

# Battered Brains

**Athletes of all ages must protect their brains.**

BY ALEXIS BURLING

**P**rofessional football players are famous for taking hard hits—and shaking them off. But a growing number of scientists and players say this attitude must change, particularly when it comes to hits to the head. Every year, dozens of professional football players suffer from *concussions*—hits to the head that cause the brain to bang against the inside of the skull. In severe cases, a player can lose consciousness or even die because of these injuries. Even mild concussions are dangerous, especially if the player experiences more than one.

Take Houston Oilers linebacker John Grimsley. He sustained nine concussions during his nine-year career. The team’s doctors said he was fine. But 10 years after he retired, when he was in his early 40s, Grimsley’s memory began to fail him. He even forgot about his son’s wedding. The problem worsened, and in February 2008 when Grimsley was just 45, he died when the gun he was cleaning went off. “Very likely he forgot his gun was loaded,” says his wife, Virginia.

After his death, Virginia was determined to understand what had happened to John. She suspected the concussions were partly responsible. So she donated his brain to science. Doctors at Boston University’s new Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy



(En·ceph·a·LOP·a·thy) studied his brain tissue. They confirmed that Grimsley suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a condition that causes confusion, memory loss, and other problems. He was the fifth NFL player to be diagnosed with the disease since 2002. And researchers believe there are others out there with the same crippling symptoms.

For years, NFL officials have denied that concussions cause permanent damage. But recent findings like those in the BU study have forced them to change their policies. Equipment is checked each season to insure proper wear and fit. Injured players are evaluated more carefully. And coaches who push players to “get back in the game” after an injury are often **reprimanded**.

But doctors feel these changes don’t go far enough and that much more needs to be done. Some retired athletes are now speaking out about their injuries. And 12 current athletes are doing even more. They’re donating their own brains to science after their deaths so that others can learn from their injuries. Their thinking? It’s better to be safe than sorry.

# No-Sweat BUBBLE TEST

Read the article on page 30. Then fill in the circle next to the best answer for each question below. Next time you take a real bubble test, you'll be a pro!

1. Which pair of words BEST describes John Grimsley's behavior after he retired from playing football?
  - A. tired and bored
  - B. excited and happy
  - C. anxious and angry
  - D. forgetful and confused
  
2. What did Virginia Grimsley think contributed to her husband's death?
  - A. old age
  - B. food poisoning
  - C. head injuries called concussions
  - D. a car crash
  
3. According to the article, NFL officials are changing their policies in the following ways, EXCEPT
  - A. using foam footballs.
  - B. checking equipment for wear and fit.
  - C. evaluating injured players carefully.
  - D. scolding coaches who pressure injured players to get back in the game.
  
4. What does "reprimanded" mean in the fourth paragraph?
  - A. criticized for their actions
  - B. made fun of
  - C. ignored
  - D. celebrated
  
5. What is the main idea of this article?
  - A. Football is a dangerous sport.
  - B. John Grimsley should be remembered.
  - C. More people should donate their brains to science.
  - D. With head injuries, it's better to be safe than sorry.
  
6. Why did the author write this article?
  - A. to celebrate John Grimsley's football career
  - B. to prove that football is a dangerous game and shouldn't be played
  - C. to warn about the dangers of letting a head injury go unchecked or untreated
  - D. to list the changes in sports medicine

## Critical Thinking

Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper.

Explain your answers using information and details from the article.

1. Why did Virginia Grimsley decide to donate her husband's brain to the Center?
2. Why is it important for coaches and athletes to learn more about head injuries?