

# Dan Rather Reports

**Episode Number:** 504

**Episode Title:** Taking a Hit

**Description:** Over the last year, the talk of concussions has been everywhere, from the halls of Congress, to NFL headquarters, to the sidelines of youth sports. Awareness is up, but has anything really changed?

**TEASE:**

DAN RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TONIGHT. TAKING A HIT. THE NFL TRIES TO CHANGE ITS TUNE ABOUT CONCUSSIONS.

JACK YOUNGBLOOD, EX-NFL PLAYER

We have concussions that go along with this game. We're all out in the open. Now what are we gonna do about it?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ALSO, YOUNG BRAINS—VULNERABLE, AND OFTEN OVERLOOKED.

BUCKY TAYLOR, HEAD ATHLETIC TRAINER FOR THE MESQUITE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

If you don't go by what I say, you're putting your son or daughter in harm. And that harm could be permanent. They could die.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND MAKING STRIDES TOWARDS A DREAM OF WALKING AGAIN.

ZACKERY LYSTEDT

If you have a concussion, when in doubt sit 'em out. Right? It's that simple.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE'LL BRING YOU THE NEWS, TONIGHT ON DAN RATHER REPORTS.

**TAKING A HIT:**

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

GOOD EVENING. TONIGHT, A LOOK AT THE IMPACT OF FOOTBALL, LITERALLY. ESPECIALLY HITS TO THE HEAD...AND THE GROWING AWARENESS AND ACCEPTANCE THAT BLOWS TO THE BRAIN...NEED TO BE ADDRESSED...NOW. A YEAR AGO, WE BROUGHT YOU THE STORY OF THE GROWING CONCERN ABOUT THE LONG TERM EFFECT OF CONCUSSIONS IN SPORTS, PARTICULARLY AMONGST PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYERS. AND THE LACK OF ATTENTION PAID TO HEAD INJURIES BY THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL LEAGUE.

WELL, WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES. OVER THE PAST TWELVE MONTHS, THE ISSUE HAS EXPLODED. AFTER INCREASING OUTSIDE PRESSURE, THE NFL NOW SAYS IT IS TAKING CONCUSSIONS SERIOUSLY. CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEES ARE ASKING TOUGH QUESTIONS, BUT THERE'S ALSO A SUDDEN AWARENESS OF BRAIN INJURIES IN YOUTH SPORTS. AND HERE'S A KEY REASON. RESEARCHERS SAY THAT SOMETIMES CONCUSSIONS NEVER REALLY HEAL. AND THE MORE YOU HAVE, THE MORE YOU RISK PERMANENT BRAIN DAMAGE. THINK ABOUT THIS: A STUDY FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA FOUND THAT THE MAGNITUDE OF THE HIT CAN BE EQUIVALENT TO AN AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT WHERE THE HEAD HITS THE WINDSHIELD AT 25 MILES PER HOUR.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FOR YEARS, THESE WERE THE TYPE OF HITS THAT MADE HIGHLIGHT REEL.

ANNOUNCER

And he's going to throw deep for Decker...what a grab! Touchdown!

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FOOTBALL HAS ALWAYS BEEN A VIOLENT SPORT. MANY HAVE CALLED IT A STAND IN FOR WAR. BUT INCREASINGLY, FROM THE NFL ALL THE WAY DOWN THROUGH THE PEE WEE LEAGUES, THE HARD LICKS AND BONE-JARRING COLLISIONS ARE NOW SEEN AS CAUSE FOR CONCERN... NOT CELEBRATION. AND THOSE PERCEPTIONS SEEM TO HAVE CHANGED MORE IN THE PAST YEAR THAN EVER BEFORE. A YEAR AGO, WE REPORTED FROM TAMPA FLORIDA IN THE WEEK BEFORE THE 2009 SUPER BOWL. WE CAME FOR A PRESENTATION BY MEDICAL RESEARCHERS WHO WERE STUDYING THE BRAINS OF RETIRED NFL PLAYERS AND FINDING POSSIBLE LINKS THAT CONCUSSIONS LEAD TO DEMENTIA AND OTHER NEUROLOGICAL CONDITIONS DOWN THE ROAD.

ELEANOR PERFETTO, WIFE OF EX-NFL PLAYER

You were number 62.

RALPH WENZEL, EX-NFL PLAYER

No...

PERFETTO

That's you.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ALTHOUGH THEIR TALK WAS IN THE SAME HOTEL WHERE PLAYERS WERE STAYING, IT WAS IGNORED BY THE LEAGUE AND POORLY ATTENDED. THOSE INTERESTED IN THE ISSUE OF CONCUSSIONS MADE THE ROUNDS OF SPORTS RADIO, TRYING TO RAISE AWARENESS.

CHRIS NOWINSKI, PRESIDENT OF SPORTS LEGACY INSTITUTE

So we need to stop and look at this as a real issue.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT WITH SUPER BOWL 44 BACK IN FLORIDA THIS YEAR, THOSE SAME RESEARCHERS AND ACTIVISTS RETURNED.

THIS TIME, THEY WEREN'T JUST JOINED BY THEIR PEERS IN THE MEDICAL WORLD. NFL PLAYERS, CURRENT AND RETIRED, REPS FOR THE PLAYERS' UNION AND THE NFL GATHERED FOR THE FIRST-EVER MEETING OF THE NFL PLAYERS' ASSOCIATION CONCUSSION COMMITTEE.

THOM MAYER, NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION MEDICAL DIRECTOR

Our hope is that we, frankly, make history today by beginning a conversation. But what we've tried to do is really pull in the best minds in this issue, in this business of how do we care for sports concussions so that we can have those frank and open discussions. So-uh with that let's make history.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ONE OF THE PEOPLE THERE WAS CHRIS NOWINSKI. WE MET THE FORMER HARVARD FOOTBALL PLAYER AND PROFESSIONAL WRESTLER AT LAST YEAR'S MEETING. NOWINSKI SUFFERED REPEATED BLOWS TO THE HEAD

OVER THE COURSE OF HIS ATHLETIC CAREER.

WWE ANNOUNCER

Up and over goes Harvard. Ohhh!!!

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND THESE TYPES OF HITS FORCED HIM INTO AN EARLY RETIREMENT. NOW HE'S MADE EDUCATING ATHLETES ABOUT BRAIN INJURIES HIS LIFE'S WORK.

NOWINSKI

I didn't know when I was blacking out in the ring and forgetting you know, who was supposed to win the match or I was seeing-- the sky would go orange on me or I'd see double that those were dings or concussions. I also didn't know that concussions were cumulative and that this brain trauma is cumulative. And I thought at 24, when I was actually having to make a decision about retiring, that somebody should have brought that up, "by the way, if you're having problems now maybe you should hang it up and go have a real job." And so when I started looking into this I realized that stuff was in the medical literature, you guys were publishing it but it wasn't getting to me at 24 out of Harvard and it wasn't getting especially to parents and kids.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

NOWINSKI WAS HERE THIS YEAR IN THE ROLE OF ADVOCATE AND HE HAD SOME VIDEO THAT SHOCKED THE AUDIENCE.

NOWINSKI

And when we think about the problems with the game (Ohhhhh!) Yeah these are two 8 year olds. This is not football. This is 2 coaches running a drill that they maybe don't have to run that is causing a ridiculously absurd hit enforced to an 8 year old's brain. That's the stuff we can eliminate tomorrow without changing anything you see.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE CONFERENCE WAS CONSIDERED A BIG DEAL BY THOSE IN ATTENDANCE. MOST OF THE PRESENTERS WERE THE TOP EXPERTS IN THE STUDY OF CONCUSSIONS.

