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Matheny's injury adds clarity to a hazy area

[Henry Schulman, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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It might be little consolation to Mike Matheny as he serves his indefinite term on the disabled list, but his extended absence following a concussion and openness about his condition could shine a bright light on a serious injury that surely strikes more catchers than

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everyone in the game realizes.

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For decades, catchers who have been smacked in the mask by foul tips have spoken blithely of having their "bell rung." They shake it off and return to their squat, woozy or not, even if that bell could be the sound of a concussion, a neurological condition that must be given time to heal.

Audi

2006 TT

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The issue is transparent in football and hockey. Forty-Niner fans are well versed in the saga of quarterback Steve Young and the multiple concussions that hastened his retirement. The injury is believed to be far less prevalent in baseball, but no less dangerous.

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"It's a rarity, but I'm not surprised by it," said Dr. Michael Collins, a neuropsychologist at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. He is a pre-eminent authority on athletic head trauma and the doctor who is treating Matheny.

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"This is an injury that can go under the radar," Collins said. "It's not like an individual wearing a cast on his head or limping. It's not like you're wearing a cast and you're immobilized and you can't move properly. With a concussion, athletes theoretically can play through this at their own risk. That's why recognizing the injury initially and using the right tools and making sure the athlete is safe to go out to play is so important."

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The high-tech masks and helmets catchers wear absorb much of the energy, but the force of repeated foul tips can be damaging.

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"It's something we all shrug off because it doesn't hurt," Matheny said. "But there are a lot of blackouts you go through, fuzziness you go through, year after year."

Mercedes-Benz

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Collins estimates athletes incur 2 million to 3 million concussions a year in the United States. He called it a "rarity" in baseball but

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cannot say how rare because there is no scientific data. That could change. As Collins and Giants head trainer Stan Conte have conferred about Matheny since he was injured May 31, they have discussed the need for such research, and a study could be forthcoming.

Already, Matheny's injury has caused the Giants to rethink how they should assess and treat catchers throughout their system when they receive multiple foul tips to the head, as Matheny did in short order.

"Mike thinks he's being a wimp by even going on the disabled list," Conte said earlier this month. "We have that mentality, which is bred into catchers. It makes us look a lot closer at what we're doing with catchers, not just at the major-league level, but at the minor-league level, too.

"We teach these kids that they're supposed to take hits and that's normal and they can't complain. And we might be missing a lot of stuff, and we're going to look at that a lot more closely in our minor leagues."

Collins said concussions are difficult to assess because they are not evident on an MRI exam or a CT scan. The injury, he said, causes more subtle damage to the chemical processes in the brain. Collins and two colleagues devised a computerized test, called ImPACT, which measures a patient's cognitive brain functions. The test provides an objective tool for gauging impairment and improvement.

Collins would not discuss Matheny's case because of doctor-patient privacy, but Matheny said Tuesday he took the test in Pittsburgh on Monday and the score was no better than it was on June 1. As a result, the Giants will not allow him to begin serious baseball work.

Each concussion causes exponentially

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more damage than the first, Collins said, but the common perception that having one makes you more vulnerable to a second is truer when the brain is not healed fully. When treated properly, an athlete can reduce his vulnerability. Collins checks off three boxes before clearing someone to return to the field: no symptoms when he is at rest, no symptoms when he exerts himself and a normal score on the ImPACT test.

Matheny said he continues to get head rushes when he stands quickly, so clearly he is not close. The Giants are being super-cautious with the 35-year-old catcher, but no more cautious than Kristin Matheny.

"My wife is very concerned," he said. "She knows what I will play through more than anybody else. She knows the things I've been blessed enough to play through that I don't know if other people would play through or not. I think she's afraid I'm going to do that with this. She's being very smart to let me know we have to take this slow, and she's right, but every day it's harder for me because there have been things worse than this to play through."

Collins, 37, was a left-handed pitcher for the 1989 University of Southern Maine team that went to the NCAA Division III World Series, so he understands the athlete mentality. As a consultant to Major League Baseball, he has seen not only catchers but umpires sustain concussions from foul tips, and said awareness was raised before Matheny got hurt. Perhaps, though, his injury will spur an even closer look.

"The Giants have been phenomenal in their response to this," Collins said. "I've been very impressed by how much Stan understands the core issues. In football, we see it all the time. He himself has voiced a desire do more research in this area. It is a research question."

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A's vs. Giants at AT&T Park

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