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Dark Days Follow Hard-Hitting Career in N.F.L.

By [ALAN SCHWARZ](#)

Ted Johnson helped the [New England Patriots](#) win three of the past five Super Bowls before retiring in 2005. Now, he says, he forgets people's names, misses appointments and, because of an addiction to amphetamines, can become so terrified of the outside world that he locks himself alone inside his Boston apartment in bed with the blinds drawn for days at a time.

"There's something wrong with me," said Mr. Johnson, 34, who spent 10 years in the National Football League as the Patriots' middle linebacker. "There's something wrong with my brain. And I know when it started."

Mr. Johnson's decline began, he said, in August 2002, with a concussion he sustained in a preseason game against the [New York Giants](#). He sustained another four days later during a practice, after Patriots Coach [Bill Belichick](#) went against the recommendation of the team's trainer, Johnson said, and submitted him to regular on-field contact.

Mr. Belichick and the Patriots' head trainer at the time, Jim Whalen — each of whom remain in those positions — declined to comment on Mr. Johnson's medical experience with the team or his allegations regarding their actions.

Following his two concussions in August 2002, Mr. Johnson sat out the next two preseason games on the recommendation of a neurologist. After returning to play, Mr. Johnson sustained more concussions of varying severity over the next three seasons, each of them exacerbating the next, according to Mr. Johnson's current neurologist, Dr. Robert Cantu.

Dr. Cantu said that he was convinced Mr. Johnson's cognitive impairment and depression "are related to his previous head injuries, as they are all rather classic postconcussion symptoms." He added, "They are most likely permanent."

Asked for a prognosis of Mr. Johnson's future, Dr. Cantu, the chief of neurosurgery and director of sports medicine at Emerson Hospital in Concord, Mass., said: "Ted already shows the mild cognitive impairment that is characteristic of early Alzheimer's disease. The majority of those symptoms relentlessly progress over time. It could be that at the time he's in his 50s, he could have severe Alzheimer's symptoms."

Mr. Johnson is among a growing number of former players and their relatives who are questioning whether their serious health issues are related to injuries they sustained and the treatment they received as players. Mr. Johnson said he decided to go public with his story after reading in The New York Times two weeks ago about Andre Waters, the former [Philadelphia Eagles](#) player who committed suicide last November and was later determined to have had significant brain damage caused by football-related concussions.

Mr. Johnson said he was not suicidal, but that the depression and cognitive problems he had developed since 2002 had worsened to the point that he now takes Adderall, a prescription amphetamine, at two to three times the dosage authorized by his doctors, who have been unaware of this abuse.

When he runs out of these pills, Mr. Johnson said, he shuts himself inside his downtown apartment for days and communicates with no one until a new prescription becomes available. He said he was coming forward with his story so that his friends and family might better understand his situation, and also so that the National Football League might improve its handling of concussions.

While the league's guidelines regarding head injuries have been strengthened over the past decade, the N.F.L.'s record of allowing half of players who sustain concussions to return to the same game remains a subject of medical debate.

"I am afraid of somebody else being the next Andre Waters," said Mr. Johnson, who spent two weeks in February at a psychiatric hospital outside Boston with, he said, no appreciable results. "People are going to question me: 'Are you a whistleblower, what are you doing this for?' You can call it whatever you want about what happened to me. I didn't know the long-term ramifications. You can say that my coach didn't know the long-term, or else he wouldn't have done it. It is going to be hard for me to believe that my trainer didn't know the long-term ramifications, but I am doing this to protect the players from themselves."

The N.F.L. spokesman Greg Aiello said that the league had no knowledge of Johnson's specific situation. Regarding the subject of player concussions in general, he said, "We are very concerned about the issue of concussions, and we are going to continue to look hard at it and do everything possible to protect the health of our players."

At a news conference yesterday in Miami, where the Super Bowl will be held Sunday, Gene Upshaw, the executive director of the National Football League Players Association, spoke in general terms about concussions in the N.F.L. "If a coach or anyone else is saying, 'You don't have a concussion, you get back in there,' you don't have to go, and you shouldn't go," Upshaw said, not speaking about the Johnson case specifically. "You know how you feel. That's what we tried to do throughout the years, is take the coach out of the decision-making. It's the medical people that have to decide."

Mr. Johnson, who has a 2-year-old daughter and a 1-year-old son, is currently in divorce proceedings with his wife, Jackie, a situation that he admitted was compounding his depression.

