



HEADSTRONG

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CASS' CORNER



Hockey on the Head

"Not (to) my knowledge. The guys here are taken (care of) with the (utmost) precaution because they are so young so even the slightest (concussion) they sit out."

Perhaps I shall provide a bit of background to the response I received, above, from an individual associated with a local sporting events.

Before I provide that, though, I suppose, it is only fair to share a fuller framing of the thoughts in my head, concerning a full-contact sport such as ice hockey:

"How can this person make that claim?! Hockey is a physical sport, in which physical contact is all but constant! Sure, players in some local hockey teams are younger, regularly even a mere sixteen years old. That doesn't mean their heads aren't contacted, though; that's why they are required to wear helmets! AND they are younger, which may substantiate claims that their brain is not yet (as) fully developed as it will likely be, in adulthood. . ."

OK then, how about the letter that precipitated this response:

"Good afternoon. This may seem like the absolute laziest thing you have ever heard of anyone doing, but . . .

I am working on an article in which I want to focus on head/brain injury in hockey. I have done some work on CTE in football and other sports and I have information on chronic traumatic encephalopathy in NHL hockey, too.

In an effort to keep it 'closer to home,' however, I would like to place a little concentration on HOMETOWN hockey and brain injury or similar difficulties occurring with our town's own hockey teams.

Please let me know of any information you may have or be aware of."

We have discussed and you have read my prior writings on CTE.

For review: Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) is a neurodegenerative disease found in people who have had multiple head injuries. It is most commonly found in professional athletes participating in contact sports such as football, rugby, ice hockey, boxing, bull riding and rodeo, or professional wrestlers and stunt performers who have experienced repeated brain trauma, such as concussions and other blows to the head.

Remember, as well, that the four stages of CTE symptoms do not typically appear until eight to ten years following the conclusion of one of these athletes' careers. Do not forget, either, that certified diagnosis of this neurodegenerative infirmity cannot take place until after death.

It may be of interest to the reader to learn that CTE was originally studied in boxers in the 1920s and was then called dementia pugilistica. The earliest research on the disease came from British neurologist Macdonald Critchley, who in 1949 composed a paper called "Punch-drunk syndromes: the chronic traumatic encephalopathy of boxers." CTE was first recognized, yes, as only affecting individuals who took severe blows to the head and was thus confined solely to boxers.

Modern-day society has seen a dramatic rise in showmanship, often most enjoyed in the full-contact sports we so regularly watch and enjoy.

Athletes from other sports (including hockey) have been shown, too, to have CTE. Neuropathologists at Boston University diagnosed Reg Fleming, for example, as the first hockey player known to have the disease.

Those who remember the Buffalo Sabres' French Connection will remember Rick Martin as a part of that noted and dreaded combination. He was diagnosed with CTE after his brain was posthumously analyzed. His was the first documented case of an ice hockey player not known as an enforcer to have developed CTE. He was believed to have primarily developed the disease as the result of a severe concussion he suffered in 1977 while not wearing a helmet. In his case, the disease was actually low-grade and not symptomatic. It was not said to have affected his cognitive functions, and he died of a heart attack at age 59 in March 2011.

Within a few months, also in 2011, the deaths of three hockey "enforcers" took place. Derek Boogaard died from a combination of too many painkillers and alcohol. Rick Rypien died of an apparent suicide, and Wade Belak, as well; both were reportedly depressed.

The Boston University School of Medicine determined the presence of CTE in these players' brains.

An NHL player partly known for leading the "thump parade" was right-winger Shawn Thornton. He spent time professionally with both the Boston Bruins and Florida Panthers National Hockey League teams. He mulled over the "tragic coincidence" of the three recent deaths in the NHL and agreed their deaths were due to the same cause.

Stephen Peat, in 2016, was 36 years old. He was formerly an enforcer with the Washington Capitals and he was reported to be suffering extreme and severe symptoms of CTE. Walter, his father, was reported to worry that his son would join the "dead before turning 50 . . . since 2010" list of fellow enforcers, including Boogaard, Rypien, Belak, Steve Montador and Todd Ewen.

What a relief it is that "the guys here are taken care of with the utmost precaution because they are so young..."

Only coming years and extended experience in contact sports like hockey will tell, eh?