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[Tennis / U.S. Open](#)
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[Soccer](#)
[Horse Racing](#)
[Other Sports](#)
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[Fantasy Sports](#)
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Dangerous job: Matheny's season over after too many blows to head

By JANIE McCAULEY
Associated Press Sports

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) -Mike Matheny had begun power washing his deck last month when the symptoms returned. Headaches. Fogginess. Short-term memory loss.

All were signs the Giants catcher had yet to recover from the concussion that has sidelined him since May 31, and now for the rest of the season, following a series of foul tips that caromed off his mask with such force that they damaged his brain.

Even the lightest bit of exertion - such as climbing stairs - is too much for Matheny, who's known for having played through all sorts of aches and pains during a 13-year career.

This time, he took enough blows in succession to put him on the disabled list at the end of May. More than two months later, his brain still hasn't healed. It's tough for him to watch his teammates on TV, let alone take in a game in person.

"I walk into a room and forget why I went in there," Matheny said, sitting in San Francisco's dugout before a recent game. "I forget things I've never forgotten before. I've lost my wallet and phone I can't tell you how many times.

"Sometimes I shake my head and laugh at myself," he said. "There's nothing I can do about it."

A concussion is a shaking of the brain that causes chemical changes. Athletes suffer an estimated 300,000 of them nationwide each year, according to the Sports Concussion Program at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Most recover fully, but experts believe a person who suffers a concussion is more prone in the future.

Repeated trauma of the brain can result in cognitive and neurological disabilities, even death.

"With a single concussion, you're going to recover," said Dr. Micky Collins, assistant director of the University of Pittsburgh concussion center where Matheny has been treated. "The problem is, when you have a concussion and undergo these chemical changes, you're a lot more vulnerable if you have a second before the first one is recovered."

While comparatively rare in baseball, concussions have ended celebrated careers in other sports. NFL quarterbacks Troy Aikman and Steve Young eventually had to call it quits after too many concussions. So did hockey stars Pat LaFontaine and Mike Richter.

Among baseball players, catchers seem particularly susceptible. Matheny's plight has others in the close-knit fraternity wondering when a foul tip, errant swing or home-plate collision might sideline them. Or, worse yet, end their career, suddenly a distinct possibility for Matheny.

The Padres' Mike Piazza points to several dents and dings on his mask from where he's been hit in the head this season by either the ball or bat. He considers himself lucky.

"Catchers do receive the brunt of the head injuries. I've had minor vertigo in game situations," said Piazza, who estimates he's had four or five concussions over the years and also got hit in the head by a pitch from Roger Clemens.

"Fortunately for me it hasn't affected my playing, but it could. You get a little lethargic. Your reflexes aren't as quick and you get dazed."

A ball can come off a bat at a greater velocity than a pitched one, and some pitchers throw fastballs approaching 100 mph. Catchers compare the impact to getting punched in the face.

Matheny uses the hockey-style mask preferred by some catchers for its better sight lines, and he was initially convinced it contributed to his concussion. But the Giants enlisted two testing centers to compare the impact resistance of the hockey mask to the traditional catcher's mask - and, so far, they appear to offer similar protection.

Around baseball, opinions vary on the traditional versus hockey mask debate.

"Personally, I don't like the new mask, I don't think it absorbs the blow like the other ones," said Arizona Diamondbacks manager Bob Melvin, a former catcher who had one concussion while in the minors. "I'm concerned with the blows these guys are taking."

Oakland's Jason Kendall uses the old-fashioned version.

"Jason has taken hits on his mask that have bent the mask," Athletics trainer Larry Davis said. "There are a lot of hazards involved. They called catching gear for years the tools of ignorance."

Piazza uses a specially ordered mask that looks like a traditional mask but is heavier.

"It protects me a lot better," he said. "I've never sustained an injury because of a foul tip. You can't protect everything. You'd be like a knight in shining armor."

Home-plate collisions pose another risk to catchers.

