

'I WAS NEVER DIAGNOSED WITH A CONCUSSION. BUT I WENT INTO THE GREEN BAY HUDDLE A COUPLE OF TIMES.'

by RICK TELANDER



PART 7
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.

VIDEO ONLINE

Rudnay on what NU means to him. Go to suntimes.com.

I can hear Jack Rudnay swearing, and it alarms me. The yelling is not loud, nor is it constant. But it has an edge to it. “[Bleep]er!”

I wait a moment, and there is quiet. I’m sitting on a chair in the guest bedroom at Rudnay’s farm 160 miles south-east of Kansas City, Mo., near the tiny town of Versailles. There are just the two of us here, other than his six horses, the pet turtle in the tank and the multitudinous largemouth bass in his 18-acre lake.

Jack is divorced and his two daughters are grown. He drives to Kansas City several times a week to run his veterinary supply manufacturing business and to spend time with his girlfriend, Linda. But he is alone often here on the farm, in these wooded hills with the grassy fields and the half-mile-long gravel driveway that, as he puts it, “Nobody drives down by mistake.”

I hear him again. “[Bleep]!”

I walk out of the bedroom and look into the large, glassed, high-ceiling room that holds the one-lane swimming pool that is now as much a part of Rudnay’s world as breathing.

He is on his back in the center of the pool, in baggy black trunks, his body lean and pale, dogpaddling fitfully against the constant current. Rudnay’s eyes are closed, his breathing labored, his jaw set in defiance.

“[Bleep]er!” he hisses.

I back out quietly. A few minutes later, when he has dried off and re-entered the main house, I ask Rudnay how his swim was.

“Good,” he says. “Very good.”

Jack Rudnay, 62, is a battered man. He will never complain. Never. That’s not how you become one of the greatest linemen in North-western history and a 13-year NFL veteran — all of them with the Kansas City Chiefs — four of those years as the AFC starting center in the Pro Bowl.

You’ve probably seen Rudnay in that oft-run Silver Bullet beer commercial, the one with Chiefs coach Hank Stram prancing on the Super Bowl IV sideline. Rudnay’s the bearded guy in the business suit behind Stram. Jack fractured three vertebrae in the 1969 College All-Star Game, and was on injured reserve for that



Rudnay gets his exercise in his constant-current lane pool. | L.G. PATTERSON-SPECIAL TO THE SUN-TIMES

1970 Super Bowl championship, his rookie year.

The back injury was just the start; or rather, it was a continuation of the thread of wounds and rehabilitation and denial that was already being stitched into the fabric of his being. A working-class kid from Chagrin Falls, Ohio, outside Cleveland, Rudnay wrestled in the state high school tourney with two separated shoulders, and never had or expected toys as a child. Recruited mostly by Ivy League schools, he arrived at Northwestern in the late summer of 1965, driven by a high school pal in a rusting Pontiac Tempest. The pal dropped Rudnay off

outside Elder Hall on Sheridan Road, turned around and drove back to Cleveland.

“There were happy families everywhere,” recalls Rudnay, whose own father died when Jack was 2. “I had three cardboard boxes, and I’m standing there alone. It was like a foreign country.”

When he tells a story such as this — simply and succinctly — there is such passion welded into his words that Rudnay often will get teary-eyed and his voice will crack. Sometimes the tears literally stream down his face, such as when he described the joy of being asked two



Rudnay was a 6-3, 235-pound center and defensive tackle who started 30 straight games for Northwestern.

of the herbal additives and powders being talked about can restore or enhance mental capacity.

Like all of us around 60, Rudnay isn't sure what his brain should be like.

"I guess my short-term memory has been slightly affected [by head blows]," he says. "But how do you know? I always forgot things."

He had looked at me as we slowly walked toward his lake in the morning.

"You got a hitch in your giddy-up there, brother," he said, concerned.

