

"What the Bucs UK and BUCPOWER has done for Buccaneer fans worldwide is something we are all amazed by"

Mike Alstott, London 2009



Bucs' first success came with a costly toll on health

They were two seasons removed from a 26-game losing streak that made them a national laughingstock. And if you listened to preseason predictions, the 1979 Tampa Bay Buccaneers weren't going to be anything special.

But rocket-armed quarterback Doug Williams, future Hall of Famer Lee Roy Selmon and tight end Jimmie Giles suddenly made pirate helmets and Creamsicle jerseys cool. The team's surprising emergence won these punch-line pirates a division title and brought them within 10 points of a Super Bowl appearance. They were young, agile and determined.

In November 2009, the former teammates reunited at Raymond James Stadium for a halftime celebration of the 30th anniversary of their winning season and Selmon's induction into the team's Ring of Honor. This time, though, they couldn't run through the tunnel. Some hobbled to midfield. Others needed assistance. One walked with a cane. A few barely fit into their throwback jerseys.

Though only in their 50s, the men's medical histories reveal decades of misery caused by a brutal and unforgiving sport — bad knees, chronic back aches, arthritis and signs of cognitive impairment, according to a Tampa Tribune survey of the 46 living members of the '79 team.

"The worst thing about it all is that we're all taught to be gladiators and that we don't even admit it if we get dinged," said Mark Cotney, a tenacious safety on the division-winning team. "You don't want to admit that to anybody, or it's like you're being a sissy. You know, suck it up and get back out there for the team, man."

These Bucs gave plenty for the team. The Tribune survey reveals a number of disturbing patterns: 83 percent of survey respondents deal with chronic arthritis, swelling of joints and muscle pain; 63 percent have serious back pain; 54 percent suffer from depression, mood swings or forgetfulness — red flags for early-onset dementia and other brain impairment.

Twenty-four players from the '79 team — 52 percent of those solicited — responded to the health survey patterned after pre-participation exams required of college and professional athletes. The survey's findings, though anecdotal, correspond with those of larger studies done on thousands of National Football League retirees, said Kevin Guskiewicz, research director of the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"What these guys are going through is happening to people 15 to 20 years older than they are," said David Leffers, chairman of the Department of Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine at University of South Florida Health. "So that's the price they paid for being in the NFL. I don't think there's a body part spared in these guys."



Never again

A writer once described Giles as having a Mack truck body and Corvette speed. He ran the 40-yard dash in 4.45 seconds, remarkable for a 245-pound man. Now, 100 pounds heavier, he is unsure about walking to his mailbox.

His bad knees, four degenerative discs in his back and three in his neck are miserable reminders of a glorious but violent career. He finds relief in epidural injections. The Social Security Administration declared him disabled, but NFL doctors have repeatedly denied him disability benefits, saying he was capable of doing sedentary work.

Beyond the physical anguish, Giles forgets things. He abruptly shut down his financial services company in 2007 after becoming disoriented on the job.

"All of the sudden, one day, man, I couldn't remember where in the heck I was," said Giles, 55, who filed for bankruptcy in March 2010. "I had to give that business up because it required a lot of thinking. I'm dealing with people ... and their lives and fortunes."

Giles estimates he had about a dozen concussions during his NFL career. Had he known how his health would deteriorate, Giles, a four-time Pro Bowl player, wouldn't have chased the NFL dream. "Absolutely would not play," Giles said with conviction. "Absolutely would not."

Major studies at UNC and the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research cite risks for retired NFL players. For example, NFL retirees younger than 60 are three times more likely to be diagnosed with arthritis than the general population, according to a 2009 UNC study. More than 80 percent of the '79 Bucs surveyed have chronic muscle and

joint pain.

Former safety Cotney, now 58, had both of his knees replaced. Teammate Randy Crowder, formerly a towering defensive lineman, is halfway there at age 57 — one titanium knee, one to go.

Players who have suffered three or more concussions have a five-fold risk for mild cognitive impairment and a three-fold risk for permanent concussion, said Guskiewicz, the UNC researcher. Two-thirds the respondents in the Bucs' survey suffered at least one head injury.

Getting 'dinged'

Jerry Eckwood, a steam-engine running back on the 1979 Bucs, was a punishing runner. No one realized at the time what the punishment was doing to him. Eckwood, 55, lives in an assisted-living facility near Nashville. He recently qualified for Plan 88, an NFL program that offers aid and treatment to players with cognitive impairment.

Eckwood recalls having a number of concussions. How many? He can't remember, except to say there were "a lot ... a lot."

Larger studies show about 25 percent of former NFL players at heightened risk for brain-related disorders, Guskiewicz said. Yet scientists are unsure why some players exhibit mental illnesses and others do not. Many '79 Bucs recalled blows that caused them to lose consciousness or feel woozy.

Cotney took a hit against the Cowboys so jolting it broke his face mask. On the sideline, Cotney said, he felt pressure from Coach John McKay to return before repairs could be made. Cotney grabbed a lineman's



helmet, so big it spun around on his head, and ran onto the field.

"Can you truly say I had a concussion? I don't know where you draw that line," said Cotney, 58, who owns a Tampa dry-cleaning business. "But you can't hit like that — at that velocity every time, different angles of your head — and not have problems."

