



Canadian ex-athletes call for early-age education and training on concussions

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As a former hockey star with a long, public history of concussion injury, Eric Lindros has little hope that, without a great deal of convincing, the NHL and other professional leagues will seriously tackle the growing public health issue.

"You're not going to control pro sports," Mr. Lindros told a conference Tuesday called by Governor-General David Johnston. "What you can control is the classroom."

If they were expecting the former player, recently named to the Hockey Hall of Fame, to detail a personal history of concussion injury, they were in for a surprise.

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"I'm not going to look back," Mr. Lindros told the conference. "We've looked back enough."

Instead of harking back to his storied NHL career with the Philadelphia Flyers, New York Rangers, Toronto Maple Leafs and Dallas Stars, the 43-year-old elected instead to talk about what might be done in the future about what many consider to be an epidemic of concussion injuries, particularly among the young.

His call for education at the youngest levels was the highlight of the "We Can Do Better" conference. It was held in Rideau Hall's luxurious ballroom, where the Order of Canada is awarded to those who "desire a better Canada." The 80 invitees in attendance this particular day – professional hockey and football players, Olympians, medical experts, teachers, coaches and parents, some of whom have lost their children to brain trauma – desire a "safer Canada."

Mr. Johnston, who opened the conference, declared it would be "about living up to one of our most significant responsibilities: to ensure all Canadians – especially young people – can play sports safely and confidently, without hesitation or anxiety."

Another member of the Hockey Hall of Fame, former Montreal Canadiens goaltender Ken Dryden, delivered the keynote address and spoke of the similarities between concussions and climate change: Both are issues where science has produced irrefutable evidence of damage – while doubters and deniers argue against taking action.

"We cannot get the big things wrong," Mr. Dryden said. "It's time for the decision-makers to catch up to the scientists."

Mr. Dryden spoke of his love for all sports, from hockey and baseball in his youth to squash and rollerblading in later years, but added, "I worry about sports now in a way I never worried before. ... I believe the greatest risk to sports in the future, to the number of people who participate, to the games we decide to play and to our understanding of sports as something good for our health and our development, is head injuries."

Mr. Lindros was speaking on a panel with two former Canadian Football League players, star quarterback Matt Dunigan and safety Étienne Boulay. Both men became very emotional while detailing their lives after multiple blows to the head.

Mr. Dunigan, who is today a sports broadcaster, played 14 years in the CFL and was diagnosed with concussions more than a dozen times. The last one, suffered in a game played in Hamilton, "was the final nail in the coffin – I knew right there and then my career was over."

In the 20 years since, he said, "I became a different person ... I've been struggling to maintain consistency." Raised in Texas, he was taught to never give in to adversity, never admit to weakness. "When you're a professional athlete and you're concussed, the last thing you want people to know is you've been concussed."

He saw how his head injuries affected his personality, memory and balance. So he took action when his son, Dolan, suffered a third concussion while trying to follow his father as a quarterback. Mr. Dunigan made his teenage son walk away from his dream. "I pulled him off the field," he said. "One of the toughest things I ever had to do in my life." Years later, with doctors' clearance, his son returned to play briefly for Louisiana Tech University.

Mr. Dunigan now speaks frequently to young athletes about the dangers of keeping head injuries secret in order to keep playing or merely to preserve a spot on a team. He wants them to let coaches and teammates, as well as their parents, know that something is wrong with them.

"It's a sign of strength now to raise your hand," he said.

Mr. Boulay, who won a Grey Cup with the 2012 Toronto Argonauts, recalled how he was a small man playing in a league of much larger men and had to make do with what gifts he had.

"They taught us to hit with our head," said Mr. Boulay. He came to believe that headaches after each match were just part of the game.

After one hard hit during a game against the Saskatchewan Roughriders in 2012, he hid his injury. He was fearful of losing his spot on the roster to a younger player who was trying to make the team – fearful of losing his only means of making a living.

"I took the wrong decision to stay in the game, to keep my spot," Mr. Boulay said. "I lied about my condition to my doctor."

It was, he believes, a near-fatal error. "It never came back to normal," he said of his damaged brain. He turned to painkillers – and painkillers turned him into an addict.

"I'm fighting that today," he said. "I'm doing great."

A second panel illustrated that concussions are not just a concern of hard-contact sports such as football and hockey. Rosie MacLennan, the two-time Olympic gold medalist in trampolining, told the gathering of her own battles through four concussions and the accompanying depression and anxiety that often follow.

Ms. MacLennan said the four years between Olympic victory in London in 2012 and Rio in 2016 were "the hardest years of my athletic career." At one point leading up to the 2015 Toronto Pan-American Games, she had fallen and was having great difficulty with light and spatial awareness, profoundly affecting her ability to perform. She felt the country expected it of her, fought through the problems and was able to win again. But, she said, she learned an important lesson.

