

SPORTS

Concussions in sports

BY MATTHEW STRADER

Lindros, Dunigan, Lafontaine, Young, and McCauley. An all star sporting event? No. The new owners of a new line of sports bars? No. A charity auction? No. These are a few sports stars who have had to consider ending — or have ended — their careers due to the arguably most dangerous threat in sports — the concussion.

It used to be a joke of an injury. Players would get their bells rung, wander around the field for a few moments and get back in the game. No big deal, right? It was funny to watch a hockey player who couldn't get back on his skates right away, or a football player who for a few seconds couldn't quite remember what they he was in that night.

They're athletes and that's why they make the big bucks. Good reasoning right? Well, not anymore.

Medical knowledge of the long-term effects of head injuries has brought about a new plague for every athlete and fan. Every big football fan can remember the day Bruce Smith of the Buffalo Bills nailed Boomer Esiason, knocking him to the field for a few minutes of sleep. When Boomer met the press after the game he was quoted as having lost the will to live. Every Leafs fan can join me in remembering March 3, 1999, when Alyn McCauley was run into the boards by New Jersey's Sheldon Souray. A clean check, with no penalty on the play, but McCauley would not rise from the ice that night until strapped to a stretcher and carried out of the building. The sixth concussion of the 21 year-old McCauley's hockey career.

Suffering five concussions in minor hockey, McCauley had al-

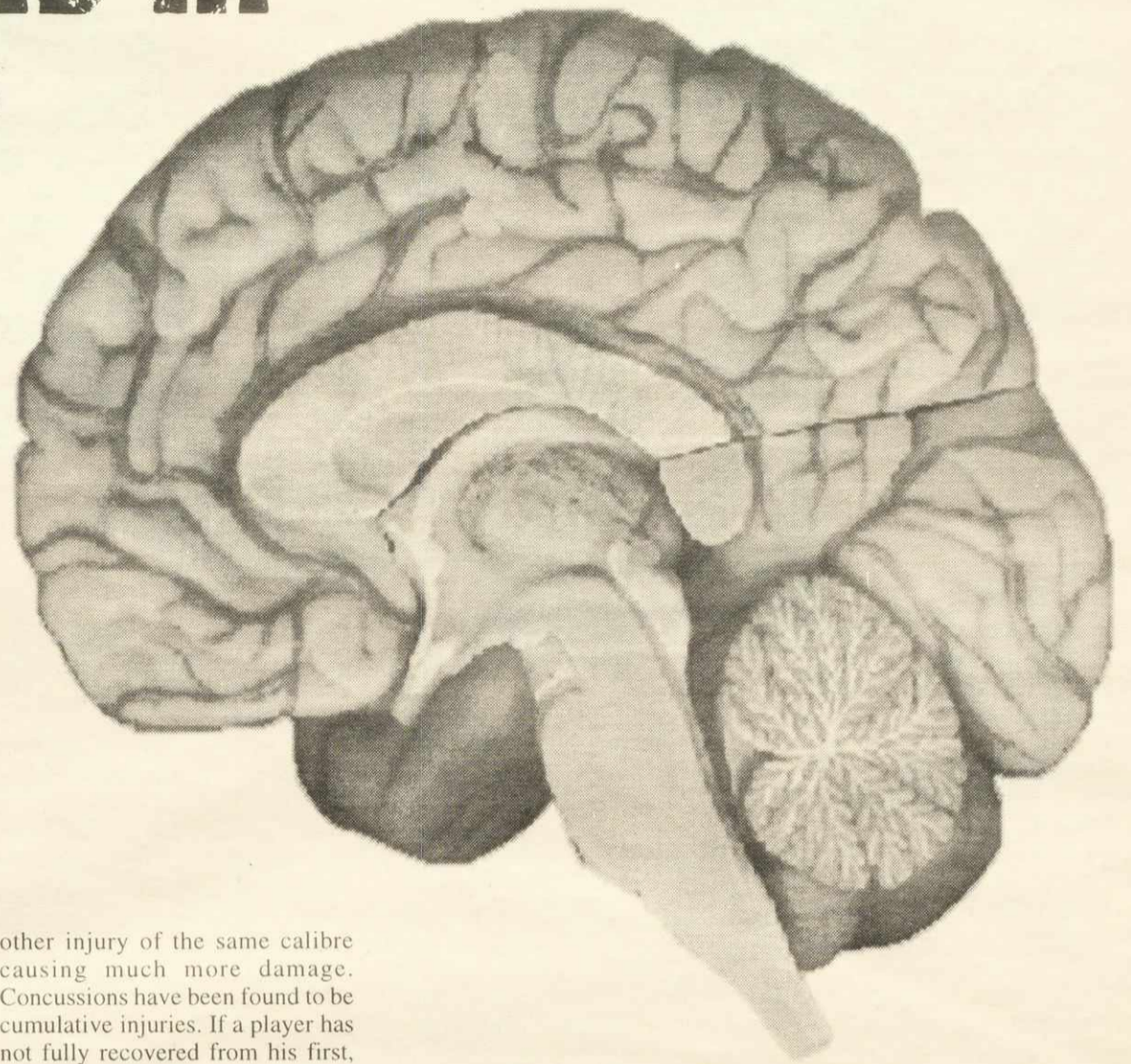
ways returned quickly, known as a "real workhorse" by the coaching staff of the Ottawa 67s. This concussion, however, kept McCauley out of the line-up for the remainder of the season, the Leafs' playoff run, and training camp. McCauley just returned to the line-up of the Leafs recently and is rumoured to be under care of physicians complaining of recurring headaches.

