

PRO FOOTBALL

C.T.E. Is Found in an Ex-Giant Tyler Sash, Who Died at 27

By **BILL PENNINGTON** JAN. 26, 2016



Tyler Sash running onto the field before the Giants' season opener in September 2011. Sash played a total of 23 games, plus four postseason games, for the Giants. Credit Ronald Martinez/Getty Images

When the former Giants safety Tyler Sash was found dead at age 27 of an accidental overdose of pain medications at his Iowa home on Sept. 8, his grieving family remained consumed by a host of unanswered questions about the final, perplexing years of Sash's life.

Cut by the Giants in 2013 after what was at least his fifth concussion, Sash had returned to Iowa and increasingly displayed surprising and irregular behavior, family members said this week.

He was arrested in his hometown, Oskaloosa, for public intoxication after leading the police on a four-block chase with a motorized scooter, a pursuit that ended with Sash fleeing toward a wooded area.

Sash had bouts of confusion, memory loss and minor fits of temper. Although an Iowa sports celebrity, both as a [Super Bowl](#)-winning member of the Giants and a popular star athlete at the University of Iowa, Sash was unable to seek meaningful employment because he had difficulty focusing long enough to finish a job.

Barnetta Sash, Tyler's mother, blamed much of her son's changeable behavior, which she had not observed in the past, on the powerful prescription drugs he was taking for a football-related shoulder injury that needed surgery. Nonetheless, after his death she donated his brain to be tested for chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or C.T.E., a degenerative brain disease caused by repeated trauma that has been found in dozens of former [N.F.L.](#) players.



Sash, who was cut by the Giants in 2013 after what was at least his fifth concussion, was found to have the degenerative brain disease C.T.E. Credit Demetrius Freeman/The New York Times

Last week, representatives from Boston University and the Concussion Legacy Foundation notified the Sash family that C.T.E. had been diagnosed in Tyler's brain and that the disease, which can be confirmed only posthumously, had advanced to a stage rarely seen in someone his age.

Dr. Ann McKee, chief of neuropathology at the V.A. Boston Healthcare System and a professor of neurology and pathology at the Boston University School of Medicine who conducted the examination, said Tuesday that the severity of the C.T.E. in Sash's brain was about the same as the level found in the brain of the former N.F.L. star Junior Seau, who committed suicide in 2012 at age 43.

Doctors grade C.T.E. on a severity scale from 0 to 4; Sash was at Stage 2. McKee, comparing the results to other athletes who died at a similar age, said she had seen only one case, that of a 25-year-old former college player, with a similar amount of the disease.

The Sash family, who released the findings, said the outcome brought some clarity to the end of Tyler Sash's life.

"My son knew something was wrong, but he couldn't express it," Barnetta Sash said Monday night. "He was such a good person, and it's sad that he struggled so with this — not knowing where to go with it."

She continued: "Now it makes sense. The part of the brain that controls impulses, decision-making and reasoning was damaged badly."

McKee said that "very classic lesions of C.T.E." were found in the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain and in the amygdala. The location of lesions has bearing on symptoms exhibited.

"It helps explain his inattention, his short fuse and his lack of focus," McKee said.

McKee added: "Even though he was only 27, he played 16 years of football, and we're finding over and over that it's the duration of exposure to football that gives you a high risk for C.T.E. Certainly, 16 years is a high exposure."

An autopsy revealed that the cause of Sash's death was a lethal mixture of two powerful pain medications, methadone and hydrocodone. A medical examiner called the overdose "accidental drug toxicity," adding that a recent shoulder dislocation and a history of chronic shoulder pain were "significant conditions" in the death.

Sash, a sixth-round draft pick of the Giants, was primarily a reserve for the team during two seasons, most notably during the team's 2011 season, which ended with a Super Bowl victory.

He played a total of 23 games plus four postseason games and was cut by the Giants weeks before the opener of the 2013 season, reaching an injury settlement after he sustained a concussion in the final game of the preseason.

In 2012, Sash was suspended for four games for violating the N.F.L.'s policy on performance-enhancing substances by testing positive for Adderall, a stimulant used primarily to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Sash said at the time that he had used the drug legally under a doctor's orders to combat anxiety before a public speaking engagement but did not know it was on the league's banned list.

