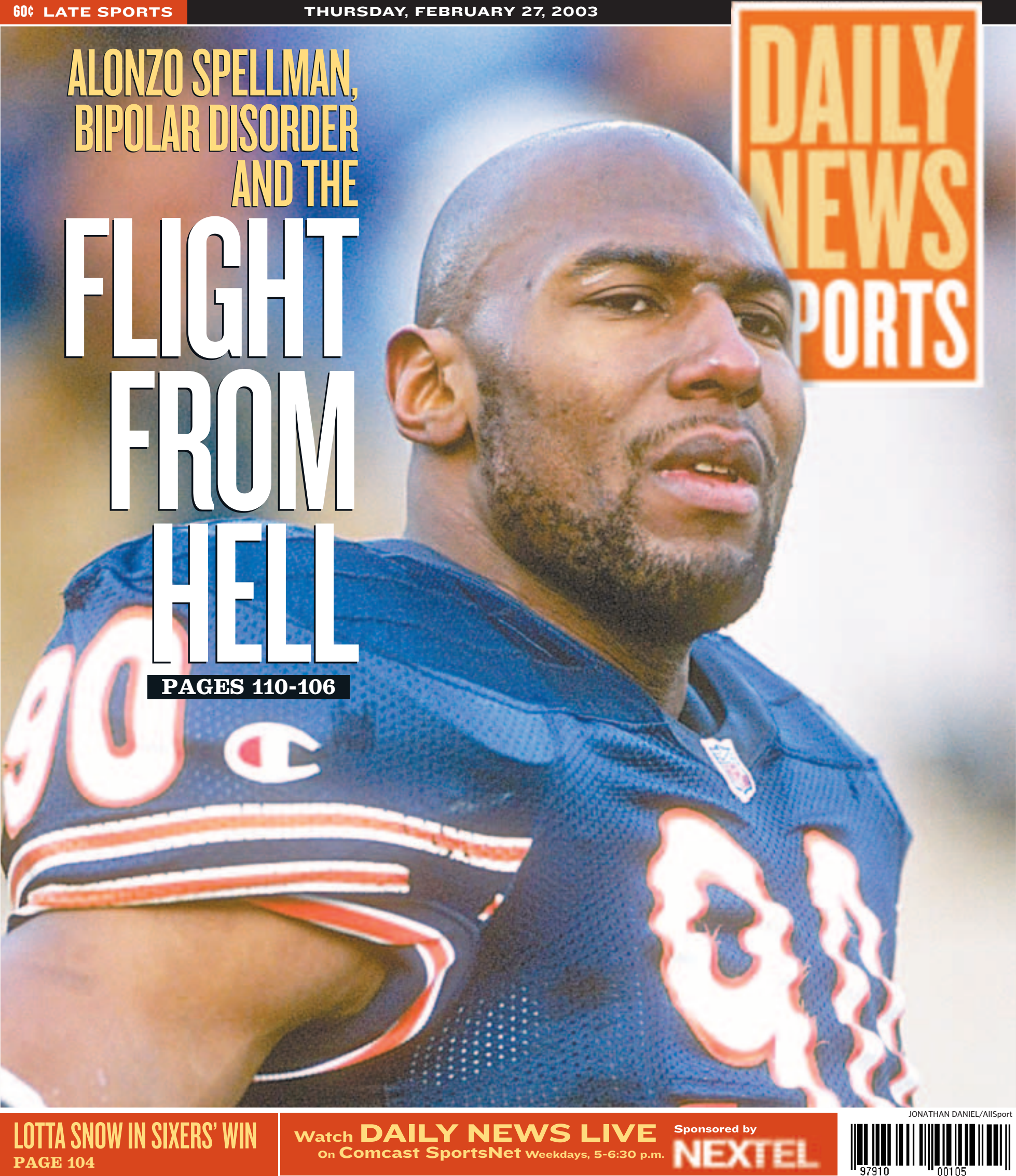


**DAILY  
NEWS  
SPORTS**


**ALONZO SPELLMAN,  
BIPOLAR DISORDER  
AND THE  
FLIGHT  
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# THE BRUTAL TRIP DOWN

A tale about Alonzo Spellman, his illness, and a terrifying flight that landed him in jail

By **MARK KRAM**

**T**HEY were on their way back to Philadelphia from a vacation in Michigan last July. Karen Weaver, husband Steve and their two small sons had just settled into their seats aboard their Delta connection in Cincinnati when Karen became aware of a small scraping sound. She wondered to herself: "What could that possibly be?" The noise appeared to be coming from behind her, so she positioned herself in such a way that allowed her to see between the seatbacks. It was then that she caught a narrow glimpse of him: this very large man in the act of stroking his beard with a comb — up one side, then the other, again and again and again. And he was talking to himself in a low yet agitated voice, switching from subject to subject in what Weaver would later remember as "a stream of gibberish."

