



# Laramie Movie Scope: Blood Equity

**This is outrageous! Have they no shame?**



by **Robert Roten**, Film Critic



**November 25, 2009** -- Whether you are a fan of NFL football or not, the documentary “Blood Equity” ought to make you mad as hell. It exposes the outrageous treatment given former NFL players by the current NFL players union. This is the sort of shameful behavior which gives unions a bad name. This powerful film exposes the NFL's dirty secrets and shames the current players to “do the right thing” for the players who came before them and built the NFL into the multi-billion dollar juggernaut it is today.

Director Michael Felix finds the right spokesman for the former players in Mike Ditka, a former NFL player and coach and Hall of Famer. Ditka isn't afraid of anyone and doesn't care what people think of him. He tears into the NFL Players Association without mercy. He quotes Gene Upshaw (a former player himself, who died in 2008) as saying that as head of the NFL Players Association he has no responsibility for the former players. Ditka says, “The former players are his responsibility and they are the responsibility of every player in the players association today. If they don't understand that they don't understand the basic democratic process of what unions or organizations are all about. I was there in the beginning. I know the guys who fought for this. I know the guys who ownership didn't look at favorably in those days because they were trying to form a player's union ... All we're trying to do is help them (the injured former players). The money's there. If the money wasn't there I'd say forget about it, don't worry about it. We'll find another way to do it. But we are going to do this regardless of whether the league helps or not. We are going to find a way to do this.”

Ditka goes on to say that there are former players who need help. He noted in past years many players made less than \$20,000 per year playing football, so they are not wealthy and many can't pay the huge medical bills required to treat conditions resulting from old football injuries. Ditka and other players note that it was common in years past for players to play hurt. Former star NFL running back Tony Dorsett tells how he played part of a season with a broken back. NFL Safety Toby Wright tells how he played part of the 1998 season with a detached knee ligament after St. Louis Rams team doctors assured him he had no serious injury. Playing with this injury ended his football career. According to the movie the player's association has denied his injury claims, arguing the injuries are not football-related.

An even more serious problem is the legacy of head injuries among former NFL players. There is mounting evidence of mental impairment among many former players caused by head injuries. A recent study commissioned by the National Football League found Alzheimer's disease or similar memory-related conditions in the league's former players, may occur at 19 times the normal rate for men ages 30 through 49 (this is not in the film, but it is a fact). The most high profile case was that of former defensive back Andre Waters, who killed himself in 2006. An autopsy showed extensive damage to his brain tissue (also not in the film, but it happened).

NFL Hall of Fame tight end John Mackey is no longer able to care for himself due to frontal temporal dementia. His wife, Sylvia, speaks in the film about how his memories slowly fading away. She shows him a

photo and he doesn't recognize his own children. Unable to get help from the league or the player's association for John's deteriorating condition, she went to work as an airline stewardess in order to get medical coverage for her husband (that wouldn't work now because most insurance companies won't cover those with pre-existing medical conditions like John's). In desperation, she wrote a letter to the former commissioner of the NFL, Paul Tagliabue, and finally something was done. The "88 Fund" (Mackey's number) was established to help stricken former players and their families.

Another family interviewed by the film belongs to former NFL star Mike Webster, who became totally disabled due to football injuries. The NFL players association denied his disability claims. The family sued the players association and won. The player's association appealed and lost again. Unfortunately, by the time the case was over, Webster was dead. A proud man, he had gradually become unable to care for his family, or himself. "You could take care of all these guys and let them live out their lives with some dignity before they leave this earth. Period. That's what this is all about," Ditka says in the film, "Do the right thing."

This film is powerful, but it really isn't up to date. After this film was shot, the NFL (with prodding from Congress) is at least starting to recognize a big problem with the way it deals with concussions which can lead to mental impairment later in life. The new leader of the player's association, DeMaurice Smith, unlike his predecessor, admits there is a problem with concussions and that neither the NFL nor the players association has done enough to prevent brain damage in players. It remains to be seen if Smith will be a stronger advocate for retired players than Upshaw was. A lot more needs to be done to address the issues raised in this film, but there is a little bit of movement in the right direction. The film is also very short at only 63 minutes. It covers only the basics. The camera work is spotty with wildly different lighting and exposures at different times in a single scene. Nevertheless, every player in the NFL should see this film. They need to start treating the former players with some respect and treat them right. If this is America's game, America should be ashamed of it. The players should be ashamed of themselves. The plight of the former players needs to be put right. This film rates a B+.

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