



**WHO DO YOU
THINK YOU
ARE? BJORN
NITTMO?**

Kicker Bjorn Nittmo chased his NFL dream for more than a decade, including a stop in training camp with the Buffalo Bills. He became a recurring character on 'Late Night with David Letterman.' A head injury left Nittmo so shattered that he walked out on his wife and four children. Years later, he continues to drop in, unannounced and unkempt, before taking off again. His estranged family wants him to get help before it's too late.

By [Tim Graham](#) / News Sports Reporter

Illustration by Daniel Zakroczemski / Buffalo News

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Bjorn Nittmo is somewhere out there, presumably in the Arizona mountains, maybe installing home-satellite systems but almost certainly running from himself.

Eleven years ago he stopped coming home to his wife and four children. The youngest was 6 months old. He had lost part of his memory and still complains about the constant howling in his head from a concussive whomp. He has filed for bankruptcy and faced at least six civil judgments or liens. At some point he began using a different name.

There might be a sinister reason to take on an alias, or perhaps he simply grew tired of people asking if he was *that* Bjorn Nittmo.

Yes, he's the same guy David Letterman introduced in 1989 as "the only Bjorn Nittmo in the New Jersey phonebook." In actuality he's the only Bjorn Nittmo in the world, though he is more peculiar than even that.

Nittmo was the left-footed, southern-drawled, Swedish placekicker the media treated like a geegaw from a Cracker Barrel store. He was a New York Giants rookie when he became a recurring character on NBC's groundbreaking "Late Night with David Letterman."

Letterman was smitten with saying Bjorn Nittmo (extra emphasis on the "Nitt!"), invited him onto the show as a guest and then invited him back again.

Letterman, tickled later to hear a man was pretending to be Nittmo at Manhattan bars to get free drinks and score with ladies, made “Who do you think you are? Bjorn Nittmo?” a “Late Night” catchphrase.

Nittmo was a New York celebrity. His NFL dreams were coming true. An innocent, immigrant’s charm made him easy to root for.

“It was exciting,” his then-wife, Mary Lois Nittmo, said. “You thought, ‘Here we are. We’re going to have it all.’”

“And we didn’t.”

Bjorn Nittmo’s brightest memories are accompanied by a dull VHS flicker and a low-def warble. Seated next to Letterman or kicking footballs into the studio audience at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, there’s so much life in Nittmo’s twinkly blue eyes, his curly, dirty-blond mullet and his gee-whiz smile.

Nittmo played six games for the Giants in 1989 and never kicked in a real NFL game again.

The Buffalo Bills signed him to test Scott Norwood’s psyche the summer after Wide Right. Nittmo chased the NFL for a dozen years, a vagabond from the World League of American Football to the Canadian Football League to the Arena Football League, including a season for the Buffalo Destroyers.

Had there been another American pro football league, Nittmo would have sought employment there. He kicked for the Miami Sharks of the fictional Associated Football Franchises of America in the 1999 Oliver Stone film “Any Given Sunday.”

Nittmo’s NFL tryouts were countless. He came cruelly close to being the Kansas City Chiefs’ kicker in 1996. He was overthrowing Tampa Bay Buccaneers incumbent Michael Husted in 1997, but a concussion erased enough of Nittmo’s brain that he insisted he had one child, although at the time he had two. A month later, Nittmo still couldn’t retrieve weeks of his summer. He grew increasingly unstable.

Now he’s a phantom, a vapor. He disappears for months, sometimes years until he returns unannounced, shabbier and more withered than the previous visit. His stops

are fleeting. He arrives suddenly and vanishes in a poof, another fever-dream figment.

His loved ones fear it's too late to pull him out of his abyss, that any day they'll answer a phone call informing them he was found dead along the roadside. July 26 was his 50th birthday.



Daughters Katarina, 22, Madeleine, 20, with Mary Lois Nittmo, 47, and siblings, Annika, 15, and Karsten, 11. At left is one of Katarina's horses, "Mama." (David Leeson/Special to The News)

Nittmo's children refuse to call him Dad. To them, he's just Bjorn, and the last time they saw him – in late April, the first time in seven months – he appeared homeless. His beard was scraggly and overgrown. His clothes were baggy, his Arizona Cardinals ballcap ratty.

"It was very disturbing the way he looked," Mary Lois said at the sturdy, pine dining room table in her Winnsboro, Texas, home about 100 miles east of Dallas. "He said he hadn't showered in a couple days. He's lost a lot of weight.

"I think we all realized where this is headed."

Bjorn showed up from two states away to slip a Mother's Day card under the windshield wiper of Mary Lois' blue Honda minivan. They have been divorced nearly 11 years, yet he continues to deliver cards for their anniversary, her birthday, Valentine's Day.

But to suggest Bjorn Nittmo operates like clockwork would be folly. He didn't realize Mother's Day was over a week away.

Alerted by a coworker a disheveled man was lurking around her car in the Winnsboro Elementary parking lot, Mary Lois went outside and convinced Bjorn to come home and see the kids. The weary Nittmo family endured another emotionally charged, awkward meeting. They begged him to get help for the umpteenth time.

Then he evaporated again, presumably back to the Arizona mountains, but not without mentioning he might drift up to the Northwest for work.

Maybe he'll actually wander there. Maybe he dropped that tidbit to inhibit his family from tracking him so he can hide out until the next time.