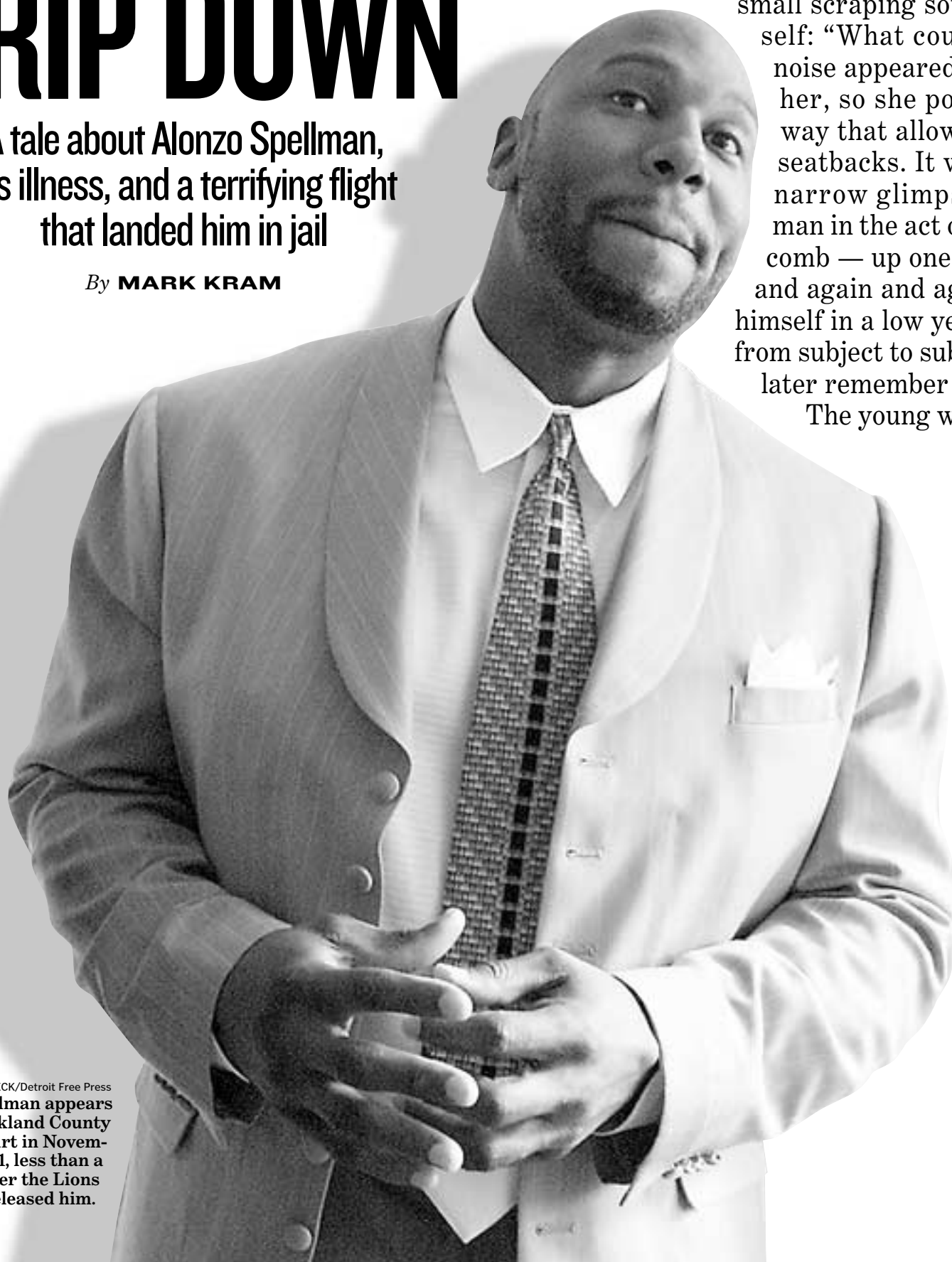
The young woman arched an eyebrow.

The jet sat on the runway for close to an hour, during which the passenger only grew louder and began straying off on scary tangents — including Osama bin Laden and the possibility that a bomb had been planted on board. Weaver says now that she should have alerted a flight attendant at this point, that perhaps he could have been removed while the plane was still on the ground. But before she knew it they were up in the air, so she focused her attention on her 3½-year-old son, engaging him in heightened conversation in an effort to drown out the chatter behind them. When the passenger began spewing not just odd nonsense but vul-

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## SOURCES

Material for this story was drawn from a variety of sources, including interviews with the chief participants, Steve and Karen Weaver, and others; court testimony and related legal documents; and prior accounts by newspapers and wire services. Through his attorney, Alonzo Spellman declined to be interviewed for this article. Additionally, numerous phone messages left for his mother, Dorothy, and his sister, Lorraine, were not returned.



PATRICIA BECK/Detroit Free Press

Alonzo Spellman appears in Oakland County (Mich.) court in November 2001, less than a month after the Lions released him.

