Lifelong Companion of Many NFL Alumni

By Bob Kravitz
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Buddy Dial was in agony.

"The pain was so bad, my wife had to help me out of the car," Dial, then a member of the Dallas Cowboys. "And that night, I sat in a tub of water, my wife had to call the neighbor to help pull me out of the tub. So I went to the hospital.

"Then, before the game, they gave me 10 or 12 shots of something -- all these needles -- and blocked the whole lower part of my back. And I played the whole game. After the game, when it wore off, I about died. It was brutal."

Such treatment of a pro football injury is not likely today.

Where the old book said numb it and play, the book today says ice it, compress it, elevate it, heat it, and rehabilitate it. Painkillers are a last resort.

The game has changed, and so has the attitude of players and doctors toward playing with pain.

"Guys are aware now of the long-term consequences of playing hurt," said Gene Upshaw, the director of the National Football League Players Association. "It's still an individual choice, but players today won't just go out and play no matter what -- the way we did years ago."

Former Steelers All-Pro linebacker Andy Russell agreed.

"Today's players know more," he said. "They're a lot more sensible than we were."

Dick Hoak's voice was filled with disdain.

"The pendulum was swung completely the other way," said the former Steelers running back who is now the team's offensive backfield coach. "Now, guys won't play with the slightest injuries. They're so afraid that the next injury is going to end their careers.

"They hear so much from the Players' Association aboutthis guy or that guy whose career ended because he played hurt. And they hear stories from Peter Gent and Dave Meggysey (about medical mistreatment), so they go overboard. That's not every guy, but some guys..."

According to Upshaw, though, today's players are making the important distinction between pain and injury.

"Guys will still play with pain," he said, "but they won't play if they think that pain means they're going to aggravate an injury."

Players' attitudes started to change in the early 1970s, when a credibility gap opened between the league and the players.

"The feeling was: 'If the players don't watch out for themselves, nobody will,'" said Tom Keating, the former Steeler and Raider and member of the Players Association pension board. "We couldn't be sure if the team doctors were shooting straight with us. We didn't know where their loyalties were."

Books like Gent's, "North Dallas Forty," and Meggysey's "Meat On the Hoof," increased speculation that football was dehumanizing and rife with abuses of pain-killing drugs.

"They cared about us getting out on the field each week, that's all," said former Cowboys linebacker. Lee Roy Jordan. "Long- term health? You think they were concerned?"

The athletes thought not.

And the lawsuits flew.

"You had some doctors working for the team who were there just because they were friends of friends of the owner," Keating said. "I was lucky. When I went down with a knee (while with Buffalo), it turned out that (owner) Ralph Wilson had hired a great doctor.

"But you didn't always know if that was the case."

The players won major concessions in the 1982 collective bargaining agreement, which gave them access to their medical records held by the team physician, and permission to seek a second opinion from an independent physician.

"Management was resistant at first," Upshaw said. "But then we asked them: 'Would you like it if your employer told you which doctor to go to?'"

The union made a point, but Jon Kolb, the former Steelers offensive lineman and now defensive line/conditioning coach, believes the players have gone too far.

"It all goes back to the owners' reluctance to pay the players what they were worth years ago," he said. "Finally, the players got some cohesiveness and had the strike.

"But now the players are greedy, and the consequence of that is that some players won't play with some pain. That's the bad part."

Playing with pain did not mean simply toughing it out. In many cases it meant using pain-killing drugs.

"Hey, let's not kid ourselves," Upshaw said. "When I played, lots of guys were using drugs. I'm not going to tell you that I didn't."

But now, painkillers -- at least those legally obtained from NFL teams -- are less abundant.

"On our team, I'd say 10 percent even got injected," said Dr. Stuart C. Zeman, team physician for the United States Football League's Oakland Invaders and the league's sports medicine consultant. "It's not something you want to do often."

Players are better educated about painkillers, too.

"The athletes can make their own decisions," said Carl Eller, the former Minnesota Vikings end who is the league's drug and alcohol consultant. "They're more concerned with permanent damage to the bodies."

The use of painkillers was curtailed in 1973 when the league developed its own drug monitoring program.

At the beginning of each season, each team is required to provide the league office with an inventory of all drugs. Three times a year it must provide copies of all prescriptions for drugs. At the end of the year, each team must provide a final inventory.

