

Football star: Schizophrenia 'cost me everything'

NEW YORK (AP) — Lionel Aldridge, a 6-foot-4, 225-pound former Green Bay Packer, was afraid to go home. He believed his wife was a witch.

Once part of NBC's television sportscasting team, Aldridge was driven from job to job in city after city by imaginary voices. He now sorts mail on the 3:30 p.m. to midnight shift in Milwaukee.

Schizophrenia cost him a career, a marriage and "just about every person I had in my life at that time."

"I figure," he said recently, "it cost

me everything."

Such are the stakes in schizophrenia.

That's why research advances, such as recent evidence that a single gene may cause some cases, are more than just nifty science.

They are another step in understanding a devastating disease that strikes perhaps one in every 100 people at some point in their lives.

Schizophrenia usually begins with an apparent personality change that may include social withdrawal, diffi-

culty in communicating and lethargy.

Later, in its more active phase, it can make victims see hallucinations and hear voices.

They may feel controlled by invisible agents or believe their thoughts are being broadcast to others. They may adopt new identities.

Nobody knows what causes the disease. Scientists have long suspected an inherited influence, and the new study provided biological evidence for a gene in a few families. But that gene is not a factor in other

families, supporting a longstanding suspicion of multiple factors, maybe environmental and genetic.

The voices and hallucinations are gone now for Aldridge, 47, thanks to daily medication that keeps his illness at bay.

"I'm enjoying relatively good health now," he said, but nothing is guaranteed to him for the future.

Aldridge's battle began in 1974, after he retired from athletics and turned to sportscasting. He had trouble concentrating, he couldn't get his work done on time, and as a

result his broadcasts often ran shorter than planned.

"I became very suspicious of people, especially the people I worked with," he said. "The workplace became very difficult, a very unhappy place."

Aldridge sought psychotherapy. But later that year, he began to have bouts of psychosis, with imaginary voices and hallucinations.

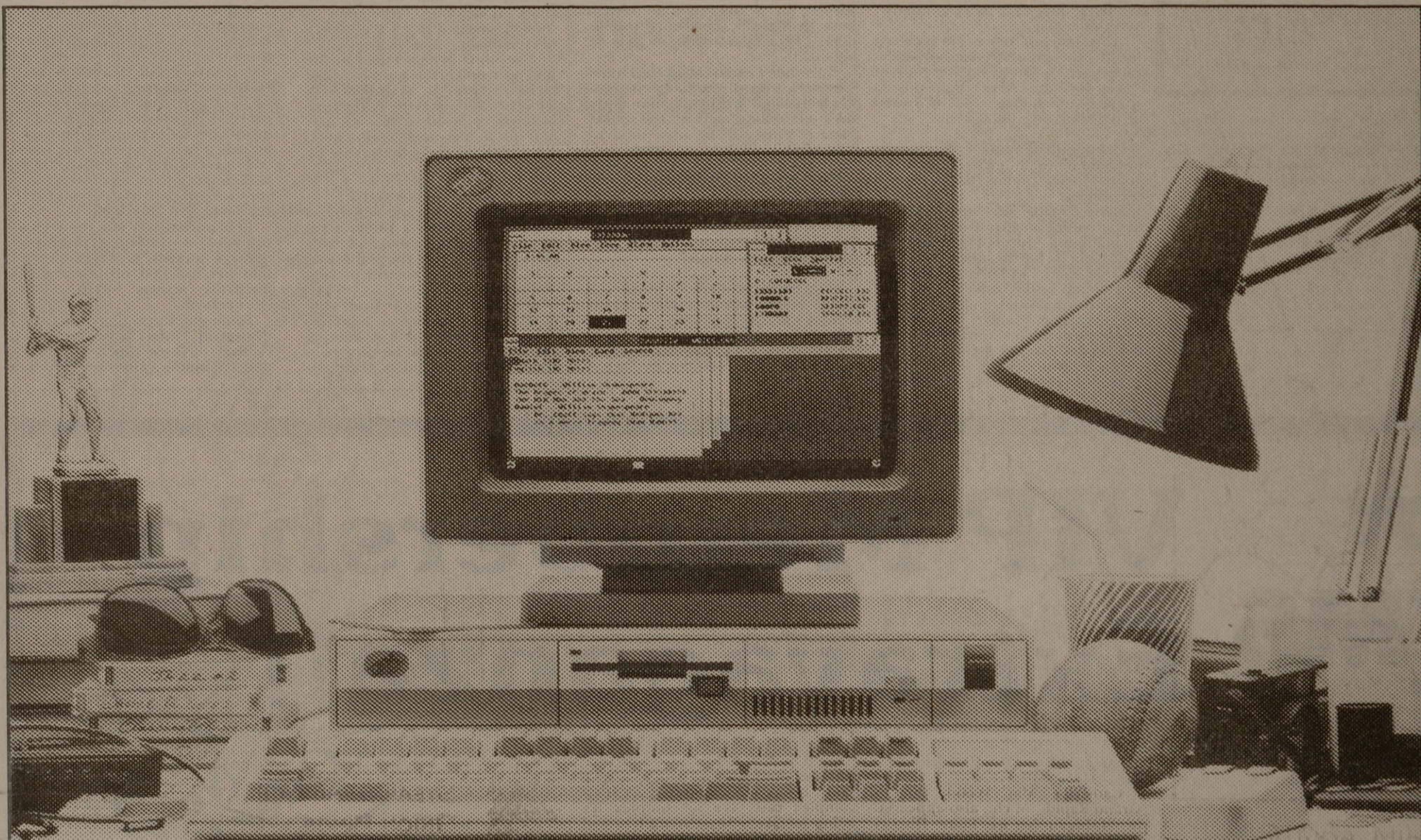
While his behavior on the air appeared normal, his life was bizarre. He feared that his wife was a witch. He ran barefoot through the snow in

search of his therapist. Soon, he was hospitalized.

"I knew I needed help," he said. "But the medication he took for a couple years 'zombied me out so I couldn't work.' He gave up on medication."

Looking back at what schizophrenia cost him, he said, "I'm trying to find out what good it brought."

"I can't think of any situation where I can be intimidated, because the worst already has happened. How much more can you lose everything?"



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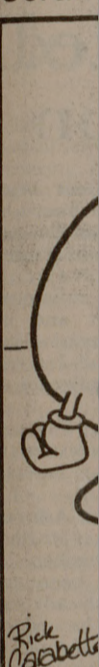


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