

Owens Denies Suicide Attempt

Dallas receiver, at center of media furor after he is taken to hospital, says reports he took up to 35 painkillers are 'absurd.' Many questions remain.

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DALLAS — It was obvious almost immediately to legendary football coach Bill Walsh that Terrell Owens' prodigious talent as a wide receiver came with a dark side.

"Anything can happen with him," said Walsh, a team consultant when Owens was drafted by the San Francisco 49ers in 1996. "He can be a generous, friendly, outgoing person, or he can just be sulking, mean and cruel and disrespectful. You just don't know what you're going to get from day to day, like a manic depressive."

The latest twist in the tumultuous saga of Owens, now a Dallas Cowboys star, played out Tuesday night when emergency medical personnel were called to his home here, where they found him groggy and incoherent.

What happened next sparked a media furor that prompted dozens of reporters and nearly two dozen camera crews to descend upon the team's headquarters and ESPN to break into its usual weekday lineup and cover the story on national television for hours straight.

An initial report from police said that he had tried to commit suicide. But Owens said later during a packed news conference that "there was no suicide attempt."

Owens, sidelined with a broken hand that required surgery, called "absurd" reports that he might have swallowed as many as 35 painkillers before emergency personnel arrived about 8 p.m. Tuesday. According to the incident report, Owens was asked whether he was trying to harm himself, and he answered, "Yes."

"At this point, I really wasn't as coherent as they probably thought I was," Owens explained later. "There was a number of people asking me a lot of questions."

And many questions remain. The initial police report said the friend who summoned an ambulance to Owens' home — later identified as his publicist, Kim Etheredge — told emergency workers that Owens told her he was depressed. On Wednesday, she disputed that.

"I don't know where that came from," she said at the news conference. "I did not say that."

All that actually happened might never be known. Late Wednesday, the Dallas Police Department released a redacted incident report that, unlike the first, made no mention of a suicide attempt, claim of depression or prescription medication.

Meanwhile, Owens spent part of the day catching passes from Cowboys quarterbacks Drew Bledsoe and Tony Romo, sending the message he might be ready to play Sunday at Tennessee. The remarks of Cowboys Coach Bill Parcells were less than revealing in his daily media session. He said the incident was "apparently an unfortunate set of circumstances" and declined to comment further.

When pressed on the subject, he grew impatient before cutting short the conference.

"When I find out what is going on, you will know," he said. "Until then, I'm not getting interrogated for no reason."

Controversy is nothing new to Owens. He's the player who accused Steve Mariucci, his coach in San Francisco, of being soft on opponents; questioned the sexuality of his 49ers quarterback, Jeff Garcia; allegedly challenged his Philadelphia quarterback, Donovan McNabb, to a fight in the locker room; and once celebrated scoring a touchdown by pulling a pen from his sock during the game and autographing the ball.

Along the way, he also became one of the NFL's most exciting and interesting playmakers. After a bitter breakup with the Eagles last season, he signed a three-year, \$25-million deal with the rival Cowboys, who figured he could help transform them into an elite team. Before the Cowboys signed him, he was widely loathed in Dallas because he once scored a touchdown for the 49ers at Texas Stadium and trampled the team logo — a star — at midfield in celebration.

When Dallas signed Owens, Cowboys owner Jerry Jones called it "an opportunity for him to basically put it all together and come in here and have a very positive experience."

But Owens' track record follows a predictable pattern. In San Francisco, as a rookie out of Tennessee-Chattanooga, he at first used "sir" and "ma'am" when addressing reporters. Later, those reporters would come to know a player who would be angry and unapproachable in the locker room after a loss, or a game when he felt slighted.

Walsh said the 49ers recommended that Owens seek counseling and arranged for him to see a psychologist. He is not sure whether the player followed through, however.

"He had a lot of help from the 49ers," Walsh said. "But I can't tell you it helped any. We felt like we did our job."

ESPN reported Wednesday that the Eagles too offered psychological assistance.

Whereas Walsh does not believe Owens would try to kill himself, at least one highly qualified expert is not quick to dismiss Tuesday night's incident as anything but a genuine attempt.

"Individuals who have a history of anger outbursts, aggression, are at increased risk for making an impulsive suicide attempt," said Dr. James E. Rosenberg, director of neuropsychiatry for the Sports Concussion Institute at Centinela Freeman Hospital in Los Angeles.

Rosenberg is quick to add he has never analyzed nor even met Owens. But Walsh knows Owens well, and the latest incident doesn't surprise him, either. Nor, he says, will the next one.

"This is going to keep going with him," Walsh said. "Just be ready for it. This kind of thing will keep showing up in one form or another. If it's not this, it's something else."

Farmer reported from Los Angeles; Wharton reported from Dallas.