Bjorn Nittmo did not respond to messages – left on his known, working mobile phone – for this story about a football player and his family muddling through the damage wrought by his dogged pursuit of a dream.

Sometimes you get only one shot to make your mark. Sometimes only one shot can take it all away.

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

For nearly 19 years, Mary Lois Nittmo had not seen the play she believes disintegrated her husband and eventually repelled him from his four young children, off into the Coconino Mountains of northern Arizona.

The preseason exhibition between the Buccaneers and Atlanta Falcons on Aug. 9, 1997, wasn't televised in the part of Florida where the Nittmos lived. Mary Lois stayed home with their two girls and wasn't aware Bjorn's opening kickoff had gone away until the Buccaneers called after the game.

Nittmo had two previously diagnosed concussions Mary Lois knows of. Both happened while kicking for the Montreal Machine in the World League. To be informed of a third head injury was disconcerting, sure, but long-term effects from multiple concussions weren't considered perilous two decades ago as they are today.

Then Bjorn got on the phone. He asked Mary Lois about 3-year-old Katarina, but had zero recollection of Madeleine, six days shy of her first birthday.

“There are parts of our lives,” Mary Lois said, “he still doesn't remember.”

Husted's recollections of witnessing Nittmo get hurt were crystalline. The fear of losing his spot to Nittmo jolted his senses.

Husted was entering his fifth season in Tampa Bay but wobbled the previous season, missing seven of 19 field-goal attempts from Week Six to Week 14. Nittmo was signed to challenge Husted and got off to a better start in training camp.

The opening kickoff was moments away when Tampa Bay special teams coordinator Joe Marciano instructed Husted to stand down; Nittmo was getting the first shot.

“So I think, ‘Uh oh,’ “ Husted said. “They were giving him a chance to take the job.”



Bjorn Nittmo, with daughter Madeleine, taken shortly before he suffered a concussion in 1997.

In May, finally, Mary Lois saw what happened next. The Buffalo News obtained a copy of the Buccaneers' game telecast.

At the same pine table the Nittmos staged their latest intervention three weeks earlier, she leaned hesitantly toward a computer monitor. Madeleine sat nearby for support.

There was Nittmo in a white uniform, his left arm raised to signal the opening kickoff. He looked to his left to make sure the coverage unit was ready on that side. He turned to make sure they were ready on his right. He had a goatee. He anxiously chewed gum.

Mary Lois gasped at the sight of him.

Nittmo took two steps, a little timing skip and two more steps. He swung his left foot, clubbing the ball end over end down the Georgia Dome field. Falcons rookie Byron Hanspard snagged Nittmo's kick a yard deep in the end zone and glided up the left hash marks. Hanspard hit a seam and didn't break stride as he closed on Nittmo, the final defender, at the Falcons' 36-yard line.

Mary Lois was transfixed but began to tremble. She sniffed back tears.

Nittmo tried to wrap Hanspard around the waist, but the reigning Doak Walker Award winner (college football's best running back) was too fast and too strong. Nittmo's left arm slowed him enough to prevent the touchdown, but Hanspard's force helicoptered Nittmo to the turf.

Calvin Collins, the Falcons' 6-foot-2, 310-pound rookie offensive lineman, was trucking from behind. He tried to hurdle Nittmo and kneed him in the head.

The replay stops one frame before contact.

Mary Lois sobbed.

“It used to take my breath away every time I watched him kick,” Mary Lois said of seeing Bjorn on the monitor, “and it still took my breath away.

“Then he got hit, and football took my breath away again.”

Nittmo lay on the field for 40 seconds until three medical staffers pulled him by his arms into a seated position. One attendant knelt behind to make sure Nittmo didn't topple backward again. Nittmo gathered himself for another 10 seconds, rose and jogged to the sideline.

Husted recalled his interaction with Nittmo the rest of the night went from “comical to disbelief to annoying to scary.” Husted at first thought Nittmo was fooling, that no football hit could wreck someone's brain so badly.

Nittmo: “What happened? What quarter are we in? Have I kicked yet?”

Husted: “You kicked off. You tried to make the tackle. You got spun around. A big lineman tried to jump over you, and his knee caught you in the head.”

Nittmo, five minutes later: “What happened? Have I kicked yet?”

Husted: “You kicked off. You tried to make the tackle. You got spun ...”

“I'd never seen this,” Husted said. “By the fourth quarter he probably had asked me a dozen times. I felt like he was overacting, maybe even faking it.

“I couldn't believe he was that messed up. It didn't seem real, the way he was acting.”

At the team breakfast in Tampa the next morning, Nittmo asked Husted, “Did I even play?”

“I’ve been popped in the head before, and I’ve been in on tackles,” Nittmo told the St. Petersburg Times two days after the hit. “But when two or three weeks of your life disappear, and you have no clue what happened, it’s kind of scary.”

Nittmo kicked six days later in the next preseason game, and the Buccaneers waived him.

Ten months later, Nittmo lamented in another St. Petersburg Times article many memories never were recaptured. For instance, he aspired for years to talk with Falcons kicker Morten Andersen and probably did during pregame warmups.

“I have no clue if I met the guy or whatever,” Nittmo said in June 1998. “I got a chance to meet a legend, and I have no clue.”

