

Collision Course: 'I would have had one every game,' ex-player says of concussions

Former players recount the blows to the head they suffered and their concerns now for their well-being

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In this game on Nov. 12, 2000, Hamilton Tiger-Cats slotback Mike Morreale pauses on his knees after a hard hit had him down on the turf for a time during the CFL Eastern Division semi-final between the Winnipeg Blue Bombers and Tiger-Cats at Ivor Wynne Stadium. The Bombers defeated the defending Grey Cup champion Ticats. - Hamilton Spectator file photo

Former football players who took part in the concussion research project describe their playing days and their health now.

This is Part 2 of Collision Course, a Spectator investigation on concussion and football. [See more series content.](#)

Game in, game out, Mike Morreale always knew what was expected of him when he stepped on the football field. His job as a receiver was to grab the tough yards, get the first downs and take the big hits in the middle of the field.

Morreale played 12 years in the CFL — that's 216 regular-season games — and he never missed one of them.

Over his career, the Hamilton native says he was never diagnosed with a single concussion, which seems astonishing.

Now that he can look back on his career, how many concussions does he think he suffered?

"I would have had one every game," said Morreale, now 46. "Every game.

"Every game I would have seen stars. Every game I would have had light-headedness. Every game I would have had an issue for a few plays in the huddle after a big hit.

"I just thought it's part of the game, that's what happens," Morreale added. "I never missed a game my whole career, so add 'em up."

He doesn't blame the team's medical staff because he says he never told them about the damage he was absorbing.

"There were many times — probably 30 or 40 games in my career — where I probably shouldn't have played," said Morreale. "But I did. You felt you had to be invincible.

"And I was always scared of someone taking my job," he added. "That's the culture that existed in sports."

Every former player has at least one story of being knocked senseless on the field at some point and then picking up — or trying to — as if nothing had happened.

"It was 'Gladiators,'" said Ticat hall of fame linebacker Ben Zambiasi, known throughout his 11-year career as a ferocious hitter.

"You wanted to eliminate as many of the other players as possible," said Zambiasi. "The more guys you got out, the better."



Rocky DiPietro, here in a 1989 game photo. He played his 14-season CFL career as a receiver for Hamilton. (Hamilton Spectator file photo)

Kerry Smith, a receiver who played six CFL seasons, including four with the Ticats in the late '70s and early '80s, said the tactic in those days was for a defender to wrap up the ball carrier and hold him upright, rather than trying to tackle him to the ground. That way, other defenders could take a run at the player, inflicting as much damage as possible.

He remembers being held up one time by another player, completely defenceless, and having the left side of his head smashed at full speed by a tackler.

"One of my fillings popped out," he said. After a few plays, he was sent back in. He couldn't see out of his left eye, he said, and the vision in his right eye was garbled "like when the vertical hold used to go in those old TVs."

"The issue that I fear is walking into a room and not knowing where that room is."

— Dan Ferrone

Lee Knight spent 11 seasons in the CFL with the Ticats as a receiver and running back.

He recalls a time playing in Winnipeg when he jumped to catch a pass and then a defensive back came from underneath and took his legs out. Knight landed on his head. One of the Winnipeg players guided Knight back to the bench and told the Ticats' trainer that he "wasn't right."

The next thing Knight remembers is being on the bench. He started giggling because a rush of childhood memories were flashing through his mind, like a video of his life. He tried to go back on the field, but someone had hidden his helmet as a precaution.

Here are the stories from some of the players who took part in the Spectator's concussion project:

Dan Ferrone, 59
Offensive lineman



Dan Ferrone in training with the Toronto Argonauts the day before playing the CFL Eastern Division title game in 1983. (Hamilton Spectator file photo)

When Ferrone watches football now and sees a vicious hit, he shudders.

"Because I go 'I did that?' I can't believe it," he said. "I don't normally watch highlights of myself but when I do, I go 'Holy sh-t, what the hell was I thinking?'"

"When your aggressiveness is there, you don't even recognize how you use your head," Ferrone said. "Other than your hands, it's probably your No. 1 weapon in the game of football."

As an offensive lineman, Ferrone said his head was taking punishment on virtually every play.

"A running back might not get the ball or a receiver might catch six or seven balls and get tackled and that's the extent of a great game," said Ferrone. "Whereas, 60 or 70 offensive plays or however many offensive plays there were in a game, on 98 per cent of those plays as an offensive lineman you were hitting something."

"And if you weren't, you weren't going to be on the team much longer."

Ferrone says he was diagnosed with one or two concussions, but suspects now he may have had as many as 10.

"Do I remember having nausea? Yes," he said. "Do I remember having the spins or not being able to stand or practice the next day? Yes."

"Back then the remedy was to stay in a dark room," he said. "But then when practice started, you had to come out and watch practice."