He was arrested in July on domestic assault-and-battery charges, which were later dropped because his wife declined to testify. Mr. Johnson said that his concussive symptoms and drug addiction not only precipitated his marriage's decline but began several years before it, specifically that preseason of 2002.

According to Patriots medical records that Mr. Johnson shared with The Times, the only notable concussion in his career to that point happened when he played at the [University of Colorado](#) in 1993. Against the Giants on Aug. 10, 2002, those records indicate, he sustained a "head injury" — the word concussion was not used — and despite the clearing of symptoms after several minutes on the sideline, he did not return to the game.

Mr. Johnson said that four days later, when full-contact practice resumed, Mr. Whalen issued him a red

jersey, the standard signal to all other players that he was not supposed to be hit in any way. About an hour into the practice, Mr. Johnson said, before a set of high-impact running drills, an assistant trainer came out on the field with a standard blue jersey. When he asked for an explanation, Mr. Johnson said, the assistant told him that he was following Mr. Whalen's instructions.

Mr. Johnson, whose relationship with Mr. Belichick had already been strained by a contract dispute, said he interpreted the scene as Mr. Belichick's testing his desire to play, and that he might be cut and lose his \$1.1 million salary — N.F.L. contracts are not guaranteed — if he did not follow orders.

"I'm sitting there going, 'God, do I put this thing on?'" Mr. Johnson said. "I put the blue on. I was scared for my job."

Regarding the intimidation he felt at that moment, Mr. Johnson added, "This kind of thing happens all the time in football. That day it was Bill Belichick and Ted Johnson. But it happens all the time."

Several Patriots teammates said they did not recall this incident but invariably testified to the believability of Mr. Johnson, the team captain in 1998 and 2003. Said one former teammate, who insisted on anonymity because he still plays with the Patriots under Mr. Belichick, "If Ted tells you something's going on, something's going on."

Mr. Johnson said that the first play called after he put the blue jersey on, known as "ace-ice," called for one act from him, the middle linebacker: to sprint four yards headlong into the onrushing blocking back. After that collision, Mr. Johnson said, a warm sensation overtook his body, he saw stars, and he felt disoriented as the other players appeared to be moving in slow motion. He never lost consciousness, though, and after several seconds regained his composure and continued to practice "in a bit of a fog" while trying to avoid contact. He said he did not mention anything to anyone until after practice, when he angrily approached Mr. Whalen, the head trainer.

"I said, 'Just so you know, I got another concussion,'" Johnson said. "You could see the blood, like, leave his face. And he was like, 'All right, all right, well, we're going to get you in to see a neurologist.'"

Dr. Lee H. Schwamm, the neurologist at [Massachusetts General Hospital](#) who examined Mr. Johnson, concluded in a memo on Aug. 19, 2002, that Mr. Johnson had sustained a second concussion in that practice. Dr. Schwamm also wrote that, after speaking with Mr. Whalen, that Mr. Whalen "was on the sidelines when he sustained the concussion during the game and assessed him frequently at the sideline," and that "he has kept Mr. Johnson out of contact since that time."

Mr. Johnson said that the next day he spoke with Mr. Belichick about the incident but that they only glossed over it.

"He was vaguely acknowledging that he was aware of what happened," Mr. Johnson said, "and he wanted to just kind of let me know that he knew."

Mr. Johnson missed the next two preseason games, played in the final one, and then, believing he was still going to be left off the active roster for the opening game against Pittsburgh, angrily left camp for two days before returning and meeting with Mr. Belichick and confronting him privately about the blue-jersey

incident.

“It’s as clear as a bell — ‘I had to see if you could play,’ ” Mr. Johnson recalled Mr. Belichick saying. Minutes later, Mr. Johnson said, Mr. Belichick admitted he had made a mistake by making him wear the blue jersey. “It was a real kind of admittance, but it was only him and I in the room,” Mr. Johnson said.

Mr. Johnson sat out the season opener but played the following Sunday against the [New York Jets](#), a game in which Mr. Johnson said he could not remember line formations and was caught out of position because he could not concentrate. After sitting out the next game against Kansas City, Mr. Johnson played against San Diego and had the same problem.

He learned how to manage the disorientation and played the rest of the season but said that, “from that point on, I was getting a lot of these, what I call mini-concussions.”

Mr. Johnson added that he did not report these to his trainer or coaches for fear he would be seen as weak.

This continued through the 2003 season, Mr. Johnson said, as he noticed himself feeling increasingly more unfocused, irritable and depressed. Teammates noticed as well, said Willie McGinest, a fellow linebacker who now plays for the [Cleveland Browns](#).

