

END GAME

The sordid circumstances surrounding the brutal murder of a former NFL quarterback suggests that the only thing tougher than becoming a pro athlete is calling it quits

WORDS: MARK KRAM JNR **MAIN PHOTO:** GEORGE CLARK

Until Steve McNair was found on the sofa at his downtown condo in Nashville with four bullet holes in him, the tragic end to an adulterous affair with a 20-year-old woman 16 years his junior, it had been customary to think of him in nothing but superlatives. In 13 years as a quarterback for the Tennessee Titans and Baltimore Ravens, during which he passed for 31,304 yards and 174 touchdowns, McNair stood apart in his capacity to endure the unending assaults on the body that the position exacts. Oh, there were a few scrapes with the law, two DUI charges that were later dropped, but the overarching perception was that he was one of the good guys, someone who not only performed at a high level on the field but also carried himself well off of it by creating a foundation that aided causes such as the Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund. Upon his retirement from the league in April 2008, no one could foresee the descent that awaited him.

Given what happened in the wee hours of 4 July, it seems fair to conclude that we knew little of McNair. Friends who had spotted him fishing with his sons and concluded that he had been at peace with retirement could not have been more wrong. To the shock of his ex-team-mates, his fans and especially his wife, the 36-year-old McNair had been carrying on a relationship with one Sahel Kazemi, a waitress upon whom he had lavished a luxury SUV, extravagant vacations and assorted other symbols of affection. But while Kazemi was under the belief that McNair was planning to leave his wife for her, the scenario that unfolded between the two seemed drawn from an old Hollywood B-movie: Cheating husband angers other woman, who buys a handgun and cools him down with two slugs to the head and two more in the chest. Careful to position herself so she would slide lifelessly into his lap, the other woman kneels down at his feet, aims the gun to her temple and pulls the trigger. Roll credits.

Stunned admirers of McNair who wondered what in the world he could have been thinking were provided perhaps a partial ▶



Baltimore Ravens player Ray Lewis (left) and Tennessee Titans quarterback Vince Young during Steve McNair's funeral



Eddie George (centre) and Emmit Smith (left) have both enjoyed success after retiring from playing professionally



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answer by Eddie George, the former star running back who played with McNair in Tennessee: Coping with retirement is never easy. George told CNN: 'I just know from experience that when you are used to doing something for so long that you love to do – how do you fill that void?' George added that it was 'uncharacteristic for [McNair] to be out there with this young lady', but that he was in search of ... something. While it is not uncommon for ex-players to prosper in the world outside of sports, that 'search' involves a scary transition for more than a few, some of whom end up alcohol or drug addicted, financially ruined or prematurely dead. When I think of what happened to McNair, it does not surprise me how hard the issue of retirement has become for quarterback Brett Favre, who is retired as of this writing, but could well be playing by the time you read this. Seeing him wrestle with his continuing indecision over whether to play or not reminds me of that cartoon in *The New Yorker*, where a doctor looks down at a sheet of paper in his hands and informs the patient across the desk from him: 'It appears that you'll definitely outlive your usefulness.'

What you have to understand is that athletes live in the here and now. This is especially true of young athletes, who have no concept of 'the future' beyond the short-term horizon of today. No one thinks of retirement when they are 22, except if it happens to come up in an abstract conversation with a financial planner who wants to get you into an annuity. Of course, older athletes tend to be more introspective, if only because their bodies begin

telling them what their hearts are not always prepared to accept: time is running out. Injuries that once healed in just a few days now seem to take forever to recover from, or you have become just a step slower than the year before, or there is some square-jawed up-and-comer who has a look in his eye that says: 'Get out of the way, Pop!' At that point the 'the here and now' becomes a cliff, beyond the edge of which can be an abyss of uncertainty.

Offsetting that reality is a somewhat rosier flipside: Given the salary structure in place in pro sports, chances are you will be very well off. Unless you spent that wherewithal on \$800 bottles of champagne, a Bentley for each day of the week, and child support payments to assorted women across the league, you should not have to work another day in your life, which gives you a leg up on players from less abundant eras. Ex-athletes from the '70s and before commonly re-emerged in society as insurance agents and such, and it was not unheard of for them to have to sell off prized possessions from their playing careers in order to keep body and soul together. Even if you have to downsize out of that eight-bedroom estate with the heated swimming pool to more manageable accommodations, chances are that the void George spoke of will have less to do with dollars and cents than the loss of your identity, the sudden realisation that you have become unmoored from the very thing that had defined you since childhood.

Ultimately, it comes down to a question of reinventing yourself. Some do that by taking jobs as coaches or broadcasters. Others ►

pursue more entrepreneurial endeavours, which brings us to the tale of Lenny Dykstra, once the tobacco-chewing All-Star centerfielder for the Philadelphia Phillies and the New York Mets. In the 10 years that followed his retirement from baseball due to a bad back, Dykstra reinvented himself as Gordon Gecko, the Michael Douglas character in the Oliver Stone film *Wall Street*. With his remaining baseball money, Dykstra purchased three car washes in South California and became adept at picking stocks, which he sold via a newsletter for \$1 000 a year. Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky sold him his estate for \$18.5 million. I had gotten a small dose of Dykstra during his days with the Phillies and would have envisioned somewhat of a less prosperous outcome; I could have seen him *working* in a car wash but not *owning* one. A friend who knows him well told me of his stock selecting prowess: 'The guy is an idiot

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savant.' I understood the 'idiot' part but the 'savant' piece still had me puzzled as I buckled in across from him in a private jet that would carry us to New England to look at some property.

