

Grand Old Men are bucking the trend

By Bill Jauss

Dave Butz, the oldest nonquarterback in the National Football League, knows the anguish of seeing friends his own age squeezed out of football and replaced by younger men.

"I've seen so many people come and go," says Butz, who turns 39 this June, "that I try not to get too close to people and their families. If I do, and they go, it's like a piece of me going, too."

And Butz, who practices and plays in pain that sidelines younger men, admits he's probably a throwback.

The 300-pound Washington Redskins defensive tackle is a member of one of the most exclusive groups in sports. Call them the Grand Old Men, the handful of athletes so tough, so dedicated and so in love with their game that they remain active competitors as they near or exceed the age of 40.

Four things stand out about these uncommon men. First, there are so very few of them. Second, they love their game. Third, they take care of themselves. Finally, physically and emotionally, they are tough.

Look at some of them. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, 41, has survived two decades of banging under National Basketball Association backboards. Carlton Fisk, also 41, is still walking away from collisions at home plate. Butz has endured 16 seasons of combat in NFL trenches. He looks ahead to a 17th season this fall.

"I have an ability to heal quickly," said Butz, explaining his longevity. "And I have always played with pain."

Butz revealed a sensitive side when he talked of teammates

Sports' grand old men Among current players

Baseball

Among 1,036 current athletes, there are:

40 or older: 5 (0.5 percent): Nolan Ryan, 42; Bob Boone, Charlie Hough, Carlton Fisk, 41; Doyle Alexander, 40
35-40: 46 (4.4 percent)
30-35: 179 (17.3 percent)

Basketball

Among 310 athletes:

40 or older: 1 (0.3 percent)
Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, 41.
35-40: 2 (0.65 percent): Robert Parish, Alex English, 35.
30-35: 64 (20.6 percent)



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

Hockey

Among 1,208 athletes:

40 or older: None
35-40: 9 (0.7 percent): Including Billy Smith, 38; Larry Robinson,

Chicago Tribune Graphic;
Sources: Team and league rosters, NFL Players Association

Tennis

Among 328 male athletes:

40 or older: 1 (0.3 percent): Sherwood Stewart, 42.
35-40: 4 (1.2 percent): Jimmy Connors, Guillermo Vilas, Kim Warwick, 36; Vijay Amritraj, 35.
30-35: 23 (7.0 percent)

NFL

Among 1,260 athletes:

40 or older: None
35-40: 52 (4.1 percent): Including Joe Ferguson, Dave Butz, Don Strock, 38; Ron Jaworski, 37.
30-35: 291 (23.0 percent)



Dave Butz

Marcel Dionne, Guy Lafleur, Borje Salming, 37.
30-35: 106 (8.8 percent)

drafted. (Some pro athletes have been known to fib about their ages.)

These figures prompt two questions: Why are there so few athletes in their late 30s or their 40s? And, how have these few been able to forestall Father Time as well as bottom-line management types who often seek to re-

ject the money and do what they

of Grand Old Men in sport these days will shrink even more in the future.

The reason, King says, is money. "Young players, especially in tennis, can make so much money so early in life now that they don't have to keep playing," said King, 45. "They can earn \$20 million by the time they're 25 or 26 and invest the money and do what they

going to do," Butz said. "They also told me they want me to play for them next year, so I'm planning on doing that."

Like Fisk and other Grand Old Men, Butz has taken good care of his body.

"I make it a rule that at this time of the year I never move more than 12 feet for anything," said Butz. "But starting in June, I'll run daily or twice a day on my treadmill pacer, and I lift weights two or three times a week."

The other constant among older players, love of the game, is certainly present in Dave Butz.

"You talk about training camp. I love camp," Butz said, "and we have a very physical camp. We hit morning and afternoon. I do not like mini-camp, because mentally and physically, I'm not into football in May. But when we go to camp, I'll be ready again."



In a different sense, Ted Albrecht was as uncommon a pro athlete in his day as Dave Butz is now.

In 1983, Albrecht walked away from six years as a Bears offensive lineman. He did this without experiencing severe withdrawal pains from football. He made a smooth, quick, successful transition to his prospering travel business.

