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MIKE ADAMLE WON'T LET ANYTHING STOP HIM

WHAT FOOTBALL DID FOR US
AND WHAT FOOTBALL DID TO US —
THE STORY OF THE 1968-70 NORTHWESTERN WILDCATS

'THE TEAM,' PART 2 BY RICK TELANDER, PAGES 20A-21A, 23A

NBC 5
sportscaster
Mike Adamle
poses after
working out
at Evanston
Boxing Club.

JOHN J. KIM/SUN-TIMES

'I HAVE LOST WORDS ON AIR OCCASIONALLY...'



PART 2



In this series, Rick Telander catches up with former teammates, who describe how football helped them in their lives, but also how injuries suffered 40 years ago haunt them today.

by RICK TELANDER

I was on the air in 1999 when I had my first seizure," says Mike Adamle, the Channel 5 sportscaster. I ask him what it felt like.

"One part of my brain was speaking, the other part was having a tidal wave," he says. "There was déjà vu. All kinds of flashing, loud ringing in my ears. Dizziness. My short-term memory was gone. There were tears in my eyes, thoughts of being a kid, thoughts of my grandfather. I was in the hospital for three days."

Mike and I go way back, to the late summer of 1967, when we greeted each other for the first time on the sidewalk in front of Anderson Hall at

Northwestern University. We were incoming freshman scholarship football players, and we were to college life as shrimp eggs are to the sea.

I was 18, almost 6-2, a mighty 188 pounds, with a crew cut and barely a beard. He was 17, maybe 5-9, wearing shorts, seemingly muscle-free, baby-faced with a big smile. My first thought upon looking at him was, "This team is in trouble." I knew Cub Scouts who looked older than Adamle.

He was from Kent, Ohio, played linebacker and running back, and I knew immediately that my suspicions about Northwestern football were correct: The program only took plankton from the bottom of the aquarium after it had been drained and the plastic mermaid removed. That plainly was the case with myself — an unwanted, weak-armed quarterback from Peoria, projected, like all suspect high school quarterbacks, to be a defensive back in college.

But this infant was to be our running back? I am not kidding when I say that, at that moment, a protective shield whirred down over my delicate self-esteem and I steeled myself for four years of having my ass handed to me on a platter.

Fast-forward to the fall of 1970, our senior season, when Adamle would lead the Wildcats to within 30 minutes of going undefeated in the Big Ten, our only conference defeat coming against Ohio State in Columbus after leading at the half. There was the Wisconsin game that season when Adamle carried the ball for a Big Ten-record



Channel 5 sportscaster Mike Adamle, who looks young for being 60 years old, says a neurologist diagnosed his epilepsy and "probably saved my life."

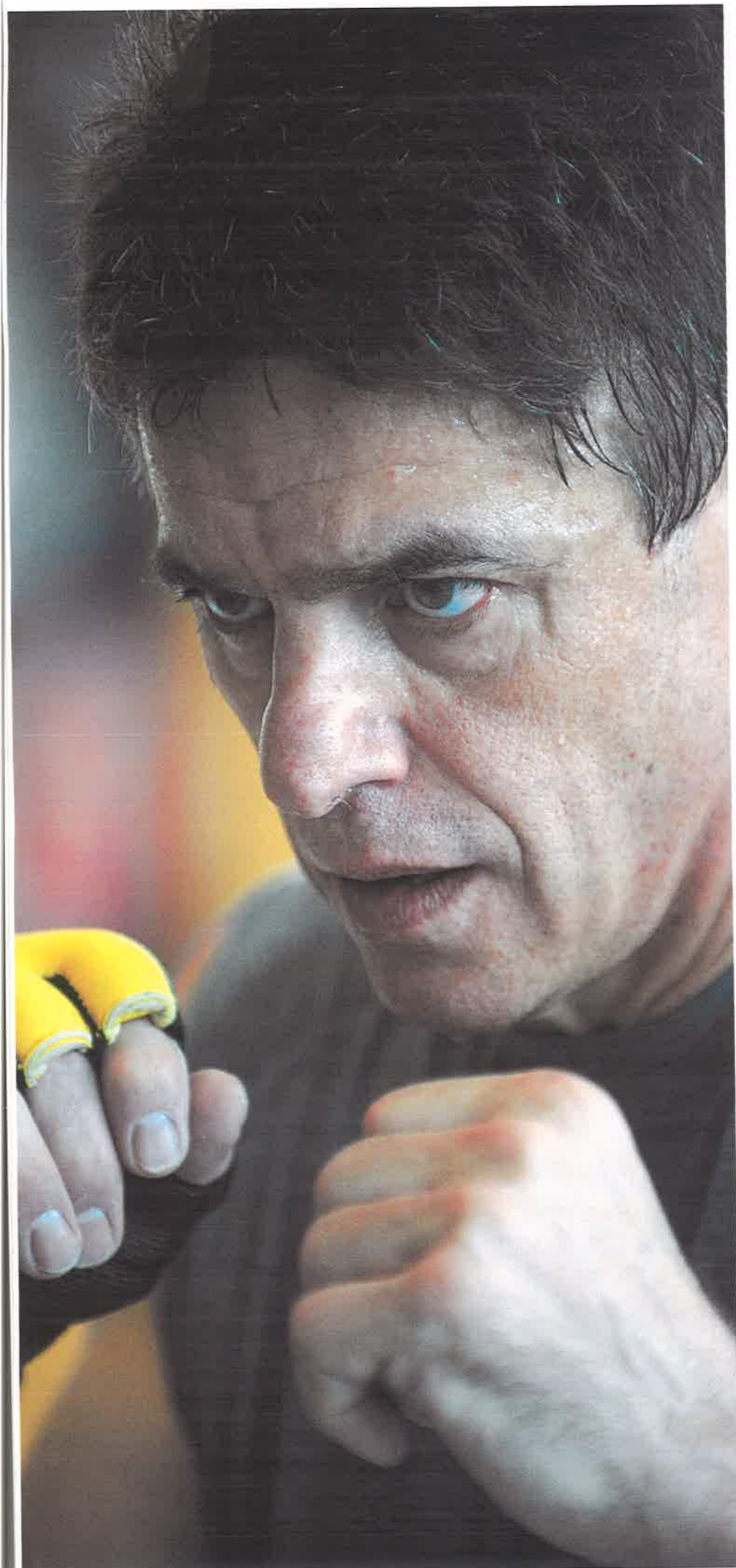
316 yards. There was the Silver Football Award he would win as the best offensive player in the Big Ten. He was our captain and our leader.

