

Troy Benson: Paid price for success

By Neil Rudel

November 15, 1987 was a dark day for Troy Benson.

That's when his professional football career, for all intents and purposes, was shaped. The Jets were at Kansas City on a cold, rainy, maybe 40-degree Sunday afternoon.

"I think everyone was having a hard time getting loose," Benson said.

And you need to be loose to handle Kansas City fullback/runaway truck, Christian Okoye.

"I remember hitting him and my right arm went totally limp," Benson said, "and I got a severe pain in my back, like somebody stuck a knife in it. I couldn't feel my arm at all."

He hustled to the sidelines.

"I sat out three, four plays and was back in."

A third-year pro in his first season as a starting inside linebacker, Benson was unsure whether to remove himself from the lineup for an extended period, even though the pain was constant. He started to get what they call in the business as a "burner," a jolt he likened to sticking your finger in a light socket, or having your dentist drill a nerve, only much worse. He was unable to lift a five-pound weight, and yet continued to play.

"For a minute or minute and a half, it's the most excruciating pain you can imagine," Benson said. "A lot of people asked why I kept playing. I wasn't a veteran at the time. I didn't know. The burners were getting worse, but I had just earned a starting position, and I didn't want to give it up, even for something like that."

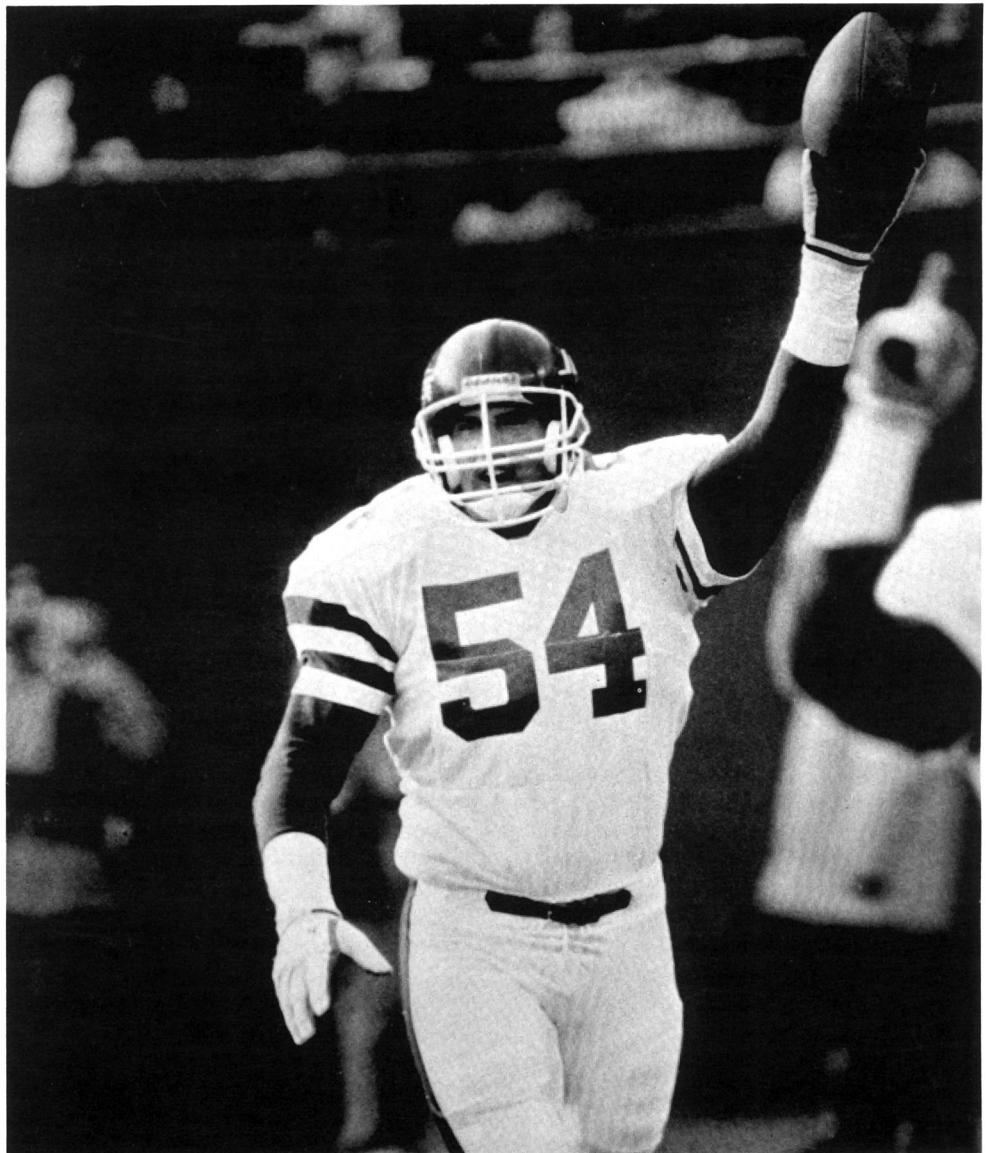
Now, though, he knows better.