DR. MARK LOVELL, PHD, FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH MEDICAL CENTER SPORTS MEDICINE CONCUSSION PROGRAM

Our protocol now with the Steelers is to use DTI – Diffusion tensor imaging...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE PLAYERS ADMITTED MUCH OF THE SCIENCE WENT OVER THEIR HEADS. BUT THE MEDICAL RESEARCHERS SAID IT WAS GREAT TO DISCUSS THEIR FINDINGS WITH THEIR PEERS EVEN WHEN THEY DIDN'T ALWAYS AGREE.

LOVELL

We're all here because we care about the issue of concussion. And we're all-- sharing different opinions on what needs to be done, which I think is extremely healthy.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DR. MARK LOVELL IS A LEADING CONCUSSION RESEARCHER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH MEDICAL CENTER. LOVELL HAS PIONEERED THE IMPACT TEST - A COMPUTERIZED TEST THAT MEASURES AN ATHLETE'S COGNITIVE ABILITIES BEFORE AND AFTER A CONCUSSION. HE SAYS THE FIELD OF CONCUSSION STUDIES IS STILL IN ITS INFANCY.

LOVELL

You know, studying-- studying long-term effects of-- of concussion is very, very complicated. And-- we've only-- hit the tip of the iceberg at this point in time, so we really need to continue that study. I think it's very important- Uh but we need to be careful to give into the temptation of jumping to conclusions before we have all the information.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ONE ESPECIALLY CONTENTIOUS ISSUE IS WHETHER REPEATED CONCUSSIONS CAN LEAD TO DEMENTIA LATER IN LIFE. SOME RESEARCHERS POINT TO STUDIES THEY'VE DONE ON BRAIN SCANS AND TO FORMER NFL PLAYERS LIKE RALPH WENZEL WHOM WE MET LAST YEAR.

PERFETTO

Should we go in your room and look at the pictures on the wall?

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IT'S A LINK THE NFL LONG QUESTIONED. BUT IN SEPTEMBER A STUDY CONDUCTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN FOR THE NFL FOUND THAT DEMENTIA, ALZHEIMER'S AND OTHER MEMORY-RELATED DISEASES OCCURRED MUCH MORE FREQUENTLY IN RETIRED NFL PLAYERS THAN IN THE GENERAL POPULATION--19 TIMES MORE FREQUENTLY FOR FORMER NFL PLAYERS 30 TO 49 YEARS OLD.

AND THAT PRESENTS A PROBLEM FOR THE NFL. THE NFL IS A BRAND WORTH BILLIONS OF DOLLARS, AND CONCUSSIONS ARE CLEARLY EFFECTING THE HEALTH OF THE ATHLETES AND THE SPORT, EVEN IF THEY'RE NOT COMPLETELY UNDERSTOOD.

DEMAURICE SMITH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION

The people who made this game great and the foundation upon which this game is built serves as a model to get the answer right.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THIS PAST YEAR, AFTER PRESSURE FROM THE NFL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION AND CONGRESS, AND BEHIND THE SCENES MEETINGS BETWEEN NFL COMMISSIONER ROGER GOODELL AND THE RESEARCHERS AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY WHO ARE LEADING THE STUDY OF CONCUSSIONS AND DEMENTIA, THE LEAGUE FINALLY TOOK ACTION.

NFL PSA ANNOUNCER

Concussions and other head injuries must be taken seriously. If you're a player protect yourself and your teammates.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE NFL ALSO CHANGED WHAT HITS ARE LEGAL AND NOW REQUIRES PLAYERS WHO HAVE SIGNS OF CONCUSSION TO SIT OUT THE REST OF THE GAME AND BE CLEARED BY AN INDEPENDENT NEUROLOGIST.

DR. ANN MCKEE, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF NEUROLOGY & PATHOLOGY, BOSTON UNIVERSITY

So there's a lot of distinctions in this disease as compared to any other neuro-degenerative disease.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

LAST YEAR WHEN WE PROFILED RESEARCHERS AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY THEY WERE FIGHTING TO GET THE NFL'S ATTENTION - NOW THE NFL IS HELPING TO FUND THAT RESEARCH BY OFFERING A MILLION DOLLAR GRANT AND ENCOURAGING PLAYERS TO DONATE THEIR BRAINS WHEN THEY DIE.

BUT CONCUSSIONS ARE STRANGE THINGS. THEY DON'T SHOW UP ON CT SCANS OR MRI'S AND THEY REQUIRE ATHLETES TO ADMIT THEY HAVE A

PROBLEM, NOT SOMETHING PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYERS HAVE A TRADITION OF DOING, ESPECIALLY IN YEARS PAST.

YOUNGBLOOD

In all reality, if you didn't get dinged once in a ballgame, you weren't playin' very hard. I mean, that was-- that's our philosophy. And I-- I think, you know, the-- the really, really good players today, those-- those players have the same-- same idea about the game.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ONE OF THE ATTENDEES AT THE CONFERENCE WAS NFL HALL-OF-FAMER JACK YOUNGBLOOD. HE TURNED 60 ON THE DAY OF THE MEETING.

YOUNGBLOOD WAS FAMOUS FOR HIS TOUGHNESS, PLAYING IN THE 1979 PLAYOFFS AND SUPER BOWL WITH A BROKEN LEG. HE SAYS BACK IN THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES, NOBODY TOOK HITS TO THE HEAD SERIOUSLY.

YOUNGBLOOD

Did the concussions come into play during that-- during that time? I don't know. (LAUGHS) Because, we didn't-- we didn't look at 'em at the sa-- in the same way, in the same fashion.

YOUNGBLOOD

Um, when you get my age and you've-- you've had the bumpy road that we've lived on— Um, you'd notice some things slowing down. You'd notice some changes in-- especially in that short-term memory. Fortunately, I-- I don't think it's too serious right now, but I don't want it to get there, either. So that's the reason I'm--I'm-- I want to be active into finding a solution.

HUNTER HILLENMEYER, NFL PLAYER – CHICAGO BEARS

As a football player, but-- but really as any person, if you think that there's something you're doing to yourself right now that could totally change your life for the worse decades down the road, that's scary.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

29-YEAR OLD HUNTER HILLENMEYER PLAYS FOR THE CHICAGO BEARS. HE CAME TO THE MEETING IN FLORIDA AFTER SUFFERING SEVERAL CONCUSSIONS.

HILLENMEYER SAYS HE KNOWS OF PLAYERS WHO HAVE TRIED TO SANDBAG THE IMPACT TESTS SO THAT IF THEY DO GET A CONCUSSION

THEIR IMPAIRED SCORE WON'T LOOK SO BAD COMPARED TO THEIR BASELINE SCORE.

HILLENMEYER

And that, to me, was just an example of the lengths that players will go to not just to hide their symptoms, but to try to beat the system altogether in the sense that they're willing to do anything they can even knowingly putting themselves further into harm's way just so they can stay on the football field.

The culture in the NFL has always been you-- you know, are you hurt or injured. And if you're hurt, then you're expected to play through it. Part of the process that I think we're making big steps towards is to take that decision out of the player's hand, and to put that decision with a trainer, a doctor, someone that's much more qualified to both diagnose that this player does in fact have a concussion, and then react in terms of how you treat them from there.

YOUNGBLOOD

The Player's Association and the medical community, they're all saying the same word. We do have brain trauma. We have concussions that go along with this game. Okay, now-- all right, now we-- now that we're all-- we're all out in the open, you know, we're-- (LAUGHS) we're-- none of us have any clothes on, now-- now what are we gonna do about it?

