

Mitch Henck "Concussion"

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"I hate football," my college-age niece muttered after seeing the new movie "Concussion." Hate football? That's like hating ice cream or cheeseburgers, I thought. Then I saw the movie, and it hit me. Both my nieces and my daughter would never let their sons play football if they ever have sons. For that matter, a lot of your sons and nephews won't let their future sons play football, either. I started to understand why Chicago Tribune columnist John Kass wrote his 2013 column "Football is dead."

The movie tells the story of how Nigerian forensic pathologist Dr. Bennet Omalu uncovered the degenerative brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). Dr. Omalu, played by Will Smith in the movie, first found CTE during an autopsy of former Pittsburg Steeler and Wisconsin Badgers center Mike Webster. Webster showed signs of dementia before dying homeless and of a heart attack in 2002. Dr. Omalu figured Webster had been pounded in the head tens of thousands of times since he was a boy.

CTE is believed to be caused by repetitive head trauma with effects including memory loss, depression and dementia. Since "Iron Mike" Webster's death, several NFL players who committed suicide were later diagnosed with CTE.

The film depicts former Steelers offensive lineman Terry Long. He died at age 45 after drinking antifreeze. The movie also portrays the suicides of former Steelers and Cardinals safety Andre Waters, and former Bears safety Dave Duerson, who shot himself in the chest after leaving a note asking that his brain be studied. There are others, but I will stop there. After all, we have playoff games to watch today.

According to SI.com, figures from the Department of Veterans Affairs and Boston University have identified the degenerative brain disease in 96 percent of NFL players and 79 percent of all football players they examined. The brain bank is the nation's largest focused on head injury and trauma. The lab found CTE, which can only be identified after death, in 131 of 165 subjects who played pro, semi-pro or college football. Offensive and defensive linemen make up 40 percent of the positive test cases.

What does this mean to our national past time? Parents and future parents may think more about whether to let their little boys play. Chicago writer Kass played football in his youth and still loves it as a fan. But when it came to letting his own boys play, Kass said he and his wife "just couldn't." "People think we're blowing this out of proportion, that this is a very rare disease and that we're sensationalizing it," said Dr. Ann McKee, chief of neuropathology at the VA Boston Health Care system. "My response is that where I sit, this is a very real disease. We have no problem identifying it in hundreds of players."

The NFL is trying to reduce concussions by increasing penalties for spearing with the helmet, and improvements to equipment. But the future lies with parents. If they fear their sons stand a good chance of scrambling their brains, they won't play.

When Badgers linebacker Chris Borland retired from the 49ers after one season to protect against future injury, the message was sent to parents throughout the country. Tennis anyone? Nah, at least have them take up something cool like golf.

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