Boston's Jason Varitek will never forget a Double-A game when Kevin Polkavich clobbered him in a collision at the plate, bending Varitek's mask. He got the out and stayed in the game, despite seeing spots. He was woozy for a week and had a constant headache, yet never saw a doctor.

The durable Kendall, who's caught more than 140 games in a season seven times in his career, estimates he's had seven concussions in 11 big league seasons. One came when Gary Sheffield barreled into him at home plate in the late '90s at Dodger Stadium.

"I ended up going to the hospital with a Grade II concussion," he said. "I was in la-la land."

The Giants didn't track the number of shots Matheny took to the head before he went on the disabled list, nor can they be sure which were most significant. The club is in the process of examining video of every pitch he caught over the last three years to determine how many foul tips a catcher typically takes over the course of a season.

The last straw for Matheny came when, during a three-game series with Florida in late May, the four-time Gold Glove winner was hit in the head several times by foul balls.

After taking two foul tips to the head in the series opener, he sat out the middle game against the Marlins. He saw a doctor, but passed the neurological testing and was back in the lineup the next day. In that game, a ball hit him square on the chin so hard that it traveled back toward the pitcher. That's when trainer Stan Conte pulled him from the game.

Matheny, who turns 36 next month, remembers those, as well as a few at Colorado in April. An umpire contacted him to tell the catcher he recalled several foul tips Matheny took during a series at Oakland.

After going on the DL, Matheny became frustrated because he was incapable of focusing on his most basic daily duties, such as sitting down with pitchers to study opposing hitters.

Eventually, he left the team so he could recover away from the sport's pressures. He now spends most of his time back home in Chesterfield, Mo.

"Some days," he said, "doing absolutely nothing at home, I feel good."

But when Matheny exerts himself through physical activity, even minor household chores, the chemicals in his brain can become stirred up again.

Despite their frequency, it can be difficult to determine the severity of concussions. CT scans and MRIs can reveal bleeding but fail to show how a brain is functioning.

"We've learned more about concussions in the past five years than the previous 50," said Collins, of the University of Pittsburgh concussion center. "It wasn't long ago that it was smelling salts and `How many

fingers am I holding up?"

Collins' concussion center developed a computerized test called "ImPACT" that puts the brain to work and derives data about points of trauma - measuring attention, memory, processing speed and reaction time.

"How can you manage something if you can't measure it?" Collins said. "It's one of those things where this type of evaluation is important."

Some hockey and football teams, NASCAR, and European soccer and rugby clubs also use that test to better determine the severity of brain injuries in athletes. Major League Baseball umpires now undergo brain testing before each season, and Matheny is determined to help bring such testing to baseball.

But that will require some change in what Varitek calls the "cowboy mentality" among major league catchers.

Trainers Davis and Conte both say they have hesitated to run onto the field to check on catchers, knowing that might bring teasing from teammates. Trainers have to balance the macho nature of catching with their concern for a player's health.

"Catching is a very dangerous job," Davis said. "You've got to take your hat off to a guy who wants to do this for a living. It's a tough way to go."

As for Matheny, his future remains clouded. He announced Aug. 3 that he was done for the season.

Before making a decision on 2007, doctors would like to see him fully functional within nine months. If not, returning probably won't even be an option. He wouldn't be cleared medically to compete.

That leaves the Giants in a touchy spot, because Matheny is signed through next season and the club might not know his status until after spring training starts.

Last month, the team had another scare: Triple-A catcher Guillermo Rodriguez went down with a concussion on a foul tip.

Matheny has told general manager Brian Sabean he understands the team must move forward with plans for next year, with or without him. He also realizes that he's more susceptible to further damage if he were to be hit again - a fact of which his wife and five children are also well aware.

Other catchers say they welcome steps to learn more about concussions.

"I think baseball has become a little bit more hip to it," Varitek said. "Trainers are more hands-on and teams aren't as apt to run their guys out there for 130 or 140 games."

"Perceptions are changing, and that's important," he said. "Ultimately it's not about baseball, it's about life."

On the Net:

<http://www.sportsmedicine.upmc.com/ConcussionProgram.htm>

<http://www.impacttest.com>

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