Head on Collision: Contact Sport Solutions in the Age of Mental Health Awareness

By Sarah Pennix

MILLEDGEVILLE, Ga. — After the final whistle blows, the impact of a hit in professional sports can linger beyond the field. For many athletes, concussions and repeated head injuries are not just physical setbacks, but are linked to long-term mental health challenges, raising questions about whether current safety protocols go far enough.

Across major contact sports, including football, soccer, hockey and boxing, leagues have implemented concussion protocols aimed at identifying and managing head injuries. However, research suggests these measures may fall short in addressing the long-term psychological consequences athletes face.

According to *St. Charles Health*, Millions of sports-related concussions occur each year in the United States, with many cases going unreported. While protocols often focus on physical recovery and return-to-play timelines, experts say the mental health effects (anxiety, depression, etc.) can persist after an athlete is cleared to return.

A recent study published in the journal, *Neurology* found that former college athletes who experienced three or more concussions reported worse mental health outcomes five years after their playing careers ended. These individuals showed higher levels of anxiety, depression and psychological distress compared to those with no history of concussions.

For professional athletes, the stakes can be even higher. A Harvard Medical School study of nearly 2,000 former NFL players found that about one in three believe they have chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain condition linked to repeated head trauma. Those who believed they had CTE reported higher rates of depression, cognitive problems and suicidal thoughts .

“CTE can have a big impact mental health” said Ph.D. Andrew Riesner “We often see many forms of emotional instability that emerge years after the original cases of head trauma.”

CTE, which can currently only be definitively diagnosed after death, has become a focal point in discussions about athlete safety. Symptoms often do not appear until years after an athlete’s career ends, making early detection and intervention difficult. Research shows that behavioral and emotional changes tied to CTE can emerge six to 15 years after repeated head trauma .

Real-life cases highlight the severity of these long-term effects. Former Kansas City Chiefs player Jim Tyrer, who died in a murder-suicide in 1980, is now believed by experts to have suffered from undiagnosed CTE. His story has become one of the most widely known examples of how repeated head trauma can intersect with severe mental health decline.

Still, the relationship between head injuries and mental health is not straightforward. Research suggests that former contact sport athletes do not always experience higher rates of depression or suicide compared to the general population, pointing to the complexity of factors involved .

Experts say this underscores the need for more individualized approaches to treatment and prevention.

“Yes, studies link repeated head trauma to mental health challenges, but the research is not consistent, factors like genetics per say also play a role,” says Ph.D. Kelly Massey, an exercise science professor at Georgia College & State University.

Current concussion protocols in professional sports typically involve removing athletes from play, conducting sideline evaluations and requiring medical clearance before returning. While these steps are critical for immediate safety, some argue they do not adequately address long-term mental health monitoring.

According to research published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, mental health symptoms are increasingly recognized as a common outcome following sport-related concussions, yet they are often treated separately from physical injuries. This disconnect can leave athletes without the comprehensive care needed to fully recover.

“Concussion protocols are useless. I am scared to go on the field sometimes, hoping that I don’t get another concussion the long term effects I have learned about scare me even more. We need to focus more on the protocols to prevent these head injuries” says Mary Grace Lewis, junior psychology major and student athlete at Reinhardt University

Some organizations are beginning to push for changes. Proposed solutions include mandatory mental health screenings following concussions, expanded neuropsychological testing and long-term follow-up care for athletes even after retirement.

Neuropsychological testing, in particular, has been identified as valuable in detecting lingering cognitive effects that may not be visible through standard physical evaluations. Studies show that athletes can experience memory and cognitive issues even after physical symptoms appear to resolve .

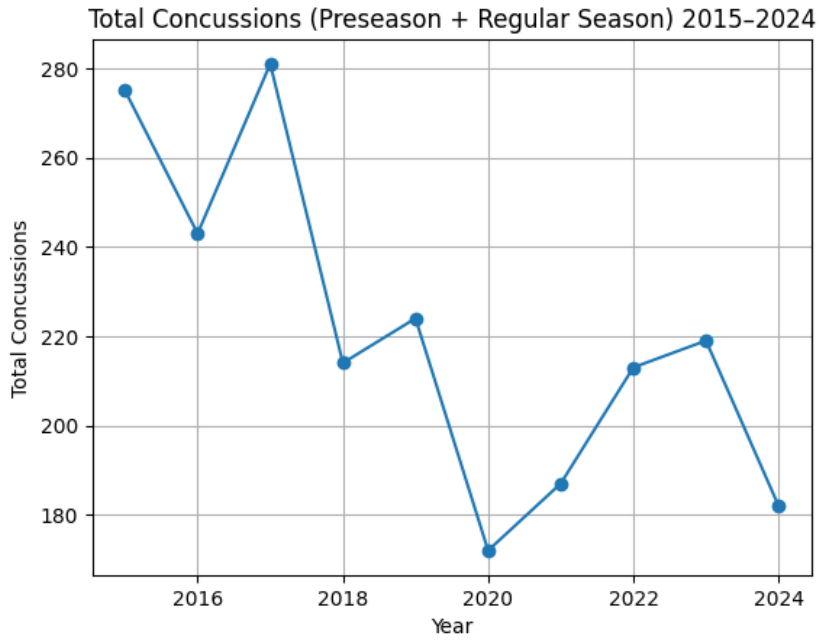
Emerging treatments are also being explored. A recent *New York Times* report highlighted early research into psilocybin therapy as a potential way to restore brain function and reduce the long-term effects of repeated head injuries. While still experimental, such treatments point to a recognition that traditional approaches may not be enough.

At the same time, prevention is still a key focus. Experts emphasize the importance of stricter enforcement of return-to-play rules, better education for athletes and coaches and continued improvements in protective equipment.

