

Chicago Tribune

HEALTH & FAMILY

Families deal with blow of concussions

NFL players' families open up about deaths, dementia tied to CTE

By ANNE STEIN
Tribune Newspapers

In basketball, it's the squeak of shoes on hardwood and a bouncing ball. In football, the most recognized sounds of the game are loud clacks of bodies hitting bodies, helmets hitting helmets — heads hitting heads.

Those hits may be entertaining, but they can cause serious brain damage, known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disease whose symptoms include confusion, mood swings, impaired judgment and, eventually, dementia.

The disease has led to a rash of suicides by young and middle-aged men who were once football's (and hockey's) most celebrated players. With the acknowledgment that CTE is widespread — and the Christmas Day release of the movie "Concussion" — players' families are opening up about life with CTE.

"I thought he was bipolar and an alcoholic," said Keana McMahon of former husband Justin Strzelczyk, the retired Pittsburgh Steelers lineman who died after crashing his pickup into a tanker truck in September 2004. She had no idea he was suffering from CTE.

Strzelczyk was 36, and his story is portrayed in "Concussion," which chronicles Dr. Bennet Omalu's discovery of CTE and the NFL's efforts to quash those results. Strzelczyk was the fourth retired NFL player, after Mike Webster, Terry Long and Andre Waters, to be diagnosed.

Though CTE can't be identified until a player is dead — pathologists need to examine the brain to discover tissue degeneration and buildup of the abnormal protein tau — there are symptoms that may point to it while people are alive.

When Laurie Navon, the long-time girlfriend of former NFL quarterback Jim McMahon, met him in 2006, "he was so charismatic and humble," she said. The two live in Scottsdale, Ariz. "He had such a bright light in his eyes, but through the years the light's gotten dimmer and dimmer. Finally in 2009, I put the pieces together and realized there was something going on in his head." At age 50, one of the game's most popular figures was diagnosed with early-onset dementia.

The even-keeled, mellow McMahon developed a temper and yelled. He lay in bed for months. Once, after dropping his kids at the airport, he called Navon to say aliens had abducted him. "He was

serious," said Navon, who calmly guided him home.

His dementia has progressed, and McMahon, now 55, is getting a service dog early next year from Heeling Heroes, an Arizona-based group that provides therapy dogs to those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain disorder. The dog will help McMahon keep his balance and prevent him from getting lost in hotels or locked out of the house. "He finds a lot of peace in animals," Navon added.

Though McMahon believes he is suffering from CTE, many NFL families had no idea why loved ones were seemingly losing their minds. Brandi Winans was married for nearly three decades to Jeff Winans, a seven-year NFL veteran who played for Oakland, Buffalo, New Orleans and Tampa Bay. He was found dead at age 61, in December 2012.

According to his autopsy, Winans' death was accidental, due to mixed drug intoxication and cardiomyopathy.

"In 2002, after begging him to get some help, he decided to see a forensic psychiatrist and was diagnosed with bipolar and manic depression," said Brandi, who runs a Florida company that helps athlete families in transition to retirement.

