



Credit Paul Bride

Was CTE Stealing His Mind? A Gunshot Provided The Answer

Jason Hairston played briefly in the NFL, hunted with Donald Trump Jr., and owned a wildly successful hunting gear and apparel company. But he increasingly worried about a degenerative brain disease.

By John Branch

Jan. 31, 2019

DIXON, Calif. — The blast from upstairs shattered the quiet of a small-town weeknight. It was all so sudden. Or had it been coming for years?

Jason Hairston had just been downstairs with his young son and daughter, who could not understand why their father was acting so strange. His wife, on the phone from across the country, was desperately trying to get her husband to say something, anything.

He ended the call without a word, walked upstairs and closed the bedroom door. He lay down on his wife's side of the bed, lifted a gun under his chin and pulled the trigger.

The son, Cash, was 10, old enough to have previously Googled "[C.T.E.](#)", wise enough to know what had just happened, poised enough to block his 9-year-old sister, Coco, from instinctively running upstairs toward the sound. He pulled her outside. The police and family members were on the way.

If there is such a thing as the American dream, Hairston, at 47, gave every indication that he was living it. He was a former college football star who played briefly with two N.F.L. teams, and he was the [founder of KUIU](#), a top-end outfitter of hunting gear and apparel. He had legions of faithful customers and good friends who aspired to be like him.

He traveled to the most remote and rugged edges of the earth in search of quiet adventures and big game. He had just returned from a caribou hunting trip in Alaska with his father and son. And he had been [sheep hunting with Donald Trump Jr.](#) in the Yukon a couple of weeks before.

He had recently described his wife and business partner, Kirstyn, during a 20th anniversary dinner toast as "truly my rock, my soul mate, the most loyal wife you could ever have."



Jason Hairston and his children, Coco and Cash, in May 2017. Credit Kirstyn Hairston Image



Jason Hairston with his wife, Kirstyn, who also was his business partner. Credit Kirstyn Hairston

They had family photos that looked like the kind that come with the frame. They lived in a grandly renovated home just a block and a half from where Kirstyn's family ran the city of Dixon's favorite gathering spot, Bud's Pub and Grill, at the corner of First and A Street. It was two miles from the headquarters of KUIU, which has been heralded as a runaway business success.

Hairston had it all, or so it seemed. Then the gun went off. And the questions echoed long after everything went quiet on that Tuesday evening in September

'I think you're overthinking this. You're paranoid.'

The case of Jason Hairston is unusual for at least two reasons. First, he was convinced, years ago, that he had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or C.T.E., [the progressive degenerative brain disease](#) caused by repeated hits to the head. It can be diagnosed with certainty only in the dead, but he and Kirstyn, now 46, intensely studied the research. They saw a clear picture of Hairston in all the data points and accounts of deteriorating brains, especially in football players.

Second, Hairston defied the image of a diminished victim of C.T.E. He was in near-perfect physical health, with 3 percent body fat and model-handsome looks. Confident and charismatic to the end, his public persona contradicted the corruption he felt in his brain.

“He was very open about it, but I just didn’t see it,” Brendan Burns, Hairston’s closest hunting partner and a KUIU executive (now co-chief executive), said shortly after Hairston’s death. “I was like: ‘Dude, I think you’re overthinking this. You’re paranoid.’ Because what you read about is the guy who can’t get out his front door. He was so sharp. Maybe that’s why I didn’t think much about it. It was conceptual. It wasn’t like we were on a sheep hunt and he’s trying to skin a sheep with a spoon.”

Hairston was a linebacker in high school and at the University of California, Davis, not far from Dixon. He signed with the San Francisco 49ers in May 1995, and spent part of the season on the team’s practice squad. The Denver Broncos signed Hairston the next May, but he left the game for good a month later with numbness from a lingering neck injury in college.



