INTRODUCTION

“IT’S ALL OVER!”

“George, don't you realize, that's it!”

She said it with love and compassion, but Tunisia, my wife, was telling me that my NFL career was over. I didn’t want to hear it.

I asked her, “Why the hell would you say some shit like that?”

“George, you're done,” she repeated. “It's all over!”

I didn’t talk to her for a couple of weeks. That’s when I started going to the beach and spending three or four days by myself. I would say, “Tunisia, I’m going to the beach on Thursday. I'll be back on Monday,” and she would say, “Really? OK.” And the beach was about two hours away. I was pissed off, hurt, angry, depressed. I just wanted to get out of there. I didn’t really want to be around people who were asking me, “George have you talked to anybody, have any teams given you a call?” I didn’t have an answer. Well, I had the answer, but I didn’t want to tell people. I was basically a failure in my mind. I was totally numb. I was in a dark and lonely place. I was embarrassed to talk with friends in the league. I envied them. So I'd get in my Chevy Suburban and whatever happened that day was going to happen. I didn't really care.

It was on the drive back home one day that I took a turn at 75 miles per hour just to see what would happen. I flew off the road and the truck ended upside down in a ditch. Thank God, I didn't hit anyone. But I survived. By the grace of God, I survived. Maybe, in retrospect, it was a suicide attempt. At the time I just didn’t care.

But the paramedics weren't going to cart me off. No chance. The football tough guy in me refused to get into that ambulance. Tunisia drove me to the house and saved my life with words, not medicine.
“George,” she said, “I don’t understand what you’re going through, but I sympathize. We cannot reinvent who you are, but we can redefine who you are.”

After we got home, Tunisia said to me, “Well, did you accomplish what you intended?”

I told her, “Yeah, and that part of me is dead now and I’m ready to move on.”

After nine years as a starting linebacker in the NFL, George Koonce’s football days had come to an end. He was depressed. Perhaps suicidal. Emotionally estranged from his wife. Avoiding his friends. Why had such a rewarding career boiled down to this? Is this what retirement amounts to for NFL players? What can they expect from life after football?

George Koonce’s account of “the end” may not be typical, but it’s not unique. It expresses many common themes of how ex-NFL players get on with their lives. Like Koonce’s account, the stories are complex and often paradoxical. NFL careers are relatively short—3.5 years according to the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA)—yet their impact lasts far longer. Recently, the spotlight has focused on tragedies, poignantly and publicly exemplified in the suicide of former All-Pro linebacker Junior Seau. At age 43, Seau shot himself to death in May 2012. Seau had been out of the game for less than 18 months. He had actually first “retired” several years earlier, in 2006. At the time, Seau referred to the move as his “graduation” because he was simply not going to stop working. He was moving to the next phase of his life, which lasted only four days before he signed to play several more seasons for the New England Patriots. Retirement on both occasions proved difficult, and ultimately tragic. His heartbreaking story epitomizes the difficulties confronted by many former NFL players. Seau’s untimely struggles and ultimate demise literally prompt the question: Is there life after football?

Junior Seau’s death launched a firestorm of speculation and investigation into the relation between head injuries and post-career troubles for NFL players. Other incidents contributed to the headlines. Since 2011 at least seven NFL players or former players have committed suicide, including Seau, Ray Easterling, Dave Duerson, Kurt Crain, O.J. Murdock,
Jovan Belcher, and Paul Oliver. Belcher also killed his girlfriend. These painful stories might shed new light on the frequently overlooked tragedies of older ex-players like Jim Tyrer, who was involved in a 1980 murder-suicide. The same might hold for the emotionally wrenching cases of dementia tormenting Super Bowl quarterback Jim McMahon and former Charger, Dolphin, and Raider Dave Kocourek. Then it’s just a short inferential leap to questioning the connection between playing in the NFL and the debilitating mental health problems, prescription drug addiction, and depression that plagued former players such as Mike Webster, Ray Lucas, and Lionel Aldridge.

But the stories are not just about head injuries. The general physical condition of former NFL players and the aftermath of their injuries are monumental legacies of this quintessentially violent game. Most retired players are scarred by major surgery, some from dozens of trips to the operating room. Many—Hall of Fame running back Earl Campbell, for example—can barely walk. Hundreds have had joint replacement surgery. Some—quarterbacking legend John Unitas comes to mind—lost use of their hands and fingers. And a few—Kurt Marsh and Jim Otto, in particular—have lost limbs to football injuries. In response to mounting health concerns, the NFL has instituted drastic rule changes and injury treatment protocols. In addition, in September 2012, the NFL announced a $30 million grant to the National Institutes of Health to study brain injuries and other sports-related health issues, and in 2013 the league and NFLPA announced a huge financial payout to players suffering the aftermath of head injuries.