What is a concussion? The definition given by the Ontario Brain Injury Association is "a change in mental status from a blow to the head and may involve loss of consciousness."

There are also two different degrees of concussions. First degree concussions are generally minor. There is no loss of consciousness, yet confusion and dizziness could last up to 15 minutes. Second degree concussions are more severe and dangerous. Loss of consciousness may occur, confusion and dizziness last longer than 15 minutes, and the player must immediately see a physician. In both instances it is now known that it is best to remove a player from the contest after a concussion has occurred.

The movement of the brain within the skull causes concussions. The reason helmets cannot prevent concussions is that a helmet will only prevent a skull fracture. When the head of an athlete is hit hard enough and with enough speed, the head will suddenly stop and the brain will keep moving. This causes the brain to hit against the inside of the skull, causing damage to the surface of the brain. This in turn causes a disturbance in the brain's electrical activity which leads to confusion and dizziness, or possible loss of consciousness.

There is also the fear of an-



other injury of the same calibre causing much more damage. Concussions have been found to be cumulative injuries. If a player has not fully recovered from his first, the second can cause up to 10 times more damage, possibly leading to permanent brain damage. A player's brain activity must return to "baseline" before they are cleared to play again.

With the new advances in sports technology making athletes faster, stronger and more skilled, every game continues to become dangerous for its top athletes. A good example is the plight of Steve Young, after numerous concussions, Young now has to wrestle with the idea of early retirement.

Matt Dunigan of the Canadian Football League fame had to retire early due to twelve

concussions in his career. Pat Lafontaine, former star centre for the Buffalo Sabers, had to retire at the prime of his career due to six concussions. And no sports fan will forget the legacy of Brett Lindros who, at the age of 20, had to leave his life-long dream of playing in the National Hockey League because of serious head injuries.

Sports physicians have said that concussions happen, in some degree, to one in 20 players. They also agree that young athletes who have suffered three or more concussions should find a new activity.

It is the new face of sports.

With the help of technology, we now know that instead of smiling at the humour of the hockey player who cannot find his way to the bench, we must now pity him. That may be his last time on the bench.

The prevention of concussions must come from smart play. Make sure your eyes are always open, don't take cheap-shots, and most importantly, concentrate on strengthening the neck muscles during your workout.

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