



- [Home](#)
 - [News](#)
 - [Travel](#)
 - [Money](#)
 - [Sports](#)
 - [Life](#)
 - [Tech](#)
 - [Weather](#)
-

- **Sports »**
- **NFL**
- **Fantasy**
- **Team Pages**
- **Scores**
- **Standings**
- **Statistics**
- **Schedules**
- **Matchups/Odds**
- **More Football**

CONCUSSION DEBATE

The NFL is "taking guys and letting them go back to play very shortly after they have this concussion, within the same game. There's no reason (for them to return) except for the dollars and cents of the league."

-- Attorney Michael Kaplen, president of the Brain Injury Association of New York State

Concussions force hard look inward around NFL

By Gary Mihoces, USA TODAY

At the Washington Redskins' minicamp over the weekend, offensive tackle [Jon Jansen](#) was asked what he knew about the incidence of concussions among players.

"I've never had one diagnosed, but I don't think I've ever been smart enough to actually go in the training room when my head's been ringing," the eighth-year NFL player says. "But there are some guys that when they get dinged, it really bothers them."

Jansen, who says he has "faith in our training staff," has been following the discussions in the league and elsewhere about the management of concussions for athletes.

He's not alone. Sports' most popular professional league, where hard knocks are part of its appeal, has become the focus of a medical debate that will be the topic Tuesday when doctors and trainers from every club meet in Chicago.

A doctor in Pittsburgh says he has found his fourth case linking the death of a former NFL player to brain damage from his football career. Researchers without NFL ties say surveys of retired players show those who had multiple concussions are more likely to report being diagnosed with depression.

The NFL disputes the validity of those findings but is launching, under first-year commissioner Roger Goodell, a study of retired players for possible long-term effects of concussions.

The NFL is mandating all players this season have "baseline" tests of brain function, used previously across the league but not required for all players as a tool in determining readiness to play after a concussion. The league also intends to set up an anonymous "whistle-blower" system to guard against football priorities overriding medical concerns about concussions, and it has invited some of its medical critics to Tuesday's meeting.

Citing its crackdown for more than a decade on helmet-to-helmet hits and its past research on helmet safety, the NFL characterizes its moves as a continuation of work begun in 1994 when the league medical committee on concussions was formed.

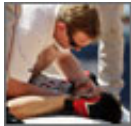
CONCUSSIONS IN DEPTH

YOU TELL US: [If you're a parent with a child who plays a contact sport, what are your concerns and experiences?](#)

Cover story: [Concussions force NFL's hand to confront rising medical problem](#)



Baseball: [MLB mindful for how head injuries affecting players](#)



Doctors disagree: [NFL disputes diagnosis of 'footballer's dementia'](#)

Q&A: [Doctor tries to demystify concussions](#)

NFL teaches players: [League wants better understanding of head injuries](#)

Tickets

Buy and sell tickets to premium and sold out events

Search by events or regions:

Location

Genre



Powered by  **TICKETS NOW**
THE POWER OF INL.

Ticket holders:

Looking to sell tickets quick? [Register now.](#)

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The NFL concussion committee is formally named the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (MTBI) Committee. "Mild" doesn't mean it's not a serious injury. It's a medical term indicating no prolonged coma. In its studies, the NFL defines an MTBI, in part, as "a traumatically induced alteration in brain function manifested by an alteration of awareness or consciousness, including but not limited to a loss of consciousness."

Goodell, at a recent NFL meeting, said, "We have been studying this issue for close to 14 years and made significant medical advances. ... But you can always look forward, and this is an area that is evolving. ... The safety and health of our players is most important."

Julian Bailes, a West Virginia University neurosurgeon who co-authored the outside-the-NFL research on retirees, is encouraged by the league's initiatives.

"We're optimistic that now it appears to be a more open and inclusive process," Bailes says.

NFL OFFSEASON

NFL's best: [You decide who the best players are at each position](#) | **Photos:** [Nominees by position](#)



Vote for the best: [DB](#) | [WR](#) | [QB](#) | [RB](#) | [LB](#) | [OL](#) | [TE](#) | [DL](#) | [Special teamers](#)

Minicamp photos: [Travel across the league as the players put the pads back on](#)



Offseason reports: [In-depth analysis of the state of every NFL team](#)

Team reports: [The latest news and rumors about your favorite NFL squad](#)



NFL draft: [Grades, analysis and our total coverage from the annual selection meeting](#) | [Signing status of top draft picks](#)



Schedule: [Week by week in the 2007 slate](#)

Free-agent tracker: [Comings and goings across the NFL](#)

How to look at problem

Bailes has been invited to Tuesday's meeting, not open to the media. Bennet Omalu, a forensic pathologist in Pittsburgh, is not invited. He says fundamental issues remain:

- Omalu says brain damage he found in the four ex-players who died in recent years is the same condition found in punch-drunk boxers. "Where (was the NFL) when we found this disease?" asks Omalu, who says football concussions caused the brain damage, which led to mental disorders.

