

TESTIMONY OF LEMUEL BARNEY  
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JANUARY 4, 2010

Good Afternoon Chairman Conyers and other members of the House Judiciary Committee, I am Lem Barney. Prior to becoming a minister, I played professional football for the Detroit Lions for 11 seasons and was inducted into the Professional Football Hall of Fame in 1992. I began playing football in 1959 at Sturgis Junior High in San Bernardino, California. After playing high school football in Gulf Port, Mississippi, I attended Jackson State University, where I was a three time all-SWAC player. I thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing. I also want to thank the Committee for bringing awareness to the important issue of brain injuries in professional football. When I played in the 60's and 70's, we did not have the same level of awareness that we do now, and we should not repeat the mistakes of the past.

I played football for a total of 20 years and concussions have always been part of the game. I have had several concussions. The first concussion that I remember was the result of a knee from Rufus Mays to the ear hole in my helmet on a play in a game. I was out on the field for twenty-one minutes before moving to the side line and later returning to play. The next concussion that I recall was a result of me becoming privy to the high knee action that made Gayle Sayers the running back that we all know today. And the final concussion that I recollect was from Robert Newhouse, known for his powerful running style.

In each incident I returned to play immediately. Sure, there was an examination done by the trainer or team doctor on the side line. There were general questions asked of players that experienced concussions. Questions like "how many fingers am I holding up?" and "what day of the week is it?" but in reality, the ultimate decision to return to the game rested on the desire of the player, and sometimes the coach.

Hindsight tells us that we should not have returned to play based on those factors alone. New research into the effects of these injuries tells us that returning to play may not have been in our best interest and more than likely made us more susceptible to further injury. But back then, as I am sure the case for some players now, guys just wanted to play. I have witnessed guys return to the game and seen firsthand how they reacted to their injuries. Players would exhibit signs of wooziness and imbalance but still in some instances be allowed to retake the field. As I said before, hindsight tells us that those players would have probably been better off not returning, thankfully that decision is moving closer to the hands of an independent third party.

The Committee and the NFLPA should be applauded for raising the public's awareness of this issue. I particularly want to note the NFLPA's new Player Concussion Committee, which will ensure that future

generations of players are provided with the knowledge to make the best possible decisions. I am delighted and encouraged to see players taking the initiative and exerting control over their personal welfare. I would also like to commend the NFL on the League's new policies to restrict the return of players who have experienced concussions and other brain injuries.

Football is a great sport and one of my favorite passions, but no sport should endanger the lives of its participants. This holds true for all levels of football, from Pee-Wees to professionals. I have never coached the game of football but I have played the game on every level including several pro bowl appearances on the way to becoming a member of the NFL Hall of Fame. Since my playing days I have noticed continual improvements in the equipment used by players on the field. Helmets used in my time were little more than a thin plastic layer with a small donut shaped piece of foam rubber in the top. (I have brought an example here for you to see for yourself.) Today's helmet is much better at protecting the player during the game and in competition.

I recognize that in today's game the athletes are bigger and stronger and faster. As a result the hits are harder and the impact from each hit is much greater. With more research into ways to protect the players, we can continue to enjoy this game for years to come. Thank you again for your hard work on this issue and inviting me to this hearing. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.