

## PRO FOOTBALL

# ***Mounds of Injury Data Can't Bury Brutality of the N.F.L.***

Sports of The Times

By MICHAEL POWELL JAN. 26, 2017



The target of several vicious hits this season, Carolina quarterback Cam Newton, bottom, said, "It's not fun getting hit in the head." The N.F.L. reported a decrease in concussions this season. Credit Stephen Dunn/Getty Images

The [N.F.L.](#) held a news conference Thursday to talk about its 2016 injury data, that annual compilation of torn-up knees, ripped shoulder ligaments and rattled brains. As a prologue, I typed the words "[Cam Newton](#)" and "[hits](#)" into Google, clicked and let the videos roll.

There was that Denver Broncos hit in early September, a lineman running at Newton full speed and striking their helmets together. Newton's head spun round. There was that Los Angeles Ram who flew at Newton and snapped his head back like a bobblehead doll.

I caught myself wincing. Play after play, game after game, I was watching the winner of last season's Most Valuable Player Award get his brain bounced. Newton was gentlemanly in response, allowing after one game that "It's not fun getting hit in the head."

In one game, he slid as a Washington Redskins linebacker went airborne and ground Newton's head into the grass. Newton flipped the football lightly toward the player who had just hit him.

Newton was assessed an unsportsmanlike-conduct penalty for his response.

So this is an excellent time to raise the curtain [on the N.F.L. and its injury data results](#). Concussions decreased 11.3 percent in 2016 preseason and regular-season games and practices.

The league's executive vice president for health and safety policy, Jeff Miller, talked for many minutes about new research initiatives and biomechanical advances, \$100 million here and \$100 million there. My mind wandered — it was though I had ended up at a NASA briefing on a space launch.

Then Miller offered us a movie tip. Make sure, he said, to watch the new video on how the concussion protocol works.

"If you haven't seen it, I would commend it to you," he said.

I'm sure that Newton must have enjoyed watching that particular video before he sustained another severe concussion this season.



Carolina's Cam Newton during a game in Denver on Sept. 8. Newton was the winner of last season's Most Valuable Player Award. Credit Joe Mahoney/Associated Press

Not long after that, Dr. Robert Heyer chimed in, “I know what we are doing will make a difference.”

Dr. Heyer is president of the N.F.L.’s Physicians Society, and what a wondrously busy group that society must be.

Let’s look a little closer at the league’s data. Concussions in regular-season games were, in fact, down, although that’s because concussions the previous year reached a five-year high of 183. In 2013, the league reported 148 concussions; in 2016, it was 167.

Then there’s the matter of torn anterior cruciate ligaments. These are brutal, career-threatening injuries, and the N.F.L. reported 56 in 2016, compared with 61 in 2013. As for tears of the medial collateral ligament, there were 143 this past season and 134 in 2013.

All of which is to say that on questions of torn ligaments and brains smacked about in their pans, the N.F.L. is hobbling sideways.

The league’s doctors and analytics experts gently pushed the argument that this season’s statistics might be better than they look. Players, they said, now report injuries more readily.

“We’ve seen an increased number of self-reported concussions this year,” noted Dr. John York, a co-chairman of the San Francisco 49ers. “I would also say that they have an effect that may cause an increase in the number of concussions that we identify.”

As players are learning more about the grievous damage this game does to their minds and bodies, they are getting better at reporting that in real time.

But the bottom line does not change: We can pile protocol atop protocol and drop a moonshot’s worth of dough on studies, but at its core, football remains an inherently brutal and dangerous sport.

A year ago, I sat in the lobby of a hotel and chatted with Warren Moon, one of the dominant quarterbacks of the 1980s and ’90s. He’s a personable man just now edging into his 60s. He had this anecdote for me: Several friends of his, former N.F.L. comrades, often pull out of their driveways, go three or four blocks, and then call their wives and ask, “Where am I going?”

That is not normal for that age group

Then there was the intriguing question asked at the news conference by a reporter from The Charlotte Observer. His news organization, he said, had monitored the reporting of concussions across the league, and found large and disturbing variations among teams. That struck me as a red flag.

I am, however, just a medical amateur. Dr. Christina Mack, director of epidemiology for QuintilesIMS, which compiled the injury data for the N.F.L., fielded that question.

“We feel confident,” she said, “that we’re getting the concussions in equal numbers from the teams.”

Oh, thanks.

Last February, after the Super Bowl, I wrote a column taking Newton to task for his churlish sulking after his team lost to the Broncos. A reader who is a nurse suggested that I might have been unfair to Newton. He had taken a tremendous beating that night, and she noted that his symptoms — monosyllabic responses, fatigue and lack of interaction with reporters — were consistent with being concussed.

The N.F.L. made no such public finding. I confess, however, that the nurse gave me cause for pause then, and even more so now. We report on a brutal, perhaps morally indefensible game. We are best advised perhaps to withhold our judgments.

After the news conference Thursday, I called Bob Carmichael, who played football for the University of Colorado before moving on to NFL Films. He is now an award-winning photographer, having long ago left football’s ravages behind.

When Rashaan Salaam, [a Heisman Trophy winner at Colorado, committed suicide](#) in December, the official finding was that he was depressed. But Carmichael suspects that thousands of blows to the head may have been a co-conspirator. His concerns prompted him to write a letter to the university’s chancellor, expressing concern over its emphasis on a sport that ruins so many minds.

“There’s so much posing going on, so much pretending that you can make this sport safe,” Carmichael said. “How do you rationalize this roulette that we are playing with young men?”

From high school to college to the pros, rationalization is a game that is increasingly difficult to play.