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EX-N.F.L. Executive Sounds Alarm on Head Injury

By ALAN SCHWARZ

TAMPA, Fla. — As the president of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the daughter of their owner, Gay Culverhouse was the woman in the men's locker room. Twenty years later, she is trying to keep her former players out of the emergency room.

Sitting at a restaurant here Friday, she reconnected with a few Buccaneers retirees. There was Richard Wood, the fearsome linebacker known as Batman whose searing migraines and tendency to get lost while driving near his home leave him scared for his future. Across the table was Scot Brantley, an even harder hitter through the 1980s whose short-term memory is gone. Then there was Brandi Winans, former wife of Buccaneers lineman Jeff Winans, who slipped into such inexplicable depression, foginess and fury several years ago that their marriage splintered.

Culverhouse looked at disability forms, listened to stories, offered counsel and expressed regret. She has done the same via telephone for another half-dozen former Buccaneers in their 40s or 50s who have increasing cognitive problems. Having followed story after story detailing how National Football League retirees are experiencing various forms of dementia at several times the national rate, and listening to the league and its doctors cast doubt that football played any role in their problems, she has emerged after 15 years to reconnect with players and sound an alarm.

She will testify before the House Judiciary Committee at its hearing on football brain injuries on Wednesday to, as she put it, "tell the truth about what's going on while I still have the chance."

Culverhouse has blood cancer and renal failure and has been told she has six months to live.

"I've got to see that someone stops this debacle before it gets any worse," said Culverhouse, 62, the daughter of the former owner Hugh Culverhouse who held various executive

positions from 1985 to 1994. "I watched our team do anything it could to get players back on the field. We have to make that right."

The N.F.L. and the players union have added programs to aid former players since their pension and disability plans came under public fire two years ago. One helps with joint-replacement surgeries, another with cardiovascular health screenings. The most prominent is the 88 Plan, which helps pay expenses for players with dementia. But for the hundreds of those whose cognitive decline falls short of dementia, the industry's disability plan has little to offer.

A recent New York Times analysis of the plan's 73 current members suggested that N.F.L. retirees ages 60 to 89 are experiencing moderate to severe dementia at several times the national rate. A recent telephone survey sponsored by the N.F.L. had similar results, corroborating findings from several independent studies, but the league and its doctors continue to discredit all evidence of such a link.

"Telling the players that football has nothing to do with it is literally adding insult to injury," Culverhouse said. "It's a joke. It's unconscionable."

Culverhouse read about the controversy, heard about how her former lineman Tom McHale had died at 45 with brain damage associated with boxers, and began calling her former players.

She had always been an N.F.L. misfit. An alumna of Columbia University with a master's degree in mental retardation and a doctorate in special education, she later became the Buccaneers' vice president for community relations and eventually president in 1991, always amid whispers that she was just the owner's daughter. But she relished a good fight; she caused a local uproar by threatening to sue the Palma Ceia Golf and Country Club because as a woman she was barred from using the team's corporate membership.

Every former player Culverhouse called had debilitating physical problems, she said. A stunning portion had cognitive ones, even in their mid-40s, and most of them lacked the short-term memory or concentration required to seek medical assistance or slog through the disability paperwork. One player told her, "I'm headed for the 88 Plan."

"The thing that I always admired about Gay is that she's a rebel with a cause," said Brantley, 51. "Football was a man's world. Still is. I've always said, if you want something done and done right, get a woman involved. No one else has shown any interest in us for a second. We might as well have the plague."

At a Lee Roy Selmon's restaurant in Tampa — Selmon is a former Buccaneers defensive lineman — Culverhouse spoke with her former players about others who might need her help, including a former Buccaneers fullback.

"I've got to get to" him, Culverhouse said.

"He's not good, no," replied Wood, 56. "It's tough to understand him because his speech is so slurred."

"I'll fly to Little Rock and fill out the paperwork for him and drive him to the doctors," Culverhouse said. "You get so far gone that you can't deal. It's easier to go home, pop a few pills for the pain and forget about it."

"Tell me about it," Brandi Winans said. After learning how cumulative brain trauma can contribute to serious emotional and substance-abuse problems 20 years after retirement, she said while breaking down, "I felt that I had deserted him." Brandi and Jeff Winans now reconnect on the phone twice a week. He lives in Northern California, and has said he is pursuing medical assistance for his cognitive issues.

All four at the table — the executive, the players and the spouse — insisted that they loved football and hoped it would continue. But they said that discussing the consequences of professional football in the 1970s and 1980s, when players routinely played through concussions with no idea of the risks, was important to comfort the retirees and, more important, to emphasize the seriousness of brain injuries to today's amateur athletes.

Dr. William Carson, the Buccaneers' team orthopedist from 1987 to 1997, said in a telephone interview that during his time and certainly before it, most players with "dings" — now understood as mild concussions — would be returned to games. And the players who never came out also played through those dings, and worse, risking cumulative damage only now understood.

Just the other day, Culverhouse called another one of her former players, Randy Grimes, who told her about his addiction to painkillers and his dwindling short-term memory. She helped explain his disability-plan options, how he was not alone. She did not tell him that she was dying, and that she would soon be in Washington sharing her experience with Congress.

Before they hung up, Culverhouse said that Grimes remarked: "I think I'm fighting this real good, Gay. Your father would be proud of me."

Culverhouse replied: “That’s just amazing to me. Because what you did for Dad, playing so hard for us and not knowing the risks, that’s what got you into this mess.”