"I can remember twice, once in college, once in the pros, that I had trouble standing and watching practice."

"The concussions were something that could actually give you a break during the week," he added. "You wouldn't practice so you didn't have to hit the rest of the week, so that was always a blessing."

Ferrone said he hasn't experienced symptoms of depression or irritability and calls himself "a happy person."

"I don't think I worry more than any other person," said Ferrone.

"The scenario of walking into a room and forgetting why you walked into a room is shared by many of my friends that never played any sport," he said. "The issue that I fear is walking into a room and not knowing where that room is."

"Today, I'm confident that I'm not worse for wear but that could change very quickly."

Bob MacDonald, 49

Offensive lineman



Bob MacDonald, 49 is a former university football offensive lineman who played for McMaster. (Barry Gray, The Hamilton Spectator)

It was just the second game of MacDonald's university football career when he suffered his only diagnosed concussion.

He was an 18-year-old offensive lineman for McMaster during the 1986 season and lined up opposite him was a University of Guelph defender he describes as "giganto" — six-foot-seven and 285 pounds.

"I went out to cut him and I took his knee right to the side of my head," said MacDonald. "I dropped and as I started to get up on my hands and knees and raised my head, everything was blue and green. It was just bizarre.

"I started walking toward the bench and the guy who was playing guard beside me said 'Bobby, where are you going?' I said 'I'm going to the bench.' He said 'We're the other way.'"

MacDonald played the second half of the game, but he doesn't remember anything about it.

After the game, he went back to his parents' house in Burlington and spent most of the next day, a Sunday, vomiting.

"But then Monday, I strapped them back on and was back at practice," said MacDonald.

Back then, MacDonald said, he was taught to employ three points of contact — punch out with two hands, and then he taps the middle of his forehead, "right here, where your cage and your helmet meet."

"I would try to knock snot out of my nose every single contact," he said. "If I saw snot on my face mask, I thought 'that's fantastic.'"

"It's craziness."

MacDonald, now a teacher at Saltfleet Secondary School, is also one of the coaches of the football team.

He admits he's really struggling with that role, particularly now that he has participated in this project.

"It's a real moral conundrum," he said. "This might be the final straw.

"When there are big hits, I'm almost triggered off, like a PTSD response," MacDonald said. "Like, 'Oh my God, what just happened to that kid's brain?'"

Retired Toronto Argonaut

In his 50s, receiver

(As part of the research project protocol, participants were guaranteed anonymity if desired.)

The player spent 16 years playing football, starting at age 11, and he admits he now has concerns about the future.

"Some of it may be natural aging of the brain, but a lot of it I'm wondering 'Would I be forgetting this? Would I be acting this way if it wasn't for football?'" he said.

He was never diagnosed with a concussion, but he does recall a couple of times when he suffered short-term blackouts from hits.

"The reality is, you make your decisions and they come with consequences."

— Don Bowman

"Back in those days, you weren't really seen by medical staff or kept out of play for long," he said. "The old 'How many fingers am I holding up?' and then you're back in within a few minutes.

"I can't even count the number of times where I had impacts where I didn't necessarily black out, but you're dazed and just kind of shake it off and get back in the huddle.

"It was part of the culture," he said. "The whole peer thing, the whole macho thing."

The player said he refused to allow his children to play football, and if he could turn back the clock, he probably wouldn't have played either.

"Had we known this information back when we were playing or thinking of playing, that would have changed a lot of our minds and certainly our parents' minds," he said. "What parent would want to have their kid participating in a sport where there's a near certainty of having a brain injury if they played for a number of years?"

Don Bowman, 65

Defensive back/punt returner



Don Bowman, 65, is a former defensive back and punt returner who played his rookie year for Winnipeg. (Barry Gray, The Hamilton Spectator)

It was 1975 and Heisman Trophy winner Johnny Rodgers, the "ordinary superstar" as he described himself, was electrifying the CFL with his long punt returns.

"So what opposition defences would do is say 'To hell with the penalty on no yards, we'll just take him out,'" Bowman said.

That was bad news for Bowman, who was playing his rookie season in Winnipeg and ended up returning punts himself.

He was playing in B.C. and back waiting for a punt, with his head up. A B.C. linebacker came racing at him.

"He's run 50 yards, he has a towel taped on his arm, so it's kind of like a cast, and as I'm looking up for the ball, he hits me in the face with a clothesline," Bowman recalled. "I haven't even touched the ball yet and I'm down.

"My face mask is broken, my nose is broken," he said. "I'm pretty sure I was out for a bit."

The trainer ran out and snapped Bowman's nose back in place with a click. He went to the sideline, cotton swabs were jammed in his nostrils and he thinks he missed one series of plays.

Then he played the rest of the game, "spitting and swallowing blood."

