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In N.F.L. Fight, Women Lead the Way

By ALAN SCHWARZ

Those who have followed the debate over the risks of sports concussions nodded knowingly Monday when its most significant legal action to date was brought by a woman.

Eleanor Perfetto's worker's compensation claim on behalf of her husband, Ralph Wenzel, asserted that his early-onset dementia was an occupational hazard of his seven seasons as a lineman in the N.F.L. Having heard league officials say for years that high rates of dementia in former players either did not exist or could not be ascribed to football, Perfetto, who has a Ph.D. in public health, said she wanted to end all doubt in the courts.

Perfetto, who declared herself "one very pushy broad" while testifying before the House Judiciary Committee last October, is one of six women from diverse backgrounds who have redirected the discussion of brain trauma. They range from players' family members to a former team president, from a congresswoman to a leading neuropathologist.

"There is a sense of: 'What is she doing here? She doesn't belong,' " said Representative Linda T. Sanchez, Democrat of California, whose blunt criticism of the N.F.L.'s concussion policies during last fall's Congressional hearing led to changes in league protocol. "People underestimate you, and it makes you very powerful.

"That's something that's afoot here with these women. The N.F.L. is so male and macho and testosterone-dominated, I don't think they figured that women were going to be a force to be reckoned with in this thing, and they're finding out the hard way."

Dr. Ann McKee, a leading neuropathologist at Boston University School of Medicine, has been the primary doctor to identify trauma-induced damage in the brains of former players, and to dispassionately connect that damage to football.

Gay Culverhouse, the former president of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, not only blistered the league's playing down those findings before Congress, but also began a foundation to assist players in need.

The eloquent personal appeals of Sylvia Mackey, the wife of the former N.F.L. tight end John Mackey, who was almost bankrupted by his early-onset dementia, persuaded the league and the union to start an assistance plan for families like theirs.

And much of the recent reform to concussion management — which extends to state legislatures covering high school sports — might never have been made without the efforts of Kwana Pittman, a niece of Andre Waters, the former N.F.L. safety who killed himself in 2006. Pittman persuaded reluctant relatives to allow an analysis of Waters's brain tissue, and the finding of rampant damage made football's concussion problem national news.

In recent interviews about their roles in the evolving discussion of football brain trauma, none of the six women condemned the sport, and most called themselves fans — just with a dash of compassion and clarity.

As Culverhouse put it: “Men look at the violence and they say, ‘Oh, yeah!’ When someone gets hurt, women say, ‘Oh, no!’ ”

A Search for Responsibility

Women have long shuddered at football’s inherent brutality. In November 1909, a New Jersey football game between Montclair Military Academy and Montclair High School was canceled just before kickoff. The New York Times later wrote, “The mother of nearly every one of the high school’s team had visited Principal H. W. Dutsch and informed him that if he permitted the game to be played and their sons were injured, they should hold him personally responsible.”

Responsibility is what Pittman also sought after her uncle’s suicide. She had watched Waters, her mother’s brother, transform from upbeat and playful to profoundly depressed in only a few years before he shot himself in the head in November 2006. Grieving, she received a startling call a few weeks later from Chris Nowinski, a former Harvard football player and professional wrestler looking into the effects of concussions. Nowinski asked her if researchers could examine pieces of Waters’s brain.

“I took some biology courses and I was interested in anatomy, so that helped, I think,” said Pittman, a middle school teacher in West Palm Beach, Fla. “My family and I, we couldn’t understand why Uncle Andre did this. We wanted some answers, and Chris promised that it would help people. I wanted to keep this from happening to other families.”

Nowinski said: “She could have hung up the phone. She could have not followed through by convincing her family to sign off on it. But Kwana really came through, and it changed everything.”

Waters was the third former N.F.L. player to have his brain identified with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative disease whose only known cause is repetitive trauma. But it was his death, and the subsequent finding of trauma, that produced headlines and catalyzed debate.

McKee was not involved in the Waters case but was immediately drawn to the study of football brain trauma. She grew up a rabid Green Bay Packers fan in Appleton, Wis., idolizing the star safety Willie Wood, who now has dementia.

