

## Lawrence Tynes' Nightmare

The man who kicked the Giants into two Super Bowls with clutch overtime field goals saw his career cut short in 2013 by MRSA, a dangerous antibiotic-resistant bacteria that can thrive in NFL locker rooms. He's not going quietly into retirement

Once, Lawrence Tynes was a special figure in pro football, a great kicker with star power to boot. His knack for converting in the clutch—specifically in the NFC title game, where he kicked overtime game-winning field goals for the New York Giants in the 2007 and 2011 seasons—made him so.

Actually, one could posit that the difference in the Super Bowls that ensued—an average of 3.5 points for the Giants—was Tynes, who didn't miss any of his field goal or extra-point attempts in those games. The reasons no one does make the case for Tynes: a) the David Tyree catch; b) the Mario Manningham catch; and c) the fact that Tynes did his work inside University of Phoenix Stadium and Lucas Oil Stadium, undisturbed by Mother Nature. But when Tynes nailed that first NFC title game winner, Green Bay was gripped in a deep freeze, and San Francisco was in the midst of a monsoon when he drilled the second. Why did Tynes always seem to be in his element when the elements were terrible? Well, he was born in Scotland, so that could have something to do with it.

Tynes's funky origin story was just another attribute—along with his 81.5 percent conversion rate and his quarterback-like confidence—that made him so intriguing. He seemed primed to become “one of those guys who stick around in the league, basically, until they can no longer physically kick or they just get tired of it,” says former Pro Bowl punter Chris Kluwe. Guys like Morten Andersen, who retired at 47, and Adam Vinatieri, who's still kicking at 42.

Tynes was forced to take meds through a PICC line, which snakes through the veins to deliver antibiotics directly into the heart.



But last year, at age 36, Tynes gave up football for good, after nine active NFL seasons. He did this not because he was in a hurry to spend more time with his wife, Amanda, and their young twin boys, Caleb and Jaden, or because he had abandoned his ambition of earning an All-Pro nod. It was because he hasn't been right physically since contracting an aggressive staph infection after signing with the Buccaneers as a free agent in the summer of 2013.

In a formal complaint filed earlier this month in Broward County, Fla., Tynes held the owners and operators of the Bucs' training facility responsible for the downturn in his health, which he says has not rebounded strongly enough for him to resume his professional playing career. He is suing for \$20 million, or the amount he believes he could have earned were he fit enough to kick for another "six or seven additional seasons," the complaint says, at a rate of "at least \$3 million" based on his "championship experience and accuracy." (The Bucs declined to comment on the matter and have yet to formally respond to the suit.)

"They took that away from me," says Tynes, who has gone from regaling David Letterman with war stories about the Giants' Super Bowl seasons to seething over his situation to the Good Morning America crew and trading on his erstwhile celebrity as a consultant for a private aviation company. He never envisioned the curtain suddenly falling on him moments into the third act of his playing career. All he saw was himself swinging away under the brightest spotlight of them all—the sun.

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After ditching soccer for football as a senior in high school, more than five years after his father, Larry, a U.S. Navy SEAL, packed up their family and moved from a western Scottish port town called Greenock to the Florida panhandle, Tynes had hoped to kick in short sleeves in perpetuity. But he had to take his few opportunities to kick when they came. He walked on at Troy, a Division II program when he turned up in 1997, and then walked away four years later with school records in made field goals (45) and points (262).

Tynes never considered a pro career until Mel Kiper added him to his draft board in 2001. Although he would go unselected that year, he had two tryouts with the Chiefs. Both times they cut him, but back then cuts weren't so cold. If a team liked a player but didn't think he was Sunday-ready yet, it could ship him to NFL Europe for a summer's worth of extra seasoning. That's exactly what the Chiefs did in 2002 with Tynes who, in a fateful twist, was sent back to Scotland to play for a team called the Claymores.

Although born amid the lochs, Tynes was recognized as an American, a classification that mattered in a league that compelled teams to humor the rugby- and footie-going ticket-buyers and field at least one "local" kicker along with their imports. Thing is, the foreign kickers were trotted out to attempt all the chip shots, while the Yanks were saved for field goal attempts of 30 yards or longer. Tynes went 9 of 12 from that distance over 10 games for the Claymores while pocketing \$700 a week.