The long-lost video now seen, Mary Lois sat distraught at the dining room table. Her face displayed worry. Her voice became louder, angrier. She spoke her next words slowly, punctuating each sentence by smacking her right fist into an open left hand.

“He was never the same after that,” Mary Lois said. “The man I married ... He was never the same. That’s when we lost him.

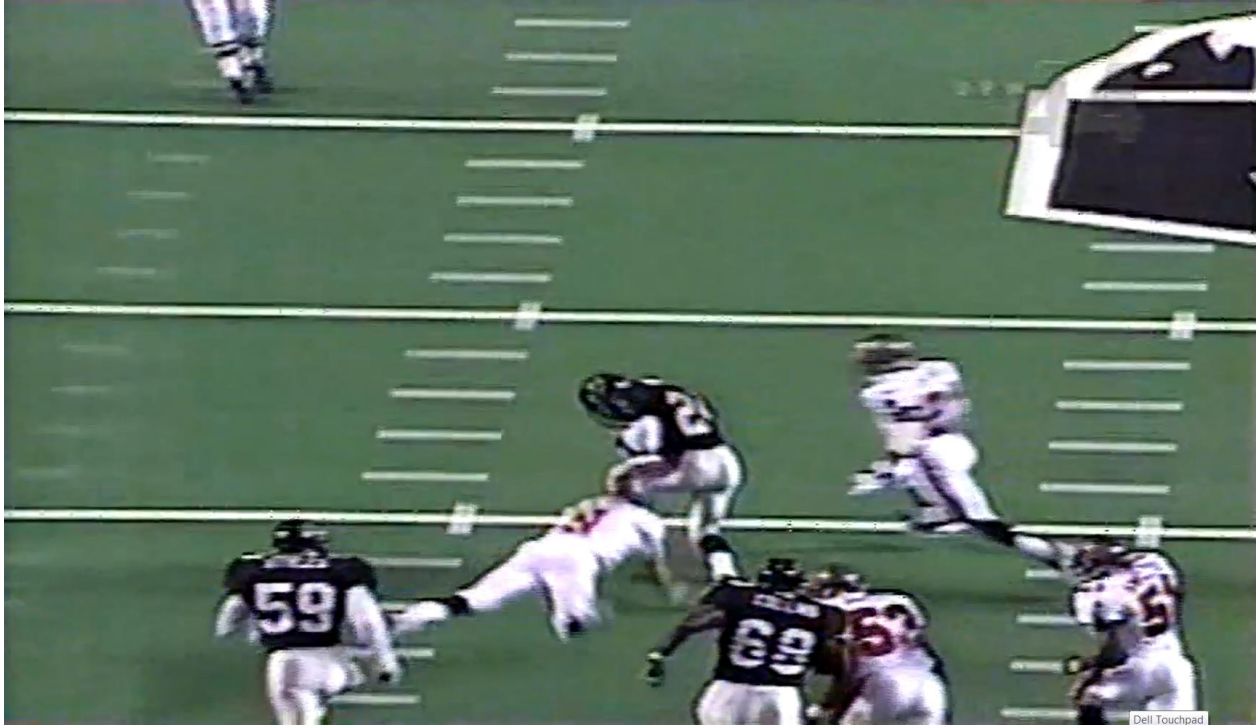
“It’s hard to watch someone you love fall apart. That’s what I’ve had to do because of,” she nearly gagged on the next word, “that.”

The video of Bjorn’s injury and Husted’s recollections have haunted Mary Lois since they were shared with her. Unable to sleep that night, she replayed the images on a loop in her mind. She spent much of the next day crying. She got sick.

“It was like watching his death,” Mary Lois wrote in an email two days later. “It was something I needed to see, and I needed to hear how he acted on the sideline. I had always wondered.”



The hit that changed Bjorn Nittmo's life occurred on the opening kickoff of this 1997 preseason game. Nittmo, kicking for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, was able to trip up the Atlanta Falcons' Byron Hanspard (24) on the return.



Nittmo went to the turf as other players chased the play. In a hit not seen on video, the Falcons' Calvin Collins (68) tried to hurdle Nittmo but ended up kneeling him in the head.



“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

The questions present darker connotations today.

The Buffalo News discovered through a public-records search Nittmo has adopted the alias “Bjorn Hihro,” a name Mary Lois never had heard.

“I don’t know where he is,” a stunned Mary Lois said. “And I guess I don’t even know what his name is.”

Bjorn’s last known address is on South Peach Lane in Camp Verde, Ariz. But he seems not to live there anymore. He recently claimed to live in a trailer in Ganado, Ariz., on the Navajo Nation.

Bjorn occasionally phones Mary Lois with cryptic information about his health, his whereabouts, his intentions to visit the kids. Bjorn often leaves messages while she’s asleep, then won’t answer her callbacks.

Mary Lois hasn’t asked him yet about “Bjorn Hihro” or the need for an assumed identity. She plans to do so in person whenever she sees him again.

Her fear is a long-distance confrontation will prevent him from calling anymore and cast him further adrift from the children.

So who wants to be Bjorn Nittmo?

Nobody, apparently. Not even him.

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

To know Bjorn Nittmo was to be fascinated by him.

“He was happy-go-lucky, a fun guy, a great guy,” former Chiefs punter Louie Aguiar said. “He was really outgoing.

“I loved talking to him about how he came to this country, didn’t know anything about American football and ends up making it.”

