

CHAPTER I

A CONCUSSION BECOMES A MISSION

*Football is a part-time profession...it gets you ready for your
life's work.*

—CHUCK NOLL

CHAPTER I PLAYBOOK:

- How concussions and improper care ended my NFL career
- My lifesaving move to ESPN
- Making youth football safer
- The emerging CTE crisis

HOW DOES A RUNNING BACK, broadcaster, coach, and dad wind up on a mission to save the great game of football from the hidden agendas of people who want to destroy it? Well, I guess it happens in the same way for pretty much everybody: you see something you can't turn away from, and have to do something about it. For me, that something was and is youth football. But before I can tell that story, I have to take you back to what happened to me before and after that last fateful hit to the head.

It was 1991, when I was with the Steelers, and it was the offseason, about two years after my only documented concussion at that time, which I'd gotten in Denver. Dr. Joe Maroon, the Steelers' neurosurgeon, and Dr. Mark Lovell, then-director of neuropsychology at Allegheny General Hospital (and later, chief scientific officer at ImPACT Applications Inc.), had developed the pencil-and-paper version of the ImPACT (Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive

Testing) test. That came about after Bubby Brister, our quarterback, sustained a serious concussion during the 1990 season.

Dr. Maroon evaluated Bubby at the time, and then before the next game he went in to talk to Coach Noll. He said, “Coach, I didn’t like some of the responses I got from him. I don’t know if he should play.” Coach Noll wasn’t happy at the idea of losing his starting quarterback, so he said, “Time out. I’ve watched him all week. He looked great. There was nothing that told me he can’t play, Joe. I can’t have you come in here subjectively, after talking to him, telling me he can’t play.”

Chuck Noll wasn’t just a great football coach. He was the Leonardo da Vinci of football, one of the most brilliant men I ever knew. He was a wine connoisseur and a pilot, would talk to me about jazz, and was completely willing to think outside the box. Coach was telling Dr. Maroon that if he was going to sit a starter, he needed objective data, not subjective opinion. So Dr. Maroon and Dr. Lovell went off and created ImPACT, a series of questions that tested a player’s reaction time and his brain’s ability to process information. The idea was that you would take the test when you were healthy to establish a baseline, and then if you sustained head trauma in a game, you could take the test again. The team doc could compare your baseline to your more recent test and determine if you needed to take some time off to recover.

That day in 1991, I was in the locker room at Three Rivers Stadium, and John Norwig (the Steelers’ terrific athletic trainer, who is still there today) approached me. It was his job to convince players to take ImPACT to set their baseline. He asked me to do it, but I had just finished my workout, and I was getting ready to leave. Because I’d had a concussion a couple of years before, I was on the team’s priority list to take the test, and John followed me out to my car, pestering me the whole way.

I didn’t want to take it. I had pool work to do and then martial arts class, and I didn’t want to waste the time. Just as we got to the car, I said, “John, I wear a helmet. Why do I have to take this?” That was my thought process at the time. That was everybody’s thought process.

People today ask why the NFL and doctors didn’t handle concussion differently in 1990 or 1994, but the answer is simple: *We didn’t know then what we know now.* We thought about a concussion as getting dazed, even knocked out, but then you rested and went back in the game, period. Nobody talked about things like brain damage or long-term cognitive problems.

But John knew just how to get me to do what he wanted. He said, “The test is also to assess your knowledge, Merrill,” he said. “Let’s see if you can be the smartest player on this team.” Clever guy. He knew just the right buttons to push. So I said, “All right, let’s get it on.” As an aside, that’s how great John Norwig is. He knew just what to do to get me to do what was in my own best interest. There are thousands across the country just like him, and we need more. Athletic trainers are vital to keeping players safe, regardless of age. They’re like a nurse, doctor, and mother hen all rolled into one, just standing on the sidelines until they’re needed.

I took the test, thinking I would never need it again. John said, “If something happens to you again, like it did in Denver, then we can do this test again, and we’ll have a better assessment of when you should return to play.” But I was right, sort of. I didn’t need that test again for the rest of the time I was in Pittsburgh.

