

Eye-Opening Cost of Playing Sports in ‘Head Games’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 28, 2012 - 8:48am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – A father speaks through tears about the teammates for his deceased son standing at the funeral in the balcony paying honor to their lost captain and it’s impossible not to ask the daunting question at the core of “Head Games,” the new documentary from the great Steve James (“Hoop Dreams,” “The Interrupters”) that opens this weekend at the Siskel Film Center – how much longer can this go on? How much longer can we let grown men and women ruin their lives by repeated head injuries in the NFL, NHL, and other sports? And how long can we let kids do the same? As a reporter says candidly, “*A lot of people don’t want to believe this is as serious as it is.*” We have to start believing.

“Head Games” is an eye-opener. It’s a film that teaches while it essentially terrifies. I have two young boys, and when they express interest in playing sports, it will be impossible not to remember what I learned from this film. The fact is there are a lot of myths out there about concussions. First, the very definition of a concussion is questionable. All the times a player felt dizzy or “shook it off,” that may have done the same brain damage as a concussion. Second, most of the damage is irreversible. The myth that a player is healed enough after a few days to get another one? Nonsense. When a doctor is asked how long players should wait to return to play after a concussion? “*Fifty years.*” Another suggests, slightly more reasonably, that three diagnosed concussions should force a player to retire from the sport. And what about this terrifying conjecture? What if it’s not the concussions but the hundreds of sub-concussive hits that are doing the most damage?



Head Games
Photo credit: Variance Films

Can you imagine? The definition of concussions are lowered to more accurately reflect the damage and three of them ends a career? The NFL would be over as James’ film terrifyingly notes how many football players are getting head injuries before they’re old enough to drive much less play in the NFL. And we all know the billion-dollar machine that is the NFL is not going anywhere. And so Christopher Nowinski, who wrote the book “Head Games: Football’s Concussion Crisis,” which was the inspiration for this film, faces a lot of resistance. He faces coaches who schedule mandatory weight training during his symposiums. And, in a riveting scene, an athletic director who suggests it’s not a problem because of all the players who don’t have concussion symptoms (to which Nowinski brilliantly responds that it’s equivalent to saying that not everyone who smokes gets lung cancer as a defense for lighting up.)

Former WWE superstar Nowinski is the main focus of “Head Games” and his efforts to uncover the true medical damage of repeated head injuries in sports along with New York Times reporter Alan Schwarz makes for riveting filmmaking for about 45 minutes. Nowinski finds some amazing parallels between brain damage from dead football players and their injury histories. And then there are the men who clearly suffer from dementia and loss of focus as they get older. This is clearly going to be the tragic story of the next decade of pro football as more and more household names suffer from repeated head injuries. The fact is that it’s an issue that hasn’t quite hit home yet. Wait until a Hall of Famer displays undeniable head injury damage. We’ll all take notice when that happens and it WILL happen.



Head Games
Photo credit: Variance Films

The football story of “Head Games” would have made an amazing TV doc, maybe a “30 for 30” on ESPN, but then James loses a little bit of focus as the film moves to hockey, soccer, and other sports, getting a bit repetitive and borderline uninteresting before swinging back to Nowinski for the final act. James should have stuck with him and Schwarz for the entire film. The “other sports are bad too” middle act adds weight to the seriousness of the overall issue but causes a bit of lost focus.

James regains that lost focus by the end and it becomes more and more difficult to watch the scene to which the director keeps returning – a youth football game in Chicago. As coaches and parents cheer on players, we get more and more concerned about the well-being of these kids as a doctor suggests that no one should play these kind of sports under FOURTEEN. Can you imagine how that would change the country?

We’re all going to have to be concerned about more and more athletes as these issues are not going away. They’re not going to be swept under the rug. More than anything, “Head Games” feels like a first chapter in a very long story. Although I must admit that I’m writing this while the Ravens and Browns play in the background and I’m looking forward to Sunday’s action. I’m not going to stop watching even if the hits feel a little more tragic than they did before.

“Head Games” was directed by Steve James and opens at the Siskel Film Center on September 28, 2012.



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