

BLOOD EQUITY: THE NFL'S DIRTY SECRET?

By Ashley Estill

Blood Equity" is a chilling documentary chronicling the life of disabled and disadvantaged retired National Football League (NFL) players and the battle they're fighting against the Players Association to receive increased assistance from the league — a seven-billion-dollar industry their blood, sweat, broken bones and fractured skulls helped build. In the film, three-time Super Bowl champion Roman Phifer sits with stars like Mike Ditka, Harry Carson and Willie Wood amongst others, as they recount what they believe their fellow teammates have suffered through — and continue to — as a result of the NFL's practices. As portrayed in the film, the NFL Players Association is cheating these veterans, including many Hall of Famer's, out of health benefits and the basic means they need and deserve to live — and die — with dignity. On Tap had the opportunity to speak with producer Rico McClinton about how the film emerged and why he thinks this issue isn't getting more attention.

On Tap: Why did you feel the need to help create a film documenting the issues facing former NFL stars?

Rico McClinton: When my buddy Roman [Phifer] went back to Florida to catch up with some old friends, we didn't realize the situation we were going to walk into. His friend was retired and living in a really tiny place. No one ever talked about this issue, so none of the players knew what was going on. We said, 'Wow, this is horrible,' and talked about doing this project together. It's for a good cause and we could help some guys. So we started putting the pieces together. Everyone will be retired and affected by this eventually. This is not a film designed to bash Gene Upshaw or the NFL, because the NFL is great. It's amazing entertainment, but there are some things that need to be corrected and that's the bottom line.

OT: What information or situations surprised you during the filming process?

RM: All of it. Everyone thinks when a player retires that they have money and do okay. They don't talk about how the body continues to break down as a result of the injuries, surgeries and hits to your head. You see players like Eli Manning and Tom Brady who are healthy, so people assume that everyone will be okay because that's what's shown.

OT: Did the NFL Players Association have any comment about the film while in production?

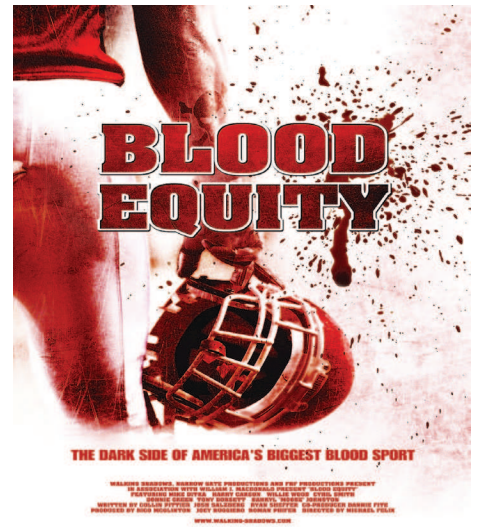
RM: They didn't know about it then but I'm sure they're aware of it now. They've had plenty of time to make changes since we started filming in 2007 but we haven't heard of any changes being made.

OT: Why do you feel this problem has gone unnoticed for so long?

RM: When you look at football and analyze the game, the excitement is focused on the players and what's next. People may not want to hear or deal with the real issues, which are these guys who are broken up with dementia and brain damage. That's the other side of sports.

OT: How did you find the players featured in the film?

RM: We found them through other players. When people watch the film, they'll see these retired players talk about helping the other guy no matter how bad off they are. They weren't looking for help themselves, but rather to help everyone. Donnie Green is in a homeless shelter and said, 'Hey, this guy is worse off than me.' Their bodies and minds are broken from building this league. These are veterans that didn't make a lot of money that played with inferior equipment and medical care, and they're paying the price.



Photos courtesy of Blood Equity

OT: What would you like to accomplish with "Blood Equity"?

RM: I hope it opens eyes. I got chills when Mike Ditka was talking. These people spoke from their heart. We had no script. This was how passionately they felt about the issue. We would love to make people aware about this and encourage change. We want to help these guys now to make it a safer game later. It's a fun game, but you can get hurt. After years of playing it shows. These guys are messed up. It's just not right.

OT: Is there a charity associated with the film; somewhere fans can go to support these former stars?

RM: Yes, the Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund. We would love for people to donate and have the film be part of the solution. It will help provide aid to these guys dealing with everything they go through after they retire.

To learn more about Blood Equity and to host a local screening or purchase a copy, visit www.bloodequity.com. To donate to the cause and find out more information about the Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund, visit www.gridirongreats.org.



Editor's Note: Recently NFL coaches Mike Ditka and Jimmy Johnson accepted a donation from entertainer Jamie Foxx for the Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund during a news conference Friday, September 25, 2009, in Grand Prairie, Texas. Foxx will be the headliner at a dinner in February benefiting the charity. Here are two upcoming star-studded Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund events open to the public. Proceeds go directly to the Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund.

February 4-6, 2010 Gridiron Greats Billfish Bowl

Join Board of Directors member Jimmy Johnson as he hosts the Billfish Bowl in Key Largo, Florida. The Bowl brings together some of today's best-known football personalities and Florida's competitive fishing teams for a world-class fishing tournament. To purchase tickets and participate call 866-203-2720 or visit www.billfishbowl.com.

February 5, 2010 Gridiron Greats Dinner of Champions/Fillmore Miami Beach

Academy Award winner and Grammy nominee Jamie Foxx will host and perform at the dinner. Over 100 NFL legends including Gridiron Greats Chairman Mike Ditka will be in attendance. To purchase tickets, please call 847-509-3086 or email shannonj@gridirongreats.org.