“I CAN NEVER CLEAR YOU”

IN 1994, I SIGNED WITH the Chicago Bears as free agent. During an August 22 preseason game in Kansas City against the Chiefs, I caught a ball on a passing play in scoring territory. As I spun around, I saw the safety between me and the end zone, but I also knew that Hall of Famer Derrick Thomas, the best pass rusher in the game at the time, was nearby. Boy, was he!

Derrick slammed into me from the side, and all of a sudden, I was lying on my back and I couldn't move. It was like being in an earthquake; everything was shaking. Tim Worley, the Steelers' first-round pick whom the Bears had picked up, came running over to me, said, "Aw, man!" and waved for the trainer to come out. I don't remember doing it, but I got up and got back to the huddle and actually ran the next play. Days later, I watched the tape, and I ran the right pass route, but I ran it like I was drunk, wobbling all over the place.

I don't remember any of this, but I'm told that I stumbled to the sideline and told one of the trainers that I'd been hit in the head. They started asking if I knew where I was, and I said, "Tampa." The trainer said, "How do you know that?" I answered, "Because I can hear the ocean."

At that, I came out of the game. But at the time, there wasn't much more the team could do, cognitively speaking, to test what kind of shape I was in, so during the second half, they took me to a nearby hospital for an MRI. Their concern was bleeding on the brain; you don't want someone with that getting in a plane and flying because of the changes in pressure. By the way, I don't remember going to the hospital. I just remember people asking, over and over, "What's your name? Where are you? Hey, buddy, how you feeling? What's your birthday? What's today's date?"

Anyway, I did my time in the MRI machine, and they gave me an envelope with my scans in it and sat me in a waiting room. I was thinking, *Great. I have these scans so that when the doctors come back, I'll be able to show them that I'm fine.* After what felt like forty-five minutes, I saw a doctor running past the door like he was looking for somebody and then stop and jump back. "There you are!" he said, looking a little frantic, like he'd been looking all over for me. I was thinking, *I've been here the whole time waiting for you,* and I reached for the scans so I could show him that I was fine. There was no envelope.

The doc said, "Oh, we have the scans. They're down in the other room." Turns out they had left me in a different waiting room on a

different floor downstairs; I had wandered upstairs to another room without remembering it. Now I got scared. The good news was that I didn't have bleeding on the brain, so I was able to fly home with the team, but I don't remember the flight or arriving home, either.

The next morning, Eric Kramer picked me up to take me to the Bears facility. When I walked into the locker room, Fred Caito, the Bears' athletic trainer, saw me and said, "How you feeling?"

I felt terrible, but I wasn't going to tell him that. "I feel great."

"Yeah?" Fred said. "Go look in the mirror." I walked over and looked, and I stopped dead. I could barely recognize myself: glossy and pale, with weird coloring. I wasn't going to fool anybody into thinking I belonged on that field. Man, after seeing myself, even I didn't think I belonged on the field.

Our last preseason game was that Friday, and I wouldn't be playing in it anyway because starters don't play in the final preseason game. Instead, I assumed I would get ready to play the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in our season opener, five days after that. That's when Dr. John Munsell, the Bears' team doctor, called me.

Munsell should have examined me in person, but instead he asked me a few questions: how was I feeling, things like that. And then he cleared me to play, just like that, over the phone. I had no face-to-face exam. No tests. Nobody looked at me to make sure I didn't have gray matter leaking out of my ears. I got cleared over the phone by a general practitioner, not a neurologist or neurosurgeon. We didn't know back then what we know now, but you don't need board certification to know that you don't okay someone to play after a brain injury without at least seeing him in person.

When Dr. Munsell asked me how I was doing, I said, "Fine." Of course I did; I wanted to be there for my teammates because that's what you do. But in reality, I had a splitting headache, and I didn't say anything about it. Nobody told me that was a symptom of a problem, so I didn't worry about it. I just wanted to play.