Bowman was never diagnosed with a concussion, but he now thinks in hindsight he may have suffered between six and 10 of them at all levels of football.

As the interview concludes, Bowman asks a small favour.

Despite the startling results from the Spectator's concussion project, despite the damage he may have sustained from the violence of the game, he doesn't want to be portrayed as being anti-football.

He's happy with the choices he's made and he's happy with his life.

"The reality is, you make your decisions and they come with consequences — some good, some bad," he said. "How you handle them is up to you.

"You had a chance to excel at something you dreamed about doing and you made it. That's pretty cool.

"Out of that whole thing, you developed a personality and a drive or a discipline that helped you do other things in your life," he added. "So why would you change all that?"

Rocky DiPietro, 61

Receiver



Rocky DiPietro, 61, is a former Tiger-Cat who played his entire 14-year career for Hamilton. He is regarded as one of the CFL's best-ever receivers. (Barry Gray, The Hamilton Spectator)

Jokingly — maybe half joking — DiPietro says he's going to post the findings of the Spectator's concussion project on the fridge so then he can just point to it the next time he forgets something.

The results, though, are no laughing matter, he admits.

"Even though you hear about it on the radio and read it in the paper, it's still surprising to see the facts in front of you," he said. "I didn't know it was that bad.

"If you knew the results would you do it all over again? I don't know," he said. "But it's certainly sobering to see all the facts in front of you and know that there's something to it."

DiPietro played 14 seasons, all with Hamilton, and became one of the CFL's best-ever receivers. Despite absorbing hundreds of punishing hits, DiPietro thinks he managed to escape the sport relatively unscathed.

"I'd like to look at the positive and think that maybe I'm one of the people who wasn't affected too much, but I guess I don't really know," said DiPietro.

"I think about it more and more," he said. "You're always questioning.

"If I forget something is there more to it? But I also realize that I'm aging, too."

Like Morreale, DiPietro says he was never diagnosed with a concussion. Looking back, he now thinks he may have suffered as many as a dozen.

"I had my head dinged quite a few times," he said. "I never really lost consciousness but there were a few times I saw stars and saw black, or getting up wobbly because your head was kind of spinning."

For him, the expression "getting your bell rung" was accurate.

"Hearing the bells, oh yeah," he said. "Hearing that pitch and then just trying to shake it off as fast as you could and get back to the huddle."

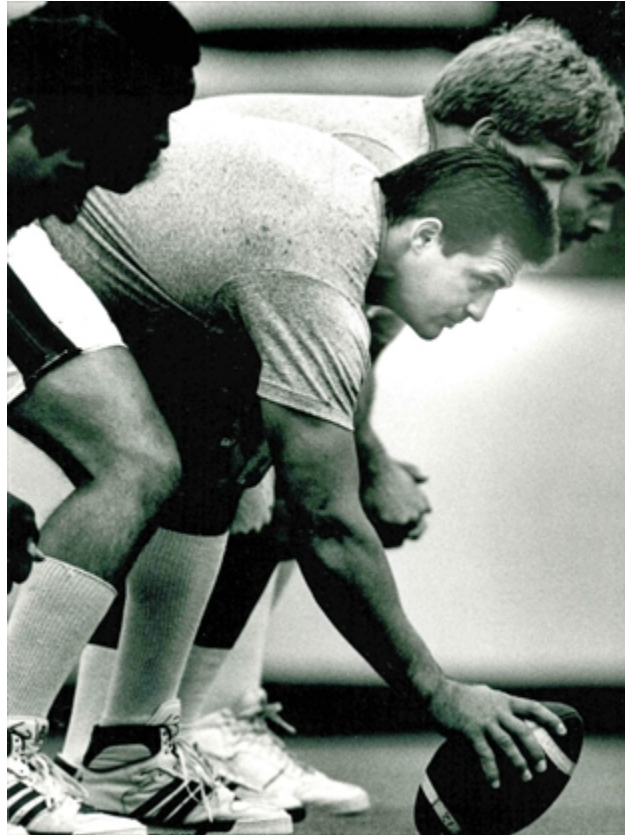
DiPietro coached high school football for many years and he still enjoys watching the game, but it bothers him when he sees a violent collision on the field.

"You get that feeling back when someone gets hit really bad," he said. "When two guys collide, it kind of brings back some of those memories.

"You kind of know almost what they're feeling and it's not a good thing. Especially now with slow motion — you can see the impact.

"And I think TV likes that," he added. "They like the viewers to see that."

Marv Allemang, 64
Offensive lineman



Marv Allemang, now 64, is a former Ticats offensive lineman. He played 14 seasons in CFL, half of them for Hamilton. (Hamilton Spectator file photo)

A year and a half ago, Allemang was watching Super Bowl 50 when they marched out all of the previous MVPs from Super Bowls past.

