

La Salle to pay \$7.5 million to brain-injured football player

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The worsening impact of head injuries on football was underscored yesterday when it was revealed that La Salle University had agreed to pay \$7.5 million to a severely brain-damaged player, an amount five times the school's annual athletic budget.

Preston Plevretes, a sophomore linebacker, was severely injured in a Nov. 5, 2005, game against Duquesne, six weeks after suffering a concussion during an Explorers practice. His lawyers argued that because La Salle prematurely cleared him to return, without having him undergo proper testing or be seen by a doctor, the player became a victim of second-impact syndrome.

In that medical condition, the brain swells rapidly after a person suffers a second concussion before symptoms from an earlier concussion have cleared up.

Plevretes, 23, from Marlboro, N.J., fell into a coma soon after a punt-return collision with a Duquesne player. He has since undergone several operations and treatments, in facilities from Pittsburgh to Cologne, Germany.

His Philadelphia-based lawyer said Plevretes still requires around-the-clock care and has difficulty walking and talking.

"He tells me he would like to be an inspirational speaker, but first he has to relearn how to speak," attorney Shanin Specter said.

The settlement in the case, which was set to have begun yesterday in Philadelphia Common Pleas Court, was reached Wednesday, according to Specter.

The Plevretes family did not want to comment, Specter said.

The family filed the lawsuit Nov. 2, 2007, just 17 days before La Salle, after an 0-10 season, dropped its football program.

La Salle officials made no mention of the case Nov. 19, 2007, when they listed reasons for the demise of the



MICHAEL PEREZ / Staff Photographer
Preston Plevretes, seen here in 2006, suffered two concussions while playing football for La Salle in 2005.

program, which had been resurrected in 1997 after a 56-year absence. Yesterday, a spokesman said their response in the matter would be limited to a three-paragraph statement.

"La Salle University confirms that the lawsuit brought by Preston Plevretes and his family has been amicably resolved without the need for a trial, sparing both sides further burdens and expense and allowing all concerned to put the litigation behind them," according to the statement issued by Joe Donovan, an assistant vice president for marketing and communication.

"Although we were prepared to defend our position, the university does not believe that it would serve any purpose to engage in further discussion about the matter.

"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."

According to documents filed in the case, the then-19-year-old was initially injured in a head-to-head collision during an Oct. 4 practice. A trainer treated him on the scene, and when problems persisted, Plevretes saw a school nurse.

His parents, concerned by continuing complaints of headaches and dizziness, had him examined in a Monmouth County hospital. Soon afterward, La Salle officials cleared him to play.

Blocking on a fourth-quarter punt return, he collided with a Duquesne player, collapsed, appeared to recover, and then lapsed into a coma. He was rushed to Pittsburgh's Mercy Hospital, where emergency surgery was performed.

"The track record of colleges around the country on adopting the well-promulgated standards for the evaluation and treatment of concussion has been lousy," Specter said.

"It's been well-documented what all programs should do from peewees to the pros. But the colleges have had an uneven compliance with those standards. . . . The standards aren't very complicated. La Salle wasn't doing any of those things in 2005. They are now."

According to a release issued by Specter's firm, La Salle now performs baseline testing at the start of a season to use as a comparison in the event of an injury. The school also requires all athletes who suffer concussions to be examined by a concussion specialist, and it now uses "computerized neuropsychological testing" for those with head injuries.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, software for those tests costs between \$750 and \$3,000.

Concussion concerns

News of the La Salle settlement came amid growing concerns and ongoing reports about the effects of concussions on football players, past and present.

Several NFL stars, including the Eagles' Brian Westbrook and DeSean Jackson, have suffered head injuries this season, and the league has appointed a special committee to investigate and find solutions for what appears to be a worsening problem.

According to the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, there are nearly four million sports-related concussions in the country annually, with an estimated 50 resulting in deaths.

Additional research has found that many football players are reluctant to report head injuries, and that those who suffer repeated head blows are likely to endure such future problems as headaches, dizziness, memory loss, sleep difficulties, even personality changes.

The issue is particularly perplexing for colleges, most of whose athletic budgets already are being squeezed.

The severity and frequency of football head injuries has led to increased liability and insurance payments for schools, many of which provide athletes with some form of medical coverage, according to a New York Times report.

Many schools the size of La Salle carry supplemental insurance for student-athletes, who first are required to submit any injury claims to their personal insurers. Many family plans, however, do not cover sports injuries.

The NCAA provides coverage in some cases when athletes are severely injured, although that policy carries a \$75,000 deductible, due to jump to \$90,000 next year.

According to Specter, the cost of the settlement will be borne by La Salle's insurer.