Death and Football

By Clark Booth. Everyone seems to agree that this year's SuperBowl was the "best" ever. The Steelers are supposed to have won because they "out-muscled" Dallas, were more "physical." But hidden behind these euphemisms is the dark side of pro football: a world of nightmares, cripples and early death.
MIAMI — It was beryl going to Miami Beach seeking the darkest secrets of life in the National Football League.

This was SuperWeek, a monument to some of the highest aspirations in the culture. At the end of the week there would be a game called "The SuperBowl" between a blunt, savage football instrument called the Pittsburgh Steelers and a slightly more creative collection called the Dallas Cowboys.

The American heart warms as much as few other prospects. Seventy-five million of these would come to see any game when the game finally emerged on Sunday.

Still, there was something that nagged about what had led to this. The Steelers qualified for the finals by outclubbing the Raiders. The game is a moment to contemporary pro football mayhem. It was played in terrible cold. An aura of great suffering, both on the field and in the stands, attended it to the last.

The Cowboys advanced by swamping the Rams in a game that was memorable for only because the Cowboys had been the underdogs. Though hardly choir boys, the Cowboys incline to stylish tactics. The Steelers older them.

It would be a contest between blunt force and creative daring; a kind of Armageddon for warring football styles.

It is impeccably correct that great ritual suffering by the players should pervade the SuperBowl. If the objective of the game is to hit with matchless ferocity down logically those who have hit the hardest and have therefore absorbed the hardest hits. It is a mark of distinction, a source of pride.

In Super IX, a year ago, Steeler defensive end Dwight White spent most of the two weeks before the game in the hospital with double pneumonia and pleurisy. He was released with the understanding that he might play "a little." He played the whole game.

Then he went back to the hospital for two more weeks.

"Did the doctor say you could play?" White was asked.

"I don't think I want to answer that."

"How did you manage to play the whole game?"

"Listen! God takes care of fools and little babies and I'm no baby," Dwight White's nickname is Mad Dog.

Two of White's comrades came to Super X in dutiful shape. Defensive tackle "Mean Joe" Greene had been bashed for almost two months with a pinched nerve in his neck. Receiver Lynn Swann had been knocked unconscious on a vicious karate-chop hit from George Atkinson in the AFC championship game against Oakland.

Greene allowed that the thought of not being fully healthy for the big game would be depressing. That, he said, is why he wasn't about to think about it. He was pressed several times to explain that further. "How is it possible to ignore the fact that you could be damaging your body for life?"

He learned his massive and malevolent football form across the table and said:

"Hey man, what are you trying to do? Hasten mah retirement? End of conversation."

Swann is Greene's opposite; a lyrical player of soft and artistic grace. He was unconscious for several hours after being jostled in the Oakland game. The memory was still a numbing blur. Doctors checked his blood pressure and probed his eyes with their tiny flashlights each day of SuperWeek. He insisted that he had been warned that another such jolt could be very dangerous. But he refused to discuss the possible consequences of playing.

"I'll say this about it and that's all I'll say: First you get well. Then you forget about it. That's the only way to deal with it. If you continue to worry about it, then you quit. It's as simple as that.

"And that's all I'm going to say about it."

End of conversation.

Over in the Dallas camp, center John Fitzgerald was sitting in a room packed with sports media freaks trying to write "quotes" out of the Cowboys. Fitzgerald, who went to Boston College, willingly played an ankle reinforced with a plastic casing, a knee with a five-inch scar and an elbow with a broken bone. He talked of his injuries almost lovingly and grinned a lot.

"I can't straighten out the arm. I can't even close. The doctors say they don't know what they are doing to about the elbow. But I know I'm not going to worry about it now."

"Hey, don't judge us by everybody else. We're not in the mainstream of society." He grinned and added. "You should have talked to Walt Garrison. He broke every bone in his body at one time or another. He went all the way against the 49ers in the playoffs with two broken ribs and a cracked collarbone."

But Garrison, having broken his knee wrestling a star at Boomerang, Montana rodeo in July, is not around any more. He has finally broken one bone too many. He is through at the age of 30.

Still with us, though, is another "great old country boy" of the game: Lee Roy Jordan, the smallest of the middle linebackers and one of the all-time best. He was a very smart player and that's why he lasted.

