|  |
| --- |
| 1. Annotate the article with at least five notes that show evidence of understanding and thinking.
 |

**Should You Let Your Kids Play Football?**

Excerpted from Roxanne Jones, *CNN,* March 20, 2015 and Jason Hanna, Debra Goldschmidt and Kevin Flower, *CNN*, September 20, 2015

Eighty-seven of 91 former NFL players who donated their brains to science after death tested positive for a brain disease that is believed to be linked with repeated head trauma and concussions, researchers said. The former players were found to have had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, known as CTE, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Boston University. The study results don't necessarily mean that 96% of all NFL players are at risk for CTE, said Dr. Robert Cantu. The brains came from players who, while they were alive, had concerns about CTE

Earlier this year, the NFL and thousands of former players settled a lawsuit that provides up to $5 million per retired player for serious medical conditions associated with repeated head trauma. The NFL said it had taken several steps to make play safer. Among the changes in recent years has been conducting pregame medical assessments of players, along with on-field and postgame assessments of players involved in hard hits.

Football is America's favorite sport. We pride ourselves on our toughness, on our ability to get back up when we're knocked down. What better sport is there to teach those lessons? Not too long ago, parents thought nothing of sending their children out on the football field to run around and burn up a little energy. Many parents still insist youth football is safe. What could be healthier for a boy? Certainly, it beats sitting in front of a computer all day.

That's exactly what Debra Pyka thought when she signed up her son, Joseph Chernach, for Pop Warner football in Wisconsin, then later in Michigan, when he was 11 years old, in 1997.

If only she knew then that her son would be dead at 25. Joseph hung himself in his mother's shed on June 7, 2012. His brain was later found to have severe CTE, a degenerative brain disease that has been linked to concussions in football. Joseph Chernach had played sports, including wrestling, pole vaulting and football most of his young life. But he spent almost four years playing Pop Warner football from ages 11 to 14.

"My son was the class comedian, loved school, always fun to be around," Pyka told me. "But we noticed after high school Joseph changed. He got depressed, angry, paranoid and withdrew from sports and his friends. We just didn't know why. After learning about CTE, I knew he had it even before we got the results. The symptoms were all there."

Pyka is convinced those early days playing Pop Warner football triggered her son's CTE. Last month, Pyka and her son's estate filed a lawsuit against Pop Warner football for $5 million, claiming the nonprofit failed to protect its youngest players and warn them and their parents about the permanent dangers of head trauma.

The lawsuit further alleges that Pyka's son and other children were intentionally put in danger because Pop Warner used amateur coaches with short tenures, who were never properly trained in the game of football, injury prevention, concussion or head injury identification.

So now, this mother is on a mission. She wants to stop children younger than 14 from playing tackle football in youth leagues.

"I don't want any kids to suffer the way my son suffered, the way my family suffered. It's devastating. Young children should not be allowed to play tackle football until they reach high school," said Pyka.

Clearly, the lawsuit faces obstacles, especially since Chernach did play other sports and it may be hard to prove the CTE was triggered by injuries suffered while playing for Pop Warner. But Pyka and her attorney, Gordon Johnson, at the Brain Injury Law Group, which is representing Chernach's estate, insist this case is not just about winning. They are going after the economics of youth football leagues. "We have to prove that Pop Warner was a substantial factor in him getting it [CTE], and we knew from research that playing under 12 is when you're most vulnerable," Johnson told media when he filed the suit. "The airing of these issues will benefit everybody," he added.

Still, when the lawyer talk is done, Debra Pyka won't get her son back. And amazingly, she did not sound bitter. And she's not out to end football. But "a 5-year-old playing football, it's ridiculous to have them out there banging their brains around."

Some good has come out of all this, said Pkya. More people are talking about CTE. She said it's important that parents listen closely to NFLers like 24-year-old Chris Borland, the San Francisco 49ers linebacker who retired this week after just one season. Borland said he quit because he was afraid of brain injuries. He understands how his decision may affect parents and he has a message: "Parents ... if you weigh the risk and decide this is something you want to partake in. ... It's a free country. ... But If I could relay a message to kids and their parents it would be twofold: Number one: make an informed decision. And number two: Don't play through concussions. Who knows how many hits is too many?"

Considering the consequences, it just may be one of the toughest decisions a parent has to make.