

NFL Football Player with Multiple Concussions

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Retired NFL player finds hope for his brain in oxygen chamber

Feb 4, 2010 by Melanie D.G. Kaplan

George Visger was a defensive lineman in the NFL. He said his dream was to play for five years and then retire and build a homestead in Alaska. Things didn't turn out the way he expected. Today Visger is 51. He is a wildlife biologist in Northern California and has spent the better part of the last 28 years suffering from brain damage, the result of numerous concussions. Visger played for the **University of Colorado** in the 1977 Orange Bowl, and many hard hits later, he finished his NFL career with the **San Francisco 49ers**, playing with the 1981 team that won the franchise's first Super Bowl. In one of his earlier emails to me, Visger wrote, "*The human body was not meant to play football. My Orange Bowl and Super Bowl rings are not worth what my family goes through dealing with my short term memory issues, anger management issues and lack of judgment.*" We talked on the phone last week.

You started hyperbaric oxygen therapy last week. Have you noticed a difference?

Within three treatments I was feeling really different. I'm a lot less tense, and my memory is better. Just remembering your call today—that wouldn't have happened before. A few months ago I also, started taking some **Dr. Barry Sears** food supplements—industrial grade Omega 3 and concentrated fruit and vegetable juices, and I think that is helping too.

Describe the experience in the oxygen chamber.

They slide you in a big pressurized glass tube and crank up the oxygen level 10 times the normal level, and for brain injuries, 1.5 times the normal atmospheric pressure. So they lock me in there and let me bake for an hour. It super-charges your blood with oxygen, which helps restore metabolic activity to the damaged areas of my brain and helps speed up the healing process. When they crank up the pressure, your ears start popping, but otherwise you don't feel anything. They originally told me 40 treatments, but now they said with my damage they want me to do 80.

How do you feel about concussions and football getting so much media coverage recently?

It's about time. I've been fighting this fight for 28 years. Things have to change. Someone needs to be held accountable. Sure, you play football and you know there are risks; all we're asking for is to be taken care of.

How is your daily life affected?

I live out of notebooks. I have to take notes on all my phone calls and appointments. I'm taking notes now. I can't tell you by the end of the day what I worked on in the morning. I've lived like that for years. When I was finishing my biology degree, I'd have to write in my notebook where I parked my truck. Yet I'm involved in three different businesses and give motivational talks. I also have insomnia and anger management issues. My [three] kids are afraid of me. They don't know which dad's going to come home today, whether he'll be sweet or lose his temper.

When was your first concussion?

I started playing football when I was 11. My two loves were biology and playing football. I made a goal when I played **Pop Warner** football. I was scrawny and skinny, but I was motivated. I was eating a dozen raw eggs a day, and I built myself up. I was knocked totally unconscious in a tackling drill and hospitalized when I was 13. I had a number of concussions through high school and college. And my second year with the 49ers—this was the first Super Bowl team and I was just coming off a knee surgery—I started developing pounding headaches, temporary loss of vision and projectile vomiting.

What was your experience with the team doctor at the 49ers?

He said I had high blood pressure. I was 22, so I said, “OK.” My brain was hemorrhaging on me, and I was on high blood pressure meds. I’d developed hydrocephalus [in which excess fluid accumulates in and around the brain]. It wasn’t much after that I was having emergency brain surgery to put a shunt in my head. I’m in intensive care for 14 days. This was September 1981. I had the next two surgeries the following May, four months after [the team] won the Super Bowl.

How many brain surgeries have you had now?

I’m on my ninth brain surgery and sixth anti-seizure medication. The shunt—I’ve had some last 10 hours and this one has lasted 16 years. When it goes, I start getting killer headaches. I went to see **Dr. [Daniel] Amen**, who does free one-day evaluations for retired NFL players. I went for three days. He said it’s amazing I’m functioning. I have huge holes on the **SPECT** scan of my right frontal cortex. He said I’m the 67th NFL player who had come through the clinic. He said, “You’re showing early signs of the stuff that’s killing guys in their 40s and 50s.”

Will you watch the Super Bowl?

I didn’t watch a football game for six or seven years. Now I watch, but I could care less who wins. I’m so cognizant of the hits, and the only thing going through my minds is, “What is that doing to his brain? What’s it doing to his body?” Fifteen years from now their bodies are going to be trashed