"Your brain is forever. My sport is, much as I love it, not forever."

She spoke on a panel with retired Olympic speed skater Kristina Groves, Olympic cyclist Tara Whitten and retired Paralympic alpine skier Karolina Wisniewska.

"You're really in a fog," Ms. Wisniewska said of her experience with concussion. "You can't expect a concussed athlete to know that they are experiencing a concussion. I, as a person, just wanted to keep skiing. It's very difficult to make any kind of decision when you've had a concussion."

But such decisions, Mr. Lindros believes, must be made – and often by others, including teammates. Concussions are not going to go away just because the sporting world now knows they are dangerous.

"You can change hockey," Mr. Lindros said. "Wider rinks, longer rinks, bring back the red line ... but that's neither here nor there. Even with all the changes, concussions are still going to happen."

Forget about the professional leagues taking action, Mr. Lindros said. They will not take up the issue as perhaps they should; many are involved in lawsuits over brain injuries, which prevents them from even discussing the health issues – physical and mental – that science has tied to brain trauma.

"Pro sports is not a way to start," he said.

(Tellingly, neither the NHL nor the National Hockey League Players' Association attended the conference in any official capacity.)

Instead, start with the kids, Mr. Lindros said – even those as young as his 2 1/2-year-old son, Carl Pierre. The youngster already knows his body parts like toes and elbows, so he can be taught about the importance of protecting his head.

"Tell kids, 'Every day is brain day,'" he said. "We can start at the bottom and work our way up. The biggest bang for your buck is going to be in the classroom."

He also called for all the stakeholders in the concussion issue to get their acts together. There should be, he said, "one message. Simplify things. Keep the message simple, up-to-date. One message. It's getting lost in the wind because it's not consistent messaging. It's confusing for parents, confusing for people. We can simplify this. A concussion in B.C. is no different from a concussion in Quebec. Let's have one protocol. We are Canada."

And that is precisely what the Governor-General hopes comes out of the gathering.

In closing the event, Mr. Johnston said this “conversation” should continue and “take us closer to a national concussion strategy” – something the country’s sports ministers have already started work on.

As Mr. Johnston put it: “When it comes to concussions, let’s skate to where the puck is going.”

HOW LEAGUES HAVE HANDLED HEAD INJURIES

NHL

In a letter to United States Senator Richard Blumenthal, dated July 22, 2016, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said the science linking chronic traumatic encephalopathy – or CTE, a degenerative brain disease – and concussions remains nascent. “In 2012, it was the consensus of medical experts on concussions in sport, including Dr. Robert Cantu (the primary expert retained by plaintiffs’ counsel in the concussion litigation currently pending against the NHL, and a member of Boston University’s CTE Center), that a causal link between concussions and CTE has not been demonstrated. And, as of today, the CTE Center researchers admit that the study of CTE remains in its ‘infancy.’”

NFL

After many years spent denying a link between CTE and repeated blows to the head, the NFL in 2013 agreed to a \$765-million (U.S.) settlement in a lawsuit brought on by more than 4,500 former players. In March, Jeff Miller, the NFL’s senior vice-president for health and safety, acknowledged publicly for the first time that there is a link between football-related head trauma and brain disease. “The answer to that question is certainly yes,” Mr. Miller told the U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Energy and Commerce in a roundtable on concussions.

CFL

Speaking ahead of the Grey Cup in Toronto last week, CFL commissioner Jeffrey Orridge denied a link between football and degenerative brain disease. “Last I heard, it’s still a subject of debate in the medical and scientific community. ... The league’s position is there’s no conclusive evidence at this point.” The CFL has been named in a \$200-million (Canadian) class-action lawsuit over concussions and brain trauma. Concussions suffered in the CFL this season were down 20 per cent (40 compared with 50 in 2015), according to Mr. Orridge.

Soccer

Despite being a low-contact sport, soccer is not immune to head injuries. As early as next season, doctors could be permitted to watch replays of collisions and have matches stopped if a concussion is suspected, according to The Associated Press. “We understand from scientific research and other sports that have introduced it that if you have a much better assessment of the injury, it might be possible, when you see the intensity and the point of contact, to evaluate potential concussions better,” said Lukas Brud, secretary of the International Football Association Board, which determines the rules for soccer worldwide.

Rugby

Ian Ritchie, head of the Rugby Football Union (the governing body in England), spoke about concussions in rugby in October. “It’s very difficult for me to talk about individual circumstances – five to 10 years ago this wasn’t given the same attention,” Mr. Ritchie told the Telegraph. “Because of the information we’ve now got, it’s right we should give it more attention. I don’t think we hide behind that at all. ... It’s about the proportionality of risk. There’s still a risk if you try and cross the road or go on a car trip up the M1 – that’s another important message we need to get out.”