"Well," says Jordan, "I guess my most serious injury was in my rookie year (73). I dislocated the 4th in my foot. They had to graft tendons and bones and stuff. Took two years to recover."

Now, approaching possibly his last game, he plays with a scimitar nerve condition that causes him from his hips to his 4th toe. He is immensely wealthy, having invested wisely in cattle and real estate.

"Why," he is asked, "do you go on, knowing that you could ruin the rest of your life by playing a few games too many?"

Unlike Greene and Swann, Jordan has been around too long. He can't lose anymore. He nods and sets his jaws.

"By the time I'm 55 I feel they'll have learned enough to medically treat me... cut the remission maybe, and relieve the pain. If they can't, I can accept that."

"D. D. Lewis sits across the room. His mindless kamikaze style of play offers him no chance of lasting as long as Jordan or of escaping as healthy. Lewis confesses lamistically that he once had a fear of breaking his neck. He says he also used to have nightmares.

"What were the nightmares?"

"I don't know... I forget."

"Why do you think you were afraid of breaking your neck?"

"Oh, I don't know. It was a ways back. I forgot." He gives a limp smile and shrugs.

That's eagerly taken as the clue to his question about linebacking strategies.

"Suck it up!" "Play with pain!" "It's a hitter's game!" They are the canticles of the cult. They must be accepted if you wish to survive in a game that has clearly become vicious.

But where many players leave the embrace of reality is the point at which they refuse to admit fear of injury and its possible consequences. Often, even, to themselves.

"It's bullshit," says Jim Morris, ex of the Patriots and now with the Lions. "But you have to see it as part of the mystique of the game. It's macho and it's a pressure too. You look at the next guy and you say, 'I can take it. I'm as tough as him.'"

Dee Cross was once an all-pro cornerback with the Eagles and Rams. Now he sits at the right hand of Phyllis George in the CBS football broadcast booth. In his rookie year, he suffered three concussions and a broken jaw in the span of a few weeks. Cross recalls:

"The doctor told me outright, 'If you get another jolt like that on the head, Banner, you're not going to be with us anymore.' I played eight more years."

"You get back there and you get white flashes and you feel nauseous and faint. You play a whole quarter and five minutes later you can't remember a thing. Not one thing! It's dumb, I know it was, really was.

Cross is a trim, handsome, very sincere man. He rams himself into every question much as he once rammed himself into the likes of Jim Brown.

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"Why main yourself...? I don't know. You just do it. You just DO IT..."

"The damage that a player can do to himself... Nobody can appreciate it. It sounds silly now, but I had something to prove. It's apparent that he has given it a lot of thought and has decided that there is no better explanation.

Morris, an immensely intelligent and articulate athlete, will likely arrive at the same conclusion some day.

"You know," Morris says. "I used to say my first knee operation would be my last one. That was before I got it cut. Now I say my second knee operation will be my last one. I guess I'm feeling myself..."

D. D. Lewis, a drawing back in sport, wraps it all up with his common-man's touch. He says, "They just didn't tell you what it was going to be like when you got into this game which is when I was seven years old. And now..." He shrugs. And he smiles.

Said Fugett in 1968, "I'm 25-year-old players with the knees of 60- and 70-year-olds..."

"You can only advise a player that repeated traumatizing of a knee or an ankle is going to lead to worse conditions. But as long as the joint is strong enough to function, I have to leave the decision to him.

"I can only go so far. I can't tell you, 'You have arthritis. There's no cure. Even now you won't lead a normal life.' I can tell you the dangers and risks involved. But for so far, I've never talked any player out of it.

Peter Gent wishes that arthritis were the only lifetime legacy from his playing days. Once a fine Dallas pass receiver, Gent later wrote North Dallas Forty, a bitter fictional account of life in the game. He laments in the SuperBowl media headquarters, alas down, and chronicles his lingering physical woes.

"I have headaches that have lasted as long as seven months. Today I've got a click in my ankle and my knees keep me so nervous my head slopes a little to the right. That's from a surgical condition. Sometimes, you know, today, I can't straighten my neck. This hip [left] has a dead spot in it. The muscle there took a massive bruise that was healing and the muscle atrophied. I have muscle spasms between my shoulder blades. The hair that the pain has lightened up, I have arthritis in my neck, back, fingers, wrists and toes. But the condition that bothers me most is my back. Vince Cotello caught me with his knee one time and buckled my ribs off the vertebrae. They couldn't completely correct it..."

