



Can Cannabis Save Contact Sports?

For nearly a century, marijuana has borne an unfortunate stigma as a brain-crippling substance throughout much of the world. But modern research suggests cannabis possesses singular medical properties that could help protect brains and aid in recovery from sports-related injuries. By **Lisabeth Fauble**

Whether it's hitting the field or cheering on your home team, contact sports are a favorite pastime for many men around the world. However, playing contact-heavy sports comes with the risk of painful physical damage, including head injury. Repeated blows to the head cause the brain to bruise and twist. If it happens enough times, this bruising can cause the formation of a poisonous protein called tau. Tau spreads throughout the brain, killing brain cells and causing a condition known as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, or CTE.

CTE carries symptoms like aggression, paranoia, impulse control issues, memory problems, confusion, depression, and thoughts of suicide. Professional and amateur athletes in boxing, American football, hockey, and soccer have the highest risk for CTE - in American football it's practically a given, with 110 of 111 American footballer's brains testing positive for CTE in autopsies, according to studies by the VA-BU-CLF Brain Bank, a collaboration between the Concussion Legacy Foundation, Boston University and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Former NFL player Kyle Turley has become one of the most outspoken advocates for cannabis use in sports. After retiring from professional football, Turley experienced bouts of severe anxiety, paranoia, and mood swings accompanied by crippling pain. Eventually, he was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease and dementia thought to be linked to CTE.

Turley blames years of being over-prescribed painkillers and other drugs for sports injuries for masking the underlying neurological issues that led to his current condition. Turley has sworn off prescription pills completely, including anti-psychotics prescribed for dementia symptoms, claiming cannabis is "unbelievably powerful and better than any psych medication I was ever given. It gave me my life back."

Some current research concurs with Turley, showing that both the CBD and THC in marijuana help improve brain recovery from common sports-related brain injuries like concussions. Cannabinoids activate brain receptors in our natural endocannabinoid system, reducing neuropathic pain and anxiety while encouraging nerve cells to heal. One animal study showed that endocannabinoids can help avert brain damage by protecting against cell death, improving blood flow to the brain, and reducing inflammation, according to studies by the Department of Medicinal Chemistry and Natural Products at

Jerusalem's Hebrew University Medical Faculty.

Cannabis can also be a highly-effective alternative to opioids for pain management and recovery, with fewer side-effects and significantly less risk of dependency. Polls indicate former NFL players are four times more likely to succumb to opioid addiction than non-players, one more reason professional athletes like Turley have become some of the biggest advocates for cannabis in sports. A survey by The Tynt of 6,000 millennials found that 93.2 percent believe marijuana is a better option for athletes than prescription opioids.

Former NFL running back Ricky Williams was publicly reprimanded for his cannabis use throughout his 11 seasons. Williams blamed the NFL's anti-cannabis policy for his early retirement at 29, citing concern over his repeated brain injuries and an unwillingness to use addictive pain pills that don't protect brain health for his pro-cannabis stance. Instead, Williams has built the world's first marijuana-friendly gym, Power Plant Fitness and Wellness, demonstrating that cannabis' is not just a lazy man's pastime, but can be a valuable tool for improving both mental and physical health.

Today, Williams and Turley are no longer alone in their quest to make cannabis more available to professional athletes. A group of former pro athletes, including NFL quarterback Jake Plummer, lineman Eugene Monroe, linebacker Derrick Morgan, defensive tackle Cullen Jenkins, defensive end Marvin Washington and many more, have come together to form When the Bright Lights Fade, a campaign that promotes sports injury awareness and funds research into cannabis's potential for athletes. The push to recognize cannabis as a viable pain management and neuroprotective agent for athletes has become so strong, it's only a matter of time before the pro-cannabis movement becomes a pro-sports reality.

"I suffer from traumatic brain injury from playing this sport. I've seen this firsthand in multiple scans of my brain. I understand that it's an occupational hazard", said Turley in a Freedom Leaf interview. "The fact that there are zero medications to stop the progression of this condition should impel everyone to search for an answer to this problem. If we want to save football, then we've got to start looking at solutions, not just count concussions. Cannabis is that potential savior. Seventy percent or more of the players use cannabis in the NFL today, because they know it works."