

# 'I WAS FUZZY AFTER I HIT A GUY'S KNEE ... THEN I BROKE MY LEFT HAND ... BUT THAT WAS IT. I FEEL GREAT!'



PART 6  
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

**G**erry Combs pads cheerfully about his elegant co-op at 200 Central Park South in the finest part of Manhattan. His shoes are off; socks work just fine on this plush carpet. Across the street is the staid, 142-year-old New York Athletic Club, of which Combs is a member. Around the corner is the Plaza. Combs also owns homes in Philadelphia and West Palm Beach, Fla., and a condo in Chicago.

Classical music plays softly in the background. The large TV in his living room is tuned to the Bloomberg financial channel, sound off, with the stock crawl moving like a slow train across the bottom of the screen. Combs, 60, is married, has a son and two stepdaughters, is self-employed and basically takes other people's money, finds investment deals and ... makes boatloads of cash for himself.

"You and I went to school in hippie heaven," he says, taking a seat on the couch in front of the TV. "There were corporate recruiting riots, Vietnam riots, the Daley riots. We players — well, most of us — were conservatives surrounded by liberals. Let me tell you, those liberals are not liberals anymore."

Combs is from St. Louis. He was an all-state tackle on his Missouri high school team, and he was a starter at Northwestern — first as an offensive tackle, then as a defensive end. He was big for the time — 6-2, 240 pounds — strong and quick, and he would be honored by playing in the Blue-Gray All-Star Game after our senior season.

A while back, our classmate Mike Adamle nicknamed Combs "the Leverage King" because of Gerry's aggressively verbal and charming behavior, bloodhound's nose for profit and 19th-century industrial baron's lust for hands-off capitalism. Still, as Adamle says, "Nobody has any idea what he does." All the old players chuckle when they think about Combs, though one wonders what his business foes throughout the world think.

Gerry studied economics at Northwestern and got his law degree from Saint Louis University, graduating cum laude. He is funny, loud, profane, irreverent, shrewd, observant, driven, over-the-top. By such men was American business constructed.

"Here's the problem," he continues. "Too many people in this country want something for free."

I hadn't asked, but there it is. "You'd like the government out of your life?" I suggest, for fun.

"Absolutely!" he roars. "I want the government out of my life!"

When we were at school, things were chaotic. Some football players sympathized with the antiwar protesters; some threw eggs at them. In the spring of 1970 there were mass protests on campus, leading to barricades being built at the corner of Sheridan Road and Chicago Avenue, a mountain of junk that isolated the school from street traffic and blocked commuters on the main thoroughfare between Chicago and the north suburbs.

Student leaders declared Northwestern a free state. Sheridan between Chicago and Lincoln became a celebratory mall. Frisbees filled the air. Dogs wandered about. Music blasted from windows. Long hair and rhetoric ruled. Police lurked darkly but did not intrude. Word was the FBI was watching. The jagged, wrought-iron fences that once lined the meadow in front of Deering Library now protruded like rows of spears from the top of the 10-foot barricade. Violence loomed. No, violence was guaranteed.

And through the buildup, we had spring football practice. When I talked with our coach, Alex Agase, shortly before he died in 2008, he told me there had been bomb threats for the spring game that year.

"We moved up the time for that game," he



**'THE  
LEVERAGE  
KING' THEN**

Gerry Combs earned the nickname from Mike Adamle because of his aggressive, charming nature — and his thirst for laissez-faire capitalism.

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— Combs proved to himself that his not-acted-upon notion that you get what you earn in life is actually true.

“As a libertarian, the connection to sport is that you're part of a team,” he says. “But that's it. The individual is still the key. But if you all put out, you'll likely succeed. You get no outside help. You can't stop on the goal line and call five guys out of the stands to help you. It's crystal clear! If you want success and you work hard, you'll get it. Maybe it's only a 90/10 chance. But if you don't work — hell, you can't even win the lottery if you don't do something.”

We walk back to his co-op. There is a doorman, a deskman and even an elevator man on the main floor.

As far as my question about what football has done for him and to him, Combs has made it clear what it did for him. He is, after all, the man who wears purple whenever he can, who organizes all our “Hardbodies” — his term — player reunions, who dropped everything and flew to Seattle to sit for days with our cancer-stricken teammate, Mike Kaminsky, presenting him with an obscenely decorated birthday cake, among other joys. When Kaminsky died May 29, it was Combs who alerted all us former teammates.