1 Player — Dimitrius Underwood — who used Spellman as an adviser while a member of the Cowboys in 2000; both have conditions diagnosed as bipolar.

1 Team MVP after recording nine tackles for loss, three sacks, three passes defended and four fumbles during his junior season with Ohio State.

1 Career pro interception, in 1994, for 31 yards.

4 Year, \$3.06 million contract Spellman signed with the Bears in 1992.

5 Sacks as a member of the Cowboys in 1999.

5 Tackles in Oct. 10, 1999, loss to Eagles.

5 Letters a day he was getting from colleges while a junior at Rancocas Valley High School in Mount Holly, N.J. He said then: "Our athletic director [Carmen Cella] told me the other day that I was going to have to get my own mailbox."

14 Sacks in his senior season at Rancocas Valley.

22 Quarterback pressures in 1999, which led the Cowboys.

23 Children who were aided by the Spellman Foundation, which was designed to provide tutors, counseling and after-school enrichment programs for this group of fifth-graders. If they kept their grades up, the foundation promised a full college scholarship. Four years later, in 1999, it had to be dissolved when he was unable to fund it.

24 Wins in 27 games by Rancocas Valley's basketball team in 1988-89, aided by Spellman, who averaged 15.4 points and 14.4 rebounds.

43 Lifetime sacks as a pro, including a career-high 8½ for the Bears in 1995.

45 Size of his suit as a junior in high school.

52 Tackles for Ohio State as a sophomore in 1990, earning All-Big Ten honors and designation by The Sporting News as the second-best defensive end in the country.

78 Tackles in 1996, his career high, as a defensive end for the Bears.

83 Career regular-season games, in nine seasons.

104 Tackles in his senior season at Rancocas Valley.

292 His listed playing weight as a pro.

1999 The Christmas season he participated in the Cowboys-Salvation Army Angel Tree, which purchases clothing and toys for children in need.

— Paul Vigna

## SPELLMAN

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gar invective, Weaver finally summoned a flight attendant, who approached the man and politely asked him to behave. Weaver would later remember he assaulted her with a "verbal rampage."

He just would not stop.

And Weaver became increasingly annoyed. Her hands trembled with anger.

She then stood up at her seat, whirled around and looked the passenger hard in the face. "Excuse me," she said evenly. "Would you mind not using such profanity? I am traveling with two young children, and this is really out of hand. Could you please try?"

Seated behind Weaver in Row 21 on Delta Flight 2038 that evening was Alonzo Spellman, the former NFL defensive lineman then in the unrelenting grip of bipolar disorder. He was chaperoned in this wildly manic state by his mother and sister, who had picked him up in Las Vegas with the intention of taking him to a psychiatric hospital back home in South Jersey. The 6-4, 330-pound Spellman had been in a long free fall since his condition was diagnosed in 1998, highlighted by alcohol and illegal drug use, erratic sprees that led to altercations with police and the dissolution of his once-promising football career. Because Spellman would not accept the very troubling fact that he had a potentially deadly illness and needed to stay on a closely monitored program of medication, a seasoned flight crew and 138 passengers found themselves in an utterly terrifying drama that U.S. District Court Judge Stewart Dalzell ultimately called "a nightmare."

Imagine yourself in their place for just a second: Here you are, strapped in your seat in that cramped cabin, and this big guy — or as one passenger later described him as "this solid brick wall" — is yelling at this young woman, who is so upset by his lewd comments that she eventually dissolves into tears. Her husband is sitting across from her, but at just 5-8 and 150, he realizes he has no chance whatsoever of successfully stepping in with force. So he has to sit there as this person calls his wife a "whore" and his sons "sorry white boys." One passenger becomes so upset by the escalating scene that he



File photo

**A two-sport star at Rancocas Valley Regional High School, Alonzo Spellman led the football team in 1987 to the South Jersey Group 3 football title, and the basketball team in 1989 to its first league title in 25 years.**

slips into the lavatory and stays there with the door locked. Suddenly, you hear this agitated man say that he is going to tear the emergency door off, so you begin to think to yourself: What can I do to stop him? The captain, Robert D. Freund, radios in and asks for priority handling. The plane lands and you see him walk back and approach the passenger, who holds up his large hands in a display of aggression and says: "You see this, I can feel the adrenaline rushing through my hands, I am about to rip your throat out." Fear has everyone

frozen in their seats.

Freund would later say, "I just wanted to see what had set him off, if it had been something Delta had done. Like losing his bags."

