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Ex-NFL linemen living on borrowed time

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Written by [contentmen](#) on 06/11/2010 2:32:17 PM

Most ex-professional athletes aren't expected to die of heart disease in their 30s. One clear exception to that rule are ex-NFL offensive and defensive linemen, whose susceptibility to health problems after their careers is gaining more attention.

It's unfortunate that it takes death for more people to notice a rising tide of poor health among ex-players. Norman Hand's death from heart disease on May 14 at the age of 37 highlights the difficulty many ex-linemen have with shedding weight once their career ends.

Their need to carry extra weight serves its purpose while they play. It just ends up potentially costing them years off their life once they retire. It's no small subject and certainly one that deserves more attention from various outlets, such as the NFL and the NFL Player's Association.

Mackie Shilstone, the executive director of The Fitness Principle at East Jefferson General Hospital in Metairie, La., has worked regularly with NFL linemen for years and recalled a study he did in the early 2000s.

He grouped 11 active linemen and tested them for five symptoms which were noted precursors to heart disease and Type 2 diabetes. If his group's average number for each category was great enough that the group, on average, was declared symptomatic, then it was counted as a strike against them. Three strikes and the group would be declared at-risk for heart disease and Type 2 diabetes. Their five categories:

- A waist measurement greater than 40 was a no-no. The group's average was 51.5. Strike one.
- They'd need a good cholesterol level of 40 milligrams/deciliter or higher. The group just passed with an average of 40.
- Their blood pressure couldn't be higher than 130 milligrams/metric on the top, no more than 85 on the bottom. The group's average for the top number was 139. Strike two.
- Their fasting blood sugar level, on average, wasn't to be greater than 100. They just sneaked below it, with an average of 99.

-Their triglyceride level couldn't be greater than 150 milligrams/deciliter. They came in at 164. Strike three.

The group on average was 6'2 and 375 pounds with a body fat percentage of 30 percent, which Shilstone said qualified as Class 1 obese. Their waist-to-height ratio, which is calculated by dividing a person's waist measurement by his or her height, was 68, even though Shilstone had made 58 the cutoff point for a healthy number.

Shilstone's study, while fielding a relatively small sample size, gives a clear indication that at least some linemen are in extremely poor physical condition. And many don't simply get in shape once they retire. No longer apart of a required physical activity routine, they can simply let themselves grow unhealthier as their risk for death rises.

This isn't to say each player is rescinded from any responsibility for his health. It's quite the opposite. Yet it seems the NFL and the NFLPA hold a responsibility to educate their athletes, especially their linemen, about how best to take care of their bodies once the gridiron is in their past.

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