Kirstyn Hairston said the couple was good at hiding Jason's symptoms of brain disease.
Credit Brian L. Frank for The New York Times



Hairston played for U.C. Davis but was a benchwarmer in the N.F.L. Credit Brian L. Frank for The New York Times

An avid hunter, he saw an open niche in high-end hunting apparel, a market overlooked by the likes of the North Face or Patagonia. Hairston co-founded [Sitka Gear](#) in 2005, and after a management shuffle, he moved on to start KUIU, a direct-to-consumer company, in 2011.

Hairston became KUIU's public face, an aspirational figure. Photos and videos of him hunting sheep, moose, bear and other big game were featured in the company's savvy social media marketing and glossy catalogs. Forbes reported that [KUIU did \\$50 million in sales in 2016](#).

I spent time with Hairston in Dixon in 2016 while exploring story ideas. (It eventually led to an article in 2017 titled, "[The Ultimate Pursuit in Hunting: Sheep](#)"; Hairston and Burns played roles.) Hairston was focused and engaging, which made it a surprise when he mentioned that he thought he had C.T.E.

He had a history of concussions, he said, too many to remember. He was fighting headaches, mood swings, impulsivity — all symptoms of C.T.E., which shares characteristics with Alzheimer's disease.

Knowing that I had written many accounts of C.T.E., including one shortly before we met, about the [former Oakland Raiders quarterback Ken Stabler](#), he and Kirstyn were inquisitive.

They used their full range of contacts and money on doctors, tests, medications and advice, all in hopes of slowing the effects. Hairston tried diets and hyperbaric chambers. The more he felt his mind slip, the more he exercised his body. The more he worried about time, the more things he crammed into whatever time he had left.



Hairston traveled the earth in search of quiet adventures and big game. Credit Paul Bride

In November 2017, Hairston emailed me a photograph of him and his son with Goliath, an aging and elusive desert bighorn sheep they hunted on a tag purchased at auction for \$235,000. That bid was a part of the article published months earlier.

“He is the new CA State Record Ram, 12 years old and as big as everyone who hunted him previously thought he was,” Hairston wrote. “Enclosed are photos of my Cash and I. It was such an amazing experience to share with my son.”

Less than a year later, his suicide shocked family and friends, admiring strangers and loyal customers. It did not surprise Kirstyn, who had watched the decline close up.

“We were really good at hiding it,” she said.

An autopsy confirms suspicions

The couple’s suspicions were right. Hairston had C.T.E.

Bennet Omalu, a clinical professor at U.C. Davis, made the diagnosis at his lab in Stockton. The results, part of a 44-page autopsy, had not previously been revealed publicly.

“He has C.T.E., there is no question about it,” Omalu said in an interview, describing the buildup of abnormal and [cell-strangling tau proteins](#) he found across most regions of Hairston’s brain. “Those are the telltale signs, undeniably. This was almost a replica of Mike Webster’s brain.”



Dr. Bennet Omalu of "Concussion" movie fame confirmed Hairston had C.T.E. Credit Brian L. Frank for The New York Times

Omalu discovered the disease in Webster, a Hall of Fame lineman who played for the Pittsburgh Steelers and [who died in 2002 at age 50](#). That diagnosis connected C.T.E. to football in the national consciousness, and garnered Omalu a measure of fame. He was played by Will Smith in the 2015 movie “Concussion.”

A malady formerly attached to “punch drunk” boxers, C.T.E. has now been found posthumously in [more than 200 former football players](#), including more than 100 who played in the N.F.L., plus an array of athletes in sports ranging from hockey to soccer, rodeo to BMX. Much of the research about the condition has centered on brain injuries in the military.

Scientists are on the verge of being able to confidently diagnose C.T.E. in the living. It promises to be a game-changer, leading to all sorts of complex ethical questions in sports.

When a football star receives a C.T.E. diagnosis, for example, who will decide whether he should stop playing? Will high schools, colleges and professional teams have an obligation to test and reveal the results? Will athletes in all sports, at all ages, have the option to be tested?