Anthony Dilweg, the Green Bay Packers' starting quarterback for seven games in 1990, lived with the Nittmos in Montreal while they tried to lengthen their careers in the World League.

When he heard Bjorn's name for the first time in eons, one of Dilweg's first memories was hanging out with punter Chris Mohr in the Nittmos' apartment, pitching loonies against the wall for small-stakes jollies.

"I loved Bjorn," Dilweg said. "He was a salt-of-the-earth guy. He was quirky. I was always intrigued.

"I had the most fun in Montreal and the World League. I felt a pretty strong alignment of guys, fighting hard to get back in the NFL. Nobody was making the big bucks.

"I just remember great stories of guys loving the sport, trying to get noticed again and a strong sense of camaraderie because you're all striving for the same goal. There was a brotherhood of chasing something greater."

Bills General Manager Bill Polian signed Nittmo and Mohr on the same day in 1991 to battle Norwood and Rick Tuten. Mohr made it; Nittmo did not. Mohr hadn't held for a left-footed kicker before or since.

"Bjorn had a neat personality, easy to get along with," Mohr said. "He always had a smile on his face."

Nittmo's old mates were disturbed to hear how deeply his life has plummeted. They asked for his phone number. They wanted to offer support somehow.

"He was light-hearted, just a good person," said Ralph Cindrich, his former agent. "You had to like him immediately. He was a solid guy, nothing at all but normal relationships that I was aware of."

Cindrich represented more Bills from the 1980s and 1990s than he could remember. He rattled off offensive linemen Kent Hull, Will Wolford and Mitch Frerotte, defensive tackle Jeff Wright, linebacker Shane Conlan, cornerback Nate Odomes ...

“There were no concerns with Bjorn,” Cindrich said, “unlike with Mitch Frerotte, who took steroids and crap and was a whackjob that died young.

“Bjorn didn’t have any of those problems aside from finding a job he could make it with. He didn’t have any red flags with family problems or drugs.”

Aguiar hasn’t spoken to Nittmo for two decades but said he has thought about him often. The last time they chatted, Nittmo had an enviable life off the field: a wife, children, a suburban South Florida home and profitable construction work on the side.

“He needs to get help,” Aguiar said. “You hear about this happening to your former teammates too often.

“We’re all family, all teammates. This hits home.”

[THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY](#)



How research for a feature on Scott Norwood led Tim Graham to one, brief conversation with Bjorn Nittmo ... and then to many unanswered questions.

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

When Mary Lois Nittmo and her children moved from Arizona to Texas in 2008, they hadn't seen Bjorn for months. While divorced by then, he supposedly was going to join them so he could stay close to the kids.

They wouldn't see Bjorn for another three years.

Winnsboro is where her grandmother grew up, and with some assistance Mary Lois purchased a comfortable ranch home on 22 acres, where oldest daughter Katarina gathered animals the way other kids collect seashells or comic books.

Katarina, now 22, keeps nine horses on the property and this spring had a pregnant mare stabled nearby. The house and land are patrolled by four dogs and two cats. At the sight of Katarina's pickup truck coming up the driveway after a shift as a CVS manager, Binky the donkey brayed.

"It's awesome to have my horses," Katarina said. "I can talk to them. I can get mad at them. But they're always there.

"I can communicate with them without having to speak to them. I can work with an animal and actually grow with him."

Katarina remembers her father more than his three youngest children. He was Katarina's soccer coach and helped her in gymnastics. She was 11 when he left.

Katarina became a state champion power lifter and competes in rodeo barrel races. She and her fiancé want to buy a plot large enough to breed and sell horses.

These Nittmos live quietly except when Bjorn suddenly materializes, a visitant out of a fog bank.

"It's irritating," Katarina said. "You finally get to where you don't have to think about him not being there, and then he's back in your mind again."

The Nittmo name evoked nothing unusual around Winnsboro for a few years. Then one of Madeleine's classmates came upon the Letterman videos on YouTube, and word spread among students and teachers.

"So then our secret was out," said Mary Lois, a teaching assistant at Winnsboro Elementary.

Madeleine was appalled at the reaction. There was no avoiding the connection. Mary Lois explained because of the way Swedes can individualize their surnames, no other Nittmos exist in the world. And Madeleine happens to resemble her father mightily.

In the high school football hotbed of Texas, the Nittmos are heretics.

They detest football.

“A lot of people don’t like my opinion,” said Mary Lois, whose daughters have performed in the marching band, as cheerleaders and on the drill team.

“I go, but I don’t watch the games. We don’t watch at the house. We don’t watch the Super Bowl.”

Four years ago, a \$60 million, 18,000-seat high school stadium opened in Allen, Texas, about 90 miles from Winnsboro. On the drive from Dallas to Winnsboro along Interstate 30, you’ll pass an 8,800-seat stadium in Rockwall and a 6,500-seat stadium in Greenville.

Winnsboro’s stadium seats 2,000 fans. The high school’s enrollment is under 400 students.

Bjorn Nittmo’s only son, 6 months old when his father disappeared, begged Mary Lois for years to let him play football.

“Karsten would say, ‘But I’ll do a safe position! I’ll be a kicker!’ “ Mary Lois said, one eyebrow raised. “Well, what was Bjorn? On the football field there is no safe position.

“He will now tell you he does not want to play football because he does not want to suffer a concussion and go crazy.”

