**As evidence of dementia link to football emerges is it time to stop kids heading the ball?**

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**BY**MARTIN BAGOT

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A study has found evidence of damage in ex-professionals as it is claimed the FA knew of the link for years but covered it up

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Footballers have been urged to give their brains to ­medicine after they die, amid the first scientific link between heading the ball and ­early-onset [**dementia**](http://www.irishmirror.ie/all-about/dementia) .

Experts identified a serious brain condition called chronic traumatic encephalopathy – or CTE – in deceased ex-players.

The study, spanning four decades, will trigger further calls for under-11s to be stopped from heading the ball.

America has already brought in a ban after 50,000 concussions were recorded among school football players in 2010.

Meanwhile ex-Liverpool ace Ian St John claimed links between dementia and heavy footballs had been covered up as the FA announced funding for further research.

Former West Brom striker [**Jeff Astle**](http://www.irishmirror.ie/all-about/jeff-astle) died of CTE, aged 59, and his daughter Dawn led calls for more brain ­donations.

She said: “It’s happened in the US with American footballers and it’s vitally important that we get a similar thing here and get current footballers or families of footballers to pledge the brain. If we hadn’t donated dad’s brain, we wouldn’t know what we know now. We wouldn’t know what had killed him.”

The new study looked at 14 retired footballers, 12 of whom eventually died of advanced dementia.

All began heading the ball when they were children or teenagers and continued playing for an average of 26 years.

Evidence of CTE – which can only be diagnosed after death – was found in four of six players where relatives gave permission for their brains to be examined. All also had signs of Alzheimer’s. Their rate of CTE exceeds the 12% average rate in a previous survey of 268 brains.

Scientists warn thousands of minor head injuries caused by heading the ball and collisions with other players could be linked to CTE, which is known as being “punch drunk” in boxers.

Ex-Scotland international Ian St John, 78, said: “It’s something that has to be investigated very closely by the FA. There’s enough evidence on the plate.

“You were heading balls every day of your life, and the harder you could head it into the back of the net, the better. Nobody thought for a minute that in a few years’ time you could lose your memory.

“People never think about it, and then it happens and you have to deal with the fall out. It’s been obvious for a long time, but the FA and players’ union never admitted it. They have hidden it.

“By knowing, playing and talking about ­football you see the players are losing their memories – people at ­Liverpool.”

In 2013 Geoff Strong – a 1965 FA Cup winner with Liverpool – died aged 75 after struggling with [**Alzheimer**](http://www.irishmirror.ie/all-about/alzheimers-disease) ’s. Former club captains Tommy Smith, 71, and Ron Yeats, 79, also suffer with “memory problems”.

England’s World Cup hero Nobby Stiles, 74, has been diagnosed with dementia along with fellow 1966 winners Martin Peters, 73, and Ray Wilson, 82.

Jeff Astle had the first diagnosis of CTE in an ex-footballer after his family asked for his brain to be re-examined three years ago. He had the brain of an 89-year-old.

It is nearly 15 years since the FA and PFA promised research after a coroner said his death was an “industrial illness”.

Nobby’s son, John, said: “They have known for 15 years that a coroner ruled that heading footballs killed Jeff Astle.

“I would say that at least one in three former footballers I know of gets early-onset dementia. This is an issue that really worries me. I now have a two-year-old grandson, Nobby’s great-grandson, and I don’t want him to head the ball because of the damage it could do.”

The study, by researchers from University College London and the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, is published in journal Acta Neuropathological. All of the subjects were referred to the Old Age Psychiatry Service in Swansea between 1980 and 2010 and treated by consultant Dr Don Williams.

He monitored them regularly, collecting demographic and clinical data, as well as concussion history from relatives. US Soccer’s ban on heading the ball for kids up to the age of 11, and restricting it for 11-13-year-olds, raised calls by the PFA last year for a similar ban in the UK.

Any child under 10 who deliberately heads the ball in the US has a free kick awarded against them. Dr Charlotte Cowie, the FA’s head of medicine, said: “The Football ­Association takes concerns around concussion extremely seriously.

“In 2015 we established an Expert Concussion Panel which led to the publication of The FA Concussion Guidelines.

“The FA is determined to support this research and is committed to ensuring that any research process is independent, robust and thorough, so that when the results emerge, everyone in the game can be confident in its findings.

“We have recently agreed with the PFA to jointly fund the research project.”

Dr David Reynolds, of Alzheimer’s Research UK, called for further studies but added: “We can’t tell what ultimately caused these players to develop dementia and this study doesn’t suggest that people who play football are at a greater risk of dementia than the general population.”

Dr James Pickett, of the Alzheimer’s Society, said: “Exercise is one of the best ways to reduce your risk of dementia.”

**Wait till 18 at least, warns movie medic Dr Bennet Omalu**

Players should not head the ball until they are at least 18, says the doctor who discovered Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in the US.

Bennet Omalu made his findings in 2002 after a postmortem on the brain of an American football player.

His work featured in the film Concussion, with Will Smith as the doctor trying to convince the National Football League of the dangers of brain trauma.

The NFL initially criticised but later accepted his findings.

Omalu said: “Our children have not reached the age of consent. We should wait for children to grow up, be provided with information on the risk of play, and let them make their own decisions.”

The US has banned children 10 and under from heading the ball – and any player who does has an indirect free kick awarded against them.

**Analysis: By Dr Helen Ling, of UCL Institute of Neurology**

This is the first time chronic traumatic encephalopathy has been confirmed in a group of retired footballers.

They were all skilled headers and sustained many minor blows to the head. Our findings suggest a potential link between playing football and development of degenerative brain pathologies.

However, it is important to note we studied only a small number of retired footballers with dementia and still do not know how common dementia is among footballers.

CTE and Alzheimer’s involve a build-up of tau protein in the brain. Previous studies have shown that the risk of Alzheimer’s disease is increased in people with previous head injuries.

On the other hand, the risk of dementia is also increased with age and we don’t know if these footballers would have developed Alzheimer’s disease if they hadn’t played football.

The most pressing question is now to find out if dementia is more common in footballers than in the normal population.