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A Former College Lineman Now on the Streets, Looking for Answers, and Help

Ryan Hoffman, a U.N.C. Football Player Two Decades Ago, Is Now Homeless

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Struggling on the Streets

Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

By [JULIET MACUR](#)

LAKELAND, Fla. — With sunset minutes away, the man in the neon yellow knit hat took his usual spot here at a busy intersection. Across from a Publix supermarket and on the edge of a Circle K parking lot, he sat against a streetlight holding a worn cardboard sign with dirt-stained hands that could easily palm a basketball.

“Lost Job. Laid Off. Homeless.”

Here was the man I had been looking for.

At the urging of his family, I had tracked him down after a string of texts to several prepaid cellphones kept — and lost — by this man, who is plagued with short-term memory problems. For weeks, I had wondered what he would be like and how many details he could remember from his former life, which he had abandoned — or which maybe had abandoned him? — years ago.

And now, here he was, looking forlorn in the fading light, his big, blank blue eyes beseeching drivers for a dollar or two. Each time cash appeared through a car window, he sprinted there, retrieved the bills with a “God bless,” and just about skipped back to his spot by the lamppost. “I really don’t want to do this,” he said, “but I have to. Gotta eat.”



A plaque showing Ryan Hoffman in 1997, during his senior year at North Carolina. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

His life wasn’t always like this. Nearly 20 years and more than 100 pounds ago, this panhandler in the yellow knit cap, Ryan Hoffman, was a hulking offensive lineman for a college football team ranked in the top 10, a starting player renowned for his toughness and durability. Now his

old Levis are so big that even a belt on its ninth notch can't keep them from sagging below his hips.

“Look, I'm still in tiptop physical shape and can probably run a marathon,” Hoffman said, the words tumbling out of a mouth missing a tooth that was knocked out in a street fight. “It's my brain that keeps me from being a productive member of society. I'm physically very strong, but I'm mentally so weak. Something is wrong with me. I don't know what it is, but I used to be normal, you know?”

“I'm confident — well, I'm pretty sure — that football had something to do with it.”

Football's toll on its participants is well established. We know about dozens of former N.F.L. players who were left with severe brain damage from repeated blows to the head. Their stories often contain disturbingly similar details — depression, substance abuse, memory loss, dementia — and their brain damage was always revealed posthumously.

But there are many more former players out there wondering if they are football's next casualties. Most of those players are not famous. Most never made a dime off the game. They are relatively anonymous men who played the sport in college and only later, for some reason or another, have found themselves struggling in life.

Just like their N.F.L. counterparts, Hoffman and those former college players have been left to wonder: Did football do this? Are the hits to the head I took the reason for my decline? Or would I be in this condition even if I'd never played a down?

They might never know the answer, because a definitive answer might not exist.

Hoffman blames football for scrambling his brain, but at this point it is impossible to disentangle what could be football-related brain injuries from his subsequent drug use and possibly genetic mental illness. He simply cannot be sure. No one can.

He and players like him are faced with the same terrifying uncertainty as former pros. Yet none of them will benefit from the \$765 million settlement the N.F.L. has agreed to pay to thousands of its former players, and few of them can expect much help.

Spun out of a college football system that makes billions of dollars for the N.C.A.A. and its member universities, these former college athletes are little more than collateral damage.

“Those are the players who are being left behind in this whole concussion debate and, unfortunately for some of them, it's a life-or-death issue,” said Ramogi Huma, president of the National College Players Association, the newly formed college players union. “But even if the N.C.A.A. paid a billion-dollar settlement, it may not be enough to help all the college players suffering right now. There are just too many of them.”

Making Sense of It All

Hoffman, 40, is about as far from the game as one can be. For more than eight months, he has been homeless. He has been stabbed. He has been shot. He acknowledges addictions to alcohol and prescription medication. He has served time in jail. He has sold his blood for \$20 to \$30 a pop, and has sold drugs, too. But sometimes even that is not enough to buy food; he once was arrested for stealing an eight-piece fried chicken bucket from a supermarket.

Once upon a time, though, Hoffman was a football star, a 6-foot-5, 287-pound left tackle at the [University of North Carolina](#), the ironman on a team that went 11-1 and sent a half-dozen players to long careers in the N.F.L. In 1997, his final college season, he played nearly every snap. His position coach, Eddie Williamson, called him “the epitome of an offensive lineman:” physical, durable, driven.



An undated photo of Hoffman provided by his mother, Irene. “If Ryan can’t get help soon,” she said, “I’m afraid we’ll find him dead on the side of the road.”

But when his dream to play in the N.F.L. never materialized, Hoffman stumbled into the real world, and he has failed to right himself ever since.

The pattern of his downfall is not unique. It is football’s ongoing problem.

At the Sports Legacy Institute, which studies sports-related brain trauma and its aftereffects, more and more phone calls are flooding in from former college players (or their families) concerned that football has damaged their ability to live normal lives.

