

Does football cause brain damage? Ask the 1972 Miami Dolphins

NBC's Bob Costas predicted this month that the sport would collapse over time barring new technology.



Nick Buoniconti, centre, a member of the undefeated 1972 Dolphins, is dealing with progressively diminished cognitive skills, a potential warning sign of degenerative brain disease, CTE, that has been strongly linked to football head injuries.

(THOS ROBINSON / GETTY IMAGES)

By **BARRY JACKSON** Miami Herald

The evidence is too strong, the alarms too loud, the effects too real for members of both these Miami Dolphins and the franchise's most famous and accomplished team to simply ignore them any longer.

Nick Buoniconti and Jim Kiick, two prominent members of the 1972 undefeated team, now are dealing with progressively diminished cognitive skills, a potential warning sign of a [degenerative brain](#) disease, CTE, that has been strongly linked to football head injuries.

Meanwhile, NBC's Bob Costas predicted, during a roundtable discussion at the University of Maryland earlier this month, that the sport could collapse over time, barring development of technology to make it reasonably safe.

"The reality is that the game destroys peoples' brains," Costas said. "The more information that comes out, the worse it looks. The whole thing could collapse like a house of cards if people actually begin connecting the dots."

Several Dolphins last week said they're acutely aware of the growing evidence linking football to brain disease and it has given them pause for thought.

"I have a son and I don't know if I want him playing this game," Dolphins [defensive tackle](#) Jordan Phillips said last week. "But this is my livelihood. I wouldn't stop it because I love the game and it does a lot for me."

Guard Jermon Bushrod said "I'm human, so I'm definitely going to think about whether to play despite the risk of head injuries. But I try not to put myself in bad positions. We've got to learn how to have better technique at certain positions."

Two days before he was arrested and released by the Dolphins last week, linebacker Rey Mauluga said he feared that he eventually will not be able to remember his daughter's name and plans to donate his brain to charity.

"Obviously guys have mood swings," said Mauluga, who was arrested Saturday morning for allegedly assaulting a man over a \$40 bar tab. "And no one knows if it's stress at home or is there a link to football and the impact it has on your head."

Defensive end Andre Branch said his belief in God eases his concerns about the risks of playing.

“If I am supposed to get a concussion, then I’m going to get one,” Branch said. “It’s because that’s how God drew my life up.”

Tight end Julius Thomas, who has never had a concussion, said several people close to him have encouraged him to quit because of the health risks, particularly to his brain.

“Most guys do understand the risk we put ourselves through and the more information that comes out makes it more real,” he said. “It hasn’t gotten to that point for me of not thinking about playing. But the fact is guys continue to get concussions. It’s scary stuff. Sometimes we don’t fully respect how serious it is.”

Last week, Chicago researchers revealed that for the first time, a living person had been diagnosed with CTE, chronic traumatic encephalopathy, though it required an autopsy of that former NFL player, Fred McNeill, to confirm the diagnosis after his death.

In the past, it had been believed that the disease could be diagnosed only in the deceased.

Would an active player want to know if he has the condition? Bushrod and Fasano said they definitely would.

Fasano said he weighs the risks of playing but “it’s an assessment you have in the offseason. It’s a concern but it’s tough to analyze because you’re not feeling the effects now. It’s tough to hang ’em up for that reason.”

As for the effects of brain damage on the undefeated 1972 team, here’s some perspective provided by former All-Pro safety and state Sen. Dick Anderson:

There were 50 players on that team. Anderson said 10 have died and one of those 10, Earl Morrall, had serious cognitive issues, though another (Bill Stanfill) said in a February 2016 phone interview that he

had been diagnosed with frontal lobe damage in his brain and “even with some old friends, I don’t have a clue what their name is.” Stanfill died last November.

Of the 40 who remain alive, Anderson said five are dealing with cognitive issues —Buoniconti (who announced this month that he will donate his brain to research upon death), Kiick and Tim Foley among them.

That seven or so out of 50 “is higher than the general population,” Anderson said. “It’s certainly concerning. Because of Nick and Jim Kiick and Earl, everybody is aware of it now.”

And some of the ‘72 Dolphins without brain issues live with some degree of fear.

“I am concerned one day I might start losing my memory, but I didn’t have a major head injury and I tackled with my shoulders,” Anderson said.

Buoniconti is Anderson’s closest friend from that 1972 team; they have lived within two blocks of each other for the past 40 years. And it pains Anderson to witness Buoniconti’s diminishment. In a teary news conference at Boston University this month, Buoniconti said he’s “not half the man I used to be.”

“It’s terribly hard,” Anderson said. “I will take him to lunch once a week. He can have a conversation with me. But he can’t remember things and he gets frustrated because he has enough knowledge to know he has a disease that won’t get any better.

“He is agitated and upset that he can’t remember. It really ticks him off and it’s frustrating. He says, ‘The NFL’s not helping me.’ Nick was the most productive individual that we had.”

Former Dolphins running back Mercury Morris, speaking to a group of businesspeople at a Tribune Pinecrest luncheon last week, said the 1972 team has reunions “every five years because we have guys slowly starting to go. Jim Kiick changed and we didn’t see it until it was too late.”

Is the NFL’s future bleak?

“I think the present is in doubt,” Morris said. “I walked into my room five years ago and said, ‘Why am I here?’ I could see it then. Nick is seeing it now and is angry.

“I feel badly for the players of my generation because they made promises with regard to medical benefits they didn’t keep. And football is much more dangerous than when I played.”

Will this doom the sport, as Costas suggests?

None of the current Dolphins interviewed believe so, though Phillips said: “I think they will take a lot of physicality out of it in the future.”

Fasano said “if less kids play the sport, there will be less talent coming up through the high school ranks.”

And the Dolphins’ Thomas predicts “we will start to see changes. The NFL has done a good job of making sure, as new data comes out, that they try to mitigate that risk through rules changes.

“I don’t know what this game will look like in 20 years but I do believe people will be playing football and enjoying it. How it’s played, that’s a whole other story.”