Fencik couldn't make that clean a break, he admitted.

"I miss the camaraderie," said Fencik. "It does not take long to clean out a locker. The moment I walked out of that locker room for the last time, I knew it would never be the same."

"When I walked out of Halas Hall that last time, carrying the golf clubs and bag the players had given me, it was a sentimental moment."

Fencik said he first thought seri-

happy to be on IR [injured reserve]. It's amazing. They can't practice, and yet, later on, after practice, they can play a mean game of basketball."

Whoever said "It's a young man's game" was absolutely right. Only he forgot to tell the Grand Old Men.

One gets the impression that athletes these days are extending their careers. One reads and hears that such modern wonders as weight training, sports medicine and health foods all have helped lengthen the careers of such athletes as Nolan Ryan, Jimmy Connors, Fisk, Butz and Abdul-Jabbar.

The truth is that these Grand Old Men are startlingly few in number.

In fact, this survey, involving 4,124 males in five pro sports—baseball, football, basketball, hockey and tennis—revealed that only seven of them 40 or older are still competing.

That's right. Seven out of 4,124.

Five pitch or catch in big-league baseball. They are Ryan, 42; Bob Boone, Charlie Hough and Fisk, 41; and Doyle Alexander, 40.

Compared to other sports, baseball is a haven for men 40 or older.

Neither the National Hockey League nor the NFL has a 40-year-old player.

Abdul-Jabbar, winding up his remarkable career, is 5 years older than the next-oldest player on an NBA payroll, Bill Walton.

Tennis, billed by its followers as the "sport for a lifetime," has just one man in his 40s, 42-year-old Sherwood Stewart, primarily a doubles player. Connors, at 36, is the second-oldest man on the pro tour.

Perhaps an even more surprising disclosure is the scarcity of pros in their late 30s.

Less than one percent of big-league basketball or hockey players are older than 35. The percentage of players between 35 and 40 is 1.2 percent in tennis, 4.4 percent in baseball and 5.1 percent in football.

Is 30 old? Consider these findings: 77.9 percent of players on major league baseball rosters on March 1 were younger than 30. In basketball, the percentage is 78.1; in hockey, 90.5; in tennis, 91.5. In the NFL, where four years of head-knocking in college is virtually a prerequisite, 72.9 percent of the wage-earners were younger than 30.

This survey was based upon birth dates listed on league and team rosters in baseball, basketball and hockey, in the pro tennis media guide and from data supplied by the NFL Players Association, which estimated ages based upon the years when players were

commercial real estate. He explained why the aging athlete often tries to avoid leaving his sport.

"It's a combination of reasons," said Fencik. "First, the sport is a very natural lifestyle, one you've been doing for a long time and doing so successfully at every level. It's easier to stay where you've been having success than to go into the unknown.

"Second, the salary. Third, the time off. The long off-season. Then, mentally you still enjoy it, even though physically you're not able to do it as well."

Randy Hundley, the former Cubs' catcher, conducts fantasy camps where adult fans pay top dollar to rub shoulders and play

This survey revealed that only seven of 4,124 males in five pro sports 40 or older are still competing. Perhaps an even more surprising disclosure is the scarcity of pros in their late 30s.

pepper with former baseball players. Guess what? The former players enjoy the camps as much as the campers.

"We were blessed that we played in a team sport," said Hundley. "We pick right up where we left off in the teamwork and camaraderie. For me, it's because my blood cells have baseball seams."

All right. So, many athletes have reasons to continue playing, and many share Hundley's love for the game. But sometimes it takes more than that.

For example, why is Fisk signed to his richest contract, some \$1.3 million for 1989, in camp with the White Sox these days, while younger former catchers are struggling to catch on in sales?

The answer is that while many younger players talked about their "love of the game," Fisk was pumping iron after night games in Comiskey Park or working out in his gym at home.

According to former tennis star Billie Jean King, the small number

he stuck it out on the court.

Connors summed it up well after he lost a recent tournament in Chicago. He said, "I can't make the living I'm making by doing anything else—except maybe robbing banks."