“They’re starting to connect the dots because the players are literally watching themselves change,” said Chris Nowinski, one of the institute’s founders. Nowinski said he used to field the calls himself, but now needs help because of the volume.

Hoffman’s sister and only sibling, Kira Soto, was the first person to make the connection between football and her brother’s radical changes in behavior. After seeing reports about chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a brain disease caused by repeated hits to the head, Soto researched its symptoms. Depression. Sensitivity to light. Memory loss. Impulse control. Aggression. With every sentence, she could feel her stomach lurch. She was reading a description of her brother.

“That’s exactly when I thought: ‘Oh my God, football. Football did this to Ryan,’ ” she said. Their mother, Irene, felt relieved that the family finally had an answer. Their father, Chad, said that while mental illness runs in the family and could have contributed to Ryan’s decline, he also believes football has permanently damaged his son.

The problem is that it cannot be conclusive that Ryan has C.T.E. because not everyone with it exhibits symptoms of it, and because it can only be diagnosed after a person’s death. Hoffman’s family members fear they might learn the truth sooner than later.

“If Ryan can’t get help soon,” Irene Hoffman said, “I’m afraid we’ll find him dead on the side of the road.”

Promise, and Then Problems

Ryan Hoffman’s memory is flimsy. Just hours after I met him at a seafood place for lunch here in January, he told me that he was not hungry because he had just been to a great seafood place. He suggested I try it. But he does remember things about his life as a football player.

“You try to hold on to those memories when they’re all you’ve got,” he said.

Hoffman took up the game as a high school freshman and pushed through the hard hits and the headaches and the time he vomited several times on the team bus riding home from a particularly physical game. Soon the recruiters from the top college programs came calling. Nebraska. Florida State. Alabama.

Hoffman, with the help of meticulous research by his father, a management consultant, picked North Carolina. But what his parents did not realize was that Ryan was about to become another interchangeable piece in America’s football machine. Once he arrived on campus, he was just a number — in his case a Carolina blue 79 — but Ryan reveled in it.

“I thought I’d just play my sport, then make the N.F.L. and go live in some big mansion,” he said.



Hoffman gathering his blankets from where he slept in between the doors of a closed restaurant in Lakeland, Fla. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

Hoffman recalled having only one concussion, during his junior year, but couldn't remember the details. He said he might have had others, too, but never complained because he feared losing his starting position. He never thought about the consequences.

Yet by his final season, Hoffman said he noticed his mind had begun to warp, and that antisocial thoughts — punching strangers, drinking and driving — had begun to creep in. When Soto visited him that year, she also noticed something odd: Hoffman had lined up clear plastic bags around his bedroom, spaced perfectly apart, containing things like his keys and his notebooks.

“I asked him why he was acting so weird — why the Ziplocs? — and he said, ‘It’s the only way I can mentally remember where things are,’ ” she said.

“Looking back,” she said, “he probably felt himself losing control.”

Lost Without Football

Maybe Hoffman was too small to be a pro. Maybe he wasn't fast enough. Whatever the reason, no N.F.L. team called Hoffman during the draft or afterward, and by the spring of 1998 his football career was over — just as it was for the thousands of other players that year (and in other years) who didn't make the step up to the N.F.L.

Many went on to productive careers and happiness outside football. Some were not as fortunate.

After graduation, Hoffman moved into his father's house in Florida, jobless and without direction. He struggled to sleep. He complained of headaches and dizziness and of hearing loud noises like shotgun blasts inside his head and of seeing flashing lights. In college, Hoffman's worst offenses were speeding tickets and fishing without a license. Now he was getting into fistfights on a regular basis, getting arrested, stealing, using marijuana, abusing Valium.

Doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong. They prescribed Xanax and Adderall, and diagnosed a laundry list of psychological disorders: depression, schizoaffective disorder, manic depression, borderline personality disorder, anger impulse control disorder.

His sister enrolled him in welding school and got him a job at a parasailing company. He worked in construction, then as a roofer, then at a mattress plant. He even fought in M.M.A., encouraged to do so by his father, who thought Hoffman's growing anger could be put to use there.

Nothing lasted, including his marriage. Hoffman divorced in 2008, and his daughter and stepson moved in with a grandmother. His life was unraveling like a tattered old Tar Heels jersey.

"I didn't have football anymore," Hoffman said, "so I felt lost."

Last summer, Chad Hoffman tried one last time to get his son back on track. He called in a favor from a friend to land Ryan an office job, but Ryan was a week late to the interview and then lost the position on the first day.

Exasperated, the father decided he could provide no more, either financially or emotionally. He had long worn one of Ryan's bejeweled bowl rings when he wanted to dress up, but now he ripped it from his finger and tossed it at his son.



Hoffman, right, with his girlfriend, Michelle Pettigrew, left, and a friend at a McDonald's in Lakeland. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

“When you’re ready to join me on this, we can move ahead together,” he recalled telling his son.