It's important to remember that at the time, the Steelers were the only NFL team doing cognitive testing of players who'd had a concussion. Nobody else was as forward thinking. That's not a criticism of the Bears; it's just reality. Even team doctors didn't know much about concussions or brain trauma. You're limited by the knowledge you have, and we didn't know very much.

Anyway, after taking the last preseason game off, I thought I was ready for the season opener against the Buccaneers in Chicago. I'd done some conditioning, but I still had a bad headache. I didn't say anything because you just didn't. A blown-out knee, sure, but a headache? No way. If I had told my head coach, Dave Wannstedt, that I couldn't play because of a headache, he would've ordered me off the field. It just wasn't done.

I practiced for the opener, but I was a mess. During an NFL season, you add a few specific plays each week to use against your opponent, but the majority of your offense is made up of staples you run every week, no matter who you play. As we got ready for our first game, I had no issues with the plays we had been running for weeks, but I struggled with the new plays we had put in for the Bucs. On Tuesday, we did a walk-through, and I was just fine until one of the new plays was called. I couldn't remember what my assignment was. I figured I could walk in what I thought was the right direction and figure it out as the play unfolded.

Boy, was I wrong. I was completely out of position, and our running back coach, Joe Pendry, finally said, "Merril, what are you doing?" I hadn't heard a coach say that in a long time. The last time I'd made a mental error was in 1987, my rookie year with the Steelers. One of my strengths was that I always knew what everybody on the field was supposed to be doing. Now I was struggling to remember what I was supposed to do.

Obviously, something wasn't right. But I didn't say anything, and nobody asked me if I was okay. That's how ignorant we were back then. Nobody went over signs or symptoms or things I should be aware of,

and there wasn't any postconcussion protocol. So I played the first game against the Bucs. In the fourth game against the New York Jets, I broke my hand, but I improvised a cast that let me grip the ball, so I was able to play our fifth game against the Buffalo Bills. That was the last game I would ever play.

If you saw the play that gave me my second concussion, ended my career, and almost ended my life, you would say, "That's nothing." But my face mask looked like I'd been in a car wreck. I took a blow on the side of the head, rolled over, and grabbed my head but then got right up. I wasn't wobbly. I went back to the huddle. I executed our next play on third down, but we didn't get the first down, so we came off the field. The trainer started to take off my helmet because my face mask had cut my chin and I was bleeding like crazy.

I don't remember any of this. They were talking to me, but I wasn't responding. Then the trainer looked at my eyes, and that's when they took me to the locker room, just before halftime. I don't remember going to the locker room, but I do remember sitting on a training table. Vinson Smith, one of our linebackers, had hurt his ankle, and he was sitting on the other table across from me, facing me. I remember him saying, "Are you all right?" and I remember thinking, *No I'm not*. My eyes started to flutter, and everything went black.

I'm told that I fell off the table and went into cardiac arrest. The medical staff started to get into position to resuscitate me, but I eventually started breathing again on my own. I woke up that night in the hospital not knowing where I was. There were machines beeping, tubes in me, sensors attached to me, you name it. I went to scratch my forehead, and I nearly gave myself another concussion because they had put a cast on my broken hand.

Later, one of the Bears' doctors, Dr. Schafer, came in and said, "You scared me to death. I've never lost a player, but I thought we were going to." But I still didn't understand the gravity of the situation. It turned out that my brother and my daughter, Kori, who was only two at the

time, had come to see me, but I didn't remember. I remember nothing other than what I've told you here.

I spent a couple of days in intensive care, and then the Bears sent me to see Dr. James P. Kelly of the Rehabilitation Institute, which was affiliated with Northwestern University. It was a week out from the Bills game, and let me tell you, I was a lost soul. I went on my own to downtown Chicago to see Dr. Kelly, and I was standing in the lobby of the building where I was supposed to meet him when I realized I didn't know where I was going or where I was. I was looking hopelessly at the information board when I heard a voice say, "Merril?" It was Dr. Kelly.

