

# **Dead Man Walking**

**Brightside, September, 2013**

**By Dr. Derek Conte**

The shot was barely heard, but it struck its target. There was very little movement from the stricken giant other than a queer smile and a small twitch. The villagers who for decades worshipped at the giant's feet each weekend looked on in silence. There was no movement from the giant to suggest any serious injury so the villagers relaxed and returned to their play. After a while, the giant swooned with brief light-headedness. What the villagers didn't perceive was that the bullet nicked a small vein rather than a vital artery in the giant. The giant began to stumble very, very faintly as he walked; so faintly that one could not really see it if they didn't want to. Even if he survived, the giant would never be the same.

On August 28th in my office, I was talking to one of my patients and her 10-year-old son about what sport team he was with now. He said he was playing football - Flag Football. I asked him about tackle football and he said something I've never heard from a child before: "I don't want to get a brain injury". I was amazed. The growing consciousness of TBI's, CBE's (Traumatic Brain Injuries and Cumulative Brain Encephalopathy) - have finally percolated down to the awareness of children.

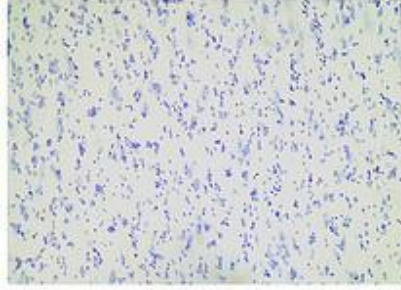
On the same day, the National Football League settled a class-action lawsuit by 4,500 brain-injured former players for \$765,000,000 (plus \$200,000,000 in legal fees) on the condition that the injured parties agree NOT to hold the NFL and the very game of football responsible for their injuries and assure that any records that might prove the NFL was aware of the football/brain-injury correlation, but covered it up, would never be examined - as if it wasn't nuclear bombs that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but rather a really large flock of pooping pteranodons that did the damage. But three years ago, in response to the revelation that repeated head trauma is dangerous, the NFL began to prohibit and heavily fine players who made head-first contact when blocking or tackling another player. Am I wrong, or is that what they call a conundrum?

So while the country still goes nuts over football, the damage has shifted to another part of the body: the knees. To avoid the painful and sometimes gratuitous fines assessed by the NFL for "hitting high", players have taken to hurtling themselves at the knees of their opponents. Already, in the pre-season alone, we have seen career-ending knee injuries. Players are getting edgy now and some are saying they would rather take the hits to the head and worry about dementia later rather than have their football lives end with one savage low hit.

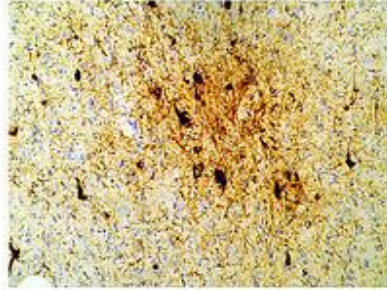
The mechanics of TBI's and CBE's concern powerful blows to the head or body causing sufficient back-and-forth or rotational head movement at speeds sufficient to exceed the elastic limits of the brain, causing tearing of nerve cells and connective or vascular tissues resulting in a wide range of symptoms, including cognitive, locomotive, psychic and behavioral regression. Research shows that with long periods of rest the brain can repair itself, but with the trend of virtual year-round football and big money, the pressures to play too soon pave the way for irreversible damage to players' brains.

What is the future of football? Let my 10-year-old patient's comment guide you: "I don't want to get a brain injury". As awareness inevitably grows, young athletes will choose less violent sports, draining the NFL of its best talent. From a distance the giant seems fine, but he is starting to pitch forward like an ancient Redwood, in a long, agonizing fall into the forest floor.

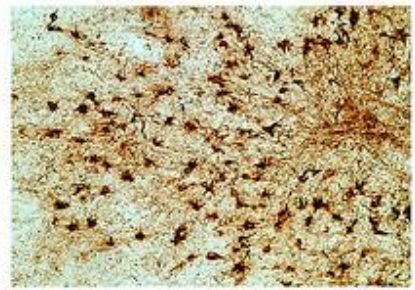
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