

Interview with Tony Mandarich, author of *My Dirty Little Secrets – Steroids, Alcohol and God: The Tony Mandarich Story*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview former pro football player Tony Mandarich, who is here to discuss his new book “My Dirty Little Secrets: Steroids, Alcohol and God, The Tony Mandarich Story.”

Tony Mandarich was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada, the son of Croatian immigrants who instilled in him a grit and determination to accomplish the impossible. Tony grew up with a love for football, and decided early in his life that he would play professionally. After a highly successful and nationally publicized collegiate career at Michigan State University, Tony was drafted number two overall in 1989 by the Green Bay Packers. The hype about being “the best offensive line prospect ever,” along with Tony’s addictions, was more than he could live up to, and his life came crashing down around him. After three more years of alcohol and painkiller abuse, Tony accepted the hand of God, went into treatment and now considers it a privilege to be able to help other addicts and alcoholics when called upon. Tony and his wife, Charlavan, have four children; they own and operate Mandarich Media Group, LLC, in Scottsdale, AZ, a full-service web media business specializing in web site development and optimization, video production, photography and Internet marketing.

Tyler: Welcome, Tony. It’s an honor to speak to you today. I’m excited to discuss the details of your book and your professional football career, but first, I want to ask you, since there has been so much awareness in the media in recent years about steroid abuse by athletes, and many stories of athletes who have fallen to rise again, what made you decide at this time in your life to write this book and why do you think your story stands out compared to the stories of many other athletes whose stories, at least on the surface, would appear to be similar?

Tony: That’s a fair question... if it had been up to me, it would have been released ten years ago, after I retired from Indianapolis, but none of the publishers were interested, so I left it alone. Five years later, in 2004, I tried to write it again and get a publisher interested, but still no interest. Eighteen months ago, my co-author Sharon Shaw Elrod pushed to get the story out there, because she said it could really help people. Again, not many publishers were interested because I wouldn’t tattle and give names; however, when we went to an independent publisher, the book sold in twenty-four hours.

One of the reasons my book stands out is that I do NOT name names; I choose not to capitalize on other people's misfortunes. The second reason—there was so much hype and speculation about my steroid use over the last twenty years, and now it's confirmed 'from the horse's mouth'. Little do people know, however, that steroids were only part of the problem, and this is where readers will be shocked and begin to understand what really happened behind closed doors.

Tyler: Tony, let's go back to your earliest days of playing football. Was it always your dream to be a professional football player?

Tony: At age eleven, it became a very real dream to me, and at that age, I made a decision to do everything that I needed to do to prepare myself to make it to the NFL. I played a lot of playground football when I was young, but I never played organized football until my freshman year in high school.

Tyler: Millions of young boys dream of being great athletes. Why do you think you succeeded where the vast majority do not? Was it natural talent, athletic ability, or a greater desire to succeed than what others had?

Tony: I think it was a little bit of all three, combined, that gave me the best opportunity to succeed. There are people with great athletic ability and poor drive; and there are people with great drive and minimal ability. The combination of all three, and some luck along the way in not ever getting injured, helped me succeed at the level I did.

Tyler: In your years of dreaming of playing professional football, were there naysayers in your life who said you would never be able to do it, and if so, why do you think you succeeded anyway?

Tony: There were absolutely naysayers, especially at the high school level. Maybe it was a mistake, to let people who weren't close to me know my dream of playing in the NFL, since they told me what a long shot it was. On the other hand, however, I used that as motivation to prove them wrong and succeed. I succeeded because I was willing to do things that other people weren't; work out on Friday nights instead of going out partying, stay home on Spring Break so I could train, and only take a week off after the end of the season instead of six weeks like the other players.

Tyler: What would you credit this motivation and hard work too? Did you want to be a football player more than others, or did something else or someone else inspire you?

Tony: My parents' story was a huge inspiration to me; their immigration to Canada to escape Communism in Yugoslavia—sneaking across the border in the dead of night with armed soldiers on the lookout, coming to a country where they didn't speak the language with only the clothes on their back—their story makes my struggle pale in comparison. I got my drive and determination from them; they showed me through example that hard work does pay off, that if you want something badly enough, you can make it happen.

Tyler: What did it feel like to be picked for the NFL draft in 1989? Can you tell us about that moment of success?

Tony: It was the culmination of the biggest goal I had had in my whole life, to be drafted into the NFL, so there was a lot of satisfaction and a lot of relief that I had finally accomplished my goal;

little did I know what was waiting in front of me. There wasn't really any specific moment of success, though, since in the last six months before the draft there was a lot of speculation that I would be among the top five picks. As the draft drew closer, that became concrete, so it wasn't really a surprise. Two weeks prior to the draft, the Packers let me know they were going to take me, so Draft Day itself was a little anti-climactic.

Tyler: When did alcohol and steroids first enter the scene for you, and how did you start down that road?

Tony: Steroids started my last few months of high school, but I never started drinking alcoholically until I left Michigan State. My brother introduced steroids to me, although by no means did he force me to do anything; he just mentioned them as an option to get stronger. I was the one who made the decision to do it. Alcohol started at parties my senior year of high school, and continued that way through college, but it never made my life unmanageable until I left college.