Thank the Lord.

He took me up to his office and did a bunch of tests, and I remember him asking me who the president of the United States was. I couldn't remember. Then he asked who the vice president was. Talk about throwing me a curve ball. Finally, Dr. Kelly told me, "I think you need to sit out the rest of the year, but you can play next year."

Okay, not the worst news. I was feeling a little better when I got home, and that's when I remembered my ImPACT baseline test. I was two weeks out from the second concussion when I talked to Fred Caito and said, "I'd like to go back and retake that test." I took it, and then I went to Pittsburgh to see Dr. Maroon and discuss my results. I stayed at what was then called the downtown Hilton, but the next morning, as I was getting ready, I couldn't find my car keys. I looked everywhere, turned the room upside down. I had my mattress against the wall, every drawer pulled out, and nothing. It was one of the most surreal moments of my life, and as I sat down in despair I remembered.

I had valeted my car.

Clearly, I was still not quite right. The signs had been there: memory problems, not knowing Bill Clinton was president, and now forgetting that I'd handed my keys to the valet the night before. But I didn't really know how bad it was until I saw Joe Maroon.

I sat down in his office, and he said, "Merril, the tests we got

back put you at about 50 or 60 percent of your baseline." I shouldn't have been surprised. A few days before, Dr. Lovell had said, "I've seen people in car accidents in better shape than you. I've never seen anybody two weeks out be this cognitively dysfunctional."

Dr. Maroon continued. "Merril, the way you're testing, I cannot put my head down on a pillow at night if I let you return to play," he said. "I just can't risk it. I don't know where you are contract-wise or insurance-wise, but I can't do it. I'm sorry. I can *never* clear you."

It was like an out-of-body experience. It was like I had the good and evil angels on my shoulders, and the evil one whispered in my ear, "You've been playing this game for twenty years, and you're just going to say, 'Okay, it's over'? You're going to accept that?" Then the good angel said, "Yeah. It happens." And just like that, I was an ex-NFL player. I was the first player in NFL history to be retired because of the results of a postconcussion cognitive test.

ESPN SAVED MY LIFE

MY CAREER WAS OVER. What was I supposed to do? What I did for a while was go through a scary period of depression, headaches, and cognitive problems. Everything was still hazy and fuzzy. There were a few months that I kept having out-of-body experiences. My career had ended during the season, like having a limb severed, and it was brutal to watch from the sidelines. There was no off-season to help me adjust.

I had just moved to Chicago, so I wasn't part of the community and didn't have a lot of support. I spent a lot of time on the couch watching television. At one point I was watching Barney with my daughter, Kori...and enjoying it! I remember sitting there, looking at that purple dinosaur, thinking, "I like this." Yeah, I wasn't quite right. The Bears sent me to counseling.

There was another terrifying incident when I went to a charity wine-tasting event. I don't like wine and don't normally drink it. But at this event, I took one sip and suddenly...I was blind! I mean, I *could not see*. After about ten seconds, my vision came back, but that was the most terrifying ten seconds of my life.

When I told Dr. Maroon about it, he said, "Because you don't drink, you are very sensitive to the effects of alcohol. You losing your vision is a clear sign that the area of your brain that has been traumatized is not healed yet. That's why you need eighteen or nineteen months to repair and recover, and that is why I won't let you play again. What if you took a hit in that area again before you're completely healed and lose your vision permanently? Would that be worth it?" Obviously, I said no. I've never forgotten those ten seconds when I lost my vision. I had been starting to feel better, and I had been calling Dr. Maroon to see if he would reconsider. That experience ended my delusions about playing again forever.

It turned out that Dr. Maroon knew what he was talking about. In 1996, I was in Chicago, driving around a bend on the Kennedy Expressway, and when I looked up at a billboard, the image suddenly cleared up. I said, "Whoa, all of a sudden, I feel good." I'll be darned if it wasn't eighteen or nineteen months after I had retired.