SOCCER ANNOUNCER

Ricketts just got clobbered. Wow!

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IT'S NOT JUST THE NFL THAT IS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT THE RIGHT APPROACH TO CONCUSSIONS. FROM THE HEAD PLAY IN MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER, TO THE HEAD SLAMMING HITS IN HOCKEY, TO THE SWINGING CHECKS IN MAJOR LEAGUE LACROSSE.

LACROSSE ANNOUNCER

Great pass...put away! Brown.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SPORTS ACROSS THE BOARD ARE TAKING A SECOND LOOK AT HOW THEY HANDLE CONCUSSIONS.

YOUTH SPORTS ARE A PARTICULAR CONCERN. STUDIES SUGGEST THAT

WOMEN MAY BE MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO CONCUSSIONS THAN MEN.

BUT FOR NOW, THE NATIONAL ATTENTION HAS MOSTLY BEEN ON THE NFL. CONGRESS HAS EVEN GOTTEN INTO THE ACT. CONGRESSWOMAN LINDA SANCHEZ SERVES ON THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE, WHICH HAS BEEN HOLDING HEARINGS ON NFL ISSUES SINCE 2007.

RATHER

What did you find the attitude of the NFL when you first started?

REP. LINDA SANCHEZ, CONGRESSWOMAN D-CA

It was very reminiscent of the tobacco industry saying that smoking didn't cause um-- any damage to your health because they had their own studies. And their own studies, surprisingly, concluded that-- you know, concussions, you know, really weren't a big deal. I'm paraphrasing here. But, for many years-- the attitude was to kind of muddy the water, so to speak and not come out with a strong statement about concussions.

RATHER

And where are you now in your hearings and your information gathering with the NFL? Have they turned completely around, partly around? Where are they and where are we?

SANCHEZ

The NFL recently-- issued a statement saying, "Well, of course, there's a link between head-- you know, repeated head trauma and long term brain damage." Although, I find this very interesting-- their sort of main go to guy for many years, doctor-- a Doctor Casson steadfastly maintains that there is not enough scholarship to prove that repeated blows to the head in the form of concussions will cause long term brain damage.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SINCE 2007 DR. IRA CASSON SERVED AS THE HEAD OF THE NFL'S COMMITTEE ON BRAIN INJURIES. AND HE'S BECOME A MAJOR TARGET FOR CRITICS WHO SAY THE NFL HAS TURNED A BLIND EYE TO THE DANGER OF CONCUSSIONS. DR. CASSON INSISTS THAT CONCUSSIONS IN FOOTBALL ARE NOT WELL ENOUGH UNDERSTOOD TO PROVE SCIENTIFIC LINKS TO CONDITIONS LIKE DEMENTIA.

DR. IRA CASSON, FORMER NFL DOCTOR

The topic of concussions, as you well know, has become highly politicized. Scientific considerations took a back seat to political, media and labor relations issues. Personal attacks upon me were distracting from the central issue of my role on the committee

which was to improve the health and safety of the players.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DR. CASSON RESIGNED FROM THE NFL'S CONCUSSION COMMITTEE IN NOVEMBER. BUT HE WAS UNAPOLOGETIC WHEN CALLED TO TESTIFY AT A CONGRESSIONAL HEARING IN DETROIT IN EARLY JANUARY.

CASSON

But you need objective, scientific, medical examinations and studies so you can try and see if there's a clinical correlation between what you're finding in the brain and the clinical picture of the subjects. And that's not available.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TENNESSEE REPRESENTATIVE STEVE COHEN WAS HAVING NONE OF IT.

REP. STEVE COHEN, CONGRESSMAN D - TN

So isn't politicalization a little bit more important just like erring on the side of caution and lives in the balance rather than waiting for the ultimate perfect scientific data. And how many more football players might have brain damage?

SANCHEZ

And to have him steadfastly maintain that position in the face of scholarship that says otherwise-- Um I think does a real disservice to young players. There is a sense of outrage there-- that he would give that message knowing that players at the lower levels are gonna hang their hats on that.

TREY WINGO, ESPN HOST

What was it you said a while ago? That there's concussions and just getting your bell rung - getting dinged, yeah.

TOM JACKSON, ESPN HOST

Yeah, you're dinged. That was a all purpose word.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WHEN IT COMES TO KEEPING A PULSE ON CONCUSSIONS AND FOOTBALL, ESPN PLAYS A UNIQUE ROLE. ON THE ONE HAND, THEIR NEWS DIVISION COVERS THE SPORT AS NEWS. ON THE OTHER HAND...

WINGO

Well, the front of the sports page in the New Orleans Times Picayune says it all.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THEY BROADCAST FOR ENTERTAINMENT NFL AND COLLEGE GAMES, AND SERVE UP HOURS OF COMMENTARY EVERY WEEK.

WINGO

But they beat the heck out of 'em...

TRENT DILFER, ESPN HOST

They really did and you said they didn't play great defense...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SIMPLY PUT, PROMOTING FOOTBALL AND BIG BUSINESS DEALS WITH THE NFL ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE NETWORK'S BOTTOM LINE.

ANNOUNCER

NFL Live is presented by...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BOB LEY IS A VETERAN REPORTER.

RATHER

Well, you're ESPN's longest serving commentator.

BOB LEY, ESPN HOST

Indeed.

RATHER

At such a young age I don't know how you've got that...

LEY

So charged. I plead guilty. (Laughs)

RATHER

How have you seen the discussion about concussions change over the years?

LEY

We have been on this issue for the last 10 years, and I can remember reporting this back even when Troy Aikman was an active player and it was -- almost the entire field I think was--was almost primitive in terms of medical appreciation of it, the way the diagnosis went, what the protocols were.

RATHER

Have you noticed a difference this year?

LEY

I think so. I think so and I think it--it all comes from the change in league policies.

RATHER

Did, as you were developing your interest in concussions and then beginning to develop the story, did you hear people on the air that you winced a little bit and said, "If they knew what I knew they probably wouldn't say that about great hit?"

LEY

Absolutely. Um-- at all networks. At all levels. High school -- college -- pros. It's—It's a It's a cheap easy piece of video when someone gets their "bell rung" that phrase -- to put it to-- to music or--or to run it, network or local. And the more we would do in this field -- wait a minute, that's—that's off base.

WINGO

The rookie out of BYU stepped up huge because Peyton kept finding him.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TREY WINGO IS A KEY NFL ANALYST AT ESPN. HE HOSTS NFL LIVE AND SOMETIMES THE POPULAR SPORTS CENTER.

RATHER

A sports columnist wrote, and I quote that, "There was a time in this country when we

weren't required to be-- wear seatbelts, smoking cigarettes was chic and bacon and eggs were considered-- a healthy start to any morning. In ten years, we might look back at the sport of football and cringe the same way." unquote. Do you agree?

WINGO

We might. But I know this much -- America is addicted to football. It is, with all due respect to baseball, it is our national pastime, it is our national passion. It's – it's in many ways everything that people like about America. It's big, it's loud, it's brash, it's violent.

RATHER

It's a spectacle.

WINGO

It's a spectacle. Very much like the Roman gladiators. People want to come in and they wanna see -- they wanna see the hits. They wanna see the touchdowns, but they wanna see it all and it's—it's now part of our you know, DNA in this country. I can't imagine a time when that changes anytime soon.

RATHER

Have you noticed a difference in the way the sportscasters, that is, well let's start with the play by play people and the analysts while the game is going on. Have you noticed any change in how they deal with this?

