

More National Football League players file suit over injuries

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A group of retired National Football League (NFL) players filed a class-action lawsuit against the league this week, alleging that professional football knowingly supplied them with illegal narcotics and addictive painkillers. The players claim the NFL encouraged an environment of bad medical practices and the massive over-prescription of painkilling drugs in its pursuit of profits.

The general thrust of the allegations, according to lawyers filing the suit at a US District Court in San Francisco on Tuesday, is that the league deliberately administered addictive and often illegal doses of prescription drugs, with little or no medical supervision, as well as little or no proper explanation of the side- and long-term effects of the drugs.

A central argument is that the league has created an environment in which players feel pressure to play through often serious injuries, turning to these risky palliatives on the advice of NFL medical staff. The suit claims that players are then often left to suffer the long-term effects of addiction, psychological trauma and debilitating physical pain.

To prepare for the violent physical toll of the game, the lawsuit alleges that many professional football players feel obliged to take a variety of opioids, amphetamines, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines and anesthetics on a weekly basis, often with life-long consequences.

Eight players are thus far publicly attached to the lawsuit—including Jim McMahon, Richard Dent and Keith Van Horne, members of the 1985 Super Bowl champion Chicago Bears—but more than 600 other former players have also signed on to the 85-page document.

Anecdotally, it has long been known that players, in the midst of a game, for instance, will take numbing or

painkilling agents—such as Toradol or Xylocaine—to continue performing through sprains or ligament tears. The lawsuit makes clear though that this medically ill-advised practice is much more pervasive and damaging than previously acknowledged.

A few of the players' stories paint a graphic and grim picture. McMahon claims to have unknowingly played multiple games with a broken ankle and broken vertebrae in his neck. Van Horne asserts that he played an entire season on a broken leg. For his part, Dent claims he has permanent debilitating nerve damage in his foot from a broken bone that could have been repaired at the time. He delayed the necessary surgery on the advice of medical staff to play out the final eight weeks of the particular season, heavily medicated with painkillers.

McMahon and Van Horne allege that medical staff never informed them of the full extent of their injuries, and treated them with a stream of powerful and addictive drugs. All three believe the NFL officially encouraged such practices.

J.D. Hill, a wide receiver for the Washington Redskins in the 1970s and fellow plaintiff, was quoted as saying “I was provided uppers, downers, painkillers, you name it, while in the NFL. I became addicted and turned to the streets after my career and was homeless. Never took a drug in my life, and I became a junkie in the NFL.”

A five-part series published in the *Washington Post* in 2013 documented a wide assortment of severe injuries and dubious medical practices either ignored or encouraged by the NFL. The *Post* reported on the rise of serious injury across the league (over 4,500 reported injuries in 2011, more than two per active player); players performing with fractured sternums and severe concussions; retired players dying of stroke and heart

disease before the age of 40; studies revealing player-dependency on narcotics to be four times that of the national rate; and the fact that 68 percent of players surveyed in a study indicated they sought out prescription painkillers from sources other than doctors. Other studies have shown that a player with a career of four years or more in the NFL will live on average to the age of 55 (compared to the average life expectancy of 75 for males in the US).

The NFL has not yet responded to the current lawsuit. If recent history is any guide, the organization will feign ignorance on such issues, settle out of court, provide token “reform” and continue to market aggressively one of the most violent sports on earth. Such was the outcome last year when the NFL paid \$765 million to over 4,500 former players who sought legal compensation for long-term brain damage from repeated and severe concussions incurred during their careers.

The concussion settlement was connected to a larger claim by players and medical experts that the head injuries—extremely common in the sport—were a direct cause of a neurodegenerative disease called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), which is being diagnosed with more frequency in retired and even active players.

There has also been an increase in documented CTE-related suicides among former NFL players, including Junior Seau and Dave Duerson. Duerson, a teammate of Van Horne, McMahon, and Dent on the 1985 Super Bowl team, shot himself in the chest and left a note indicating that he wanted to preserve his brain so it could be examined for degenerative neurological conditions he suspected he incurred during his career in the NFL. Subsequent tests proved him correct.

The average worth of the 32 teams in the National Football League is \$1.17 billion. The league brought in more than \$9 billion in revenue last year. Its commissioner (and thus representative of the wealthy owners), Roger Goodell, receives an annual salary of \$44 million. He announced in late 2013 that the league intends to boost revenues to \$25 billion by 2027.

The lawsuit brought against the NFL this week further highlights the state of sports under the profit system. The inherent beauty of athletics is perverted into a mad money grab, with the talented human beings involved turned into cattle, on the one hand, and a large

army of working class youth, on the other, desperate to take their place in this oftentimes barbaric sphere, hoping for a meteoric shot out of poverty.



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