

BIG MEN LOOKING FOR BREATHING ROOM

Bubba is a big man. He's a strong
BY AL THOMPSON man. He's the kind of
man most men hope lifting weights
will allow them to grow into. He's
the kind of man the NFL pays
millions to play their game. Bubba
has a look of invincibility. But as
impressive as he is, when night
falls and he hits the sack to
recharge his batteries, it's his
very size that might kill him—
tonight, or maybe tomorrow night,
or the next. Bubba has sleep apnea.



Sleep apnea can be a killer of big men

NOT SO SWEET SLUMBER

According to a medical study of professional football players in the January 23, 2003 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* and reported on by the National Institutes of Health, up to one-third of all linemen may suffer from obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), a potentially life-threatening condition that's often undiagnosed.³ This particular form of sleep-disordered breathing is a serious condition characterized by numerous involuntary breathing pauses during sleep. If left untreated, sleep apnea can lead to life-threatening diseases such as heart disease, hypertension, and stroke.

OSA is characterized by frequent pauses in breathing during sleep that can range from a brief moment to a few minutes. The condition's name comes from the Greek word *apnea*, meaning "want of breath." This condition occurs in all age groups and both genders. Some cases develop through heredity. Most often, however, OSA is diagnosed in middle-aged men who are overweight, suffer from high blood pressure, and snore loudly, and those with a physical abnormality of the nose, throat, or other parts of the upper airway.¹

THE NFL HAS SUPERSIZED

What's frightening is that perfectly normal,



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highly conditioned athletes in the NFL are developing this condition at an alarming rate. According to NFL records, in 1986 there were 10 players who weighed 300 pounds or more. Today

there are about 340.² So it's easy to see that obesity, along with all the dangers that come with carrying that much weight, like apnea, is prevalent in the NFL.

Allan Levy, MD, associate physician for the New York Giants and contributing faculty member of the SleepTeam that performed the study cited in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, says his peers must look at sleep apnea with a different set of eyes. "I think the medical community, based on our study, is

going to have to change the way they think about this disease," Levy explains. "It's been thought for years to be a disease of obese, middle-aged, and upper-aged people. The average age of our group was 27. There are a whole lot of 280-pound 27-year-olds out there right now that aren't nearly as physically fit as our football players are, who obviously must have sleep apnea and nobody is paying attention to it. It's probably a major cause of death in big people."

ONE PLAYER WHO FOUND RELIEF

Eagles Pro Bowl offensive tackle Jon Runyan

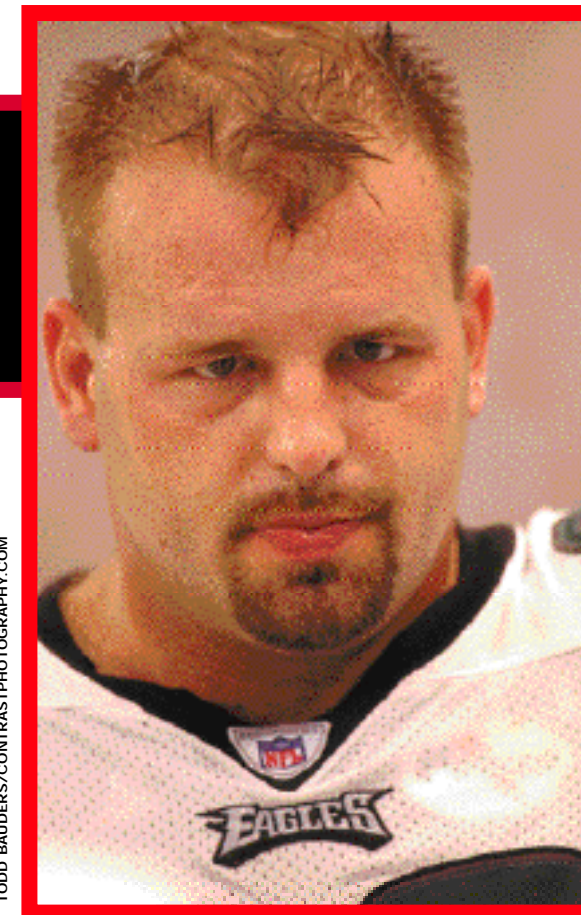
saw the problem both as a condition he inherited from his father—a 6-foot-1, 250-pound man—and as the result of being himself a 6-foot-7, 330-pound pro football player. "Always being around him [my father] and hearing him snore and the volume of his snoring, added to the comments my mom would make about how he would stop breathing, concerned me," Runyan told *Pure Power* in a recent phone interview.

