Tim Green fought ALS diagnosis until it nearly killed him, and now he's fighting back

By Zak Keefer
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SKANEATELES, N.Y. — He speaks with his eyes, staring long and hard into the screen in front of him, pupils dancing from one letter to the next until he's willed words into sentences and sentences into something more. The conversation crawls forward, stunted by long, uneasy stretches of silence, a quiet that's interrupted every few minutes by a machine that spits out his thoughts.

You wait while the eyes work.

The voice is his, close as it can be, culled from hundreds of hours of his own audiobooks. Breathtaking as the apparatus is, allowing him to continue two careers while living with a debilitating, fatal disease, it's also a devastating reminder of what's been taken from him. The pole, the cords, the screen, the wheelchair — they are the shackles of his new reality.

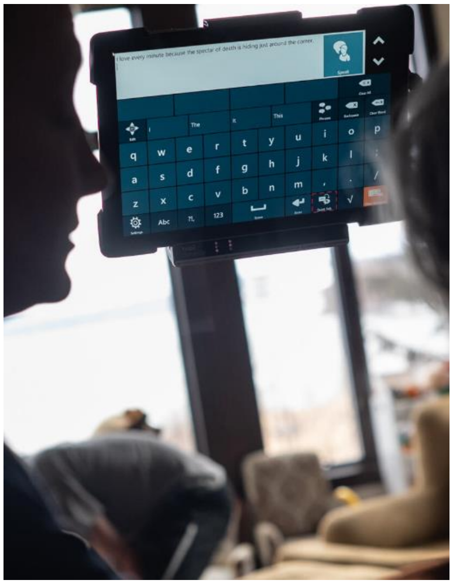
"All of this is hard," he musters. "The pain. The indignities."

It's a daily test of his resolve.

His mind, sharp as ever, is tethered to a body that's wasting away. It's the same body that used to crunch Emmitt Smith in the backfield and swallow Joe Montana for a sack. That body was his ticket, the game his vehicle, and Tim Green wrote an All-American story all his own: He was the star at Syracuse who became an eight-year pro with the Atlanta Falcons, the burly defensive end who'd read *War and Peace* on the bus before games then work on his novel on the flight home, the ex-jock with Kennedy looks who became an attorney, an author, a broadcaster, a TV host, a speaker, a husband to one and a father to five.

"He was Superman," his wife Illyssa says, staring out at the lake from their home. "Superman's not supposed to get ALS."

No, he's not, which is why at first, Tim wouldn't buy it. He refused. He wasn't about to utter those three terrible letters and wasn't about to let anybody in the house utter them either. After all, ALS patients aren't supposed to have career years at the law firm, aren't supposed to write *New York Times* bestsellers, aren't supposed to host "A Current Affair" and show up on CNN and coach the local football team and rep 100-pound dumbbells with their son in the basement.



A device allows Green to speak in his voice, the audio for which was pulled from hundreds of hours of his own audiobook narration. (Todd F. Michalek / *The Athletic*)

“I spent four years in denial,” he says now.

The hands were the first to go. The fingers. He’d fumble with his nail clippers, then brush it off. *Probably an old football injury*, he told himself. When he’d lift weights, he could hoist the dumbbells but couldn’t grip them. *Still strong as ever*.

Now, those hands are limp, resting on legs that spend all day in a wheelchair. His back will scream in pain. His ankles will throb. The worst comes after the trachea that keeps him breathing is scraped clean.

“Excruciating,” he calls it.

But the eyes? The eyes work just fine. His doctors have told him they’ll be the last to go.

His first instinct was to fight. The symptoms. The diagnosis. The truth.

“You have ALS,” a doctor told him in 2016.

“No I don’t,” Tim Green shot back.

He’d always been wired for conflict, relishing whatever battle — big or small — came next. He was that way in high school, where he wrestled his way to a state championship in the heavyweight division. Once, during a match, an opponent lost his cool and swung at him. Tim responded by hoisting his opponent above his shoulders and body-slamming him. That settled that.

He hated practice unless it was full-go, and that pissed off some teammates. Illyssa remembers what training camp was like in his playing days. She’d turn on the TV and cringe. “Every night it was, ‘Tim Green got in a fight, Tim Green got in a fight,'” she says.