Yes, I'm joint-damaged like the others, though a lot of it is from pick-up basketball, if it matters. My right shoulder has never been good since a tackle junior year. Some of my fingers are messed up. We all chose to do what we did, anyway. How many concussions did I have in football? One? Two? What's the joke answer: None, that I remember! And a firestorm last winter in my spinal cord staggers me yet. Transverse myelitis they call it. From a flu shot? From football? Both arms and one leg were paralyzed. Scary as hell.

Rudnay quotes Carlos Castaneda to me, "We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves happy. The amount of work is the same."

Rudnay's the guy who has dislocated every finger on both hands and dislocated both big toes so badly that they touched the top of each foot. Sometimes he has to turn on the ignition of his car with his left hand because the right hand won't work. His blocking technique was to punch with both hands after centering the ball — "maybe a million times," he says. This destroyed his wrists. And once he busted the little finger on his right hand so badly that the bone protruded from the skin. He taped the pinky to his ring finger.

"The team doctor said, 'You are through.' I said, 'Doc, you don't understand. I'm kicking this guy's ass!'"

He went back in, and blood from his pinky spattered the white pants of startled quarterback Mike Livingston and tailback Ed Podolak on each snap.

So it goes.

"People get pain and suffering confused,"

Rudnay says.

We do.

COMING SUNDAY: PART 8

George Keporos is doing fine, though he admits he forgets things. Is it normal or does he have anything to do with football?

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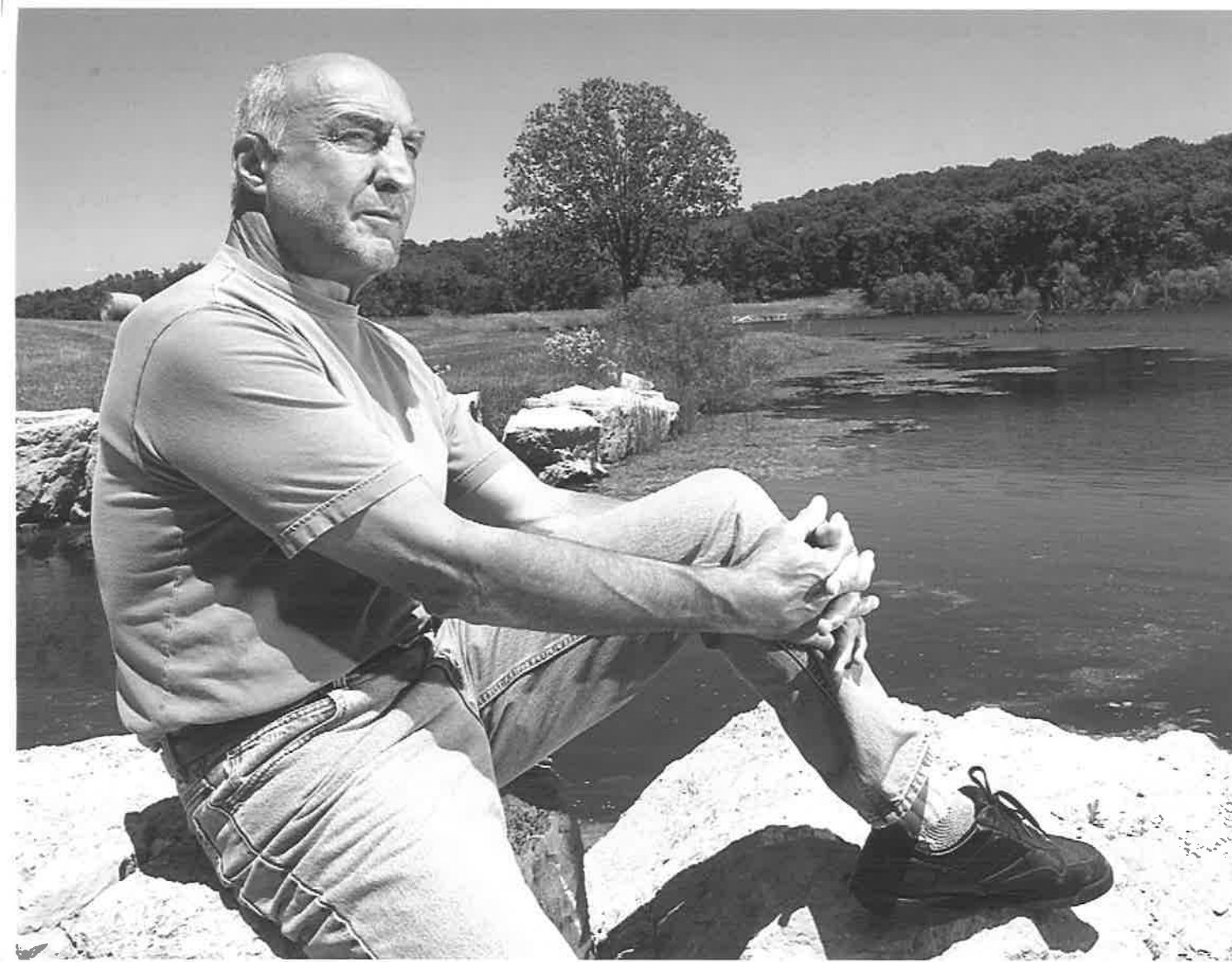
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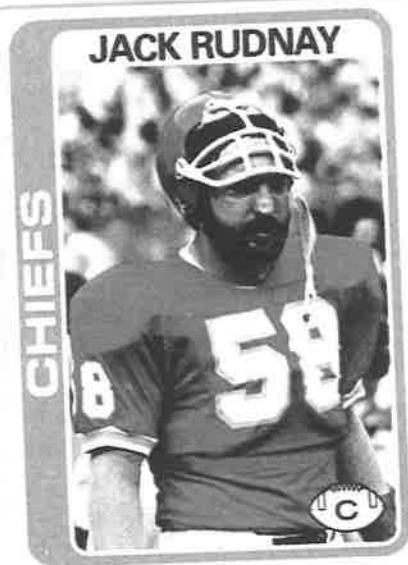
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JACK RUDNAY IS A BATTERED MAN, BUT HE'LL NEVER COMPLAIN. NEVER.



