By JOE BIDDLE

New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees joined the thousands who showed up to mourn and honor the life of Junior Seau with a paddle out on surfboards in the ocean in front of Seau's Oceanside home.

They chanted Seau's number, the 55 that was on his jersey throughout his 20 years with the Chargers, Dolphins and Patroits.

Seau died in his house after a self-inflicted gunshot wound to his chest. Two days earlier he had played in a charity golf tournament where he was the jovial, accommodating Junior Seau fans instantly connected with and loved.

The family is growing close to making a decision that would allow researchers at Boston University's School of Medicine to study the impact that multiple concussions have on NFL players' brains.

Seau is the third former NFL player to commit suicide in recent years. Researchers suspect a link between concussions and depression and dementia/Alzheimer's disease.

Seau was only 43 years old. Former NFL quarterback Jim McMahon is 52, and he fears the worst. He is already showing signs of concern.

"(My) short term memory is not good,'' McMahon admits. "It breaks your heart when guys you've known all your life don't know who you are.''

Boston University has studied the brains of 19 former NFL players. All but one was found to have chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

By virtue of Seau's status as a player, his death could shine even more of a spotlight on the NFL to increase financial responsibility to support players past and present who are affected.

Commissioner Roger Goodell knows the NFL is a violent game. With players getting increasingly bigger, stronger and faster, concussions and head injuries are not going away. They will increase if the NFL doesn't accept its culpability and put stronger safety measures in the rules and work on making the equipment more safe and protective.

They have come a long way since McMahon played in the 1980s.

"Back then, you just taped an aspirin to your helmet and you (went) back in,'' the former Bears quarterback said.

McMahon is one of seven former NFL players who have sued the league over these health issues they believe are results of concussions and other brain injuries.

Seau's family could help move the process forward by allowing his brain to be studied by the experts in the field.

He was not a player who missed games with concussions. At least we don't know whether he kept personal issues to himself.

Seau's ex-wife, Gina, says it would be wrong to assume he never had concussions.

"Of course he had,'' she told ESPN. "He always bounced back and kept on playing. He's a warrior. That didn't stop him. … It's not ballet. It's part of the game.''

Seau was 6-3, 248 pounds. He could get from sideline to sideline or take running backs head-on. The former Southern Cal All-American always played at the highest level.

You can't understand the speed and intensity of an NFL game from even the closest seats in the stands. TV doesn't do it justice. Stand on the sidelines, however, and the picture becomes clearer.

It is a problem that will not go away. It would help if players went back to tackling with their arms instead of their heads. For too long, they have been allowed to use their helmets as weapons.

The tragic consequences have got to stop.

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