NFL Player Shares A Real CTE Story (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy) Transcript

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Jonas Craft's Introduction and Family History

Everybody sitting around here, and I'm with my good friend Jonas and Jonas, who's on the Philadelphia Eagles. And, we really bonded through one major element, which is concussive injuries and traumatic brain injuries.

So Jonas wants to kind of introduce yourself and tell you the story with that. Yeah. Hey, guys. Thanks for having me on. My name is Jonas Craft's. I was a tight end with the Philadelphia Eagles and, you know, we started talking about brain traumas.

And when I met you, what, 3 or 4 years ago now. And, you know, my dad played professional football as well. And, with Denver Broncos and about eight years ago now, my dad kind of just went berserk one week.

There's just stuff. Was it right? It wasn't that. My mom's call me. She's like, hey, your dad stood outside the shower for 45 minutes while I was washing my hair.

The next day, my dad gets a big legal pad and he's writing, trying to write my mom a letter because he didn't know what to say. He couldn't complete a sentence.

Everything was in capital letters scratched out, capital letters scratched out. And she's like, your dad's acting really weird. My dad was just a fun, funny guy.

The next morning, it's 5 a.m. ish. My phone search vibrating. I reach over, I look, and I see mom and dad kind of just turn it off because I'm halfway asleep.

What calls again that point time? I'm like, oh crap, why are they calling right now? So I answered my mom bawling, crying. I'm like, okay, something's wrong.

She goes, your dad told me to get out of the house before he hurts me. That's okay. Where are you going? Because of your sisters. I was like, I'll meet you there, but call an ambulance.

Call somebody. Obviously, something's not right. Me and my sisters, we go to the house. We go to my mom's house. Finally, as we pull up to the ambulance, we see fire department out there.

And I said, hey, who's in charge? It's my dad. The chief came over and he goes, well, here's what happened. You know, we knocked on the door. We got the call for distress from your mom.

We knocked on the door. When your dad answered the door, you had a knife in one hand, a bottle of tequila in the other. But as soon as he saw us, he dropped them both, so we knew it was a cry for help.

They had him. They kind of cuffed him. So he was in the back of an ambulance. So I pulled up and it's just if you've ever been concussed you know what it looks like I mean he's looking 20 yards past you.

You know he's not focused on you.

Father's Sudden Decline and Emergency

He's focused 20 yards past and he's just shaking. He's he sees me and that's all he can do is kind of hold my hand and he's just shaking and he just looks scared as all get out.

Well, this you know what was happen at the time. Absolutely not. No clue. I mean, I guess eight years ago, I think CTE kind of just came out, you know, junior sales maybe a couple years before that. Yeah.

This wasn't something that we knew. I mean, my dad was 70 or 69 at the time. Yeah. You know, and so he was relatively young and it's like, what the heck is going what was going through your head at that particular time?

Gosh, it's just, you know, what is this? How do we fix it? How did it happen as well? I mean, it was like, how did this happen and how do we fix it? Not again.

He was young enough that I was like, oh, he'll be fine, you know? And that's what I'm kind of thinking. I'm like, okay, something is wrong. So, you know, we take him over, get him checked out, and sure enough, the doc, you know, as they did, I believe was a Cat scan or something, they said, yeah, you know, that he has vascular dementia.

Okay. All the my new arteries leading up to the back of the brain had hardened and died off. We in the football realm call that more than likely CTE, right?

You couldn't can't necessarily diagnose it unless you cut the actual brain open and see everything. But we knew that the brain wasn't getting the oxygen, wasn't getting the blood flow that it needed.

And how those minute arteries leading up to the brain harden and pretty much shut off when the rest of his plumbing, his heart, his cholesterol, his blood pressure, everything.

The doctor goes, he's 35 years old. He's not a 70 year old guy. He's 35 years old. So just by looking at the clean arteries. Correct. Okay. They said, yeah, all the plumbing and electrical is great here.

Why isn't it going up to the brain? So vascular dementia mostly is people with other vascular issues like in the heart in the carotid arteries. But this was clean as can be.

So obviously something was causing it. That's outside of the standard of norm which we now know. You know, eight years later that is one of the hallmarks of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE.

And so how long was it after that that you thought, hey, maybe this is from like repetitive trauma? Pretty much as soon as they told us that the next day, we said, we know what it's from, because when he goes, the arteries are clean.

You know, it was like, okay, we know it's from different pounding heads. And if you knew my dad when I was getting recruited into college, yeah, I get because he played ball.

