

## **Head Shot: The NFL's Concussion Epidemic**

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By Joe Flaherty

I'm not one much for playing contact sports. As a kid growing up, I always found myself on the baseball diamond or the basketball court as opposed to the football field or the hockey rink.

In retrospect, after watching Chris Nowinski's documentary on concussions, I feel like I'm a member of a lucky few who has escaped an uncertain future filled with potential mental issues.

I know it's not that black and white, but the one concrete point in a documentary that presented a lot of ambiguous topics (not in a bad way) was that concussions, however they are defined, are more frequent and more destructive than anyone could've ever imagined.

Documentaries are supposed to be an in-your-face, brutally honest wake up call, and Nowinski's "Head Games" falls into that category. And even though some people might see this style of presenting this issue as overbearing, I couldn't disagree more.

Even though awareness of potential harm from concussions is at an all time high, a lot of people are treating concussions like a non-issue until they see some more concrete facts.

And at this time, that's simply something that's not available. The whole problem with the concussion issue is that there is an extremely large grey area when it comes to the basics.

What is a concussion? How many is too many? What's the wait period to return? What steps are being taken to reduce concussions?

The list goes on, and almost every question has no singular answer. Nowinski is putting in a valiant effort to compile hard data, but the one factor that is holding him back is time. In order to have enough research at his disposal to start making definitive statements, he's unfortunately going to have to wait while the data, and concussions, pile up over the years.

But by that time, it may be too late for many athletes who started their sport at a young age and didn't deal with concussions properly.

Pee Wee football leagues are still a staple in many children's lives across the nation. Add in the recent resurgence of hockey to the national scene and the sudden rise of lacrosse in the last decade, and your child now has an array of "collision sports" to try out.

But football takes the cake in the popularity contest. Young kids fall in love with football because of the competition and the primal nature of it. There's nothing more animalistic

than hunting down a person, dragging them to the ground, and then repeating the whole process on the very next play.

In this sense, football serves as a great outlet for aggression. A lot of kids stick with football because they find this fun, and this macho bravado has become synonymous with the sport over time.

As their egos get bigger, so do the players themselves. And they not only get bigger, but they get faster. Today's NFL stars look nothing like they did in the early days of football. It's a game of monstrous guys who can run incredibly fast and even BIGGER monsters who can't run quite as fast but can hit twice as hard. Just take a look at the guys who are out on the field hitting each other 70+ times a game and it's easy to see why concussions have become such a big problem.

But the problem doesn't start in the NFL, or college, or even high school. It starts in the Pee Wee and grade school leagues, where the athletes first learn to love the game.

Several of the doctors in Nowinski's documentary mention how children are basically a walking concussion if they play tackle football. Their heads are disproportionately big, their necks are weak, and their brains are still in an undeveloped state. Combine that with a child's propensity to mimic their favorite stars in the NFL and go for big head shots to wow the crowd, and you've got one potent recipe for a future laden with brain damage.

So how can we go about changing this and stopping the problem at the root? Can we stop kids from playing football? Well, on a national scale, that's simply not feasible. History shows that widespread removal of something the nation loves by law doesn't exactly turn out so well (see: prohibition). Besides, football still has its positives, like keeping underprivileged kids off the streets and building lifelong friendships with your teammates.

Okay, so maybe we can alter the way the pros play so the kids stop mimicking their malicious ways? The NFL has implemented a fining system to try to reduce head to head contact, but that doesn't seem to be working very well. A fine of \$50,000 these days is more like a slap on the wrist to millionaire athletes. And the game of football has progressed to the point of extremes: extremely freakish athletes trying to make the hugest hits possible to get the biggest reactions out of people. People are drawn to hits like that because America is based on the "bigger is better" mantra, and football is no different.

Alright, well then maybe we can upgrade the equipment? That won't work either. The brain itself is floating in the middle of your head in surrounding liquid. No matter how much protection you're putting on your skull, your brain will still jostle around and be affected by sudden movements. And like Rick Telender said at the panel discussion, you're head is dead center on your body, so there really is no way to avoid using it to make tackles.

Which brings me to my next possible solution: maybe we can change the way the game is played altogether? Let that sink in for a second...

Changing the way the game is played and teaching it to the younger generations may be the only way we see a solution that appeases both sides of the argument: football for fans to watch, and football that is safe to play.

The only problem here is how do you change the rules in a way that keeps the grittiness everyone loves in the game while taking your head out of harms way?

It's a long shot at best because re-teaching the game would take years, if not decades. And the rule changes would alter the game so much that it may no longer look like the classic football we know and love. If this happens, people might start turning away from the league for something more exciting.

And the game of football might be played at such a fast pace that any rule changes you make might go by the wayside in the heat of the moment. At NFL speed, instincts take over. You don't have time to think about injury prevention on every play.

But outside of changing the rules, there really is no other scenario that makes concessions to both sides. The only other options would be the ones at either end of the spectrum.

We can all stand by and watch as football continues to evolve into a blood sport where everyone is fully aware of the danger their putting themselves in. The players would become more like hired hitmen who have no care for their bodies or their futures, only for the present and for the entertainment of the millions of people watching.

Or we can take away football altogether to err on the extreme side of caution. This would take concussions completely out of the picture in football because... there would be no more football.

Of the three options, the most likely "solution" would just be to leave football as-is. There's too much money tied up in the NFL and college football for the game to become anything other than it already is. It's a shame, but in the future I can see the NFL resembling the UFC, where fans pick their favorites based on who's "crazier" and more lethal. The pool of talent would turn into a group of guys who most people would call insane based on what they're willing to put their body through.

That's why, if I had a son, I would never let him put on a football (or hockey, or lacrosse) helmet. Like Hunter Hillenmeyer said at the panel discussion, I wouldn't even make it an option. There simply isn't enough information out there about anything relating to concussions for me to justify putting my child in harms way.

If one day information turns up that shows concussions are treatable, or even avoidable, I may reconsider. But until then, I wouldn't put my child in a situation where he could get an injury that most doctors aren't sure how to diagnose properly.

I hope the evidence Chris and others find in the near future shed some light on how we can start limiting concussions and the effects we experience from them. But all I can do now, just like Chris, is wait for time to take its course.

Hopefully by then, it's not too late for the sport of football and its players.