### Early accolades

It was sometime during his first few years with the Chicago Bears that Alonzo Spellman called one of his high school coaches and asked him out to dinner at a place in Cherry Hill. Spellman had depended on Raj Mackara, then the assistant football coach at Rancocas Valley Re-

gional High School in Mount Holly, N.J., to open up vistas and point the way for him. Schoolwork had not come easy for Spellman, yet he and Mackara worked hard on it, even as Spellman became a target of fierce razzing by opposing fans. Whenever he stepped to the foul line on the basketball court, the chant would swell and echo through the gymnasium: "SAT! SAT! SAT!" So it pleased Mackara deeply to see how far Spellman had come as they sat across from each other at dinner that evening, how the

**"He just had to get it out to show me ... he was no longer the pupil I once knew but a responsible adult."**

RAJ MACKARA  
*Spellman's high school mentor*

variety of hardships he had faced as a youth had been galvanized into an accomplished adult. Oddly, what Mackara remembers years later is the computerized address book Spellman had with him. "It looked so small in his big hands, but he just had to get it out to show me how organized he had become — how he was no longer the pupil I once knew but a responsible adult," Mackara says. "He was still young and learning, but he wanted to show me that he had coped and adapted. And I remember being so happy for him, because he and I had been very close."

The former coach pauses. "We talked less and less after that," he adds. "You know how it goes. The young move on. But I can still see him sitting there at dinner as if to say, 'I have grown up. And I am doing OK.'"

How Spellman became something less than OK is a cautionary tale of just how destructive untreated bipolar disorder can be. Wild instability set in under the guise of the usual ups and downs as the years passed, and plagued him both on and off the field. He was All-America at Rancocas, All-Big Ten at Ohio State and a No. 22 pick in the first round of the 1992 NFL draft, yet he would verbally spar with coaches and be looked upon as an underachiever during his pro career

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## SPELLMAN

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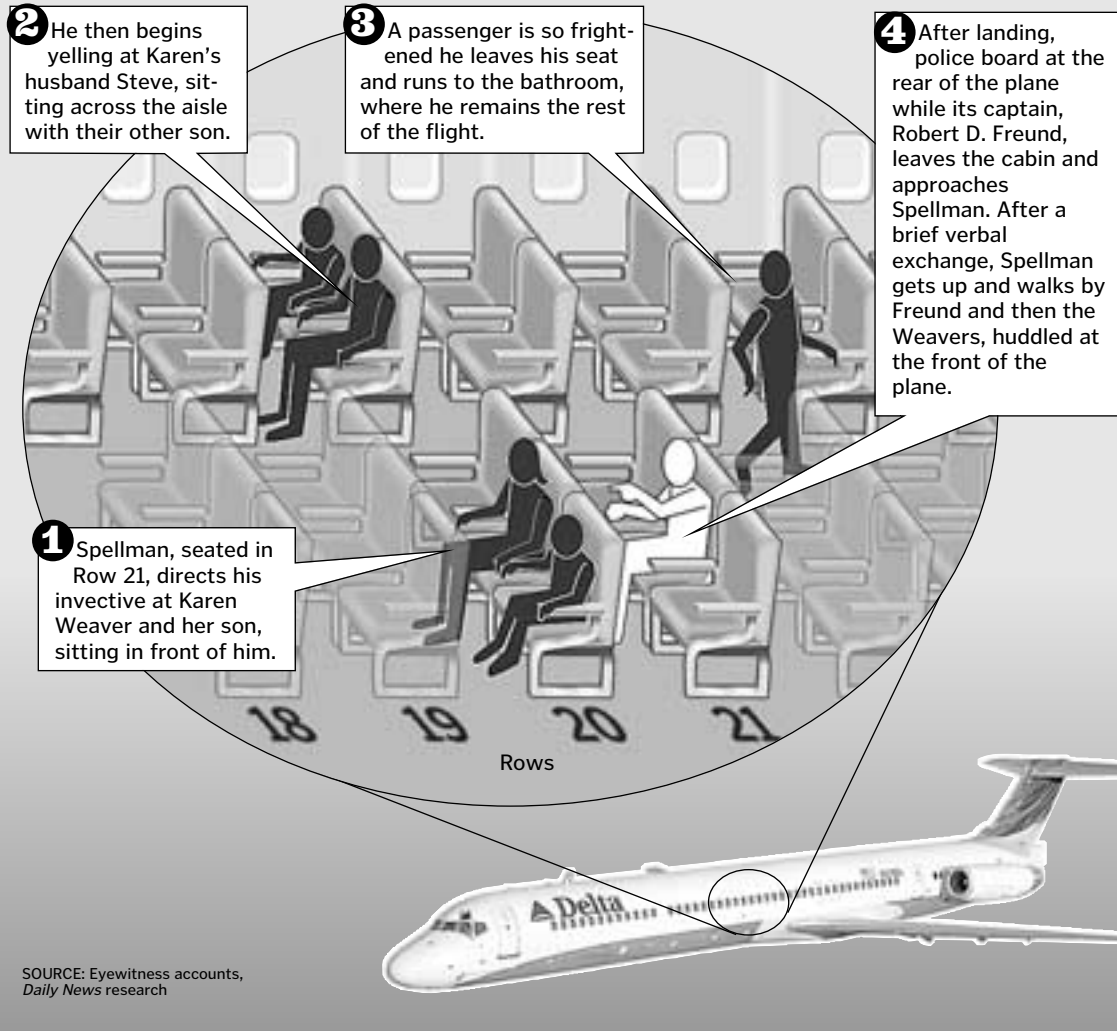
with the Bears, Cowboys and Lions. Mom Dorothy got a new house when he signed his big contract with the Bears, and he began a foundation in Chicago that promised to underwrite educational scholarships for 23 underprivileged youths, yet the wealth slipped away on this and that, including settlements with three women with whom he had children. His sister, Lorraine, told the court that Spellman “had a tendency to overgive” to people and that “it seemed like his money was dwindling pretty quickly.” Says Mackara, “He just always wanted to do the right thing.”