He was a coach also. So, you know, growing up, all his friends were coaches of teams. Right. So me getting recruited, half of those coaches would come and go.

Jonas, if you're if you're a 10th as mean as your daddy, you're going to be a hell of a ballplayer. My dad was just that. Me. My dad was just, you know, there was no quit.

There was no stop. Right. And so, you know, to have that and it's like, man, just to know how he played, he played all out and that that's how we play as professional athletes.

It's all or nothing. Rarely is it. Oh, let me protect myself now.

Diagnosis of Vascular Dementia and CTE

I think we're kind of getting to that realm of should I make that extra hit or should I go out of bounds. You know, so as we see that I go, okay, we knew exactly what this is from.

Just because he was an all in type of guy to make you fearful for yourself. If you were going to go under same feet. So funny enough or ironically enough, he gets sick in October.

Yeah. Of 2011. I meet with one of the doctors because I was doing diabetic nutrition in San Antonio. I meet with one of the doctors in December of 2011, and that's what he goes, you know so much, you know, so, so many people.

Why don't you open up a medical clinic? I'll be your medical director. He told me that in December of 2011. I opened up my medical clinic in March of 2012, and I did that.

It was almost like an because I was scared and I was like, hold on. Some of these pieces to the puzzle are falling in place. How do I? I always wanted to be like my dad, but how do I not end up like my dad?

And so that was to me was like, hey, how can you fix this? I'm young enough. I was 30 years old, 31 years old. I said, how do I fix this? So that way I don't end up at his shoes. Right?

And I was kind of looking for answers the whole way of saying, hey, I'm young enough. My brain, I believe, is still pliable enough that I can create that neurogenesis within the brain.

So I don't end up another CTE victim from the NFL. Right? Right. And so when you open that up in August, you know, that's that's a very personal reason why you open up.

Right. And so what is your mission now when it comes to CTE? Oh, my mission. Gosh. It's it's educate those that have already played because again, our brains are still good as long as they're still good.

And that's what you know, we saw with with the study educate the former athletes because the former athletes are going to talk to the current athletes, and the current athletes are going to talk to the future athletes, meaning high school, middle school, peewee football.

These guys are still hitting hard. And as they're growing, I believe, I mean, from an eight, eight year old. So the eight year olds, that's what the brain is really growing robust.

And it's going okay. You know what. We could talk about helmets all day long. We can talk about, you know, safety and hitting up. There's still going to be accidents.

If you look at you know Tua Tagovailoa you know he gets thrown down. He didn't get hit. He got thrown down right hitting a human. There's a little bit of pliability there hitting the ground.

That thing doesn't move. And that's what rattles the brain. And so we go you can have all the science. But what if we could feed the brain every time after we play, you know.

And what do us athletes get after, a football game? It's always simple. Carbohydrates, pizza, spaghetti, wings. And what do we like to do? We like to celebrate.

What else was there? Alcohol. So there you go. Okay, I'm having alcohol. I'm having simple carbs. Are any of those good for the brain now? No.

Launching a Clinic to Protect Brain Health

So this to me is a big education piece for the universities, for the school districts, for high schoolers. Yeah, yeah, the school districts, you know, so that way they can start going, hey, you know what?

We know that, you know, on average about 70 to 80 offensive place. So every time if I'm a lineman, if I'm excited, which I was you know out of those 70 plays I'm probably hitting somebody at least 60 just during the game.

Not to mention during the the daily week of practice. Right. We're buttoned up. We're buttoned up. You're taking steps. That way you can have it, I would say minimum 100 times a day.

Our brains are doing this. What are we doing to help feed and re nourish the brain after. Right. As athletes, we go to work out at the gym. We can talk to every athlete and more than likely going to take a pre workout one likely going to have a protein.

So amino acids everything. So that way we can help the muscle right. So when we go to the gym we're creating chaos in the muscle. But we utilize all those supplements.

So that way we can help repair the body okay. Now for creating chaos in the brain. Can we utilize nutrients just like that, like some nootropics of CBD, some good things to help the brain heal itself.

Just like the muscles can heal themselves. Yeah. And the answer is yes. Correct. And so, let's talk about the study. And the study that we're referring to is one that, I was part of the publication where, enter cannabinoids.

So cannabinoids, some form of CBD and other forms of cannabinoids. What did it really do to people with multiple hits in the head? And so the study was published in the journal called Neuro Regulation.