"I should not have played."

Troy Benson's National Football League career is now over. It lasted six years, four seasons of action sandwiched around two, the first and last, on the injured-reserved list.

Whether it might have lasted longer had Benson sought medical attention earlier is uncertain - "I don't know, but the chances would be a lot better" - but one thing is: He never recovered.

In 1988, he experienced back problems throughout the preseason, something he thought "stemmed from my neck," but "made it through" by trying not to use his head when he tackled. During the fifth game, at Buffalo on a Monday night, it was unavoidable. He took another shot, this time trying to tackle Bills' fullback Carl Byrum. He went out again,



Troy always showed a nose for the football.

for one play.

"I never missed a game in '88," Benson said, "but there were a few I didn't play too well."

In '89, Benson missed most of the preseason with the continued neck problem, and played after the Jets' doctors had assured him that "I wouldn't risk permanent injury."

"I had a decent season," he said. Benson, the Jets' second-leading tackler in 1988 and '89, sought a second opinion last year in Pittsburgh, and was told that to play would risk further injury.

"I really didn't think there was much of a decision to make," he said. "They told me my problem was continuing, one that wasn't

going to go away. One doctor said if I kept playing, eventually one of those nerves would get pinched and it might not come back and I could lose complete use of my right arm and there's nothing worth that."

Benson, 28, lives in pain daily. Nothing biting, but enough to know he played football for his entire adult life.

"My everyday activities are pretty much normal," he said. "I know it's there. Some days are more painful than others. I get tightness in the middle of my back. Sometimes if I move in a real fast manner, I get a numbing sensation. If I sit in one place for a long time, I get stiff."

Unfortunately for the parties involved, most professional athletes don't go out on their

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own terms. While he is "not bitter," Benson also doesn't like to use the word retirement. He feels there is a voluntary connotation to that, which doesn't apply to him.

His older brother Brad played 11 years with the New York Giants before retiring. To Troy, the culmination of that kind of career merited a *retirement*.

"Brad's situation was different than mine," he said. "His hips were bothering him severely, but he also had a Super Bowl the year before and was an all-pro so there were no regrets about his career being over. I only got six years in and two of those I wasn't even playing. I feel like I'm young enough that I could still be playing."

"I didn't retire. My decision was not to play anymore because of my neck. But I'm not bitter about it. Some guys get injured and don't even start their NFL career."

Benson never envisioned his post-NFL future in New York. He and his wife, Jeryl, bought a townhouse in North Hills and Benson immediately secured a membership at the Sewickley Heights Golf Club where he will attempt to shoot par from the gold tees.

"Moving back to Pittsburgh has made it easier," he said. "This is always a day I knew was going to come. I knew I would move out of New York when my career was over. I can't say that I'm not going to miss football, but Pittsburgh has a lot to offer and the nice thing is it's close to home."

Benson has never strayed too far from home. Whether at Pitt or in New York, he would frequently be back on weekends, joining his father Bill and brothers Brad, Todd and Shawn, to fish, hunt, trap, three-wheel or shoot at the family's cabin at Blue Knob. All the while, his memories of growing up in Lakemont, of playing baseball with the Hammakers and the Shieldses and the Moores and the Laffertys, remain strong.

"It was a great place to grow up," Benson said.

