

A Barber Who Won't Cut It Close

by Rick Reilly

IN AMERICA, you do not quit at the top. You do not quit when you're the leading rusher in the NFL. You do not quit when there's millions left on the table. But Tiki Barber, a 31-year-old Giants running back, is retiring at the end of this season, his 10th in pro football—and the country wants to sue.

To me, [he's] quitting. That's not retiring.

—MICHAEL IRVIN, ESPN



“Everybody wants me to keep playing,” Tiki says, “but when I’m 50 and having trouble just getting down the stairs, will they be cheering for me then?”

Meet Earl Campbell. Heisman-winning running back at Texas and 1979 NFL MVP with the Oilers. His back is shot. Two months ago, at his old college stadium, a statue depicting a strong and virile Campbell from his playing days was unveiled. The man himself, though, had to be helped out of a golf cart and to the podium so he could speak to the crowd. He is 51.

Meet Jim Plunkett. Played quarterback for 15 NFL seasons. Yesterday was a very bad day for Plunkett. What happened? “I woke up,” he says. Plunkett doesn’t seize the day. It seizes him. He has constant throbbing in his back and neck. He’s got arthritis in one hip and both knees. He can’t raise his left arm past his shoulder. His spine is so curved, he tilts like a sinking oil tanker. The pain wakes him up at night. He’s 58.

“I tell my kids, ‘Pretty soon, you’re going to be wheeling me around;’” says Plunkett. He’s not laughing when he says it.

“I don’t quite know why Tiki is quitting. Maybe being a Super Bowl champion isn’t that important to him.”

—JIM OTTO, HALL OF FAME CENTER

It meant a helluva lot to Otto, who never won a Super Bowl in 15 seasons with the Raiders but nearly destroyed his body trying. He’s had nearly 60 operations—48 on his knees, three on his nose, three on his shoulders, three on his back and one on each elbow. His ankle looks like a science project. He’s got rods up and down his spine. Arthritis in his feet and neck tortures him. He is 68.

“He could be leaving 3,000 yards on the field, which could put him on the wrong side of the Hall of Fame bubble.”

—GARY MYERS, NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

At the Pro Football Hall of Fame induction ceremony every year, we see the price of greatness. It gouges. Anvil-jawed heroes teeter across the stage as if it’s their first time on stilts. It takes them longer to sit down than many drive-through transactions take.

Meet Paul Krause. He was enshrined in Canton after spending 16 seasons as an NFL free safety, 12 of them with the Vikings. Pain forces him to change positions every five minutes.

Meet Hall of Famer Jim Langer, 12 seasons, including 10 on the Dolphins’ offensive line. He walks like a man with nails in his shoes, but he’ll never use a walker. “If it gets to that point, I’ll move on,” he says. What’s that mean? “That’s my business.”

Meet Dan Dierdorf. Lineman, Cardinals, 13 seasons, also in the Hall. Uses a cane when he walks, if you can call what he does walking. Blocking with his head first has left him two inches shorter than he was in college. He’s already got two artificial hips, and he’s planning to have a second knee replacement. His ankle needs fusing. “I’ve got more titanium in my body than in my golf bag,” Dierdorf says.

Once, Dierdorf happened to be walking down a Canton hallway next to Dick Butkus. They looked like a pair of Iwo Jima survivors. Butkus’s legs are so bad, he lumbers along as though he’s about to tip forward on his nose. Dierdorf walks like a Maryland crab, from side to side. “If we could’ve found a guy who walked tipping over backwards,” Dierdorf says, “we’d have had every direction covered.”

Honestly, I don’t want Tiki around anyway if his heart isn’t in it.

—DKATZO, BBI CORNER FORUM

Tiki Barber has his money, his memories and most of his cartilage. What he doesn’t seem to have is the right to live his own life.

“When I get home from work,” says Barber, “my [two- and four-year-old] kids come running at me. They make me get on my knees, and we play tackle football. On replacement knees, that’s not happening. I saw this video of O.J. Simpson once, and his kids came running at him and he couldn’t even pick them up. So I can see that if I play three or four more years, like everybody wants me to, that could be me. But when I’m 50 years old, and I’m having trouble just getting down the stairs, will they be cheering for me then?”

Meet Tiki Barber.

He walked, while he still could. □