Runyan started his career with the Houston Oilers as a fourth-round draft pick out of Michigan in 1996. As he got older—and bigger—he started to experience symptoms of OSA. But it wasn't until he got married that he decided to do something about the condition. "I've experienced myself a few times, waking up out of a dead sleep...you haven't taken a breath in a minute or two and all of a sudden you catch some saliva in your throat and you are struggling to even breathe," he explained. "By the time you get any air into you, you're in a full sweat; full panic... I woke my wife up and all that kind of thing."

Apnea occurs when the throat muscles and tongue relax, allowing the soft palate and uvula to block a person's airway. There's usually heavy snoring, frequent arousals, and periods of apnea due to airway constriction when the person tries to inhale.¹ Several methods are used to treat OSA. Among them are surgery to remove the uvula from the back of the throat, mouthpieces to keep the air passageway open, CPAP devices (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure) to pump air into the lungs while asleep, or simply losing weight.¹

Runyan sought treatment from Philadelphia area physician Mansoor Madani, MD, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, a diplomate of the American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, and a fellow of the American Association of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons. After consulting with Runyan and his wife, Madani recommended

surgery. "The doctor didn't really guarantee anything," said Runyan, who's also performed in several Highland Games competitions as an amateur. "He said he would definitely do something with the snoring, but the apnea is a combination of a lot of things. A lot of times it has



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THE EAGLES' JON RUNYAN IS A BIG MAN WITH SLEEPING PROBLEMS THAT HE'S GETTING UNDER CONTROL. WHO WANTS TO WAKE UP DEAD?

something to do with the size of your soft palate and how far it falls down your throat when you actually do fall asleep."

Madani removed Runyan's uvula to relieve him of his symptoms. "He said the only purpose the uvula has in the human anatomy is when you take a drink of water it keeps the water from going up your nose," Runyan said with a laugh. "It was instantly better. At night I would be sleeping and I would sleep 20 to 40 minutes at a time before I'd stop sleeping and wake up. Now I sleep four and a half hours before I wake up. I now have meaningful rest."



JOE PULCINELLA

BEING BIG, STRONG, AND POWERFUL HASN'T KEPT STEVE PULCINELLA FROM DEVELOPING SLEEP APNEA.

application custom-fitted for my mouth and then in 1997, I had laser surgery on my throat. None of these things worked for me so far. When I can bring my body weight down to close to 270 pounds it definitely helps decrease the snoring a

lot, but I keep myself up around 300 pounds just for athletic purposes."

The 38-year-old Pulcinella, who's 6-1, has competed in track, bodybuilding, strongman, and

Highland Games his entire life. He says the condition affected his first marriage in a negative way: "When I was married I used to sleep in our spare bedroom for years." Pulcinella says OSA affects his relationships today. He resists using a breathing device so his only hope is to lose weight. But like so many other athletes, the desire to compete outweighs the risk. "When my Highland Games career winds down I'm going to whittle my weight down and hopefully that'll cure most of it," says Pulcinella. "I'll be trying to reduce some of my bulk. I'm a big guy and will always be a big guy, so I'm sure I'll struggle with this apnea my whole life."

THE FUTURE

Dr. Levy says there's no new treatment for OSA, but there's been improvement on existing measures. "The only thing that's happened is that the equipment is a little better for treating it, the CPAP machines and all. But there are no radical new treatments," he explains.

Former NFL tight end Vyto Kab is the co-managing director of a company that produces breathing devices. Kab believes that the breathing devices are the most effective way to treat athletes who need to be big in order to be effective. "The most effective treatment for OSA is the CPAP device worn nightly during sleep," Kab says. "Laser surgery can improve the snoring, but it doesn't provide a solution to the apnea. Weight loss is a great treatment—but it's not an option for the

lineman or the iron man because they need to keep muscle weight on."