“He was always an upbeat, positive guy,” Mr. McGinest said. “After the last few concussions, you could tell he was off at times.”

Playing poorly, Mr. Johnson lost his starting job.

In the week before the 2004 Super Bowl, Mr. Johnson said, a friend who supplied amphetamines to several major league baseball pitchers gave him some Adderall pills to cure his lethargy and increase his concentration. “It was the best I had felt in the longest time,” Mr. Johnson said. “The old Ted was back.”

After playing only sparingly in that Super Bowl, Mr. Johnson began taking larger and larger doses before and throughout the 2004 season, when he regained his starting position at middle linebacker and helped the Patriots win their second consecutive Super Bowl.

The better mood did not last long, he said. The minor concussions — euphemized as “dings” in N.F.L. lingo — that he regularly sustained in practice and in games hurt more than the Adderall could help. The thought of violently tackling a player, he said, “made me physically ill.”

“For the first time in my life,” he said, “I was scared of going out there and putting my head in there.”

Mr. Johnson retired before the 2005 season and briefly worked as a football analyst for WBZ-TV in Boston. But he said his malaise and cognitive problems were only getting worse, and in his attempt to regain some sort of balance, he wound up taking large amounts of antidepressants along with increasing amounts of Adderall, creating a dangerous up-and-down cycle that he realized required professional attention. Last February, he spent two weeks at McLean Hospital, a psychiatric institution in suburban Belmont, Mass.

Mr. Johnson said he felt no better after that experience, and he quickly resumed the Adderall abuse that continues today. He has moved out of his former house during his divorce proceedings and lives in a

two-bedroom apartment downtown, which after three months contains dozens of half-open moving boxes.

“Welcome to the glamorous life of a former N.F.L. player,” he said. A half-hour later, he stepped into his Range Rover and drove to his local CVS to pick up another bottle of Adderall. The 72 pills of 30 milligrams each are supposed to last nine days, but he knows he will blow through them in four or five.

One of his most maddening frustrations, Mr. Johnson said, is that no tests — from M.R.I.’s to other scans of his brain — have confirmed his condition, causing some people in his life to suspect that he is wallowing in retirement blues. “That’s ridiculous,” he said, “because I always treated football as a steppingstone for the rest of my life. I used to have incredible drive and ambition. I want to get my M.B.A. But I can’t even let myself have a job right now. I don’t trust myself.”

Dr. Cantu, his neurosurgeon, said he was convinced that Mr. Johnson’s condition was primarily caused by successive concussions sustained over short periods of time. He said that M.R.I.’s of Mr. Johnson’s brain were clear, but that “the vast majority of individuals with postconcussion syndrome, including depression, cognitive impairment, all the symptoms that Ted has, have normal M.R.I.’s.”

The most conclusive method to assess this type of brain damage, Dr. Cantu said, was to examine parts of the brain microscopically for tears and tangles, but such a test is done almost exclusively post-mortem. It was this type of examination that was conducted by a neuropathologist at the [University of Pittsburgh](#), Dr. Bennet Omalu, on the brain of Mr. Waters after his suicide, revealing a condition that Dr. Omalu described as that of an 85-year-old with Alzheimer’s disease.

“The type of changes that Andre Waters reportedly had most likely Ted has as well,” Dr. Cantu said.

Experts in the field of athletic head trauma have grown increasingly confident through studies and anecdotal evidence that repeated concussions, particularly those sustained only days apart, are particularly dangerous. Dr. David Hovda, a professor of neurosurgery and director of the Brain Injury Research Center at U.C.L.A., said, “Repeated concussions — it doesn’t matter the severity — have affects that are more than additive, and that last longer.”

Sitting in his apartment this week, Mr. Johnson said that he had not considered a lawsuit against Mr. Belichick, any Patriots personnel or the N.F.L. He said that his sole motivation was to raise awareness of the dangers that football players can face regarding concussions.

Asked who was to blame for his condition — Mr. Belichick, Mr. Whalen, himself or the entire culture of the N.F.L. — Mr. Johnson thought for 30 seconds and said he could not decide.

Several hours later, he was riding in an elevator up to a consultation with Dr. Cantu. As the door opened on the seventh floor, a middle-aged man walked out and smiled warmly at Mr. Johnson. “We missed you this year,” he said.

“Thanks, man,” Mr. Johnson said with a grin and a nod. Later, Mr. Johnson said something else went through his troubled mind at that moment.

“I miss me, too,” he said.

Clifton Brown contributed reporting from Miami.

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