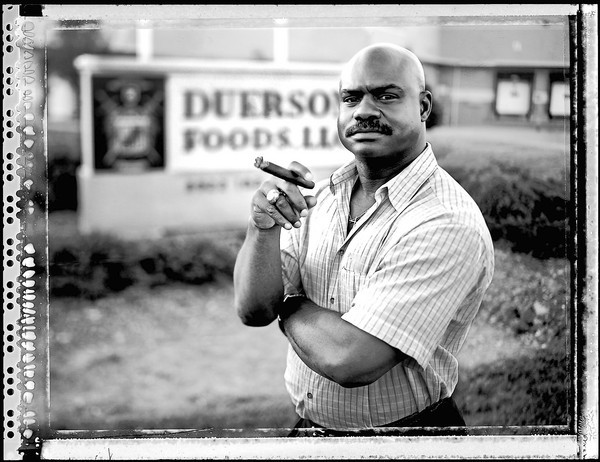
Dave Duerson: The Ferocious Life and Tragic Death of a Super Bowl Star

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By Paul Solotaroff



Dave Duerson set the scene with a hangman's care before climbing into bed with the revolver. The former Pro Bowl safety for the Super Bowl–champion 1985 Chicago Bears drew the curtains of his beachfront Florida condo, laid a shrine of framed medals and an American flag to his father, a World War II vet. On the dining room table were notes and a typed letter that were alternately intimate and official, telling his former wife where his assets were and whom to get in touch with to settle affairs. He detailed his motives for ending his life, citing the rupture of his family and the collapse of his finances, a five-year cliff dive from multimillionaire to a man who couldn't pay his condo fees. Mostly, though, he talked about a raft of ailments that pained and depressed him past all tolerance: starburst headaches and blurred vision, maddening craters in his short-term memory, and his helplessness getting around the towns he knew. Once a man so acute he aced his finals at Notre Dame with little study time, he found himself now having to dash down memos about what he was doing and when. Names, simple words, what he'd eaten for dinner – it was all washing out in one long wave.

No one had to tell him what those symptoms implied or what lay in store if he stuck around. Once a savage hitter on the best defense the game has ever seen, Duerson filled the punch list for chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), the neuron-killing condition so rampant these days among middle-aged veterans of the National Football League. It was a bad way to die and a worse way to live, warehoused for decades in a fog, unable, finally, to know your own kids when they came to see you at the home.

Duerson dispatched a blitz of texts in the last couple of hours of his life, some of them making an emphatic plea: Get my brain to the NFL's brain bank in Boston. The meaning of the texts seems plain enough: I'm sick and my mind's failing from all the helmet-to-helmet collisions in eleven brutal seasons in the NFL. Please see to it that my cortex is studied by doctors seeking treatments for brain trauma – and inquire no further about my reasons. It was a grandiose gesture, killing himself at 50 so that current and future players might be spared this horror, and was italicized by a second theatrical stroke: He shot himself through the heart, not the head, to preserve his brain for science.

The youngest of four children born to Julia and Arthur Duerson Jr. in working-class Muncie, Indiana, Dave Duerson was as exceptional off the field as he was on it. A big, powerful kid with a nose for the ball and the long-stride speed to get there first, he dominated boys two and three years older in football from the time he hit sixth grade. Even then, though, his dreams were broader than jock stardom. Among friends he talked brashly about owning his own factories and running for the Senate someday. Duerson made the National Honor Society in high school, learned the trumpet and tuba by the age of fifteen, and toured overseas in an ambassador's band while earning ten varsity letters.

With his pick of football factories like Texas and USC, Duerson chose South Bend for its glorious campus and network of corporate contacts. "From when I met him in seventh grade, he was positioning himself for a career after football," says Dave Adams, Duerson's teammate at Northside High and his roommate at Notre Dame. He interned at a law firm, then for Indiana Senator Richard Lugar.