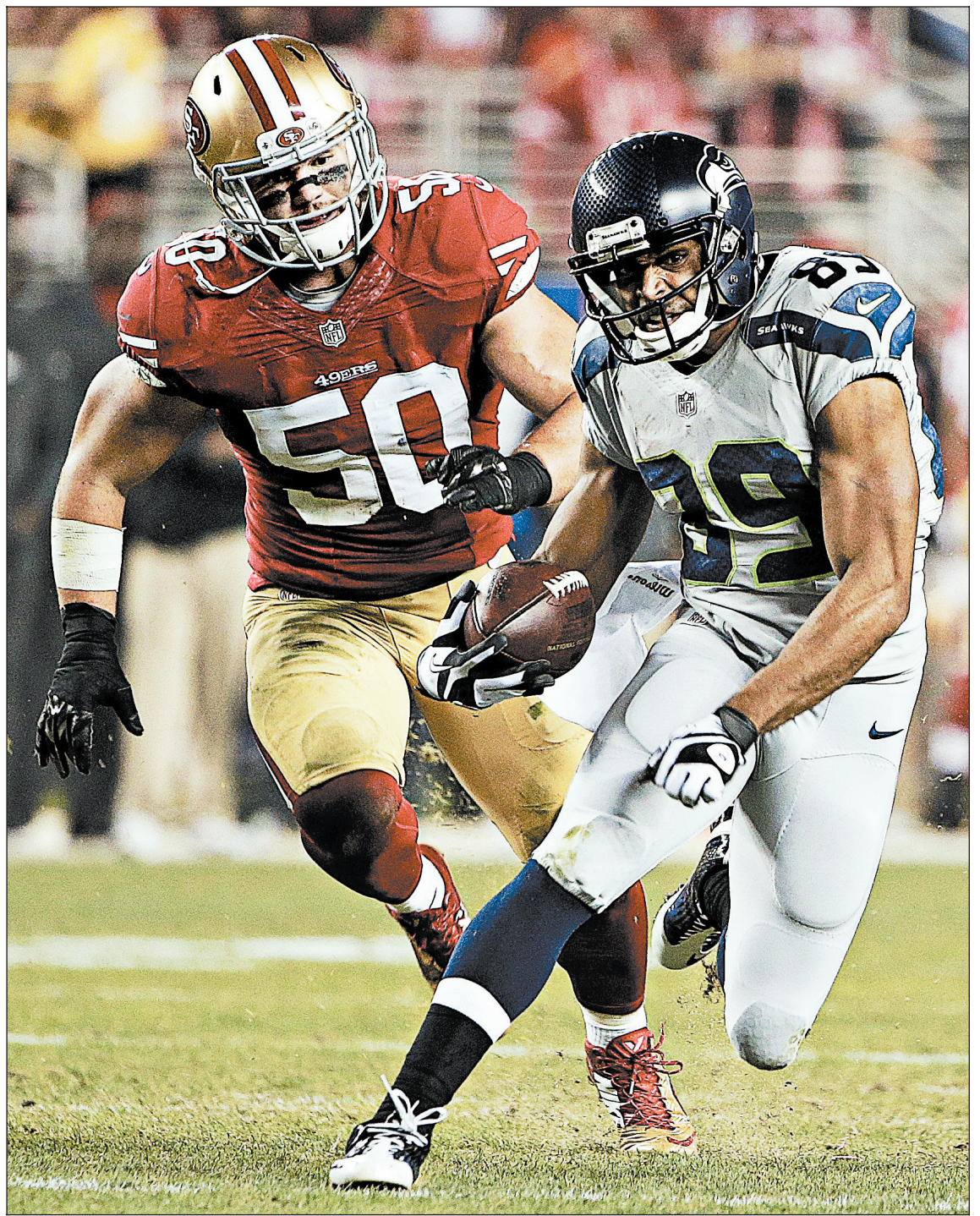
"He would forget conversations, started watching the clock every time I left the house, breaking things that meant something to me and several times begging me to hit him, so he could hit me back," she said.

Jeff told Brandi that "I didn't live in his body ... didn't understand what he was feeling inside. And in all honesty, I didn't." He was later diagnosed with stage 2 CTE. (There are four stages.)

Ray Easterling, who played eight seasons for the Atlanta Falcons, shot himself at age 62 at his home in Richmond, Va., in April 2012. He and his wife, Mary Ann, sued the NFL in 2011 after Ray was diagnosed with dementia; like Brandi Winans, she is active in concussion education through the Concussion Legacy Foundation.

The Winans met at Bible study in 1975; he'd been a pro for three years, and she was a college music major. About nine years after his career ended, in 1989, Ray started having trouble sleeping.

