

NY Mets still learning how to handle concussions in wake of Ryan Church, David Wright injuries

by [Brian Costa](#)/The Star-Ledger

Friday August 21, 2009, 7:00 AM



Frank Franklin

II/Associated PressThe Mets' David Wright, center, is checked out by trainers after taking a Matt Cain fastball to the head last Saturday, resulting in a concussion.

NEW YORK -- Less than 48 hours had passed since David Wright took a 94-mph fastball off his helmet. And yet, when he returned to Citi Field on Monday, he didn't have a bruise. He wasn't wearing a bandage. He wasn't holding an ice pack.

The Mets third baseman was walking and talking like someone who could easily play in a game a couple hours later. And that's the problem.

At the medical level, baseball teams have become far more knowledgeable about concussions and how to treat them. But at the baseball level, where playing through pain is a virtue, misperceptions still exist about an injury whose symptoms are often invisible.

That much was evident Sunday when Mets manager Jerry Manuel implicitly questioned the toughness of Ryan Church, who missed extended time after suffering two concussions last season. "That's the thing that would really (tick) you off," Church said. "You're the only one that really knows. It's your brain. It's one of those things where, looking at you, 'He looks fine.' Yeah, I may look fine on the outside, but you don't know what's going on on the inside."

Stung by the criticism they took for their mishandling of Church's concussions last year, the Mets have taken a far more cautious approach with Wright. They put him on the disabled list the day after his injury, much sooner than the three weeks they waited to do so with Church after his second concussion. And while Wright has insisted he will play again this season, the Mets have been non-committal.

But it remains unclear how much the Mets have learned about concussion management besides erring on the side of caution, which was easy to do with Wright with his team out of contention. The Mets do not allow their medical staff to speak to reporters.

"I think the whole industry is learning more and more about those things," general manager Omar Minaya said.

But when asked what the Mets have learned, Minaya declined to answer.

Specialist Micky Collins of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center is a leading expert in sports concussion management who has consulted with many major-league teams. Collins said MLB has made significant strides in how it handles concussions, which are far less prevalent in baseball than in football and hockey.

Teams are more aware how widely the aftereffects of concussions can vary. And all 30 teams are now equipped with the ImPACT test, a computer program that measures brain function and helps determine when it is safe for a player to return.

"Fifteen years ago it was smelling salts and 'how many fingers am I holding up' that predicated the return to play," Collins said. "There's been a lot of advances made in baseball."

But for all the medical advances, concussions are still sometimes viewed differently than more common bone-and-flesh injuries. An athlete can appear able to hit, run and throw with no problem while suffering from post-concussion symptoms such as headaches and dizziness.

And Church did just that in the days after his second concussion, pinch hitting in games he said he doesn't even remember.

"It's not like athletes have a cast over their heads," Collins said. "It's something that can be an invisible injury, and because of that, I think it's been a little bit more difficult to accept by the general public and by clinicians, even."

After apologizing for his comments about Church on Tuesday, Manuel went on to criticize him further.

He said Church, who was traded to the Braves last month, was partly to blame for the way his concussions were handled last year. It was difficult to know what to do with Church, Manuel said, because he didn't communicate clearly enough about how he was feeling.

But Church said it is only natural for players to try to talk their way into the lineup by downplaying the severity of an injury. When he finally told then-manager Willie Randolph he was unable to play last year, Church recalled feeling ashamed.

"It almost brought tears to my eyes, because I had never done it before, going in there and asking a manager, 'Hey, I need a day off,'" Church said. "It just hurts."

Wright expressed a similar "embarrassment" about being put on the DL on Monday.

For that reason, Church said the decision should be taken out of players' hands entirely. He said teams should automatically put players on the DL when they suffer a concussion. And since his injury, teams have been more proactive about doing so immediately or shortly after the injuries. The Dodgers put pitcher Hiroki Kuroda on the DL on Wednesday after he took a line drive off the head the same night Wright got hit, even though Kuroda said he was feeling better.

And the Giants put pitcher Joe Martinez, a South Orange native and Seton Hall Prep grad, on the DL the day after he suffered a concussion and three small fractures to his head on April 9.

He returned to the mound on Aug. 5.

Mets catcher Brian Schneider, who thinks he had concussions that went undiagnosed early in his career, said he hopes teams have learned from Church's experience.

"You just realize what could happen, how long the effects could linger and how it's more serious sometimes than you think it is," Schneider said. "I think everyone just thinks, 'Oh, concussion, you're fine.' They don't realize it's something more than that."