WINGO

First of all, anytime there's a big hit on a game your first reaction is WOW you know, and then it's almost immediately now followed up with OK is he gonna be alright? And I don't think it used to be that way. I mean for years the way the NFL would go about handling the idea of concussions - how many fingers are there? You know 2? You're good to go. The NFL's not doing that anymore.

Look, you're never gonna legislate big hits out of football. You might as well try to legislate football out of football. It's-- It's part and parcel. But I think you have to treat them in a way that you look at it a little more serious than you did in years past. I mean for years the NFL used to sell these tapes called Crunch Hits and Big Times. They're not doin that anymore.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

FEW PEOPLE AT ESPN KNOW THE COST OF CONCUSSIONS MORE PERSONALLY THAN NFL ANALYST MERRIL HOGE WHOSE CAREER ENDED

WITH A CONCUSSION THAT LEFT HIM NEAR DEATH IN THE TRAINING ROOM.

MERRIL HOGE, ESPN HOST

Because I had a serious concussion, didn't recover, wasn't evaluated and received another one, it cost me my career and nearly cost me my life. That is the biggest danger with head trauma. It's not that you get a concussion. People immediately think you get a concussion, "Oh your career is over." Some people say, "Your career is over. You're never gonna be the same." No. If – if they're not properly treated, cared for and evaluated, yes, you run that risk when he or she walks back out on the field, but if they're properly cared for, properly treated, properly evaluated, no, they can go back and play without the same risk that they had prior to that.

RATHER

Given what we now know about concussions, and we're still learning but there's a lot of knowledge out there, can professional football, let me confine it to the NFL now, can professional football continue to be played the way it is now and really do something significant to reduce concussions or does the game have to change?

HOGE

Can't change the game and I think that's dangerous. We're trying to create football to be risk free. It's impossible. You can't create risk free anything in life. There's gonna be a danger associated with a lot of things that we choose to do in life. There's dangers with playing football. Concussions are gonna be a part of that. It's my honest belief that if we are educated and we are aware and we are intelligent with the injury, that we don't – we don't make the one critical mistake – which is reentering players. That to me is the biggest danger. If we could eliminate that we would eliminate every tragedy that I have heard of.

RATHER

Show me what you got here?

BRIAN WESTBROOK, NFL PLAYER – PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Well these are just a few of the trophies I've been able to pick up over the years. And you know, of course, we have all the balls. These are all the game balls that we've had -- some of 'em, not all of 'em - that I've had over the course of my eight years with Philadelphia.

RATHER

Well, you know, my guess is that a lot of people that watch television may have asked, "What do you do with those game balls?" This is what you do with them.

WESTBROOK

Yep. Exactly...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

SINCE BREAKING INTO THE NFL IN 2002 WITH THE PHILADELPHIA EAGLES, RUNNING BACK BRIAN WESTBROOK HAS BECOME A STAR. HE'S FAMOUS FOR HIS GRIT AND VERSATILITY ON THE FIELD, BUT THIS PAST OCTOBER, AFTER A RUNNING PLAY AGAINST THE WASHINGTON REDSKINS, HE BECAME WELL KNOWN FOR SOMETHING ELSE.

ANNOUNCER 1

Here's a hand-off to Westbrook. Makes a cut up the middle gets hit-- taken down at the 45 yard line of the Redskins.

ANNOUNCER 2

They knocked him out. He's out - like cold.

ANNOUNCER 1

He is out cold. I believe -- Yeah, Westbrook's down...

WESTBROOK

I remember the beginning of the play breaking the huddle. Quarterback callin' off the calls at the off-- at the line. Um, and then I get the handoff and the next thing that I know after at that time point is wakin' up.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WESTBROOK WAS KNOCKED UNCONSCIOUS. HIS YOUNGER BROTHER BYRON, PLAYING FOR THE REDSKINS, RUSHED TO HIS SIDE.

ANNOUNCER

He is knocked out. Great hit. His knee hit him right in the head. Great hit. Both teams on their knees praying for Westbrook who is moving down there but his bell is rung.

WESTBROOK

I see my brother's face standin' over top of me. I see the trainers-- on the left and the right side of me. And you're kind of wondering what just happened? Why are all these people

starin' at me? Why is my brother on the field with me right now lookin' at-- lookin' down at me? And-- you're kind of confused as to what-- what went on. And, you know, suddenly - suddenly things start to come back into perspective. You start to understand that, you know, obviously you got knocked out. Obviously you were out for—a--a certain period of time. And now you have to get up off this field and, you know, go to the locker room and check things out.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WESTBROOK WAS FORCED TO MISS TWO GAMES AS HE WAITED FOR HIS HEAD TO RECOVER.

RATHER

How'd you take that?

WESTBROOK

It's tough. It's tough, 'cause as an athlete your-- your number one goal is to get out there and perform. That's your profession. That's what you do.

RATHER

Well, was there a consensus on when you could play again?

WESTBROOK

You know, there wasn't. I think um-- you have to initially wait for all the symptoms to disappear. And once the symptoms are gone you have to pass that ImPACT test.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WESTBROOK DID PASS THE IMPACT TEST, BUT BEFORE HE COULD BE CLEARED TO PLAY TEAM DOCTORS MADE SURE HE COULD EXERCISE WITHOUT A RETURN OF HIS SYMPTOMS.

WESTBROOK

When you're running do you have a headache? When you're ridin' a bike do you have a headache? Um, and if you do at that point you stop until you can-- do those things without havin' a headache. And I was able to do that maybe two weeks down the line, three weeks down the line and that was it. At that point I was able to return to practice.

RATHER

Well did you get anything that you interpreted as even subtle pressure from teammates,

coaches, anybody say, "Listen, it's unfortunate but-- you seem okay and let's get back out there?"

WESTBROOK

You know what? I didn't. I think my teammates were great about it as well. A lot of my teammates came up to me and said, "You know, West, you scared the crap out of me. I was really worried about you. I-- I couldn't believe you-- I tried to help you up and you was just layin' there. Looked like you were dead. I think the most pressure came from myself, 'cause I wanted to play. I wanted to get back out there. I wanted to be healthy. I wanted to help this team.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WESTBROOK RETURNED TO ACTION NOVEMBER 15 AGAINST THE SAN DIEGO CHARGERS. BUT THEN ONE SEEMINGLY ROUTINE TACKLE UPENDED HIS LIFE AGAIN.

WESTBROOK

And I run head first into the defender. He hits me on my right side on my facemask. And um-- you know, I was fine. Didn't-- I didn't-- you know, wasn't knocked out or anything like that.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT THEN WESTBROOK MADE EYE CONTACT WITH EAGLES HEAD COACH ANDY REID ON THE SIDELINES.

WESTBROOK

And the one thing about Coach Reid, he always-- he's always watchin'. And I look right at him and he's said, "Come on." He-- eh-- he knew. And I kind of knew too as I was just started walkin' to the sideline.

RATHER

Did you see any doctor that was not in some way connected with the team?

WESTBROOK

After my first concussion, no, I didn't.

RATHER

Did you think about it?

WESTBROOK

Um, I thought about it. I thought about it long and hard. Um, and that's where I-- the trust factor with the trainers and the team doctor, I-- I felt that trust with them. I still trust them. Very much so. But-- you know, hindsight bein' 20/20 I probably shoulda conferred with another doctor, but I didn't.

RATHER

Well, with hindsight do you regret your decision to play?

WESTBROOK

Um, I think-- I think I did everything I could to find out if I was ready or not. I think I did everything I could. There was no indication that I was not ready to play football.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WESTBROOK SAYS PART OF THE PROBLEM IS PLAYERS GET CONFLICTING INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO TREAT CONCUSSIONS. HE HAD BEEN CHECKED OUT. HE WAS CLEARED. BUT HE NOW RECOGNIZES HE RETURNED TO PLAY TOO SOON.

