

# College Football Player's Brain Injury, Suicide Raise Questions

*Posted on Sept 24, 2010 - On behalf of Johnston, Moore & Thompson*

The highly publicized suicide in April of University of Pennsylvania foot ball player Owen Thomas has added to the debate about the risk of brain injury posed by football and other contact sports. Owen reportedly committed suicide after a sudden change in his personality and mood, which is a common symptom of brain injuries. An autopsy showed he had early signs of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a type of brain damage commonly caused by repeated concussions.

A recent article by Dr. Roy Benaroch for the WebMD newsroom questioned whether the news media was overreacting and unfairly blaming Thomas's death on football. Whether the media's reaction has been overblown or not, there has been a lot of news in the past few years about mild traumatic [brain injury](#) in professional sports and among veterans.

The NFL has spent a lot of time considering whether it can reduce the risk of brain trauma and other sports injuries, and it makes sense to consider what could be done for younger players. Benaroch rightly points out that the risk of a brain injury from football, while real, is probably outweighed by the health benefits of playing sports.

At the same time, parents, coaches and schools have a duty to take reasonable steps to limit unnecessary risk -- especially when the risk is brain injury and a potentially lifelong disability for a young person.

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One aspect of Thomas's medical case that caused a stir was that Thomas was not known to have a previous history of concussions. Mild traumatic brain injury and CTE have been believed to be the result of repeated concussions.

As Benaroch points out, it is quite possible Thomas did experience other concussions but did not report them. Under-reporting has often been an issue among athletes and soldiers, perhaps because of a "macho" culture or because they don't want to let their teammates or fellow soldiers down.

Both coaches and players need to learn the symptoms of concussion and understand how serious they can be. And, recent studies of both athletes and veterans appear to indicate that repeated mild concussions can cause permanent [brain damage](#).

A severe concussion often causes an immediate loss of consciousness, although it is generally only momentary or short-term. Loss of consciousness for any length of time should be a signal to see a doctor immediately.

Milder concussions often cause a period of drowsiness, confusion, balance problems and headaches, which are often severe. These types of concussions can take weeks or months of rest to fully heal. Both players and coaches need to take them seriously.

A blow to the head that causes no further symptoms might be perfectly fine or it might not -- the science isn't in yet. What coaches, players and parents absolutely need to consider, however, is that research increasingly seems to be indicating that repeated blows to the head can cause cumulative damage, even if no single event causes symptoms.

Suicides after a mild traumatic brain injury are very rare. No one should worry excessively, and there's no reason to "pull the rug out from sports participation," as Benaroch says.

That being said, it's important to be aware of the risks. If you or your kid plays a contact sport, keep an eye on the research trends -- and be aware of how many shocks to the head you or your child is exposed to. Good information is the best place to start so you can make the best decisions.

**Source:**

"College Football, Suicide and Brain Damage" (Dr. Roy Benaroch, WebMD Newsroom, September 22, 2010)