

La Salle settles injured player's lawsuit

Associated Press
Novmber 30, 2009



PHILADELPHIA -- A private university will pay \$7.5 million to provide care to a football player who suffered a severe brain injury in a 2005 game, settling a case that questioned how the school handled a concussion the player allegedly suffered a month earlier.

The family of Preston Plevretes, 23, of Marlboro, N.J., settled their lawsuit against La Salle University on Monday, the day it was set for trial in Philadelphia.

The settlement came as the NFL, the NCAA and other governing bodies review rules about when athletes should return to play following concussions, amid research that suggests returning too soon can lead to brain damage.

NFL quarterbacks Ben Roethlisberger of the Pittsburgh Steelers and Kurt Warner of the Arizona Cardinals, who faced off in the last Super Bowl, both sat out Sunday after suffering head injuries, as did Philadelphia Eagles running back Brian Westbrook and others.

"Only in the past one to two years has there been the kind of attention placed on this matter necessary to force schools, colleges and the NFL to actually adhere to the well-promulgated and common-sense standards of the medical profession," Shanin Specter, a lawyer for the Plevretes family, told The Associated Press.

Plevretes, then a 19-year-old sophomore, was injured when he took a hit while covering a punt in a 2005 game at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. He was briefly knocked unconscious but then awoke and was combative for three to five minutes before lapsing into a coma, Specter said.

"That is the signature presentation of second-impact syndrome," Specter said. "A brain already contused from a prior concussion ... swells very, very rapidly and herniates while the player is still on the field."

Plevretes had emergency surgery to relieve brain swelling.

The lawsuit hinged on the family's claim that an earlier concussion made Plevretes more vulnerable to the second, catastrophic blow. According to the lawsuit, Plevretes took a helmet-to-helmet hit in an Oct. 4 practice and took himself out of the next game in the fourth quarter, complaining of a headache.

La Salle contends the injury stemmed solely from the Duquesne hit, Specter said. Several Duquesne defendants were previously dropped from the suit, which was filed by the player's parents, Theodore and Tammy Plevretes.

The NCAA did not immediately return calls about the lawsuit Monday.

The NFL declined to comment on the La Salle settlement. Asked Sunday whether the league is considering additional guidelines on how to handle players with concussions, spokesman Greg Aiello said the NFL is "continuing to review all aspects of our guidelines on concussion management and treatment."

La Salle admits no wrongdoing with the settlement, which is covered by its insurance.

"From the time of Preston's injury, the university community, led by those who know Preston and his family, have been hoping and praying for his recovery. That hasn't changed," the school said in a statement.

The executive director of the American Football Coaches Association believes the focus on player safety has grown along with the medical understanding of concussions and other injuries.

Grant Teaff cited as examples the ban on helmet-to-helmet contact -- blamed for some of the most devastating football injuries -- and better training through videos on proper blocking and tackling techniques.

"We're all in a learning process. What the outcome of that will be, I don't think anybody knows, because the game is a very important part of Americana," said Teaff, a former Baylor University coach who is in the College Football Hall of Fame.

At the same time, players rarely want to sit out, he said.

"Most of us growing up playing the game felt indestructible," he said. "That part of it won't ever change."

Plevretes once dreamed of becoming a sports broadcaster and now hopes to become a motivational speaker. However, he has so far recovered very little speech and instead communicates mostly through a keyboard. He needs assistance to walk even a short distance and suffers from short-term memory loss, Specter said.

"He and his family still love football. They realize that what occurred is a rare circumstance but one that is preventable through proper medical attention after a concussion," Specter said.

La Salle revived its football program in 1997 after a 56-year absence but shut the program down again in 2007, citing a shrinking number of foes in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference.