

'I'M NOT GOING TO USE MY HEAD ON A TACKLE AGAIN'

John Voorhees' love of football was bigger than fear of injury.

BY RICK TELANDER, PAGES 12-13



SUPREME COURT SHOOTS DOWN GUN BAN



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SCHOOLS BOSS: SOME CLASS SIZES WON'T GO UP

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Jon Burge arrives at the federal building Monday morning. He could face up to 45 years in prison. | RICH HEIN-SUN-TIMES

GUILTY

Ex-cop Jon Burge convicted of lying about torture

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MARY MITCHELL City has paid hefty price for police brutality

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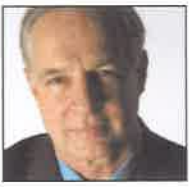
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‘I LIKED THE PHYSICAL CONTACT. A LOT OF PEOPLE, EVEN THOSE WHO PLAY THE GAME, DON’T LIKE IT. I ALWAYS DID.’



THE TEAM

PART 4



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.

CHRIS HENRY'S DEATH

After examining receiver's brain, doctors say he suffered from CTE
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by RICK TELANDER

I see the stream ahead. It's not a big one and there's no sign on the road, but I ask my friend if he wants to check it out. John Voorhees backs up his car and gets his fly rod from the trunk.

John, 59, is a lawyer, a public defender for the state of Wisconsin, a graduate of Northwestern University and Marquette University Law School. But he wouldn't mind chucking it all to become a fishing guide someday.

John looks at a map. This, apparently, is the Rib River, crossing under the two-lane blacktop and flowing into the hardwood forest to the south. We're near the Rib Mountain ski area outside Wausau, Wis., where John has driven from his home in Hazelhurst, Wis. He had a meeting earlier, but now he's free.

As we walk along the banks of the sandy-bottomed stream, we talk football.

I ask John, my old pal from Peoria and a former middle linebacker for Northwestern, how many concussions he has had.

John, who can be quiet for long periods of time before rocketing off into lengthy stories, thinks. He mentions seeing stars after blasting the Pekin High School quarterback as a 17-year-old junior from Peoria Spaulding.

"I thought on the sideline: 'I'm not going to use my head on a tackle again,'" he says. He ponders some more.

"What's a concussion?" he asks.

This is not a trivial question. Nor is it one I properly can answer. One definition of a concussion is a violent blow to the head. Does that not occur to numerous players on almost every football play?

But there was the Indiana game on Nov. 14, 1970. John was a junior; I was a senior. We were at Memorial Stadium in Bloomington, and it was a cold, overcast day. He was wearing the "electric hat" for Dr. Stephen E. Reid Sr.'s head-trauma study, and he was knocked out by the Indiana running back's knee smashing into the left front side of his helmet. That was a concussion by any definition.



Former Northwestern linebacker John Voorhees fishes at the Rib River in Wisconsin in March. | RICK TELANDER-SUN-TIMES

"Even then, I was walking around," John says.

"You were down on your knees for a while," I tell him.

"I was?" he says.

"I was standing near you, and I'm pretty sure of that," I recall.

We won the game 21-7, our fifth Big Ten victory against one loss. But John, who made a textbook tackle on the play — except for the fact he had pivoted into the hole and never saw the knee slamming into his helmet — was removed from the game. The

graph in the press box measured the force of the blow to his skull at 188 times the force of gravity for nearly a third of a second.

The sun is beginning to dip, and we leave the stream to have dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant called Carmela's.

Over chicken and pasta, John reminds me that he didn't want to wear that wired-up helmet because, among other things, the bulbous extension on the back that housed transistors, transmitters and what-not made the wearer look like a balloon-headed alien. It also took forever for Dr. Reid's assistants to glue the wires to the wearer's head, attaching the sensors to bare scalp in between tufts of hair. And to do this before a game? When you're geeked? And you can't take the helmet off until the game is over?



John Voorhees (40) was wearing a specially designed helmet to measure brain waves when he suffered a concussion against Indiana University in 1970. It was the only such injury ever recorded at impact.



Rick Telander (left) and John Voorhees take in a Cubs game at Wrigley Field in 1977.

abnormality with probable locus within the thalamic-hypothalamic region," the caption reads. "This type of abnormality is usually seen in adolescence, at times with neurovegetative types of symptoms like headaches and dizzy spells and also at times in patients with behavior disorders. In addition, a very mild slow wave disorder was seen on the frontal occipital and left temporal areas."

"So what happened?" I ask.

"I watched game film every day, and then I practiced on Thursday," he says.

"You're kidding," I say.

He shakes his head. I calculate. Less than 120 hours after the concussion, he was in uniform.

"We were timing up on Thursday," he continues, "and Naughton looks at me and says, 'Let's see if you can still hit!'"

John smiles.

"He wanted me to go live to see if I could still hit," he says.

Pat Naughton was our sometimes-frothing-at-the-mouth linebackers coach. John smiles not at the danger in that statement, but at the ignorance of it. Like he ever would forget how to hit.

"Then what?" I ask.

"I made a few tackles," he says. "And I started the next game against Michigan State."

