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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 skills at heading the ball. They all developed a form of 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. COMMENTATOR: Astle, nodding it on. Jeff Astle's heading ability was well-known, but he couldn't have imagined the long-term consequences. The West Brom and England footballer developed dementia and died in 2002, at the age of 59. A coroner said he had an industrial disease. In other words, heading a ball made a significant contribution to the cause of death. Since then, Jeff Astle's family have campaigned for more research on the impact of heading heavy, often waterlogged

footballs in that era. Jeff's job killed him. I knew the day Jeff was diagnosed because why else would a man, you know, physically fit, only 55, suddenly overnight, virtually, it came on so rapidly, be diagnosed with dementia? The Astle family was told at the time by the football authorities that a research programme had been started, but it was dropped because of technical flaws. Now, 15 years on, they're angry that nothing more has been done. For too long, it's been about protecting the product of football and what it should be doing is protecting its players and I think they're terrified that if the results come out and it's shown that football could be a killer. The new study examined the brains of six former players who'd developed dementia, seen here in these images. Four had chronic traumatic encephalopathy, also seen in former boxers.

The Football Association, based here at Wembley, which covers England, said it took concerns about head injuries extremely seriously. It said it was committed to supporting further research which had to be seen to be independent, robust and thorough. Play on. So what does it mean for the current generation of players and is it safe for children to head the ball? The study authors make clear they're not drawing any conclusions. I think the risks in heading the football are likely to be quite low and I think that we need to engage with more research into finding out ways of making the game safer but, overall, we think playing football is a safe thing to do. But with children under 11 in the United States banned from heading a ball in practice, there's an ongoing debate about modern football and head injuries as well as the game in previous decades. Hugh Pym, BBC News.