He played angry, welcoming every hit he could find. His head would swell up so much during games that by the second half he wouldn’t be able to slip his helmet back on. (He’d often have to coat his head in Vaseline to do so.) Green once talked his way back on the field with a broken collarbone — “the bone was sticking out,” he recalls — and this was *after* he says the team doctor denied his request for a Xylocaine shot. His coach in Atlanta, Jerry Glanville, used to walk up to him on the sideline during the fourth quarter, see the bloodstains on his jersey, and ask if he was ready to finish the job.

"Can't wait!" Green would tell him.

"He hasn't been scared since the third-grade picnic," Glanville says now.

Green played in 99 games over eight seasons in the NFL, all for the Falcons. (Getty Images)

So the man's first impulse, standing inside a hand surgeon's office in New York City years later, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with him, then hearing those three terrible letters, was to dismiss and deny. He didn't have ALS. He *couldn't* have ALS.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease — slowly but steadily strips away muscle function throughout the body.

"Get your affairs in order," the doctor continued. "You might have as little as six months."

Illyssa stood next to him, stunned into silence. *ALS? My husband?*

They said nothing. They picked up their things. They left. "I don't wanna talk about it," Tim mumbled, so for the four-hour drive back to Skaneateles, neither said a word. He told the rest of the family the same: Don't bring it up, and don't tell anyone else, either.

For years, he looked for every excuse he could find. When he started losing the feeling in his fingers, he blamed those old football injuries. He'd broken his elbow and never had it fixed. *This must be it*, he told himself, so he had surgery on his ulnar nerve. Then he had two bones in his thumb fused together. Then he had surgery on his *other* elbow. No matter. Nothing helped. He was losing his hands. His arm was shrinking inside the cast, the pain intensifying. Eventually he got so tired of waiting for something to happen he took a knife out and cut off the cast himself.

During their daily workouts in the basement, Tim would have his middle son, Troy, balance those 100-pound dumbbells on his palms because Tim no longer could clench them. His strength was there — fading, but still there — but his motor function was slipping. At dinner, his speech would slur after a single glass of wine. Once, at an airport, he pulled Troy aside in a panic.

"My ankle … it's not coming up," he told him. "I'm lifting it, but it's not coming up."

He first refused a wheelchair, then refused to have a tube inserted into his throat to keep him breathing. “He didn’t wanna give an inch,” Troy remembers. “If you walked into our house back then, even after the diagnosis, you’d literally have no clue he had ALS.”

But by 2018, there was no escaping it. The disease would not relent. One night around 1 a.m. the family had to rush him to the hospital; Tim was blue in the face, barely able to breathe. It was a double pulmonary embolism. Both lungs were clogged.

The doctors intubated him overnight. He woke up a day later and wanted out.

“I’m going home,” he told them.

But they wouldn’t let him. The carbon dioxide levels in his blood, they finally learned, were triple what they should be. He was about to die.

“A typical person’s range is between 22 and 29,” Troy says. “At 40, most people are unconscious. At 50, most are dead.”

His dad’s were north of 60.

The doctors intubated Tim again overnight, hoping his CO2 levels would drop. It didn’t work.

“He needs a tracheostomy *now*,” a doctor told him a day later.

Tim wouldn’t budge.

“Screw this,” he said. “We’re leaving.”

“Tim, if you don’t get the trach right now, do you know what that means?” the doctor asked.

“I’m not doing it,” he said.

The doctor began to tear up. Then she left the room.

The decision whether to let Ty (left) play football later served as inspiration for Tim’s latest book, *Final Season*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller. (Courtesy of the Green family)

To Tim Green, the trach meant surrender. For a man who’d won all his life — in sports, in his countless careers, in *everything* — it was something he couldn’t stomach. He’d seen a documentary on Steve Gleason, a former safety with the Saints who'd been diagnosed with ALS and was now in a wheelchair, breathing through a tube, and he'd told himself that was no way to live. To Tim, the breathing tube felt like waving the white flag at a disease that would mercilessly and relentlessly tear him down. It was letting an offensive tackle drive him into the turf.

He'd rather die.

Troy listened to the doctors tell him his dad might not make it another day, maybe even another hour. Then he pulled up a chair.

"Listen," Troy told his dad, "nobody gives a shit about your body. Nothing we need revolves around you being what you once were. I've got kids. I need to know how to raise my kids. I need to ask you those things."

