

Concussed

By Ben Utecht

“I’m in here counting the days while my mind is slipping away. I’ll hold on as long as I can to you. I may not remember your names or the smell of the cool summer rain, everything and nothing has changed, nothing has changed.” – Ben Utecht

I remember my first tackle vividly: digging the toe of my foot into the soft grass, giving my young athletic body the best chance for speed that it had. With complete abandonment, I took off towards my target and threw myself into the chest of my dad, who enveloped me in his arms as he was falling backwards onto the ground from his knees. Playing catch in the backyard with dad in 3rd grade is when it all began. Then came the pads in 4th grade along with full contact 9-year-old aggression. When I look back at my complete experience in tackle football from 9 years to 29 years of age, I am shocked to say that I had a 20-year career playing the game of football. What a career it was...

The night was February 4th of 2007. There was a cool Miami Florida mist filling the Dolphins stadium as I stepped on to the largest professional sports field in the world on that night. It was hard to believe that a river rat kid from Hastings MN was now one of the starting tight ends in the biggest game in history. Roughly 100 million viewers tuned in that night from around the world to watch Super Bowl XLI, the Indianapolis Colts vs. the Chicago Bears. I’ll never forget two weeks prior when our Pro-Bowl place kicker, who had already won three Super Bowl rings, told the team “don’t blink, don’t you dare blink” at kick-off. So there I was standing between future Hall of Fame head coach Tony Dungy and future Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning watching our kicker about to lay his foot into the sweet spot on that NFL pig skin ball, when I remembered his words. The whistle blew and the players let loose their speed and our kicker crushed the ball. I kept my eyes as wide open as humanly possible and experienced a light show I’m sure would rival that of Neil Armstrong’s. It was truly amazing, as if I was dancing with the stars. It was a very special cinematic slow motion picture moment that I hope is never taken from me. We went on to defeat Chicago 29-17, and the Indianapolis Colts became world champions. It was my dream come true.

That dream was shattered 2 years later when I woke up face down on a training camp field in Georgetown Kentucky, playing for the Cincinnati Bengals. Next I was strapped down to a gurney and rushed to the hospital after my 5th documented concussion. That began an 8-month rehabilitation processes that led to my retirement from the NFL due to traumatic brain injury. My post concussion symptoms were numerous including amnesia, sleeplessness, night sweats, dizziness, fatigue, and some behavioral changes, to name several. However it was a gift I took for granted that would become my greatest concern and priority... My memory.

My memories began to fade away along with pieces of my identity. My wife Karyn and I, along with our three beautiful daughters, visited one of my best friends and roommates from college. Matt and Kim began sharing favorite moments from their wedding as

Karyn nodded in remembrance while I sat in mental darkness trying to understand why nothing sounded familiar. I stopped Matt mid-sentence, asking him, “Why wasn’t I able to be at your wedding?”. He looked at me awkwardly and continued, but again I asked the same question. This time Matt, Kim and Karyn stopped talking and studied me looking for a comedic reaction, but nothing came. I continued, “When was it...surely I wasn’t busy?” Kim got up from the table and retrieved their wedding photo album. Page after page – I was in disbelief, seeing myself in numerous pictures, as a groomsman and singing for them a song. To this day I still have no memory of that event. Unfortunately for my family and me, that is only one of multiple memory gaps in my 32-year-old brain.

What is my greatest fear? It’s to be trapped inside the coffin of my mind. To wake up one morning and not remember the faces and names of the people I cherish the most. I was asked by a good friend to do something very difficult. Write a love letter to my wife and girls from the perspective of the 50-year-old NFL’er who doesn’t remember them any more. I wrote the letter, on a plane ride home with the brim of my hat over my eyes to hide the tears as they began to flow. This letter produced the song that will forever let my wife and 3 beautiful girls know that no matter what brain disease may take from me in the future, it can never take their love.”

“I can still feel you here in this place beyond all tears, where love does what it does, it stay, yes it stays. And I will remember your smiles and your laughter long ever after this moment is gone... Seasons turned and turned again, till they became remember when. The love in your hearts made this man complete, my Cinderella’s you danced on my feet. You will always be my girls, you’re the beauty of my world and no matter how tomorrow unfurls, till the moment I am dome with this world, my yesterday babies in curls. You will always be my girls” – You Will Always Be My Girls, Ben Utecht/Rick Barron

I can’t help but to throw myself into a new target... Neurology. To tackle a new opponent, brain disease, and particularly TBI/Concussions. I have been impassioned through advocacy to fight for those lives being ripped apart by brain diseases and disorders. We need a national revival for funding research that will help us find the cures. You as Senators can become my new coaches: you can help decide the games strategy and put in the countless hours of work and research into creating policies that can change this nation connecting people to their most valuable asset, their minds. We can become world champions on a new gridiron, the field of our identity. I will not stop in the pursuit of finding cures for brain disease, and creating an emotional connection between the world and neurology because neurology is what cradles the miracle that makes us human, our brains. It’s time for all of us to realize how special our brains really are!

Please watch this short documentary on my story:

<https://vimeo.com/92857976>

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