Tynes, who beat out Morten Anderson for a spot on the Chiefs in 2004, knows how tenuous a kicker's fate can be.



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In 2003, Tynes signed up for another one and a half seasons abroad—this time with the Ottawa Renegades of

the CFL, which offered him far more money (six figures) and far more chances to do his thing in their three-down setup. In 26 games, Tynes connected on 81.6 percent of his field-goal attempts, a conversion rate that led to another tryout invitation from the Chiefs. Tynes accepted, knowing full well that to capitalize on this chance he'd have to beat out Anderson, who was 44, or too old for anyone to remember the last time he was beaten out of a job in camp. When Tynes prevailed—an achievement he ranks up there with his two Super Bowl victories—his breakthrough did not go unremarked upon. I hope you know I'm cutting a Hall of Famer for you, coach Dick Vermeil more or less told him.

Tynes lasted three seasons in Kansas City, through many harsh Missouri winters, through two head coaches, through god knows how many mornings he arrived at work the day after a less-than-stellar Sunday to see a handful of free-agent kickers in the parking lot getting ready to make a run at his job. He didn't lose until the spring of 2007, when the Chiefs shipped him to the Giants. As much as Tynes would have preferred to end up in a fair-weather spot like San Diego or a city with a domed stadium, there were certainly worse places to land than the media capital of the world, with one of the league's more upstanding organizations. Besides, he figured if he did his job well, he could chart his next destination and name his own price.

At the end of the 2013 season, after Tynes kicked the Giants to two Lombardi Trophies while climbing to third place on the franchise's all-time scoring list, New York offered him a multiyear extension. But the idea of accepting it wasn't nearly as enticing to him as seizing on the agency that had eluded him since high school. "I thought it was the right time to move on," he says.

Tynes signed a one-year deal with Tampa for \$905,000. He might have held out for more dough, given that he was a top-20 placekicker at the time—most of whom commanded annual compensation in the \$3 million range. "I just factored in the warm weather in Tampa and the great conditions in the NFC South," he says. "I had been in the cold my whole career, including Canada. And I was like, God, what a great opportunity to sign a one-year deal and have a fantastic season and then sign a multiyear deal with somebody."

But before Tynes could get to work, he had to see a man about his foot.

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Tynes' 47-yard game-winner in sub-zero temps at Lambeau earned New York a trip to Super Bowl 42, where they upset the Patriots. (Simon Bruty/Sports Illustrated) Tynes' 47-yard overtime game-winner in sub-zero temps at Lambeau earned the Giants a trip to Super Bowl 42, where they upset the Patriots.

Ingrown toenails are one of the hazards of playing pro football, right up there with having to park among your would-be



Tynes' 47-yard overtime game-winner in sub-zero temps at Lambeau earned the Giants a trip to Super Bowl 42, where they upset the Patriots. (Simon Bruty/Sports Illustrated)

replacements after a subpar Sunday. The foot faults usually manifest in one of two ways: on trampled-upon linemen, or on kickers who insist on wearing a shoe that's at least one size too small on the striking foot, for increased power and feel.

Tynes's habit of wearing right shoes that were two sizes too small necessitated routine preseason visits to the podiatrist to have ingrown toenails removed. On July 30, 2013, a week after passing his Bucs physical, Tynes visited Bayshore Podiatry in Tampa, a consulting practice for the Bucs, Yankees and other sports organizations, to have about two millimeters of right toenail cut out from his big toe. "They set up the appointment," says Tynes, referring to the Bucs. "They sent me to the doctor. They told me to go get it done with their doctor." He reckons the procedure was over in 10 minutes. In fact, numbing his big toe was the most time-consuming part. (Gerald Consentino, Bayshore's chief physician, declined to comment on the matter, citing HIPAA privacy laws.)

Tynes says the Bucs further advised him to report back to their facility for his rehab, a regimen that mostly consisted of hot- and cold-tub baths and changing the dressing on his wound. He did as recommended. However, in the days after the procedure, he noticed that his toe had not only failed to heal as quickly as it had before, but that it "had turned red and swollen with puss oozing out," according to his complaint, making him "feverish with chills." It rendered him too sick to practice. On Aug. 9, Tynes's toe was cultured; test results showed the presence of Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA. The infection thrives in hospitals but is also adept at settling in less sterile environments where cuts and abrasions mingle with bad hygiene—like battlegrounds or playgrounds or their approximate hybrids, football fields. St. Louis, Cleveland and Washington are among NFL teams that have had high-profile cases of MRSA among players in recent years.

