

Take One for the Team, or Not

By: Carl Dizon

Sisler High School, Winnipeg

Supervising Teacher: Susan Carpick

Take One for the Team, or Not

It was the third of May when Rowan Stringer played three games of rugby. She was tackled in the second game and soon felt a headache coming on. The next Monday, a player stepped on her head during a game and she knew that she had suffered a concussion. Her next game was on the eighth of May. It was her last game before her death four days later.

Rowan's autopsy determined that she had died because of Second Impact Syndrome.¹ Was Rowan's case an anomaly within the youth sports culture, or was it a hint of the systematic problems deeply ingrained within said culture? I am inclined to say that it is the latter. Cases like Rowan's expose the dangers that come with high-impact sports and it is high time that society prevent the youth from joining them.

Contact sports such as rugby and football have always been associated with danger ever since their inception. Numerous studies have shown that repeated head injuries during games can lead to long-term, degenerative brain diseases.^{2 3} One particular disease, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), is thought to be linked with concussions. Moreover, this disease has been found in high frequency among deceased football players.⁴ If so many able-bodied men displayed evidence of this disease, then what of the children who play these sports?

¹ "Meet Rowan." *Rowan's Law*, rowanslaw.ca/meet-rowan/.

² Belson, Ken. "Study Bolsters Link Between Routine Hits and Brain Disease." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Dec. 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/12/03/sports/study-bolsters-link-between-routine-hits-to-head-and-long-term-brain-disease.html.

³ Goldman, Tom. "Repeated Head Hits, Not Just Concussions, May Lead To A Type Of Chronic Brain Damage." *NPR*, NPR, 18 Jan. 2018, www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/01/18/578355877/repeated-head-hits-not-concussions-may-be-behind-a-type-of-chronic-brain-damage.

⁴ Breslow, Jason M. "76 Of 79 Deceased NFL Players Found to Have Brain Disease." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 30 Sept. 2014, www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/76-of-79-deceased-nfl-players-found-to-have-brain-disease/.

Take One for the Team, or Not

Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that young athletes display far worse cognitive function than those who start later. Researchers from Boston University's CTE Centre found that out of 42 former football players, those who started football before the age of 12 fared 20 percent worse on cognition and memory tests than other players.⁵ Although the results do not necessarily cement the connection between CTE and age, it does seem to suggest that there is a strong correlation between these two factors. There is something inherently dangerous with childhood head collisions and the potential, long-lasting consequences that come with them.

It does not help that sports leagues continue to downplay the significance of concussions on their players. Randy Ambrosie and Gary Bettman, commissioners for the Canadian Football League and the National Hockey League, respectively, believe that there has not been enough evidence to verify the link between CTE and head collisions. The NHL bolstered their stance by denying funding to concussion research⁶. The inability of these figures to recognize the long-lasting effects of head collisions endangers not only their players, but also the fans and observers of their sport. It is these people that are often the greatest promoters and, sometimes, participants of contact sports. Soft-peddling the dangers of contact sports should be a flashing red light to fans and nonfans concerned with the safety of the youth.

However, it is not so easy for people to abdicate from something so dangerous when it has become a part of everyday life. These games may be filled with thrills and adrenaline that seem to counteract the normalness of life, but they still lie within the boundaries of the ordinary.

Contact sports have become so deeply ingrained within what defines childhood that it is

⁵ Stromberg, Joseph. "New Study: Playing Tackle Football as a Child Could Be Especially Risky for the Brain." *Vox*, Vox, 28 Jan. 2015, www.vox.com/2015/1/28/7930919/football-concussions-childhood-research.

⁶ Armour, Nancy. "Skeptical of CTE Link, NHL Won't Fund Concussion Research." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 26 Jan. 2017, www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nhl/2017/01/25/nhl-concussions-research-funding-nhlpa-gary-bettman-lack-of-support/97046568/.

Take One for the Team, or Not

incredibly difficult for society to look past this familiarity and acknowledge the inherent flaws that lie within them.

For what it is worth, this is not a move to discredit the role that contact sports play in the development of a child. Parents, specifically, defend contact sports because of the values taught to children. Although contact sports are necessary elements of a child's growth, we should be aware of the risks that come with them. Adults should also be aware that there are alternatives that significantly lessen the danger of brain injury without eliminating the important values taught in contact sports. There are literally thousands of sports that children can play without causing brain injury. There is no shame nor harm in trying them.

We have much to do to combat the dangers of contact sports, but things are looking up. Just this March, Ontario passed Rowan's Law.⁷ Named after Rowan Stringer, this law is meant to promote concussion awareness among players and coaches. As other provinces hopefully follow suit, we must always remember that the problem will never fully be eliminated. As long as there is a possibility that repeated hits can cause CTE, contact sports will lead to brain injury. When laws do get passed and there is regulation, the impetus is still on the adults to prevent their children from playing contact sports at young ages.

Bennet Omalu, a prominent figure in CTE research, once asked whether we were endangering a child when we let them play high-impact contact sports.⁸ The answer is yes. Science backs this up, and so does the aggressive sports culture that continues to disregard the danger of these sports. A monumental shift in how we view contact sports is sorely needed in

⁷ Giunta, Mark. "Ontario Passes 'Rowan's Law' to Prevent Concussions in Young Athletes." *Global News*, 7 Mar. 2018, globalnews.ca/news/4068686/ontario-passes-rowans-law-to-prevent-concussions-in-young-athletes/.

⁸ Omalu, Bennet. "Don't Let Kids Play Football." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 7 Dec. 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/opinion/dont-let-kids-play-football.html.

Take One for the Team, or Not

order to prevent children from harm. The moment we accept the reality of danger in our favourite sports is the moment we prevent the same danger from ever coming in contact with our children.