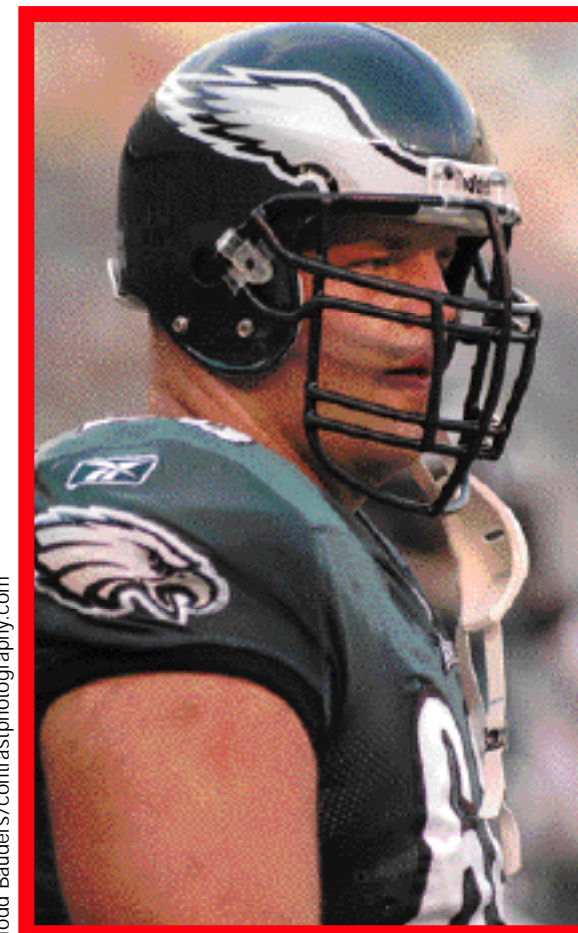
Kab says that athletes should seek out a qualified member of the medical community to monitor their sleep patterns. "The best step a person should take if they suspect that they have OSA is to seek out a qualified, board-certified sleep physician, rather than a general physician, who will put them in the right direction," Kab says. "Our NFL study showed that NFL players can improve overall well-being by using CPAP without giving up the sport."

REALITY CHECK

A sobering thought was brought to light by Dr. Levy and others in the medical community. "The average life expectancy of these large men is very short," Levy says with a sigh. "I think it's 54. But nobody knows for sure. It's the best guess based on watching them go." Levy, who's worked in the NFL for 35 years, decided he wanted to incorporate his research and experience with the work of another group that is monitoring the health of NFL players, in particular because OSA has been tied to heart disease.

Levy is working with a new group, the Living Heart Foundation, which was started by former NFL quarterback Archie Roberts, MD. Roberts went to medical school part-time while he served as a backup signal caller in Cleveland and Miami. He was a noted cardiac surgeon before suffering a stroke. Although he's recovered, he doesn't perform surgery anymore. Instead, he spends most of his time with the foundation, which is based in New Jersey. "The foundation just started this past year," Levy explains. "The foundation is doing cardiac workups...really very, very good screenings on retired NFL players."

The Living Heart Foundation plans to follow each player over the next two years. The players will then be asked to report every two years so foundation doctors can monitor their heart patterns. Players will also be given advice on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle, including how to reduce the likelihood of sleep apnea. Levy hopes the research provided by the foundation can help all big men who take up the gridiron or iron



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sports. "We're doing it to see if it's really true, that their life expectancy is short," says Levy. "We know that it is; we just don't have any proof; we have no statistics. We also want to find out what it is...that if their life expectancy is so short, why? What's happening to them? We want to see where they get in trouble and if we can stop it. Can we change what they're doing when we see what it is?"

For all those 300-pound heroes out there, it's a sobering thought indeed. While that big man may enjoy turning heads every time he walks into a room, that pleasure could come with a very steep price: the loss of sleep—or his life. **PP**

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NOT EVERY STORY HAS A HAPPY ENDING

Runyan had a happy ending to his problem. Not everyone's so lucky. OSA, as it pertains to young athletes, obviously isn't just restricted to football players. Powerlifters, strongman competitors, track athletes, and most large strength athletes are going to have the same problem. Their weight is simply slowly choking them to death every day.

Highland Games professional Steve Pulcinella has suffered from sleep apnea for years and has found little relief. "Loss of real REM [rapid eye movement] sleep is the number one thing," Pulcinella explains. "I pretty much snore until I stop breathing altogether; then I choke myself awake and the whole thing starts over again. It leaves me very tired during the day to the point where I fall asleep whenever I sit down for more than five minutes. I've tried every over-the-counter method and then some. I have tried nasal breathing strips, throat sprays, special pillows, a dental