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Help for Everett's situation 20 years in making

Sep. 18, 2007
By [Lesley Visser](#)
CBS Sports

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Back in June 1985, legendary linebacker Nick Buoniconti was having a glass of champagne with a buddy when he got a phone call. It was from The Citadel, where his son, Marc, was the starting middle linebacker. The news was bad. A legal tackle he'd made against Eastern Tennessee had broken Marc's neck. And so began a journey that's taken more than 20 years and \$34 million, with lots of joy and heartbreak along the way.



Marc and Nick Buoniconti have helped blaze trails with the Miami Project. (Getty Images)

Monday night, I was one of the people honored by the Miami Project as a Sports Legend, along with Magic Johnson, John Elway, Gary Player and others. Each one of us, including people who'd just come to be a part of the Buoniconti Fund to Cure Paralysis like Tom Brokaw and Bob Bearman, hung on every word said by Dr. Barth Green, co-founder of the Miami Project more than 20 years ago.

"The young man from Buffalo, Kevin Everett, sustained the same injury -- though not as severe -- as Marc, but he will recover beautifully, in part because of a procedure developed here at the Miami Project. It is a remarkable touchdown in the world of spinal paralysis."

It was a revolutionary treatment that Dr. Green developed. In the ambulance in Buffalo after owner Ralph Wilson had called Dr. Green, Dr. Andrew Cappucino made, according to Dr. Green, "a bold decision" to implement the "hypothermia treatment." The treatment involves a cold saline solution administered intravenously immediately to cool the body's temperature and reduce the swelling.

"I think Kevin will walk again," said Dr. Green.

The Miami Project to Cure Paralysis is the largest, most comprehensive spinal cord injury research center in the world, and as Bob Costas said, "this week it is particularly important."

That's because while NFL commissioner Roger Goodell has had a tougher summer than Karl Rove -- between Michael Vick, Pacman Jones, Tank Johnson and now the Patriots' film festival -- he should now focus on player protection. And Dr. Green, chief neurosurgeon at the University of Miami School Of Medicine, says there is more the league can do to protect injuries like the one Everett suffered.

"I think Reebok and the NFL have to develop some type of air bag that would be packed in the front of the players' turtleneck," he said. "People think paralysis comes from when the head snaps back, but it doesn't. It's when the head snaps forward. We need some kind of shock absorber in the front."

Buoniconti's story is still to be told. He's in a wheelchair most of the time but can walk once or twice a week with the aid of therapists and a special treadmill. It's still tremendous progress from where he started.

"We need two things," Marc said on Monday night. "Although it's very controversial, we need stem cell research. With the NFL getting faster and stronger, the impact is more violent than ever and we need to keep up on the research. We also need to keep up awareness -- but I am more optimistic now than ever."

I was there on Nov. 17, 1991, when Mike Utley fractured his 6th and 7th cervical vertebrae. He was No. 60, an offensive guard for the Detroit Lions, and one of my favorite players. Six-foot-six, he was at the top of his game. But on this play he attempted to throw a block against the Rams and all 320 pounds were hammered into the ground as he went down with a thud. While being carried off, his courageous thumbs up has become the symbol of his fighting spirit. I walked beside him while he lay motionless on the stretcher, his parents joined me outside the locker room door and we all held hands and cried.

Today, Mike lives an exhaustingly active life outside Seattle. He skydives, scuba dives, water skis and takes endless bike trips. All while paralyzed. So let's take a moment, praise the Miami Project and raise a glass to those who get it done.

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