And that is a beautiful story of getting 54 former professional, NFL players, into rooms and actually scanning their brain, using something called quantitative EEG analysis called a brain view neuro scan probe.

That's the name of the device. And what we did is we wanted to see what their brains actually did. Looking at the brain patterns before and after, cannabinoids, specifically this formulation of focus from, from my body.

And so this is a THC free version, which means there's zero THC in it. And what I really want to know is because there hasn't really been any studies done on THC formulations of what actually does the brain and does it develop resilience. And the answer is yes.

So the actually the studies showed that there's actually improved resilience, improved reaction time. Right.

Using Cannabinoids to Support Recovery

And improved able, improved, the ability for the brain to categorize things as well. And this is just a few minutes, after taking cannabinoid. So this was sort of a landmark thing.

And so when that got published, what the what are the NFL do sit there and tell us. Yeah, the test perked up. Well, I think it was it was they they made sure we had it published because it begetting it was like no, no, no. Yeah.

Now that you published it, now they're going, hey, hey, right. You guys are actually doing something right? Right. And so we come to a point in time where, you know, we know that stuff like, cannabinoids and stuff like that can potentially improve the brain in some way.

This is the first studies actually showing that there's there's a quantitative improvements. Right. Well, turning words into numbers instead of people say, I kind of feel better now we're saying you're this much percent better and this is difficult.

Statistical analysis saying that this is statistically significant measure the so, you know, now now we're now we're in a very different world. We're in a world where chronic traumatic encephalopathy is all over the news.

We're in a world where there's a recognition by, very big, professional companies from the NFL World Cup. We recognize that it's an actual thing. Where do you what do you wish the world will know the next five years about CTE?

What do I wish for them to know? I wish for them to know how to stop it before it happens. Yeah. So we can get

science there. Now we can go play without having to worry about.

Am I going to be able to walk, you know, 20 years, 30 years from now? Right. You know, because that's the scary part. I mean, to have my dad do what he did and he just it was a downhill slope for two years, I it was a shell of a man.

And I didn't like seeing my dad like that, but it was just it was not getting better. It was only getting worse. And it was really nothing that we could do about it.

So my whole wish is that can we prevent anything like that from happening? So that way nobody has to be in my shoes or anybody shoes that has passive CTE.

To see that happen to a family member. How can we completely stop that if we could? Yeah. You know, I think a lot of answers are really gonna come in the next few years.

Yeah. And I think that the world has an understanding now. There's modifiable risk factors as well. And there are even genetics that, people are now understanding as a risk factor.

For example, there's a, there's something called the April E4, which is called the Alzheimer's gene. In reality, it just means the brain can create more inflammation, but CTE can develop because of that as well.

I have one of the one of the copies of that gene, and I had my own traumatic experiences with concussions as well. And so we know that now there's other things like priests and IL and one priests and one, two and all these different things that we're looking at the world of Alzheimer's disease, but we're translating that to chronic and rheumatic encephalopathy as well.

And that's the beauty of what we're going really the next five years.

Preventing CTE Through Education and Risk Awareness

Nice. And I think that if the people are educated and understand those risk factors and even get genetic tests beforehand, right, the baseline, your baseline, then I can I can discuss with my daughters whether or not they should really go into soccer.

Right. By the way, soccer is a really girls soccer has extremely high rates of concussions right after boys football. Yeah. And in fact, the impact is actually identical to to football.

In the soccer, arena. So we so, you know, as a father of three girls and, you know, and making decisions based on this, I think all those things are really necessary to understand, like what are my risk factors and is it really worth it as well.

Right. And what do you think? And going back to the topic of cannabinoids and then CBD, what do you think is going to be the friction? Well let me reword that.

What do you think it's going to take for people to start realizing that stuff like diet and, CBD, or, you know, other things and, and physical activity, what do you think it's going to take them to understand that these are the actual things that we should be doing?

I think it's going to it's going to take us that it's played before. Yes, I think it's going to take the coaches, the trainers because I think science is getting better.

Right? We're always getting bigger, faster, stronger. Right. So the science is getting good on that realm. I think we need to get the science good on the preventative realm as well for the brains.

And once once kids start doing that, the the coaches are going to talk to the parents. The parents are going to talk

to the kids. That's I think that is how we do a mainstay.

They can't go talk to their family practice doc per se. You know, he might not know everything about what we're doing with this, but it's the guys that do it.

It's it's having that firsthand experience. I mean, yeah, I think I told you that's when I, I just felt like my brain opened up. The first two weeks I was taking focus.