Bipolar disorder is a chronic condition characterized by the cycling in and out of periods of soaring highs that can be accompanied by delusional rages, relative normalcy, and crushing lows that can come upon an individual with such force that the simple act of getting out of bed can be overwhelming. Caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, it does not commonly reveal itself until the late teens or even well into the 20s, at which point it can become a slippery slope unless recognized and treated. Spellman was diagnosed with the condition in March 1998 when he flew into a rage and barricaded himself inside the suburban Chicago home of his publicist because a doctor who was supposed to give him an NFL-ordered steroid test did not show up. Although Spellman was unarmed and did not appear to be holding anyone hostage, a SWAT team surrounded the house and a police negotiator was called in, in part because Spellman spoke of committing suicide. What became a 10-hour standoff ended when former Chicago teammate Mike Singletary appeared on the scene and spoke calmly to Spellman, who agreed to undergo observation for 72 hours at Good Shepherd Hospital. Police found him the following day dressed in only his hospital pants and walking barefoot along Illinois Highway 22.

Getting someone to accept a bipolar diagnosis is problematic; the highs that one experiences during episodes of mania are just too exhilarating. Even if he or she agrees at some point to go on medication, there is a strong likelihood they will become noncompliant. This happened recently to

## AT THE CENTER OF THE MAELSTROM

Alonzo Spellman, along with his mother and sister, boarded a Delta MD-88 jet for the trip from Cincinnati to Philadelphia last July 23. From there, the trip turned into a harrowing journey for all those on the plane, particularly those sitting near him. As the flight progresses:



SOURCE: Eyewitness accounts, Daily News research

BRAD J. GUIGAR/Daily News

Oakland Pro Bowl center Barret Robbins, a bipolar sufferer who reportedly had stopped taking his medication and was barred by his coach from playing in the Super Bowl when he blew off practice and left the team hotel for 24 hours to engage in a drinking binge. Spellman was equally uneasy when it came to taking medication. Cut by Chicago in June 1998 and then let go that summer by Jacksonville, he told the *Chicago Tribune* in an interview that November that he planned to play again but that under no circumstances would he agree to take a medication — even if an NFL team demanded that he do so as a condition of employment. He told the *Tribune* that he had tried a medication briefly but said that he did not care for the emotional numbness he experienced taking it. He added, “I know everything’s all right with ‘Zo.” Court documents filed in the Delta case indicated that Spellman was self-

medicating at certain junctures with amphetamines, cognac and marijuana. His sister, Lorraine, conceded in court that “there was never a time he was accepting” of the fact that he was bipolar.

Chaos just surrounded Spellman until he simply unraveled one evening last July in suburban Detroit. He appeared at the Dearborn home of his aunt, barged in and announced he was going to “bleep up” his cousin over some money. Told that his cousin was not there, Spellman sped off in his SUV, nearly running over a child on a bicycle and a woman holding a baby. He was arrested with an open bottle of cognac on the front seat, charged with drunken driving and later set free. Later that week, with the financial help of a good Samaritan, he took a bus to Las Vegas. There, he called home to his mother, Dorothy, who helped him check into a hotel by giving the clerk a credit-card number. Dorothy and

Lorraine immediately caught a plane to Las Vegas. They found Spellman in what Lorraine described in court as “an agitated and paranoid” state.

He was pacing the floor as if caged.

And he had jammed hotel towels in every airway leading into the room.

### A wave of fear

So when Karen Weaver told Spellman she was traveling with two small children and asked him if he would please stop using such profanity, it was as if she had poured a cup of hot coffee in his lap. “Bleep you,” he replied, “Who the bleep do you think you are?” Weaver sat in her seat in stunned silence as Spellman zeroed in on her.

“He started criticizing me about the way I looked, the clothes I had on, the type of mother I was,” she says. “He said, ‘I

bet you lift up your dress and let your husband bleep you while your kids are watching.’”

Weaver could not believe her ears. “And I never said another word to him,” she says. “I just sat there and took it. He called me a whore, talked about my private parts . . . and he is yelling this. The whole plane could hear what he was saying, and at that point I started to cry.”