Around the same time Tynes took ill, Pro Bowl guard Carl Nicks was sidelined with an infected blister following surgery to repair a damaged left toe. The Bucs hired an outside firm to sanitize the facilities at Raymond James Stadium and the team's offices, dropped five figures on a massive air purifier and required players to shower before migrating from the locker room and cover their cuts and abrasions with watertight bandages before submitting to hydrotherapy. The team also brought in an infectious disease specialist, Deverick Anderson, the co-director of the Duke Infection Control Outreach Network, for a review. He'd go on to tell one of their early opponents, the Eagles, that the Bucs had "the lowest risk of transmitting MRSA to any other team."

*"The problem was the facility," Tynes says of the Bucs' training rooms and locker. "Half the damn team was on antibiotics."*

But Nicks, after starting two games, suffered a MRSA relapse in the fall, and cornerback Johnthan Banks came

down with his own MRSA infection. “To our own fault, we probably found more MRSA because we were trying to be safe,” former Bucs GM Mark Dominik told Sports Illustrated in November 2013, “so anything at all was cultured.” Anderson was flown back to Tampa to sit for a series of Q&A sessions to allay the fears of players and staff alike. “A dog-and-pony show,” Tynes called the entire effort. “I think you should focus on the fact that they said they cleaned the facility, and then four to six weeks later Johnthan Banks got MRSA.” In his complaint, Tynes alleges that “appropriate precautions and procedures designed to prevent a MRSA infection, and the spread of MRSA, were neither in place nor being actively followed at the Bucs Training Facility in 2013” and that he was not informed of “ongoing separate incidents of infection amongst individuals who used and visited One Buccaneer Place” when he decided to rehab his toe at the facility instead of elsewhere. Among those undergoing rehabilitation for bacterial infections, the suit claims, were Bucs guard Davin Joseph, punter Michael Koenen and special teams coach Dave Wannstedt.

However, the lawsuit does not account for the differences in the conditions of those Bucs. In October 2013, Joseph told reporters that he had indeed suffered from a staph infection, but that it was during the summer and he “never had MRSA.” (He went on to start all 16 games that season.) Koenen told The MMQB on Tuesday that he was fighting an infection that summer but said he caught his after suffering a deep cut on his right (kicking) toe while swimming in a lake by his grandmother’s house. After sitting out a few days of camp following a quick stitch-up and a round of antibiotic treatment, Koenen was good to go for the ‘13 season. “Once [the infection] showed up, they tested me right away and they kept [the wound] clean, would bag it when I would shower,” says Koenen, who added that his test results came back positive for a water-based bacteria, not MRSA. “I haven’t had any issues with it since.” (Wannstedt declined to comment through a representative with Fox Sports, where he now works as a college football analyst.)

The suit claims former head athletic trainer Todd Toriscelli was the Bucs’ MRSA Patient Zero, asserting that Toriscelli “had undergone several knee surgeries related to an infection” and “admitted to close friends that his own MRSA infection was the source of Mr. Tynes’s infection.” A source close to Toriscelli, now the director of sports medicine for the Titans, disputed this assertion, telling The MMQB that Toriscelli “never tested positive for MRSA, and cultures were taken at the time that verify that fact.” (Koenen, the punter, says of his own treatment, “I know Todd did a good job with me.”)

“The problem was the facility, let’s be real,” Tynes says, mentioning the known cases of MRSA on the Bucs in 2013 and the additional players and team employees who had staph infections. “If we get into this, I bet you there’s 10 more guys—because half the damn team was on antibiotics.”

