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CONCUSSIONS IN DEPTH

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By David Kohl, AP

Cincinnati Reds outfielder Norris Hopper checks on Ryan Freel after the two collided and Freel was knocked out during the May 28 game against the Pirates. Freel was cleared Friday to do light workouts, but he won't play until he is free of concussion symptoms.

Baseball taking note of concussions

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By **Jorge L. Ortiz, USA TODAY**

Within a three-week stretch, Cincinnati Reds outfielder [Ryan Freel](#) sustained a concussion that forced him onto the disabled list and Los Angeles Angels first baseman [Casey Kotchman](#) suffered one that sent him to the hospital.

Neither plays the position most susceptible to head injuries.

Their cases highlight that concussions are not merely the purview of football and hockey, or even of catchers, who are most vulnerable in baseball. In response, clubs have made strides in how to manage these injuries, even in the last few months.

Freel, knocked unconscious in an outfield collision with [Norris Hopper](#) on May 28, was cleared Friday to do light workouts. However, he won't be allowed to play again until he's free of symptoms — at rest and during exertion — and his results come out normal in the ImPACT test, a tool more than half the MLB clubs have acquired this season to help determine when concussed players can return to play.

In the recent past those decisions were made based on less scientific data, possibly to a player's detriment.

"It's getting out there as a real medical problem, whereas years ago it was treated as, 'Oh, the guy's got a little bell-ringer headache. Give him a week's rest and then go back,'" says Dr. John Brannan, a head and spine specialist in Cincinnati who is treating Freel. " 'With a second one, give him three weeks and go back. Third one, oh, he's done for the season.'

"These were all very old-school recommendations on how you treat these things."

Concussions — traumatic injuries to the brain that result in chemical changes — are far more common in contact sports.

But baseball still presents several instances when they can occur: foul tips off

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Head injury still affects Matheny

More than a year later, the San Francisco Giants' Mike Matheny still hasn't overcome all the post-concussion symptoms. The four-time Gold Glove award-winning catcher was forced to retire in February because of the effects of a series of concussions in May 2006.

Matheny has been leading a normal life except for wearing a monitor when exercising. He has noticed the symptoms return when his exertion level goes above 120 heartbeats a minute. Earlier this month he shot an instructional catching video and was surprised to get a headache and experience fogginess shortly afterward.

"I was moving around, blocking a little bit," says Matheny, 36. "It didn't even enter my mind, and an hour or so later it hit me like a ton of bricks. It was like, 'Wow, it's still here.' It's amazing."

Matheny's daughter and four sons all play hockey, where concussions are much more frequent than in baseball. Matheny says he often sees parents sending their kids back on the ice shortly after a head injury.

That's especially dangerous, says Micky Collins, a renowned specialist on these injuries, because recent findings reveal younger brains take longer to recover from concussions.

"I see far too many kids with post-concussion problems," says Collins, who treats 60 to 80 head-injury cases a week in Pittsburgh. "I think you'd be amazed if you knew how many kids have chronic symptoms as a result of this stuff."

By Jorge L. Ortiz

catchers' masks, collisions on the bases or in the field, getting hit in the head by a ball, taking a line drive off the head, slamming head-first onto the ground or into a fence.

Kotchman was hurt Saturday when, scrambling back to second on a pickoff attempt by Los Angeles Dodgers catcher [Russell Martin](#), he was hit in the helmet. Kotchman received three stitches on his head and is listed as day-to-day with a mild concussion.

Last season three players sustained concussions that sidelined them for extended periods, bringing the issue to the forefront.

- San Francisco Giants catcher [Mike Matheny](#) took a series of foul tips to the mask a year ago May, couldn't play the rest of the year and had to retire in February.

- Milwaukee Brewers third baseman [Corey Koskie](#) suffered whiplash when he fell awkwardly chasing a popup July 5 and hasn't played since. Koskie, who declined to be interviewed, is not expected back soon, if at all.

- St. Louis Cardinals center fielder [Jim Edmonds](#) banged his head on the warning track after crashing into a fence June 21. He returned after sitting out three games, but the post-concussion symptoms lingered and he started only four games in the season's last month and a half. The aftereffects lasted into the offseason, although they didn't keep him from helping the Cardinals win the World Series.

"I remember not being able to concentrate on a lot of things," Edmonds said earlier this season. "On the field it just didn't feel good, but off the field I was aware that driving and the stress of everyday life was a little bit more difficult to handle. I remember driving home and not remembering passing off-ramps."

