

# Erie man faces off with NFL

By [John Dudley](#)  
john.dudley@timesnews.com

Over the past few years, Stacey Thompson has seen her husband's once-sharp memory begin to fade. She's noticed his delay in responding to questions in everyday conversation.

She's helped him search for things -- keys, his wallet, important papers. And she's watched his body strain, a little more each year, from the poundings he absorbed as a young man.

"It's very disturbing to see someone who was so vibrant, so happy-go-lucky in life, go through what he's going through," she said. "It's really heartbreaking and hurtful to watch."

Stacey Thompson's husband, Woody, was one of the greats in Erie football history. He starred at East High School in the 1960s, then at the University of Miami before becoming a third-round pick of the Atlanta Falcons in the 1975 NFL Draft.

Thompson played only three seasons of professional football, but they were violent years filled with jarring hits and crushing tackles.

As a blocking fullback and special teams standout, Thompson ran into opposing players at full speed nearly every play.

He estimates he suffered multiple concussions, nearly all of them undetected and undiagnosed, at a time when football players were commonly told to shake it off, clear their heads and get back onto the field.

"Coaches at that time promoted blocking with your head, tackling with your head," Thompson said. "If we got hit, they gave us smelling salts, asked us some obvious questions they knew we could answer. Then they sent us back out there. As players, we didn't know any better."

They do now. Thompson and thousands of other former players -- 4,127 as of Feb. 22 -- are plaintiffs in an

ongoing lawsuit against the NFL. They claim the league hid the results of medical studies showing the game was far more violent and players much more at risk of suffering lasting brain injuries than previously believed.

The lawsuit was in the headlines all last week. The league's lawyers have argued that the players' claims should be heard by an arbitrator as part of the collective bargaining agreement between their union and the NFL. The players want the case to play out in an open courtroom and its outcome decided by a jury.

Thompson won't comment on the lawsuit or speculate on how it might turn out. He has a separate workers' compensation claim against the Atlanta Falcons pending in California.

But in a recent interview with the Erie Times-News, he described the chronic injuries and debilitating cognitive damage he says are a direct result of his years in the NFL.

"The NFL has some accountability for players that came into the league like me, because they withheld information about the risks of repeated head injuries," said Thompson, 60. "We were thinking football was just a contact sport. No one told us we could suffer long-term effects from repeated blows to the head. The NFL knew that even years and decades before we played, and they still try to debunk that information."

Emerging football star

In the 1940s, Alexander Woodrow Thompson left his home in Kingston, Jamaica, and set out for the United States.

Thompson found transient work throughout the South, traveling from place to place before eventually moving to Chicago, where he met members of a small but active Jamaican-American community.

Through his new friends in Chicago, Thompson was able to contact a cousin who lived in Erie, and eventually he moved here and started a family.

On Aug. 20, 1952, his wife, Laura, gave birth to a son who took his father's name.

Woody Thompson grew up on Erie's lower east side. He was a natural athlete who became a star running back for coach Bill Brabender at East and won a state wrestling championship.

Football earned him a scholarship to Miami, where he became a member of the school's fourth racially integrated recruiting class.

College football at that time remained somewhat segregated, particularly in the South.

The Hurricanes in those years were still several seasons away from contending for national championships, but they played an ambitious schedule that included some of the best programs in the country, including Alabama, Oklahoma, Texas and Notre Dame.

Thompson stood out, emerging as an NFL prospect and ending up in Atlanta, where then-Falcons coach Marion Campbell preferred to rely on a strong running game and vicious defense.

In practices, Thompson experienced the ferocity of defensive coordinator Jerry Glanville's unit, which set an NFL record by allowing 129 points in 14 games in 1977.

One of the team's most violent hitters was a free safety named Ray Easterling, and Thompson learned to keep his head on a swivel, making note of where Easterling was on every play.

"He was a white guy playing in the secondary, so he had a little bit of a chip on his shoulder," Thompson said. "I figured out right away I had to be careful, because I saw him end some careers."

Thompson became a starter and rushed for 877 yards and one touchdown from 1975 to '77, but by then the wear and tear on his body already was catching up with him.

He said the coaches had asked him to play with broken ribs in 1976. During his third and final season with the Falcons in 1977, Thompson began to realize his playing days were coming to an end.

He had spent the year dealing with a variety of injuries and tried to play through them for the most part, but

he was limited to seven games.

He sensed resentment from the coaches, and when he returned, they asked him to serve as the wedge-buster on the kickoff coverage team, one of the most violent jobs in football.

