

# *Just a Ding?*

The NFL responds to research on  
football-related concussion



# BACKGROUND

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# National Football League

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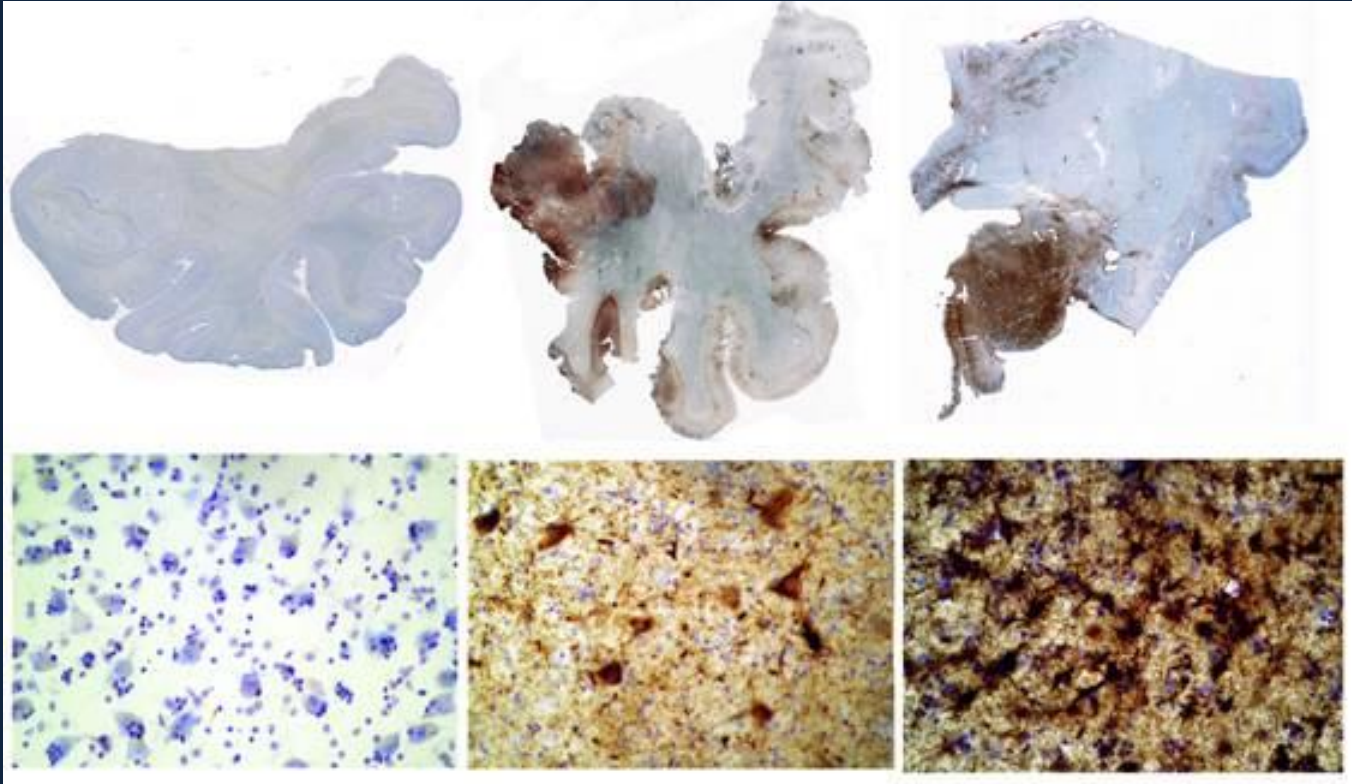
- Professional American football
- 32 teams
- Average franchise value: \$1.02 billion (2010)
- Broadcast television deals:  
\$95.8 million per team (2010)
- Founded in 1920



# Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy

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- A progressive degenerative disease found in individuals who have been subjected to multiple concussions and other forms of head injury
- Linked to memory loss, confusion, impaired judgment, paranoia, impulse control problems, aggression, depression, and progressive dementia
- Can only be diagnosed posthumously via autopsy
- Characteristic streaks of a protein called tau found on the brain



# ISSUE TIMELINE: PART 1

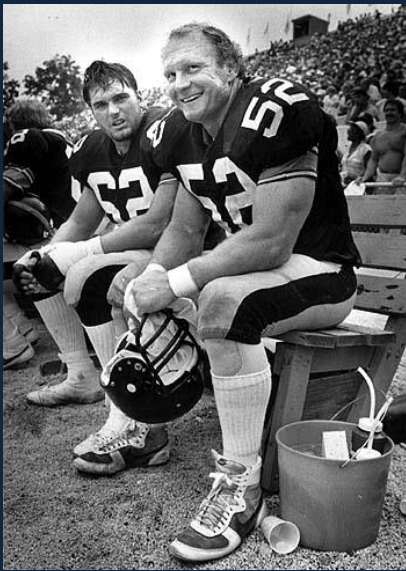
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2002-2007

