

STATE NEWS

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WVU researcher wants to take head shots out of football

by Jake Stump
For the Daily Mail

MORGANTOWN, W.Va.-- After several years of studying the damaged brains of former athletes, Dr. Julian Bailes remains in a three-point stance, ready to charge the NFL and change the way the multibillion-dollar league handles concussions and other head-related injuries sustained by its players.

His fight is documented in the October issue of GQ magazine in a story titled, "This is Your Brain on Football."

Bailes, chair of the West Virginia University Department of Neurosurgery, is a primary source for the article, which discusses reform of the NFL's safety rules.

A team neurosurgeon for the Pittsburgh Steelers throughout the 1990s, Bailes has studied the brains of almost 20 athletes who succumbed to violent and puzzling deaths at early ages. Traumatic brain injuries and concussions were found to trigger psychological distress and illnesses in the athletes, according to his research.

"We've studied this now for five years," Bailes said. "You can see the chronology of what's happened. I hope that the NFL, because they are the highest of the pro leagues and America's most popular sport, will look at this closely and say, 'There's more we need to do.' The problem is only going to get worse."

The GQ article also features Dr. Bennet Omalu and Wheeling attorney Bob Fitzsimmons, who with Bailes established the Brain Injury Group, a brain bank and laboratory located at WVU's Blanchette Rockefeller Neurosciences Institute.

Bailes said his main focus is football because it's the most popular sport in the country. But he says the problem is not confined to the NFL.

"I don't want to pick on them," Bailes said. "It's all contact sports."

Bailes noted that more than 200 million people play soccer nationwide and they aren't immune from concussions. He added boxing, mixed martial arts and hockey to the list.

Even in sports like basketball and baseball, collisions often result in concussions or head injuries, Bailes said.

After an athlete's death, a routine autopsy won't detect specific diseases and trauma to the brain, he added.

That's where his lab and brain bank comes into play.

"Routine looking at the brain won't tell you anything," Bailes said.

Bailes served as the Steelers' team neurosurgeon during the career of offensive lineman Justin Strzelczyk, who died in 2004. Strzelczyk, 36, was killed in a fiery car crash following a high-speed police chase. It is believed his life spiraled out of control after he retired in 1998 because of mental illness brought on by head injuries.

Three other football players who died in the past five years were found to have had brain damage. They are Mike Webster, who died of a heart attack, and Terry Long and Andre Waters, who both committed suicide.

The players' brains displayed what doctors call neurofibrillary tangles, which are pathological protein aggregates found within neurons in Alzheimer's disease cases.

Bailes said those cases alone should prompt immediate action in the NFL. He suggests the league implement neuropsychological testing and provide safer, dual-arched mouthpieces.

Instead of the usual mouthpieces that adhere only to the upper teeth, these devices go all the way into the mouth and separate the upper and lower sides. Bailes said they lessen the impact of concussions.

He is also urging rules changes.

"The head should be taken out of the game - striking and being hit in the head," he said. "I'd even take the linemen out of the three-point stance."

Bailes was the lead neurosurgeon for the brain analysis of professional wrestler Chris Benoit, who killed his wife and son and then committed suicide two years ago.

Reports based on the tests claim that Benoit's brain was so damaged that it resembled the brain of an 85-year-old Alzheimer's patient.

Damage was found in every section of Benoit's brain, the research showed.

Bailes also serves as medical director of the University of North Carolina's Center for the Study of Retired Athletes, which he helped establish 12 years ago. The center is affiliated with WVU, Bailes said, and receives funding from the NFL Players Association. He also helps run the Sports Legacy Institute with Dr. Omalu and former professional wrestler Chris Nowinski.

Bailes has written several professional articles citing the link between concussions and emotional problems. One report is a 2003 study documenting the increased likelihood of clinical depression for football players who have suffered more than three concussions.

The October issue of GQ is now on newsstands.

COMMENTS (1) ON "WVU RESEARCHER WANTS TO TAKE HEAD SHOTS OUT OF FOOTBALL"

Posted By: **Parsons** (8:37pm 09-28-2009)

This is important work. Kudos to Dr. Bailes and to the team at WVU for putting this forward.

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