It would require him to sprint full speed downfield and smash into the three-man wedge of blockers in front of the ball carrier.

Thompson refused, reasoning that it made no sense for the team's fullback to put himself at risk in such a manner. The Falcons released him before the 1978 season.

At age 26, Thompson was out of football.

"The NFL takes a toll on your body like nothing else," Thompson said. "I took some hits in college that left me stunned. I can remember the old spring-coil tackling dummy at East High, and if you didn't hit it just right it would knock you over.

"But the NFL was a whole other level. And when you get to the point where you're not willing to sacrifice your body the way they want you to, you're gone."

A steady decline, and tragedy

His career over, Thompson worked seasonally for a few years in a heavy-equipment business his father helped him start. He later worked for National Fuel and Perseus House and as a counselor for at-risk students for the Erie School District.

Thompson continues to work with kids through Bethesda Children's Home, a rewarding job he says he enjoys. He has no children of his own either with Stacey Thompson, whom he married in 2010, or from his first marriage, which ended in 1980.

But Thompson says he would have a hard time giving his blessing to any young athlete who aspired to play football, particularly in the NFL.

"Just based on the effects in my body, I would recommend them finding another sport to play," said Thompson, who has taken sleep aids for years and still wakes several times a night. He's had both knees replaced. "After playing the game at that level, your body is never the same."

Stacey Thompson, who has two grown sons, is more adamant. She first met her husband about 30 years ago when he lived in Houston, and she said she understands all too well the toll the game has exacted on him over the past few decades.

"I was very sports-minded and athletic in high school, but I did everything in my power to discourage my boys from playing football," said Stacey Thompson, 48. "Basketball, golf: Those were fine. But I don't care if they would have gotten full scholarship offers from six schools, it wasn't worth it to me to see them go through life after football. Fortunately, they listened to me and never played."

Woody Thompson acknowledged that despite his declining health, he misses the game and would be tempted to do it all over again, even knowing how things might turn out. But like many of his contemporaries from the 1960s, '70s and '80s, he believes he deserved to know more about the risks he assumed by playing.

And he believes the league and helmet manufacturers could have done more to protect players from concussions, a sentiment shared by contemporaries like Buffalo Bills Hall of Fame guard Joe DeLamielleure.

"I saw stars every day in practice," DeLamielleure said at the Erie Charity Sports Banquet in 2011. "You were taught to tackle with your head, and nobody knew any better. Now I forget things, I lose things, I have a short fuse -- I never was that way before."

Thompson said he can relate. And he's been exposed to the worst of what the concussion lawsuit's plaintiffs have gone through.

He and Easterling, the big-hitting safety, became friends during their playing days and occasionally talked after they retired.

One night, in April 2012, Thompson received a phone call from Easterling, whom he hadn't heard from in

some time.

Thompson knew Easterling had been suffering from dementia and was one of the lead plaintiffs in the concussion lawsuit.

"One of the big challenges for me is just getting up in the morning and figuring out where I left everything the night before," Thompson said. "But Ray was worse. He had gotten to the point that he couldn't even find his way home. It's scary, and we talked about that."

The two chatted for a while, recalling a few stories about their playing days, then said goodbye.

The next morning, Thompson received a call from Easterling's wife, Mary Ann, who said her husband had taken his life. He was 62.

A subsequent autopsy found evidence of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a progressive form of brain damage linked to repeated blows to the head.

The news hit Thompson hard.

"I was actually the last person he talked to before he shot himself," Thompson said. "He was reaching out to several old teammates who had played with him. Why he picked me as one of them, God only knows. But he was actually telling me goodbye. After that, I became even more firm in my resolve about this lawsuit."

JOHN DUDLEY can be reached at 870-1677 or by e-mail. Follow him on Twitter at [twitter.com/ETNdudley](https://twitter.com/ETNdudley).

#### ABOUT Woody Thompson

- Age: 60
- NFL career: Three seasons with the Atlanta Falcons (1975-77).
- NFL totals: 877 rushing yards and one touchdown, 42 receptions for 259 yards.
- Notable: One of 4,127 plaintiffs in an ongoing lawsuit against the NFL that accuses the league of hiding information from players about the risks of long-term brain trauma from repeated blows to the head.
- How he feels about football now: "I was one of those old-school players. I would have played for free. But looking back on all the injuries from head to toe, if I knew then what I know now, I could have done some other things with my life."