The suicide of professional football player Junior Seau

Tom Eley
4 May 2012

Former National Football League (NFL) star Junior Seau was found dead from an evident self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest in his southern California home on Wednesday morning. Oceanside, California police are investigating the death as a suicide.

Seau's body was found by his girlfriend at about 9:30 a.m. Police and paramedics arrived soon afterwards, but were unable to resuscitate Seau. A handgun was found near the body. There was no suicide note.

A legendary player in his prime, Seau was a six-foot-three-inch, 250-pound linebacker who was a twelve-time Pro Bowler and a ten-time All-Pro, the highest awards bestowed on National Football League players. He spent his career playing for the San Diego Chargers and Miami Dolphins before briefly retiring in 2006, only to "unretire" days later and join the New England Patriots. He retired for good in 2010.

He was born Tiaina Baul Seau, Jr in American Samoa in 1969. His family moved to San Diego when Seau was seven; English was a second language. Seau's family was working class—his father worked for a time in a rubber factory, his mother in a laundry. Junior and three brothers slept in the family's one-car garage. Seau excelled in high school athletics, especially football, earning a scholarship to the University of Southern California. The Chargers selected him fifth in the 1990 NFL draft.

The apparent suicide is the latest in a series of incidents highlighting the dangers and brutality of America's most popular spectator sport. There are parallels in Seau's death to the recent suicides of former Chicago Bears safety Dave Duerson and former Philadelphia Eagles cornerback Andre Waters.

Duerson committed suicide last year, shooting himself in the chest and leaving behind a suicide note directing that his brain be turned over to Boston University School of Medicine. Scientists there discovered that the former player was suffering from a neurodegenerative condition called CTE (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy) that is associated with concussions and head traumas in sports. This very likely played a role in the depression and suicide of Duerson, who suffered at least 10 concussions and countless violent hits during his career.

Waters, known for his violent hits during a twelve-year NFL career as a defensive back, killed himself in 2006 at the age of 44. A forensic pathologist who analyzed his brain found that its tissue resembled that of the brain of an 85-year-old man in the first stages of Alzheimer's disease.

CTE, first identified in "punch drunk" boxers in 1928, promotes the growth of a tau protein that is also prevalent in degenerating brains like those of people suffering from Alzheimer's disease. In a recent study, Boston University researchers found CTE in the brains of 14 of 15 recently deceased NFL players, and in four of the six brains of deceased professional hockey players. They even found CTE in the brains of high school and college football players who died as young as 17, 18, and 21 years old.

Last week former Dallas Cowboy linemen Randy White, Bob Lilly and Rayfield Wright launched a lawsuit against the NFL, alleging that it knowingly ignored the dangers posed by repeated concussions. A number of other former players joined the class-action lawsuit. Another concussion-related lawsuit was launched this week. There are now over 1,000 retired NFL players suing the league on the grounds it failed to adequately protect or warn them of the dangers related to concussions.

Concussions are not the only health problem confronting former NFL players.

© World Socialist Web Site

Seau is the fifth member of the 1994 San Diego Chargers, which lost to the San Francisco 49ers in the Super Bowl, to die since 2006 from conditions possibly related to their NFL careers. All were younger than 45.

In 2006, Curtis Whitley was found dead in his Texas trailer from an apparent drug overdose. Months later former lineman Chris Mims was found dead in his Chicago apartment from a heart attack. Mims weighed 456 pounds at death. Shawn Lee died of a heart attack in February 2011, resulting from complications from pneumonia, diabetes, and obesity. In December 2011, former linebacker Lewis Bush also died of a heart attack.

A 1994 study of 7,000 former players by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health revealed that NFL players had a life expectancy of 55, at that time 20 years below the average for American males. Former NFL linemen had a 52 percent greater likelihood of dying from heart disease than the population as a whole.

The culture of violence promoted by professional football and its media sponsors—always bound up with grotesque flag-waving patriotism associated with the violence of American imperialism—has made the NFL the richest sports league in the world. Most of the 32 franchise owners are billionaires, and the league itself is valued at about $33 billion, more than the GDP of Kenya, population 41 million.

This spring it came to light that coaches of one NFL team, the New Orleans Saints, were paying bounties to defensive players in order to encourage them to injure players on opposing teams. In a bid to save face, the league has handed down suspensions to coaches and players involved in the scheme.

Whether or not the league admits it, dangerous hits are integral to the game—and to the owners' vast wealth. Seau was celebrated for his ferocious hits on running backs and quarterbacks, but as one commentator pointed out, he faced violent collisions on virtually every single play.

"[M]aybe almost 30 years (including high school, college and pro football) of repeated shots to the head did permanent damage," writes Andy Staples of SI.com. "As a linebacker, he collided with a blocker or a ballcarrier on every down…. Seau came of age in an era when guys who 'got dinged' in the head sucked it up and got back on the field."

Violent concussions permeate the college and high school game as well. There are over 1 million US high school football players in any given season. Nearly half of these have no access to an athletic trainer. About ten high school players die per year as a result of collisions on the field.

The author also recommends:

The New Orleans Saints' "bounty" program and violence in American sports
[8 March 2012]

US: Experts warn of dementia risks from football injuries
[10 November 2009]

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site