

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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December 7, 2014

“Concussions: Just How Bad Are They ?”

For some bizarre reason, we seem to enjoy seeing an NFL player "getting his bell rung." Unfortunately, people wrongly believe that it shows strength and courage to play while injured. Researchers report that even some teenagers appear to show changes in their brains after one season of playing American football. There is increasing concern about the potential effects of contact sports on young, developing brains and studies are focusing on concussions. Just how bad are the problems involving concussions? In 2012, 3,800,000 concussions were reported, double that of 2002. High school football accounts for 47% of all reported sports concussions and 33% of all sports concussions happen at practice. High school athletes suffer 2 million injuries, 500,000 doctor visits and 30,000 hospitalizations annually. There are three times as many catastrophic football injuries among high school athletes as college athletes. And, 15.8% of football players who sustain a concussion severe enough to cause loss of consciousness return to play the same day but 90% of most diagnosed concussions do not involve a loss of consciousness. In 2011, the NFL set rules to determine whether an athlete who's taken a powerful hit and sustained a concussion will be benched or sent back into the game. The guidelines include checking the player's symptoms, attention, memory, and balance, starting immediately, on the sidelines. Research shows that athletes who have repeated concussions are more likely to get long-term brain damage, including a condition known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a brain disease that mimics dementia. Former NFL players who have had CTE include the late Junior Seau, Chris Henry, and Dave Duerson. Tragically, athletes may try to hide their symptoms or convince the coach that they "are just fine" or that they can "tough it out." Experts say, "Linemen who've had almost no concussions have the majority of cases of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, because on every play they get their brains rattled, trying to block with their head." So, use your head, don't abuse your head.

In the America that I love, we must emphasize that playing with a concussion can lead to long-term problems, even death. Sports allow kids to be healthy and build team skills but we must watch pushing the limits of injuries associated with speed, strength and endurance. Sometimes, athletes do not recognize their own limitations, especially following a concussion or they try to "push their limits." Parents and coaches need to be able to recognize danger signs such as a change in the athlete's behavior, thinking or physical functioning. And, it is not as simple as how many concussions one has had but it is the "total brain trauma" that leads to problems. Please try to enjoy safe sporting activities.

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