But what did the game do to Combs?

“As far as my head, I was fuzzy after I hit a guy's knee on a kickoff against Iowa in a freshman game,” he says. “Then I broke my left hand on somebody's facemask in spring ball sophomore year. But that was it. I feel great!”

So what do you actually do for a living? “What do I do?” he says.

We have entered the apartment again. His 26-year-old son, Jonathon, a Manhattan financial worker, has stopped by.

“Investment banking,” Combs says. “But ... I would call it, hmmm, independent financial opportunist.”

“Rainmaker!” Jonathon yells.

Combs still is thinking.

“Merchant banker, perhaps?” he offers. “I like that.”

He leads me into his home office. There is a large map of the world tacked to one wall. His eyes go directly to China, and he smiles.

“We believe that the economic growth for the rest of my lifetime will take place in Asia,” he says, not mentioning who “we” is.

Combs' hand hovers above Hong Kong like a tarot reader's, like a chef's over a warming sauce. He caresses Hong Kong.

“That's all that matters,” he says. “Right there. You can get everything in Hong Kong.”

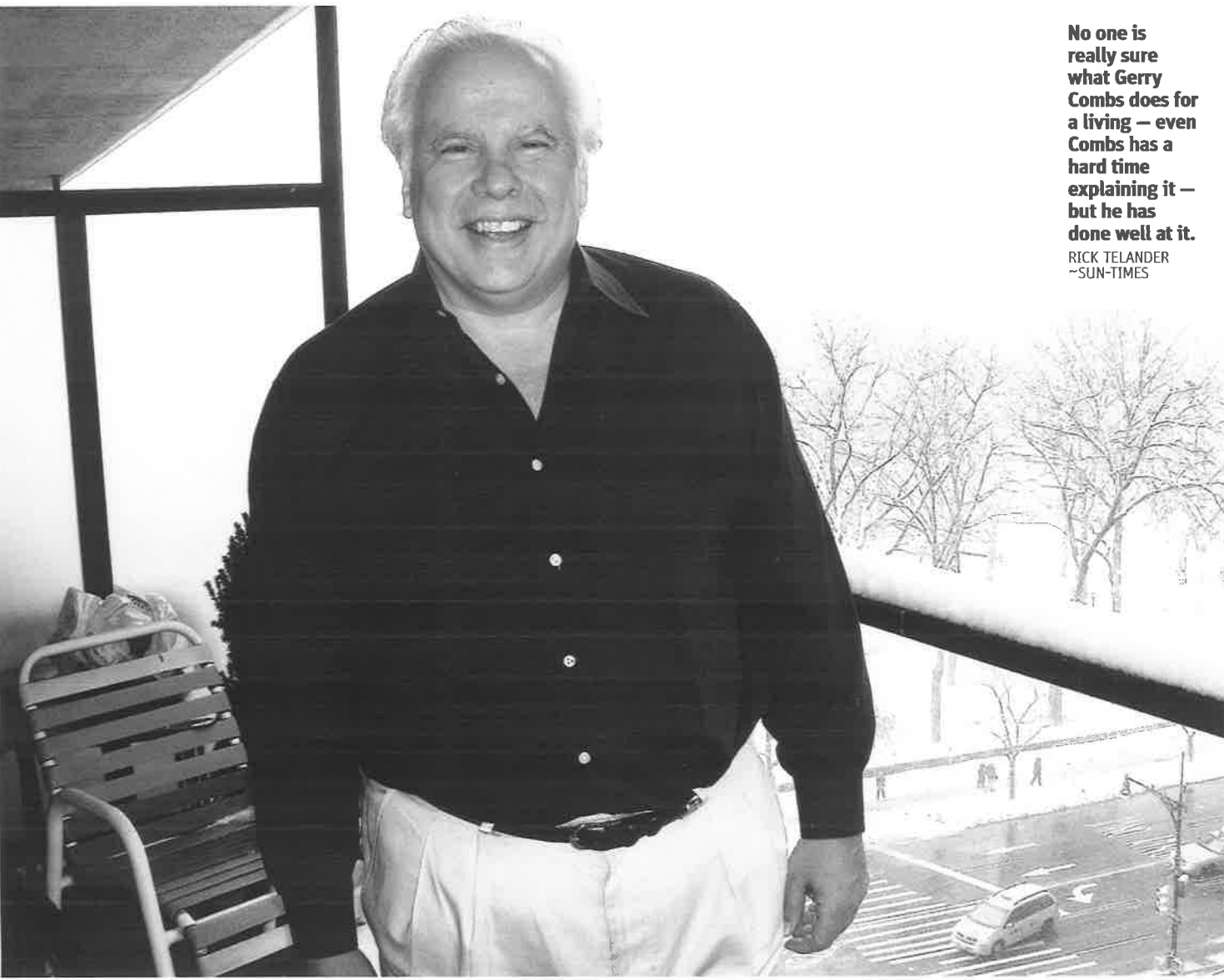
He'll be there in a week to check on “electronic investments” in nearby Guangdong Province. The hunt is on. Combs, as ever, will take what he bags.

