

Concussions and the National Football League

Like any full-contact sport, American football poses certain inherent physical risks to its players. In particular, concussive head injuries have become a significant topic of concern for many who love the game. The National Football League acknowledges the danger that concussions pose to our valued players, and is engaging in a dialogue with staff and the American public to shed light on these risks and make the game as safe as possible. This document serves to address many of the issues of player safety that have come under public scrutiny in recent months, and affirm the NFL's commitment to improving health and safety standards in our league and at all levels of play.

A concussion is a serious injury to the brain and skull that results from blunt force trauma to the head. While all concussions are serious and must be avoided, not all concussed players lose consciousness when injured. This potential ambiguity at time of injury poses a unique challenge in diagnosing the condition, since the player or coaching staff may not be aware of the causative injury's severity during the game. Two primary initial symptoms of concussion are include dizziness and disorientation; signs that may be hard for coaching staff and players to recognize or heed during gameplay. These challenges in recognizing and treating initial head trauma are some of the factors that have made long-term brain injury a unique challenge for the NFL and its valued players.

Concussion patients can experience a range of long-term problems with memory loss, lexical challenges, even significant brain damage if left untreated. We at the NFL have taken to heart the fact that a concussion patient is more likely to experience vastly greater damage from a subsequent concussion, even if the first was relatively mild. Having seen the level of damaging concussions present in previous generations of players, this information is as salient and valuable to us as it is regrettable.

During the early years of the NFL, a still-developing rule book as well as relatively lax safety regulations resulted in a far higher rate of traumatic injuries to players than would today be considered acceptable. Although documentation of the occurrence of traumatic brain injury is scarce prior to 1960, the years before the standardization of safety gear, and especially helmets, certainly exposed players to a much higher risk of concussion on the field than exists today. Prior to 1970, an average of 16 fatalities occurred each year throughout the United States during organized football games, with a total of 74 direct fatalities for all semi-professional and professional football leagues between 1931 and 1970. Between 1990 and 2007, only three direct fatalities have occurred in these leagues, largely due to increased safety measures such as heavier padding and more rigid helmets as well as the quality of athletic medicine.

Since the early era of professional football, vast advances have been made to protect the safety of players before, during, and after games, and the sport is now far safer than at any other time in its history. These changes include advances in equipment technology, access to high-quality medical care on and off the field, codifying rules and penalties, and proactive policy action from the NFL. In 1994, significant improvements were made to the leagues approach to player head injuries. Commissioner Paul Tagliabue formed the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury committee in order to prevent concussions from the highest levels of policy-making within the league. Since then, we have taken an active role in preventing concussions, enacting policies that train players,

coaches, and on-field staff to spot concussions on the field. Our chief medical advisor, Eliot Pellman, has been especially active in formulating protocol for teams with concussed players.

Today, NFL players wear helmets that meet exacting safety standards. The Ridell equipment company revisits and revises the design of professional football helmets regularly, to ensure that each model is rigorously tested to absorb the most dangerous G-force levels to a human skull. Extensive research has been done in the field of impact-oriented brain injury, and this same scholarship influences the level of crash resistance that our helmets are built to withstand. While risk avoidance practices and trauma care have improved substantially, we at the NFL acknowledge that concussive head injuries remain one of the most significant threats to players today.

Although our team members are some of the most dedicated and powerful athletes in their sport, we hope the public keeps in mind that NFL players suffer significantly lower frequency of traumatic brain injury than players at other scholastic and professional levels of the sport. While concussions affecting nationally known athletes inevitably get the most amount of recognition, professional football is much safer than the scholastic levels of the sport. In the past fifteen years, nearly 50 teen and preteen players have been killed in the United States due to concussion, and players below the professional level have been shown to be far more prone to long-term brain injury than professional players. We at the NFL recognize that we are in a unique position as a standard-bearer for our sport, and we have long maintained efforts to help secondary and higher scholastic football leagues adopt best practices for safety. As we find growing success in protecting our teams from long-term damage due to on-field injuries, football in general is becoming safer than ever at all levels of play.

Football is, like all physical activities, a potentially dangerous sport that invites the possibility of serious injury, particularly to a player's head and skull. Despite these risks, we will continue to play and promote the sport that we and our nation love, and this includes making it as safe as possible. There is still progress to be made in the realm of concussive brain injuries, and we welcome public discussion about the matter as a valuable contribution to the sustained progress of football and the NFL. These discussions have made today the safest time in the sport's history to play football, and we strongly believe that current levels of scrutiny will help all of us continue this evolution until professional football is synonymous with player safety.

Works Cited

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