# First Diagnoses of CTE

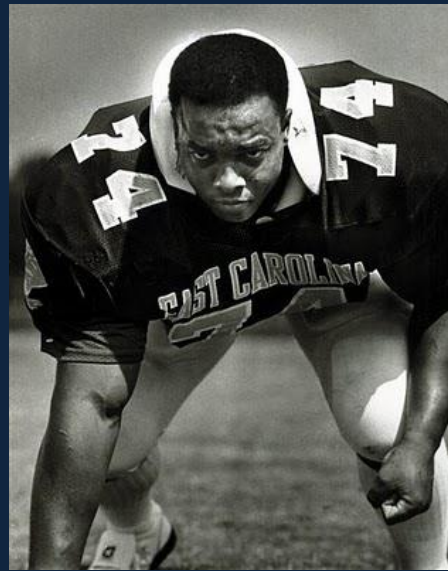
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**Mike Webster**



Diagnosed: 2002  
Case published: 2005

**Terry Long**



Diagnosed: 2005  
Case published: 2006

**Andre Waters**



Diagnosed: 2006  
Story published in  
*New York Times*: 2007

# The NFL Response

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- MTBI Committee dismisses Omalu's research in medical journals

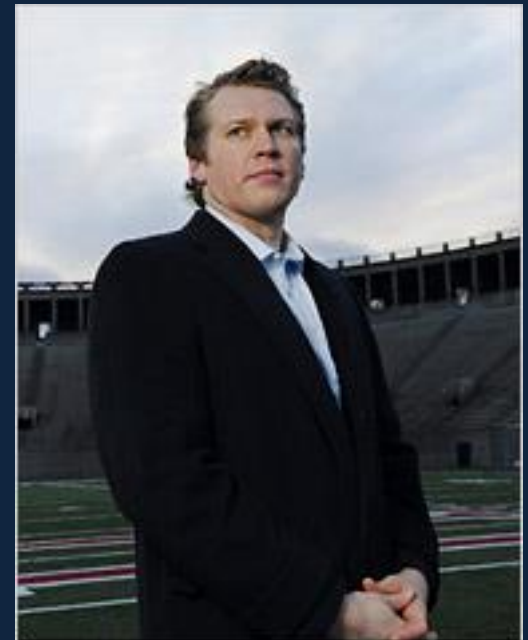
*“The picture is not really complete until we have the opportunity to look at the same group of people over time.”*



# Chris Nowinski

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- Football player at Harvard University
- Professional wrestler with WWE
- Suffered from multiple concussions
- Founder of Sports Legacy Institute



# Media Coverage

- Chris Nowinski contacts Alan Schwarz with a tip on the Waters case
- Schwarz breaks the story in the *New York Times*
- Coverage begins to snowball

## The New York Times

Expert Ties Ex-Player's Suicide to Brain Damage



AI Messerschmidt/WireImage  
Eagles safety Andre Waters making a tackle in 1988. Waters had a reputation as one of football's hardest-hitting defensive players.

By ALAN SCHWARZ  
Published: January 18, 2007

Since the former National Football League player Andre Waters killed himself in November, an explanation for his [suicide](#) has remained a mystery. But after examining remains of Mr. Waters's brain, a neuropathologist in Pittsburgh is claiming that Mr. Waters had sustained brain damage from playing football and he says that led to his [depression](#) and ultimate death.

# NFL Takes Action

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- Overall message is the same: “We need more research.”
- Launch “88 Plan” to assist retirees suffering from dementia
- Hold concussion conference

# Conflicting Guidance

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- NFL suggests stricter return-to-play guidelines, but does not impose them on individual teams
- MTBI committee statement:

*“Current research with professional athletes has not shown that having more than one or two concussions leads to permanent problems if each injury is managed properly. It is important to understand that there is no magic number for how many concussions is too many.”*

# Discussion Questions: Part 1

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- It could be argued that Chris Nowinski played a central role in the unfolding of the Waters case, the media response and the NFL's subsequent actions. Do you agree? How did Nowinski's background position him to reach out to the different publics in this case: the players' families, the media, the researchers?
- The NFL initially chose to respond to the emerging issue of CTE through the scientific community, with members of the MTBI committee acting as its primary spokespeople. Was this a good decision?

# Discussion Questions: Part 1

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- When faced with attention from the mainstream media, the NFL chose to continue with a similar message—“we need additional research”—and the same spokespeople. How did this decision affect the NFL’s credibility? Would you have chosen the same strategy?

