

Ex-NFL star Steve Jordan helps kick off study for detecting CTE in living people

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(Photo: Sean Logan/azcentral sports)

It's not uncommon for Steve Jordan, Derek Kennard and Ray Perkins to see each other occasionally. All are residents of the Phoenix area, in their 50s and played in the NFL at roughly the same time.

But their get-together on Wednesday morning in downtown Phoenix was different. All three arrived early at Translational Genomics Research Institute (TGen) to participate in a study that could one day lead to detecting chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in the living and improve treatment for those who have suffered brain injuries.

"If we can detect CTE in living patients, that's going to be a huge win," said Jordan, a former tight end who made the Pro Bowl six times in 13 seasons with the Vikings.

That's why Jordan and eight others showed up Wednesday to give samples of blood, urine and saliva and complete a 140-question background questionnaire.

Nine volunteers among ex-NFL players is a modest amount, but those conducting the study were pleased with the outcome of the first official "collection."

Volunteers aren't being paid for their time and they won't receive individual results. They are donating their time to possibly help future generations of athletes across all sports, as well as others who suffer brain injuries, including those in the military.

That makes nine volunteers “an amazing number,” said Callie Hammersland, clinical research manager at TGen. “I honestly feel great about it.”

Working in concert with Aethlon Medical of San Diego, TGen is trying to find out if biomarkers indicating CTE can be found in the blood, urine or saliva of the living. A study by a subsidiary of Aethlon suggests that’s possible. Researchers found levels of the tau protein in the blood of 78 former NFL players were nine times higher than in the control group. Tau is associated with Alzheimer’s and other neurological diseases.

The goal of the TGen study is to enroll 200 athletes, mostly current and ex-football players, and compare their results with a control group of people who weren’t subject to repeated head trauma in sports.

There will be “collection dates” in other areas of the country, and it’s possible TGen employees could coordinate testing with events such as NFL alumni meetings and golf tournaments.

Those plans are still being formulated. Wednesday’s collection was the first of the study, and the process was simple.

With Jordan, it started with donating small amounts of blood and urine. “I’m a vascular guy,” Jordan joked, “a phlebotomist’s dream.”

The saliva sample was collected while he completed the questionnaire on a computer.

Officials estimated the entire process would last no more than an hour, but some of the volunteers on Wednesday were finished after about 30 minutes.

Many NFL players of Jordan’s generation are suffering from the effects of repeated head trauma from their playing days.



Former NFL tight end Steve Jordan participates in a CTE study in Phoenix. (Photo: Sean Logan/azcentral sports)

Jordan, who played at South Mountain High and Brown University, remembers being “dinged” a few times in his career. Back then, players routinely remained in the game after suffering concussions.

In one game, Jordan remained in after suffering a concussion in the second quarter. He played well, but after the game could not remember one play after the second quarter.

When Jordan played, in the 1980s and '90s, “coaches and staff were telling you, ‘Hey, we need you this week. You’ve got to come back,’” he said. “And you know you shouldn’t play, but you do. We’re motivated. We love the game.

“I really appreciate now that there are independent people who will pull a player out of the game. I know it’s not 100 percent (perfect) but that’s so much better than what it was before.”

As Jordan said recently, he has a skin in the game, literally. His son, Cameron, is a star defensive end for the Saints.

But Jordan’s motivation for participating in the study is larger than that. Male and female athletes in all sports can suffer head injuries, and this CTE study could also benefit soldiers and others.

“You go to these meetings with former players,” Jordan said, “and the hope is we’ll be able to do something that will make it better for future players and our own kids. Most of us who are former players, we have kids who play or have played youth sports. We want to help ameliorate that (diagnosing and treating head trauma).”

It’s impossible to predict with any certainty how long it will take TGen to complete the study, Hammersland said. Samples are processed soon after collection, but no one knows how long it will take to enroll 200 volunteers, or the amount of time it will take to study and then publish findings.

“Obviously, we want to enroll as fast as we can to get this moving and see what we can find,” Hammersland said. “With that being said, you just never really know. It could take a super long time to enroll or it could be super fast.”

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