

Congratulations! You've lost?

Chris Borland's decision to quit football due to concerns regarding traumatic brain injury is rational. But what about those who can't?

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A dark, hazy cloud of criticism and doubt has been cast in recent years over the National Football League, and football at all levels, in regards to concussion treatment and protocol.

In 2012, the suicide and ensuing biopsy of 12-time NFL Pro Bowl linebacker Junior Seau revealed that his brain had developed chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), piquing the fears of players, parents and spectators alike.

The scathing PBS Frontline documentary *League of Denial: The NFL's Concussion Crisis*, which aired in September 2014, confirmed those fears. The investigation reported that 76 of 79 deceased NFL players examined had tested positive for CTE, a degenerative brain disease that has been linked to brain trauma accumulated while playing football over an extended period of time.

Now, almost three years later, 24-year-old NFL linebacker and rookie sensation Chris Borland is calling it quits because of these exact anxieties, sending shockwaves through the sport.

Borland made the obvious choice, determining that the benefits of gridiron glory, if only for but a few passing moments, do not outweigh the physical, emotional and psychological price that football players pay.

However, there are those who do not sit atop the mountain of privilege, whose income and escape from violent neighborhoods and poverty is just as vital for their families as their physical wellbeing.

And the decision is not as clear.

Mychal Denzel Smith of *The Nation* harps on this issue--how players that come from lesser economic means, particularly Black Americans, which make up a majority of NFL players, are exploited and even endangered by the system in place in order to maintain financial security within the league--in a January

2013 article published online.

"For too many, this is their answer to debilitating poverty," Smith writes. "So what's a little permanent brain damage?"

Junior Anthony Smith, who plays two positions that are highly susceptible to head injury in football on the Clarke Central High School varsity team--tight end and linebacker--says that in playing football he has to disregard the possible repercussions.

"My past football season I had two concussions and an injured ACL. So yeah I've had a lot of injuries, but this is my senior year coming up and I'm hoping that I don't get hurt because after that I wouldn't know what to do," Anthony Smith said. "This is what I've been preparing for: to go to college for football."

Mychal Smith refers to this usage of football as a vehicle for success as a sort of "lottery ticket."

In effect, exceptional football talent can be cashed in for a free education from an elite university, sure, but more importantly it serves as a gateway to the cash itself. While some like Borland might benefit from financial security within their families and have the ability to quit football easily, many don't.

The fact of the matter is the NFL is not going to go away anytime soon. There's too much money invested, and it will only continue to increase with lucrative TV contracts. The game will go on without Chris Borland.

Events like the University of North Carolina academic scandal tell us what some universities think of players, disregarding that young athletes have been taught their entire lives that athletics is one of their only options to succeed.

So, instead of concentrating our efforts on professional football, the focus, rather, should be stressing to high schools and collegiate institutions that athletes are far, far more than just their physical talents.



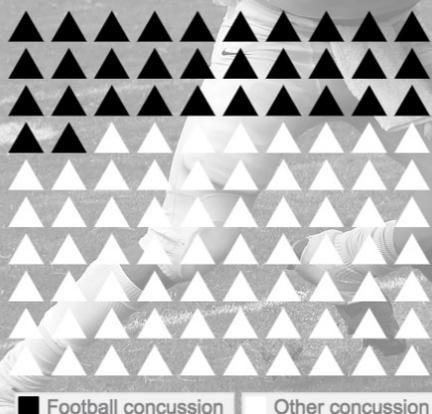
CONCUSSION FAST FACTS

33 percent of high school athletes who have a sports concussion report two or more in the same year.

1 in 5 high school athletes will sustain a sports concussion during the season.

39 percent of cumulative concussions are shown to increase catastrophic head injury leading to permanent neurologic disability.

LEFT: Ratio of all reported sports concussions that occur during high school football compared to other sports.



Information collected from headcasecompany.com. Photo by Chad Rhym
Infographic by Aneesa Conine-Nakano