

Sapp says he'll donate his brain for CTE research

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The changes are imperceptible, especially for men accustomed to ignoring the signals their bodies are sending as they struggle to play the game of football.

One day, though, something clicks. Maybe it's forgetfulness or emotions that cannot be controlled.

Warren Sapp, a 44-year-old hall of famer who played for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Oakland Raiders, has had that aha moment and it led him to decide to donate his brain for research into chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disease that can stem from serious or repeated hits to the head.

"I've also started to feel the effects of the hits that I took in my career. My memory ain't what it used to be," he said on the Players' Tribune website. "And yeah, it's scary to think that my brain could be deteriorating, and that maybe things like forgetting a grocery list, or how to get to a friend's house I've been to a thousand times are just the tip of the iceberg. So when it comes to concussions, CTE and how we can make our game safer for future generations, I wanted to put my two cents in --- to help leave the game better off than it was when I started playing."

Sapp's plan involves donating his brain to Boston's Concussion Legacy Foundation when he dies. Even as he admitted to playing "in a macho league," he was critical of owners and others who have refused to acknowledge the link between degenerative brain disease and playing football. Even as he sees the game moving in a safer direction and hopes that it continues to evolve, Sapp knows what his 12-year career has done to him.

"I decided I wanted to pledge my brain when I got an email from [former running back] Fred Willis that had quotes from NFL owners and down the line you could see: 'There's no correlation between football, CTE, suicides' and all of this foolish stuff," he said in a Players' Tribune video. "I mean, where are you getting this information from? And then spewing it out as if it's fact. I remember those month-long training camps where we just banged and banged and hit and it was 'who's tough?' and 'misery loves company' and all the foolish sayings we used to say to each other. I mean, it was just bad. It was Neanderthals. We were dinosaurs. We were doing Oklahoma drill [where players run at one another until one is on the ground], bull in the ring [players circle a player and throw themselves at him], all this crazy stuff that was just about a tough guy. It wasn't about how much skills you had. It was just the bare bones of bone-on-bone and that's not what this game should be. It's about skills."

Nick Buoniconti, the Miami Dolphins' 76-year-old Hall of Famer, describes a decline that leaves him feeling childlike. Telling Sports Illustrated that he has fallen, experienced memory loss and struggles to do things such as pull on a shirt and tie a necktie, he explains, "I feel lost." Sapp says he can relate to those feelings even though he's decades younger.

"We play in a macho league. We're talking about Hall of Famers who are immortalized forever, made busts, legends of the game. There's no way any of us wanna really admit that we can't remember how to get home or a grocery list that the wife has given us or how to go pick up our kids [at] the school or whatever it may be," he said. "You try to 'All right, I'm gonna get a little more sleep.' 'Maybe it's something I did last night.' 'Maybe [it's] something I drank' or whatever it is. You try to find a reason that it's not --- that it's my brain, that I'm not deteriorating right before my own eyes. It's the most frightening feeling, but it's also a very weakening feeling

because you feel like a child. I need help. I need somebody to help me find something that I could've found with my eyes closed, in the dead of night, half asleep."

Sapp is able to rely on technology as a mental crutch.

"I find myself at times, you know, now having to use my reminders in my phone because I had one of those silly memories. I used to call myself an elephant in the room. Never forget anything. Many, I wake up now and be like, 'Okay, what are we doing? let me get the phone,'" he said. "I mean, with the reminders in the phones, it really helped me get through my day with appointments and different things that I have to do because it's just, I just can't remember anymore like I used to. And it's from the banging we did as football players."

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