read over Tatum's memoir, *They Call Me Assassin*. When describing hard hits, Duerson explained, "I've expressed several times, there is nothing like hearing the air rush out of another man."¹⁰ His former college teammate at Notre Dame, Rod Bone marveled at Tatum as well, "We all looked up to Jack Tatum, because Jack Tatum would hit you and you were out. We wanted to be Jack Tatum. A hard hit felt good. It didn't hurt. If you hit right, people just bounce off of you. We assumed that the helmet was good enough."¹¹ Bone recalled about feeling woozy from a big hit, "Every once in a while, you'd see double and feel fuzzy or dizzy. It was part of the game. The trainer would hold up two fingers. If you saw four fingers, you'd close one eye until you saw two fingers. Then you'd get back in there."¹² For the 1985 season, Duerson totaled five interceptions, recorded two sacks, and earned a trip to his first Pro Bowl.¹³

The following season, 1986, was his best statistically. He picked off six passes and recorded a career high seven sacks, while being named to the Pro Bowl. He was also a first-team All-Conference choice by the UPI and *Pro Football Weekly*.¹⁴ The Associated Press named him as a second-team All-Pro, but Duerson was elected to the first-team by

- 1 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.
- 2 Solotaroff, Paul. "Dave Duerson: The Ferocious Life and Tragic Death of a Super Bowl Star," Mensjournal.com, May 2, 2011, <https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/dave-duerson-the-ferocious-life-and-tragic-death-of-a-super-bowl-star-20121002/>.
- 3 "The 1985 Chicago Bears – The Greatest NFL Defense of all time," theSporting.blog, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://thesporting.blog/blog/the-1985-chicago-bears-the-greatest-nfl-defense-of-all-time>.
- 4 "Dave Duerson found dead at 50," ESPNChicago.com, February 18, 2011, <https://www.espn.com/chicago/nfl/news/story?id=6135463>.
- 5 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.
- 6 "Chicago Bears Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/chi/>.
- 7 "Chicago Bears Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/chi/>.
- 8 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.



the *Sporting News*, *Pro Football Weekly*, and Pro Football Writers of America.¹⁵ The Bears rolled to a 14-2 record, but fell in the divisional round of the playoffs to the Washington Redskins, 27-13, a game in which the Bears committed four turnovers, as the Redskins scored the game's final 14 points.¹⁶

His 1987 campaign is memorable because he was the recipient of the NFL Man-of-the-Year-Award for his extensive charity work. Duerson started in 12 games, nabbing three interceptions and recorded three sacks, while earning the third of four consecutive Pro Bowl selections.¹⁷ He was also named second-team All-Pro by various media outlets. Chicago made a final run in 1988 at the Super Bowl with Duerson, posting a 12-4 record, however, falling to the San Francisco 49ers, 28-3, in the divisional round of the playoffs.¹⁸

The team regressed to 6-10 in 1989, and Duerson was released by the Bears prior to the start of the 1990 season.¹⁹ In seven seasons with Chicago, he played in 102 games, starting in 76, reeled in 18 interceptions while recording 16.0 sacks.²⁰ Six days after his release, Duerson signed with the New York Giants as a free agent.²¹

He started just two of 16 games in 1990, but New York signed him to shore up its defense. The Giants boasted the league's top ranked defense, led by Lawrence Taylor, Pepper Johnson, Erik Johnson, and Everson Walls.²² New York rolled to Super Bowl XXV, defeating the Bears in the process, 31-3. Duerson earned his second Super Bowl ring when Buffalo's field goal attempt in the final minutes missed, sealing New York's

9 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end," *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.

1 0 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end," *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.

1 1 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end," *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.

1 2 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end," *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.

1 3 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.

1 4 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.

1 5 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.

1 6 "Divisional Round – Washington Redskins at Chicago Bears – January 3rd, 1987," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/198701030chi.htm>.

1 7 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.

1 8 "Chicago Bears Franchise Encyclopedia," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/chi/>.



