

## **The Cloud Over Football**

Steve Chapman | September 9, 2012

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A few weeks ago, a 25-year-old man was found in his car in Tampa, Fla., dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. It was a sad but ordinary story except for two facts: The man, O.J. Murdock, was a wide receiver for the NFL's Tennessee Titans, and the wound was not to the head but the chest.

Exactly why Murdock killed himself is impossible to know. But his case inevitably brings to mind other former NFL players who committed suicide — particularly Dave Duerson of the Chicago Bears. He feared he was suffering from brain damage and shot himself in the heart for a considered reason: He wanted his brain intact so it could be assessed for illness.

It was, and The Chicago Tribune reported, "Scientists at Boston University who examined Duerson's brain tissue said he suffered from a 'moderately advanced' case of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain disease associated with repeated blows to the head."

This is the first weekend of the NFL regular season, which follows closely on the opening of the NCAA schedule, and it brings with it some of the most cherished rites of fall. But this year, it carries with it a sense that the sport's best days are over. The most popular spectator sport in America may be no match for the revelations of medical science.

One of those came Wednesday from a study of more than 3,400 professional football players who had played at least five years in the league. Their death rate from three grave brain diseases — Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Lou Gehrig's — was triple the normal rate.

"It is very appropriate to say that what these guys in the study died of is likely CTE," said Robert Stern, a neurology professor who co-founded the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at Boston University.

But the news is even worse than it sounds. Many of the subjects played in the NFL decades ago, and Stern said that because modern players are bigger and faster, they may be inflicting even worse brain damage on each other.

The stark truth is that shots to the head turn out to be unhealthy for the brain, and such blows are to football what running is to basketball: something that happens every play.

Concussions were once thought to be the main risk, but experts have established that CTE can occur even in players with no history of multiple concussions.

It's a progressive disease, with no known cure, and its effects are grim — including "memory loss, confusion, impaired judgment, impulse control problems, aggression, depression, and, eventually, progressive dementia," according to the BU center.

What does this mean for the future of football, professional or otherwise? It can't be good. To begin with, some parents are bound to bar, or at least steer, their sons from the game. Even some NFL players share that impulse.

"I don't want my son to play football," New York Jets linebacker Bart Scott told the New York Daily News. Former Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner said he wants his sons to avoid the game that made him rich and famous.

As the known casualties mount, fans may also recoil or drift away in search of less destructive forms of entertainment. It's not so much fun to savor a spectacular hit once you confront the insidious harm it can do to a player's most vital organ.

Players and fans have always accepted the risk of broken bones and torn ligaments. An epidemic of irreversible, devastating mental decline will be harder to discount.

Even if parents and fans don't care, there are people who will: trial lawyers and juries. More than 2,000 NFL alumni are already suing the league, accusing it of "actively concealing the risks players faced from repetitive impacts." Colleges and high schools will find legal bills raising the price of an expensive sport. A few big damage awards could upend the sport.

Walter Olson, a liability expert at the Cato Institute who founded the blog *Overlawyered*, told me, "My reading is that if the same legal principles that are applied to other industries are applied, football either goes away or gets transformed into a very different game."

For the moment, football will go on as always, beloved as always. But like a player who has just had his teeth rattled, it may be at the start of an inexorable journey to an unwanted destination.