

# 'I HAD MY CONCUSSIONS ... BUT ... I NEVER WOULD ALLOW MYSELF TO BE HELD OUT OF A GAME BECAUSE OF SOMETHING LIKE THAT.'



PART 5  
OF 9



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

Jack Smeeton and I were roommates during pre-fall at Northwestern. We shared a non-air-conditioned dorm room in Sargent Hall, where all the players stayed during camp because the rest of the university, being on the quarter system, would not open until after we Wildcats played our first game.

We were like prisoners on a work farm. Summer heat. Athletic department T-shirts. Dime-store flip-flops. Raw ankles from tape applied to bare skin, then ripped off. Sunburned wrists and calves. Bloody elbows. Dehydration. Exhaustion. Curfew. Hence our passion for quoting from the recent prison movie "Cool Hand Luke."

"You gonna gitcher mind right, Luke!" and "Shakin' it here, boss!" were two of our favorites. Everybody was miserable. But you and your roommate were miserable together. And how you handled your conjoined misery was critical.

Smeeton, from Downers Grove, had a natural sense of the absurd, an explosive laugh, a demented wit. He didn't snore, and he brought with him a small black-and-white TV and an electric fan. Thus, he was the perfect roommate.

We would lie on our beds, cramping and delirious between doubles, trying to nap, looking at each other across the cluttered floor, and Jack would say something like, "A clam moves on its foot."

And I would respond with something like, "The foot of the clam." And we would start giggling, and then laughing, and then hoo-ha-ing until we would be doubled-up, gasping for air. Then we'd quiet down. And he'd say, "The foot." And it would start over again.

In fact, I'm giving you actual dialogue. The clam thing, based on my having said one time that our muscular and squatty senior middle linebacker, Don Ross, resembled a bivalve, was a running thread of lunacy for Jack and me. We didn't laugh to keep from going insane. This was an era, remember, when football players could not drink water during practice, when free love was out there for



Jack Smeeton's '68 touchdown is immortalized at Mustard's Last Stand. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES

others, when race riots were common, when the draft took buddies off to fight ghosts in Vietnam, when students battled cops, when American leaders were assassinated, when the Beatles told us to "roll up!" when our own head coach was a decorated Marine from World War II who had killed men in close quarters. No, we *were* insane.

Jack and I sit now in Mustard's Last Stand, the tiny hot dog joint across from Dyche Stadium in Evanston. (Nobody from my era ever calls it Ryan Field.) Smeeton, 61, a criminal defense lawyer who worked for years as a prosecutor in the Cook County State's Attorney's office, lives just a couple blocks north in Wilmette. He sips a Diet Coke while I

gorge on a hot dog, studying the framed black-and-white photo on the greasy wall above me.

It's an 8-by-11 of halfback Smeeton catching a touchdown pass against Purdue on Oct. 5, 1968. "Score one for Mustard's Last Stand! Jack Smeeton — #31," reads the inscription. There are cheerleaders screaming in the background, the striped-shirted ref with both arms raised, a photographer in a pork-pie hat. Norman Rockwell does the Big Ten.

But the Smeeton touchdown I remember happened three weeks later at Dyche — a three-yard catch that was the game-winner in a 13-10 defeat of Wisconsin. It was the only game we won in 1968, his junior year, my sophomore year. It was the same year Robert



Smeeton's bad knees kept him out of Vietnam but didn't keep him off the football field. | JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES

F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were shot, the Tet offensive began, the Beatles' "White Album" was released, and protesters at the Democratic National Convention battled Chicago cops in Grant Park. I remembered seeing the gathering social storm there by Lake Michigan as my father drove me up from Peoria to Northwestern for pre-fall camp. Who was right? What should I do? What should anyone do?

"Crazy times, weren't they?" Smeeton says now.

Consider this: Jack was hit by one of our own linebackers, Ron Mied, during spring practice in 1968, nearly lost a kidney, was forced to drop out of school, had his student deferment taken away, was classified 1-A by his draft board, recovered in a hospital bed, was drafted by the Army, flunked his physical because his knees were so bad, and was back playing football at Northwestern by fall.

"Got out of 'Nam because of my knees," he says with a chuckle.

