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- Professional footballers who repeatedly head the ball during their career could be more prone to long-term brain damage. That's according to a new study which looked at the brains of six former players all known for their skill at heading the ball. They all developed dementia in later life - before they died. The Football Association has welcomed the research. Our Health Editor Hugh Pym has been looking at the findings. Jeff Astle's heading ability was well-known but he could not have guessed the long-term consequences. The West Brom and England footballer developed dementia and died at the age of 59. A coroner ruled in 2002 that he had an industrial disease brought on by heading the ball. Since then, his family have campaigned for more research on the impact of heading heavy, often waterlogged footballs,

on previous generations of players. Jeff's job killed him. I knew the day he was diagnosed. Why else would a man, physically fit, only 55, suddenly, overnight virtually, it came on so rapidly, be diagnosed with dementia? His daughter Dawn is angry that 15 years on, the football authorities have not started a thorough research programme. For too long it has been about protecting the product of football and what it should be doing is protecting players. I think they are terrified, that the results come out, and it is shown that football could be a killer. Some former players in England and Scotland agree that more needs to be done. I just think that there is research needing done. In years gone by, the balls were different, they were a lot heavier, leather balls, and it really picked up a lot

of weight when they were wet. This definitely had an effect on players. The new study examined the brains of six former players who had developed dementia, seen here in these images. Four had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, also seen in former boxers. The Football Association, based here in Wembley, says that it takes concerns about head injuries very seriously and is committed to supporting further research, which had to be seen to be independent, robust and thorough. A spokesperson acknowledged it would be several months before that process got underway. So what does it mean for the current generation of players, and is it safe for children to head the ball? The authors of the study make it clear that they are not drawing any conclusions. I think the risks of heading a football are quite low and we need to engage with more research to find out ways of making the game safer. Overall, we think playing football is a safe thing to do.

But with children under 11 in the United States barred from heading the ball in practice, there is clearly an unresolved debate about modern football and head injuries. Hugh Pym, BBC News.