WESTBROOK

Just from sittin' in the trainin' room talkin' to the guys. They say, "Now I wonder-- I remember back in '03 when I hurt my head-- I wonder if that was a concussion. You know, "What's the information that you got from the doctor? What did he say?" And they're truly interested because they-- they want to be safe as well.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WESTBROOK TOLD US THAT IN YEARS PAST, PLAYERS WOULD TALK ABOUT GETTING THEIR BELL RUNG - A HIT TO THE HEAD THAT CAUSED THEM TO THINK THEY HAD JUST MOMENTARILY BECOME DISORIENTED - AND IT WAS NO BIG DEAL. BUT NOW THAT HE KNOWS MORE ABOUT CONCUSSIONS, HE REALIZES THINGS HE USED TO SHRUG OFF ARE MUCH MORE SERIOUS.

WESTBROOK

Maybe those were slight concussions. Maybe those were—

RATHER

But you didn't think of it that way?

WESTBROOK

You didn't. I didn't.

RATHER

You just thought of it as, "Got my bell rung. I'll put some water on my face.

WESTBROOK

Yeah, but in hindsight playing with a concussion, even slight ones, is a major thing.

FOOTBALL PLAYER

Let's go!

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WESTBROOK EMPHASIZES THAT FOOTBALL IS A TOUGH GAME, WHERE PLAYERS ARE SUPPOSED TO PLAY THROUGH PAIN. IT'S A LESSON OFTEN TAUGHT BY COACHES ON YOUTH TEAMS.

WESTBROOK

They see Brett Favre limpin' back out there. And their coaches say, "Remember that game with-- between the way the Vikings and the Saints? Brett Favre went back in there with-- with was leg injury? Remember that game when, you know, Brian Westbrook broke his rib? He still played. He still did that so you can still do it. Get back in the huddle and keep playin.'" That's what these coaches are telling these kids. And in some-- in some aspect it-- it's correct to do that. But when you're-- when you're messin' around with head injuries, that's one thing that I would never play with. And I would encourage-- no young kid to-- to play with a head injury because you can't replace your brain. You can never replace it.

RATHER

Do you think your average middle school, high school, even college coach fully understands that?

WESTBROOK

I think they look at the-- the small picture. The small picture is winnin' football games. Um, sometimes having your best players out there. The big picture is these kids' lives are

at-- at stake. The big picture is it's more than just a game. It's just-- it's not a football game. It's-- it's life.

RATHER

Hard to get that through your head when you're 15, 16 years old and dreaming of being a Brian Westbrook.

WESTBROOK

It's hard to get it through your head when you're 30 (LAUGHTER) and you are Brian Westbrook. It's—it's hard to do it because you wanna go out there and play. That's what you've been doin' it for the last 20 years. You wanna go out there and play football and that's what I wanna do. And I know the-- I know the risks. I've talked to the doctors. Um-- but you know, at some point you have to sit down and have a real heart-to-heart with yourself and say, "You're not okay right now. And if you continue to put yourself at risk—uh, you really are risking serious, serious damage."

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

STAR RUNNING BACK BRIAN WESTBROOK.

WHILE NFL PLAYERS LIKE WESTBROOK NOW HAVE MORE AWARENESS ABOUT CONCUSSIONS AND BETTER ACCESS TO MEDICAL SPECIALISTS, THAT IS NOT THE CASE IN YOUTH SPORTS. ACCORDING TO A NATIONAL STUDY, ONLY 42 PERCENT OF HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES HAVE ACCESS TO ATHLETIC TRAINERS. WE'LL DEAL WITH THAT PART OF THE STORY WHEN WE RETURN.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

SO FAR TONIGHT, WE'VE FOCUSED ON THE NFL AND HOW THE LEAGUE IS BEGINNING TO CHANGE ITS APPROACH TO CONCUSSIONS. WHILE IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT CONCUSSIONS ARE A PROBLEM IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL, THERE ARE NEW STUDIES THAT SHOW WOMEN MAY BE EVEN MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO BRAIN INJURIES THEN MEN, AND ACROSS THE COUNTRY MORE AND MORE YOUNG ATHLETES, YOUNG WOMEN AND MEN, ARE LEARNING THE STEEP COSTS OF CONCUSSIONS.

NIKI POPYER

I wish I was still the girl that people looked at and said, "Oh, she's a athlete. She's a basketball player. Oh, I've seen her play." But-- that's gone now.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

16-YEAR-OLD NIKI POPYER WAS A HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL STAR. AT MARLBORO HIGH IN NEW JERSEY SHE WAS THE FIRST FRESHMAN IN SIX YEARS TO START VARSITY AS A POINT GUARD. COACHES TOLD HER PARENTS THAT A COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP WAS IN HER FUTURE. BASKETBALL WAS A GAME SHE LOVED SINCE SHE WAS A LITTLE GIRL, AND IT LOVED HER BACK.

RATHER

You were good. I'm saying that. You don't have to say that. The record shows that you were good. Did you consider yourself a star?

NIKI POPYER

I would never consider myself a star. I didn't play just because I was good at it or anything. I played because I loved to play and I loved the feeling of playing.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND NIKI PLAYED THE GAME HARD. THAT'S HER WITH THE BALL - NUMBER 23 IN THE DARK BLUE JERSEY. NIKI WAS MAKING HER WAY UP THROUGH THE ELITE YOUTH RANKS, BUT AS SHE DID, SHE WAS SUFFERING INJURIES THAT SHE WOULD PAY FOR LATER.

RATHER

I think most of us who watch football, particularly professional football, concussions are a given.

NIKI POPYER

Yes.

RATHER

But as you were developing as a basketball player, did you think about concussions, think about head injuries?

NIKI POPYER

Not at all. Like, when I got hit in the head, like, the first couple times, I was just like-- like, I have to suck it up. Like, I want to play. I don't want to sit out. But nobody even told me to sit out, so I was like, "Okay, then it's fine."

CATHY POPYER

We were led to believe that each concussion was its own entity. And once her brain healed from that concussion, she was fine to play again. What we know now is it's not just the big hits along the way, it's the dozens of little hits in between that you don't even notice.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

CATHY POPYER IS NIKI'S MOTHER. SHE SAYS HER DAUGHTER FIRST HAD A CONCUSSION IN SEVENTH GRADE.

RATHER

Well, when she first started having head injuries, what did you do?

POPYER

We did everything that we thought was right. We took her to the hospital. They checked her out. They did a very perfunctory neurological exam, said-- that she was okay, had a mild concussion, and could go back to school in one to two days. That was the first one.

RATHER

And then what happened?

CATHY POPYER

She sat out. Maybe the next game was a week later. She didn't have any headaches at that point that we remember concentrating on. And she played again. Then she got another hit in the head. Those first two were eight days apart. I'm not sure we went to the hospital for that one. But I remember one of the fathers for one of the subsequent injuries said that they saw that one of her pupils was dilated differently than the other, so we took her to the hospital again. I always had the feeling in the hospital, looking back, that we-- I was just a hysterical mother. And that here was a kid that just bumped her head.

RATHER

That was their view.

CATHY POPYER

That was their view. And that's how they made me feel. So we-- didn't press anything. They took MRI's, and they took X-rays. But what we know now is that those tests were irrelevant.

CATHY POPYER (IN KITCHEN)

Head's bothering you?

