

STATE NEWS

Tuesday January 4, 2011

WVU neurosurgeon the foremost authority on concussions1 11 1

MORGANTOWN - The most important gift that sports gave Julian Bailes was a neck injury.

He hurt himself while playing college football at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, La. The injury didn't just take him out of the game; it gave him a glimpse of what would become his future profession.

"That was my moment realizing I was never going to be able to continue to play, or make a living at it so I think I got more serious about my studies at that point. It just motivated me to get the kind of education I realized I needed," Bailes said.

The former Louisiana all-state linebacker/strong safety jokes that although he loved to play football and was often on a winning team - including a Louisiana state-champion team - none of his loved ones would remember his career with any specificity.

But his medical career has been one to remember, largely because of his influence in the sports world.

Bailes, chairman of West Virginia University's Department of Neurosurgery, has been recognized as a leader in the field of neurological research, specializing in concussion research.

"There's been more learned about concussions in the last decade than we ever knew before," Bailes said.

Bailes' opinions on the brain are highly sought. His love for both sports and neurosurgery took him to the Pittsburgh Steelers, where he served as the team doctor for 10 years. Even though he was not with the franchise for any Super Bowl-winning seasons, he has a great fondness for his time there.

Currently the team doctor for the Mountaineer football team, the father of five still has a lot on his plate. Bailes is also the medical director for the Pop Warner Football League in Morgantown, the Brain Injury Research Institute and the Center for the Study of Retired Athletes. He has also helped start up what is known as the Second Opinion Network, a network of doctors across the country whose function is to provide outside opinions for the medical staff of each NFL team.

Although his life now revolves around medicine, his original passions lay with sports. Bailes played football and baseball most of his adolescent life. Sports that taught him the importance of teamwork, something he still uses in the operating room today.

"In a team sport, you endeavor to accomplish something as a team that an individual can't. It transfers into any job you undertake. Everyone we operate on, we couldn't do it without the team," Bailes said.

Becoming a neurosurgeon is an impressive individual accomplishment. Bailes' devotion got him through 16 years of post-high school education.

"If you're determined to be a certain type of physician, you realize before you make that choice the number of years it takes to achieve it. It's a graded learning experience that's fascinating, so if that's what you want to do it's probably a labor of love," Bailes said.

The sports that Bailes played has helped shape his professional career, as he now dedicates his time trying to make the sport safer.

"I think there are only a few physicians that really dedicate themselves to sports medicine, particularly the neurological aspects," Bailes said. "I think that probably my interest and some knowledge of sports led me to pursuing that path.

Bailes' research into the long-term effects that repeated impact of the head has on the structure of the brain led to changes in concussion policy at football's highest level, the NFL.

Controversy has swept across the NFL as the league has started implementing stiff monetary penalties and possible suspension for head-to-head contact. Fans and players alike believe the penalties are bad for the game.

Bailes, however, believes the league has taken great steps to protect the safety of players.

"The problem, the risks of repetitive head impacts, I think are real and I think that football has to evolve and keep up with the times, just like everything else in life," Bailes said.

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