

Mother of Ty Pozzobon says concussion-related depression a factor in his death

Repeated concussions suffered by the star cowboy may have led to permanent brain changes, says expert

By Karin Larsen, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jan 12, 2017 12:42 PM PT Last Updated: Jan 12, 2017 2:42 PM PT



Canadian bull riding champion Ty Pozzobon may have suffered from concussion-related anxiety and depression. He was found dead Monday in Merritt, B.C. (Facebook.com)

Karin Larsen is a former Olympian and award winning sports broadcaster covering BC teams and athletes for 25 years.

From all outward appearances, Ty Pozzobon had everything to live for.

Young, handsome, by all accounts a great guy with a kind heart who also happened to be one of the fastest rising stars in the rodeo world.

But on Monday, the 25-year-old's body was found near his Merritt, B.C., home. The B.C. Coroners Service says his "sudden death... has been determined to be non-suspicious in nature."



Merritt, B.C., bull rider Ty Pozzobon in action. (Richard Drew/Associated Press)

The Pozzobon family released a statement which did not reveal specific details but did include a cryptic quote from his mother, Leanne:

"It's important that people know about the implications of head injuries as the result of concussion."

Family spokeswoman Gail Joe told CBC News that Leanne Pozzobon wants people to be aware of the connection between concussion and mental illness before it's too late.

Ty Pozzobon's death has been confirmed as a suicide.

Samples of his brain tissue have been collected by concussion researchers.

Numerous concussions

Joe said she didn't know how many concussions Pozzobon had suffered in his bull-riding career but that they were "numerous."

Video of Pozzobon being knocked out or having his helmet smashed and head kicked by a bull is easy to find on the internet.

Concussion researcher Dr. Charles Tator told CBC news it's now well known that repeated concussions can lead to mental health problems.

"In post-concussion syndrome, the incidence of depression is very high, like 40 per cent. The same is true of anxiety," he said. "It's the brain changes that occur as a result of repetitive concussion that produce the depression and the anxiety."

The Professional Bull Riders have a concussion protocol which requires riders who suffer a concussion to be cleared before returning to competition. But Dr. Tandy Freeman, a long time physician with the PBR, says the protocol does not take into account repetitive concussions.

"No, we don't have a different protocol for people who have had previous concussion," he told CBC News from his office in Dallas, Texas.



Ty Pozzobon at Calgary Stampede 2014:29

Freeman also says helmets, which were introduced to the PBR in 2012, don't prevent concussions.

"The primary mechanism of concussion is acceleration and deceleration or rotational force — in other words it's what happens to the brain inside the skull as a result of changes of direction," he said.

Cowboy tough

There is an intrinsic pressure in the sport for athletes to compete despite injuries because if they're not riding, they're not getting paid.

As well, in a sport defined by the seemingly superhuman toughness of cowboys who battle 900 kilogram bulls for a living, playing hurt is just part of the game.

Pozzobon was celebrated in November for placing fourth at the Built Ford Tough World Finals in Las Vegas, despite riding with multiple injuries, including a broken wrist. He had also sustained a collapsed lung and broken femur in recent years, along with the head injuries and concussions.

Tator says people need to be aware that post-concussion syndrome anxiety and depression are treatable.

"That's one of the strong messages we want to get out there. They shouldn't be silent sufferers. They can be helped," he said.

A memorial service for Pozzobon will take place Saturday at the Merritt Civic Centre.

Where to get help

If you're worried someone you know may be at risk of suicide, you should talk to them, says the Canadian Association of Suicide Prevention.

Find a 24-hour crisis centre.

Here are some warning signs:

- Suicidal thoughts.
- Substance abuse.
- Purposelessness.
- Anxiety.
- Feeling trapped.
- Hopelessness and helplessness.
- Withdrawal.
- Anger.
- Recklessness.
- Mood changes.