# ISSUE TIMELINE: PART 2

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2008-2010

# Controversy Renewed in 2009

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- The Center for the Study of Chronic Encephalopathy (CSTE) discovers the early stages of CTE in an 18 year old high school football player
- Results from an NFL-sponsored survey show retired NFL players have higher rates of early-onset dementia; the NFL denies the validity of the study



# Media Coverage Grows

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- Increased media coverage



# Public Interest Also Grows

<b>Compare by</b>	<b>Search terms</b>	<b>Filter</b>
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Search terms <input type="radio"/> Locations <input type="radio"/> Time Ranges	Tip: Use a comma as shorthand to add comparison items. (tennis, squash) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● NFL concussions</li><li>● concussions in nfl</li><li>● concussions football</li></ul> <a href="#">+ Add search term</a>	Web Search Worldwide 2004 - present All Categories
		<input type="button" value="Search"/>

## Web Search Interest: nfl concussions, concussions in nfl, concussions football

Worldwide, 2004 - present

Categories: [Sports](#), [Health](#)

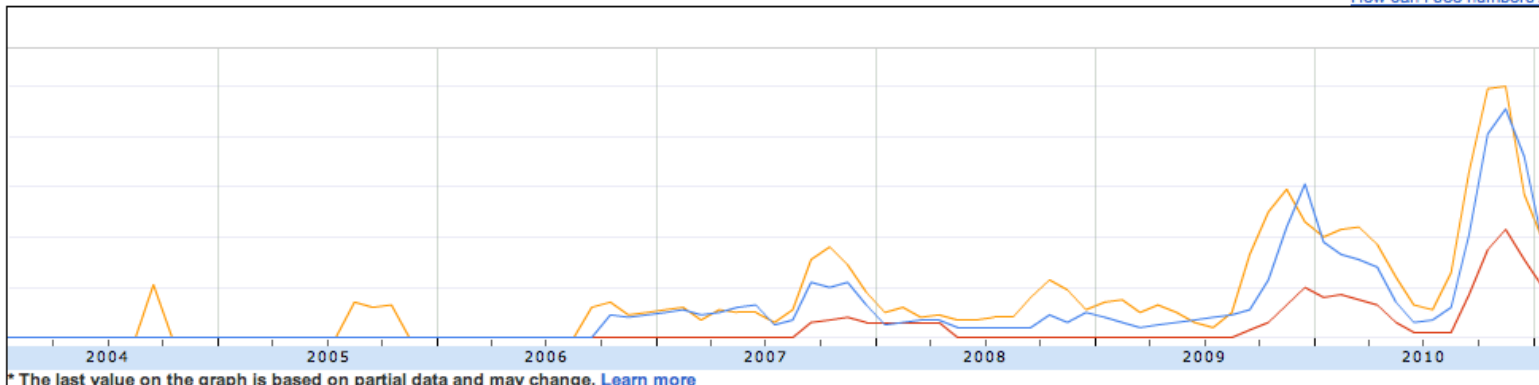
### Totals



### Interest over time

Forecast [?](#)  News headlines

[How can I see numbers?](#)



\* The last value on the graph is based on partial data and may change. [Learn more](#)

[+ Google](#) [Embed this chart](#)

# Congressional Hearings

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- October 28, 2009 hearings with House Judiciary Committee
- Antitrust exemption threatened

# The NFL Responds

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- On December 20, 2009, the NFL issued a statement acknowledging the long-term health risks of concussions:

*“It’s quite obvious from the medical research that’s been done that concussions can lead to long-term problems.”*

# The NFL Responds

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- Revamps the MTBI committee to include outside experts and an expanded focus
- Supports independent research centers
  - Conference
  - “No strings attached” financial support
- Rule changes

# Young Athlete Initiatives

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- Lobby for more stringent return-to-play laws on the state and national level
- Educational poster for high school athletes in partnership with the CDC
- Events for parents, coaches and players in conjunction with the Sports Legacy Institute



# Discussion Questions: Part 2

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- Map the progression of the issue according to the 5 stages of the issues life cycle. What events prompted escalation of the issue? How would you classify the issue currently?
- One key strategy for the NFL in 2010 is to position itself as a leader/resource in the area of concussions in young athletes. Have they succeeded in positioning themselves this way? Is this an effective strategy?



# Discussion Questions: Part 2

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- Research on the effects of sub-concussive hits is growing. What can the NFL do to stay in front of this new development?
- How did the NFL's relationship to the federal government influence their actions? If you were directing public relations for the NFL what would be your governmental relations goals? If you were directing public relations for the Sports Legacy Institute what would be your governmental relations goals?