I was like, okay, I can notice my knees because my joints were feeling better. But it took about a month and I was like, whoa, everything open for my brain for the most part.

And I would talk to my friends and going, oh, Jonesy was trying to sell me a bottle of wine. I, I don't I'm not trying to say anything, but I know you've had more concussions than I have.

Yeah, and I know how your life is. I've talked to your wife, I've talked to your kids, and they're saying that they don't even know who you are today.

And so as they get on, these products are going, Jonas. Thank you. I'm getting the phone calls. I'm getting the text messages. Jonas. Thank you. You know, he he won't ever listen to us, but he listens to you.

And I think it's it's us guys, and it's that peer peer to peer talking and educating that really needs to take place. Now. So that way we can go talk to the coaches.

We can go talk to the trainers, we can go talk to the strength conditioning coaches. So that way we can get a better protocol again, starting from the NFL, college, high school down to peewee football.

Right. And what was so powerful for me, being the private investigator on that study, our principal investigator on the study was that I've never really spoken to large groups of people playing professional football before.

I have one on ones, I have friends. It's been. And I saw yourself, a few other ones as well. But when everyone got into a group, it was such so powerful because they were talking about symptoms.

Symptoms, Personal Struggles, and Lessons Learned

They never told anybody. Yeah. And I'm just like, say, well, I'm like, whoa. Like, there's so many of the military veteran PTSD group we used to hold in my office back in the day.

And it's like we're we're starting to share stories, and people think and people ask me what yours is. This is normal for me. So, like, space out a little bit and then come back into the conversation.

I'm like, well, no, it's not, you know, and it can really affect relationships and it has affected relationships quite a bit. It can create addictive tendencies. Right?

It and it can create so much like over excitation especially, you know, after they retire from the NFL that they're going down the same road. But they think that, oh, maybe it's just me, right.

And so seeing those symptoms, pop up and having people talk about it is exceptionally important. So what are the symptoms? Panic attacks for no reason.

One of the biggest things that people talked about during during the study. Right. Another one is being really triggered with anxiety and really terrible sleep.

Okay. Or sometimes they have too much sleep in the wake up and they still feel like, busted them in the face right? So these are just things that are that that people don't talk about because they think that it's a normal thing, but it's not a normal thing.

And if you're listening to this and you've had concussions yourself, you kind of understand, you know, after these, these injuries, it's not necessarily, easy to recover from, but they're modifiable risk factors.

Right. And so last question that that I would like for you to, to talk about is what have you learned maybe in the last year or two that you wish you knew when you were playing football?

Oh, wow. What's funny? I kind of just want to piggyback on what you said earlier. Sure. As you just started talking about all those things, it just made me think of who I was five years ago.

What? Just that reactive person. Just irritable for no reason. Something could happen, and I just go off. Yeah, but it's like, you know, in football we're trained to do that.

Those. And I was like, I don't know was I would tell my staff, no, this is how I respond. Just get it. And once I started getting this in my body, it was like you brought back memories from literally five years ago.

What? How I used to act and react and feel. Yeah. And I was like, yeah, I did like, I don't I liked it, I didn't like who I was. I remember that I'll just, I'll say this I was successful in my business.

I was making more money in my business than I did in the NFL. And I just remember I was depressed. I remember literally sitting on the floor of my condo on the 25th floor overlooking San Antonio.

I was going, why do I have all this? This is this is so stupid. It's not. Nothing makes me happy right now. And it was the weirdest feeling because I literally had everything that you would want.

The watches, the cars, the condo, the the lifestyle. And I'm sitting there depressed as hell. And I did. I did not like that. And so now as we move on forward, that last question was what would I like to see come to fruition?

Well, what did what is what do you wish you knew when you were playing football back in the day, but that there was a way to prevent this? There's a way to prevent this. There was that.

There was a right way. Let me say there was a right way to feed my brain after it went through chaos. There you goes. The simplicity of that. Yeah. So even though a lot of this is preventable, even if you do have symptoms of chronic traumatic and stuff.

Allopathy, there's it's never too late. You know, you can turn it around like Johnston a few years ago. And that's that's what's the most important thing.

I'll just thank you so much. Yes, sir. Being vulnerable and talking to me. Always a good friend, I appreciate thank you for all you've done for us and what we're doing so that we we got to share this with the rest of the world, including us athletes.

Thank you so much. Yes, sir. Thank y'all. Thank you.