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## Head Cases

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# POETINIS: DRINK IN THE TRUTH

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## Head Cases

Are we doing enough to protect college football players from concussion-related brain damage?



Orran Balagopalan

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Everyday life can be a struggle Franklin Littaua, a Whittier College Junior and former Poet football player. As an offensive lineman, Littaua was accustomed to life in the trenches. He expected contact on every play and the crack of a helmet getting slapped by a hand, struck by a forearm or butted by another helmet was just the sound of football. One collision among the many, though, stands out. It was the 2014 season, Littaua's freshman year, and he was running drills in practice like any other day. This particular drill called for the offense to make a first down on fourth and one. Littaua knew the offensive line would have to drive the defense back to get the ball over the line for a first down. The coaches blew the whistle and the rest is a blur. All Littaua remembers is a pile of people on top of him and suddenly feeling dizzy. He approached one of his coaches and told him his head hurt. "Just wait until the end of practice," Littaua remembers his coach saying, "So, I tried to fight through the pain."

After struggling through the rest of practice, Littaua went to the trainers and told him he thought he had a concussion. The trainers did some cosmetic tests — checking his pupils, making him stand on one leg with his eyes closed and repeating back random words and sentences. "They told me, 'I think you have a concussion,' and that was it."

Littaua called his mom and had to wait for her to drive to from Los Angeles to Whittier in order to take him to the emergency room. Some of his teammates stayed with him, keeping him awake — while it's long been a myth that concussion victims are in danger of falling into a coma if they fall asleep within the first 24 hours, the real danger is that a concussion victim might vomit while sleeping — and helping him through the pain. It was Littaua's fourth concussion and that meant no doctor would clear him to play football. More devastatingly, it meant he could not play rugby anymore. Littaua had impressed some professional scouts from Australia who had come to watch his games at Whittier. "Yeah, I got my foot in the door with a contract, but the scouts never contacted me again after my fourth concussion."

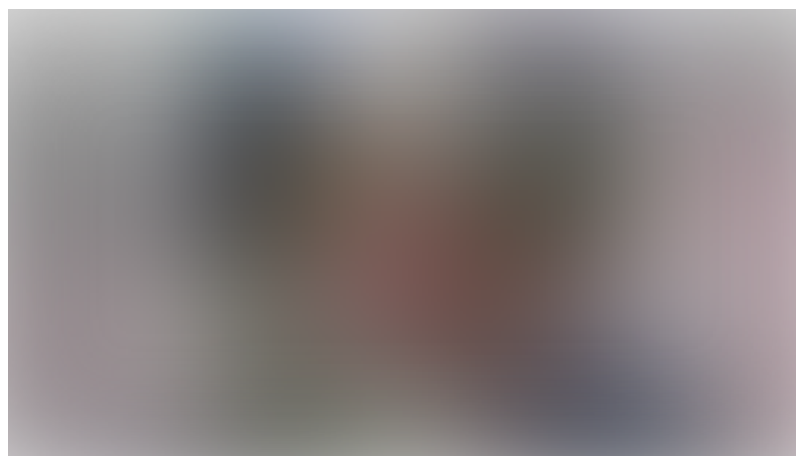
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random twitches. Also, it is hard for me to study. I used to be able to read through material twice the night before a test, and get an A. Now, I read through it three times and I fail.

Besides ending his chances at pro rugby, concussions have presented day-to-day challenges for Littaua. “After my last concussion, I started noticing I have random twitches. Also, it is hard for me to study. I used to be able to read through material twice the night before a test, and get an A. Now, I read through it three times and I fail.” Littaua tries new techniques all the time to help him retain information, with some more helpful than others. “I wish I would have just focused on rugby, but it’s cool. It’s not the end of the world,” he says.

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**T**he short-term symptoms of concussions include pain, headaches, dizziness, irritability, forgetfulness, inability to focus, and depression. Those who have suffered repeated concussions are in danger of chronic symptoms, including degenerative brain function. Football players appear to be especially at risk.



Hall of Famer Mike Webster was among the first diagnosed with CTE

Those risks came to the fore on September 24th, 2002, when Pittsburgh Steeler legend

“Iron” Mike Webster died at the age of 50. Webster had been suffering from amnesia, dementia and depression for years before his death and had been homeless on and off following his Hall of Fame career. Webster became the first person neuropathologist Bennet Amalu diagnosed with Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Will Smith played Dr. Amalu in the recent film *Concussion*, which dramatizes Amalu’s attempts to raise awareness of the disease and its connection to football. CTE is a degenerative disease caused by repeated blows to the head. The effects of CTE can be devastating, with symptoms including disorientation, memory loss, suicidal thoughts, loss of motor function, loss of verbal function, deafness, and dementia. Since Webster, hundreds of NFL players have been diagnosed and hundreds more are expected to have the disease, which can only be diagnosed posthumously by analyzing brain tissue.

Ten-time Pro-Bowl linebacker Junior Seau, who spent most of his career with the San Diego Chargers, is among the better known casualties. On May 2, 2012, he was found dead, having committed suicide by shooting himself in the chest. His brain tissue was sent to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke and it was determined Seau had CTE. Just a year before, former Chicago Bears and New York Giants’ Safety Dave Duerson was found dead in his home. He also shot himself in the chest. In a text message sent to his family shortly before his death, Duerson indicated he wanted his brain to be donated to Boston University. Just three months after he passed, scientists announced he, too, had CTE.

*Concussion* as well as the documentary and book, *League of Denial*, have in recent years shed light on this dark side of our biggest professional sport. In 2105, a federal judge settled a class-action suit filed on behalf of more than 5,000 former pro football players for damages related to CTE. The settlement awarded up to \$5 million per player to compensate for serious medical issues related to head trauma. The settlement covers players who retired on or before June 7, 2014. The settlement, however, has yet to be awarded because y some players are appealing it. Meanwhile, more players are coming forward and filing separate lawsuits against the NFL, a more than \$13 billion business.