But during that ugly year and a half, it was getting into the broadcast booth and later joining ESPN that saved my sanity and my life. I was really struggling cognitively; I could pay attention to what I needed to say on the air, but I couldn't listen to what other people were saying at the same time. So I would block everybody out—and I mean everybody. In 1995 and part of 1996, you could've stood right in front of me and called my mother every name in the book, and I would've said, "Thanks. Here's what I think about the three-four defense." But I had to break out of my depression, which means I had to look for my life's work and deal with my cognitive issues along the way.

I cast out a bunch of lines, including into coaching and broadcast-

ing, and Lynn Swann, the great Steelers receiver, was kind enough to grab one of them. He was on ABC, and he let me come watch him, Keith Jackson, and Bob Griese do their thing on TV. That was great because I was interested in broadcasting and had been doing a lot of it in the off-season.

Thanks to Mr. Rooney, in 1995 I joined Bill Hillgrove, the Steelers' play-by-play broadcaster, and Myron Cope, the team's color analyst, in the broadcast booth on WTAE radio. Then in 1996, I got a job at ESPN covering college football, and later I got to team up with Jaws (my buddy Ron Jaworski) on the *NFL Matchup* show. It's not an exaggeration to say that ESPN saved my life, and here's why.

When you look at the concussion rehab that we do now—that was done with my son, Beau—it's not about resting in a dark room anymore. Now we're challenging the brain and trying new exercises. Well, when I joined ESPN, it was like doing the same thing in real life. I went into an arena where I had to learn a lot of new things quickly. I had to do things live on air that were cognitively challenging for me, especially in those months before things cleared up in Chicago. I had to remember facts and names and translate it all into a thirty-second segment. That was the best therapy I could have done.

That does *not* mean it went smoothly, at least not in the beginning. I had to watch lots of tape, call coaches, and find out information that I didn't know, but that was easy. Putting it together and condensing it into a TV segment? That was hard, especially doing it day after day, week after week.

As a result, I made a lot of on-air mistakes, and here's the problem with that. We acted like *NFL Matchup* was a live show, but it was actually taped. If you make a mistake in television when you're taping, you can't just reshoot that one mistake; you have to tape the entire segment again.

With all my trouble with attention and memory, I had to shut everyone else out so that I could say what I had scripted in my head. Because I didn't use a teleprompter, I had to remember what I was going

to say, and the only way I could do that was by *not* listening to anyone else on set. So I made a ton of mistakes, and each time I did, we had to shoot the whole segment again. And again. And again. After a while, the entire crew was ready to kill me.

Finally, our producer, Greg Cosell, suggested that we tape notes on the bottom of the screen of the camera to help jog my memory. We called it “redneck teleprompting.” Because I had that crutch, I got more comfortable. Then, after my symptoms finally cleared, I didn’t need the notes because I could focus on what I needed to say and listen to my colleagues. That’s when our chemistry really started to take off and I started to really have fun as a broadcaster.

BEGINNING TO TRANSFORM YOUTH FOOTBALL

AFTER THAT, LIFE WENT ON. I raised my kids, got involved in youth football as a coach, grew my broadcasting career, and as I said earlier, appeared before Congress. Over the years, I also prevailed in my lawsuit against Dr. Munsell, joined the boards of the Chuck Noll Foundation for Brain Injury Research and IntelliCell Biosciences, joined the NFL’s Return-to-Play Subcommittee, and as you know, overcame my own personal health challenges.

Still, how did all that lead me to the mission I’m on today? To answer that, I have to go back to when I got hurt. I looked at the way I’d been treated after my first concussion—cleared to play again over the phone, without a physical exam—and said, “That wasn’t right.” Then in 2003, when he was seven years old, Beau decided he wanted to play youth football. The minimum age was eight, but league officials said that if I would coach, they would let him play. So I signed on with the Fort Thomas (Kentucky) Junior Football League. Beau and I were put on the Red team (our league went by colors depending on where

you lived in the community), and the head coach asked me to be the offensive coordinator.