“The Leverage King” likes his odds.

Comment at [suntimes.com](http://suntimes.com).

No one is really sure what Gerry Combs does for a living — even Combs has a hard time explaining it — but he has done well at it.

RICK TELANDER -SUN-TIMES



told me. “We almost canceled it.” Maybe I once knew that. Of course, I did. Then school president J. Roscoe Miller abruptly told everyone to go home, saying spring quarter was over. Every student would get a passing grade in every course. There would be a low-key graduation ceremony for seniors. Otherwise, get the hell out before killings such as those at Kent State and Jackson State happened here.

It was such a strange time to be a young American, to be a young American football player, that I cannot express it in these confines. My nerves were on fire. Little made sense. That vertigo I felt in Dr. Ann McKee's office as we looked at the diseased brains of dead football players, I felt that at Northwestern, too.

But “the Leverage King” was not overly troubled. Indeed, he barely was thrown off-stride.

“I was not antiwar,” he says as we walk down Seventh Avenue, heading to P.J. Carney's for some specialty garlic burgers. “I reported for my draft physical, and I failed it. Because of asthma.”

I knew Combs had bad asthma and other allergies. That was one of the reasons he didn't work out overly hard during the summers — OK, did he work out at all? — and why Agase was so infuriated with him early on. Indeed, the coach was angry enough after Combs missed a critical goal-line block in the Illinois game our junior year, a narrow 10-6 victory, to tell the media: “I wouldn't even talk to him. We had tried everything in the world to motivate him and couldn't get it done, so I gave up on him.”

“Yeah, that was something,” Combs says now, digging into his burger. “I started against Illinois, and the next week I didn't even travel.”

“The Ag” as we called our coach, a tough-as-nails, Purple Heart-winning Marine and two-time All-America lineman at Illinois and then Purdue, could chew on his cigar so hard that the shredded tobacco turned to paste. He did that, for a spell, whenever he looked at Combs.

Gerry was so talented and had been so successful in high school that he was on cruise control in college. “Lazy” was the word coaches used. Agase tossed him off the offensive line and made him a defensive end. If Combs rode the pine forever, so be it.

But he didn't. His pride kicked in. As Agase had said in his frustration: “We always thought he had the

ability but not the desire, although sometimes we thought he did. His teammates rode him as hard as we did.”

I guess our linemen rode Combs, though I certainly didn't. I was off with my skinny defensive backs, and we had enough to worry about.

So the summer before our senior season, Combs worked himself into great shape, lifting and running in the St. Louis heat, asthma be damned, dedicating himself in a way he never had before.

“I realized I had just one year left, and I went for it,” he says.

As a new starter at defensive end, Combs and the other D-linemen — Will Hemby, Jim Anderson and Pat Kershaw — helped Northwestern have the top pass defense among major colleges in 1970 (79.3 yards net yards per game) and set a school record for fewest average yards allowed per offensive play (3.8).

On a personal level, Combs saw his post-adolescent principles hammered in the forge. A libertarian through and through — though he might not have known the term back then

Combs: an 'all-out' effort

Article excerpt with multiple columns of text and a photo of Gerry Combs on the football field. The text describes his dedication and performance during his senior year.

AGASE THOUGHT HE WAS LAZY, BUT COMBS WAS DEDICATED HIS SENIOR YEAR



Coach Alex Agase