One story explains the toughness of Dave Butz, a quality he feels that most young players lack.

In the 1987 season, when Butz was a mere lad of 37, he practiced every day during a week when he had such a serious intestinal disease that his weight plunged from 315 to 282 pounds.

"On Saturday, I went into the hospital," Butz recalled, "because I couldn't keep down even a glass of water. They put 11 quarts of fluid into me intravenously. They couldn't pump it into me fast enough."

The next day, Butz checked out of the hospital, went to the stadium and played well enough to win a game ball.

"Then I went back into the hospital," he said, "and had five more quarts of fluid put into me."

Why? "I'm just one of a rare group that feels we are paid to play, so we show up every time and go to work," said Butz.

Butz is one of four survivors of the rookie class of 1973. The other three still on active rosters are all quarterbacks: Joe Ferguson, Ron Jaworski and Don Strock. Butz has played football for 24 years, four at Maine South High School, four at Purdue and 16 in the NFL.

Butz and his wife have three children, and for a while, this set him apart for unmarried or childless teammates.

"Being the oldest player, I have the oldest wife and the oldest kid," Butz said. "Players kind of kidded me for a while. They called me 'Mother Mom' because I'd go home to take care of the kids. But now that some of them are having children of their own, they ask me about bringing up kids."

The Redskins elected not to include Butz on their list of protected players. This neither surprised nor annoyed him.

"I expected it to me at my age. They told me what they were

signed his first contract as Bears' No. 1 draft pick, out of California, in 1977.

"My agent gave me the best vice an athlete could receive," Albrecht. "He told me, 'Your game also could be your last.'"

"I never forgot that," said Albrecht. "The minute he said that began planning for my second year."

Albrecht's agent and Jim Fitz then the Bears' general manager, difficulty, Albrecht recalled, reached agreement on that first contract.

"Steinberg told me I could do the 1977 season and sign the year with New Orleans for more money than the Bears would pay," said Albrecht. "He also told me Chicago was the No. 1 sports city in the country, that if you can't get a job there, you can't get one anywhere. I fell in love with the city."

Albrecht said the Bears told him to "Save money, be smart, get an off-season job," but that when he followed this advice, then-coach Armstrong said Albrecht was "busy" for off-season weight training and football activities.

"That wasn't true," said Albrecht. "Football remained my No. 1 priority. I had them open the weight room early. I worked out there before I went to my job."

In late July, 1983, Albrecht reported to his seventh Bears camp to a lower back ravaged by ruptured discs. He was going to listen to a doctor's advice, Albrecht said, "to hear if a little being me would cry out, 'Ted, that's enough!'"

When that call came, Albrecht cleaned out his locker and left the Hall without regrets.

What does he miss most about football?

"Really, nothing," he replied after a thoughtful pause. "Oh, I had withdrawals. The opening day of season and the Super Bowl. But I have no regrets."

Albrecht has managed to keep football ties by moonlighting as a perceptive analyst for WBBM radio.

Radio-TV jobs, fantasy camps, the highly popular seniors tour, golf and tennis have helped create comfortable bridges (not to mention income) for pro athletes who wish to maintain ties with their sport in the limelight.

Butz eases into retirement

Ex-Boiler recalls great moments in football

By JEFF WASHBURN

Journal and Courier

For 16 seasons, Dave Butz was the National Football League's Ironman.

While teammates and opponents begged out of the lineup with everything from stress fractures to stress attacks, the 6-foot-8, 315-pound defensive tackle from Purdue missed a total of four games during two seasons with the St. Louis Cardinals and 14 with the Washington Redskins.

But when Washington opens the 1989 season Monday night in Robert F. Kennedy Stadium in our nation's capital against the New York Giants, the Ironman will be sitting in front of the television set in his Belleville, Ill. home.

Although Butz wanted to play one more season, the Redskins thought their 38-year-old Boilermaker could be replaced, so he reluctantly retired.

