

Aging NFL players deserve better from league

By [JOE HENDERSON](#) | The Tampa Tribune

We've been highlighting the problems of retired National Football League players on these news pages for a while now.

We've told you about those who battle the effects of multiple concussions long after their playing days ended. We've told you about those who tried to self-medicate to combat the pain from joint and back damage but became addicted to powerful prescription drugs in the process. We've told you about players who need surgery but can't get it, or those who are slipping into dementia at way too young an age.

Those were powerful anecdotes, but separately they don't tell the full story of the issues facing these athletes long after their playing days are a distant memory.

On Monday night, though, in a hotel conference room in North Tampa, we got a bigger picture. About 50 former players, including many familiar names that played through the years for the Bucs, limped and hobbled on bad knees and aching hips to hear a message of hope from the daughter of the skinflint who used to own the team.

It was stunning to see the toll this game took on many of these men. Even the ones who didn't show obvious outward signs of physical problems told of daily battles with pain - an unwanted souvenir from their days as young men when they threw their bodies around with no thought for tomorrow.

Tomorrow has arrived, though, leaning on a cane with bootleg bottles of pain medication stuffed in its pockets.

"A lot of guys here have nowhere to go," said Council Rudolph, a defensive end on the expansion Bucs in 1976. "We definitely need a spokesman for us."

They have one.

Former Bucs president Gay Culverhouse - whose father, Hugh, was the team owner for two decades - met with the players as the latest step in her crusade of conscience to get them the help they need. It's a moral issue with her, as it should be with the rest of the league.

The NFL has programs to address players showing signs of dementia, physical disabilities and severe financial problems. However, players applying for help routinely complain that it's almost impossible to navigate the bureaucratic maze set up by the NFL.

"The NFL is taunting in a way," Culverhouse said. "They say, 'Here's the money - now try to get it.'"

They listened attentively as Culverhouse told them how the death of former Bucs lineman Tom McHale convinced her that something had to be done to help them. McHale died in 2008 after a drug overdose, and an autopsy showed that he suffered from a brain condition normally associated with punch-drunk boxers.

"I'm glad somebody's going to bat for us," former Bucs safety Mark Cotney said.

John Reaves turns 60 on March 2. He was a former No. 1 draft pick in Philadelphia, played for several NFL teams and later for the Tampa Bay Bandits of the United States Football League.

Reaves has problems with his right shoulder, an aching back, pain in both knees, and he can barely feel his right foot.

"But then you try to get help from the NFL and their strategy is the three D's: deny, delay and hope you die," he said. "It would be nice to get some help. I'm tired of being in pain."

I've heard dozens of these stories in just the past couple of years from former players all around the country. They feel abandoned by the owners, who reaped billions in profits from the spectacle provided by their work. They feel betrayed by their union.

The counter-argument, of course, is that nobody forced them to play pro football. Most of them say they'd do it all again, even knowing the physical toll it would take. Cotney just had both knees replaced but said he has no regrets.

Many of them played in the era before big money, too. Cotney told of receiving a three-year contract offer in the mail from the Houston Oilers after seeing on TV that they had drafted him. They offered him \$17,500 the first season, escalating to \$27,500 by the third year - take it or leave it.

He took it.

It wasn't about the money. It was about the love of the game.

You see them assembled in one room and then you think of the thousands more who are scattered around the country. You think about the ones playing now who will be in the same position in 20 years.

Love of the game? The game - and the league they built - needs to love them back.