"I have epilepsy from lesions on the left hemisphere of my brain," he says now, tapping the upper left part of his head. "Scar tissue up there. From football. Neurologist Richard Rovenor, from Northwestern Memorial, diagnosed it and probably saved my life. I went to his funeral

recently, and I shoveled dirt on his casket. He was a guy who knew about football, a wonderful man. He helped me so much, and I miss him."

What do you do for the epilepsy? I ask. "I take medications," he said. "And when they stop working, I take different ones."

What if you feel a seizure coming on? "I try to get in a safe place, tell people to help me so I don't bite or swallow my tongue, and I get in the fetal position," he says.

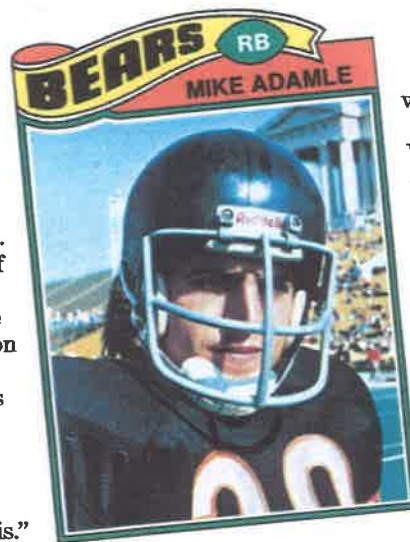


Mike Adamle works out during a "martial fitness" class at the Evanston Boxing Club. Adamle says attempting physical feats helps him deal with his fears. | JOHN J. KIM~SUN-TIMES

I ponder this. I am amazed, astounded. It's one thing to have epilepsy; it's another to have it and be on TV, to do everything Mike does. "I looked at the tape of that first time," he says, "and I don't think people knew. I have lost words on air occasionally, and viewers have sent letters to the news director, wondering if I'm drunk. Maybe some people feel sorry for me, but I want people to know about this." We look at each other. Why not? The clock is ticking for us all.



The toughest, smartest and most talented people I played with at NU were defensive tackle Jack Rudnay, safety Eric Hutchinson, linebacker John Voorhees and Adamle. Adamle was the best. He looked like a child back then — though he's 60 now, he still looks 10 or more years younger than I do — but he weighed a deceptive 198 pounds and could leg-press 680 pounds. One man couldn't tackle him. His thighs were massive (which I hadn't noticed), his balance uncanny. And his desire



Adamle had his best day in the NFL with the Bears in 1975. He rushed for 110 yards on 17 carries, but the Bears lost 31-3 at Pittsburgh.

was off the charts. In that record-setting Wisconsin game in Madison, our coach, Alex Agase, called Adamle's number eight consecutive times on one scoring drive. Not just his number, the same play. By the end, even the body-passing student drunks in Camp Randall knew Adamle was going off right tackle. When he scored on the last of the runs, he looked fresh. But he wasn't.

"I had bite marks, scratches all over me," he says. And then there were the head blows. We all took them. But when you carry the ball 483 times in three seasons — 48 times in one game (Minnesota, senior year) — you up the ante dramatically.

"Saw stars?" Adamle says. "I can't count the times."

We're eating dinner at P.J. Clarke's on Fairbanks, not far from the NBC studio. Adamle is off today, no newscast, and he's having a yolk-free spinach omelet and a glass of red wine. He's in terrific shape,

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JOHN J. KIM~SUN-TIMES

ADAMLE IS ALWAYS UP FOR A PHYSICAL CHALLENGE. AT 60, HE COMPLETED THE IRONMAN TRIATHLON IN HAWAII IN A FASTER TIME THAN WHEN HE WAS 50.

