

Super Bowl-winning quarterback Jim McMahon says he wishes he had played baseball

By Maggie Hendricks



(Getty)In my family, the members of the 1985 Super Bowl-winning Chicago Bears team ranked just slightly behind the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost. In fact, as a 6-year-old I was taught the "Super Bowl Shuffle" by a Franciscan nun, so that ranking could be muddled at times. Walter Payton was at the top of the list, but I couldn't help but be crazy about the rebellious, mouthy, "Punky QB known as McMahon."

The way he would play football made me misunderstand the quarterback's role as a child. Aren't all quarterbacks supposed to jump over the top of the pile? Don't they all take punishing hits then pop back up for more? Why would a quarterback slide for a first down when he could get an extra half-yard by taking the big hit?

During his career with the Bears, Philadelphia Eagles and other teams, McMahon never started a full season. His tough and sometimes reckless style of play meant he suffered many, many injuries. Now, 16 years after he retired, he is experiencing an injury that can't be fixed by a surgery or therapy.

At 53, McMahon is in the early stages of dementia. He is part of the group suing the NFL that says they hid the effects of concussions. Though his career resulted in a Super Bowl ring and a Pro Bowl appearance, he still says he would have played baseball if he knew what concussions would do to him.

"Being injured, if you don't play, you don't get paid. If I was able to walk out on that field, I was gonna play," he said in an interview with Chicago's WFLD-TV at his Arizona home. "Had I known about that stuff early on in my career, I probably would have chosen a different career. I always wanted to be a baseball player anyway."

McMahon played football while at Brigham Young University, but said he would have stuck with baseball had he received a scholarship for that sport.

He is a group of more than 2,000 players who need help from the NFL after concussions have filled their retirement with dementia, memory loss, and in some cases, a bitter end. McMahon's teammate, Dave Duerson, committed suicide and asked for his brain to be studied. He was found to have chronic traumatic encephalopathy, the same disease found in other players who have died under tragic circumstances.

The NFL has made strides in improving how concussions and head injuries are treated. Though problems still exist, like Colt McCoy being sent back in the game last season when he was not healthy, the culture around head traumas is changing.

But the retired players who sacrificed their bodies to create the exciting game we all know and love today should not be forgotten. When one of them says he wishes he didn't even play the game that won him fame, it's a cry for help that should not go unheeded.