Terry Long's death tied to football injuries

By Jill King Greenwood
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Wednesday, September 14, 2005

Repeated blows to the head during Terry Long's eight-year National Football League career led to a brain inflammation that killed the former Steelers guard in June, Allegheny County Coroner Dr. Cyril H. Wecht said Tuesday.

Long's death was caused by a cerebral meningitis that resulted from "repeated mild traumatic brain injuries while playing football," Wecht said.

The case, Wecht said, underscores the need for better helmets and complete neurological exams performed on football players -- from the high school level to the pros -- as part of athletes' annual physicals.

"I'm not saying for one second that we need to put a stop to professional football," Wecht said. "But by no means do I believe we've reached ... what is the best way to protect these athletes and prevent long-term brain damage. Everybody needs to have a better mindset about this."

Long, 45, died June 7 several hours after paramedics found him unconscious at his Franklin Park home.

Though meningitis is often caused by a viral or bacterial infection, that wasn't the case with Long, Wecht said.

"The colloquial term we use is 'punch drunk syndrome' or an injury that boxers sustain," Wecht said. "Those repeated blows and injuries lead to cumulative long-term effects in some people that are degenerative in nature. That's what we believe happened here and set the stage for the acute swelling of the lining of the brain and the eventual meningitis."

Ex-Steeler defensive end L.C. Greenwood, part of the famed Steel Curtain, said he never thought about head injuries or the price he might pay down the road for the hits he took on the field.

"When I was playing, we knew what the game was before we signed on," said Greenwood, who played from 1969 to 1981. "We got hit in the head, we got concussions, but just called it 'getting a little fuzzy in the head.' You just bucked up and went back out there to take some more hits."

Technology -- including tests that allow doctors to determine whether a player has healed from a concussion -- has improved players' chances of avoiding serious head injuries, but it doesn't change the fact the football is a violent game, said Craig Wolfley, a former Steelers guard who played with Long from 1984 to 1989.

"Everybody knows the inherent risks," Wolfley said. "That's what all these guys face. It's one thing to play when you're 16, 17 and 18, and another when you're in your 30s."

Wecht said Dr. Bennett Omalu, a forensic neuropathologist for the coroner's office, conducted the autopsy on Long, and Wecht reviewed the findings.

Wecht said Omalu noticed swelling of Long's brain lining and evidence of repeated head injuries. Tests were done on Long's brain cells, tissues and fluid.

Steelers spokesman Dave Lockett declined to comment on the findings, which came two years after at least three manufacturers introduced new helmets in the NFL and NCAA designed to guard against concussions. The new helmets came in response to published studies showing that players who had one concussion were more susceptible to others.

There's no doubt that the repeated blows to the head that athletes suffer can lead to long-term repercussions, said Dr. Jack Wilburger, chair of neurosurgery at Allegheny General Hospital.

Studies have linked even mild brain damage in athletes to depression, mood and behavioral disorders and memory problems such as the early onset of Alzheimer's disease, he said.

"Once an athlete has had a head injury the brain is more vulnerable to sustain other injuries or problems, which in Terry Long's case could have made his brain more susceptible to contracting meningitis," Wilburger said.

The autopsy results finally brought some answers for Mark Rush, Long's former business attorney and friend.

"We now have partial closure on Terry's tragic death and demise," Rush said. "It certainly saddened me to learn that football, a sport Terry loved, possibly contributed to his death."

The Steelers selected Long as their second pick in the fourth round of the 1984 NFL Draft. He briefly left the Steelers in 1991 after attempting suicide when he learned he faced suspension from the league for violating the NFL's steroid policy. Long later rejoined the team, but didn't re-sign the next season.

Long in March was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of fraudulently obtaining loans for a North Side chicken-processing plant that prosecutors alleged he burned for insurance money in 2003.

Just days before he died, he filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, estimating he was more than $1 million in debt. He was still awaiting trial on the federal indictment.