**“The whole plane could hear what he was saying, and at that point I started to cry.”**

KAREN WEAVER

Spellman then realized that Steve was her husband, at which point he glared at him and said, “What are you doing to do about it, dad?” Steve looked at him from across the aisle and weighed his options. “He was talking to Karen and I was thinking, ‘What am I going to do?’ And then he started in on me. I had our youngest son and I was slipping a diaper on him because it was getting late and Spellman said, ‘Oh, you use those cheap kind of diapers. What kind of a father are you?’ I guess I could have poked him in the eye, but then I would have died and he would have fallen on my son.”

Dorothy just gazed from her window seat in Row 21 at the passing clouds as this was happening; Lorraine sat in the row behind. Both had seen this side of Spellman before and were helpless when the flight attendant asked them to try to calm Spellman, who just seemed to get increasingly agitated. While they would later come under sharp criticism from their fellow passengers — one approached Lorraine in the baggage area and told her, “We should not have had to put up with that!” — Lorraine told the court that their overriding concern had been to get Spellman home so that he could receive treatment. Lorraine said that Spellman “talked to himself” on the trip in from Las Vegas — and that this annoyed some of the passengers seated near him — but he did not get out of hand until he boarded his connection in Cincinnati.

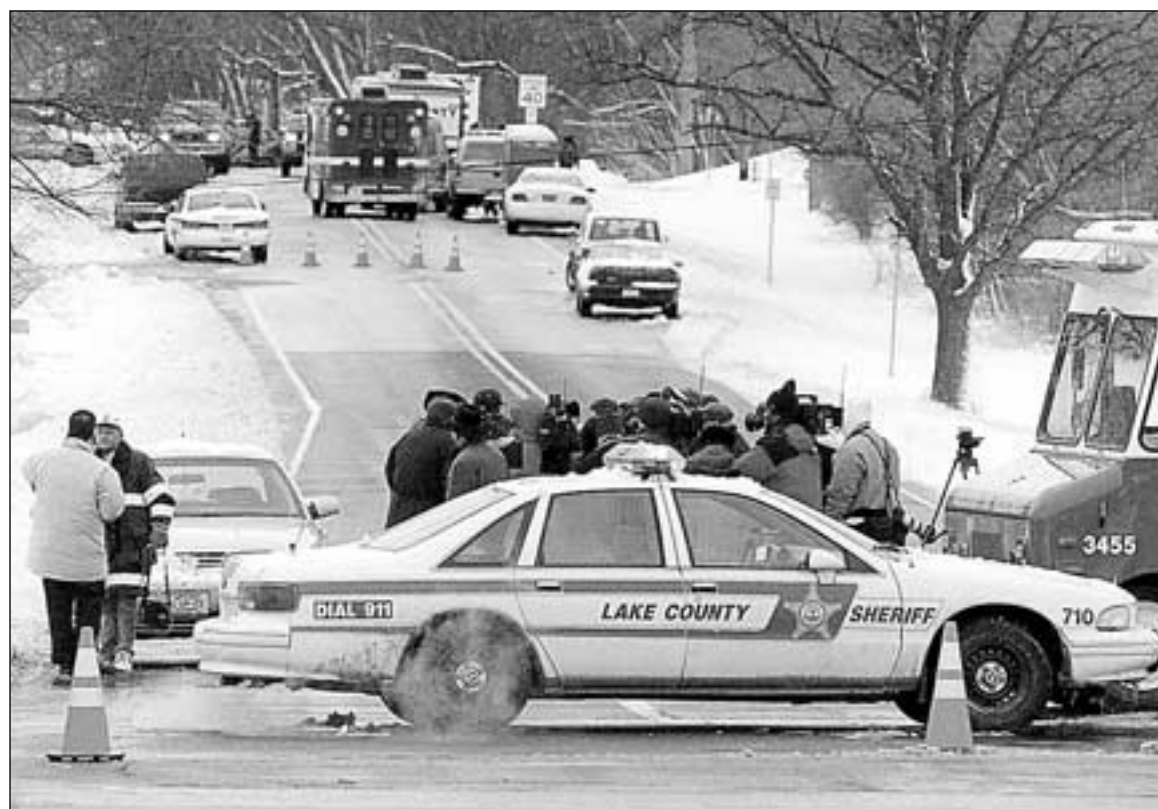
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nati. He announced that he preferred to drive back to South Jersey. Dorothy twice asked him to settle down once the plane was airborne, but Spellman became enraged, told her to “shut the bleep up,” and reminded her that he had not wanted to get on the plane to begin with. Says Karen, “So she just turned and looked out the window again.”

Other passengers began shooting Spellman uneasy glances. When Freund asked him over the PA to settle down, that he was scaring the other passengers, Spellman yelled back that he was “not going to be quiet for anybody” and invited him to come back to try to stop him. Visions of 9/11 only added to the increasing level of concern in the cabin. Fearful that Spellman was going to charge the cockpit and crash the plane, passenger John Liebenenthal told authorities he “started to think of things that he could use as a weapon to subdue Spellman” if it came to that. He decided that he would use the edge of his computer. Passenger Patricia Fanty said that she was “very frightened” of Spellman and that several male passengers “were watching him and planning to take him down if he got up.” And



BOB LANGER/Chicago Tribune

The first signs of trouble for Spellman: a police standoff outside Chicago in March 1998.

a passenger became so upset that he would not come out of the lavatory, and against FAA regulations was permitted to stay there during landing. When Freund landed the plane in Philadelphia at 9:12 p.m., Steve Weaver immediately swept his two children un-

der his arm, carried them up the aisle and parked them safely in the galley. He then picked up a pen he saw laying on the counter. Says Steve, “It was like: I have no chance against this guy that big, but I figured if I had to I would stick the pen in his eye.”