Rudnay played 13 seasons in the NFL and started in the Pro Bowl four times.

L.G. PATTERSON-SPECIAL TO THE SUN-TIMES

ciously. "As if it's giving in."

Pat Harrington, the captain of our Northwestern team in 1969, and an arthritically challenged hobbler himself, calls Rudnay's farmhouse set-up, "Aqua Land." A better term might be "Water World," for without the H₂O and the pain pills and the nerve pills he takes when he starts to get mean and intolerant, Rudnay would live in something closer to hell.

"I never was diagnosed with a concussion," he says. "But I went into the Green Bay huddle a couple of times."

The warrior code meant Rudnay continued on, out of duty. Indeed, he played in 144 straight NFL games after 30 straight with Northwestern. "I felt it was a sacred obligation with my teammates and my opponents," he says, sounding philosophical. He reads constantly and he meditates, and he says, "I think I'm a Buddhist, spiritually, at least. I'm alone a lot, and the universe is my church."

But he also practiced in the church of hurt, becoming a high priest there. At Northwestern, he was a 6-3, 235-pound dynamo at defensive tackle and center, and though he got up to 280 pounds in the NFL, he would often drop to as low as 220 by the end of the season. It was his battery that never faltered.

"I wanted the ability to have an on-off switch, and believe me, you didn't want to see me on Sunday," he says. "I was a professional killer."

During the weekend that I am with Rudnay, he gets a call from former lineman Ed White, a friend of his who played 17 years with the Minnesota Vikings and San Diego Chargers. It is interesting, because what they discuss is the passing of a beloved assistant coach and a "brain study" in California they would like to be involved in because there is word that some

years ago by Northwestern coach Pat Fitzgerald to address the Wildcats football team on the field. "It was beautiful for me," he said. We were in his car when he told me that story, on the long drive from the Kansas City Airport, and at first I thought he might have allergies or dust in his eyes. Eventually, he wiped the tears from his face and we drove on.