NIKI POPYER

Yeah, I have a headache.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

IT'S A COMMON MISCONCEPTION THAT TESTS LIKE MRI'S CAN SHOW THE EFFECTS OF CONCUSSIONS. IN THE END, NIKI FIGURES SHE'S HAD 11 CONCUSSIONS. SHE FINALLY WENT TO AN INDEPENDENT NEURO-PSYCHOLOGIST WHO SAID HER BASKETBALL CAREER WAS OVER.

NIKI POPYER

She was really the first one to say, "Stop. Don't exercise. Don't-- go back to sports because I could get dizzy or nauseous." But she said I can't get hit in the head anymore because each one makes it harder to recover.

RATHER

Well, what are you not able to do? Or what is it advised that you not do?

NIKI POPYER

I can't go on a train. I can't go swimming. Can't go in the ocean. I can't go to the movies. I can't listen to live music, or have bright lights, or flashing—

RATHER

Television?

NIKI POPYER

I could watch television, but I try and, like, put it down to an hour because it gives me a headache.

RATHER

Well, you take tests in school?

NIKI POPYER

I take tests, but I have special accommodations for them. I get extra time. I-- I get up to 50 percent extra time. I have to leave class early because they don't want me in the halls.

RATHER

Because of the noise and—

NIKI POPYER

Because of the noise and chaos and just –

RATHER

bumping.

NIKI POPYER

Yeah.

CATHY POPYER

She was very, very depressed for a long time. She would come home crying, cry all night, and just be-- very out of sorts.

RATHER

I know it may be a difficult question to answer. Is Niki the same person that she was?

CATHY POPYER

She's getting there, but she's not. Niki is very good at her public appearance. And for the most part, because there's no cast, there's no bandage, or no crutches, to everybody that sees her, she looks fine. She seems fine. She can go a long way to be cheerful and make everybody around her feel better. But when she comes home and she sits with Mommy, or Daddy, or her sister, we see just how overwhelmed she is with what she is not allowed to do, not able to do, or capable of.

NIKI POPYER

Me and my dad used to go to all the basketball things together, road trips. And now, we don't really have that bond anymore because it's even hard for me to be around basketball. I still go to the games, but every day I come home and I just get really upset.

RATHER

For a while at least you went to practices.

NIKI POPYER

Yeah, I still go to practice. It's just really hard.

RATHER

Well, if it's really hard, why do you go?

NIKI POPYER

I still want to be part of the team. I don't want to lose my friendships with all of my pl-- all my teammates, and I want to keep that. And if it means risking being upset for-- just to have the friendships that I've made along the years, then it's worth it.

RATHER

And what do we have here?

NIKI POPYER

Ahm one of the times when I got hurt my varsity team at school got a basketball and they all signed it for me.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

DOCTORS SAY NIKI'S BRAIN MIGHT NEVER FULLY RECOVER. AND ALTHOUGH NIKI SHOT A FEW BASKETS FOR OUR CAMERAS, IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT JUST THE SLIGHTEST TAP ON THE HEAD NOW COULD HARM HER. SHE WAS KNOCKED UNCONSCIOUS RECENTLY WHEN SOMEONE BUMPED INTO HER IN THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA.

RATHER

Well, question -- should someone have recognized earlier that there were all these concussions, and that cumulative effect of those concussions were gonna have-- at least a dire potential? Should someone have recognized that earlier?

CATHY POPYER

Absolutely. Absolutely. The school's basketball coaches have to be educated about how potentially dangerous these concussions are for these young brains that are still developing.

RATHER

And you think they haven't been.

CATHY POPYER

I think they absolutely haven't been.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

MESQUITE, TEXAS. A BLUE COLLAR SUBURB OF ABOUT 135,000 JUST OUTSIDE OF DALLAS. IT'S THE KIND OF PLACE WHERE RODEO AND BARBEQUE ARE BIG, BUT HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS IS KING... YEAR ROUND. FROM FOOTBALL... TO SOCCER... FROM VOLLEYBALL... TO BASKETBALL. AT MESQUITE HIGH SCHOOL, HOME OF THE SKEETERS, ATHLETIC SUCCESS HAS A LONG HISTORY THAT CAN BE FOUND IN THE TROPHY CASES THAT LINE THE SCHOOL'S HALLWAYS.

COACH

There you go. Come on, come on, come on.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

ATHLETES IN THIS PART OF TEXAS PRIDE THEMSELVES ON THEIR TOUGHNESS.

COACH

If you need to throw up, finish and go over there off the turf.

FOOTBALL PLAYER

Yes, sir.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND UNTIL RECENTLY THAT MEANT SHAKING OFF EVEN THE MOST SERIOUS HEAD INJURIES TO GET BACK IN THE GAME. BUT ALL THAT CHANGED WHEN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S HEAD ATHLETIC TRAINER STARTED HEARING HOW CONCUSSIONS COULD BE A LOT MORE SERIOUS FOR YOUNG ATHLETES THAN PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT.

BUCKY TAYLOR

Their brain is still growing. It's still maturing. And if you injure that brain, it's-- it's-- it's a significant thing.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUCKY TAYLOR HAS BEEN AN ATHLETIC TRAINER FOR MORE THAN TWO DECADES. HE SAYS HE WENT TO A CONFERENCE ABOUT FOUR YEARS AGO WHERE BOSTON UNIVERSITY'S DR. ROBERT CANTU TALKED ABOUT THE POSSIBLE LINK BETWEEN CONCUSSIONS AND LONG TERM DISABILITY AND HE GOT A SINKING FEELING.

BUCKY

You know, I just looked out-- back over my career. And I thought, "My goodness," you know-- you know, I don't know how many concussions I average a year. Probably five or six. And I did-- and I-- and I can think back over my career, some of those kids that had really bad concussions. And I took care of 'em way the standard of care was at the time. But I-- I-- I worried. And it just-- it just worried me. 'Cause, You know, the NFL's doing, you know, all these studies. They're getting the cadaver brains. And they've been showing some really significant damage to the brain that these gentleman have had over the years. And-- when I saw that the first time, I-- you know, again, it goes back to me thinking about my career. I think, "You know, that-- that could be a brain of a kid that-- that I had. And that first concussion that he had was when he was a freshman at Mesquite High School."

RATHER

Was that case of sort of a light bulb went off?

BUCKY

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I came back, and I talked with our athletic trainers in our town. And we kind of felt like we needed to have somethin' in writing. And we all needed to be on the same page.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TAYLOR STARTED RESEARCHING CONCUSSION SCIENCE, WHEREVER HE COULD GET HIS HANDS ON IT. HIS GOAL WAS TO DEVELOP STANDARDS FOR HIS DISTRICT THAT WOULD MEAN FROM HERE ON OUT, NONE OF HIS ATHLETES WOULD BECOME STATISTICS IN WHAT THE CDC HAS CALLED AN EPIDEMIC IN YOUTH CONCUSSIONS.

RATHER

You came up with guidelines—

BUCKY

Yes, sir.

RATHER

--for dealing with concussions.

BUCKY

Yes, sir.

RATHER

What are the highlights of those guidelines that were not there before?

BUCKY

We do baseline testing on all of our athletes.

BUCKY (TO ATHLETES)

There's no right or wrong answer to anything you're gonna do. Just do what your- what the screen asks you to do.

BUCKY

The neuro-cognitive testing is a computer program that-- that tests memory, it tests reaction time. We get a baseline on all those kids before they-- they start. And then if they have a concussion, then-- then we've got-- we re-test 'em. And we've got-- we can compare the-- the-- the norms and see if they are-- are within the norm that they need to be.