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20-19 win.²³ He was released following the season, when he signed with the Phoenix Cardinals for the 1991 season.²⁴

Duerson spent his final three seasons with the Cardinals, mainly working in a backup role. He started just eight of the final 42 games of his NFL career. Duerson retired following the 1993 season at the age of 33 having played in a total 160 games, including 86 starts.²⁵

Duerson was born on November 28, 1960 in Muncie, Indiana to Arthur Duerson and Julia Leavall. He was the youngest of four children.²⁶ His father served in World War II, worked as a manufacturing worker at a Chevrolet plant, and served as a deacon at a local church. Julia ran a successful catering business for nearly five decades.²⁷

Growing up, Dave was a star on the baseball, basketball, and football teams at Muncie Northside High School. He earned All-Conference, All-State, and All-American status in 1978 and 1979 for football. In 1979, he was Indiana Mr. Football.²⁸ Off the field, he was a high achieving student, earning National Honor Society recognition and All-America band honors as a senior.

- 1 9 "Dave Duerson," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=duerson&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.
- 2 0 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.
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- 2 2 "1990 New York Giants Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees, Injury Reports," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 2, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/nyg/1990.htm>.
- 2 3 "Super Bowl XXV – New York Giants vs. Buffalo Bills – January 27th, 1991," ProFootballReference.com, accessed July 2, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/199101270buf.htm>.
- 2 4 "Dave Duerson," ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=duerson&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.
- 2 5 "Dave Duerson," ProFootballReference.com, accessed June 25, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DuerDa00.htm>.
- 2 6 "Duerson, David R.," Indiana-football.org, accessed June 25, 2022, <http://www.indiana-football.org/?q=node/121>.
- 2 7 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end," *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.
- 2 8 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end," *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.



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No matter what Dave picked up, he excelled greatly.²⁹ He could have chosen any career and been successful, recalls a close family friend, Carl Kizer, Jr., “I thought he might go on to be a senator or anything he wanted.”³⁰ Dave was even offered a baseball contract by Los Angeles Dodgers' scouts, which he turned down to attend college. He met his wife, Alicia, during his college days. The couple had four children, sons Chase, Tregg, and Brock, and a daughter, Taylor.³¹

Dave chose the University of Notre Dame to continue his education. He earned a baseball and football scholarship, and shortly after enrolling football became his focal point. Duerson started all four years on the football team, earning All-American honors in 1982, when he was also the team captain and team MVP.³² In his four years at Notre Dame, the team won 27 games, including a top ten finish in 1980. Alicia recalls, “Sports were the springboard. He made so many plans for such a young age and had the brains to pull it all off. He had a photographic memory, which used to make me mad, because he'd barely study and get A's, where I'd be up a week of nights and be happy to get a B.”³³ Duerson's efforts in high school and in college earned him induction into the Indiana Football Hall of Fame in 1998.³⁴

The consequences of bodily wear and tear caught up with Duerson in the days after football, particularly brain and head traumas, in the form of concussions, depression, and dementia. Alicia remembered, “Dave would get concussed on the first or second series and play the whole way through, or get a dinger in the second half and be back at practice Wednesday morning. Dave had one speed, and that was full-out.”³⁵ The effects changed his personality from a quiet, caring and loving husband, father, and businessman to raging and angry. His behaviors were unrecognizable by his family, which included a short temper, personality changes, and violent swings in mood. Alicia compared him with his old self, “The old Dave would never do that; he never showed violence toward me.”³⁶

Sadly, on February 17, 2011, at the age of 50, Duerson committed suicide at his home outside Miami, Florida. Duerson climbed into his bed and shot himself with a loaded gun.

2 9 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. “Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end,” *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.

3 0 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. “Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end,” *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.

3 1 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. “Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end,” *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.

3 2 “Duerson, David R.,” *Indiana-football.org*, accessed June 25, 2022, <http://www.indiana-football.org/?q=node/121>.

3 3 Solotaroff, Paul. “Dave Duerson: The Ferocious Life and Tragic Death of a Super Bowl Star,” *Mensjournal.com*, May 2, 2011, <https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/dave-duerson-the-ferocious-life-and-tragic-death-of-a-super-bowl-star-20121002/>.

3 4 “Duerson, David R.,” *Indiana-football.org*, accessed June 25, 2022, <http://www.indiana-football.org/?q=node/121>.