Tim stayed silent.

"We don't need your body," Troy continued. "We need your brain … your heart … your soul. *That's* what we need, and we're not ready to lose that."

Four years later, sitting in a wheelchair, breathing through a tube, staring into a screen, Tim Green listens to his middle son — he calls Troy his "life coach" — tell the story once more. Why'd he give in? What made Tim finally change his mind?

The eyes start dancing again.

A few minutes later, he speaks.

"It was a great argument."

He won't blame football. He probably should. Deep down, he knows he's paying the cost for all those hits all those years ago. But outwardly he holds no hostility toward the game.

He reveres it.

"It's a beautiful sport," Tim says.

He was 10 years old when his junior league coach, Ron Kelly, called him out in front of the entire team. "Tim, you're gonna be my ticket to the NFL," the coach told him. Years later, Tim invited Kelly to a game against his favorite team, the Giants. Tim sacked Phil Simms that day, and the two of them caught up afterward. "This was a dream come true," Kelly beamed.

Three months later, Kelly was dead of brain cancer.

"When he said I was his ticket, I believed him," Tim, 58, says now.

He was a two-sport star in high school who had to turn down Ivy League offers because his parents — dad worked at a power company, mom was a schoolteacher — couldn't afford tuition; this was long before the schools offered athletic scholarships. Tim would have to carve his own path. So he did. He landed at Syracuse, signing on to play defensive line for George O'Leary, the same coach he'd had at Liverpool High School, about 10 miles north of the Syracuse campus. O'Leary still remembers the night Green committed. After making him sweat for a few weeks, and refusing to give him an answer, Tim showed up at his door at 11 p.m. holding a bottle of champagne.

"Coach, I'm coming," he said. "I just wanted to bust your chops for all the times you busted mine on the field."

He became an All-American and the Falcons' first-round pick in 1986. He bought a red Mazda Rx7 after his rookie season and spent that first summer "driving it 95 miles an hour," drinking and partying. But it left him empty and unfulfilled, wanting and needing more. He begged Illyssa, whom he'd met back at Syracuse, to come to visit him in Atlanta. "I was gonna stay one night at first," she says, "and I ended up staying three weeks." He started writing commentaries for NPR and columns for his hometown newspaper. During his second NFL season, he began work on his first novel, writing some chapters on the flights to and from road games, hauling his bulky laptop with him.

"I wanted to be something more than an English major who played football," he says.

Troy holds up his father's jersey at the Carrier Dome in 2019. Green is the first Syracuse defensive football player to have his jersey retired. (Courtesy of SU Athletics)

He was. Glanville remembers catching Green buried in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* on the bus ride to a game in Washington. "I looked over at our other defensive end," the coach says, "and he was reading a comic book." Green became one of Glanville's all-time favorites: ferocious on the practice field, a monster on Sundays, a model pro during the week. During his second season, in 1991, Glanville found himself saddled with a brash, immature rookie quarterback. What to do with him? He pulled the kid aside one day and gave him strict orders: Follow Tim Green around for a week. Then you'll learn.

"Watch 99," Glanville urged Brett Favre. "That's how an NFL player's supposed to act."

By 1994, Green was weighing what was next. Fox Sports — new to the NFL broadcasting world — called to gauge his interest in the TV booth. Tim auditioned the same day as Joe Buck and lasted 10 years at the network, leaving only because he was tired of missing weekends at home with the kids. It was his springboard into television; he'd go on to host a reboot of "A Current Affair" and a few reality shows. In his spare time, he worked as an attorney at an upstate firm.

But his real passion was writing. He wrote one book, then another, then another, never tiring of the thrill. To date, he's published more than 40, including one with Yankees legend Derek Jeter.

"His résumé reads like five different people's lives," Troy says. "If I'd accomplished half of what he's accomplished, I'd probably have it tattooed on my face."

Yet even while he juggled two or three (or four) careers, Tim always felt the pull of home. The fiery on-field persona that made him such a destructive defensive end belied the man he was off the field, away from the cameras: a father who relentlessly poured himself into his five children. “They are our magnum opus,” he says of Thane (a family therapist), Troy (who runs the family’s real estate properties), Tessa (a veterinarian), Tate (currently in a two-year internship with the NFL) and Ty (a high school freshman).

