



Sport's unspoken disease

Clubs need to put their players' health first and recognise the continuing dangers of head injuries, **KATE HENNE** writes

Like many Brumbies fans, I was dismayed to see Christian Lealiifano go down with a severe ankle injury this past Saturday. However, it was not the first injury that upset me that evening.

In the first half, I shuddered when I saw Tatafu Polota-Nau remain motionless after one of his signature kamikaze tackles. As play continued, Polota-Nau struggled to his feet, only to fall again. My heart sank as I watched staff allow him to play on. I shook my head and said to my husband, "Don't they hear about what's going on in the US? Or, do they just not care? It's not like this is his first head injury."

My husband, who has had teammates die from concussions, sighed, "I don't know what they are thinking." On our way to Canberra Stadium, we had discussed the recent suicide of Junior Seau, a 12-time National Football League Pro Bowl linebacker with whom my husband had worked at the San Diego Chargers. Less than two weeks before Seau's death, Ray Easterling, a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the NFL over the handling of head injuries, took his life.

Just a year before that, Dave Duerson, another former NFL player, shot himself in the chest and left a note about donating his brain to a study on chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative disease that afflicts people who have experienced repetitive head trauma. CTE was once thought to be a boxer's affliction, but recent studies and high-profile deaths have highlighted that it also affects American football players, hockey players, and even soldiers.

Seau did not leave a note. He sent texts to his ex-wife and their three children saying that

he loved them. In so doing, he left many unanswerable questions. Seau's family has since announced that they may permit researchers to examine his brain for signs of damage sustained during his football career. In fact, Australian Football League Players Association representatives are consulting US leagues and exploring the development of their own "brain bank" for further research.

Suicides are tragic but not typically associated with rugby union or rugby league. Then again, the Super Rugby and National Rugby League competitions are young compared to the NFL. With medical professionals connecting head injuries to serious medical concerns, including depression, CTE, and early-onset Alzheimer's, there is enough evidence to take concussions seriously. Both the AFL and NRL have recently adopted stronger concussion management policies. Why has Super Rugby not followed suit?

There are, of course, pressures that keep injured athletes on the field or prompt them to return to competition too soon. In the case of Polota-Nau, I understand the desire to have him available for the Waratahs' important match against the Bulls on Friday but am relieved not to see him on the roster. It is a mere six days after significant head trauma—no longer an issue of individual tackling technique, but one of professional responsibility.

Responsibility is a word increasingly evoked in sport. We hear a lot about the expectations of sports figures: they should behave professionally and be good role models. To prevent them from acting inappropriately (as some undoubtedly do), there are seminars about behaviour and

sometimes sanctions for misconduct. Last month I attended one such seminar, the Australian Rugby Union's anti-drug module, and was struck by its narrow focus on the responsibilities of athletes. The speaker warned of the health-related and economic consequences of drug use. He even addressed how individual actions could tarnish the image of the sport. The program, however, made no mention of how sport can actually contribute to these detrimental effects – or, whether or not the ARU would help afflicted athletes.

On and off the field, we condemn sports figures for their weaknesses and celebrate them for the strengths, but what of the damage caused along the way? Competitive achievements may yield pride and profits, but they should not render sport's most precious resources – athletes – as mere commodities. Despite talk about protecting the integrity of sport, there remains little discussion of the responsibility sporting organisations have to athletes.

The integrity of sport should be about more than preventing bad behaviour that can tarnish a marketable brand. At the very least, it should reduce dangers inherent to sport, even when they appear in tension with competitive outcomes. The dismissal of head injuries highlights systemic issues. As a researcher and athlete, I have encountered resistance from staff at the mere mention of concussions. Even those who otherwise appear to strongly support players have referred to the "c-word" as a bad word, not to be spoken in public.

They have explained that people get hurt in contact sports; it's just part of the game. Surely, then, there is a professional responsibility to



put safeguards in place and not turn a blind eye? I have suffered post-concussion syndrome. Years ago, while playing rugby, I collided with a teammate and endured another hit to the head a week later. After taking a few minutes to recover, I resumed participation. Within hours, I found myself violently ill in an emergency room. I took three months off, only to suffer another concussion.

Then, pursuing my PhD, my priorities were clear, and I did not play rugby for nearly two years. I am well aware that many aspiring athletes do not have that choice. Having spoken with athletes across the

US and Australasia, I have heard numerous accounts of how taking time off is not an option, especially when career prospects hinge on participation. This sentiment was most prevalent among male athletes, often from poor and working-class backgrounds, who viewed sport as their most promising professional opportunity. Resting after a head injury is thus unlikely, because concussions usually do not hinder physical ability for very long.

Further, why would athletes step aside when sporting organisations and staff

encourage them to compete instead of recognising the damage concussions cause? With high-profile deaths and lawsuits mounting in other professional contact sports, perhaps now is the time to critically re-evaluate how we approach the issue here in Australia.

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