Ryan Hoffman left and never came back.

These days most of his things are tucked into one corner of his sister’s garage: a red bicycle that he had put together from used parts; a worn duffel bag from the Sun Bowl, now filled with sweatshirts and socks; a scuffed laptop; his rock collection. His worldly possessions now take up barely 10 square feet.

He considers himself lucky some nights if he can find an abandoned home where he can sneak in with his flattened cardboard box and thick gray mover’s blanket and settle into a restless sleep. Other nights, he naps on the concrete porch of a shuttered business, or in a dark field, keeping one eye open for police.

His family worries.

“How do you help someone you love so much, and who is so precious to you, who you’d give your life for, but who doesn’t want help and who can’t think straight anymore?” Chad Hoffman said, his eyes filling with tears. “Maybe you can’t.

“How did someone who had that much talent end up like Ryan? Maybe we’ll never find out.”

What Now?

How many parents of former college players are asking the same thing?

When I wrote last year about Rayfield Wright, the Hall of Fame offensive tackle, and his battle with early-onset dementia, more than a dozen emails arrived in my inbox from college players who empathized with him. Football had damaged their brains, too, they wrote.

But those players weren't N.F.L. Hall of Famers; most had been mere practice dummies or complementary players like Hoffman, comets who once dazzled on Saturdays nights but quickly fizzled out and disappeared from view.

Hoffman, picking up a used cigarette in the parking lot and lighting it, said he was not jealous of those who made the leap to the N.F.L. that he could not. The rosters of his college teams are littered with players who went on to long pro careers. Dre Bly. Alge Crumpler. Greg Ellis. Vonnie Holliday. One of Hoffman's old linemates, Jeff Saturday, went from Chapel Hill to Indianapolis, where he won a Super Bowl as Peyton Manning's longtime center.

Saturday told me he was shocked to hear that Hoffman was homeless and aimless now because Hoffman had been so focused in college. Hoffman was elated to hear that Saturday remembered him.

"I'm proud of those guys who made it," Hoffman said. "And, you know, maybe if I would have made it in the N.F.L., maybe I would've gotten paralyzed or something."



Hoffman collecting 2 dollars from a driver while panhandling in Lakeland. Credit Ángel Franco/The New York Times

Instead, he is paralyzed in other ways. Months after the police supposedly confiscated his identification last year, he has yet to apply for a new government I.D. Day after day he told me, “Yeah, maybe tomorrow I’ll go to the office to get one.”

Without an I. D., Hoffman can’t stay in a shelter, so he spends his days and nights looking for places to hang out for a while. His girlfriend, Michelle Pettigrew, lives on the street with him, and often snuggles next to him when he’s panhandling.

Hoffman has also befriended a 22-year-old high school dropout who told me he has a mental illness, is addicted to drugs and is occasionally suicidal. Hoffman said he feels a responsibility to keep Pettigrew and the young man safe. He is in charge of finding them a place to sleep every night. He said that duty gives him a purpose, but that he wants so much more.

“I really just want to get a job, so I can be a good father,” he said, wiping tears. “I don’t want my daughter to see me like this.”

Soto continues to seek help for him. At one point several years ago she reached out to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, who steered her to the University of South Florida. Hoffman said he underwent neuropsychological testing there, but his first visit there was also his last.

“Those doctors said there was definitely something there and that I should follow up with more tests, but I never did because I didn’t like them prodding,” he said. “I’m afraid they will tell me something I don’t want to hear.”

Instead of seeking regular medical help, Hoffman said he self-medicates, often by using his panhandling money to buy apple pie moonshine off the street or \$2 Modelos from convenience stores.

He said he felt “like a king” at North Carolina because of how football players were treated. Now, when he needs a shower, he drops by a friend’s house, maybe once a week. To use a toilet, he relies on gas stations and McDonald’s. He is losing weight, week by week, and is down to 185 pounds. The dimple that once graced his face is all but gone, not that there is much to smile about anymore.

His family lives about 200 miles northeast, a world away. Hoffman’s mother wires him \$20 here, \$100 there, mostly for new cellphones because Hoffman keeps losing his. She is desperate to keep tabs on him.

Before Christmas, she sent him a text on his girlfriend’s phone: Where are you now? Don’t give up. Ryan, I can’t assist you if I don’t hear from you. Need to hear from you, Ryan.

Hoffman responded: sorry. depressed and its got best of me. might not make it. i quit.

His mother wrote back: Where are you? Don't give up.

Hoffman: I need a phone. I'm miserable. i want to die.

"Sometimes, I just pray that a meteorite hits me," Hoffman told me. "I think about drinking until I die and just lay down. But I need money to get a drink, so I need to work. A little bit of me still thinks there's hope. I have some issues, but I'm still viable.

"I just need a little help. I just don't know how to get out of this myself."

Inside that shell of a man — a player turned panhandler whose spotlight is now a dim streetlight — there is still that athlete who doesn't want to quit.