THE AILING NFL PLAYERS AND THE LAWYER THEY SAY SWINDLED THEM

BY RYAN BOYSEN | JULY 19, 2019

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Former Baltimore Ravens defensive tackle Larry Webster, shown here winning Super Bowl XXXV. (Getty)

Larry Webster was being given a second chance.

A hulking, self-described “country boy” from a small town in rural Maryland, Webster spent 10 years in the NFL smashing into other players as a defensive tackle and won the 2001 Super Bowl with the Baltimore Ravens just before he retired from the league at the age of 33. Fourteen years later, he was in his mid-40s, between jobs and down on his luck.

So Webster says he listened carefully as a lawyer in Tallahassee, Florida, explained that he was guaranteed a six-figure check from the newly inked National Football League concussion settlement. Brokered primarily by Seeger Weiss LLP, the deal saw the league establish a bottomless fund to compensate up to 20,000 retired players suffering from football-related brain injuries.

Money like that meant Webster could move his twin 11-year-old sons and their mother down from Baltimore to live with him near Orlando, Florida. He could pay off his debts. They could finally get married.

It was a balmy day in November 2015 and the lawyer, Timothy P. Howard, told Webster he was so sure the concussion claim would work out he would give him a loan from his hedge fund that paid out in monthly installments until the claim was approved, Webster recalls.

Sitting in the plush office, looking up at framed newspaper clippings detailing Howard’s involvement in Florida’s multibillion-dollar 1996 tobacco settlement, Webster remembers being impressed. Howard talked a mile a minute in a booming voice and sprinkled his conversation with references to arcane legal concepts and his Christian faith. He oozed confidence.

The pair shook hands and Webster agreed to sign with Howard. He also agreed to take the loan.

Webster had just taken the first step down a bizarre path that would cost him and many other ailing football players dearly.

Easy Money

Hundreds of lawsuits had been pending for years when the concussion settlement was **struck in April 2015**, allowing the league to put to rest claims that it had known for decades about the long-term dangers of concussions but did nothing to warn its players.

The league was forced to leave the settlement fund uncapped and agreed to pay anywhere from a few thousand dollars to $5 million per player, depending on their age and the severity of their football-related brain injuries.

Former NFL players Larry Webster, Corey Fuller and William Floyd have all accused Howard of stealing their life savings.

The program has already paid out more than $500 million to nearly 1,000 retired players and appears on track to more than double that sum over the course of its 65-year lifespan, making it by far the largest settlement of its kind in any professional sport.

But since its inception, the deal has also been marked by bad blood and lurid accusations.

The NFL has cried foul about alleged **rampant fraud**, accusing lawyers and doctors of teaming up to juice the medical tests players take to determine the size of their awards. According to the league, one firm directed a retired player to show up to a neuropsychological evaluation “hungover and on valium,” while other players were allegedly coached on how to appear sicker than they actually were.

Attorneys for the athletes, meanwhile, accuse the league of playing up those fears to **push for changes** to the settlement that make it harder for players to get paid.

Those attorneys have **denounced** the “scorched earth” tactics they say the league employs to deny all but the most grievously injured players’ claims, accusing the NFL of turning the deal into a "black hole of audits” and “technical squabbles,” a situation **one attorney has likened** to an “administrative knife fight.”

As a result, many player attorneys say, the acceptance rate for new claims has practically ground to a halt in recent months.

But in the early days, with 20,000 retired players potentially eligible for seven-figure payouts, the deal looked to many like easy money.

Empire Building

Howard, the fast-talking lawyer who beguiled Webster with his bombastic claims and ardent Christian faith, cut his teeth on the high-profile tobacco litigation that consumed the Sunshine State in the late 1990s. After a brief stint running a used-car dealership, Howard refocused on his mass tort practice.

Timothy Howard saw the landmark NFL concussion settlement as an opportunity to grow his law practice.

By late 2014, he had set his sights on the concussion litigation. According to many individuals who worked with him, Howard saw so much promise there that he set out to build an empire on top of it.

Like many other lawyers, Howard turned to former football players to bring in clients.

Howard hired Addys Walker and his business partner Linda Bedell, who had both previously worked as paralegals and private investigators, to help him find clients in exchange for a consulting fee. Walker had played football at Florida A&M University and was close to many retired NFL players.

Howard also struck a referral-for-pay deal with a retired NFL player, who spoke at length about his experiences to Law360 but declined to be named.

