

FEBRUARY 28 2017

Concussion risks extend to children, too

Parents have a duty to get involved and ensure the risk is minimised for every child.

"Let's fight, let's fight, I'm good to go."

That's what boxer Danny Green reckons he told the referee when one of two ringside doctors urged him to pull out of the Anthony Mundine grudge bout. A cheap shot from Mundine had hit Green in the head in the first round.



James McManus is suing the NRL. Photo: AAP

"You wanna fight, you don't know what the rules are," Green said later. "Mate, I didn't know if I was Arthur or Martha."

Given his profession, few would be surprised that Green fought on to record what was a fortunate victory on two counts.

He won on points and survived to tell the tale.

But the decision to proceed left the advising doctor so appalled that he quit his oversight role there and then.

Green was at serious risk of being permanently damaged – even killed – by the next punch to the head. Money was at stake. Testosterone and pride were surging, both inside and outside the playing arena.

Similar pressures are brought to bear in all footy codes.

Consider first grade rugby league player James McManus. The 166-game Newcastle Knights veteran retired in July 2015 following several head knocks that doctors say have left him with "minor brain damage" and "scarring on the brain". He now suffers mood swings and headaches. The first hearing of his legal battle against the Knights is on March 17.

All codes need to take concussion risks more seriously. Players are simply at the mercy of the concussion rules; they rely on the skills and integrity of caregivers after being hit.

The Knights clearly owed McManus a duty of care, although the court case will determine the degree and whether it was properly exercised. Were the rules and guidance strong enough to ensure the Knights could fulfil their legal duty? That is the question which debate around the McManus case will seek to answer.

The NRL had strengthened the concussion protocols just months before McManus' last game. This came as professional gridiron in the US faced billion-dollar lawsuits from former players. The early National Football League cases claimed that when gridiron began "to monetise and glorify violence on the field, it breached its duty of due care". Later cases have been focused on the damage, not failure to foresee the risks or guard against them. The NFL is negotiating a \$1.3 billion settlement with hundreds of former players. The code's reputation demands it.

The NRL in Australia has been more active on mitigating the risks of concussion. At present, much to the chagrin of some league commentators, the NRL's team doctors must ensure players showing any sign of concussion are removed from the field and must pass a clinical check to be cleared to return. Players are not allowed to return if they display loss of consciousness, falling to the ground without taking protective action, seizure, memory impairment or balance disturbance.

Sure, the rules can be toughened. More investment in technology is required to improve testing of players before games and after head injuries. It makes sense for the NRL to review its protocols and commitments every year.

At stake in the McManus and likely future cases are large sums of money from NRL clubs or insurance policies which inevitably cost fans more in membership and ticket prices.

But what about the moral issues? Critically, what about children?

That is where this becomes a community issue.

Consider the case of your child playing rugby league or rugby union or netball or even soccer – yes, heading the ball too often can cause head injuries, according to early research.

"Let's play, let's play, I'm good to go," your beloved child says after copping one on the head. You can bet he or she doesn't really know the concussion rules but you can bet they don't know whether they are Arthur or Martha. The symptoms of many head injuries do not present for months or years. As the *Herald* said in 2013, tragic accidents happen. You cannot wrap your child in cotton wool.

But the only things that separate a young person on the field from permanent damage are the strength of the concussion protocols and the ability – or desire – of club officials to apply them, without fear or favour. Parents have a duty to get involved and ensure the risk is minimised for every child.