But Rudnay never weeps over physical pain. He has a specially built hot tub on the deck next to his pool, with high-pressure jets that are customized for his wrists, hips and back. And the 19-foot constant-current pool is the gentlest way he can exercise. Indeed, it's basically the only way.

On bad days, Jack is halfway crippled, overwhelmed by nerve pain in his arms and spine and throbbing osteoarthritis pain in just about every other joint. One knee is sort of OK, but that is compromised by the four surgeries to replace a damaged right hip joint.

The first surgery wasn't a success, and the hip kept slipping out of its socket. Ten times that happened. Rudnay learned how to get the dislocated joint back in place by using rope or sheets, wrapping them around his foot and having several people hold his torso while one yanked the coil as hard as possible.

Dr. Victoria Brander, an associate professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Northwestern University and a partner in the Northwestern Orthopedic Institute, says she marvels at the former football players she sees in her arthritis practice.

"Matched to their non-athlete peers, the level of arthritis for them is much greater," she says. "Yet their perception of pain and disability is much less. These old warriors. They refuse to give in." She sighs, looking at me suspi-

'I HAVE TO JOT THINGS DOWN TO REMEMBER THEM ... IS THAT BECAUSE I'M GETTING OLD?'

by RICK TELANDER



THE TEAM

PART 8
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.

George Keporos was a specimen. The curly haired tackle stood 6-1, weighed 255 pounds, had 21-inch arms, a 22-inch neck, benched 350, and ran the 40 in 4.9. This was 40 years ago, before such things were common. Still, George sometimes got knocked around, as everyone who played Big Ten football did. In the 1971 Northwestern opener against Michigan at Dyche Stadium, he took a blow to the head and went down.

"I got knocked out before half, and they carried me off the field," he says now, as we sit in the living room of his compact but luxurious condo on Illinois Street, just east of Michigan Avenue. "We were ahead, 6-0, when I went out, and I wake up on the bench and it's 21-6, Michigan!"

He laughs at the silliness of the tale, the cartoon-like dreaminess that comes with getting the old bell rung. But George played hard and got dinged a few times. And some of the players around him were concerned.

When Eric Hutchinson, our All-America free safety, got a concussion in a 1970 game, he came to the sideline and was disoriented and done for the day. Tears trickled down his cheeks as he watched the game. "Please don't make me like George," he pleaded to no one.

We all joked about each other's head collisions, about seeing stars, about birds tweeting, planets circling. Hutchinson was briefly out of his mind and had no idea what he was saying for that day. Brain trauma was not that big a deal back in that era, anyway, largely because no one understood the lingering or delayed or compounding effects of such unseen wounds.

It also was hard to take any injury seriously when the guy looked fine. That is rapidly changing. A recent Time Magazine cover story on the dangers of football states, "No other sport gives rise to as many serious brain injuries as football. High school players alone suffer 43,000 to 67,000 concussions per year, though the true incidence is likely much higher." The reason the incidence is underreported is that most concussed play-



George Keporos (58, getting the sack against Syracuse in 1971) had a string of successful car dealerships in Chicago until he sold out at just the right time.



ers never say anything about their symptoms.

There is another, unwitting, culprit here. In a survey, college trainers stated that they observed concussions in only about 6 percent of the players under their watch. But when the college players were asked any-

mously, more than 70 percent said they had experienced concussion-like symptoms. Clearly, it's hard for trainers to diagnose what they don't know much about and the wounded won't describe.

George Keporos, 60, looks good, feels good, and he's in good health. He's a big dude, but he has run in 14 marathons. His joints are fine. He's happy, has three beautiful daughters, ages 21 to 28, and because he's recently divorced, he is dating again.

But none of us know about our heads.

After Northwestern, Keporos had a free-agent tryout with the Bears, and then he got into the car business with his father. George proved to be an outstanding salesman and businessman. He and his dad built up their stores until they had successful Lincoln-Mer-