

# Head trauma-ALS link found: report

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A BOSTON UNIVERSITY neuropathologist says she's found yet another reason why football players, soccer players and boxers should be worried about their long-term health. BU associate professor Ann McKee says brain damage can lead to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

In an explosive report that will air tonight on HBO's "Real Sports", McKee says the toxic proteins that form after brain trauma and lead to depression and dementia may also cause ALS.

Real Sports also reports that Gehrig's premature death from ALS, which slowly destroys muscles and usually leads to death by respiratory failure, may have been caused by six serious head injuries he suffered during the Hall of Fame career with the Yankees.

ALS is a rare ailment that apparently afflicts athletes in far greater numbers than the general population. It strikes only one in 100,000 people, which means only one and possibly two NFL players since 1970 should have gotten the disease. But Real Sports says it is aware of 14 NFL retirees who are afflicted with ALS. More than 40 professional soccer players in Italy and at least eight Canadian Football League players have also been diagnosed with the deadly disease.

"Turns out, this disease is preying on elite athletes across different sports in different countries," correspondent Bernard Goldberg says.

About 10% of ALS cases are caused by genetics, but doctors have been unable to figure out why or how the vast majority of patients became afflicted. McKee, who is the director of the National Veterans Administration Brain Bank, and her colleague Chris Nowinski,

a Harvard-educated former professional wrestler, say their research represents a major breakthrough. Their findings will be published in two weeks in the Journal of Neuropathology and Experimental Neurology.

The "Real Sports" segment focuses on Steve Smith, the captain of Penn State's 1986 national championship team who later spent nine seasons as a running back with the Oakland Raiders and Seattle Seahawks.

Smith, 45, is unable to move out of a hospital bed in the living room of his home near Dallas. He can't eat or speak; his wife, Chie, a former Raiders cheerleader, feeds him through a tube attached to his stomach and he communicates with a computer.

Chie Smith and Mary Hilgenberg, whose husband Wally was a former

Minnesota Vikings linebacker who died from ALS in 2008, said the NFL did not provide assistance with the mountains of medical bills that piled up after their husbands were diagnosed with the disease.

But the league told HBO it would consider offering financial help to players with ALS now that a link between concussions and Lou Gehrig's disease has been established.

Gehrig, of course, was baseball's Iron Horse, the tough-as-nails first baseman whose record of 2,130 consecutive games stood until 1995, when it was broken by Cal Ripken.

But "Real Sports" says Gehrig's durability may have contributed to his death. Recent studies have shown that failing to rest after concussions can make the long-term effects of brain injuries much worse.

"Now the guideline for athletes is not just even physical rest, it's cognitive rest," Nowinski says during the report. "They don't want you thinking after a concussion, because it can actually damage the cell."

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**- Correspondent Bernard Goldberg**