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Gary Bettman appears to be in denial on NHL, CTE

The current issue of Rolling Stone magazine details the plight of BMX rider Dave Mirra. Mirra took his own life at age 41. After Mirra's sudden, seemingly inexplicable death, neuropathologists examined Mirra's brain. The scientists discovered his brain was riddled with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE.

CTE is the same neurodegenerative disease that has been found in the brains of 90 out of 94 NFL players' brains examined by the Boston University Center for the Study of Traumatic Brain Encephalopathy.

The tau protein deposits found in Mirra's brain were indistinguishable from the kind that have been found in the brains of former football and hockey players with CTE.

Lili-Naz Hazrati, a Toronto neuropathologist, told ESPN The Magazine "I couldn't tell the difference. The trauma itself defines the disease, not how you got the trauma." Clearly, Mirra's brain cells did not distinguish the concussive blow sustained during falls off his bike from the helmet-to-helmet hits NFL players are exposed to or a punch.

Brain trauma is brain trauma, and brain trauma causes brain damage.

Against that backdrop, it would be odd for anyone to argue that CTE is only a football disease. Yet, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman is currently embroiled in a public debate on whether NHL play subjects its participants to an increased risk of developing CTE or other neurodegenerative diseases.

Just this summer, in a written response to U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., the ranking member on the Senate Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety,

Insurance and Data Security, Bettman denied that a link exists between concussions and CTE.

It is as if Commissioner Bettman is stuck in time and insistent upon taking a page out of the NFL's now-discarded nefarious playbook.

By now, most have heard the story of Dr. Bennet Omalu's 2002 autopsy of former NFL player Mike Webster and his subsequent findings of CTE in a number of NFL players' brains in the early 2000s and how those findings were met with skepticism and opposition from the NFL.

While the league's denial is well-documented, it bears repeating that as recently as 2007, the NFL was proffering that "... the only scientifically valid evidence of a chronic traumatic encephalopathy in athletes is in boxers and in some steeplechase jockeys." Lauren Ezell, "Timeline: The NFL's Concussion Crisis" on "Frontline," Oct. 8 2013.

The NFL's continued denial was not limited to the 'science'; the league was also critical of how news media outlets reported the developments. On several occasions, the NFL publicly shamed the media for creating a link that was "scientifically premature." Lindsey Barton Straus, "CTE: Is media narrative ahead of the science," Moms Team, Oct. 10, 2013.

More than 5,000 retired players brought suit against the NFL. A \$1 billion settlement was reached. And finally, in March 2016, when asked at a congressional roundtable discussion pertaining to concussions if there is a link between football and degenerative brain disorders and CTE, NFL Senior Vice President for Health and Safety Jeff Miller answered, "certainly yes." Mark Maske, "NFL stands by safety official's acknowledge-

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ment of CTE link to football," The Washington Post, March 15, 2016.

The NFL seems to be learning its lesson. Just last week, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell announced a \$100 million grant to youth football programs across the country aiming to enhance the safety of its participants as well as provide accurate, up-to-date information about the connection it repeatedly dispelled for nearly a decade.

The NFL's evolution from a league of denial to an organization committed to remedying

"The trauma itself defines the disease, not how you got the trauma."

years of mistreatment of its players is playing out before our very eyes. Robert Cantu, a clinical professor of neurosurgery at Boston University and co-director of BU's CTE Center, said it is long overdue as scientists "around the world have connected this," and he "look[s] forward to other sports stepping forward as well." Mark Maske, "NFL stands by safety official's

acknowledgement of CTE link to football," The Washington Post, March 15, 2016.

But, the NHL lags significantly behind. Its commissioner still denies any link between the repetitive head traumas sustained in its entertainment product and CTE. Just what does Commissioner Bettman stand to gain by writing to Sen. Blumenthal that "even where CTE is found, the consensus of medical experts is that there is insufficient science to link it to participation in professional sports or contact sports generally"?

Where the brains of former football players, hockey players, BMX riders, wrestlers and even battered wives all show evidence of the disease, why would Bettman disingenuously argue that the head shots endured by NHL players don't cause neurodegenerative disease?

Bettman's denial is astounding. By carelessly maintaining that NHL hockey is somehow immune from the scientific realities of head trauma, Bettman misses a great opportunity to shine a bright light on the importance of the brain health of players at all levels.

"The only known risk factor for CTE is having had multiple concussions and cranial impacts," said Dr. Julian Bailes, a CTE researcher at NorthShore University HealthSystem who was profiled in the movie

"Concussion." CTE has, in fact, been found in the brains of Bob Probert, Steve Montador and Derek Boogaard, all former NHL players.

History demonstrates that the NHL's disturbing denial will not stand the test of time.

Brain trauma is brain trauma and trauma is not good for the brain. Do you really disagree, Mr. Commissioner?