

You Can't Escape: The Tony Elliott Story

by Richard E. Lapchick
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Former NFL player Tony Elliott has so much more on his mind than the opening of NFL camps. Twenty years ago he stared down the barrel of a gun. Then owner of the Magnum was a drug pusher who Tony was attempting to rob in order to support his cocaine habit. Facing death, Tony finally realized he had reached the bottom scale of life. He could no longer be overly concerned about his pro football career and sought help to stay alive.

Now he sits in a Stamford, CT hospital, the lower portion of his body paralyzed after he was shot on February 18th in what police believe was a shooting by a drug dealer.

I have known Tony since 1985 and have followed his mercurial and often tragic life both in its depths, in its rebounds, and even today.

In a nation of fractured childhoods, not many can compare to the horror of Tony's. When he was only four years old, he collapsed in a pool of his mother's blood after he witnessed his father Bobby brutally slaying Ruby Elliott, his mother. They were not only husband and wife, but Bobby was Ruby's pimp.

His new guardians were his uncle Wilbert. Their relationship was always volatile but ultimately close. Over the years, he lived with other relatives and, finally, in a state home for boys. To add to Tony's confusion, his father was released from prison and Tony had to deal with his mother's killer.

By middle school, Tony was affiliated with gangs and was on the way to becoming an alcoholic. For Tony, life at the boy's home included cocaine and marijuana provided by the director of the home. Only his selection for the Harding High School football team drove him away from gang membership but not drugs.

Harding won the Connecticut Championship and Tony was an all-state and all-American selection. Suddenly this incredibly confused young man, whose life was so complicated by his family's history and by his growing abuse of drugs and alcohol, was being called a role model by those he lived with at the boys home and by his classmates at Harding High. If there was a chance for a normal life to emerge, that chance was shattered when his father shot and killed Uncle Wilbert after an argument.

The next few years were even more chaotic. Tony flunked out of the University of Wisconsin at Madison and enrolled at Pratt Junior College in Kansas where he played well enough to get a scholarship to North Texas State. Football, cocaine and booze were the three constants in college. Academics were never part of the equation as Tony passed 3 classes at North Texas in four semesters.

Tony was drafted by the New Orleans Saints in the 5th round and suddenly had a lot of money. He sought out his old friends in Bridgeport and went on a two-week cocaine binge and money-spending spree that drained \$14,000 dollars of his signing bonus. Tony made the team but his addiction was destroying him. By mid-season he was sent by the team to the Timberlawn Rehabilitation Center in Dallas, Texas. Released after 30 days, he rejoined the team. Tony stayed off cocaine for the rest of the season while believing his use of marijuana was somehow OK.

In the off-season, Tony returned to the streets and the coke culture. Still using when the Saints camp opened in July, the Saints forced him into rehab again. The rehab was interrupted with the news that his brother had been murdered. His mounting loss and anger drove him to use drugs even more self-

destructively. Tony emptied his \$10,000 savings account, sold his car, furniture, appliances, and jewelry to purchase even more cocaine. Tony had been loaded on cocaine for about 21 straight days when he began to write bad checks at several stores.

Flat broke again, his insatiable appetite for cocaine allowed him to continue to compromise his moral values when he stole his friend's income tax refund check. Then Tony decided to rob a cocaine dealer. The suspicious dealer answered the door with a .357 Magnum pointed at Tony's head. Tony talked his way out of this precarious situation and went directly to the Depaul Drug Treatment Center for admission. This time it was his own choice and he remained in treatment for 85 days.

Tony decided to go out into the community to help others, lecturing in schools throughout New Orleans. He had learned the importance of honesty at Depaul and disclosed deep personal truths about himself. Tony soon became one of the most sought-after speakers in New Orleans.

The courts placed him on three years probation. Tony appealed to the NFL for reinstatement and Commissioner Pete Rozelle allowed him to rejoin the Saints. It was then that I heard his story. We agreed to meet after the 1985 season.

It was his first drug free season and Tony started every game at nose guard. I hired him at Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society in Boston. He gripped audiences in Boston with his powerful story. Teachers praised him and the impact he was having. He continued to spend his off-seasons with us until his playing career ended.

At that point, he went into a series of businesses in New Orleans. He seemed to finally remove himself from the streets as he was showcased as one of football's positive role models on the drug issue on the TODAY Show, Good Morning America, CBS Sunday Morning and in many of the nation's leading newspapers.

It seems incongruous that this huge man, all 300 plus pounds, is now immobilized, imprisoned in a hospital bed. Like a cat with nine lives, Tony seemed to escape death's grip over and over again. He escaped death one more time in February, his life hanging in the balance for more than two months after the shooting. The bills for his hospital care have drained the resources of Tony and his successful and devoted wife, Jeanette. I wanted to believe he has escaped the drug culture, but ultimately it does not matter whether he was personally involved with drugs leading up to the shooting. The streets caught up to Tony.

His story helped many children avoid the need for a second chance. He used drugs to numb the pain of his life. He could understand the pain of so many children. They flocked to him. Now I hope that he gets that ninth life for himself and that the NFL and the NFLPA help him as they help so many current players with multiple chances. Tony Elliott needs them now more than during his career.

**Northeastern University's
CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SPORT IN SOCIETY
360 Huntington Avenue, Suite 161 CP
Boston, MA 02115-5000
Phone: (617) 373-4025
Fax: (617) 373-4566 / 2092**

E-MAIL US at sportinsociety@neu.edu