

Terry Frei: Sore subject of sports-related brain injuries must be discussed

By Terry Frei The Denver Post The Denver Post

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Football almost killed Ed Reinhardt. The toll of the brain injury the former Colorado tight end suffered in a September 1984 game at Oregon has been documented many times, most recently in my Sunday story.

Near the end of my visit with Ed and his parents, Floyd Edward and Patricia, we got around to placing Ed's situation in the context of the heightened attention on concussions and brain injuries in sports and the military.

Ed's three brothers also played major-college football. His older brother, John, was playing for Nebraska the day Ed was injured in the Buffs' game at Oregon, and Patricia was at that game in Lincoln, Neb. Younger brother Tom also played at CU, and the "baby," Matt, played at Oregon.

I asked if, after all these years and with Ed's life so affected, the family was bitter toward the game.

His parents both said no.

Ed's father noted that the lessons learned in football have helped his other sons in life. "They're strong, they stay with it, they're leaders in their field," Floyd Edward said. "I say you have to let them do what they want to do. What I told our boys and I tell the folks who ask about it, if they're going to play, they should be in excellent physical condition. Ed was. ... It wasn't a violent hit. I've seen 10 times worse. I've seen Broncos get hit so hard, I didn't think they'd ever get up."

By now, Patricia is able to see the tape of Ed being tackled and his head striking the artificial turf, the frantic aftermath, without feeling sick. But that wasn't the case at first. She turned to Ed and said, "The first time I saw the film of them pulling you off the field on a stretcher, I had to leave the house and go out and walk."

She added, "Ed was a risk-taker who was hurt taking a risk."

I asked Ed, "Should people play football now?"

"Yes," he said.

Then Ed tapped the side of his head with an open palm.

"But ... boom!" he said.

Yes, as exceptional as Ed's injury was (and still is), with one hit or one bump, or more often through the cumulative effect of repeated blows to the head, the results can be devastating. We have become more aware of that in the nearly 28 years since that game in Eugene, Ore.

Football-related pain

Next, as Ed had done several times during our conversation, he came right back at me with childlike inquisitiveness.

"What's your opinion?" he asked.

By then, he had spotted the several scars on my right knee, remnants from a time when ACL surgery required major incisions, large permanent scars and eight weeks in a toe-to-hip cast.

I had told him I had football to thank for them, but I hadn't mentioned that both major surgeries were performed at Eugene's Sacred Heart Hospital, where he had been rushed after his injury.

I told him I have mixed feelings. In my generation and also later, if you played sports, it was a virtual given that

football was one of them, at least initially. While I despise athletic overspecialization at a young age, it's good that skipping football while trying other sports is more accepted.

I said that to Ed, and I stopped there.

The rest? I've written about concussion issues plaguing current athletes, especially in hockey and football. I've got the bad knee, as I know so many others do, because of football. (I aggravated my post-surgery problems by insisting on remaining a catcher in baseball.)

I have the aches and pains, but I know they're minor compared to those of the men I've read about and written about in chronicling the plight of former NFL players and their fights for disability benefits. I've followed the reports of devastating brain injuries leading to shortened lives. And, yes, I'm the son of a man who played, coached and worked in football until the day he died, and I saw the good and the bad in the college and pro games from a semi-insider's perspective.

On second thought ...

So this is the most honest answer I should have given Ed last week. At this point, I'm like Ed's dad. I still can say to young men, in my family or anyone else's, if you want to try football, sure, go for it. But I'm wavering. I'm not sure I'll still be saying that in a year or two. I might be saying: No way.

I've thought more about how funny it is that with each event that draws attention to the issue, we highlight the dangers of the game. Then without a beat, we go back to covering men who for the most part seem to think that they're bulletproof and invulnerable.

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