



**Testimony of
Harry Carson
Before the
Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law
of the
Committee on the Judiciary
"The National Football League's System for Compensating Retired Players: An Uneven Playing
Field?"
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On August 5th, 2006 I joined the ranks of the greatest football players to ever play the game with my induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. While it was a very proud moment for my family and friends, I viewed it as the culmination of a journey that began many years ago as a youth growing up in Florence, South Carolina.

Before my induction I reflected back on my days playing sandlot football with my friends and then trying out for the high school team as a 9th grader. On that first day of practice I realized early that I did not have what it took to do so much running, agility drills and especially take part in live contact drills. Before the conclusion of the practice session I turned in my helmet and pads to the equipment manager. The combination of the very hot and humid August day, wearing the many pounds of equipment and the screaming of coaches barking out orders was a complete shock to my system. Up to that point I thought football was easy and anybody could play. I was wrong and I discovered that I was not quite tough enough to play.

For a year (9th grade) I lived with the humiliation of being a quitter in the eyes of some but more importantly I had to live with the bitter taste of quitting in my own gut. I came back the next year determined to rid myself of that taste of giving up. The next time I stepped on the football field I was better prepared for what I knew I was going to face and I knew I was going to have to push myself mentally and physically to stick and stay if I was going to make the team. As much as I did want to quit again I forced myself to do whatever it was going to take to survive practice. Making it through that first day of practice and then the next day and the next taught me that playing football was not a game for everyone. To play football you have a special toughness but you also have to be committed and dedicated to the team and the game. I made the team and went on to finish my high school years and then my college years at South Carolina State University.

Before my induction on August 6th I reminisced about being drafted to play for the New York Giants. Being chosen to play professional football was probably the dream of every player who plays the game. It was no different for me but I knew the likelihood of making it was not great. These men that I was going to be competing against were seasoned veterans and I was a kid out of Carolina being asked to play a position I had never played before. I took on the challenge knowing that if I didn't make it as a Giant I had a backup plan. I graduated with my college class and was qualified and prepared to teach in South Carolina and move on with my life.

I relied on those early lessons of commitment, giving my all and the will to be the best to make the transition to professional football. From the beginning I knew it was very temporary, I had no idea how long I would play but I learned very quickly that a career could be over in the blink of an eye. The speed, quickness and power of the players were things that I rarely saw in high school or college. To compete on that level you really had to be good!

As a young naive player with the Giants, it hit me early in training camp that the football that I was now playing was not just a sport but was very much a business. I had never been a part of teams that cut players; the training on teams I played on was so rough that players usually cut themselves by quitting. As a rookie I saw that if a player was injured or could not perform on the field he was waived or cut. To play on this level you had to be able to practice and you had to be able to play to your maximum on Sunday afternoons. Players would talk about it but I grew to understand that the team was a machine and all of the players were bit parts of that machine that made it function effectively. If a part was broken it was easily replaced with another to keep the machine running.

With the enormous amount of physical contact most people saw on television coupled with the amount of contact in practice drills it would be hard for most players to remain unaffected by muscle strains and sprains, pulls, tears, etc. Many of the players I played with had some type of knee, ankle, hip, back, shoulder, elbow or neck injury they had to contend with to play football. Most were able to recuperate sufficiently enough to get back on the playing field to compete while others ended their football careers with an injury that prohibited them from playing. I watched many quality players clean out their lockers because an injury cut their playing careers short.

As a linebacker I had more than my share of injuries. Elbows, fingers, ankles, back, nerve damage in my right shoulder resulting in the atrophy of my posterior deltoid muscle and four knee operations are a part of my football resume. I firmly believe that every player who plays professional football walks away from the game with some ache or some pain. Some are able to live relatively normal pain free lives while others have to live their lives with an understanding that they may never know what feeling "normal" is all about.

