

OLD-TIMERS PLAYED GAME MORE FOR LOVE THAN MONEY

By Tony Barnhart

Reprinted by permission of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

Al "The Ox" Wistert was a tough, raw-boned defensive tackle for the Philadelphia Eagles in the 1940s. But one Sunday afternoon he didn't feel tough when a crippling pain shot through one of his legs. He limped to the sidelines and faced coach Earle "Greasy" Neale.

"I think my leg's broken," said Wistert.

"Well, go back out there until you're sure," said Neale.

Wistert, now 66 and living in Thousand Oaks, Calif., can laugh about it now. But then it wasn't a laughing matter. In the first four decades of pro football, according to results of a survey of NFL old-timers by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, players were expected to play with pain and injury. The owners and coaches were all-powerful, and a refusal to play drew their wrath, the players recall.

Of 130 former players who responded to the survey, 73 percent said they regularly played games when they were injured. And more than a fourth, 26.2 percent, said they are currently disabled in some fashion due to playing pro football.

"In my day, unless a guy was pretty well immobilized he was expected to play," said Art White, who played for the New York Giants and the Chicago Cardinals in the '30s and '40s. "We really didn't question it. That's just the way it was."

Those surveyed played professional football between 1920, when the NFL was founded, and 1959, when the game is generally considered to have entered its modern age. The respondents' ages range from 60 to 86. Other findings of the survey included:

*Almost half of those surveyed, 46.9 percent, said that since they retired, they have required medical treatment for injuries that went untreated while they were playing pro football. Just over 25 percent have required hospitalization of these injuries.

*Since retiring, 37.7 percent have required dental work to repair football-related damage. *Prior to the institution of a pension plan for Pre-59ers last July, 37.6 percent of those surveyed said they were living on \$10,000 or less annually. Another 35.4 percent were living on \$30,000 or less.

* * *

The majority of those surveyed tended to define their pro football careers in two terms: The amount of money they made and the physical price they eventually paid.

When it came to being pressured to play with pain or injury, no one, not even the superstar, was immune, the respondents indicated.

Bill Dudley, a Hall of Famer with the Pittsburgh Steelers, had a legendary run-in with coach Jock Sutherland in 1946 when Sutherland insisted Dudley play despite badly damaged ribs. Dudley left the Steelers and joined the Detroit Lions to get away from Sutherland. To this day Dudley is uncomfortable talking about the incident.

"I didn't mind playing, but the fact of the matter was I couldn't run," with Dudley, now living in Lynchburg, Va. "But in those days we were expected to play just like you're expected to go to work."

As a star, however, Dudley was assured of another job. Other, less talented, players did not have that assurance.

"On my team, you didn't get paid if you didn't play," said Pete Tinsley, 74, who played his college football at Georgia and was a guard with the Green Bay Packers in the late '30s and early '40s. In 1941, said Tinsley, both his knees were seriously injured in a game against the Chicago Cardinals. After three days in the hospital his roommate came to visit him.

"He told me I had better get out of that bed because I was going to be fined \$25 a day for missing practice," with Tinsley, who now lives in Florence, Wis. "I was only making \$100 a game so I went back."

Others played hurt, they said, simply because they loved the game and did not want to sit while others played.

"Even though I was injured I played because I wasn't thinking about next week or next year or even the rest of my life," said Wistert. "All that mattered was the game that day."

But now that most of these men are in their 60s and 70s, those years of pounding are starting to take their toll.

Tommy Thompson, who quarterbacked the Philadelphia Eagles to NFL championships in 1948 and '49, has been disabled since 1968 due to arthritis resulting from various injuries, he said. His story is a familiar one – 69 of 130 men surveyed said they were suffering from various degrees of arthritis in the body joints that came under so much stress during football.

"If I had to do it all over again I might be a little smarter about my body," said Wistert, who had two concussions during his career. "But the fact is that in those days there wasn't that much money and so there wasn't as much incentive to take care of yourself. Today, if you do something stupid you might be blowing a million bucks."

There wasn't any real money to blow back then. There was only the game. And the reality now for these men in their 60s and 70s is that while they may have loved to play, doing so did not come without a long-term price.

"We had a 35-year reunion a while back," said Mel Hein, the Hall of Fame center of the New York Giants. "All the guys who came back walked to the podium to be recognized. Just about all of them limped up there."

* * *

It hurts these players as much to talk about money as injuries. In fact, pay was so low in the beginning that much of pro football's history could have been altered with a few extra bucks thrown around here and there.