Not that he shouldn't have. His knees were the worst things ever. He was so bowlegged, the inside of his jeans never touched. He limped like an old man. He had eight

operations, starting in high school, capped off by double knee replacement in December 2007, followed by left hip replacement a year later. After the new knees, Jack was nearly an inch taller. "It's John Wayne!" I said when I first saw him post-op.

But there is rabbit-hole irony in being able enough to play a violent game but not able enough to march through rice paddies with a rifle. Such was the chaotic drumbeat of the late '60s and early '70s. As teammate Mike Adamle says, "It went from panty raids to 'Off the Pig!' in the blink of an eye."

Smeeton, like all college running backs, took a beating. By his senior year, he had been bumped down a notch by junior Adamle because Jack had those bad knees and because Adamle was a phenom.

Earlier, I had asked Jack about head trauma. I told him about my visit with neuropathologist Ann McKee at her lab at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Bedford, Mass., and the research she was conducting on chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in football players.

"I had my concussions. Two or three," he says. "I saw stars. But I was never knocked



Jack Smeeton with son John and wife Andrea.

## AFTER HIS THIRD CONCUSSION IN AFGHANISTAN, JACK'S SON JOHN WANTED TO 'GET BACK TO WORK.' THE MARINES THOUGHT OTHERWISE.

out cold. I never would allow myself to be held out of a game because of something like that. You don't want anybody to think you're a pussy, right?"

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In a way, the crazy times haven't ended.

Jack's son John, 21, joined the Marines almost two years ago, and the Smeetons recently were notified that the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle he was riding in as the turret gunner was blown up by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. No one was killed, the Marine spokesman said, but the vehicle was ruined — and John had received shrapnel wounds and some type of concussion.

Details were scarce. Andrea Smeeton, Jack's wife, was out of her mind with worry. After several days, the Smeetons got an e-mail from John saying he just wanted to "get back to work" and that the Navy docs — "those [bleeps]" — better

clear him soon.

But the Smeetons found out more — the shrapnel had been cleaned away from John's wounds, yes, but he had received a grade-3 concussion and, as Jack and Andrea knew, it was their son's third brain insult from improvised bomb explosions in a month.

"The first ones were 30- to 50-pound bombs," Jack says. "He had ringing in his ears and headaches. He said it was a 'rush.' That's John. But this one was a lot bigger. They estimated it at about 150 pounds. It would have blown a Humvee to pieces."

Indeed, the Smeetons, who have one older son, Joe, 26, had found out that John was unconscious for two minutes and "loopy" for another 45 minutes after the blast. It didn't matter what John wanted or how he felt a couple days later, said a Marine authority, the soldier was not going anywhere near combat for some time. He wasn't allowed in a vehicle. No bounces. No gunfire. No nothing. Just stay on the base. His memory would return, they assured him. Things would settle. Word would come out later that doctors were amazed John survived the blast force.

That was encouraging news, but all

Andrea wanted was to hear her son's voice. She had barely slept in days. Jack was holding up better, at least on the surface.

Of course, there's little connection between a head injury suffered in a game like football and one received in combat, in the service of our country. But the similarity is in the wound itself, a potentially ticking surprise that may not fully reveal itself for many years, and the fact that the injured man might not have a clue as to the real significance of his trauma. Nor of the risk he undertook.

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We're sitting at the Smeeton's dining-room table, Jack and I. We've been shooting the breeze about old times. "I don't mind the injuries," he says of his ruined knees, his hip, his two bad — as yet uncut — shoulders. "As long as they can fix whatever, great. Like a badge of honor. Football taught me determination and tenacity and discipline. Being an attorney is a natural profession for a former football player, guys who like competition. I mean, if you can take doubles — without water? — you can pretty much take anything. The hard part is when it ends, when you can't play anymore. What makes it OK is you still have all your friends. That's what John will have with the Marines."

I asked Jack about his day at 26th and California. His court stories are often amusing. That day, he represented a robber happy to take eight years in a plea bargain, explaining to Jack in an aside that he was "tweaked" on drugs when he did the crime, which consisted basically of sneaking around an apartment, robbing his sleeping friends.

"Tweaked," Jack says.

"Tweaked," I say.

And we start laughing like it's nap time 40 years ago.

### ON THURSDAY: PART 6

While other players are concerned about their health, Jerry Combs — "the Leverage King" — likes his odds.

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