

A Football Player's Safe Exit

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#) MARCH 21, 2015

It takes a special kind of professional football player to walk away from cheering crowds and multimillion-dollar paychecks. But that is what Chris Borland, a star rookie for the San Francisco 49ers, felt compelled to do in the face of mounting evidence that the game's repetitive head trauma could leave him gravely and permanently damaged. "I just thought to myself, 'What am I doing?'" the 24-year-old defensive player explained in [an interview with ESPN](#). "Is this how I'm going to live my adult life, banging my head, especially with what I've learned and know about the dangers?"

What the young man so gifted at tackling had researched was increasing evidence that long-term cognitive problems are linked to the repeated head trauma suffered in the violent hits that are part of football's popularity. Degenerative brain disease was found in 76 of 79 former pro players whose brains were posthumously studied by federal researchers, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs, which runs a research brain bank and studies head injuries.



Chris Borland, No. 50, of the San Francisco 49ers. Credit Thearon W. Henderson/Getty Images

As the evidence grows, thousands of retired players are suing the [National Football League](#), claiming all manner of brain damage, depression and memory loss. The N.F.L. has finally acknowledged it has a problem and is trying to upgrade its protocols to minimize hard hits to players' heads.

Beyond the pro game, the decision by Mr. Borland to quit after one season to protect his health should be carefully noted by parents of the hundreds of thousands of youngsters eager to play each year at the peewee, high school and college levels. Research published in January in the medical journal [Neurology](#) found that former professionals who started playing before the age of 12 performed "significantly worse" in mental dexterity tests than those who began tackle football later, according to a study by the Boston University School of Medicine. Even in the absence of diagnosed concussions, high school players showed measurable brain changes after just a single season of tackle play, according to a separate study last December by the Wake Forest School of Medicine.

President Obama spoke as a parent two years ago when he admitted, "If I had a son, I'd have to think long and hard before I let him play football." Not many politicians can afford to talk that way in this football-happy nation. Polls suggest that while many parents say they don't want their sons playing football, most expect the game to be no less popular in 20 years. Whether, like the head-pounding sport of boxing, football evolves as an ever more guilty pleasure for fans remains to be seen. But Mr. Borland set quite an example in walking away.