BUCKY (TO ATHLETE)

Okay, you can git after it...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THESE ARE HEALTHY STUDENT ATHLETES, NEW TO THE SCHOOL SYSTEM WHO ARE TAKING THAT SAME "IMPACT TEST" THE PROS TAKE. COACH TAYLOR MAKES SURE THEY HAVE A BASELINE SCORE BEFORE THEY ARE ALLOWED TO EVEN PRACTICE. IF ANY OF THESE ATHLETES SUSTAIN A CONCUSSION DURING THEIR SEASON THEY WILL TAKE THE TEST AGAIN AND THAT SCORE WILL BE COMPARED TO THE ONE THEY GET TODAY. JUNIOR AMANDA MENN IS BACK IN COACH TAYLOR'S OFFICE FOR AN UPDATED IMPACT TEST. THIS FALL, SHE COLLIDED WITH A GOALPOST WHILE PLAYING SOCCER.

RATHER

Well, when you got hurt what happened?

AMANDA MENN

I was running and defending the goal. And I misjudged where the goal was. And kind of hit it.

RATHER

Did you lose consciousness? Did it knock you out?

MENN

No. At first it didn't hurt that bad. I didn't think really anything of it. And then, like, the big knot on my forehead. And I was, like, "Oh, it's not really anything." And then, like, I started getting headaches. And, like, I couldn't really go to sleep. And I wasn't really hungry. But then I hadn't eaten anything and I felt like I was gonna throw up.

RATHER

Were you taken to a hospital?

MENN

No.

RATHER

What happened?

AMANDA MENN

At first I was given, like, a test of, like, minor things, like, "Can you stand with your feet together and your arms out with your eyes closed? Do you have balance?" Which I didn't have.

RATHER

Well, when this first happened did you think it was serious?

MENN

I actually-- I really didn't think that it was that bad until, like, the next day when I came to school. Everyday things were hard to do. Like, one day I even had trouble tying my

shoes. Like, I didn't even know that was possible. My English teacher wanted me to read and I kept trying to explain to her that I couldn't read.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AMANDA WAS SUFFERING FROM THE CLASSIC SYMPTOMS OF A CONCUSSION. SO BEFORE COACH TAYLOR COULD CLEAR HER TO RETURN TO THE GAME HE NEEDED TO CHECK WITH AMANDA'S TEACHERS, FRIENDS AND FAMILY TO GET THE FULL PICTURE OF HOW SHE WAS RECOVERING. AND SINCE SHE HAD TAKEN A BASELINE IMPACT TEST, COACH TAYLOR HAD WHAT HE CALLS ONE MORE "TOOL IN HIS TOOL BELT" TO DETERMINE WHEN AMANDA COULD GO BACK ON THE FIELD.

MENN

How'd I do?

BUCKY

Well, we're fixin' to find out. That's good. That means you're gittin' well, girl. And, in fact, really, it means you are well.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TODAY, AMANDA IS BACK WITH HER TEAMMATES...

RATHER

Do you think all concussions get reported and treated?

MENN

Probably not. I know some people who've had a concussion and know they've had a concussion. But they just don't wanna admit to it.

RATHER

Did you think about that?

MENN

Yeah.

RATHER

About saying, "Hey, I'm okay, send me back in?"

MENN

Oh, I wanted to go back in really badly. And then-- I was talking to Coach Cross, our JV coach, and she was, like, "Well, you know, if you were to do this you could, like, have internal bleeding in your brain." And I was, like, "Oh, bench me s-- now."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BUT COACH TAYLOR SAYS THAT NOT EVERYONE IS SO UNDERSTANDING OF HIS DRIVE TO TAKE CONCUSSIONS SERIOUSLY. SOME PARENTS REMEMBER THEIR OWN GLORY DAYS AND PRESSURE THEIR CHILDREN TO MEASURE UP. OTHERS ARE HOPING THAT THEIR CHILD'S SUCCESS ON THE FIELD OR COURT WILL LEAD TO AN ATHLETIC SCHOLARSHIP FOR COLLEGE. A CONCUSSION THAT JEOPARDIZES THOSE DREAMS IS SEEN AS AN OBSTACLE TO GET AROUND.

RATHER

Now what do you do with a parent who says, "Well-- he-- he's supposed to be out two to four weeks."

BUCKY

Right.

RATHER

The scouts are-- at-- at every other game. Sometimes they don't even know they're here. You're costing my kid a scholarship here.

BUCKY

Right. Well, I try to be as honest and-- straightforward with 'em as I can be. And I'll tell 'em. I said, "I'm doing this because I want your son or your daughter to have a fruitful life."

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

TAYLOR SAYS HE RUNS INTO WHAT HE CALLS DOCTOR SHOPPING, WHERE PARENTS TRY TO FIND A DOCTOR WHO WILL CLEAR THEIR CHILD TO PLAY, BUT TAYLOR WON'T PUT THE KIDS ON THE FIELD UNTIL THEY PASS HIS CRITERIA.

BUCKY (ON THE FIELD)

You didn't feel anything pop or snap or anything like that?

RATHER

Let me understand. If my son gets a concussion or my daughter and I get a doctor to sign a piece of paper saying, "I think-- he or she's all right," that you can override that?

BUCKY

I can right now. I can right now, 'cause we've got a-- a policy in place that's been-- adopted by our school board.

RATHER

What happens when the coach comes to you, "Bucky, Bucky, Bucky, I love you, I love what you do. This guy's my middle linebacker. He's the whole key to our defense. His doctor," you say he may have shopped a doctor, "his doctor has signed off on it. Who-- who the hell are you, Bucky, to say that he can't go back in there?"

BUCKY

Well, I s-- you know, first of all-- I didn't say the job was easy. (LAUGHTER) Okay? But I-- I've told many a coach that, you know-- in my office right there and I-- I pointed to my wall and said, "You see that degree? Now-- I may be wrong, and you may be right. But-- I'm the one that's got the degrees. You aren't."

RATHER

Well, that requires that-- your athletic director-- backs you up with that.

BUCKY

Absolutely.

RATHER

And that the school principal backs you up.

BUCKY

Absolutely.

RATHER

And that the superintendent backs you up.

BUCKY

Absolutely.

RATHER

You have no way of knowing with precision, but in how many high schools around the country does that situation prevail?

BUCKY

Probably more do not than do.

RATHER

Really?

BUCKY

Yeah. You know, every high school in the nation should have access to a certified athletic trainer.

BUCKY

Well, what do you feel like with the new stuff?

DANIEL

I liked it. I'm really sore...

BUCKY

They should. Because if you don't go by what I say, you're putting your son or daughter at harm. And that harm could be-- not somethin' that a surgeon can repair.

KID AT PT

See ya tomorrow, coach.

BUCKY (AT PT)

Alright, be good.

BUCKY TAYLOR

It could be permanent. It could be very debilitating. They could die.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED TO 16-YEAR-OLD RYNE DOUGHERTY, A HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PLAYER FROM MONCLAIR, NEW JERSEY. HE WAS CLEARED TO PLAY AFTER SUFFERING A CONCUSSION IN PRACTICE AND THEN COLLAPSED DURING A GAME AND DIED.

CONGRESSMAN BILL PASCRELL

So this young man died going back into the game. He got another concussion and he died. I mean that was a tragedy. I went to that funeral and it was no day at the beach.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

BILL PASCRELL IS A DEMOCRATIC CONGRESSMAN FROM NEW JERSEY. HE'S SPONSORED LEGISLATION CALLING ON THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL TO COME UP WITH STANDARDS FOR TREATING CONCUSSIONS IN YOUTH SPORTS, SO TRAINERS LIKE BUCKY TAYLOR OUT IN MESQUITE AREN'T FORCED TO DO IT ON THEIR OWN. ONE PERSON WHO'S SPOKEN IN FAVOR OF THE BILL IS FORMER NEW JERSEY HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL PLAYER NIKKI POPYER.