At Iowa, Sash started 37 games from 2007 to 2010, earning first-team All-Big Ten honors in his final season.

Sash came from a football family. His father, Michael, played in college and his brother, Josh, was a good enough high school player that he considered playing in college as well.

Josh Sash, eight years older than Tyler, said his brother sustained at least two concussions in high school, one documented concussion in college and two with the Giants, including one in the Giants' playoff victory over the San Francisco 49ers that earned the team its berth in the Super Bowl after the 2011 season.

In the San Francisco game, Sash, who was 215 pounds, was blindsided by a brutal and borderline late hit on a punt return by a 281-pound defensive lineman.

"Those concussions are the ones we definitely know about," Josh Sash said. "If you've played football, you know there are often other incidents."

Experts believe that less severe blows to the head — those not strong enough to cause a concussion — also significantly contribute to the damage that results in C.T.E. These lesser traumas are especially troubling, neurologists say, because they happen frequently in contact sports like football but go undiagnosed.

Josh Sash, who has two young sons, said it would be difficult for him to recommend that his children play football when they grow older. Barnetta Sash, who said she had always loved football, felt similarly.

“I want other parents to realize they need to have a conversation with their kids and not just think it’s a harmless game — because it’s not,” said Barnetta Sash, whose daughter, Megan, has three children.

The N.F.L. has agreed to a court settlement with former players that would compensate them for severe neurological conditions. The settlement is being appealed. Sash’s family would not be eligible for a payment because only the families of players who died and were found to have had C.T.E. before the settlement was approved in April 2015 may receive compensation.

When Tyler Sash returned to Iowa after the Giants released him in 2013, Barnetta Sash said he hid his shoulder injury for some time because he still hoped to sign with another N.F.L. team. Both shoulders had been operated on in college.

“His shoulders were an ongoing problem; he couldn’t sleep on either shoulder,” said Barnetta, who said her son sometimes would go two days without sleeping because of the discomfort.

Tyler received a doctor’s prescription for hydrocodone and awaited doctors’ evaluations about surgery that could repair the shoulder. He worked at jobs doing menial labor but his shoulder was a constant problem, dislocating once as Sash took off his shirt.

In time, the Sash family noticed Tyler’s forgetfulness — he would sometimes repeat himself several times in a conversation. The family told Boston University doctors that Sash had headaches, lost his wallet several times and had trouble doing other routine tasks like composing or reading emails.

“He didn’t quite seem to be the same person he used to be,” Josh Sash said.

Barnetta Sash said Tyler had multiple offers for better-paying or higher-profile jobs.

“He couldn’t focus long enough to do a job,” Barnetta said.

Tyler talked to various people in his circle of friends and family about stories he had read of mental acuity issues, and C.T.E., in former football players.

“He would make comments periodically,” Barnetta said. “He would joke, ‘I’ll be sitting in a nursing home with dementia.’ ”

But Barnetta mainly worried about the pain medications Tyler was taking and felt they were the source of his problems.

“We thought the surgery he was going to have would take care of things so he didn’t have to take the medication and we would have our son back,” she said.

Two days before he was found dead, a Sunday, Tyler was at his parents’ house and spent much of the day playing with his nieces and nephews. But he had recently fallen off a ladder and dislocated his shoulder again. His mother and sister popped it back in.

“It must have cracked and snapped 10 times, 20 times,” said Barnetta, adding that Tyler appeared exhausted, which she surmised was from a lack of sleep.

Tyler left his parents’ house Sunday around 9 p.m., making his way to his home in another part of Oskaloosa.

“What I suspect is that he found some methadone from somewhere and he took it to relieve his pain but there are probably special instructions that go with that,” Barnetta said.

The next day, Labor Day, Barnetta went to Tyler’s house, as she often did, to walk his dog.

“I saw him sleeping on the couch,” she said of Tyler. “I was so happy because he had seemed so tired and stressed out.”

She walked the dog, brought it back to the house and quietly closed the door. She returned the next morning, Sept. 8.

“That’s when I found him,” she said. “We think he died Sunday night. He was gone.”