About the same time, Howard ran into his old high school football buddy Don Reinhard in a Tallahassee grocery store, Reinhard said in an interview. Reinhard was working at the market and trying to rebuild his life after the collapse of a hedge fund he had run led to a four-year prison sentence for tax and bankruptcy fraud and left him on the hook for millions in restitution payments to his former clients.

Howard offered Reinhard a job, and in March 2015 the pair created a new hedge fund, Cambridge Capital, Reinhard said. Reinhard, who had been barred by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission from working in the securities industry, was never listed on the fund’s registration documents.

Cambridge quickly began soliciting investments and making high-interest loans to Howard’s NFL clients.

The Financial Genius

On that balmy day back in November 2015, Webster says Howard didn’t mention any of that history when he stood up and shook his hand. But Howard did mention another opportunity that intrigued Webster.

Howard took Webster down the hall and introduced him to Reinhard, the "financial genius" who ran Cambridge out of a room in the Howard & Associates PA office. Reinhard was also a fast talker, but unlike Howard his voice was subdued and tinged with a Southern twang.

Webster says both men told him they could double his returns if he invested his NFL 401(k), practically the entirety of his savings, in Cambridge.

Webster left and mulled it over for a few weeks. When he returned the next month for neurological testing, he decided to do it. He knew other players had invested in Cambridge, including friends and former teammates. It seemed like a safe bet.

Don Reinhard ran Cambridge Capital before being arrested on charges of aggravated child assault.

In December 2015, Webster rolled over nearly $350,000 from his NFL 401(k) into Cambridge, according to financial documents and court filings reviewed by Law360. Nine other players represented by Howard would do the same, according to Seeger Weiss filings.

Webster says Howard and Reinhard promised him that his retirement funds would be kept "totally separate" from the loan he'd taken out with Cambridge, which they said would be paid off with the proceeds from his settlement claim.

Webster and other players who invested with Cambridge said they were kept in the dark about Reinhard's criminal background, but in a jailhouse interview, Reinhard told Law360 that all of them were well aware of his past.

We Thought We'd Be Helping These Guys

Throughout 2015 and 2016, Walker, Bedell and the unnamed player brought a constant stream of retired players through Howard's office in north Tallahassee, a handsome brick building surrounded by oak trees festooned with Spanish moss.

There, Webster and dozens of other players would take hourslong neuropsychological tests administered by Dr. Edwardo Williams.

Some of those players seemed fine, but Walker, Bedell and others who worked with them say that for many, their illness was on painful display from the moment they walked through the door.

One player urinated on himself in the office, then drove hours in the wrong direction and ended up in Alabama by mistake, more than 200 miles from his home in Jacksonville, Florida. Another player broke down and cried as Williams explained that he couldn't cure him, only test him. Many players called several times a day, asking the same question each time.

Addys Walker, a former college football player, used his connections in the sport to steer players to Howard.

"That was the worst shit I've ever seen in my life," Walker says.

The players didn't know that Williams had been arrested in August 2014 for allegedly groping a female patient at his family practice. For much of the time he was working for Howard, Williams was on probation and under an emergency restriction imposed by the Florida Board of Medicine that allowed him to see only male patients.

Howard represented Williams as he fought those charges, but in April 2016, the doctor lost his license. Nonetheless, Williams continued to see players for Howard until the fall of 2017, according to Walker, Bedell and emails reviewed by Law360. Williams did not respond to several requests for comment.

In the beginning, Walker says he thought the "NFL operation" held a lot of promise. But it would end up devastating many of the players who were depending on him, Reinhard and Howard.

"We thought we'd be helping these guys," Walker says, shaking his head. "If I had known how badly they'd get hurt, I never would have participated."

The Whole Thing Was A Sham

By the end of 2016, things were going well for Howard. He had signed up more than 200 NFL clients, according to Seeger Weiss filings, and Cambridge had made about 40 high-interest loans to players that would net the hedge fund millions when their claims were paid out.

Howard had also just closed on a $7 million loan of his own with litigation funder Virage Capital Management LP. According to Jeff Khan, the broker who arranged the deal, the loan was mostly backed by Howard's fee interest in his NFL clients.

In the span of a year, Howard had hired more than 20 new employees and opened two new offices across Florida.

"When I came on, they had all these big plans. They had pamphlets for different types of private jets on the coffee table," says attorney Miguel Amador, who joined the firm in fall 2016 and left a year later. "But the whole time, the whole thing was a sham."

Webster was feeling good as well. He was getting several thousand dollars a month from his Cambridge loan and preparing to buy his family a home in Florida. Meanwhile, Webster says Reinhard told him his 401(k) funds were generating healthy returns.

