4. Friday Night Regrets

On Monday April 27, 2015, The New York Times, ran a stark single piece on the front page of its sports section surrounded by a lot of white space and none of the usual pictures. Entitled “A Son Calls His Mother,” the article told the story of Patrick Risha, 32, who had recently hung himself.

His mother, Karen Zegel, relates how her two children “grew up midsentence in a never-ending football conversation.” Patrick played football from the age of ten, following in the steps of his high school coach father. Like his dad, he became the local hero—from Mighty Mite to “The Horse”—he was vaunted in the press, looked up to by the other kids, and supported by his family who even spent their summer vacations at football camp. He went on to Dartmouth and, according to a teammate, became a “pounding running back” who loved contact. He got his degree in government but with a disappointing academic record.

Looking back, his sister recalls praying that he’d get up after each tackle. His mom referred to his body as a “piece of meat,” highlighting the common sports injuries reported among footballers—sprains and strains, growth plate and repetitive motion injuries, and heat related illness. Sometimes Patrick couldn’t remember the game he had just played. In retrospect, she recounts just chalking up Patrick’s erratic behavior and fits of anger during high school to adolescence.

Growing up, Patrick was an outgoing, smart, self-sufficient kid. Through and after college, though, he increasingly become an impulsive loner, overwhelmed by even the simplest tasks of daily living like managing his finances. He dabbled in pain killers and other drugs prescribed to address his problems.

He lost even further ability to cope after a year of dramatic life changes including fatherhood with his longtime girlfriend, his sister’s marriage, and his own father’s death. Finally, he called his mother one last time—from the end of his dog’s leash.

Patrick’s brain, on autopsy, revealed chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain disorder caused by repeated blows to the head. Detectable only posthumously, this finding is not uncommon among former football players. It is tied to cognitive problems, mood swings, depression, impulsive anger and actions, and memory loss.

Karen Zegel has established a foundation and a website (www.StopCTE.org) aimed at parents and at youth football. But she is going up against a culture that spawned the CNBC reported $7 billion youth sports industry (June 13, 2014).

Case from the 2016 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl National Competition
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