Freund told the passengers to remain seated, that the police would be boarding from the rear of the plane. When he walked back to Row 21 to investigate why Spellman had been so upset, he could see the fear in the faces of the passengers as he passed

them. Freund told the court at sentencing: “The closer I got to where Spellman was sitting, the more terrified people looked.” Freund added that Spellman told him, “You look like a white bleep

**“The closer I got to where Spellman was sitting, the more terrified people looked.”**

ROBERT D. FREUND  
*Delta captain*

who tried to handcuff me one time,” and announced that “the police are going to have to take me off in a body bag.” Freund spoke calmly to him, asking, “What would it take for you and I to walk off this plane?” With the police on board in the rear of the plane, Spellman began walking up the aisle toward the front, where the Weavers had joined their children. Karen saw him coming and huddled in closely with her children. Steve wondered if Spellman was going to “slug me as he walked by,” and gripped the pen in his hand just in case. But Spellman approached him and then passed by without even what appeared to be a glimmer of recognition. Says Steve, “I

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## ONE STORY; A BIGGER PICTURE

This story focuses on Alonzo Spellman, but one of its initiatives is to document the devastating effects of manic depression. According to [webmd.com](http://webmd.com), nearly 19 million Americans suffer from some type of depression. Researchers say one in four women and one in 10 men will be diagnosed with depression within their lifetime. Making the condition worse is a patient’s unwillingness to take the prescribed medication. Often, they haven’t even recognized that the condition exists.

### BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder characterized by mood swings from mania (exaggerated feeling of well-being, stimulation, and grandiosity in which a person can lose touch with reality) to depression (overwhelming feelings of sadness, anxiety, and low self-worth, which can include suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts). The periods of highs and lows are called episodes, with each rotation from one extreme to the other called a cycle. Abuse and violent behavior is common in the most severe form of the disorder. Some celebrities who have been confirmed as bipolar:

- ▶ **Patty Duke** (Anna Pearce): actress, writer
- ▶ **Connie Francis**: actress, singer
- ▶ **Peter Gabriel**: musician
- ▶ **Charles Haley**: athlete
- ▶ **Kristy McNichol**: actress
- ▶ **Spike Mulligan**: comic actor
- ▶ **Abigail Padgett**: mystery writer
- ▶ **Murray Pezim**: Canadian financier
- ▶ **Charley Pride**: musician
- ▶ **Barret Robbins**: athlete
- ▶ **Axl Rose**: musician
- ▶ **Ted Turner**: entrepreneur
- ▶ **Dimitrius Underwood**: athlete
- ▶ **Robin Williams**: actor, comedian

### UNIPOLAR DEPRESSION

People with unipolar depression suffer from periods of depression only. Studies show that they tend to be older than those who are bipolar. The disorder is marked by diminished interest or pleasure in nearly all activities, significant weight loss or gain, insomnia, fatigue and feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt. Some celebrities who have been confirmed as unipolar:

- ▶ **Roseanne Arnold**: actress, writer, comedienne
- ▶ **Dick Cavett**: writer, media personality
- ▶ **Tony Dow**: actor, director
- ▶ **Kitty Dukakis**: former Massachusetts first lady
- ▶ **William Styron**: writer
- ▶ **James Taylor**: musician

— Paul Vigna



ALEXANDER ALVAREZ/DAILY NEWS

Several of the many medications that can be prescribed for bipolar disorder include, from left: Paxil, Depakote, Celexa and Zyprexa. In the case of Spellman and Barret Robbins, of the Oakland Raiders, who was kicked off the team the day before this year’s Super Bowl, both players had stopped taking their medication before their nationally publicized episodes. Special thanks to Molly Tritt and David Jasan, of Hahnemann University Hospital, for assisting with the photograph.

## SPELLMAN

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looked him in the eyes and I could see that there was nobody behind them.”

Spellman got off the plane and began walking through the airport. Armed police were nearby, but according to the Weavers and other eyewitnesses, they seemed fearful of tangling with the oversized Spellman. When Karen Weaver “literally grabbed one of the officers by the arm” and asked him why Spellman had not been placed in handcuffs, she says that she was told, “We do not have the capacity to handle someone like that.” Dalzell later observed in his sentencing memorandum that police displayed “indifference and abject cowardice.” Police argued that they acted appropriately, given the circumstances. In a letter that appeared in the Feb. 17 edition of the *Daily News*, Lt. Mike Lista of the city Police Airport Unit said, in part: “Could Spellman have been taken into custody? Certainly, but the final outcome could have been disastrous. A man that size, and mentally unstable, would need an army of officers to get him under control ... In the end, not one person was injured, including Spellman.”