With two older brothers who were star football players, she recalled: “I used to play football in the summers. I used to run the tires with the guys during practice. I remember being told I should have been a boy.”

Now one of the nation’s leading neuropathologists, McKee was approached by Nowinski’s group to examine football players’ brains. One pleasure of the otherwise ghoulish process, she said, was speaking to the players’ widows and helping them understand better what had happened to their husbands.

“The tissue teaches us,” McKee said. “The men are not alive, but there’s a sense of existence. I do feel like John McHale, John Grimsley, Wally Hilgenberg, these men are still speaking to us. I help them explain things to their wives.”

Culverhouse is speaking to her father, in a way, by criticizing how the N.F.L. has handled the concussion debate. She described her father, Hugh, as the typical N.F.L. owner of his era — in football for glory and money and

male fraternity, she said, “with no regard for the players’ health.” Culverhouse said she saw players shot with cortisone on the sideline and routinely sent back on the field after serious concussions.

“I think my father made some very poor choices — I’m embarrassed for the choices he made,” Culverhouse said. Asked if she felt guilty, she said: “None of us knew what was going on, really. Now I’ll stand in front of a truck to make things right.”

Her foundation, the Gay Culverhouse Players’ Outreach Program, has identified two dozen former players whom she is helping to fill out disability paperwork. One of those players, the former tight end Jimmie Giles, said with a laugh, “Her daddy would slap her.”

While Culverhouse and Perfetto have been vocal from the outside, Sylvia Mackey has taken a more conciliatory tone from inside the N.F.L.’s innermost circles. Partly because John Mackey was a union leader, she has always known management well; today she considers herself friends with Commissioner Roger Goodell and his wife, Jane. She sat with them and Gen. David H. Petraeus at the Super Bowl in 2009.

The 88 Plan, the N.F.L.’s dementia assistance program begun in February 2007 and named after John Mackey’s uniform number, derived from Sylvia Mackey’s letter to the former commissioner Paul Tagliabue in which she pleaded for help with her husband’s “slow, deteriorating, ugly, caregiver-killing, degenerative, brain-destroying tragic horror.” In dozens of interviews, she has always expressed gratitude for the plan without criticizing the N.F.L., complementing Perfetto’s more pointed activism.

“I love Eleanor — it fits her personality, not mine,” said Mackey, who considered filing a worker’s compensation claim for her husband a few years ago. She said the papers remained in a desk drawer, blank.

“When you’re fighting a fight, or you’re trying to win fair benefits and recognition, you need different types of people on different roads going for the same thing,” Mackey said. “I feel I get more with sugar than with vinegar. But we need her personality on our side.”

Perfetto’s personality is summed up in one statement: “I don’t care if the commissioner of the N.F.L. is mad at me.”

She has watched men defer to the N.F.L.’s power structure from their own playing days and dreams. But the wives of players with dementia regard their relationship with football as personal. After husbands live the dreams, the wives live the nightmares.

It’s Up to the Women

But what if men were to find that a woman’s product — cosmetics, for example — were dangerous? Would the husbands fight for change as passionately?

“I don’t think so,” said Perfetto, a senior policy director at Pfizer. “I think it’s the way women handle health issues. If it were all women who were sick, it would probably be a lot of women taking care of them. That’s kind of how health issues are handled in our society.”

In a Congressional hearing regarding football head injuries last October, McKee, Culverhouse and Perfetto provided some of the most compelling testimony, and Sanchez made many of the most damning remarks toward the N.F.L.

Meanwhile, Representative Lamar S. Smith, Republican of Texas, played down the scientific findings that led to the hearing; Representative Ted Poe, another Texas Republican, rued “the end of football as we know it.”

Sitting in her Congressional office months later, after the N.F.L. and many state legislatures had adopted rules to make football safer, Sanchez smiled.

“In some instances, you have to be the outsider to be the person who advocates for change — the person who’s not part of the status quo,” Sanchez said. “That’s something the women in this share in common. We’re this outside element, and we’re tough. And we’re not going to be pushed around.”