"Sports were the springboard," says his ex-wife Alicia, who met him at a bowl game his freshman year. "He made so many plans for such a young age and had the brains to pull it all off. He had a photographic memory, which used to make me mad, because he'd barely study and get A's, where I'd be up a week of nights and be happy to get a B." A four-year starter at Notre Dame and a team captain, Duerson was as proud of his degree in economics as of making All-American, which he did twice.

In his eleven-year run with the Bears, Giants, and Cardinals, Duerson suffered multiple minor concussions, though he was never knocked out cold. Emerging after games in a pair of dark glasses and wincing against the dusk, he'd complain of nausea and ringing headaches, says his ex-wife Alicia. "Dave would get concussed on the first or second series and play the whole way through, or get a dinger in the second half and be back at practice Wednesday morning," she says. "Dave had one speed, and that was full-out."

As his playing days dwindled, Duerson weighed his options, beginning with politics. "Both the Republican and Democratic parties in Chicago tabbed him to run for office," says Harold Rice, one of Duerson's oldest friends and the man who accompanied Alicia and Tregg to Florida after Duerson's death. "Dave wanted to be a difference maker, but realized pretty quick that it wasn't worth the scrutiny."

Rice, who owned a McDonald's, urged him to enter his business instead. Duerson opened a franchise in Louisville, Kentucky during his first year out of football. Later, he got an attractive offer from a McDonald's supplier: There was an ownership opportunity in a meat-processing plant an hour outside Chicago. Duerson bought a controlling stake and, with his contacts and charm, promptly doubled the plant's revenue to more than $60 million a year. He bought himself a huge house in Highland Park, just up the road from Michael Jordan's place, engraved his jersey number, NFL 22, on the driveway pillars, and spent a bundle on exotic cars, including a midnight-blue Mercedes SL 600 with the vanity plate DD22. By then he'd had four kids with Alicia, had local sports talk shows on both radio and television, and was jetting off to Cambridge, Massachusetts, for months at a time for the executive program there. "Dave loved it at Harvard, getting to network with CEOs and bounce ideas off presidents of foreign companies," says Alicia. "When he took us to Europe, it was first class all the way: stretch limos, four-star dining, and – his big dream – flying in the Concorde."

But friction eventually sparked between Duerson and his partner at the plant, who resented his comings and goings. In 2002, Duerson sold his interest to open his own processing plant nearby. It was the first big mistake in a life of shrewd decisions, and caught Duerson flat-footed, stunned by failure.

From the beginning, Duerson Foods had disaster written all over it. He shelled out millions to gut and double the factory's floor space, then borrowed heavily to buy state-of-the-art freezers from a company in the Netherlands. They were impressive to look at but so unsound that he had to postpone opening by six months. He fell behind on his schedule to supply Burger King and Olive Garden, and soon he was leveraged to the hilt. At his swank offices in Lincolnshire, Illinois, employees, some of them relatives, saw a change. His niece, Yvette Fuse, would call Rice in a panic to say that "Dave was berating people, acting mean." Duerson borrowed more, using his house as collateral, and sued the freezer maker. He won a $34 million judgment, but the company filed for bankruptcy and never paid him a dime. By 2006, creditors were raining down lawsuits, and Duerson, broke and heartsick, shut the plant. He'd lost his mother to a heart attack and his house to the finance company, and his father was ailing with Alzheimer's. "The pressure on him was phenomenal," said Rice. "It would've taken Superman not to break."

As it turned out, Duerson had broken, if briefly. In February 2005, he and Alicia drove to South Bend for a meeting of Notre Dame's board of trustees, of which he was a member. During a small-hours argument at their hotel, he threw her out the door of their room into the hallway wall. Alicia suffered cuts to her head and went to the ER with dizziness and pain. Duerson was charged with several misdemeanor counts and later pleaded guilty to domestic battery. In an interview, he called that night "a three-second snap," but it was played up big in the Chicago papers and forced his resignation from Notre Dame's board of trustees. Alicia, looking back now through the prism of his death, sees a clear demarcation in his conduct. The old Dave, she says, "would never do that; he never showed violence toward me. It was the changes," she says of his new hair-trigger temper, sudden downshifts in mood, and lack of impulse control – all signs of brain trauma.