Madeleine groaned at how the boys “freaked out” over the NFL connection, how the school’s kicker angled for personal tips, how one teacher asked if he could have the sweater Bjorn wore for the first “Late Night” appearance. The video was played in class against her wishes.

“It made me angry how people idolized him,” said Madeleine, a 20-year-old English major. “It’s frustrating. I was very vocal about how much I did not like him.

“I hate him with the burning passion of a thousand suns, but they didn’t care. They just cared he played in the NFL.”

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

Mary Lois at first was too embarrassed to tell the story about how she and Bjorn met. Midst hearty laughter, Madeleine nudged her mother to go ahead and share.

Mary Lois Garner, the daughter of Appalachian State Athletics Director Jim Garner, was a high school senior in 1986, when she opened up a game program and browsed as though it were a J.Crew catalog.

“I pointed at his picture and said, ‘Daddy, I want him,’ “ Mary Lois said, her giggle filling the house. “He looked cute, and he was from Europe.

“And Daddy said, ‘No.’ We weren’t allowed to date any of his athletes. But it was my Daddy’s secretary who got us together. She said Bjorn liked me and told Bjorn I liked him.”

Nittmo, a college sophomore, came to the United States four years earlier as an exchange student. The coach at Enterprise High in Alabama introduced Nittmo to kicking field goals. The first American football game Nittmo witnessed was the first game in which he played.

Nittmo loved America and football so much he returned to Enterprise for a second year and then enrolled at Division I-AA Appalachian State in Boone, N.C. To hone his kicking skills, he took up karate and ballet.

He lettered every year, kicked a school-record 55 field goals, twice scored 15 points in a game and was voted All-America in 1988. Appalachian State, now a Division I-A program, named Nittmo to its 75th anniversary team.

Jim Garner softened his no-athletes policy once he got to know Bjorn, an enchanting young man according to anyone who spent time around him.

“My parents accepted Bjorn and loved him very much,” Mary Lois said. “It was Daddy who asked Bjorn what his intentions were after three months of dating.

“After he proposed we went home and told my parents. Daddy got out the football schedule and said, ‘We got a game here and a game here, and if we make it to the playoffs ... And we need to get it done before Bjorn goes off to the NFL.’ “

They wed New Year’s Eve, 1988, in Boone. For their first dance as husband and wife, the band for some reason played “Desperado,” a mournful ballad about a loner unfulfilled by what he holds and chasing what he can’t have.

DESPERADO, WHY DON’T YOU COME TO YOUR SENSES?

COME DOWN FROM YOUR FENCES; OPEN THE GATE

IT MAY BE RAININ’, BUT THERE’S A RAINBOW ABOVE YOU

YOU BETTER LET SOMEBODY LOVE YOU BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE

Two days ahead of the Nittmos’ first anniversary, the couple sat giddily in the back of a limousine on the way to Manhattan for "Late Night."

Bjorn was kicking for the Giants, a playoff-bound team starring Phil Simms and Lawrence Taylor and coached by Bill Parcells. The Giants signed him to their practice squad out of training camp and promoted him when Raul Allegre strained a leg muscle.

Nordstjernan, a Manhattan-based Swedish newspaper, compared Nittmo’s NFL emergence to Ingemar Johansson’s knockout of Floyd Patterson and Bjorn Borg’s ascension to tennis greatness.

Letterman introduced Bjorn to an audience of about 3.1 million viewers. Bjorn tried to keep up with Letterman’s banter and, while Paul Shaffer’s band played "Gotta be a Football Hero," kicked out of Letterman’s hold.



Bjorn Nittmo was a New York Giants rookie when he became a recurring character on NBC's "Late Night with David Letterman."

Neither desperation nor a nomadic lifestyle seemed to be in the Nittmos' future.

"It was strange, but quite rewarding," Cindrich said. "All of a sudden, he was mentioned on national TV. The way Letterman would always say it: 'NITT-mo! ... NITT-mo! ... NITT-mo!'"

“I thought that would help him gain another opportunity, help teams to remember his name more.

“It’s hard with kickers sometimes, and he wasn’t quite cutting it.”

The injury-plagued Allegre recovered in time for the playoffs. Parcels called the personnel decision one of the most difficult of his career up to that point, but opted for Allegre’s experience. The rookie hadn’t kicked in a big game yet.

Nittmo didn’t kick in a real NFL game again.

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

As his football career unfolded, the name meant less and less.

The Chiefs signed him in April 1990, but he couldn’t unseat Nick Lowery. Nittmo worked out for the Philadelphia Eagles and, when Allegre got hurt again, tried out for the Giants. Matt Bahr, an experienced, bad-weather kicker, was better and went on to win the Super Bowl when Norwood’s kick drifted astray.

Seven months later, Nittmo failed to unseat Norwood in Buffalo. That November, the Houston Oilers cut Ian Howfield and invited Nittmo to a group audition. Al Del Greco won the job.

Nittmo kicked for Montreal again in 1992, lost out to Del Greco again in Houston and eventually found work in 1993 with the Cleveland Thunderbolts of the Arena Football League.

“Kickers are like old soldiers. They never die,” Cindrich said. “They keep coming back and coming back. He’d get released and kept wanting to give it a shot. He just wanted to play.”

