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## PETER KEATING

THE BIZ

### HEADS-UP: IS THE NFL FINALLY GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT CONCUSSIONS?

#### THERE'S A CROSSROAD JUST AHEAD:

The world of football is on the verge of changing its approach to concussions.

In the past, the NFL has referred all questions about concussions to its Committee on Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (MTBI). That's the group that has found "no evidence ... of widespread permanent or cumulative effects of single or multiple MTBIs in professional football players" and whose members have downplayed the effects of concussion.

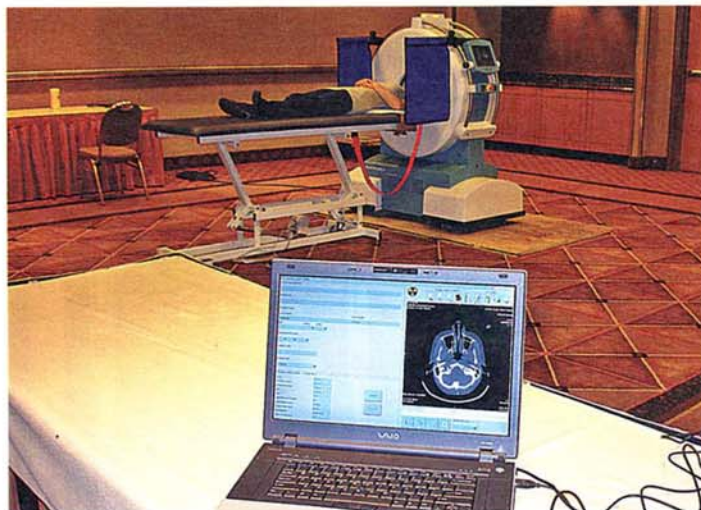
In January, though, the committee added three important new members: a neurologist, a neuroradiologist and a neurosurgeon. In February, the controversial Elliot Pellman (a rheumatologist who's not a neuro-anything) stepped down as committee chair. In April, the NFL made baseline neuropsychological tests mandatory for all teams. And in May, NFL commissioner **Roger Goodell** ordered every team to send two doctors and two trainers to a June 19 summit on concussions in Chicago. The event's speakers won't be just members of the MTBI committee, but outside scientists, too, including some of the committee's most strident critics.



### THE GAME IS MOVING, FITFULLY, AWAY FROM SHRUGGING OFF "DINGS."

Why the turnabout? Headlines, for one thing. Researchers outside the NFL have continued assembling evidence about the effects of concussions, making news even when the league has declined to fund their projects or has dismissed their results. Leadership, for another. The commish has an ongoing interest in concussions and has pushed the committee to involve outside research in its work. "At no time should competitive issues override medical issues."

Check out Peter Keating's short history of the long ball, *Dingers!*, available now from ESPN Books.



Goodell has said. That's common sense, but still a powerful statement to put on the record. And there's a financial reason for teams to want to do better: The salary cap simultaneously funnels huge money to star players and prevents clubs from spending more if those athletes get hurt. So injuries to just one or two noggins are enough to wreck a team's season. (**Big Ben**, anyone?)

At the same time, companies that make athletic equipment, medical devices and playing surfaces are beginning to see brain protection as a competitive advantage. Safety is becoming something you can sell, like no-smoking sections in restaurants and passenger-side air bags in cars. The latest cool example: NeuroLogica, a Danvers, Mass. firm, just rolled out a **portable CT scanner** that doctors can use to examine the brains of injured athletes. NeuroLogica recently debuted the machine ringside at a series of boxing bouts

impairment later in life. It hasn't been enough to jar a strangely quiet NFLPA into making any noise about the issue (although the union has funded concussion studies), but it's getting more difficult for athletes and their agents to accept brain injuries as just another cost of doing business. "It's going to be harder to ignore this once players really understand they're risking senility," says Leigh Steinberg, the agent whose warnings about concussions in the early 1990s prompted the league to create the MTBI committee. "That's a horse of a different color than aches and pains. We're talking about your identity."

What happens next largely depends on two studies the NFL just launched: one on the long-term effects of concussions and a second on whether mouth guards and chin straps protect brains. Ultimately, players could be required to wear more protective technology. The league could also sit injured athletes before they're at significant risk for brain injury. There's a long way to go before any such thresholds are established or accepted. But the game seems to be moving, fitfully, from shrugging off "dings."

On that score, I'd be negligent if I didn't mention how many experts shake their head at ESPN's "Jacked Up" segments, where

*Monday Night Countdown* hosts cheer replays of bone-crunching tackles (although producers say they are careful not to show clips in which a player is hurt). In a few years, looking back at those spots may feel like watching drunken celebrities on old **Dean**

**Martin** roasts does today.

We will be embarrassed about what the world once found entertaining. ☺

in Vegas, and the results were impressive: Of eight boxers scanned (two KO'd, the rest on the rec of on-site docs), seven checked out just fine, but one fighter's scan revealed a brain bleed, and he was rushed to the hospital. Just imagine if the NFL had such a machine on the sideline at every game.

It does feel like a sea change is coming. The latest research and the stories of disabled former players suggest strong connections between concussions and both depression and mental