I’d run football camps starting back in 1991, so there were lots of ways I figured I could help the kids. One area I have always felt needed work was the passing game. I established some drills to help our quarterback, wide receivers, tight ends and running backs learn about running routes, throwing the ball, and catching the ball. We were a couple of days into these drills (and were doing about as well as kids can at ages seven, eight, and nine) when the head coach came over to me and asked, “What are you doing?”

“Working on our passing game,” I replied.

“We will never complete any of those passes.”

“I didn’t say we would, but if we don’t start somewhere, we will never complete a pass,” I said. And he fired me. He told me that he’d been an all-state football player and that in this league, they just ran the ball. Fine. I became just a coach who helped out, but I vowed this would never happen to me again. If Beau wanted to continue playing football, I would be his head coach so he’d learn the game the right way.

Then I said to myself, “All the things that I didn’t learn until I got to the NFL—how awesome would it be if kids started learning them at age eight?” I wanted to change how we coached and practiced, and I was determined that we would have a head-trauma protocol. No one had ever talked about a concussion protocol for youth sports because everyone assumed the kids didn’t hit hard enough to cause real injuries.

I wanted to take charge of our league because our drills were terrible; nobody was teaching the kids how to play football the right way. But one of the biggest problems we faced was the same one I had seen in the NFL: the idea that being tough meant keeping quiet about an injury, even when that injury was severe. That was even a problem in the military, which is why the Pentagon honored me in 2011 with an invitation to speak to the army about bridging the gap between the culture of silent toughness and the seriousness of head trauma.

My message to the kids was the same as my message to the military brass: you can be tough and smart at the same time. Toughness in the old days of the NFL meant that you ignored injuries and just played. That's why a few of the guys who played in the sixties and seventies have had such a rough time with their health; they played through trauma that would bench a guy today. Tough doesn't mean stubborn or stupid. Because of that, I had an ironclad rule: if a kid suffered any kind of head trauma, he would be removed from the game and he wouldn't play the next week. It was nonnegotiable.

The kids never argued. They understood. I never had problem with a kid about that rule, ever. I had talked to Dr. Maroon and other experts in the field of concussion and asked them the most critical part of recovering from head trauma, and they all said it was the first two weeks. You remove kids, get them out of that dangerous environment, and take care of them. So that's what my team did. No mother's child would be at risk on my watch.

But guess who was always begging me to play a kid the week after a head injury? The parents. That's how much ignorance there was in 2004–05. The parent would come to me and say, "Johnny feels so good—he's been running around at school, and he really wants to play." And I'd say, "That's beautiful. That's exactly what I wanted to hear. But he's not playing. I know it's tough, but we have these rules for a reason, and I'm doing the best thing for him."

The parents didn't like it, but I didn't care. When I ran my team, I also fired a lot of coaches for putting kids at risk with improper instruction. One day at one of my camps, teams were running drills when I heard this coach shout, "We're gonna take our head and run it right through you!"

Whoa. I walked over. "Coach, come here," I said. "Where'd you learn that?"

He said, "That's how I was taught."

I said, "Well, coach, that's not how we teach it here, okay?"

"That's how I teach."

"Well, get your check because you're done." Just like that, fired. I don't tolerate anything that puts kids at risk. There was a lot of weeding out of those old dogs who think if you drink water in the hundred-degree heat, you're soft. I'd been part of that "rub some dirt on it and keep playing" mind-set, and I wasn't about to let a young player return to a game right after getting a concussion, or in the following week's game.

So we had our rules, and we followed them. We had one practice that included fifteen minutes of full contact drills every two weeks, and that was it. We practiced twice a week and played on Saturday. That might not seem like a lot, but we were always prepared and we got better each week. I saw concussion screenings improve steadily. Still, I never dreamed we would be where we are today with treatments, therapies, and protocols. Having been part of the pro game and the youth game for so long, I've watched both become safer, giving kids a great way to get in shape, learn teamwork, and develop mentally and physically.