Spellman remained in the baggage area for close to an hour. Instead of taking Spellman immediately to a psychiatric facility, Dorothy and Lorraine took him to Willingboro, N.J. Spellman then dropped by to see his brother, John, and flew into another rage. He tore off the screen door and later pushed an air conditioner through a window as he stormed through the house looking for his brother. Dorothy called the police. Spellman then sat down on the curb and was talking to himself when patrol cars appeared on the scene. Police escorted him to the psychiatric ward at Lourdes Health System-Rancocas Hospital in Willingboro, where he remained for a week until federal agents arrested him. He has since been in the Federal Detention Center in Center City.

Court testimony by psychologist Dr. Xavier Amador indicated Spellman has since responded well on mood stabilizers and antipsychotic drugs, yet cautioned that one of the problems in treating bipolar patients is their lack of insight into the disorder or



CHARLES BENNETT/Associated Press

what he refers to as unawareness syndrome. “What you have to realize is that none of this would have happened if he had been taking his medication,” Amador told the court. “Mr. Spellman is still not 100 percent convinced he is bipolar, but he told me he is willing to consider it as a possibility. The trouble we run into in treating bipolar patients is that it becomes difficult to teach someone about an illness they do not believe they have.”

He paused and added, “Their brain is telling them that nothing is wrong with them.”

### Lasting effects

On the February day that Dalzell handed down his sentence, Spellman was led into Courtroom 10-B in a green prison jumpsuit with his hands cuffed in front of

him. He had pleaded guilty in early January in Philadelphia federal court to interfering with a flight crew and two counts of simple assault on an aircraft. In custody since his arrest back in August, he appeared calm as he heard the case against him summarized again by Nancy Beam Winter, the assistant U.S. attorney, and the parade of witnesses who took the stand to give their account of what had happened. When Winter and defense attorney Judith S. Gracey were finally through, the judge asked Spellman if he would like to address the court. Spellman said he did and walked slowly toward the bench.

The judge smiled and asked, “So how are you doing, Mr. Spellman?”

“Doing fine, judge,” he began. “And I would just like to say I understand that I was wrong, and



JOHN F. RHODES/  
Dallas Morning News

**Alonzo Spellman runs over Warren Moon in 1995, then is run down by Cowboys owner Jerry Jones after getting thrown out of a game in 2000.**

that was why I pled guilty. I have had a chance to see myself through the eyes of other people. I know now that I need to take my medicine.”

He paused and added, “I know I need help.”

The judge absorbed this and eyed Spellman, who stood before him with hands folded. The judge then began gravely, “You heard what these people had to say?”

Spellman nodded and replied, “Yes, sir.”

“They were scared,” the judge said. “And it is unfortunate that that had to happen.”

Chances are that no one who was on that plane will ever look at flying quite the same again; a few said they would think twice about even getting on a plane again. Karen Weaver says one of the lingering effects of her encounter with Spellman is that she has had “thoughts of him coming after me and my family in revenge.” She says her oldest son began using a certain word of profanity the boy had overheard Spellman using, and it upsets her that she and

Steve have had to sit down with their children at such an innocent age and try to explain such adult concepts as “obscenity, violence, hatefulness and fear.” Steve adds that the incident was “particularly emasculating” to him in that he was powerless to protect his family. “Whatever I would have done would have made the situation worse,” he says. “I understand that, but here was this man, calling my wife vulgar things, and there was absolutely nothing I could do.”

Karen says that the incident “brings up larger societal issues,” which is to say: How do you get adults who have psychiatric problems to properly address them? “And you have to wonder how equipped airlines or department stores or any [public entity] are to handle people who are walking around every day unmedicated and potentially violent,” she says. “I just know that the people on that plane were powerless to do anything.”

Spellman implored Dalzell to place him in a treatment center and not a jail cell. In the courtroom that day, some members of his family whispered among themselves: “What good is it going to do anybody by sticking him in a cage?” The defense asked that Spellman be placed in a program sponsored by the NFL Players Association in Florida, and added that with proper care Spellman could well even play in the league again at some point. But to a certain extent that concerned Winter, who claimed in her motion for an upward departure in sentencing guidelines that Spellman had yet to address “the issues underlying the violent acts . . . that have brought the defendant to where he is today.” Winter added that the acknowledged use by the defendant of amphetamines in order to stay “up” and aggressive enough to play football argued against his “needs for better mental health.” Dalzell granted that upward departure and sentenced Spellman to an 18-month prison term.

The judge said Spellman, 31, would receive “blue-chip treatment” in the prison system.

Spellman nodded again.

At which point Judge Dalzell told him: “You have many years still ahead of you. And I hope that you can leave your demons behind.” ★

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