"He was angrier more, he started making bad financial decisions and eventually we lost our house," said Mary Ann, an educator and piano teacher. "He used his head a lot when tackling and must have done tremendous damage his last year. I saw him go from a confident, thoughtful planner to a person who would do things impulsively. I couldn't fathom what was causing the change in his character."



MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP 2014

Chris Borland, left, retired from the NFL early in 2015 after a very successful rookie season, citing concussion fears. He says that he couldn't continue playing, "especially with what I've learned" about the dangers.



JOHN SWART/AP 1985

Chicago Bears quarterback Jim McMahon is slated to get a service dog early next year to help him cope with progressing dementia.

In 2000 Ray started seeing a psychiatrist, who didn't attribute the changes to CTE. Once he was diagnosed with dementia in 2011, the Easterlings realized that Ray wasn't going to get better. "The hopelessness of it is really hard," Mary Ann said.

Women dealing with CTE in their partners are finding help through Sisters in Sports, a San Diego-based athlete-family support group founded by Karen Moyer, the wife of former pro pitcher Jamie Moyer. (He isn't suffering from CTE, but the two run children's camps and other

philanthropic programs.) SIS helps families with anything from moving to player retirement.

"The sisterhood is there for you when you're winning your national title and when you're going through the most grueling tragedy of your life," she said. "Like everything in life, you feel stronger, more normal and empowered when you're around people going through what you're going through."

Current players also are paying attention. When top NFL rookie Chris Borland announced his retirement last season, he cited

Easterling, Webster and Dave Duerson, all diagnosed with CTE. "I just thought to myself, 'What am I doing?'" Borland told ESPN. "Is this how I'm going to live my adult life, banging my head, especially with what I've learned and know about the dangers?"

So far, 88 of 92 NFL players whose brains were tested at Boston University's CTE Center showed evidence of CTE. (Omalu's lab, the Brain Injury Research Institute, also examines brains.) The latest casualty? Linebacker Adrian Robinson Jr., who killed himself in May at age 25. In October it was announced that his brain showed CTE.

It doesn't just affect pros. In 2010, University of Pennsylvania football player Owen Thomas killed himself and was later found to have early-stage CTE, the first college player diagnosed with it.

The blows to the head begin young, and that bothers the wives, widows and girlfriends who have witnessed the effects.

"Sometimes parents are the primary pushers of kids to be involved in Pop Warner and middle and high school sports, and not regard the health of your body but to lay it on the line," said Mary Ann Easterling. "That's how Ray played, but it's not good for a person's long-term health."

Anne Stein is a freelance reporter.

ABC-7's Tracy Butler weathers it all, good and bad

HEIDI STEVENS
Balancing Act

The year was 1989.

The sweater was white and chunky. A giant windmill adorned the front.

"I actually wore this on TV," ABC-7 meteorologist Tracy Butler told me, holding it up for emphasis. "Doing the weather. I mean, it's a giant windmill!"

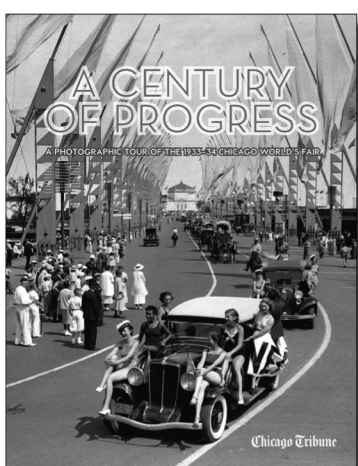
It was the '80s. Her grandmother bought it for her. What can you say?

Besides, people adored it. "People called the newsroom loving it," Butler said. "They wanted to know where to get it." Grandma, for the win. Meteorologists, the women

anyway, get a whole lot of feedback on their appearance. Stories abound about pregnant meteorologists being body-shamed by viewers who don't want to witness their weather forecasters growing human life. Others are just criticized for wearing the wrong clothing.

Recently, a photo of almost 50 female meteorologists wearing the same dress made the rounds, reigniting a discussion about our mild obsession with the appearance of people who are versed in weather patterns, climate change

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