The last years of his life, Duerson knew he was in decline. He'd gotten divorced from Alicia in 2009 and fled to Florida in glum retreat, dropping out of sight for months on end. On his trips to Chicago to see his kids, he'd complain to Alicia about persistent headaches and frightening spells of blurred vision. "He thought at first he was getting old, but seemed more concerned as time went on," she says. His memory was shot, he wasn't sleeping much, and he had to ask her directions to get around Chicago – a town he'd known cold for 25 years. "He could hide the changes from friends and such, but he couldn't hide them from me. He'd say, 'Remember the time we did such and such?' as if to prove he wasn't fading, but he was."

He was a step above flat broke and trying to hide that, too. He hocked his wedding ring and Rolex watch, unloaded a newer Mercedes and his beloved Harley, and borrowed heavily against the equity in his apartment, though he'd put the place in trust for his four children. Even so, he couldn't make his child-support payments or keep up with his condo fees and the stress and shame compounded his symptoms and began, it seemed, to derange him.

With the exception of Alicia and a couple of his old cronies, Duerson told no one how grim things had gotten or how badly his symptoms had unhinged him. He holed up in Florida, where he avoided his neighbors. Beyond the occasional visit from one of his kids, the only break in the deepening gloom was a last-chance love affair. He'd met Antoinette Sykes in May 2010 at a business conference in Las Vegas, where he gave a talk to aspiring entrepreneurs about growing and selling a million-dollar company. By summer, he and Sykes, who owns her own PR and marketing firm in Washington, D.C., were speaking or texting 10 times a day and flying to each other's homes for weeklong stays. In the fall, he proudly showed her off to building manager Ben-David, calling her his "angel" and fiancée. They were scheduled to be married in April 2011, when his daughter, who would be on spring recess, could attend.

"What we shared was so sacred and joyful," Sykes said over the phone from D.C. "I knew he had headaches and – and a lump on his skull that he was worried about, but what I'm reading in the papers now about his brain, it's thrown me for such a loop. Maybe he wanted to shield me, but he seemed so excited about spending the rest of our lives together. On our last night, Valentine's, he joked that I owed him 29 more because we'd committed to 30 years of wedded bliss. And then I flew home to pack my things to move down there…" She breaks off, convulsing.

On February 17, Sykes woke up in Washington to a text from Duerson. It began, "My dear Angel, I love you so much and I'm sorry for my past, but I think this knot on my head is the real deal." Sykes called him, heard nothing back, and became frantic as the morning passed. Sometime after two that afternoon, she called Ben-David and asked him to knock on Duerson's door. When no one answered, she faxed him her permission to use a spare key. "I got the door open, but there was a chair wedged against it. That's when I called 911," he says. Paramedics and cops arrived and pushed their way in. "I heard them in the bedroom, yelling 'Sir! Sir! Is everything all right?' Then they asked me to leave," says Ben-David. Duerson was found shortly after 3 pm. He had shot himself about 12 hours earlier. Apart from the large patch of blood beneath him, the place was immaculate, said Miami-Dade police officers. Veteran detectives, they said they'd never seen a suicide planned and executed so meticulously.

On May 2, 2011, doctors at the Center for Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at the Boston University School of Medicine announced that Dave Duerson was suffering from a “moderately advanced” case of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) – a disease linked to repeated blows to the head whose symptoms can include memory loss, depression and dementia – when he committed suicide three months earlier. 17 months later, after four years of research, Duerson's CTE was confirmed in the scientific journal *Brain*.

Analysis Questions:

1. As Dave Duerson’s adult life progresses, how do his circumstances deteriorate? Offer three specific examples.
2. What, ultimately, is the determined cause of Duerson’s deterioration?
3. Offer two theories as to who is to blame for the tragic story of Dave Duerson.