Only recently did retired NFL players and the public realize diagnosed concussions "are only the tip of the iceberg" when it comes to long-term brain injury, said Robert Stein, a Boston University neurologist and co-director of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy.

The larger danger, research shows, is repeated blows to the head that players might dismiss as a "ding" or "getting their bell rung." These types of blows, Stern said, have a direct relationship to chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE — a progressive, degenerative brain disease that causes memory loss, depression, confusion, paranoia, aggression and, eventually, dementia.

During a single season, the average NFL player may experience 1,000 hits involving his head. Members of the '79 Bucs point out that practices in their era were full contact, every play. "I can remember who I sat next to in elementary school," said Danny Reece, 55, a cornerback and fleet-footed punt returner for the '79 team, "but I can't remember who I had lunch with yesterday."



Shared regrets

It's easy to see the effects of football decades later. But chronic pain in retirement is the last thing on the mind of a professional player. For players and coaches, it's about winning on Sunday, said Steve Wilson, starting center for the '79 Bucs and now an executive with Outback Steakhouse. "You can't even think past your career, when you're not going to be playing football," said Wilson, 56.

Tribune survey results show many members of the '79 Bucs were split as to the physical toll of their decisions: 62 percent feel mentally or physically limited compared with other men their age; 54 percent view their playing days as a positive experience, or at least a mixed blessing; 46 percent said their NFL careers left them in regrettable physical shape.

Even if he had known his future, Cotney would have played. Crowder, too, would play again and has a son in the NFL, Miami Dolphins linebacker Channing Crowder. But he advises his son to carefully document every injury and trip to the trainer's office.

But Charley Hannah, an offensive tackle for the '79 Bucs, shares some of Giles' regrets. He no longer considers jogging or playing tennis. He can't sleep on his sides because his shoulders will hurt in the morning.

The 55-year-old real estate developer wishes he had stopped playing after an all-conference career at the University of Alabama, where he played for Coach Bear Bryant. Hannah's father, uncle and two brothers played football for the Crimson Tide, but Hannah (pictured right wearing his old 73 jersey) will not allow his 12-year-old son, John David, to play.

Not yet, anyway. He hopes current players, at least, will be better informed about the health risks. "Now it's intoxicating to have millions of dollars that you can make," he said. "Are they going to walk away from it? I don't know."

Benefits battle rages

The 1979 Bucs were not wealthy men. Total payroll hovered near \$7 million, and most players had offseason jobs to make ends meet. By comparison, quarterback Josh Freeman received about \$10 million as a first-round draft pick in 2009.

Cotney made \$17,500, plus a \$4,500 signing bonus, as a rookie with the Houston Oilers in 1975. Chosen by Tampa Bay in the 1976 expansion draft, Cotney played nine seasons for the Bucs. "As soon as I established myself as the starting strong safety in Tampa, they called me in and jumped my salary up to like \$40,000," he said.

Giles recalled borrowing \$3,000 from his father to pay bills. "As a professional football player, I had to go to my father to make ends meet," Giles said. "How pathetic is that?"

NFL players went on strike in 1982 and 1987, in part because players sought better benefits for their predecessors. A generation later, many former players are distraught about the response of the \$8 billion industry to the needs of the men who built the NFL. Seeking improved pensions and medical plans, retired players accuse the league and the NFL Players Association of failing to honor the past.

The NFL Player Care Foundation, an independent organization created in 2007, has a pension and disability plan that offers grants to former players with medical needs. Grants cover joint replacement, spine treatment, prescription medication and, recently, the evaluation and treatment of brain-related conditions. A separate program, Plan 88, provides annual grants for retired players with dementia-related diseases.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell argues the process of getting money to the retirees has been streamlined. Reece, who lives in California, said it's about time. "They used to have a slogan: 'Deny, deny and hope you die,'" Reece said. "Well, so many of us are dying now it sounds like they're trying to address it."

Recently, a surprising advocate for retired players emerged. Former Bucs President Gay Culverhouse, the daughter of former owner Hugh Culverhouse, formed the Gay Culverhouse Players' Outreach Program to help retired players navigate the benefits process.

Culverhouse also testified on behalf of former players at an October congressional hearing. She criticized the NFL for creating a culture that encouraged injured players to risk their health by continuing to play. She suggested the judgment of team doctors was clouded by "vested interests."



Joseph Diaco, who retired last year after serving as the Bucs' team doctor for 33 years, rebutted those accusations. "I've never had an owner who pressured me into playing a player or a coach who said, 'He has to play, no matter what you say,'" Diaco said.

The price is pain

In 1980, two days before facing the Green Bay Packers, Giles' back went out at practice. He fell to the ground screaming. "I couldn't even walk, but they stuck a needle in me that long for the game that Sunday," said Giles, holding his hands about 12 inches apart.

On game day, however, Giles couldn't run. At some point, everything went numb and he removed himself from the game. Coaches yelled at him on the sideline, he said, "calling me all kinds of names for not playing hurt."

Now he has been told he needs back surgery. He worries things will get much worse. "You see us and we're trying to tell you how we feel," Giles said. "But you can't imagine how we feel."