If the ravages of injury aren’t enough, former players by the dozen face financial disaster. Despite their lucrative contracts, ex-players are showing up flat broke shortly after retirement. Terrell Owens is nearly penniless despite earning top dollar for years. He reportedly owes the IRS $438,000 in unpaid taxes. Seven-time Pro Bowl defensive tackle—and one-time multimillionaire—Warren Sapp has filed for bankruptcy. Court documents show he owes more than $6.7 million to creditors and in unpaid child support. The NFLPA says that between 1999 and 2002, at
least 78 players and former players were swindled out of more than $42 million. *Sports Illustrated* claims that over three quarters of former NFL players are in desperate financial straits within two years of retirement.\(^\text{10}\)

Still looking for trouble? Late in 2013, Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez was arrested and placed under investigation for double homicide. Ryan Leaf, the second player taken in the 1998 draft (after Peyton Manning) and retired since 2002, was arrested in March 2012 on burglary, theft, and drug charges. Four days later he was rearrested for similar offenses. Leaf pled guilty to burglary and drug charges and has been sentenced to five years in a Montana state prison. In late April 2012, Texas authorities issued two additional warrants for his arrest. Leaf is just one of several recent additions to the list of convicted felons among NFL alumni. Some examples:

- Billy Cannon: counterfeiting
- Thomas “Hollywood” Henderson: sexual assault
- Dave Meggett: sexual misconduct and burglary
- Eugene “Mercury” Morris and Nate Newton: drug trafficking
- Lawrence Phillips: multiple assault convictions
- Art Schlichter: forgery and over 20 gambling-related felonies
- Lawrence Taylor: tax evasion, sexual misconduct, and patronizing a prostitute

While no one can forget O.J. Simpson, his actual convictions pale in comparison to some of his fellow alums'. Former Patriot and Colt Erik Naposki was convicted of homicide and received a life sentence without parole, but the standard may have been set by Keith Wright, a defensive lineman who lurked at the fringes of the NFL from 2003 to 2006. In 2012, Wright was found guilty on 19 charges including armed robbery, burglary, kidnapping, and false imprisonment, for which he was sentenced to a combined 234 years in prison.\(^\text{11}\)

The litany of horror stories goes on and on. But are they the entire story of life after the NFL? Are there other stories to tell, other chapters being written? Former players have coached Super Bowl winners and
college national champions. NFL front offices are full of NFL vets. Fans love media personalities who graduated from the NFL: Michael Strahan, Troy Aikman, Howie Long, Terry Bradshaw, Boomer Esiason, and Herman Edwards, just to name a few. The list of NFL alums among successful local broadcasters is burgeoning as talk show radio and TV employ ex-jocks to talk sports 24/7, nonstop. While they’ve certainly capitalized on their football fame, there’s also a long list of serious actors among NFL alums, including Jim Brown, Fred Williamson, Merlin Olsen, Carl Weathers, and, of course, O.J.

But former players succeed offstage, too. Ex-Viking Alan Page is a justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court. Jack Kemp, formerly of the Chargers and Bills, was a nine-term congressman from New York and U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Steve Largent and Heath Schuler were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Duane Benson, member of the “badass” Oakland Raiders, was a Minnesota state senator. There’s a catalog of other successful professionals—physicians, dentists, attorneys, and educators, among others—who’ve launched successful second careers after the NFL. Willie Davis, Jerry Richardson, and Eugene Profit have made millions of dollars in business and investments. Herbert Blumer, an All-Pro for the Chicago Cardinals in 1929, went on to become one of the foremost sociologists of all time.

In light of these contradictory stories, the question “Is there life after football?” demands a complex and nuanced answer. Perhaps several answers. The recent cascade of tales of lives gone awry has predisposed the popular media and sports journalists to emphasize the perils of both playing and retiring from football. But these hazards have been around for a long time. For decades, former NFL players have complained—sometimes bitterly—of being discarded and forsaken. They contend that both the league and their own union have abandoned retired players once they can’t produce on the field. Many have decried the NFL’s and NFLPA’s indifference to the plight of old-timers, and the media have been especially eager to offer sensationalized accounts, sometimes corroborated with poignant, sympathetic personal stories. But the media tend
to bury more mundane success stories in the process, leaving the public with little but visions of life after football as a cataclysmic mess. And they rarely have the patience for nuanced answers. Why do relatively young, capable men who are seemingly on top of the world so frequently fall off the cliff after retirement? Why has the lucrative financial situation of NFL players not translated into rich lives after football? What are most lives after football really like?

*Is There Life after Football?* offers an “insider’s” look at the challenges facing NFL players when they leave the game, but it also provides an analytic distance from which to approach the many paradoxes of NFL life. The book draws upon the experience and stories of hundreds of former players as they describe their lives after their playing days are over. But it also incorporates stories about their playing careers, as well as times before entering the NFL, to provide context for understanding their current situations. The research is inspired by the NFL life and “afterlife” of former player George Koonce. Koonce initiated the project with his doctoral research on the “life course” of professional football players. This research draws upon his many years of experience in and around the NFL and its players, as well as a decade coming to grips with his own retirement. Koonce was a starting linebacker on the Green Bay Packers’ Super Bowl teams of the 1990s. He also spent a year with the Seattle Seahawks at the end of his career. After continuing his education—he now has a master’s degree from East Carolina University and a Ph.D. from Marquette University—he returned to Green Bay to work for the Packers in a number of off-field capacities, such as director of player development. Koonce also held positions in the athletic and advancement departments at Marquette, and served as director of athletics at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. He is currently the vice president of advancement at Marian University. His involvement with retired players has deepened as a result of his research, and he is presently a member of the National Football League Player Engagement Advisory Board.