Image from <http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-08/does-cte-brain-disease-found-nfl-players-really-exist>

The risk of CTE, however, is not confined to the National Football League. In fact, it may be hitting much closer to home. On October 2016, the Concussion Legacy Foundation published the results of a study that looked at the brains of 152 deceased former Division One college football players. The results were staggering — 138 (91 percent) were diagnosed with CTE. More than a third of the players whose brains were studied never went on to play professional football, adding weight to increasing concerns that playing football even at the college level presents significant risks to brain health.

Peter Landesman, the writer and director of *Concussion*, believes there is really no difference in risk between college and professional players. “CTE is as real and dangerous for college players as it is for pros,” says Landesman, especially, because “many of these guys started playing as children, when their brains were most vulnerable.” Landesman sees CTE as a parasite on the game of football, noting that there is “a growing number of CTE cases among college and high school players.” Landesman says that unless something is done to lessen the risks, “CTE will erode the game until the best athletes play other sports.”

CTE is as real and dangerous for college players as it

# is for pros, says Landesman.

According to The Mayo Clinic, the best way to prevent CTE is to “reduce mild traumatic brain injuries and prevent additional injury after a concussion.” Professional sports organizations such as the NFL and the NBA have recently adopted more stringent concussion protocols that attempt to keep players from practicing or playing until sufficiently healed.

The NFL’s guidelines call for two non-team affiliated medical personnel to monitor every game with the power to stop play if there is sufficient worry that a player suffered a concussion. This measure has been controversial, though, because some say even unaffiliated medical personnel will be hesitant to take star players out of a game, especially when the stakes are high. Some say the recent Carolina Panthers versus Denver Broncos illustrated the problem when a Broncos’ safety hit Cam Newton, the NFL’s reigning Most Valuable Player, helmet-to-helmet. After the collision, Newton lay face down in the grass, struggling to rise. He wasn’t removed from the game. The NFL argued there was not sufficient reason to take Newton out, but critics believe he was left in because nobody was willing to remove the star player with the game on the line in the fourth quarter.

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**H**ere at Whittier College, 90 percent of the more than a dozen football players responding to an informal survey conducted for this article said their coaches and trainers had not discussed CTE with them. What’s more, about half said their coaches and trainers have never spoken to them about concussions. One sophomore said that he has, “heard the word concussion come out of a coach’s mouth, maybe once.” A junior on the team added, “If you say you hurt your head, the coaches just tell you to get over it.”

Since Whittier College is a member of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the institution is required to follow the NCAA Concussion Policy and

Legislation, which mandates that an annual report educating student-athletes about the signs and symptoms of concussions be presented to all intercollegiate team members. Whittier College's Executive Director of Athletics Rob Coleman says the college is compliant with the NCAA rules. "The Whittier College Football team, along with the other 21 sports teams, are given concussion education every year before being cleared for activity," says Coleman, adding that after a player sustains a concussion, "participation is not allowed until symptoms are completely gone." In addition, Coleman said concussion protocols include a "return to learning component," by which athletes under concussion protocol are provided with academic help from campus organizations like CAAS and Student Disability Services while dealing with the cognitive effects of a concussion.

Just about all the football players interviewed said they think about CTE at least a few times a month while nearly a third said they think about it almost every day.

Whittier football players are not the only ones worrying about their future mental health. Recently, Indiana University backup quarterback Zander Diamont announced he was not going to play in his final season or attempt to play in the NFL because he's had too many concussions. Said Diamont, "I think that for my safety and my future, I'm not going to the NFL. I need my brain. So that was the decision."

**"I need my brain." — Indiana quarterback Zander Diamont**

Former Whittier College running back, senior John Thomas, is another young man who has had to adjust to life with the lasting effects of concussions. During running drills in the 2015 football season, Thomas got a hand-off and was running up the right side of the field when he got tripped. As he was falling, a linebacker hit him head-to-head. "Everything around me was slow and I felt memory loss for sure," said Thomas, "I couldn't even remember putting on pads."

After the collision, players and coaches told him to take a play or two off and watch



from the sidelines. Thomas realized this wasn't just a hard hit and that he had a concussion. He spoke to the trainers and for days following the concussion. They had him fill out an evaluation form indicating whether or not he was feeling better or worse. "They [coaches/trainers] just assume you are going to tell the truth," says Thomas. "I probably rushed mine, because, of course, I wanted to play." Thomas eventually decided to cut his season short and didn't play in the final two games. He says he did not feel he was sufficiently healed from his concussion.

The physical effects of his concussion have gone away, but Thomas says he's still grappling with neurological ones, including increased difficulty managing stress — no doubt compounded by the academic pressures of senior year — and depression. "There will be days when I'll be fine," says Thomas. "I'll be the most lovable guy walking around campus. And there will be other days when I don't want to talk to anybody."

If he ever has children, "They will never play football."

While Thomas does not regret playing football — he says it taught him valuable life lessons — he says he'd play a different sport if he could do it all over again. Meanwhile, Thomas has decided to focus his senior seminar on the short- and long-term issues that go with concussions as well as new technologies and techniques to combat them. He hopes to raise awareness and educate those involved in football, including parents, players, coaches, and trainers, about the dangers of concussions. So far, his research has led him to one solid conclusion — if he ever has children, "They will never play football."

For Thomas, the short-term high of a victory on the gridiron isn't worth the long-term damage caused by concussions. "We all value winning," he says, "but what price do we pay?"