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Before he passed away, Duerson sent his family text messages detailing he wanted an autopsy performed on his brain to study its neurological condition. One of them read, “PLEASE, SEE THAT MY BRAIN IS GIVEN TO THE NFL’S BRAIN BANK.”³⁷

Duerson's son, Tregg, recalled, “He was looking for an answer. And he was hoping to be a part of an answer.”³⁸ He left notes at his home, detailing his motives for ending his life, for his family failures that included his marriage ending in divorce, the financial struggles he endured from his businesses after football, and various specifics about what depressed and pained him. In May of that year, researchers at Boston University discovered he suffered, “from a moderately advanced case of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).”³⁹

Several events contributed to Duerson's sadness and depression, including the loss of his mother in 2006 due to a heart attack.⁴⁰ Despite the severity, he never shared its impact with anyone. Also, his ventures into business did not turn out as planned. He opened a McDonalds franchise in Louisville, Kentucky in 1994, and bought a controlling stake in a meat processing plant near Chicago. The purchase resulted in doubling its revenue to \$60 million. After experiencing friction with his business partner, Duerson sold his share, and started his own plant, Duerson Foods.⁴¹ He shelled out millions of dollars on the building footprint and equipment, such as state-of-the-art freezers to increase food supplies. He struggled due to supply chain issues, and for the first time in his life, he experienced

3 5 Solotaroff, Paul. “Dave Duerson: The Ferocious Life and Tragic Death of a Super Bowl Star,” Mensjournal.com, May 2, 2011, <https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/dave-duerson-the-ferocious-life-and-tragic-death-of-a-super-bowl-star-20121002/>.

3 6 Solotaroff, Paul. “Dave Duerson: The Ferocious Life and Tragic Death of a Super Bowl Star,” Mensjournal.com, May 2, 2011, <https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/dave-duerson-the-ferocious-life-and-tragic-death-of-a-super-bowl-star-20121002/>.

3 7 Rosenthal, Gregg. “Dave Duerson's son: 'He was hoping to be a part of an answer,’” ProFootballTalk.nbcports.com, February 22, 2011, <https://profootballtalk.nbcports.com/2011/02/22/dave-duersons-son-he-was-hoping-to-be-a-part-of-an-answer%E2%80%9D/>.

3 8 Rosenthal, Gregg. “Dave Duerson's son: 'He was hoping to be a part of an answer,’” ProFootballTalk.nbcports.com, February 22, 2011, <https://profootballtalk.nbcports.com/2011/02/22/dave-duersons-son-he-was-hoping-to-be-a-part-of-an-answer%E2%80%9D/>.

3 9 Solotaroff, Paul. “Dave Duerson: The Ferocious Life and Tragic Death of a Super Bowl Star,” Mensjournal.com, May 2, 2011, <https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/dave-duerson-the-ferocious-life-and-tragic-death-of-a-super-bowl-star-20121002/>.



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failure. Later in 2006, the company's assets were auctioned off.⁴² In 2008, after reaching a low point, Alicia and Dave divorced.

Duerson's story is no doubt a grand football tragedy, but in death he tried to make a difference for future players by volunteering the donation of his brain to be studied to raise attention to a deficiency in player safety. Alicia reinforced this by saying, "I think it's just an example of the type of person he is. In his time, he put the future in front of him – future generations of football players in front of him. I'm just so proud of him at this moment."⁴³ The impact has been resounding, with at least 100 current and former players having agreed to donate their brains for research studies at Boston University.⁴⁴

End Notes

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- 4 0 Solotaroff, Paul. "Dave Duerson: The Ferocious Life and Tragic Death of a Super Bowl Star," Mensjournal.com, May 2, 2011, <https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/dave-duerson-the-ferocious-life-and-tragic-death-of-a-super-bowl-star-20121002/>.
- 4 1 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end," *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.
- 4 2 Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "Dave Duerson's secret life and tragic end," *Miami New Times*, April 28, 2011, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/dave-duersons-secret-life-and-tragic-end-6380651>.
- 4 3 Rosenthal, Gregg. "Dave Duerson's son: 'He was hoping to be a part of an answer,'" ProFootballTalk.nbcports.com, February 22, 2011, <https://profootballtalk.nbcports.com/2011/02/22/dave-duersons-son-he-was-hoping-to-be-a-part-of-an-answer%E2%80%9D/>.
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