Frustration for athletes

Loss of short-term memory is one of about 25 symptoms of a concussion, says Dr. Micky Collins of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, regarded as one of the country's leading authorities in head injuries. Other symptoms include headaches, nausea, irritability, fogginess, blurred vision, fatigue, sensitivity to light and dizziness.

Collins, who helped devise the ImPACT test and treated Matheny and Koskie, says one of the most significant advancements is the realization concussions need to be managed individually. He and Los Angeles Dodgers trainer Stan Conte believe the prominence of the Matheny, Koskie and Edmonds cases raised awareness.

"We see athletes who can get better in a day or two based upon a less severe injury, and we see athletes who take months and months to recover from a single event, as well," Collins says.

"Every athlete is going to take a different amount of time to recover based on a whole host of factors."

That can make the injury extremely frustrating for hard-driving athletes eager to get back on the field. The same mind-set that makes them successful in their sport can prove detrimental in recovery. Increased exertion can exacerbate the symptoms and prolong recovery time.

Mild concussions also are difficult to recognize, even by the player. Returning to the field before fully healing exposes the athlete to exponentially more damage in case of another blow to the head.

"The next hit is not added one-plus-one, it's one-plus-four, and the third one is one-plus-12," says Conte, who was the Giants' trainer until last October. "So until the brain is recovered, the guy is more susceptible to less of an impact causing more of a problem."

Word spreads

Collins says MLB clubs have been receptive to implementing the ImPACT concussion management program, which measures brain functionality. The computer-based test lasts 20-25 minutes and has several components, including a questionnaire, to measure reaction time and verbal and visual memory. Healthy players get measured to provide a baseline result, which can be compared to a result taken after a head injury.

Clubs in the NFL (25), NHL (two), NBA (three), several auto racing circuits and Olympic organizations and high schools and colleges across Canada and the USA are using the ImPACT test to help in concussion management. Fewer than five MLB clubs were using the program last season; 18 have it now. The Giants, Matheny's former club, are among the new ones.

Known as one of the toughest players in the game, Matheny had six foul tips bounce off him in a week in May 2006 and says he started feeling the effects after three, occasionally forgetting what pitch he had called. He kept playing anyway. After three more he finally consulted with Conte.

"I felt maybe I was being a baby going to the trainer for that," Matheny says. "That's just the way I was taught the game, which isn't exactly smart. But I do believe there's a fine line there. If you waited till you felt good, you'd never play."

When Matheny's symptoms continued, Conte sought help from Collins, who at the time had not encountered concussions from foul tips.

A month later, after news of Matheny's condition spread, catchers from different levels of the game contacted Collins reporting similar symptoms. More than likely they had concussions and didn't know it.

Conte and assistant Dave Groeschner, now the Giants' head trainer, surveyed 261 pro catchers and learned 20-25% had experienced some concussion symptoms from foul tips. "So we think that these things happen all the time but we don't actually pick up on them," Conte says. "They're undiagnosed minor concussions."

Oakland A's designated hitter [Mike Piazza](#), a catcher during his 15 previous seasons in the majors, says professional athletes have a "gladiator mentality" that makes them less receptive to warning signs.

Piazza recalls being hit in the head by a batter's backswing in 1998. He was knocked unconscious and later told he was loopy and incoherent. Concussion. "But you know what," he says, "I had a couple of aspirin, went to bed, the next day we had a day game and I was in there, 98 degrees."

Freel was so weakened by bouts of dizziness and nausea that he could barely get out of bed for five days and had headaches just from reading. But he does not intend to change his daredevil playing style.

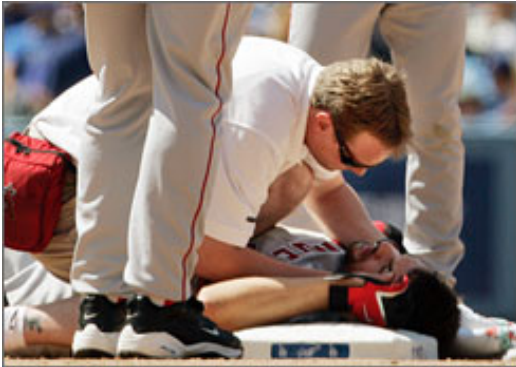
"I'm still going to be aggressive," Freel says. "I'm sure I'll think about it, but as far as getting out there, I don't feel any fear of something like this happening again."

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By Reed Saxon, AP

Casey Kotchman of the L.A. Angels is examined by a team trainer after an errant pickoff throw June 16 against the Dodgers hit him in the helmet. He was diagnosed with a concussion but is not expected to spend any time on the disabled list.

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