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Tynes’s medical regimen was intense. He underwent three surgeries to remove the infected tissue. After subsequent tests still revealed the presence of MRSA, he submitted to six weeks of



Tynes before Super Bowl 42. (Peter Read Miller/Sports Illustrated)

intravenous antibiotic therapy through a peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC). In this procedure, a tube from 10 to 24 inches long is inserted into a vein in the arm, then threaded through larger veins and into the superior vena cava near the heart; this allows for a more efficient delivery of medications over an extended period of time. “Obviously when you get sent home with a PICC line, you can’t lift your kids—you can’t lift anything when you have that thing in your arm,” says Tynes, adding that he couldn’t share towels at home or throw his dirty laundry in with the rest of his family’s. “And for me, probably because I was more cautious than anything, I was a little hesitant to touch—not necessarily...I wouldn’t completely not touch [my kids], but there was always part of me that wondered what if I transmit this to them? I was definitely in a guarded state around them and around other people.”

The Bucs struck an optimistic public tone about Tynes’s recovery as the season drew near, but Amanda tweeted a picture of her husband sitting glumly on a coach with a tube snaking into his right biceps, with the caption “I hear my husband is responding ‘well’ to treatment. LOL! He’s NOT responding at all yet. This is our #bucslife.” Three days later the Bucs placed Tynes on their non-football injury list rather than injured reserve, another point of contention in his complaint. “If you put me on IR,” he says, “you’re saying I got [the infection] at the facility. They didn’t want to admit that I got it there.”

*“I didn’t get past more than 10 balls,” Tynes says of attempt at a comeback. “I kept thinking [the pain] was going to go away, and it just didn’t.”*

In November 2013, Dominik told SI that he was optimistic the team could work with Tynes on that, just as it had on many of the other issues Tynes had encountered to that point. “He went out and sought second opinions, which is perfectly legal under the CBA,” Dominik said. “We had no problem with him flying up to New York and seeing a doctor. We had an infectious disease specialist that was going to meet with Carl [and him], but Lawrence wanted to go back to Kansas City. So I met with him and his agent that morning, and we talked about everything. And then that afternoon, we sent him back home to Kansas City and set him up with a local infectious disease specialist that’s treated him since.

“It’s unfortunate what’s happening to him. That’s why we’re paying him right around \$50,000 every week right now. We never abandoned him.”

Tynes’s response: “That’s my salary, so...”

Although the IV therapy was successful in resolving Tynes's MRSA infection, he claims the infection and the surgeries have led to chronic aches and pain. Furthermore, he says, months of rehab and physical therapy haven't made it any less agonizing for him to kick a football. He made his first attempt at a comeback last May on a high school field near his home in the Kansas City area, hoping to start out with a few extra points and then gradually work his way farther back from the uprights. "I didn't get past more than 10 balls," Tynes says. "Just the amount of pain that I was in at impact, I certainly anticipated it going away. I tried multiple times through the summer. I just kept think it was going to go away, and it just didn't."

After the Bucs cut him on March 11, 2014, Tynes conceded the end of his playing career. But the question of its exact duration of that career would gnaw at him. By being placed on the non-football injury list during his MRSA ordeal instead of on injured reserve (where Tynes believes he would have been classified if he had, say, accidentally dropped a weight plate on his foot), Tynes lost a year of service in the league—a technicality that affects his pension, 401(k) and annuities, among other benefits. After he filed a grievance through the NFLPA, Tynes says the Bucs "offered to make it right in terms of my classification" and "give the credited season without even a hearing." That's when he figured he had a case.

Scoring a win will be challenging. The NFL and its member organizations have historically proven to be well-heeled and combative defendants. "As someone who has been involved in a lawsuit against an NFL team," says Kluwe, referencing his recent legal battle with the Vikings, "it's not gonna be quick or easy." Furthermore, all of the former players who have lost their careers to MRSA and pursued lost wages have taken settlements. In fact, Nicks did so, settling with the Bucs for \$3 million in August 2014. Then there's the matter of who was billed and who paid for the ingrown procedure. (One of Tynes's lawyers, Matthew Weinshall, asserts that its invoice remains unpaid.) And there's the reality that many of the people Tynes is charging with negligence are no longer in the team's employ. But the most daunting of the many obstacles in Tynes's path to what he sees as justice might be the fact that the Bucs discovered three distinct cultures of MRSA during their stricken 2013 season, making it all the tougher to prove the hypothesis of Toriscelli as Patient Zero.

Tynes isn't deterred. Long shots, after all, were his specialty. "I'm gonna be here until I win," he says. "Whatever that entails. I don't care how long it takes."