On Monday night, it's very likely that his mind will wander during the game. He'll think about coach George Allen and the "Over the Hill Gang," and he'll think about the 1982 Super Bowl victory against the Miami Dolphins.

And he'll smile when he thinks about the Sunday morning when he got out of a Washington, D.C. hospital bed while being treated for intestinal parasites and played against the New York Jets, making a crucial fourth-quarter sack that kept the Redskins in playoff contention.

But the experience Butz probably will think about most is the 1973 East-West Shrine Bowl, a college All-Star game for the benefit of the Shriners' Hospitals for Crippled Children.

That experience — visiting with



Butz

small children who were suffering from a variety of crippling diseases — made a lasting impression on the then college senior.

Each time he thought about sitting out of an NFL battle, he remembered the children who smiled when he visited with them.

"It was just so ironic," Butz said Thursday afternoon. "Here we were, guys who could run and pick people up and throw them around like matchsticks with little or no effort.

"And we were playing a game for crippled children, small kids who were working as hard as they could just to hold up a pen. I never forget that. Still to this day, it's the highlight experience of my football career. People probably think winning the Super Bowl was the ultimate. To me, it was the East-West Shrine Bowl."

Once, Butz broke a thumb, sat out seven plays and then returned to action. Another time, he played with a torn bicep. Countless times he played after having blood drained from his knee.

It was the only way Dave Butz knew how to play.

"When people talk about me, I hope they remember me as a guy who executed the gameplan and the directive to the letter," he said. "I was a guy who came to play every game, every down, regardless of how I felt."

The epitome of that work ethic was the time Butz contracted in-

testinal parasites, which he thinks he picked up eating lettuce.

He'd had a good week of practice, and then on Friday night, he became very ill. Butz was rushed to the hospital at 9 a.m. on Saturday, and by 9 a.m. Sunday — only hours before kickoff — he'd lost 33 pounds.

"They started pumping fluids into me, and after they'd given me 11 quarts, I told the doctor to pull the needles out of me," Butz said. "The doctor said, 'Why?,' and I said, 'Because I've got a football game to play.'"

Who was going to tell Butz he couldn't play? Certainly not the doctor.

Butz played, the Redskins beat the Jets, and he went right back into the hospital.

"Want to know the ironic thing about the whole situation?" Butz said. "The most pain I felt that whole day was after the game when this nervous intern poked a 3-inch needle into my arm and couldn't find a vein."

Butz has spent many hours this summer thinking about his career and says the thing he'll miss most is the intensity of each game.

"You could always focus yourself on a goal and then try to achieve it," he said. "I loved going against 11 other individuals."

And what won't he miss? "Nothing," he said. "Every small part made up the whole of what football is all about."

Having made \$500,000 during the 1988 season, Butz is in no hurry to jump into a new career, although he'd like to do some broadcasting, and he's done some promoting for Winchester Arms, which supports the use of guns



By The Associated Press

Former Purdue star Dave Butz (middle) terrorized NFL offensive linemen during his 16-year career.

for sport.

"We've saved enough nuts for winter," Butz said. "I don't have to beat the bushes if I don't want to. Right now, I'm adjusting.

"I was geared up for one more year in the NFL. I think any athlete thinks he can go one more year. I felt I could still help the team, both on and off the field, but things just didn't work out."

And now that he won't be spending his Saturday afternoons preparing for a Sunday game, he might even find time to return to Purdue for a game or two.

Butz was recruited by former head coach Jack Mollenkopf and by then assistant coach Ron Meyer, who now calls the shots for the Indianapolis Colts.

The recruiting class that in-

cluded Butz also featured Otis Armstrong, Darryl Stingley, Gary Danielson, Steve Baumgartner and Greg Bingham. Each went on to star in the NFL.

Despite all that talent, Purdue was 4-6, 3-7 and 6-5 during Butz's three years of eligibility. Freshman were not allowed to play varsity football when Butz entered Purdue in the fall of 1969.

"We had a sensational group of players, but I was extremely disappointed when Jack retired," Butz said. "He and Ron (Meyer) were the reasons I came to Purdue.

"If anything, it was disappointing that we didn't do better."