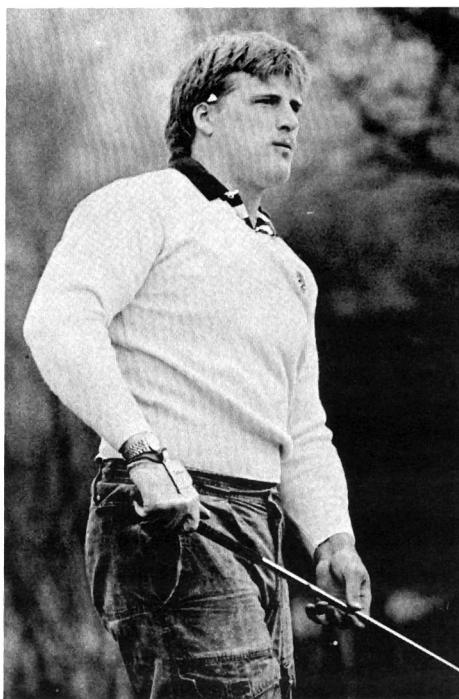
Spurred by his grandfather Bart's interest first love. He parlayed that and his ability to earn an incredible 10 varsity letters - four in baseball, three in wrestling and three in football.

"I don't remember much about my sophomore year in football," Benson said. "I remember that we were terrible, and I was pretty terrible, too."

The Frank Rocco arrived and Benson became an all-over-the-field linebacker, helping to make maybe 75 percent of the tackles during his senior year.

"I think the biggest change in me came from my sophomore to junior year," Benson, who described himself as awkward at Roosevelt Junior High, said. "I started to develop and got bigger and faster and stronger. I went from a 167-pounder as a sophomore who was getting thrown all over the place to a heavyweight my junior year."

In his last two wrestling seasons, Benson, a two-time District champion, was 41-3-1.



. . . his new favorite sport . . .

But football was his sport. He earned all-state honors and played well in the Big 33 game.

"Troy was one of the most coachable kids you'd ever want to meet," Rocco, now an administrative assistant at Penn State, said. "His background and mindset was just into being an athlete and into being a great football player. He was just one of those all-out guys. He listened, he was tough and he knew the game, but with all of those things, the one that stands out is he wanted to be a player. He wanted it."

Benson credits Rocco for "instilling dedication."

"I never got to know him that well, other than he's an honest man and a good coach," Benson said. "I don't think Altoona was ready for him. He wanted more time than the Altoona people wanted to give, but I wanted it to be my life so I was ready for it."

Benson also feels wrestling coaches Marty Rusnak, Matt McKee and Jim Torsell were positive influences.

"I always wondered what my career would have been like if I had played basketball," Benson said, laughing. "But I made the right choice. It wasn't really a choice, because I never would have passed (Rusnak's) gym class if I hadn't wrestled."

The determination and heart needed in wrestling carried over to Benson's football career. Wanting to carve his own identity, rather than follow Brad to Penn State, which didn't recruit him hard anyway and with Joe Paterno later admitting that mistake, Troy was anxious when recruited by Pitt.

"Pitt knew how to recruit and made me feel I was a big-time recruit even though I wasn't," Benson, who became a four-year letterman, two-year starter and tri-captain as a senior when he was named to the All-East team, said.

"I tried to recruit Brad," Foge Fazio, who was Troy's head coach for three seasons at Pitt, said. "I said then anytime you're getting a Benson kid, you're getting a high-profile guy with great character and intelligence. Troy might not have had the reputation of some other players, but we were pleased to get him."

Fazio later hooked up with Benson as an assistant coach with the Jets.

"Troy had all the things you love to see in a middle linebacker," Fazio said. "He was very, very physical and instinctive. He knows football and he doesn't shy away from anybody. That's why his career was shortened. The way he played, the way he played, the way he hit was unbelievable. He went in there nose first."

Benson's style offset a lack of speed that provided a question mark that Benson usually answered.

"He played well for me," Joe Walton, the former Jets' head coach, said. "He had some injuries that slowed him down, but he was always a very tough football player and that's what I liked about him."

"He always came to play and he was a good team man. He always has a little speed problem, but he made up for it by being smart. The key thing in this league is staying healthy and anytime injuries start to slow you down, it doesn't allow you to achieve what you could."