Gent has mellowed some since he wrote his scathing novel. But not too much. "When you hurt the coach can't forgive you. They get annoyed with you. You've gone and got yourself hurt. It's like they are trying to say, 'Look, I can do anything for you. Quit confronting me. Don't you know I can't do anything for you anymore.'"

"It's like that horse, Raffian. It was really a shock when they had to shoot that little old horse. Remember how everyone cried? Well, they shot her because the horse was worth more than the horse. It would be much simpler if they could do that with football players; though spiritually, they damn well need to do it!"

Gent wonders about the long-term implications of treatments with drugs. For a time there was much experimentation with drugs in the league. He claims there still is. He suggests the use of steroids to control the swelling of joints could lead to cancer. He wonders what the complex interactions of the drugs such as butotesal and corinseps might be.

But Gent, you say, is a celebrated maverick. Then take the case of Alex Webster, the old Giant mainstay and devout company man. Back in the mid-Fifties, Webster began experiencing "black-outs" when he was hit. Eventually it was discovered that he had developed a radical mastoid problem from repeated thumps to the head. In time, he had surgery on the right ear tube. The operation involved cutting off his ear and then reassembling it back. Now, years later, he has developed middle-ear problems.

You don't have to lurk in corners like some dark specter of gloom to uncover the problem of the present suffering of the football heroes of yesterday.

Ask Wally Woodhead, the Heisman man of San Francisco. "What was the most grotesque injury you've ever seen in football?" and you get this for an answer:

"I've been trying for about ten years to forget it. It was in Houston. It was somebody named Roger Cochran. He broke his leg backwards, got forwards. It (Continued on page 18)
snapped like a chicken bone. It was literally broken off his body. They had to retire the muscles and the blood vessels. He was immobilized for six months. In the hospital for a year. He never played again. He's lucky if he can walk."

Or ask the same of Will McDonough, who has watched thousands of football games for the Boston Globe."

"The worst I ever saw was Craig Hamsun's leg break with the Patriots last year. The ankle ripped right out of the socket and a bone stuck right through his nose. Some of the players looked at it and wanted to pull right out on the field. They kept his head turned away so he wouldn't see it. They were afraid he could go into convulsions."

"Ask Andy Russell, veteran linebacker and captain of the Steelers."

"The worst I ever saw, I couldn't possibly every forget it. It was John Reger. He swallowed his tongue. He had a concussion. Blood was coming out of his nose. His eyes were in the back of his head. And his heart stopped beating. The ambulance was coming and we were all standing around scared shit.

"And you know something, that was the toughest break I ever got in the game of football. I replaced him in the game and got his job."

Russell shook his head. I asked him, "Didn't you feel a little guilty?"

"I feel ambivalent," he replied. "I said to myself, 'God, what a brutal game.' But there's Coach Don Shula telling me 'I'm gonna play and I'm more scared of Buddy Parker.'"

In that same game, Ivy Cross was across the field playing for the Steelers' opponent, the Philadelphia Eagles. Interestingly, the memory to Cross has much greater force. He seems to have been more deeply affected.

Cross recalls that the Eagle runner was Theron Sapp. He cut through the middle and had some steam behind him when he caught Reger in the throat with the full force of his helmeted head. He says, 'I can never forget it. I can see it as clear now as it happened yesterday.'

"There were 60,000 people there... screaming... and the place suddenly went silent. Reger went limp. He was so still on the field. They had to punch out two or three teeth to get his tongue free. They just PUNCHED them out. And then they bent over him and started pounding his chest frantically.

"Cross began to pound the coffee table furiously. We were sitting in the crowded CBS Hospitality Suite, surrounded by people drinking cocktails and watching great moments in the history of CBS sports coverage. Excerpts from the '58 Giants-Colts championship game were spinning by. Joe Mantain was in the booth. He had an Alfred Hitchcock voice, and it was perfect for the occasion. Mantain kept turning to the other announcers and saying, 'You can't believe they let me do this.'"

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"I was so nervous, I couldn't even get my breath back. I was just lying there, thinking about what had happened. It was such a strange feeling. I couldn't believe it had actually happened."

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