

The football culture needs to be changed

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George Visger thought he had it all when he was drafted by the New York Jets in the sixth round of the National Football League draft in 1980. Visger had it all mapped out. He was going to play for five years and then hunt and fish for the rest of his life.

It would be an ideal life. But to players the initials NFL don't stand for National Football League. They mean "Not For Long" and Visger, like many others, didn't understand that aspect of pro football when he started his journey to make the Jets squad.

The Jets coaching staff seemed to like Visger. But there was a problem; Visger was an undersized defensive lineman at 259 pounds when he arrived at mini-camp. But there was a solution called steroids, which were legal and easily obtainable. When Visger returned for Jets training camp at Hofstra University he was 275 pounds. The supplements which included Dianabol, Anavar helped an awful lot and Visger started one pre-season game against the Pittsburgh Steelers where he lined up against his idol, Steelers center Mike Webster. But Visger wasn't good enough and Jets coach Walt Michaels sent him packing.

It is the beginning of the end for Visger's dream, life and the start of a nightmare that continues to this day. Visger eventually signed with the San Francisco 49ers a number of weeks into the season. He suffered a concussion in his first game on the first play of the day. It wasn't Visger's first concussion in his life; he had many before going back to his days in Pop Warner football. But this one was bad. It took somewhere between 25 and 30 smelling salts to get Visger's head clear enough to play the rest of the game. During the game there were more smelling salts.

The training staff and Visger laughed it off. After all, he was in the NFL, where playing with pain is part of the testing of your manhood, which is very important in the NFL. But this concussion was no laughing matter. Visger developed hydrocephalus (water on the brain) and within a year, he had the first of his eight brain surgeries.

In mini-camp in May 1981, Visger blew out his knee. The 49ers doctors patched it up and he made it to training camp. The knee went again but that was the least of Visger's problems. The 1980 concussion caught up to him.

In August, Visger developed major headaches, projectile vomiting and a loss of vision. "I had a bright ball of light in the middle of my vision like in front of each eye, and the edge of my vision would light up like someone was holding a spot light on the back of my head," he said. "Each time I had the headaches at night. I discovered through my own investigations that these are common symptoms of brain swelling where it puts pressure on the optic nerves. My hearing would come and go with the beat of my heart during the headaches each night (also caused by swelling to the brain). One of them (a 49ers team doctor) said I had high blood pressure and prescribed high blood pressure medication.

"Headaches began a few weeks after the knee surgery and got progressively worse. (I) saw the team doctors a few more times on the headaches, as I was doing rehab on my knee several times a day, and would see them on a regular basis. (The) Headaches culminated in focal point paralysis of left (or right) arm the night of the Chicago game."

By September, Visger had emergency VP shunt brain surgery at Stanford Hospital and spent two weeks in intensive care. The 49ers organization was more concerned about winning football games than the health of a player who was useless to the team. Football teams move on, it is a cold reality of the business.

"No players or coaches visited during this time other than my two roommates Terry Tautolo and Scot Stauch," said Visger. "They cut Terry a day before I was released from the hospital, and Scott was packing his bags as I walked in the door after my hospital stay. He was sent to New Orleans. The doctor stated the surgery would only take a couple hours and I was in for over 4 hours. He had mentioned to my family in the waiting room, before the surgery, that my aqueductal stenosis (blockage of the aqua duct of Silvius, which was causing fluid to build up in my back two ventricles as apparent by the CAT scans), could be caused by a tumor. When I was in surgery for so long the family guessed they found a tumor. (They) asked the doctor about it after surgery and he said he never stated the surgery would only take a couple hours. They said he got very defensive. To this day (they) don't know what took so long, but I immediately began having brain seizures from alcohol right after the surgery."

Visger was gone from the NFL but the wreckage heaped on his body from playing football remained. Besides the head injuries, there were the knee injuries, broken vertebrae and then anger management issues. He would have seven more brain surgeries and nearly died in 1982 from his brain injuries. He was also arrested. Yet at the age of 51, Visger is still around to talk about life after football and even is suggesting ways of improving the working conditions of football. But Visger is one of those players that both the NFL and the National Football League Players Association would like to forget. Visger's career was short; he didn't qualify for retirement benefits and is begging the league for help with his health and his family's sanity.