Since the end of my professional football career almost 19 years ago I've tried to live the best life I could accepting the aches and pains that come along with what I did as an athlete. Occasionally I have to deal with back pain brought on by degenerative disks in my neck and lower back that press against my spinal column that causes me pain in my lower back and legs. But the one area that causes me the greatest concerns is living with Post Concussion Syndrome, a condition I was diagnosed with two years after leaving professional football. Aside from the physical wear and tear on my body, I sustained many concussions during my career that I was able to play through. I was very good at what I did as a player. Others might say I was the best inside linebacker and goal line linebacker to play the game, but there is a price that you pay for being the best. Part of the toughness of being able to play the game is to be physical with opposing lineman and running backs at the point of attack on the football field. A player risks his body and limbs to make the big tackle or to make the big play to win the game not always understanding the cumulative effects on the body afterwards. I knew something was wrong with me while I played but because I was so in tune with my physical body I just couldn't put my finger on what the problem was.

I, like many other players at that time ignorantly laughed when we saw someone get hit so hard that they didn't know where they were on the field during the game. I was one of those players who played hard and clean but tried to make opposing running backs know that they were in for a long hard day when they faced the NY Giants defense. While in making big hits I was never knocked out but I can remember seeing stars or losing my vision with everything fading to black sometimes after hard hits given or received. In playing the game I would at times reflect on my high school physical science knowledge of Newton's Third Law of Physic which simply states "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction". Those hard hits that I was giving as a player on the field were hits that equally affected me.

In the 1970s and 80s when I played much attention was focused on the more visible injuries sustained by athletes but very few focused on the "dings" or the concussions players sustained until now. There are many studies taking place to determine whether concussions in football can lead to dementia or Alzheimer's in older former players. When you look back on the equipment that was used especially the helmets worn some might wonder if the inferior products could have contributed to concussions that might lead to future bouts of neurological disorders in players. It is my opinion that it is the pure nature of the game of football that causes traumatic brain injuries. Concussion or "dings" have always been a part of football and will probably always be a part of the game. When you have the speed of massive bodies colliding and with the surface of the brain hitting the inner shell of the skull causing a bruising on the brain an athlete is going to be affected in some ways that might not be easy to detect.

I played the game at a very high level and was proud that I was able to leave on my own accord. In making my transition to life outside of playing I became more aware of various neurological events that created problem for me. Areas of concern were depression, occasional headaches, blurred vision, and short term memory loss, difficulty concentrating and staying focused, sensitivity to bright light and loud noises, among many other issues. These problems were highlighted because I chose sports broadcasting as a vocation after my days of playing football. I sought help from my physician when I realized I was having some problems in my personal and professional life. I underwent 2 days of extensive testing and was diagnosed with a mild post concussion syndrome. The condition affected my ability to perform my job effectively (inability to process information quickly) and was a partial cause of the dissolution of my first marriage. Since my diagnosis in 1990 I have learned much about the condition, have spoken with various groups around the country on traumatic brain injuries in sports and have begun to write my memoirs on the subject as it relates to my life.

Over the years since I played I have come to understand that there are many former players who have had similar problems adjusting to life after ending their careers from the NFL with many of the same symptoms I've experienced and have concluded that many of my fellow retirees are effected with Post Concussion Syndrome. I consider myself fortunate to at least know what my condition is because I was examined by an expert in that field. I feel for those who might be affected by the lingering long term effects of concussions they sustained as players but have no clue because they were never examined. As I see the many older retirees of the NFL who are now battling dementia and other mental and neurological disorders I unfortunately see what may eventually become my future. I feel that I must speak very openly and candidly about this condition from a player's perspective. In all probability the NFL and the NFL Players Association will dispute my testimony and will attempt to present evidence to the contrary to shoot down any correlation between those neurological conditions and a player's career in the National Football League.

As I was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame I chose to use the occasion to highlight the plight of the retired NFL players. Attention needed to be brought to bear on pension and disability issues that many retirees felt were being ignored by the NFL and the Players Association. I considered myself to be fortunate to have had a very unique opportunity to be a part of a fraternity of men who are made of the best stuff and were able to exhibit their talents at the highest level to play on the professional level. I also consider it an honor to speak today for many who do not have a voice here.

I look forward to answering any questions you might have.