Seau’s suicide points to CTE

Winslow Townson/Associated Press

Junior Seau's suicide on Wednesday has brought new attention to the damage football players suffer during their NFL careers and the devastating impact CTE can have on their lives once they've retired.

The number of concussions sustained by Seau during his career is unclear. He was never listed on an NFL injury report as having had a concussion. But in a game where players consider playing through injury as a badge of honor, that means little. There is no tangible way to gauge how many he may have sustained. But consider the prospects of spending 20 years in football while completely avoiding a concussion unlikely, to say the least.

Should it be the case that Seau took his life to end the suffering brought about by the effects of CTE, it will have happened at a particularly damning time for the NFL. The league is already rife with controversy as commissioner Roger Goodell
attempts to legislate player safety by handing down fines for particularly vicious hits, a procedure unpopular with many players. It also comes on the heels of revelations that the New Orleans Saints placed bounties on opposing players, with Saints players given bonuses for delivering hits that resulted in injury.

Former Saints assistant Gregg Williams’ words, “Kill the head,” captured in an audio clip leaked last month, certainly ring louder now than they did 48 hours ago.

At stake is the reputation of a sport that has easily become the most popular in the country. And Seau’s apparent suicide again brings about concern over concussions at lower levels of sports — specifically high school.

According to former Natick High football coach Tom Lamb, the sport will always be a great game for high school and youth level players, but he stressed teaching the game to be played in the safest manner possible.

“I think it’s key to remember that we are looking at a level that’s very extreme up there, both with contact and atmosphere,” said Lamb, who now works as the defensive coordinator at Boston English. “That doesn’t have to be a part of the game, and isn’t a part of the game at the high school level. I think we are all very proud of our game, that we don’t have to teach contact with the head, and I’m proud of the state for jumping on this new information we have on concussions, educating our coaches and players and administrators.

“I think this reinforces our commitment to concussion awareness and the fact that we have to be careful.”

That falls in line with the advice of the Brain Injury Association’s Williams, whose expertise lies in prevention.

Nobody can yet say with certainty why Junior Seau took his life. But so far the evidence points in one direction, and as the days go by, the picture will become clearer.

The former NFL linebacker, who starred for the San Diego Chargers and Miami Dolphins before spending parts of four seasons with the Patriots, was found dead by his girlfriend in his California home on Wednesday with a bullet wound marking his chest.

His brain was left intact.

It was the same method of suicide used by former Chicago Bears safety Dave Duerson, who shot himself in the chest in February of 2011. In that case, a note was left with specific instructions to have his brain donated to science and
examined. It was given to a unit at Boston University, which found that Duerson suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

CTE is an incurable neurodegenerative condition brought about by serious brain trauma. Associated symptoms include headaches, dementia, early onset Alzheimer’s and depression. In the case of Duerson, it was a byproduct of a career in the National Football League.

“I don’t want to try and speak specifically about Junior Seau, never having met him, or try to diagnose someone that isn’t a patient of mine,” said Dr. Neal McGrath, the clinic director and founder of Sports Concussion New England. “But what I will say in general is that there is a pattern emerging of players who have been diagnosed with CTE. These players tend to have functional problems in retirement, between the ages of 30 and 50, marked by memory loss, depression, irritability and the loss of cognitive ability. Sometimes what happens to these guys is they just deteriorate and turn to suicide.

“And when they make the decision to commit suicide, they do it in a way that leaves the brain intact so it can be studied.”

During his 20-year pro career, Seau played in 268 games at a position that demands high impact on nearly every play — and that doesn’t include the hits he took in postseason games, preseason games, training camps and two years in college at USC.

Once an autopsy is completed – Sports Illustrated reported yesterday that Boston University has requested permission to study Seau’s brain — some insight may be gained into the price Seau paid for his life in football.

“What they do is go in and do autopsies specific to the brain, try and diagnose any signs of CTE,” said B.J. Williams, manager of the prevention department at the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts in Westborough. “More or less to see if the athlete has signs of any diseases leading up to concussion-based syndromes that come later in life. Through that they have found different reports on the longevity of these injuries, and have showed that over time there is a definite connection between concussions and CTE.”

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That falls in line with the advice of the Brain Injury Association’s Williams, whose expertise lies in prevention.

“The importance is getting the message out there that at these younger ages, the brain is not developed and injuries can have significant affects in development. It can slow down development,” said Williams. “If you’re going out there for high school sports, that’s great, but you also have to realize you only get one brain and you need to take care of it, and you need to be concerned with your health and happiness over the course of your entire life.”

(Craig Gilvarg is a Daily News staff writer. He can be reached at cgilvarg@wickedlocal.com. Follow him on twitter @CraigGilvarg.)