Nittmo spent 1994 and 1995 with the Shreveport Pirates of the Canadian Football League. His father-in-law, following three years as Oklahoma State's athletics director, was Shreveport's executive vice president of administration.

"After so many teams," Cindrach said, "I told him, 'Bjorn, it's time to get on with things. You've got to make a living.' "

There wasn't any more use for an agent. Nittmo had circulated enough. GMs knew where to find him if they wanted to summon him for a tryout.

"At some point you have to fish or cut bait," Cindrach said. "With the amount of time you have to devote to placing a guy every year or multiple times a year, if you only had guys like him, you'd go broke."

Mary Lois, meanwhile, stayed home – wherever that was, Lockport for a year – and raised the children.

The Nittmos constantly were in flux. Mary Lois didn't unpack their wedding albums and framed photos until she moved to Winnsboro; they'd been divorced two years.

"I was willing to follow him across the country so he could pursue his dream," Mary Lois said. "I didn't get to finish school. We moved a lot, so I never made a lot of close friends. I was always away from family.

"And every time he got cut, that's hard to watch him go through it and wondering 'What are we going to do now?' "

Their dedication to Bjorn's kicking career paid off at the end of Kansas City's 1996 training camp.

The Chiefs were Sports Illustrated's pick to win the Super Bowl. They went 13-3 the prior season, but Lin Elliott missed all three of his field-goal attempts in a 10-7 playoff loss. Now the gig was Nittmo's.

"I still remember the smile on his face that he made it," said Aguiar, who introduced Nittmo and the rest of the Chiefs' special teamers at a kickoff luncheon.

By the time Nittmo departed the banquet room, the Chiefs traded a fifth-round draft choice to the Miami Dolphins for Pete Stoyanovich. The Chiefs released Nittmo.

“I thought for sure he was going to be the guy for us,” Aguiar said. “All the guys on the team liked him. It was hard.

“As a specialist, there’s only 32 jobs out there. There aren’t backups. When you think you’ve got the job and the next thing you know you get released, it’s heartbreaking.”

Mary Lois, pregnant with Madeleine, had moved with 2-year-old Katarina to Kansas City at the team’s request. To avoid disrupting Bjorn’s opportunity, Mary Lois’ labor was induced the Thursday between Kansas City’s second and third preseason games. Madeleine was 6 days old when the Chiefs cut her father.

“The Chiefs situation was terrible,” Mary Lois said. “When Bjorn came home it was the most devastated I’ve ever seen him.”

One year later, Nittmo homed in on the Buccaneers’ roster. But a stampeding behemoth’s knee found Nittmo’s head first.

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

Even in their own locker rooms, kickers are stigmatized. Teammates who block, tackle, absorb hits and score touchdowns often don’t consider kickers real football players.

Among the Pro Football Hall of Fame’s 303 inductees, only one was a full-time kicker and one was a full-time punter.

Some monitoring head-trauma lawsuits against the NFL have scoffed at filings from kickers and punters.

At a November federal appeals hearing to weigh whether an NFL settlement should include players who may yet show symptoms of the disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), Judge Thomas M. Hardiman mused, "So now the settlement is going to be watered down by every field-goal kicker who is depressed."

In a 2013 column for NFL.com, analyst and former defensive end Akbar Gbaja-Biamila called kickers and punters "pretenders in the lawsuits" alongside practice-squad players and others who never got into a regular-season game.

Gbaja-Biamila wrote this type of player "feels entitled because he played in the NFL, thinks the league owes him, and sees this as an opportunity to get paid."

Aguiar is among the thousands of former players suing the NFL.

"We are humans," said Aguiar, who punted in 156 NFL games. "We get concussions."

One of the Pro Bowl's most heralded highlights was Washington safety Sean Taylor detonating Buffalo punter Brian Moorman on a sweep fake.

Former linebacker Mel Owens, now a worker's compensation attorney in California, represents many retired kickers and punters. Owens has spoken about "punter hunters" who target specific prey.

"Punters and kickers get cheap shots all the time," Aguiar said, "but people don't see them because after we kick the ball we're off the TV screen."

Under a YouTube video of Baylor kicker Chris Callahan getting slobberknocked by Michigan State cornerback Tony Lippett in the 2015 Cotton Bowl, the (unedited) comments include:

"Blindside layouts are the sweetest hits in football in my opinion....PICK UP YO TEETH BOY!!!! LOL"

"I could watch that guy get hit all day long."

"He's a kicker and sometimes they forget. He tried involving himself in a portion of the game where he didn't belong. Because of this he payed for his actions."

"Whew big hit on fragile fella, he got mannequined lol"

"and that's why he's a punk ass kicker."

"On game day," Aguiar said, "if there has to be a tackle made, guys like Bjorn and me would go out there and make the tackle. I know many kickers – I won't name names – who wouldn't do that."

"You're the 11th man on the field. You can't just kick balls and run off the field."

Some kickers overcompensate to be considered one of The Boys. Nittmo spoke about how much he relished contact. He was the only Giants kicker to make a tackle in 1989.

"Most people think kickers are wimps," Nittmo said in a 1989 New York Times column. "But there's nothing more I'd love to do than smack somebody in the head."

Nittmo faced the Eagles one week after the infamous Bounty Bowl, when Cowboys coach Jimmy Johnson accused Eagles coach Buddy Ryan of offering his players bonuses to hurt quarterback Troy Aikman and kicker Luis Zendejas.

