Concussion in the National Football League: Viewpoint of an Elite Player

Joe DeLamielleure

Concussive injuries to the head and brain are relatively common in the National Football League (NFL). This is not news, since the issue has been covered in many articles in the popular press and many news specials on television. As an NFL offensive lineman for 13 years, I suffered a huge number of hits to the head — an estimated 215,000 at least. Nevertheless, I have fared better than many of the players of my era: many suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). For example, some of my fellow Hall of Fame players from that era, Mike Webster, Jim Ringo, John Mackey, and Joe Perry, all suffered from CTE and all are now deceased. I count myself lucky that the main malady affecting me after those many blows to the head is a 60% hearing loss in my left ear — probably due to undiagnosed concussions and particularly to thousands of head slaps by defensive players, whose first hit after the snap was often a right-handed blow to the helmet’s open hole over my left ear.

Many NFL players have died in recent decades and have donated their brains for study at Boston University’s Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy. Of 34 brains of former NFL players examined by researchers, 33 were found to have CTE. Three committed suicide recently: Dave Duerson in 2011, and Ray Easterling and Junior Seau in 2012. Seau died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest in May 2012; the finding of CTE in his brain was announced in January 2013.1 Personally, I was among the first to commit to donating my brain to the Boston University research program after my death; since then, many other players have made a similar commitment. CTE resulting from hits to the head and concussions is incredibly frequent among players and former players. It is critically important for this problem to be studied and widely discussed.

The NFL has become aware of this problem and has changed the rules in ways designed to decrease injuries, including head injuries. One of the problems that I have pointed out to the NFL and the NFL Players Association is that former players, especially those who played from 1969 to 1993, are suffering from the consequences of inadequate helmet design and game rules that allowed “head hits,” “the wedge,” “bump and run,” and head slaps, all of which are now illegal.

Joe DeLamielleure played college football for Michigan State University and was a first-round pick in the 1973 National Football League draft. He played with the Buffalo Bills (1973-1979 and 1985) and the Cleveland Browns (1980-1984). He was Offensive Lineman of the Year in 1975 and 1977, was elected to the All-Pro Team 8 times, and played in 6 Pro Bowl Games. He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame with the Class of 2003.
The rule change that would result in the most protection against concussion is to redesign helmets to remove what I believe is the greatest threat to head injury: the face mask. The plastic single-bar face mask came in 1955, but by the late 1970s, vinyl-coated steel face masks became common. I believe that concussions and CTE were uncommon when there was no face protection or only single-bar protection, and I think that highly protective face masks led to more head injuries because players had less fear of hitting with their heads due to the improved protection. Without face masks or with single-bar masks (still used by some kickers), there would be more broken noses and lost teeth (and more unhappy wives and girlfriends), but far fewer serious head injuries.

Although current contracts provide good benefits for retired football players, players from the 1970s and 1980s have poor benefits and no health insurance. I believe it is incumbent on the NFL to provide lifetime medical insurance for all former players, not just recent ones.

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Other methods for reducing concussion in football players are being developed, and I wish them all great success. Head injuries and concussion are a scourge to football and must be dealt with, one way or another.

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References