Take the case of Hein, a charter member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, who was the New York Giants center for 15 years and the 1938 Most Valuable Player. He is considered one of the major building blocks in the foundation of the Giants' franchise.

If not for an extra \$25, however, Hein would have had the dubious distinction of beginning his career with a forgettable team called the Providence Steamroller. Here's what happened:

Hein, an All-America lineman at Washington State in 1930, really didn't want to play professional football. "My coach and friends told me that pro football was filled with alcoholics and burns," said Hein. "But when I graduated I was \$1,000 in debt and it was the only way I thought I could make enough money to ever get out of debt."

The NFL had yet to establish a player draft and so Hein could sign with any team he wished. Providence sent a representative to the West Coast who dropped off a contract for \$125 per game, a fair sum for the day. Hein thought about it for a few days, signed the contract and put in the mail.

The next day a representative of the New York Giants offered Hein \$150 a game. Hein told the man of the Providence contract. The Giants spokesman reminded Hein that the contract would not be valid until Providence received it. Hein called the postmaster in Providence and asked him to stop delivery on his letter. While it wasn't exactly legal, the postmaster sent the letter back to Hein who then signed a contract to play for the Giants.

"I often think how my life would have been different if that postmaster in Providence hadn't been a nice guy," said Hein.

Even stranger things were going on in pro football's early days when it came to money.

For instance, if Hein had read the fine print in his Providence contract, he would have noticed that it said "\$125 for games played in daylight." The Providence owners believed that players should help pay for lights, so they received only 60 percent pay for night games.

"You'll never go broke paying good money for good players," said George Preston Marshall, the colorful owner of the Washington Redskins. "But if you pay good money for mediocre talent you'll lose your shirt."

It was a philosophy shared by most owners of the day which made negotiations with those below superstar status always interesting.

Marshall's name continually crops up in pro football history when the subject turns to money.

Cliff Battles led the league in rushing for the second time in 1937 and the Redskins won the NFL championship. In the off-season Battles, who was making about \$4,000, asked for a \$1,000 raise. Marshall's star, however, was rookie quarterback Sammy Baugh, who was up for a raise on his \$8,000 salary after leading the league in passing. Marshall turned Battles down and Battles quit pro football to be a college assistant coach. He never returned.

"[They tried] (Marshall) and the other owners to see how little they could get you for," said Paul Stenn, a tackle who signed with the Redskins in 1946. "It was like a game to them. They'd sit around at the owners meetings and brag if they had gotten a guy to sign for less than he was worth."

When Stenn came out of Villanova he was determined to sign for \$7,500. "But Marshall took me out to this fancy restaurant and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," said Stenn, now living in Berwick, Pa. "By the time we got out of there, I had agreed to play for \$5,000."

Despite the discrepancies between the financial situation of today's players and those of the first four decades, the most bitter financial pill to swallow was the fact that, until recently, no player who retired prior to 1959 received a penny in pension from the NFL. When commissioner Bert Bell started the NFL pension plan in 1959, he determined there was only enough money available to begin with the retirees of that year. He promised that the others, the Pre-59ers, would be included at some future date.

Bell, however, died on Oct. 11 of that year and Pete Rozzelle took over as commissioner the following year. And as pro football was heading into the modern era, the issue was never addressed. Those representing the Pre-59ers continually pointed out that many of these former stars were now in desperate straits.

A lawsuit was filed against the NFL on behalf of the Pre-59ers but it was unsuccessful. Finally the Pre-59ers formed their own organization, NFL Alumni, in an effort to do something. Through charity golf tournaments and other fund-raising measures, a small amount of help was provided.

Finally, on March 17, 1987 the NFL owners voted to create a \$40 million pension fund for the 948 men who retired prior to 1959. Sixty-five of those men are in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Those with a minimum of five years in the league are eligible for the pension, which will be \$60 a month for each year of service. Thus a five-year man would receive a pension of \$300 per month. The first checks were sent out July 15.

It isn't a lot, but the money is clearly needed. Prior to the implementation of the pension, the survey reveals that 37.6 percent were living on \$10,000 or less and another 35.4 percent were living on \$30,000 or less.

"We were doing okay before but this will help me and my wife breath a lot easier," said Hein, 77, whose 15 years of service gives him \$900 per month. "But I'm telling you, for some guys it's going to mean the difference between making it and not making it."