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## Dying to Play

By KEVIN COOK

THE beating goes on. This past Saturday a Tulane University football player, Devon Walker, collided with a teammate while making a tackle. Walker, who is 21, broke his neck. Fans gasped. Doctors performed C.P.R. He may or may not walk again.

The incident was an urgent reminder of a problem that even the [National Football League](#) seems finally ready to acknowledge: all that on-field headbanging is taking a serious toll.

Just three days earlier, the N.F.L. said that it would [donate \\$30 million](#) to the National Institutes of Health to support research on brain injuries and other serious medical conditions prominent in athletes — an announcement that came hours before the Giants and Cowboys kicked off the 2012-13 season in a festive, nationally televised event that drew more than 20 million viewers. (For comparison, that rivals the number of Americans who tuned in to Bill Clinton's speech at the Democratic National Convention the same night.)

Earlier that day, the journal *Neurology* carried the results of a study of 3,439 retired pro football players. It reported that veterans of N.F.L. combat are more likely than the rest of us to die from brain diseases including Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Not 50 percent more likely, or twice as likely, but three to four times more likely.

America's ready for some football, but the human brain may never be.

More than 3,000 former players have sued the N.F.L., charging that the league failed to inform them of the dangers they faced, to protect them against concussions and to provide health care. Those men played in the years when nobody talked about getting "concussed." You got your bell rung, your clock cleaned. You got nuked or blown up. You got your head handed to you. And unless you liked being called frilly names, you got back on the field as soon as you could locate it.

We know more about concussions today, but not how to prevent them. No helmet can offer much help, since the injury occurs when a fast-moving body suddenly stops or changes direction. The brain keeps moving until it collides with the inside of the skull, causing damage that can lead to chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or C.T.E.

Sports science's next frontier may be discovering why some brains are so vulnerable to concussions while others seem resistant. Meanwhile, it is heartbreaking when football heroes wind up in wheelchairs or worse. John Mackey, the pioneering president of the N.F.L. Players' Association, was found to have frontal temporal dementia in his early 60s. Former Bears safety Dave Duerson was 50 years old when he committed suicide, shooting himself in the chest so that his brain could be studied. (It showed signs of C.T.E.) Junior Seau, a 12-time Pro Bowler for the Chargers, was 43 when he shot himself in the chest last spring.

Fans may wonder whether they should support such a sport. Many parents face a more practical question: Should our kid play football? When the Raiders' Phil Villapiano, one of the hardest hitters in N.F.L. history, watched his son Mike get his bell rung in a high school game, they had a father-son talk about it. Mike dreamed of playing college football, maybe even making the N.F.L. They both felt he wouldn't get there by sitting on the sidelines, waiting for a doctor to send him back in. Father and son agreed: Mike kept his mouth shut and his options open. He stayed in the game and led his team to a state championship.

I'm not about to second-guess the Villapianos, whose fortitude I admire. But no family should face such a choice.

The N.F.L. now uses simple written or [computerized cognitive tests](#) to assess concussions. Before each season, players are shown a page featuring 20 words and asked to write down as many as they remember when the page is taken away. The same with 20 simple pictures: Draw as many as you can remember. Later, after an on-field hammering rings their mental bells, the pros take the same test. Match your baseline results or sit out.

Some players cheat. They purposely give wrong answers on the preseason baseline test in hopes of passing the test when they're concussed. But no screening plan is foolproof, and this one has the virtue of simplicity. Every college and high school football program should use such a test until we find something better. Above all, though, football needs a culture change: parents, coaches and fans must never pressure an injured player to "get back in the game" before it's clear that he's of sound mind and body.

How should we view last week's donation from the N.F.L. to the N.I.H.? Cynics will no doubt see the pledge as a cheap public relations move. Given that \$30 million represents four and a half minutes of commercial time during the [Super Bowl](#), the league's donation might seem paltry.

But it's a start.

*Kevin Cook is the author of "The Last Headbangers: NFL Football in the Rowdy, Reckless '70s — the Era That Created Modern Sports."*