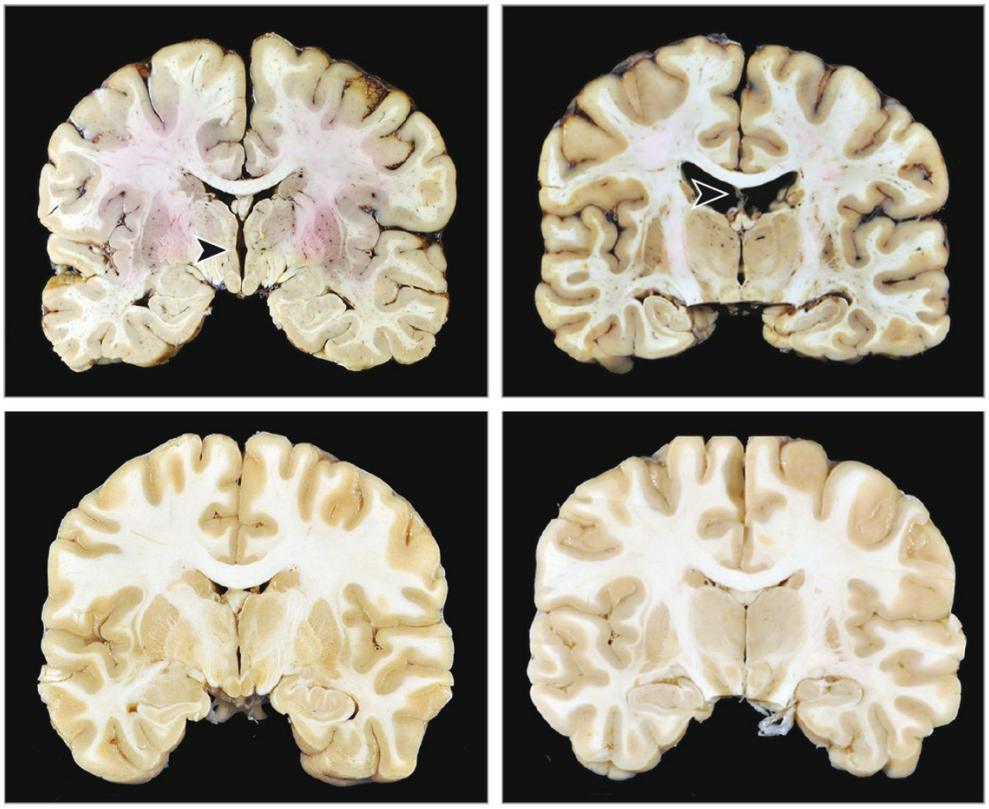
According to the NFL injury data tracking concussions the 2015 through 2025 seasons, the league recorded a combined preseason and regular season total of 275 concussions in 2015. While the number did decline to 172 in 2020, with the pandemic shortening the season and no preseason games, totals have remained persistently high, reaching 219 in 2023 and 182 in 2024, underscoring that despite the protocol “updates,” concussions in professional football remain a recurring and unresolved concern.

The Concussions and CTE Foundation, which is a leading non-profit dedicated to brain trauma research and athlete support, offers a model for what comprehensive care could look like. The organization's free helpline connects athletes and families with experienced clinicians, peer support networks and treatment resources. They also advocate for a CTE prevention protocol and education program that are changing the culture of head injuries in the athletic world. They argue that CTE is the only neurodegenerative disease that is entirely preventable.

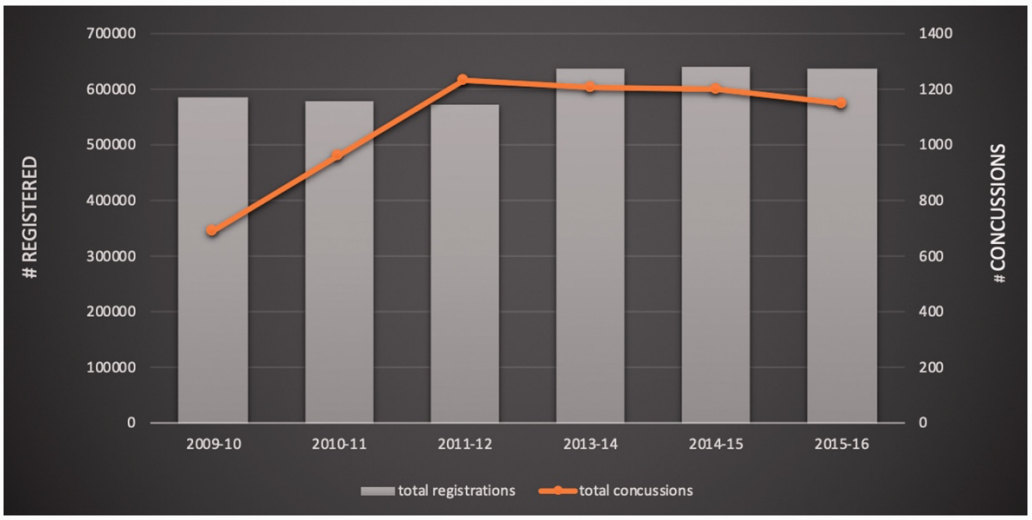
As awareness of CTE and concussion-related mental health issues continues, so does pressure on professional sports organizations to evolve. While progress has been made, many argue that a more comprehensive approach is necessary to protect athletes both during and after their careers.



This graph represents a public record released by the NFL showing the number of concussions that occurred from the 2015 season to the 2025 season.



Researchers found brain abnormalities associated with CTE shown in this image. Such as thalamic notch (top left) and the degredation of the fornix (top right)



Canadian Hockey registration and reported concussive injuries over six years (2009-2016)

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