Visger is one of the thousands upon thousands of NFL players who fall through the cracks. The National Football League Players Association wanted no part of these players and received no help from Gene Upshaw and Doug Allen when they ran the association. Since going public with his plight, Visger has heard from the new Executive Director DeMaurice Smith but there is no money coming from the NFLPA. Visger is working with NFL Head, Neck and Spine Committee co-chair Dr. Richard Ellenbogen in an attempt to change the culture of football.

Visger wants to see changes in medical testing, in training procedures in terms of diagnosing and the treatment of concussions, along with changes in equipment including the elimination of helmets (unlikely) because helmets are used as weapons. Visger would change some rules and hopes that players start speaking up about injuries.

The "culture of football" can best be described by Jim Burt's reaction as he was walking into the New York Giants locker room at Giants Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey. This was just after the 1987 NFL strike ended when the players caved and went back to work. Burt said, "We are used to being beaten over the head" and went back to work after the owners strategy prevailed.

Visger is not surprised with the findings that one time Cincinnati Bengals receiver Chris Henry, who died in a traffic accident last year, had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) — a form of degenerative brain damage caused by multiple hits to the head — at the time of his death, according to scientists at the Brain Injury Research Institute, a research center affiliated with West Virginia University. Henry, Visger's idol Mike Webster, Tom McHale, Justin Strzelczyk and Andre Waters also were found to have damaged brains during their autopsies. Visger himself is amazed that he is still alive.

The brain is not designed to stand up to high speed collisions which take place on the field.

Visger is a test case of sorts for doctors. He will be visiting Dr. Daniel G. Amen this week in Newport Beach, California and go through a series of tests on his brain. Visger is hoping that Dr. Amen would provide some help to him and his family. But he also wonders, how many former players there are who are in bad shape and no one really knows it.

Conrad Dobler is very visible talking about his knees and how one of his legs needs to be amputated. The former President of the National Football league Players Association John Mackey, the Hall of Fame tight end, has dementia and lives in a full time assisted adult program. The National Football League Players Association Executive Director a number of years ago, the late Gene Upshaw, refused to help Mackey and pay him disability because Upshaw and the NFLPA claimed there was no direct link between playing football and players who suffered brain injuries. But there is a University of North Carolina study of 2,500 former NFL players that showed they faced a 37 percent higher risk of Alzheimer's disease than other men their age group. Eventually the players and the league came up with the "88 plan" which provides \$88,000 for home nursing care and \$50,000 for assisted living.

Mike Ditka has a Facebook page called Mike Ditka's Official Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund. Ditka has been a tireless worker on behalf of the football playing community to help out players who are like Visger. The page outlined the problem — "the Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund. Gridiron Greats is a 501(c)(3) humanitarian organization providing financial and medical services to retired NFL players in DIRE need, most, if not all — who contributed greatly to NFL's national past time status, popularity and appeal. Due to inadequate disability, health care and insurance and no established retired player pension program, these men face dire daily challenges to sustain a quality of life and due to the amount of trauma their bodies endured during their careers, are either unable to work or face financial hardships since their careers ended. Gridiron Greats mission is to assist these men financially and provide them with medical assistance through their pro-bono medical program to provide these men with the dignity they so deserve."

"Iron" Mike Webster's bust stands in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. Webster might have been the greatest center of all time but his post-career was anything but Hall of Fame grandeur. Webster had brain damage and lived out of truck in both Wisconsin and Pittsburgh, begging for Kentucky Fried Chicken leftovers.

People do ask, "Whatever happened to so and so?" In some cases, the stories are far less than storybook endings. A good number of rookies are eagerly awaiting the beginning of training camp and getting on an NFL roster. Would Visger do it all over again if he could?

The answer is quick and to the point.

"No."