'Bro, I was born to make money,' Dykstra told me as he chewed on a strand of liquorice and checked the closing averages on the New York Stock Exchange on his laptop. I found him coarsely amusing that day, but became somewhat less impressed with him as his story continued to unfold. In his capacity as publisher of *The Players Club* magazine, a glossy monthly that was geared to the lavish lifestyle of the contemporary athlete, Dykstra became buried in delinquent debts – including \$10 700 in a personal credit card withdrawal by a flight attendant that helped enable him to charter a jet home. Legal actions against Dykstra are up over 20 and counting, but Dykstra showed no sign of remorse ▶

Brett Farve is one of many who struggled to let go when they retired



PHOTO: MATT STROSHANE/GETTY IMAGES/GALLO IMAGES

when the HBO programme *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* showed up to speak with him at the Gretzky place, now unfurnished and placed in foreclosure. Correspondent Bernard Goldberg found Dykstra in a state of denial just weeks away from declaring bankruptcy.

DYKSTRA: 'Who? Tell me who I owe?'

GOLDBERG: 'Let's go through a few people. The printers [of *The Players Club*].'

DYKSTRA: 'Fuck the printers. The printers are criminals.'

GOLDBERG: 'The flight attendant?'

DYKSTRA: 'Fuck the flight attendant ... They all think they can come here and steal my money.'

But Dykstra is not unique when it comes to such chicanery. Back in the '60s, Denny McLain was a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers – and quite a brilliant one. In fact, McLain was the last pitcher to win 30 or more games in a single season; he won 31 in 1968 and led the Tigers to the World Championship. I got to know McLain some in 1983, by which point his weight had ballooned to 330 pounds and he was under investigation by law enforcement for cocaine trafficking, embezzlement and racketeering. He ended up in prison. When his conviction was overturned, he became a popular radio personality back in Michigan, only to end up back in prison on charges connected to the theft of \$2.5 million in pension funds from a company he had purchased a piece of. McLain is out of prison again. Today, he still does occasional appearances at autograph shows, where he sits behind a table with other ageing stars and signs pictures of himself for a fee. When he looks down at some of those old photos, does he wonder what happened to the big winner he once was?

Even stars such as McNair, Dykstra and McLain understood that their careers came with an expiration date not of their choosing. Suddenly, someone else is in your place in the line-up and at 38 years old you are out on the golf course each day playing with men in their 60s, which is to say people who are actual retirement age. Someone has told you that you can no longer play in the league, which is ultimately far safer than how the end game is played out in boxing. Because a boxer is answerable to no one but himself, he can continue on far beyond what good sense would seem to dictate. The legendary Muhammad Ali said again and again that he would not end up the same battered wreck that Joe Louis had become. But no one but Ali had the power to stop him from stepping into the ring, which in part accounts for the brain damage that he clearly suffers from today. No one could say no either to the splendid champions Alexis Arguello or Arturo Gatti, both of whom committed suicide in July.

But letting go is hard under any circumstances. I happened to be in attendance the day the Baltimore Orioles pitcher Jim Palmer announced his retirement in 1984. Few athletes have been

as articulate as Palmer, who in 1966 at age 20 beat Sandy Koufax of the Dodgers to become the youngest pitcher to ever win a World Series game. But words caught in his throat as he stood at the podium at old Memorial Stadium and with tears in his eyes stepped away, saying: 'I can't do this'. While Palmer became an exceptionally skilled broadcaster and had done well for himself in the endorsement field, he donned a uniform again seven years later and attempted a comeback in 1991 at age 45. The Hall of Fame pitcher worked a spring training game and gave up two runs in two innings before he retired again. This time there were no tears – only a torn hamstring.

When it comes to changing his mind, Brett Farve has done it more than a teenage girl picking out what to wear on the first day of school. For 16 years he had been the engine that drove

the Green Bay Packers. One of only two players ever to win three consecutive Most Valuable Player awards, he led the Packers to victory in Super Bowl XXXI. It seemed only appropriate that he close out his career with the Packers, which is exactly what appeared would happen when he announced his retirement in an emotional press conference. Next stop: The Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Except that Farve changed his mind. In an interview with the Fox News Channel in July 2008, he conceded that he had been 'guilty of retiring early'. Conversations with the Packers on the subject of his return then became bogged down: The Packers had found a new quarterback, Aaron Rodgers, and would only consent to re-signing Farve if he agreed to be a back-up. Farve said no. The Packers ended up shipping him to the New York Jets. Farve played well in the early part of the season, but the team unravelled and was beaten out for a play-off berth. With a torn bicep tendon in his right shoulder, Farve told the Jets that he was planning to retire. Next stop: The Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Except that Farve changed his mind again. Or seemed inclined to when the Minnesota Vikings asked him to reconsider and play for them this year. For weeks Farve agonised over what to do, a period during which the press portrayed him as a diva. By the beginning of training camp in July, Farve had still not decided what to do and the Vikings still did not have a quarterback. Some days it seemed as if he would play again, other days it seemed as if he would just stay on his farm in Mississippi. Finally – if not irrevocably – he chose not to play, in part because he had been friendly with McNair and had come to the conclusion that he better take advantage of the years he still had left. Next stop: The Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Except that it is still only August ... ■

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Kram is a celebrated sports writer with *The Philadelphia Daily News* and the contributor of *Business Day Sport Monthly's American Read*.