Tim used to race through airports after TV shoots to make it home in time for dinner. When “A Current Affair” asked him to relocate to New Jersey, he swiftly declined. Skaneateles, a picturesque village on one of the Finger Lakes, was home. He coached his kids in every sport they signed up for. When Thane wanted to try hockey, Tim took him to the ice rink every day for two weeks so he could learn how to skate. “Tim had no idea what he was doing,” Illyssa says, laughing at the memory. “He couldn’t skate at all. He’d be out there on the ice with a walker, barely able to stand up while people are whizzing by him right and left. He didn’t care.”

He’d drive the kids to school each morning, then show up two hours later and read to their class. When he coached his sons in football, he bought every player on the team new equipment. When Illyssa was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006, he shaved his head in support — even though she didn’t end up having to do chemotherapy. “He called every doctor he could find and drove me to every single appointment himself,” she says.

An English major who played football? Tim Green became more. A close friend, Falcons owner Arthur Blank, calls him “one of the truly great Renaissance men you’ll meet once in your life.” Their paths first crossed in the early 2000s, after The Home Depot co-founder had purchased the team and was so impressed with Green’s commentary during games that he decided to call him up out of the blue.

“Give me your analysis of our team,” Blank said. “What do you like? What do you see?”

They grew tight over the years. Tim would call after games. The families would vacation together in the summers. These days, Blank calls Tim “almost like a brother.” He flies the entire family down to Atlanta a few times a year for Falcons games, and he stays in touch with his old friend via email.

“He does it with his eyes, I do it with my fingers,” Blank says, “and he probably still does it better.

“Sometimes, it’s hard to tell how strong someone is, not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally. If you wanna look up a picture of a fighter, you’ll see a picture of Rocky and a picture of Tim Green.”

Falcons owner Arthur Blank with the Green family. Blank calls Tim “almost like a brother.” (Courtesy of the Green Family)

Everything changed after they met Dr. Merit Cudkowicz, chief neurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and one of the nation’s leading ALS experts. The family still bristles over what that first doctor told them, back in 2016, that Tim might only have six months left, that he better get his affairs in order because time was running out.

“He was dead-fucking-wrong,” Troy says now. “That was six years ago. *Six* years ago.”

Tim has a slow-progressing form of ALS, and Cudkowicz says the dire “six months to live” prognosis happens far too frequently. “No one can predict how long someone will live with this illness,” she says. She’s also not ready to lay his fate solely on football. Though American football players are four times more likely to get ALS, she says, but the vast majority do not get it.

“Everyone assumes it’s the head trauma, and a number of (research) papers show that,” Cudkowicz says. “But it’s not enough. It’s one of the risk factors, but there’s no way to truly know.”

She started seeing him a year into the diagnosis, back in 2017, and her words eased the family’s early concerns. There were ways to slow the progress, for starters: clinical trials, therapy sessions, daily exercise. Tim attacks his workouts — stretching sessions from his wheelchair — like he did as a rookie with the Falcons. “He has this positive energy and a purpose — he fights,” Cudkowicz says. “If you could bottle that up and share it with every ALS patient, it’d be incredibly valuable.”

Tim keeps his days full, stimulated by what he can still accomplish. He spends most mornings responding to emails, his wheelchair parked in the middle of his spacious living room, facing the lake. Later, he jumps on Microsoft Teams calls with the law firm, speaking up every few minutes.

He carves out time in the afternoon to write, same as he always has. He holes himself in his office, laboring on word after word, sentence after sentence. It’s an arduous process. Chapters used to take a day. Now they take a month.

So, he’s asked: Why keep writing?

“Because I can’t imagine not writing,” he says with a smile.

He fell in love with reading as an 8-year-old; it was a *Hardy Boys* book that first hooked him. “Magic,” he calls it. “I wanted to grow up and make magic.”

So he does. His most recent work, *Final Season*, became a No. 1 *New York Times* children’s middle-grade bestseller. He just finished his memoir. He’s been at it for almost three years.

A New York Times bestselling author, Green has written more than 40 books. (Todd F. Michalek / *The Athletic*)

Sure, there are things he deeply misses: a smooth Cabernet, watching the sunrise with a warm cup of coffee, long walks with his wife. His condition requires daily, around-the-clock care. Green said his insurance company recently informed him that the level of care he needs would no longer be covered under his plan. He grew irate. He can afford the additional expenses but knows most ALS patients can’t.

