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### SPEEDWAYS



**BLOOD WITHOUT MONEY ROMAN PHIFER AND RICO MCCLINTON'S NEW DOCUMENTARY, BLOOD EQUITY, DELVES INTO HOW SUFFERING EX-NFL PLAYERS ARE BEING LEFT HIGH AND DRY BY THEIR UNION.**

BY ELI KOORIS PHOTOGRAPHY BRIAN LOWE

November 2009

It's a fall Sunday and Barney's Beanery on the 3rd Street Promenade is a forty-five minute wait, slammed with a mishmash of NFL die-hards from around the country who now find themselves living in the only major American city without a professional football team. Rico McClinton swivels his massive head on his massive neck between the tube TV's hanging above our booth, taking in the violence of the football field.

"My boy just turned six and wants to get into the local tackle football Pee Wee League," McClinton says. "I don't know if I'm going to let him play."

McClinton is a medium-sized mountain of a man by today's standards: thick, jovial and barrel-

chested standing a few inches over six feet and weighing in somewhere in the two hundreds. He looks like an exfootballer himself and probably would have been, if he hadn't been so successful in bodybuilding and acting in bit roles on major network shows like "Alias" and "CSI: Miami" — usually as a burly door guy or corrections officer. For the past few years, in between acting gigs and raising a family, McClinton has helped train young football players for the NFL combine before draft day, working with some of the more talented athletes coming out of college, just days away from becoming millionaires.

"If these guys get injured but have some good money management skills, they'll be set to do whatever they want for the rest of their lives," McClinton remarks. "But the guys who first began playing in the NFL were making fifteen to twenty thousand dollars a year, not getting seven to eight figure signing bonuses for a few seasons.

Once they couldn't play anymore, what happens to them?"

This question was reiterated when McClinton and his buddy Roman Phifer — a three-time super bowl champion with the New England Patriots and current assistant football coach with the Denver Broncos — went down to Miami to hang with some ex-players for a charity golf tournament. On the course, men tend to talk about what's bothering them and the main topic of conversation was how the NFL Players Association — the union for all NFL players, playing or retired — wasn't supporting the veterans who had helped build the NFL despite making the owners and the league rich by season after season of killing themselves on the field.

"Roman and I realized there was something here," McClinton explains. Donning a producer's cap for the first time, he and Phifer began cobbling together candid interviews with Hall of Fame ex-players and coaches like Mike Ditka, Daryl "Moose" Johnson, Tony Dorsett, and Willie Wood about their lives after the NFL. The response from everyone interviewed was unanimous: the Players Association wasn't paying out what it should to retired veterans.

"You work in a mill or automobile plant and you hurt yourself and can't work anymore, your union makes sure you're taken care of," McClinton says. "Why isn't the NFL Players Association doing the same thing for the players it promises to protect in the first line of its mission statement?"



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This question is the theme of their documentary, *Blood Equity*, which strings all of these interviews together and repeatedly raises the question of why the NFLPA has done little to help these players, who are clearly suffering from injuries caused by their days in the old NFL, when the equipment wasn't safe and the rules allowed for chop blocks that could bend your kneecap in the opposite direction. Over 8,500 players have retired from the NFL since 1960 and less than five percent of them have received any type of benefits.

What's worse, is that the NFLPA has over a billion dollars in an account, collected from teams for just this purpose yet seems to be just sitting on it, despite paying their union president, like the late ex-player Gene Upshaw, millions of dollars per year. Corruption seems evident, yet no one from the Players Association has given a real concrete explanation for their actions—or lack thereof.

"Because they don't have an answer," McClinton notes. "But the system is set up in such a way that they don't have to give one. So that's why we made this film, because those players needed a voice."

*Blood Equity* is a microcosm for the American health care system: those that are needed by the larger system get treatment and those that aren't needed by the larger system are ignored—and tend to suffer until their dying breath. ▼

*Blood Equity* opens November 20th at Laemmle's Sunset 5 in West Hollywood and on DVD, BluRay, Hulu, and iTunes starting December 1st.

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