NFL players speak out on marijuana policy

By John Fauber

When NFL lineman Eugene Monroe spoke out publicly against the NFL’s ban on marijuana, it sparked a national conversation about the merits of cannabis as an alternative method of pain management for players.

“What I noticed was that former players would openly speak about their experiences being addicted to opioids that they were prescribed by their team doctors,” Monroe told Yahoo Global News Anchor Katie Couric.

Monroe, who was recently released by the Baltimore Ravens, has found an ally for his cause in Tennessee Titans linebacker Derrick Morgan.

In an exclusive interview, Morgan told Couric, “I think for the NFL to say that cannabis does not benefit the long-term health of its players without actually having gone and done the research — I don’t think that’s an accurate statement.”

Tennessee Titans linebacker Derrick Morgan speaks out for the first time about the NFL’s pot policy, and why he’s advocating for medical marijuana research. ”It's about not only us, but former players, future players, and more so society as a whole,” he tells Yahoo Global News Anchor Katie Couric.

The NFL says its Substances of Abuse policy is “collectively bargained and is a joint NFL-NFL-Players Association program. We are guided by medical advisers. They have not indicated a need to change.”

Monroe and Morgan are both particularly interested in a cannabis compound called cannabidiol (CBD), which has been shown to be an effective treatment for certain epilepsy patients and has been classified by the U.S. government as a neuroprotectant.

“There’s been some extraordinary compelling, preclinical work that’s demonstrated that CBD is incredibly effective at helping to limit the extent of brain injury, which is really very intriguing and promising,” says Staci Gruber, Director of McLean Hospital’s MIND program and an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

Morgan says, “I feel like the NFL has a responsibility to look into it, to delegate time and money to research this for its players.”

NFL players like Monroe and Morgan are increasingly concerned about chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), the neurodegenerative disease that was highlighted in the movie “Concussion” and has been discovered in the brain of many deceased players.

The league acknowledges the findings but feels that additional research is needed to determine the potential causes of the
disease.

Monroe has teamed up with Colorado’s Realm of Caring, a nonprofit medical marijuana advocacy group, to fund two upcoming research studies that will study the effects of cannabis on the health of both current and former players.

Realm of Caring CEO Heather Jackson treated her son with a CBD product called Charlotte’s Web to stop recurring seizures from a rare disease called Doose syndrome.

Heather Jackson, co-founder of Realm of Caring, became an advocate for medical marijuana after turning to the drug to save her son Zaki’s life. Jackson says Zaki, who had suffered over 500,000 seizures by age five, is now seizure-free thanks to a cannabis strain known as Charlotte’s Web.

University of Pennsylvania researcher Marcel Bonn-Miller says the studies are important to determine specifically how marijuana can play a role in player health.

“Remember cannabis is not cannabis is not cannabis. It’s made up of 130 different chemical compounds,” he says, “some of which may have benefits for these folks and some may not, so it’s really important to understand what could help.”

For Monroe, the cause he started when he spoke out is personal.

“I’m fearful of … becoming addicted to these pills. I know continuing my career, I’ll deal with a great deal of pain pushing through the injuries I’ve already had, which are numerous. And I have a family. I want to be there for them when I’m done playing this game.