He says no more on the topic.

“We’ll be able to talk more if they deny our appeal,” he says, the fight simmering inside him. “Then we may go to war.”

Most of his kids live on the same lakeside street with their families. Troy runs the family’s real estate business, which has faced criticism from New York officials in recent years over safety issues that exacerbated during the pandemic. The family says it has changed property management to address the concerns and is currently renovating the properties.

All of them gather a few times a week. The growing number of grandkids scamper about in the living room. “My favorite part of the day,” Tim calls it. “When they’re all over screaming with delight.”

The tablet keeps him connected. He stares into it, willing words into life, and when he wants to speak a device developed by a Canadian startup called Lyrebird translates it into his voice.

He meets virtually with Dr. Cudkowicz once a month. They email regularly, and Tim always signs off with the same three words: “You’re an angel.” It brings a smile to her face each time. She says the average patient lives 3-5 years with ALS; he’s well into year six. With an influx in trial drugs — many of which Tim has participated in — plus additional research and funding, the limits of the disease are being reimagined.

Cudkowicz is even willing to go this far: “He could live a normal lifespan.”

Troy actually expects it. He sees his father's fight every day. He doesn't see him losing.

"My best bet," Troy says, thinking on it for a moment, "is that he dies of old age *and* that he happens to have ALS. Maybe I'm sounding arrogant, but I'm not just some kid who looks up to his dad. He's my best friend. Literally, my best friend. Every time he's been faced with adversity, he's won.

"I can't see him dying of ALS. I just can't see it. I think it's gonna take a whole lot more than this to take that son of a bitch out."

The argument started the day their youngest son came home with a question.

"The football coach asked me if I could play for the team this year," Ty told his parents. "What do you think?"

He was 13, blessed with his father's size and speed, drawn to the game his family has seen both beauty and horror in. Football was Tim Green's launching pad; it gave him the life he'd dreamt of since he was 10 years old. Almost four decades later, he believes it has stolen everything but his mind.

Still, Ty should play if he wants to, Tim argued. The game is safer. The game can offer so much.

"Look at what it did for me," he told them.

Illyssa wouldn't hear it.

"He had *no* point," she says now, still bristling over the thought. "There's so many other things Ty could do. He doesn't *need* football."

Ty played two seasons of youth football, but not on defense — that was part of the negotiation. Mom held firm. He's now a freshman in high school and a star lacrosse player. The dispute later served as the inspiration for Tim's latest book, *Final Season*, in which a family wrestles over whether their sixth-grader should play football after his father's ALS diagnosis.

After running from his fate for years, Tim has become a face of the fight against ALS, believing that one day it won't be a death sentence but a curable disease. "It is woefully underfunded," he says. "I'm doing my best to help the cause, even if it comes too late for me."

In 2019, he formed Tackle ALS, and in three years the foundation has raised more than $5.5 million for research. Among its biggest donors: Blank and NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. Tim has poured in a sizable chunk.

The smile he wore on TV for all those years is still there, wheelchair and trachea be damned. O'Leary, his old high school and college coach and to this day a dear friend, remembers visiting him after the diagnosis. It crushed him to see his old lineman — the first defensive player in the 133-year history of Syracuse football to have his jersey retired — stuck in a wheelchair, breathing through a tube, unable to speak on his own. He can still think back to the call, years back, when Tim first broke the news.

He started crying and begged his old coach to give him a minute.

"Can I call you back?" Tim asked.

But for O'Leary, sitting there in Green's living room, this felt different. Tim was smiling, somehow at peace with it all. His coach could sense that. After a while, O'Leary got up to leave and told him everything was going to be fine, even though deep down, he wasn't sure he could believe that.

Tim felt his coach's fear. He looked at him, then looked into his screen.

“Don’t let this wheelchair fool you,” he finally said.

He doesn’t worry about what’s next as much as he welcomes what’s now. Tim Green’s life became everything he wanted. Maybe Superman wasn’t supposed to get ALS, but then again, maybe Superman’s not done.

How much fight does the man have left?

He smiles. He thinks for a minute. Then the eyes start dancing again.

“Plenty.”