Nittmo, listed at 5 foot 11 and 185 pounds, struck a defiant tone in the days leading up to the Eagles game. Parcels suggested Nittmo cool his jets.

"Nittmo?" Parcels asked reporters. "The Swedish kicker I got? How many guys are there in the league, 1,580? Well, 1,575 will kick his ass."

"There may be five guys he has a 50-50 chance against. And there's probably a couple of equipment managers that can take him, too."

A joke at the kicker's expense is as much in football's DNA as a toss sweep, gambling and John Facenda's voice.

The Nittmos don't find a laid-out kicker too funny.

Mary Lois said Bjorn complained about postgame headaches, but beyond the Buccaneers concussion he would uncharacteristically lose his temper, couldn't handle his money anymore and would black out while driving.

"He finally broke down and told me he would get in his car to go to work – he would call it 'losing time – and he would wake up a few hours later somewhere else," Mary Lois said. "We lived near Fort Lauderdale, but he would be driving around Miami, 30 miles away. He never made it to work."

Mary Lois described his vacant eyes. She would call her mother in tears to tell her Bjorn wasn't the man she married anymore.

"He doesn't sleep at night because he's got ringing in his ears, a constant noise, and he can't shut it off," Mary Lois said. "I ask him what it feels like, and he says, 'It's a hurricane all the time.'"



Illustration by Dan Zakroczemski

Nittmo squeezed more glory than most would out of a six-game NFL career.

The cost was steep.

“I was in class,” Madeleine seethed through a clenched jaw, “and someone said he doesn’t feel bad for the players who suffer because they’re getting paid so much money, so why should he worry about them if they chose to do it and are getting paid?”

Bjorn didn’t get rich kicking footballs. Mary Lois said he made more money as a construction worker once his career was over.

He played on the margins, continually auditioning but not snagging the paycheck. The Canadian and Arena Leagues paid so little he needed to work odd jobs over the offseason to pay the family’s bills.

Nittmo slogged through four Arena Football League seasons in Tampa Bay, Buffalo, Arizona and Carolina. By 2001, the knee ligaments in his plant leg were frayed. Mary Lois, watching over three children then, couldn’t endure the chase anymore.

“He had been traded from Arizona to Carolina,” she said, “and I told him, ‘This is it. Time to get a real job. Time to be normal people.’”

“He got very angry with me and put his fist through the door. That was the first time he got angry to the point where he did damage to something. He said football was all he knew, took his bag and left to Carolina.”

Bjorn played one more season and joined a crew building schools on Native American reservations in Arizona. He grew more distant from his family despite having a fourth child with Mary Lois.

They lived in the Phoenix area, and in 2005 Bjorn stopped coming home from a construction project three hours away in Flagstaff. That summer, Mary Lois’ father underwent surgery on a brain tumor and suffered a stroke.

Bjorn never had been a big drinker, but his oldest daughters noticed he would get sloppy drunk.

Madeleine recalled a visit to an aunt's house while her grandfather was in the hospital. Bjorn stayed back to watch the kids. He left Madeleine and Katarina outside in a lightning storm. He drank too much, locked all the doors and forgot his daughters had been swimming in the pool.

Without telling Mary Lois, he filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy in January 2005. He claimed assets of \$3,500 against debts of \$119,352 to 24 creditors, including courts in Utah, Louisiana and New York.

Nittmo, at 39 years old and four seasons removed from the game, still yearned for football.

Former Pirates President Lonie Glieberman arranged a tryout with his new CFL club, the Ottawa Renegades. Nittmo didn't bother to inform his wife about that either. He was cut in June and gave up the ghost.

Mary Lois filed for divorce in August. She was a stay-at-home mother who didn't finish college because she propped up Bjorn's career ambitions. Mary Lois went Chapter 7 in October, listing \$10,749 in assets and \$41,346 in debt. Her occupation was "unemployed."

The Nittmos' divorce was finalized in January 2006. The kids were 12, 10, 5 and 1. Mary Lois would move three times as a single mom.

"I have survivor's guilt," Mary Lois said. "I survived it, but Bjorn didn't.

"I feel maybe I should have done more to help him. But what do you do? There was no information, no guidance."

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

The zenith came quickly for Bjorn Nittmo. His appearance on “Late Night with David Letterman” – as the kicker for an august NFL franchise – marked the highlight of his career.

Tragically poetic, those involved hardly remember it.

Nittmo said Giants tight end Howard Cross in 1989 accosted the bar-hopping imposter who inspired the catchphrase. Cross, reached by The News in June, insisted he wasn’t aware of the tale and never played with Nittmo, although Nittmo kicked the extra point on Cross’ lone touchdown in 1989.

Chris Elliott and Gerard Mulligan, “Late Night” writers at the time, had no recollections of the Nittmo bits when contacted by The Buffalo News. Neither did producers Jude Brennan and Barbara Gaines nor Letterman’s publicist, Tom Keaney.

Bill Scheft, who joined Letterman’s writing staff in 1991, did remember Letterman enjoyed tossing a Nittmo-signed football during rehearsals.

Eric Stangel as a young “Late Night” fan remembered the Nittmo gags. Nittmo’s autographed, purple Montreal jersey hung in Stangel’s office when he and his brother, Justin Stangel, were Letterman’s head writers from 1998 to 2013.

