

What it's really like to slam your brain against your skull during a football game



Brett Williams

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Shortly after I suffered my first concussion, I fell off of a bench, vomited, cried, and repeatedly asked what had happened—but insisted that I was okay and nothing was seriously wrong. There was a football game to be played, after all.

It happened in the first half of a game during my freshman season of football at

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many deem the most dangerous in a sport full of car-crash collisions—when a three-player wedge block crashed into me like a tidal wave and sent me sprawling head-over-heels to the turf, my brain smacking against my skull in the process.

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I stayed in the game a while longer, at first showing no signs of cognitive damage. I had my deeply ingrained football instincts to fall back on and responsibilities to my team to fulfill. No one questioned me so long as I could do my part.

The writer, shortly after sustaining his first concussion. He has no memory of this play.

Then the confusion set in. I remember being unsure which direction a play needed to be run, a momentary panic that, as a first-year player still learning the ins and outs of college football, was a dreaded feeling only a few games into the season. But this uncertainty wasn't because of my inexperience. As the game wore on, I became

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increasingly mentally and physically affected until, as long snapper, I launched the ball twenty yards over the punter's head—a comically large margin. At that point, my coaches and athletic trainer pulled me from the action. My condition quickly deteriorated to the vertiginous and emotionally volatile state of the badly concussed.

In the movie *Concussion*, set to be released on Christmas Day, Will Smith will immortalize forensic pathologist Dr. Bennet Omalu's discovery of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative disease linked to repeated head trauma. The conversation around the film—along with the circumstances of the last few years, in which too many players have lost their lives to the disease and the sport's leaders have finally begun to take head trauma seriously—has led me to relive the horror of my own concussions. When I suffered these injuries, I lost control of my physical self, my personality morphed, and my brain felt like a million scattered puzzle pieces. The fact that the sport once took concussions lightly is deeply troubling to me.

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Even today, the popular perception of what a concussion looks like is misguided. Unlike football's more obvious and immediate damage to bones and tendons, the effects of a brain injury aren't always visible immediately after impact—they lurk insidiously beneath the surface. According to [Heads Up](#), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's youth sports brain health initiative, concussions rarely result in a [loss of consciousness](#)—the classic scene of a gruff old coach reviving a knocked out player with smelling salts is mostly a dramatic flight of fancy.

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My second concussion came three years later, when I was a college senior. The play that sparked the mental trauma was easy to spot—an up-the-gut run from my

running back position that ended with the opposing team's safety and I smashing together, heads lowered like two rams battling for dominance.

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Just like the first time, I immediately got up and continued to play, leaning on muscle memory as my mental faculties abandoned me. My teammates noticed that something was wrong quickly this time, and I was pulled from the game before losing my ability to function.

The most troubling aspect of these memories is that they're not really mine. Although they were traumatic moments in my life, I have little recollection of them. With my first concussion, I remember everything about the game leading up to and immediately following the hit—the bright red of our opponents' uniforms, the sounds of the hostile crowd celebrating their homecoming game, the smell of the grass. But everything that came afterward, including the crying, the falling, the vomiting—I recall nothing. My teammates are the only reason I know how I reacted. When I try to remember, all I find are blurry spurts of light and sound.

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The second concussion was much worse. It's as if I was never even there. This erasure doesn't begin at the moment of impact—the entire day is gone, from the warm-up to pregame meetings to my first look at the St. Louis Arch on the bus ride into the city that morning.

My behavior was worse that time around, too, I've been told. I sobbed when I was forced to remove my pads and had my helmet taken away and hidden, just in case I tried to insert myself back into play. After the game, I led three teammates on a wild goose chase for a missing bag I was convinced was still in the locker room, insisting that we couldn't leave without it. On the team bus, I asked my teammates the same questions on a loop to the point that one of them grew tired of answering and wrote a cheat sheet for me, listing the score of the game, how I was injured, when I left the game, and that I had called my parents. My mom and dad were relieved to hear my voice at first, but alarmed when I called them a second time five minutes later, unaware that we were repeating a conversation we'd already had.

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The writer (left) while playing for the German Football League.

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The third time I suffered a blow to the head I remember vividly. I continued my football career after college professionally in the [German Football League](#), which employs fewer trainers experienced with contact sport injuries and lacks the caution that now comes with the game in the U.S. After taking a hit that blacked out the entire right side of my field of vision and failing the poorly administered concussion test, I was once again removed from the field of play.

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It was then that I realized what I must have gone through when I had taken concussive blows in the past. The mental wrestling of the experience was the most excruciating part—if I had indeed damaged my brain, there was nothing to do but sit and wait for the effects to take hold, not knowing whether the next moment would be the one in which I lost the ability to control my emotions and actions. I wondered if I had undergone this unraveling twice before, or if the process then was quicker, cleaner. The remainder of the game was clouded by that fear as I paced the sidelines. Thankfully, this third time, I maintained control and was soon after deemed concussion-free by a doctor. But I can still feel the creeping horror of that day.

The third time the writer suffered a blow to the head was the scariest—since he knew what might happen next.

Courtesy of Brett Williams

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When I think back to my concussions, I realize that I was lucky. My injuries were detected quickly and treated properly—too often, players manage to hide their symptoms to stay in the game, even while their brains are severely damaged. I wasn't playing for anyone else's benefit when I sustained my two worst injuries—at the NCAA Division III level at which I competed, there's not a whole lot of money on the line, so having me back on the field wasn't a financial decision affecting the athletic department's bottom line, as it is in so many other cases.

But most of all, I'm lucky that my football career happened in an age when we are finally connecting the dots and realizing that the trauma that often follows big hits can have huge ramifications later in life. Today, there are sport-wide initiatives for safer play with an emphasis on head injuries, from Heads Up at the youth level to sweeping changes in the NFL—both on the field, with rules prohibiting the most vicious hits, and off of it, with strict new protocols to handle the recovery of concussed players. Even during the four years of my college career, from 2009 to 2012, the emphasis on player safety and prevention grew significantly. And now, with a high-profile Christmas release like *Concussion*, the issue is sure to gain even more exposure.

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I still love football, and I would play all over again in a heartbeat. But I would change one thing: I would take concussions much more seriously, as I do today. I'm grateful

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What it's really like to slam your brain against your skull during a football game that I can look back at 25 years old and say that. There are far too many people—players lost to the game—who can't.

Brett Williams is a New York-based writer whose work has also appeared at Supercompressor, Thrillist and AskMen.

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