Hairston embodied some of that coming anxiety. During news media interviews in recent years, he sometimes mentioned offhandedly that he thought he had C.T.E. The conversations always moved on quickly.

Even those who hunted with him regularly said they did not see cause for concern. Paul Bride, an outdoors photographer who worked for KUIU, accompanied Hairston on all his expeditions.

“I saw him on his best days, in the best place he could be — the mountains,” Bride said.

In hindsight, though, his friends said maybe Hairston had become more forgetful, a bit less predictable. None of those close to him were alarmed enough to worry that he might end his life. He had it all.

Privately, though, the Hairstons struggled to hold it together. Jason Hairston routinely broke down and cried, Kirstyn said, scared of where his brain was headed. When a scan revealed deterioration in the frontal lobe that had not been present a year earlier, she said, Hairston made her promise she would never make him have another test, because he did not want to know the results.

A slow decline over the past decade, she said, sped suddenly into a drop.

“The last 18 months, he wasn’t there,” she said, sitting in the living room of the family home. “It was like a switch flipped. He was so different. We were going from one crisis to another. I felt like I was drowning.”

Impulsivity spiked through flashes of infidelity and alcohol abuse. (He had been in alcohol rehabilitation about 10 years earlier, Kirstyn Hairston said.) Hairston showed unfamiliar anger — toward the children, the family pets, other drivers on the road. He sometimes fell to his knees with headaches, complaining of ice picks to his brain. He dropped into dark periods of depression, his wife said, tinged with fear of being alone.

“I knew it was C.T.E.,” Kirstyn said. “I read everything I could. This was such typical behavior for C.T.E.”

She cried as she delved into details.

“He said, ‘If you leave me, I’ll be dead in three months,’” she said. “And I said, ‘You’ll be dead in a week.’ But I needed him for the kids. And I know he would have stayed for me.”

The two were apart for most of Hairston's last month. He went on two hunts. Kirstyn was invited to New York with friends, a rare time away. They crossed paths at the Sacramento airport. He was on his way home. She was on her way out. He took the children.

"He said: 'You think I can't take care of our kids for three nights? I'm good,'" Kirstyn said. "I said, 'O.K.' You always want it to work out."

They shared a long embrace, then spoke on the phone the next evening, discussing KUIU. (Kirstyn worked alongside her husband and remains the chairwoman and majority owner.) Jason ordered pizza for the children. The couple laughed at the role reversal, she said. Usually she was the one at home with them.

She was at dinner in New York two hours later when her son called, saying that Jason was behaving oddly. She asked to talk to him. Her husband held the phone to his ear but said nothing. He hung up.

Kirstyn Hairston called her parents, who lived a few blocks away, to ask them to rush to the house.

When she called her son again, the gun had already gone off.

The autopsy found a blood-alcohol level of 0.22 percent, two to three times the typical limit for drunken driving. His system also contained [sertraline](#) and [trazodone](#), prescription medications commonly used to combat depression and anxiety.

Kirstyn Hairston had a feeling the day would come. But not so soon.

"I thought I had another five years," she said through tears. "I really did."



Kirstyn Hairston, who remains the chairwoman at KUIU, with her son, Cash, last week at their home in Dixon, Calif. Credit Brian L. Frank for The New York Times

But she believed that if Hairston ever took his life, he would shoot himself in the chest to preserve his brain for examination, [as Dave Duerson did](#) in 2011 (at age 50) and [as Junior Seau did](#) in 2013 (at 43). Both posthumously received diagnoses of C.T.E.

Still, Omalu said there was plenty of Hairston's brain tissue to study. The answer he provided — the positive diagnosis of the C.T.E. that the Hairstons long presumed — brought some measure of relief.

"I'm not surprised Jason killed himself," Kirstyn Hairston said. "I'm surprised he did it with our kids in the house. I'm surprised he did it here. But would you want to live if you knew you were losing your mind? Especially being really young and really healthy?"

She let the questions linger, unanswered. The house went quiet.