We won 23-20 in East Lansing. On Tuesday, John had disordered brain waves. On Saturday, he was tackling Eric Allen.

"You were OK?" I ask.

"In the fourth quarter, they saw something on the EEG up in the booth and made me come out," he says. "I didn't want to. I told them, 'I feel fine.' I already had 16 tackles."

John was a brilliant player. He had more assisted tackles as a senior — 12 per game — than anybody in school history. By far.

He needed to be informed and then left alone. When coaches yelled at him, which was rare, John would stare back with an assassin's darkness in his eyes. I think it terrified the coaches. Mystified them, at least. Agase told me he never could figure John out, and that troubled him for life.

"How could a player be so good and yet hate the game?" Agase asked me when he was in his 80s.

I tried to explain to our old coach that John never hated the game; he loved it. He just hated the nonsense around it.

"I always thought college would be more... creative," John says. "I liked the physical contact. A lot of people, even those who play the game, don't like it. I always did. But some things we did were so backward. I mean, why did the coaches have to humiliate us?"

One afternoon, during a hot, horrible two-a-day, a yellow bird alit on John's forearm and perched there as Naughton talked with the assembled defense. Some of the more religious folks — maybe the devoutly Catholic Naughton among them — thought it was a miracle. I certainly did.

If John has a post-concussive brain issue, it's not apparent. But when do we know anything? I wonder about myself. I had

brought up the time John clotheslined Notre Dame quarterback Joe Theismann in the open field. It was a vicious and effective tackle, and I told John how much I appreciated it. He told me it occurred in 1970 at Dyche Stadium. I had no recollection of having played Notre Dame that year or ever at home.

I do remember the 1970 game against UCLA in Los Angeles. John was wreaking such havoc on the Bruins' offense that UCLA coach Tommy Prothro stopped the game.

"That guy's getting signals from coaches in the press box!" Prothro yelled.

Wrote Dr. Reid in his book: "The instrumented player proved to be too much for the opposing team... The instrumented player was brought to our bench by an official... The electronic helmet had to be removed, and valuable data was lost."

I stood on the field and watched the paranoid charade, thinking it would be comical if it weren't so unfair and dumb.

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According to Paul Reber, a psychology professor at Northwestern, the human brain consists of about a billion neurons, each with about 1,000 connections to other neurons. There's so much potential circuitry it's, well, mind-boggling. This vast network of memories, instincts and ideas is the magnificence of humanity. It's what we should protect above all else. It's what Dr. Reid was working on with John.

Noted neurologist and author Oliver Sacks has written often of a brain patient's "essential being," of his or her "personhood," pointing out that such a seemingly clear concept as who one is is not always so simple. A damaged brain creates a philosophical problem as well as a physical one. Sacks calls this the "neurology of identity" because it deals with "the neural foundations of the self, the age-old problem of mind and brain."

Obviously, we want to stay ourselves for as long as we can. That's something I think about on my drive through the Wisconsin night.

COMING TUESDAY: PART 5

Jack Smeeton didn't want to come out of a game because a concussion, but his son is home from Afghanistan after suffering his third concussion in combat.

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"We got on the plane after the game, and Dr. Reid sat next to me," John says. "He talked to me the whole time, probably because he didn't want me to fall asleep. Then I had to go to Evanston Hospital every day for an EEG. They would put me in this black room, and then they'd turn on these strobes and flashing lights."

In *Head and Neck Injuries in Sports*, the 1984 book he co-wrote with his son, Dr. Reid included three blurry film frames of John fighting out of a double-team block, then meeting the Indiana running back's leg head-on. I'm not in the picture because I still would be coming in from my spot at right cornerback, but teammates Gerry Combs, the left defensive end, and Eric Hutchinson, the free safety, are identifiable in the close-up. Three other white-uniformed Northwestern players are on the ground or closing in. This play was going nowhere for the Hoosiers.

On the preceding page are graphs showing John's brain waves before the concussion and immediately after, with the notation, "There is a unilateral decrease in amplitude on the right side of the brain, which persisted."

There is a subsequent graph of the clinical EEG taken three days later at Evanston Hospital.

"Positive spike discharges indicate an

"I asked [coach] Alex [Agase] if I could not wear it," John says. "He said, 'Why don't you talk to Dr. Reid?' So I did, and he took me up to the press box at Dyche and showed me the setup. Dr. Reid was a really nice guy, and he was so respectful. You know how I would always sleep before games, and how I didn't want to talk to anybody?"

I did. He earned the nickname "Sleepy John" because of his ability to sleep on the bus, in front of his locker, on a training table. Of course, it was "Killer John" once he took the field.

"Anyway, Dr. Reid talked me into it," John continues. "He said, 'We put it on Woody Campbell.' Naturally I knew who Woody was, so OK." (Campbell was a former NU running back who was an American Football League All-Star in 1967.)

But what happened after that concussion? John and I lived in the same off-campus house on Asbury Street in Evanston with several other friends, but so much time has passed that it's all a blur. We never paid much attention to each others' injuries, anyway.