Further, each team is inspected once a year by regional security representatives -- all former Drug Enforcement Agency agents.

"(NFL Director of Security) Charley (Jackson) has been known to just walk into a locker room," Upshaw said, "and tell the trainer, 'Open the safe, let me see what you've got.'"

Still there are abuses.

"Our monitoring program only ensures that players are not getting drugs from the NFL," Jackson said. "But we're not so naive to think that people aren't taking shortcuts. We simply can't control purchases on the street, or over-the-counter distribution of game-enhancing medication."

But according to former Steeler Rocky Bleier, those abuses are not as often perpetrated by the teams themselves.

"It used to be if you asked for a shot, you got it. You asked for a pain pill, you got it. There wasn't any supervision," he said. "But into the second part of the 1970's and into the '80s, that all became much more controlled by the league."

Understandably, players and team executives are reluctant to discuss the subject. The league's image has taken a beating in the past, and loose talk on pain-masking drugs is rare. It was poor public relations when TV cameras caught the Bears injecting quarterback Jim McMahon's hand on the sidelines.

But injections of analgesics into the joint are not necessarily destructive. There are times when a player will not do himself further harm by playing with an injury. Steelers linebacker Jack Lambert had his foot injected to speed the healing process. By decreasing the pain, Lambert could play and then break the toe's adhesions -- an aid to healing.

Yet former players like Gent, considered a pariah in some NFL circles, wonder what has become of their unenlightened generation.

"We did so much drugs -- cortisone, xylocaine, you-name-it -- what's going to happen to all those guys year down the road?" Gent asked. "Are we going to have some sort of hidden epidemic?

"Most of the guys I know who I played with and against have some sort of chronic pain. I worry about that."

Players know the score soon after they don the helmet and pads.

"If you're this far into the season and still walking," said Steelers lineman Craig Wolfley, "you can consider yourself healthy.

"It's part of my job, and I'm a paid professional. Obviously, I'm concerned about my long-term health, but now, I'm young and strong. Injuries aren't something you want to think about."

Yet they are something almost every player will experience. According to Dr. David Axelrad, director of the National Pain Foundation in Washington, D.C., almost every former NFL player suffers some degree of chronic pain.

And Upshaw said union's DataBank, which stores the names of all former players, shows that almost every one is partially disabled by a football-related injury.

"These days, trainers and team doctors are generally very good about not letting a player participate if it would aggravate the injury," said Dr. Allan Ryan, editor-in-chief of *The Physician And Sportsmedicine* magazine in Edina, Minn. "But when you did see players participating hurt, you see now that they are worse off than their contemporaries will be years from now."

Jordan said that should be a great relief to today's player.

"I always thought I was the tough guy, somebody who would play at all costs," he said. "Now I look back, and I see I was just dumb."

That lack of education has resulted in scores of partially disabled former players.

"Being able to live with pain is not an easy thing to do," he said. "There are a lot of guys who are having difficulty doing day-to-day work ... pain interfering with work. Many of them have problems with knees deteriorating, hips, shoulders. There are probably quite a few like Buddy (Dial), only not as extreme."

Former Bear Roger Stillwell and former Raider James Harvey are just two. In Jordan's words, both are "physically destroyed."

Those in deepest trouble tend to be the players who stay in the game too long.

"When you're in your 20s, you get rid of the soreness by the next weekend," Kolb said. "When you get into your 30s, you're still sore this week from last week. That's when guys get in trouble.

"Problem is, a lot of people, after a few years, they become addicted to playing. It scares you not to play."

Sometimes, the pressure to play with pain is imposed by the team. More often, it is self-imposed.

According to Ryan, research has shown that players pressure the trainers so they can play more often than the team pressures the player to compete.

"I remember one time Mike Webster's hamstring was so bad the back of his leg turned black," Kolb said. "But he told (trainer) Ralph (Berlin) that he had to practice, that he was losing his edge."

In every football career, the athlete develops a close and personal relationship with pain. And in the end -- rules or no rules -- he must make the decision.

"You and I are on the same team and we have the same injury," Kolb said. "I take a shot and I play. You don't.

"Who's right and who's wrong?"