

Former NFL star Aaron Hernandez found dead in his prison cell

By Alan Gilman
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On Wednesday April 19, less than a week after being found not guilty in a Boston, Massachusetts double homicide trial, former New England Patriots star Aaron Hernandez, who was serving time on another murder conviction, was found dead in his prison cell at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center in Lancaster, Massachusetts.

According to prison authorities Hernandez hanged himself by using a bed sheet that he attached to a cell window. Officials further claimed Hernandez had tried to block his cell door from the inside by jamming the door with various items.

Hernandez was housed in a single cell with the general prison population and had not been considered a suicide risk. No suicide note was found. Hernandez's lawyer Jose Baez disputed that Hernandez's death was a suicide and demanded a full investigation.

The 27-year-old Hernandez was born and raised in Bristol, Connecticut, which during his youth was a depressed former factory and manufacturing town. In the last decade it has been somewhat revived, mainly because its largest employer, ESPN, has become the world's largest sports broadcasting cable channel with more than 3,500 employees.

During his childhood Hernandez's family twice was forced to declare bankruptcy. His father died when he was 16, and according to his mother, his father's death greatly affected him, leading him to rebel and defy authority.

As a senior in high school, Hernandez was named Connecticut's Gatorade Football Player of the Year and received a football scholarship to the University of Florida. He became a star tight end, a position requiring an unusual combination of athletic skill, size and physical toughness. He was an important part of Florida's national championship team his junior season, when he was also awarded the John Mackey Award given annually to the nation's best tight end.

While at Florida Hernandez was investigated for an assault on a restaurant employee, as well another allegation that he was involved in a shooting incident. No charges, however, were filed against him, and the assault charge was settled out of court. Also while at Florida he failed multiple drug tests.

After his junior year, Hernandez decided to forgo his senior season and enter the 2010 National Football League (NFL) draft. Because of his off-the-field problems, his draft stock dropped considerably and he was not selected until the fourth round (113th overall) by the New England Patriots. He signed a four-year contract worth potentially in excess of two million dollars.

Hernandez was highly successful his first two seasons with the Patriots and before the 2012 season he was given a five-year \$40 million contract extension that included a \$12.5 million signing bonus.

His legal problems began to surface after the 2012 season. On June 13, 2013, Alexander S. Bradley, described as a friend of Hernandez, filed a lawsuit against him in a Florida federal court. Bradley claimed that on February 13, 2013, Hernandez had shot him while the two were riding in a car on Interstate 95 in Palm Beach County, following an altercation at a Miami strip club.

On June 26, 2013, Hernandez was arrested for the murder of Odin Lloyd, a man who had been his friend and who had been shot to death nine days earlier.

The Patriots immediately released Hernandez, thereby terminating the portion of his contract that was not guaranteed, totaling \$19.3 million. They also voided all remaining guarantees including \$3.25 million of his signing bonus that was due in 2014 and additionally took steps to recoup the signing bonus that they had already paid him.

On April 15, 2015, Hernandez was found guilty of Odin Lloyd's murder and was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Prior to this trial, on May 15, 2014 Hernandez was indicted for a double homicide that occurred in Boston in July 2012. On April 14, 2017, five days before his death, Hernandez was found not guilty of these two homicides.

Questions remain about whether Hernandez's death was a suicide and if it was, what motivated it, considering he had just been found not guilty of a double homicide and his prior murder conviction was still being appealed.

There is little doubt that the arc of Hernandez's career, from initial success to violent death to suicide, suggests a severely disturbed and damaged personality, with the likelihood that playing football in college and the NFL was a major contributor.

The NFL admitted in 2014 in a federal lawsuit that because of the repeated head trauma many players had sustained, it expects nearly a third of retired players to develop long-term cognitive problems and that these conditions are likely to emerge at "notably younger ages" than in the general population.

An autopsy involving an examination of Hernandez's brain could determine if he was suffering from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). Many former NFL players who exhibited erratic behavior and who subsequently committed suicide were found to have suffered from CTE.

Hernandez's troubled life also illustrates that fame and wealth do not overcome the problems that many victims of social dysfunction suffer from, but may simply serve to temporarily obscure and mask the effects of these social ills.

"A lot of guys come into the NFL haunted by the past," said Tully Banta-Cain, Hernandez's Patriots teammate in 2010. "Some guys overcome it and some continue to be haunted throughout their careers if they're not able to disassociate themselves from certain people or certain atmospheres. Aaron may have fallen victim to that."

On the same day as his death—and no connection has been established for the coincidence—Hernandez's former teammates were honored at the White House by President Donald Trump for winning the Super Bowl earlier this year.

There has been more than usual controversy over the customary White House visit for sports champions because of Trump's actions during the campaign and after taking office. Immediately following their Super Bowl victory on February 5, 2017, even before a formal invitation had been sent, several Patriots players indicated they would not go to the White House because of their

opposition to Trump.

These players included running back LeGarrette Blount, defensive end Chris Long, defensive tackle Alan Branch, linebacker Dont'a Hightower, tight end Martellus Bennett and safety Devin McCourty.

McCourty, a team captain, told *Time* magazine: "Basic reason for me is I don't feel accepted in the White House. With the president having so many strong opinions and prejudices, I believe certain people might feel accepted there while others won't."

Bennett told reporters after the Super Bowl: "It is what it is. People know how I feel about it. Just follow me on Twitter." The outspoken Bennett had joked that he might move to outer space after Trump was elected.

Blount said in a radio interview on the Rich Eisen Show, "I just don't feel welcome in that house."

Both Bennett and McCourty last fall raised their fists in protest during the national anthem for one game, following the lead of San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, protesting police shootings of young black men.

Ironically no other NFL team is as closely associated with Trump as the Patriots. Just before the election, Trump claimed that he had the support of star quarterback Tom Brady, coach Bill Belichick, and owner Robert Kraft, a long-time friend and crony. Kraft contributed one million dollars to Trump's inauguration festivities, and has appeared with Trump frequently since he became president.

Tom Brady did not appear citing family reasons. Brady's mother is known to be seriously ill with cancer. Brady's wife, Brazilian model Giselle Bündchen, has been publicly critical of Trump's attacks on immigrants and tweeted her support for the April 29 People's Climate March, called to protest the Trump administration's attacks on science and the environment, only hours before the Patriots appeared at the White House.

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