In April, Omalu presented cases involving three of the deceased players at a meeting of the California-based Sports Concussion Institute: former Philadelphia Eagles safety Andre Waters and former Pittsburgh Steelers offensive linemen Mike Webster and Terry Long. Webster died of a heart attack. Suicide was ruled in the deaths of Waters and Long. Omalu says all three suffered from severe depression as a result of their brain injuries.

Last weekend, based on his latest inquiry, Omalu said he had found the same damage in the preserved brain tissue of former Steelers offensive lineman Justin Strzelczyk, who died in the 2004 crash of his pickup while being chased by police in New York.

Omalu says he found evidence of the disease, chronic traumatic encephalopathy, by examining brain tissue under a microscope. He says his findings will be presented to the NFL by Bailes. "I think the findings are real," Bailes says.

- The NFL, which challenges Omalu's methods and conclusions, says its

study of retired players will take two to three years. However, a 2005 study

out of the University of North Carolina, based on surveys of retired NFL players, found those who had had multiple

concussions during their careers reported a higher incidence of mental impairment and memory loss. This month, the same researchers reported a higher rate of those retirees saying they had been diagnosed with depression.

The NFL's stance: studies based on surveys, not examinations, are flawed.

The lead author of the North Carolina research, Kevin Guskiewicz, professor of exercise and sports science, also is invited to Tuesday's meeting; Bailes is among his co-authors. "We've got the only data out there. ... I'm glad to be able to have a forum to present and share that information," Bailes says.

- An NFL study of active players, done over six seasons (1996-2001) and published in 2004 found "no evidence of worsening injury or chronic cumulative effects" from multiple concussions. In a related study, the league found "many NFL players can be safely allowed to return to play" on the day of a concussion if they are without symptoms and cleared by a physician.

A 2003 study of college players (Guskiewicz was lead author) found those with previous concussions more likely to have future ones than those with no history and were slower to recover.

The NFL is "taking guys and letting them go back to play very shortly after they have this concussion, within the same game. There's no reason (for them to return) except for the dollars and cents of the league," says attorney Michael Kaplen, president of the Brain Injury Association of New York State.

Neurologist Ira Casson, new co-chair of the NFL's Committee on Mild Traumatic Brain Injury, says the study was based on evidence: "One of the criticisms that we constantly seem to have to field is that ... there is somehow an NFL conspiracy, that the NFL is just telling us what to do. ... It's just not true."

- Just before the last Super Bowl, the *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* reported former New England Patriots linebacker Ted Johnson said he wasn't given sufficient time to recover from a 2002 concussion — even though the team's trainer said he was not ready. It was also reported that Johnson said he had a second concussion in practice, more concussions over the next three seasons and now has severe depression.

Goodell, not addressing that case specifically, said in announcing the whistle-blower system that "medical decisions must override competitive decisions."

"The league is more willing now to take a look at these issues than it has been," says agent Leigh Steinberg, keynote speaker at the April concussion meeting. Beyond player health, he says, "They have a vested interest in having their critical player available for a season and for a career, not just the next game."

Christopher Nowinski, a former Harvard football player and pro wrestler who says he had concussions in both pursuits, is skeptical about the NFL initiatives. "They're 10% of the way there. They've taken some minor steps," says Nowinski, who last year published *Head Games: Football's Concussion Crisis* and works with Omalu.

Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon, a spokesman for the Sports Concussion Institute, says he had at least five concussions in his playing days, the first at 11.

"There were a lot of other times of being dinged and seeing stars ... and shaking it off," he says. "You never knew if you had

a concussion or not because you just didn't allow yourself to stop."

Moon, 50, says he has experienced no long-term effects. But he remains wary: "I always look for little signs. I make sure I get my examinations regularly."

YOU TELL US: If you're a parent with a child who plays a contact sport, what are your concerns and experiences? Share your thoughts below.

Posted

Updated

[E-mail](#) | [Save](#) | [Print](#) |

To report corrections and clarifications, contact Reader Editor [Brent Jones](#)



[Enlarge](#)

By Bill Kostroun, AP

Medical officials tend to Jets receiver Wayne Chrebet during a 2003 game against the Giants. Chrebet went on injured reserve after the game with post-concussion syndrome.



Former Chiefs QB Trent Green lies motionless after a tackle by Cincinnati's Robert Geathers on Sept. 10, 2006. He was carted off the field with a concussion that kept him out for eight weeks.

By Dick Whipple, AP

Conversation guidelines: USA TODAY welcomes your thoughts, stories and information related to this article. Please stay on topic and be respectful of others. Keep the conversation appropriate for interested readers across the map.

[Newspaper Home Delivery - Subscribe Today](#)

[Home](#) • [News](#) • [Travel](#) • [Money](#) • [Sports](#) • [Life](#) • [Tech](#) • [Weather](#)

About USATODAY.com: [Site Map](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Jobs with Us](#) | [Terms of Service](#) [Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Right](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Reprints and Permissions](#)

News Your Way: [Mobile News](#) | [Email News](#) | [Add USATODAY.com RSS feeds](#)

Partners: [USA WEEKEND](#) | [Sports Weekly](#) | [Education](#) | [Space.com](#)

Copyright 2007 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.