Things are changing, to be sure. During one of my later speeches at the Pentagon, I was with former Raiders, 49ers, and Redskins linebacker Matt Millen, who represented one era, and Atlanta Falcons linebacker Deion Jones, who's from a more modern era. We all talked about our understanding of head trauma in our era. Matt was talking about how they shoved smelling salts up your nose and said, "You're good to go." But Deion said he had started learning about concussion protocols in youth football, which was encouraging. It's like the seat-belt law, which took a few generations to become the norm.

Deion talked about a game where he removed himself after getting hit in the head, which never would have happened in my era. Now, players are watching out for each other. We're all gatekeepers: players, coaches, and trainers in college and the pros; coaches and parents in the youth game. We're learning to play the game better and safer and be smart about head trauma. You can still be tough, but you're actually being smart and tough now because you're doing the right thing for yourself, short term and long term.

THE FIRST WHISPERS OF CTE

THAT'S WHY WHEN THE SUBTLE attacks on football started, I paid attention. First, it was Bennet Omalu and Mike Webster. Then it was the death of former Eagles and Cardinals safety Andre Waters and Chris Nowinski turning that tragedy into a branding opportunity for himself. Then the congressional hearings on the NFL. Then the *Head Games* documentary. Then the *League of Denial* book. Then Jeff Miller admitting a link between football and CTE just to avoid a public backlash. In between, story after story in the *New York Times* and elsewhere about football and CTE, ex-players, and suicide.

It was obvious: the blame game had started. Hidden agendas were playing out, and the public had no idea. The thing that really struck me was Mike Webster's story. He'd been my friend, a fantastic guy, and losing him tore my heart out. But he was one guy. How does one man's death turn into an epidemic?

I've been around thousands of retired NFL players. We have millions who played youth football and millions more who played in high school or college. We don't have enough hospitals to house all the guys who should have permanent, progressive neurodegenerative diseases from playing football, at least according to the doomsayers. Yet those guys are all around us, some in their seventies and eighties, mostly doing fine. It didn't make sense then, and it doesn't now. I talked with Dr. Maroon and Dr. Julian Bailes, chairman of Pop Warner Football's medical advisory committee, and said, "Help me understand this." It smelled bad back then, and in the years since, that smell has only gotten worse.

But what finally made me realize how ridiculous and irrational the talk about CTE and football had become was a few years ago when I actually asked my players in the Fort Thomas league to stop going to recess and lunch at school. I was taking roll before practice and asking, "Where is so-and-so?" He'd slipped off the monkey bars and broken

his wrist. "What about Andy?" He'd hurt his ankle playing kickball. After a few more injury reports, I said, jokingly, "Here's what we're going to do: nobody go to recess. Just eat lunch, go back to the room, and sit down, at least until the end of the season. Because I need you guys to play football, all right?"

I was messing around, of course, but it struck me then that no one was talking about banning recess, kickball, riding bikes, or climbing monkey bars. Today, nobody is talking about banning hockey, soccer, equestrian sports, or, hell, even boxing. They were and still are attacking football. But why? We had already improved the entire game, from practice rules to coaching to equipment, to make it safer than ever before. The game was obviously under attack because unlike the NFL or NCAA, it doesn't have big money sponsors or a central organizing body to defend it. Somebody was building his or her reputation by building a climate of fear around the game I loved and knew was great for kids.

No. Not while I had something to say about it. I started researching and making contacts, and that's how we are where we are now. Ironically, I probably wouldn't be tilting at this windmill if I hadn't experienced the effects of brain trauma back in the bad, old days before the NFL knew how to manage head trauma properly. I don't blame the league, although some of the anger that came its way was deserved because it did try to ignore and even deny what was going on for a long time. However, in recent years, the league has stepped up and tried to make it right. More important, the guys that played in the league are not, for the most part, extras from *The Walking Dead*. That's another myth that needs busting. So let's start there, with a deep dive into what's really happening with current and former NFL players, why it's happening, and what it all means.