PASCRELL

She can't play anymore. She is no longer able to play. All she has to do is have a slight jar of the head and she has tremendous, tremendous headaches, dizziness and whatever the case may be. Three million five hundred thousand concussions in the United States every year - so need I tell you how significant I think this is in protecting life and limb.

RATHER

Well, why is getting this act passed so important to you?

NIKI POPYER

Well, I think that there's plenty of athletes that are lying about how they feel just so they can get back in the game and not sit out for even a month or whatever it takes. But it really is so much better to sit out a season than to have your whole life get so messed up because of a concussion that, if you sit out, could be fine.

RATHER

And to that person who may be watching and listening and says, "Listen, I'm compassionate about this problem, but this is not something the federal government

ought to be into. They shouldn't be passing any federal laws about this," you should say what?

CATHY POPYER

I would say that I consider this law the same as the parent of a football player should consider a helmet. It's protective gear for their child.

RATHER

Well, what do the doctors tell you now about the fragility of your brain?

NIKI POPYER

They say that once you get, like, another concussion, it makes it so much harder to go back to the way it was, and that you get more susceptible because your brain never fully heals.

RATHER

Did you have any idea that concussions could cause this much trouble?

NIKI POPYER

Never, I-- I had no idea that getting hit in seventh grade could put me where I am today.

RATHER

Do you ever think about what might have been had you been diagnosed correctly with the knowledge we now know when in seventh grade you first got a concussion?

NIKI POPYER

Every day. I think if I sat out maybe a month in seventh or eighth grade, or more than two days, then maybe the next ones wouldn't have been so bad. And then maybe I wouldn't even have gotten any because I was sitting out. So I think about that a lot, and how it has affected every aspect of my life, and especially in school. Maybe I could have gotten into a really good college, or h-- kept my grades up. But yeah, I think about that every day.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

NOW THERE'S ONE BIT OF GOOD NEWS, BUCKY TAYLOR, THE TRAINER IN MESQUITE TEXAS, SAYS SCHOOL DISTRICTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY ARE NOW BEGINNING TO CALL HIM UP TO LEARN ABOUT HOW THEY CAN ADOPT HIS GUIDELINES FOR TREATING HEAD INJURIES IN SPORTS. NEXT UP WHEN WE COME BACK, WE CHECK IN WITH AN OLD FRIEND... A

TRAILBLAZER IN THE CAUSE OF YOUTH CONCUSSIONS. SO STAY HERE WITH US.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

WELCOME BACK. FINALLY TONIGHT WE TURN TO A STORY ABOUT A YOUNG MAN, INFUSED WITH THE ATHLETIC SPIRIT, WHO NO LONGER CAN COMPETE ON THE FIELD OF PLAY.

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

EARLY LAST YEAR, WE BROUGHT YOU THE STORY OF ZACK LYSTEDT. ONCE A YOUTH SPORTS STAR, HE SUFFERED A BRAIN INJURY ON THIS FOOTBALL TACKLE, BUT HE WAS RETURNED TO THE GAME ... WITH CATASTROPHIC RESULTS.

ZACK'S THERAPIST

Pull, Zack. Pull pull pull pull pull pull pull...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

WE SAW ZACK STRUGGLE AT REHABILITATION...

ZACK LYSTEDT

He could not land...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

AND WE WERE THERE WHEN HE TESTIFIED IN FRONT OF THE WASHINGTON STATE LEGISLATURE FOR A BILL IN HIS NAME THAT WOULD SET STRICT STANDARDS FOR HEAD INJURIES IN YOUTH SPORTS.

ZACK LYSTEDT

My life changed drastically...

RATHER (VOICE OVER)

THE BILL PASSED AND ZACK BECAME A LIVING SYMBOL OF THE DANGERS OF CONCUSSIONS. SINCE OUR REPORT, OTHER NATIONAL MEDIA, FROM HBO TO 60 MINUTES, HAVE PROFILED HIS STORY. AND WHEN WE CAME BACK TO HIS HOUSE NEAR SEATTLE RECENTLY TO TALK TO ZACK, HIS FATHER VICTOR AND MOTHER MERCEDES, WE FOUND A YEAR OF PROGRESS AND PRIDE.

PHYSICAL THERAPIST

What's up Zack?

ZACK

What up? Well, hello, Mart Dog.

MARTY FRANK, PHYSICAL THERAPIST

My dog?

ZACK

MART dog.

MARTY

MART dog - oh, very nice. How you feelin' today?

ZACK

I'm feelin' good.

MARTY

Better than yesterday.

ZACK

Uh...yeah.

VICTOR LYSTEDT, FATHER OF ZACK LYSTEDT

Zackery has done so much this last year. You know-- last year Zack was-- it was real hard for Zack the hold himself up. And-- and Zack-- actually, stands out of his wheelchair now. And-- and Zack continues pushing that right leg to do more and more so that it'll eventually carry him in a walk.

MARTY

Very nice. Like break dancing, right?

VICTOR LYSTEDT

We've just started a new thing called Pushing Boundaries where he's actually in a device that is a robotic machine.

VICTOR

So things are feelin' ok?

ZACK

Yeah.

MARTY

This is the Lokomat. It's like a gait training machine, basically. Try to stimulate the neur -- the neurons, basically to kind of retrain the body how to walk with the proper gait.

ZACK

Of course, it's not comfortable because I'm hanging, like, from my crotch. Like, I get better at one thing, it stay. Like I-- one thing. I can say I significantly-- significantly gotten better at it.

VICTOR LYSTEDT

What'd you get better at today?

ZACK LYSTEDT

Oh. (LAUGHTER)

VICTOR LYSTEDT

I thought-- I thought you got better at one thing every--

ZACK LYSTEDT:

Standing--

VICTOR LYSTEDT

Yeah, standing. You did good today standing.

ZACK LYSTEDT

Yeah. I-- standing up straight.

VICTOR LYSTEDT

What-- what else?

ZACK LYSTEDT

I said one thing a day.

VICTOR LYSTEDT

Oh, one thing. Okay. (LAUGHTER) Don't press it, huh?

ZACK LYSTEDT

My goal for graduation is that-- I will be able to walk-- just, like, walk the stage for graduation like a normal kid.

VICTOR LYSTEDT

Good job, dude. You're gonna be able to do that.

ZACK LYSTEDT

I think and believe that.

VICTOR LYSTEDT

Yeah. You'll be able to do that.

ZACK LYSTEDT

If I have to use a cane, whatever.

VICTOR LYSTEDT

Yeah, that's right. We'll-- we'll-- we'll paint it up. It'll be a nice looking cane.  
(LAUGHTER)

ZACK LYSTEDT

Be a little pimp cane. (LAUGHTER)

ZACK LYSTEDT

Hopefully my law can go national.

VICTOR LYSTEDT

It will go national, buddy. It will be going national.

ZACK LYSTEDT

If I continue at this pace, anything's possible.

VICTOR LYSTEDT

That's right.

ZACK LYSTEDT

That's like, the one motto I've always lived by is anything is possible. Peace out.

RATHER (ON CAMERA)

AND ZACK LYSTEDT, WITH YOUR SPIRIT, WE TOO BELIEVE ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE. WE HOPE TO BE THERE WHEN YOU WALK ACROSS THE STAGE TO GET YOUR HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA. AND THAT'S OUR PROGRAM FOR TONIGHT. FROM NEW YORK, FOR HDNET. DAN RATHER REPORTING. GOOD NIGHT.