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having recently completed the Ironman in Hawaii — a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride and 26.2-mile run — in a better time than he did at 50.

He's always up for physical challenges, always has been. He has jumped from airplanes, scuba-dived, gotten in the ring with a pro wrestler, run up the John Hancock Center stairs. At Northwestern, he ate 50 hard-boiled eggs in an hour, just like our hero, Cool Hand Luke.

I saw Mike one day at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia — he was there doing TV work — and the area around one eye was a hideous pastiche of green and purple. He'd done a back flip off the 10-meter board and landed on his face. He'd never tried such a dive before, never been on a 10-meter board. But he'd told his boss at NBC, Larry Wert, a former varsity diver at Wisconsin, that he had to do it.

"He'd come into my office, and we'd practice," Wert says. "He'd fall backward, and I'd catch him. I told him, 'Stand there. Look out. Fall. Don't move your head.' Then I said, 'Do you really want to do this?'"

He did.

Wert remembers how it ended.

"I got a call from a worker in Sydney, who said, 'Your boy splattered,'" Wert says.

The irony is that Wert, never a football player, did a lot of head and spine trauma to himself in his seemingly gentler sport. He hit his head twice on diving platforms, suffering two concussions and multiple stitches. Entering the water again and again at almost 40 mph eventually led to him having to undergo cervical fusion because of ruined vertebrae. He has to medicate himself because of the constant neck pain, and he says there are days "when I'm speaking to a crowd or to our team, and I wonder if I'm up to it, feeling ready?"

But he wouldn't give up his athletic past for anything.

"Not a chance," Wert almost shouts. "Competing brought me everything."

So he understands the drive of the hyper-competitive Adamle, saying: "I'm aware of his condition, and I'm supportive of him. There's always risk in live television for all performers. If things happen, we'll discuss them."

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In a victory against Illinois in our junior year, Adamle got knocked out at the end of a long run. He played seven seasons in the NFL, once gaining 100 yards for the Bears. While with the New York Jets, he was on the "suicide" bomb squad with fellow wild man Lou Piccone, an undersized speedster who sometimes wore a "Saturday Night Live" conehead off the field. Together, they were wedge-busters.

"Lou was R-1 and I was L-1," Adamle says. "Before games, we painted red suns on our chests, drank sake and yelled, 'Banzai!' One time we agreed to dive over the wedge simultaneously. We launched ourselves and landed on the receiver. Our quarterback, Joe Namath, said it was the best freaking play he'd ever seen."

When did the brain trauma occur for Adamle? Who can say? Maybe it happened in increments. Maybe it happened as I and other Northwestern defensive players watched from the sidelines, cheering him on.

On a recent broadcast on Channel 5, Adamle does a fine job reporting the day's sports news, finishing a bland non-statement from Bulls general manager Gar Forman with the editorialism, "Blah, blah-blah, blah-blah, blah-BLAH!" It's appropriate and hilarious.

"Mike is a bona fide celebrity athlete, and when he's on, he's great," Wert says.

But there is the head issue. Was playing football worth it?

"Yes," says Adamle, who began in pre-med before switching his major to broadcasting.

Why?

"Because we were all together," he says. "Because of the camaraderie. Because of the time in our lives. Because we punched holes in our tickets we could never punch again."

We're finished eating, and the waiter takes the dishes away. Adamle looks down.

"I'm scared," he says. "I have two girls, and I don't want them to see me with a drool cup. I combat this by doing the Ironman, by hustling up the Hancock, having people say, 'How did you do that?' My mom had Alzheimer's, and she didn't know who I was at the end. My dad had it, too. And I said, 'That's gonna be me. I'm a perfect candidate.'"

My old pal looks at me. He has a wry smile on his young face.

"Yes, I'm scared," he says.

Comment at suntimes.com.

COMING MONDAY: PART 3

Rick Telander talks with the son of 'Ol Doc Reid,' NU's team doctor who did groundbreaking work on brain trauma.



PART 2

FOOTBALL'S DAMAGED HEROES

MIKE WEBSTER

Pittsburgh Steelers, 1974-88
Kansas City Chiefs, 1989-90
4-time Super Bowl champion
Hall of Fame inductee



Webster died at 50 in 2002. After retiring, he spent years living in cheap hotels and sleeping in the back of his truck. When he died, his youngest son — then in high school — was caring for him. Webster frequently shocked himself into unconsciousness with a Taser so he could sleep. Dr. Jonathan Himmelhoch, a psychiatry professor at the University of Pittsburgh, examined Webster six times. He concluded Webster had a "traumatic or punch-drunk encephalopathy caused by multiple head blows."

JUSTIN STRZELCZYK

Pittsburgh Steelers, 1990-98

Like Webster, Strzelczyk was a Steelers offensive lineman who suffered from brain injuries. He died at 36 after leading police on a 40-mile, high-speed chase that ended when his truck struck a tractor-trailer and exploded. Shortly before he died, he complained of depression and of hearing voices he called "the evil ones," the New York Times reported. After his death, three doctors examined his brain and diagnosed him with chronic traumatic encephalopathy.



Old teammates Mike Adamle and Rick Telander at P.J. Clarke's.

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