Tyler: Tony, can you tell us about how athletes get access to steroids, and do you think the situation with steroid use has gotten better or worse since you were first in professional football?

Tony: Athletes can get steroids in a lot of ways: from people at their local gym, from a doctor, or from the Internet. Whether it's gotten better or worse is tough to say, because I now only have an outsider's perspective and an outsider's information. But with all the nonsense in pro baseball lately, I don't think it's gotten better! Also, I think a lot of players are switching to human growth hormone (HGH).

Tyler: What is the difference between steroids and growth hormone?

Tony: One is a hormone and one isn't, for starters! Steroids are a lot cheaper and easier to get, while growth hormone is expensive and more difficult to purchase. Steroids will make you stronger; growth hormone helps you recover more quickly. HGH improves overall well-being, and it's difficult to say that about steroids. And HGH is not a steroid, contrary to what many people believe.

Tyler: Tony, what drives athletes to use steroids? Obviously they want to perform better, but they must realize the risks they are facing. Do they feel fame is more important than health or longevity?

Tony: Yes, they do feel it's more important—a lot of it is competition, and a lot of it is the pressure to perform, and a lot is millions of dollars at stake if you lose your job. That little bit of extra strength may help athletes keep their jobs. I'm not sure 'fame' is the right word; it's more like competition to be the best and earn a good living. There are a lot of risks, and of course the athletes know about them, but a lot of the time athletes think they are bulletproof.

Tyler: Included in your book title is God. Will you tell us where God fits into the picture?

Tony: Well, without God in my life, there is no picture. All the things that I've accomplished since I got sober in 1995 have been a direct result of not drinking, not drugging, AA, the people in AA, and God. By no means am I a bible-thumper, nor do I tell people what to believe and how to believe. Organized religion doesn't work for me, but it does work for millions of people, and I don't knock it. In my situation, I had to almost die to find the God of my understanding.

Tyler: Did you have a relationship with God as a child, or when did He come into your life? What made you turn to him during your troubles?

Tony: Yes, I did have a relationship with Him as a child, being born and raised Catholic. He never left my life; I had turned my back on Him. He was always there; all I needed to do was be willing to ask for help, and when I did, He was a gentleman and gave it to me. I turned to Him because I was sick and tired of being sick and tired; I finally realized I couldn't do it on my own, and that I needed His help. So I asked.

Tyler: Tony, would you say there was a moment when you knew you had hit “rock-bottom” and that made you realize you had to turn your life around?

Tony: Yes, I had hit many bottoms, but one of the biggest ones was when there was a plate-throwing incident in my house (described in the book), and my three-year-old daughter was there and was terrified, full of fear—that's when I realized that I was at the bottom and something had to change.

Tyler: "Did substance abuse contribute to the end of your first marriage, if so how?"

Tony: Yes it did, because once we got sober we realized we were two different people, and not the people that we were when we were in the midst of our disease together.

Tyler: So would you say your family had a major impact on your ability to make a change?

Tony: No, I had to change because I wanted to change and needed to change; nobody was going to change me, I had to be willing to change myself. I realized that I wasn't a good father to my daughter, and that helped me see that I needed to change something—but that willingness is something internal, and unless it comes from your own heart, the changes you make won't be permanent.

Tyler: Will you tell us about your second NFL career and how it was different from the first?

Tony: The biggest difference was I was sober; I was never sober a day in Green Bay, and I was sober every day in Indianapolis – that was THE difference.

Tyler: Tony, our reviewer at Reader Views commented upon how honest you are in telling your story. As you were writing the book, were you tempted to leave things out or not tell the full truth because you were afraid it would make you look bad? What made you decide to be so completely honest?

Tony: I wasn't even going to attempt to write the book unless I told everything about myself. I felt that readers have the right to know about everything that happened with me, and the mistakes I made, and the things I did right. I wasn't concerned about looking bad; I was concerned about telling an accurate story so I could help other people not make the same mistakes. Readers who may be in the same desperate situation deserve to know the whole truth, so they can see their way out of it in the same way I did. Holding things back may make them think they are worse off than I was; I need to be honest to inspire hope.

Tyler: Besides writing this book to raise awareness, what other work have you done to help addicts?

Tony: Going to Twelve step meetings helps both myself and the other people in AA. I've gone to hospitals, institutions, prisons, jails, high schools, colleges, corporations, and special interest groups to share my story. Sharing my story helps people get a better understanding of how cunning, baffling, and powerful alcoholism and drug addiction can be.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Tony. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information may be found there about "My Dirty Little Secrets: Steroids, Alcohol, and God"?

Tony: At my website, www.TonyMandarich.com, you can find part one and part two of the Inside the NFL interview conducted by Armen Keteyian. You can also pre-order the book there, which gets you a personally autographed copy. There is an electronic press kit up there for media to access images, Q&A's, and press releases. There is a place to ask me questions, and some of my favorite inspirational stories are in my Recommended Reading List. Thanks, Tyler!

Tyler: Thank you, Tony, for a great interview, and for your willingness to share your story to help others.

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