In a sense, Koonce is the consummate “participant observer”—a researcher who has been embedded in his research subject most of his
life. He's an authentic insider who has seen and done it all. Koonce's observations and insights inform the analysis throughout the book. In addition, the other authors (Jim Holstein and Rick Jones, both sociologists at Marquette) spent dozens of hours interviewing Koonce, conducting in-depth life history interviews. These interview data also appear throughout the book, with Koonce's stock of experiential knowledge of football, the NFL, and retirement supplying the empirical bedrock for this study. In addition, the book draws upon dozens of formal, in-depth life history interviews as well as many more informal interviews conducted with former NFL players—players with experience on a variety of teams, from different eras, playing different positions, from diverse social, economic, and racial backgrounds, and experiencing varying degrees of success and financial reward in the NFL. Several other academic studies of NFL players, former players, and their families also provide revealing first-hand data. Finally, the book draws on narratives and interviews on retirement-related issues from a wide variety of media sources, citing hundreds of players.\textsuperscript{12}

The sports and entertainment media provide plenty of sensationalized, sweeping generalizations and judgmental conclusions about life after football. An anecdote here and there is usually deemed sufficient to warrant the claims. But an empirically narrow, predetermined focus often distorts players’ lived realities. It’s likely to ignore complexity and discount the mundane. Life after football is as complex and variegated as it is in any other segment of society. It’s just lived in a spotlight, or under a microscope, but there’s more to discover if we recognize and honor the complexity, nuance, and paradoxes of ex-players’ lives that defy easy characterization.\textsuperscript{13}

Recently, head injuries have been the big story. Prior to that, money dominated the discussion, with reports of monumental TV deals and collective bargaining agreements juxtaposed with lurid tales of profligate spending and bankruptcy. Crime, domestic violence, social relationships, sexuality, isolation, and addiction claimed the sidebars. But none of these issues emerges in a vacuum. Nor do they develop in stereotypic lockstep
with media images. Like everyone else in 21st-century America, former
NFL players live at the complicated intersection of race, social class, gen-
der, and the economy. Everyone faces the mundane challenges of getting
by from day to day in a world of jobs, bills, ailments, and relationships.
Life after football is no different. If the challenges are distinctive, it’s due
in large part to the radical social changes that players encounter when
they exit the game. When NFL players leave football, they encounter a
version of culture shock. They aren’t just retiring from a job or a career.
They’re leaving a way of life, entering a world that is foreign to them.
They know the language—sort of—but they speak a distinctive dialect.
They’ve seen the sights from afar, but they’re no longer tourists or disin-
terested onlookers. Now they live in the neighborhood. The world after
football for some players is so different from what they’ve experienced
for their entire adult lives that it leaves them disoriented.

NFL players are tough, talented, and well-compensated. Their lives
revolve around competition and commitment. Violence and injury lurk
around every corner. Teamwork, loyalty, and camaraderie are transcen-
dent themes, juxtaposed with individual glory and respect. Beyond ques-
tion, the NFL is a man’s world, where masculine pride and character are
constantly challenged. Even though players occupy the spotlight much
of the time, they also occupy a private world, shielded, if not isolated,
from the mundane world of everyday life around them. They live in a
“fishbowl”—an arena where they are scrutinized, but also insulated from
many of the routine demands of everyday life.

When a player leaves the league, everything changes. It’s not just the
money or the lifestyle. The codes and principles by which players live in
the NFL bubble no longer apply. Players are no longer part of the locker
room culture. Everything they’re used to is up for grabs. But old ways
die hard; the NFL imprint is deep. How players adapt to radical post-
career changes can be excruciatingly personal, even if they might seem
avoidable, trivial, or absurd to outsiders. On top of that, former players
are challenged daily to work things out at the intricate nexus of celebrity
and oblivion.
George Koonce’s personal story provides a point of departure for examining these changes. As informative as his accounts are, however, they aren’t definitive. Instead, his experience provides the narrative anchor for telling the broader range of players’ stories. Koonce faced his fair share of challenges and changes. He’s met with plenty of setbacks and successes. But his story isn’t everyone’s story. Sometimes it confirms broader patterns; sometimes it serves as instructive counterpoint.

To grasp the range of challenges, we must carefully consider what life was like while players were still in the game, as well as the standards to which ex-players compare their post-NFL experience. Players’ lives both before the NFL and while they played serve as the backdrop for their lives after football. Understanding how players carve their niches within the NFL and embody the game’s culture helps us to appreciate how they make their peace with life after football.