Then, in February 2017, Webster got an email from Reinhard. His eyes widened as he read that Reinhard was in jail.

Reinhard had been arrested on charges of aggravated child assault over a potty training incident gone wrong. In a local news article about the arrest, Reinhard could be seen wearing a Cambridge Capital polo shirt in his mugshot.

Webster started to freak out.

For the next few months, Webster says he couldn't get a straight answer out of Reinhard, Howard or anyone else when he tried to check the status of his 401(k) funds. Calls and emails went unanswered. Then the monthly payments from his loan were abruptly cut off. Everything began to fall apart.

"It was like getting hit in the face with a brick," Webster says. "This affected my entire family. It put me in a place where I couldn't trust anyone."

Other players who had been depending on the loans were hit just as hard. One lost his apartment, according to Walker, Bedell and others who knew him. Bedell says another called her on the phone in the fall of 2017, threatening to kill himself.

"I made decisions for my family based on this," one distraught player wrote to Howard in a text, according to Seeger Weiss filings.

After receiving calls from players affected by the cutoff, Seeger Weiss began **investigating** Howard and Cambridge.

There was another problem as well: Howard had made no discernible progress toward submitting his clients' concussion settlement claims.

"The delay on top of Tim breaching the loan contracts was an astronomical double whammy for these players, many of whom had basically put their entire family's finances in Tim and I's hands," Reinhard says.

Reinhard blames Howard for Cambridge's collapse, but all of the players who spoke with Law360 say they consider Reinhard equally culpable. Still in prison, Reinhard denies any wrongdoing.

Howard did not respond to dozens of calls and emails from Law360 and two visits to his Tallahassee office.

It Was Staggering

Khan, the broker, says Howard spent most of Virage's loan on a series of madcap business ventures like a tech startup and movie production company.

"He blew through the money," Khan says. "It was staggering."

Virage did not respond to several requests for comment.

Most of Howard's employees quit en masse in January 2018 after not being paid for weeks.

Last summer, Webster learned what had happened to his own money when he opened a letter from Seeger Weiss that was reviewed by Law360.

According to that letter and other court filings, Cambridge had used the $3.6 million invested by Webster and nine other players to cover the loan payments Cambridge was making every month to them and 30 others.

Webster says that while he received about $50,000 from Cambridge, that amount is dwarfed by the $300,000 he is still missing.

In its letter, Seeger Weiss said the SEC was investigating the episode and urged the players to contact local law enforcement.

The SEC and Seeger Weiss declined to comment.

Corey Fuller, another former player who says he invested 401(k) funds in Cambridge, sued Howard in July 2018 for allegedly stealing his money. He was later joined by fellow ex-player William Floyd.

Together the pair claim to have lost "hundreds of thousands of dollars" to Howard's scheme.

Webster says he tried to join the suit but was turned down by Fuller's lawyer, who declined to comment. At that point, Webster says he was so demoralized that he gave up on trying to sue Howard and simply hoped the authorities would sort things out.

Discovery has not yet commenced in Fuller and Floyd's suit. Both declined to comment.

Really Hard To Believe

Other firms have also been accused of exploiting the class of ailing former players covered by the uncapped concussion settlement to enrich themselves.

In fact, the Seeger Weiss investigation into Cambridge grew out of a **broader probe** into “deceptive practices” in the settlement, sparked by a New York Times exposé that described a “feeding frenzy of lenders and lawyers” using underhanded methods to sign up players as clients and entice them into taking out high-interest loans.

While he was a bit player in the settlement overall, the scale of Howard’s alleged misconduct dwarfs anything described in those investigations.

Despite the findings in the Seeger Weiss probe, Fuller and Floyd’s suit, and numerous bar complaints over other matters, Howard continues to practice in Tallahassee and represent players in the settlement through a co-counsel arrangement with Houston-based Shenaq PC, according to Seeger Weiss filings.

Shenaq did not respond to several requests for comment.

A whirlwind of litigation involving Howard, Walker, Reinhard and others is still ongoing.

Meanwhile, Webster is back in Baltimore these days, looking for a job and mending ties with his family.

Asked how he’s holding up, Webster pauses before describing his feelings as a mixture of rage, depression and bewilderment.

“It’s still really hard to believe,” Webster says. “It just seems like everything’s been at a standstill for so long. All I can do is hope something happens with Tim that makes him give our money back.”

--Editing by Jill Coffey.

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