But any insight on why Nittmo became a thing was nil.

“I think funny people like Dickens, Groucho or W.C. Fields have always enjoyed odd names,” Mulligan said, “whether they were created, as with [popular Letterman character] Larry ‘Bud’ Melman, or they were found, as with Bjorn Nittmo.

“Why? I don’t know. Comedy can be very mysterious, but as with so many things, God is in the details. The right reference will make or break a joke.”

Letterman, for example, had a fetish for U.N. chief Boutros Boutros-Ghali. And let’s not forget Regis and Oprah. Letterman frequently ended his Top Ten lists on punchy lines that included “ass” or “pants” because the words simply got laughs.

Some evidently are more memorable than others.

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? BJORN NITTMO?”

Bjorn Nittmo knew this story was being written about him and his family. He quickly replied to The Buffalo News' voicemail in February, when the topic was competing with Norwood in 1991. He talked about the old days and said he was installing home-entertainment systems in the Flagstaff area.

But Bjorn dodged the recent calls, several of them, despite Mary Lois' pleas for him to participate in the story. She explained he has a history of freezing people out once they learn about his problems and that he's the same as many professional athletes: too ashamed and manly to admit he needs a boost.

When he turned up last April in Winnsboro and looked like a vagrant, he signed over power of attorney to Mary Lois and Katarina for his healthcare, but he made tracks before they could get the documents notarized.

Two months later, Mary Lois provided unforeseen updates. Bjorn astonishingly called to say: 1) He had been to a neurologist; 2) Scans showed brain trauma; and 3) He was scheduled to see a neurosurgeon.

She said Bjorn informed her he would come to Winnsboro the weekend of June 24 to discuss the next steps with the whole family.

Bjorn did not show up. He has not called again.

“It confuses me,” Mary Lois said. “It's just what we've been through over the years. He knows we want him to get help. I hope that he does.

“But I know he's never going to get better. I don't think he'll ever get better.”

Katarina struck a more hopeful tone, adding “I think he's still in there somewhere.”

Mary Lois continues to raise their four children. She never remarried. Katarina said her mom never has had a serious boyfriend. Since their grandfather died in 2007, there hasn't been a significant male influence.

Mary Lois has been doing it all, and she apparently is doing well. All four kids are overachievers in school. Katarina and Madeleine graduated high school with honors. Madeleine won a scholarship with an essay about her mother's solitary devotion.

"I want to become successful," Madeleine wrote in the essay, "so that my mother will no longer have to take care of me. It can be my time to take care of her."

The week Mary Lois finally saw the video of Bjorn's 1997 concussion and learned he has an alias, Madeleine was on the front page of the Winnsboro News as the lead in a local "Bonnie and Clyde" production.

Annika, 15, is a dynamo. She's into powerlifting, cheerleading, gymnastics, track and the marching band.

Karsten, who'll be 12 this month, has been a cynic since kindergarten. Mary Lois told the story of the day Karsten turned 5.



The last time Bjorn Nittmo visited his family – in late April, the first time in seven months – he appeared homeless. As seen in this photo taken by his daughter Madeline, his beard was scraggly and overgrown, his clothes were baggy, his Arizona Cardinals ballcap ratty.

“He said, ‘Would you call Bjorn and tell him I’m 5 now?’ I said, ‘I can’t. I don’t have his phone number. I’m sorry,’ “ Mary Lois recalled. Madeleine nodded her head as an eyewitness. “Karsten got in my lap and *sobbed* heavily.

“He cried himself out, got calm and looked at me and said, ‘You do know he’s just running from his own shadow.’ Ever since, he’s acted as though that’s just the way it is.”

Mary Lois emitted a full-lunged sigh and shook her head.

“Bjorn would have gotten such a kick out of what the kids have done,” she said. “They’ve been through hell, but they’ve ... You know, they’ve done good. I’m proud of the people they’ve become.”

Mary Lois admitted she has tried to track down Bjorn for the child support he doesn’t pay, but deadbeat dads must be difficult to trace out in the desert.

The summer between Madeleine’s junior and senior years of high school, she was diagnosed with pseudotumor cerebri, a disorder that causes chronic headaches. She has undergone multiple spinal taps. Bjorn doesn’t help pay his kids’ medical expenses either.

“I feel sorry for him,” Madeleine said. “I realize he didn’t do anything to us out of malice.

“Maybe we could have had a normal childhood, but I don’t resent him for chasing his dream.”

Madeleine paused to keep the tears back, but they welled anyway.

“I don’t blame him,” she blurted. “I blame the NFL for not giving him the care he deserved.”

Even when Bjorn's not around, thoughts continue to seep into his estranged family's lives.

Mary Lois recently took Annika and Karsten to the movies and heard Bjorn's favorite song, Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." The film was "Finding Dory," about a fish with recurrent short-term memory loss trying to find her way back home.

The best-case scenario for Bjorn, his ex-wife said, was for him to maximize the rest of his life with neurological and psychological care.

The desperado needs to come to his senses.

"Before it's too late, I'd like for the kids to have a good memory of him," Mary Lois said. "If it's true what they say about CTE, he might not have a lot of good years left.

"I just remember how much he loved these kids. Although he's done horrible things and I'm mad at him, I don't think he set out to destroy our family. I don't want him to suffer.

"But I've already grieved his death."