"I remember saying 'Hey, I've got something in common with all those Super Bowl MVPs — we all walk the same,'" Allemang said. "Everybody hobbled out there almost, or tried not to show it."

Allemang spent 14 seasons in the CFL, half of them with the Tiger-Cats. He then went on to have a second career as a firefighter, a profession that carries a different set of risks than football.

"I feel blessed to have been able to be a professional football player and a professional firefighter," he said, "but you also have to be aware that those are occupations that have side effects and dangers."

Allemang said he was never diagnosed with a concussion, but believes he may have suffered a couple from football. He says he was fortunate to have never lost consciousness on the field, but he does remember having headaches.

"Sometimes I would think it was from wearing my helmet too tight but who knows?" he said. "I'd have headaches and sometimes a bruise on the outside of my skull from the helmet."

Allemang admits he worries about what the future holds for him but he tries not to dwell on it.

"It's not something I'm depressed about and it doesn't really affect my mental state," he said.

"You ask yourself honestly 'Would you still do it?' and if the answer is yes, then you've just got to accept it.

"That's the decision you made and you go with it," he added.

Bob Macoritti, 66

Kicker/punter

Macoritti remembers he had just booted a kickoff and was running down the field.

It was the mid-'70s and he was playing for the Saskatchewan Roughriders against Winnipeg, his former team. One of his friends was on the field for the Bombers.

"He comes by me and goes 'Boo' and he just keeps running by," Macoritti said. "I'm thinking 'OK, he didn't hit me, that's good.'"

Then the play changed direction and Macoritti turned to get in position to make a tackle.

"Well, he's come from behind me and he's waiting for me and as I turn, he just lays me right out," said Macoritti. "Blindsided me.

"The guys had a good laugh at me going ass over tea kettle on the film.

"He hit me so hard that my insides felt like they were moving around, like they weren't part of me, for about three or four days," he said. "I've never felt that before or since."

Macoritti thinks he's had three other concussions — two as a kid and one when he was on the field lacrosse team at university.

"It was a three-hour bus ride back to the university throwing up the whole way," he said.

"They dropped me off in the hospital and I was in the hospital for five days."

Like other players, he says he now has some concerns about his short-term memory.

"I'll get up and go to do something and in the middle of it 'What was I going to do?'" he said.

"Don't even give me your phone number because I won't remember it. Names are tough.

"But I think I'm still functional," Macoritti said. "Sometimes it's difficult to ascertain if your injuries are causing this or if it's just the normal process of aging."

Would he do it again? There's a pause.

"Ummm ... ahhh ... it offered me a lot of opportunities," he hesitates, then tears begin to flow.

"I don't know," Macoritti said, wiping his eyes. "It's one of the issues I have — I've become very emotional. Overly emotional.

"And I know that can be one of the effects of concussions, an imbalance of your emotions."

Mike Morreale, 46

Receiver



Mike Morreale, 46, is a former Tiger-Cats receiver. (Barry Gray, The Hamilton Spectator)

After a horrid 2-16 season the year before, the 1998 edition of the Tiger-Cats suddenly found themselves among the CFL's elite.

It was the first year in Hamilton for quarterback Danny McManus and receiver Darren Flutie and with three games to go in the regular season, the Ticats were trying to clinch first place in the East Division.

They were playing in Saskatchewan and it was second down and 22 yards to go. As luck would have it, Morreale was about 20 yards shy of having 1,000 yards in receptions for the season.

"Danny threw kind of a line drive over the middle and I went up to get it, left my feet and before my feet could touch the ground, I took a shot in the face," said Morreale.

He hung on to the ball, jumped up and stretched out his arm to signal first down.

"Holy, I didn't know where I was," he said. "I could have pointed the other direction — I just happened to land in the proper direction.

"It's one of the most hellacious hits I ever took in the head."

But there were also lots of random hits, he said, that hurt just as much — a forearm to the face mask, a knee to the temple during a pileup, or his helmet bouncing off the turf during a tackle.

"The back of the head was always the most painful for me because instantly you'd see stars," said Morreale. "Everything goes dark and you just kind of shake it off.

"Can you imagine? Shaking off a brain injury? That's what you'd do.

"It's crazy," he said. "How do you shake off something that's already shook in the first place?"

Now, Morreale says he can't go on roller-coasters, he can't spin his daughter around and he doesn't like anything that involves a lot of motion.

"There's a lot of things I can't do because they make me feel nauseous, so I just avoid them," he said. "What does the future hold? I don't know."

And yet despite all the "hellacious" hits, despite his estimate he suffered a concussion per game, if someone gave him a chance to strap on the pads again for one more series of plays on the field, Morreale says he'd be tempted to say yes.

"Physically, I think I could manage one series," he said. "But that one hit I take could ruin my life.

"That's scary," he said. "Because I think I have a lot of life ahead of me."