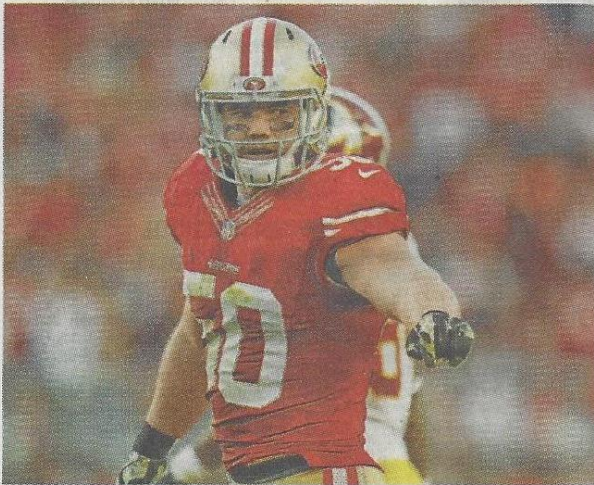


# ROC Sports

*'It takes a man to do the logical'*



CARY EDMONDSON USA TODAY SPORTS

San Francisco 49ers inside linebacker Chris Borland stands on the field against the Washington Redskins on Nov. 23, 2014.

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**L**ess than two weeks into NFL free agency, the league's power structure has potentially been changed with a flurry of moves and trades.

Another story that's been reported well but triggers less conversation — maybe because it's the 500-pound gorilla in the room — also has the potential to change the NFL as we know it over time. That's the rash of retirements by young players.

Players with productive years ahead of them opting to walk away from the game because of chronic injuries, fears for their long-term health, lost passion to keep playing or a combination of all

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# Early

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these.

Electing to step out of the limelight, on their terms, and leaving millions of contract dollars on the table were San Francisco linebacker Chris Borland, 24; Tennessee quarterback Jake Locker, 26; Pittsburgh linebacker Jason Worilds, 27; Oakland running back and longtime Jacksonville Jaguar Maurice Jones-Drew, 29; 49ers linebacker Patrick Willis, 30; and Miami cornerback Cortland Finnegan, 31.

If half a dozen significant young players bowed out in the same month a decade ago, everyone would do a Groucho Marx with their eyebrows. But it's understandable today.

For one, players can afford to. Guaranteed money is on the rise and built into every deal now. Even someone like Borland, a third-round pick, was able to earn more than \$1 million as a rookie last season with his signing bonus and base salary.

With financial incentive mitigated and the heightened awareness about brain injuries and the long-term effects football can have on one's health, this could be the start of a trend of players calling it quits before the age of 30.

Last fall, a brain bank in Bedford, Massachusetts, reported that 76 of 79 deceased NFL players had CTE — chronic traumatic encephalopathy — a degenerative brain disorder. Some that committed suicide like Andre Waters, Dave Duerson and Junior Seau had CTE. Dozens of living retired players, from Dallas Cowboys running back Tony Dorsett to Buffalo Bills linebacker Darryl Tal-

his wife and two young daughters to open in the event the day comes when he no longer recognizes who they are.

"It's unlike any other injury in the sense that it truly affects the soul," Utecht told the Indianapolis Star.

Armed with these stories and statistics, Borland, the Big Ten defensive player of the year in 2013 and rising NFL star, resolved the inner struggle he was having and told the 49ers his football playing days were over.

"I just honestly want to do what's best for my health," Borland told ESPN's *Outside the Lines*. "From what I've researched and what I've experienced, I don't think it's worth the risk."

Borland, who had two documented concussions as a teenager (one came while playing soccer), sustained what he believed to be a concussion while making a tackle in training camp last summer. He played through it because he was trying to make the team. That rationale scared him.

"I just thought to myself, 'What am I doing?'" he said. "Is this how I'm going to live my adult life, banging my head, especially with what I've learned and know about the dangers?"

While Borland may have been the only one to specifically cite fear of permanent brain damage for quitting football, each of these new retirees had to have resolved the risk

vs. reward, health vs. wealth dilemma. A shredded knee is one thing. A shredded brain is another.

"I can't fault him (Borland) for calling it quits," wrote St. Louis defensive end Chris Long on Twitter. "His concerns are real. Still it takes a man to do the logical."

The NFL issued a news release claiming concussions were down 25 percent last season, continuing a three-year trend.

I do believe the game is safer today, thanks to concussion protocols, better helmets and efforts to eliminate helmet-to-helmet blows. But the biggest safety change is occurring at the grass roots levels where "getting your bell rung" is no longer treated as a rite of passage. It's treated as an injury.

Ray Ciancaglini, the tireless concussion safety advocate from Romulus who suffers from the boxing form of CTE, recently told me that when it comes to helping prevent the long-term ill effects of head trauma, athletes must learn to advocate for themselves.

"Immediate honesty about any concussion symptoms is always the best and will always be the best policy and protection," Ray said.

Chris Borland's honesty led him to conclude walking away from football was the best thing for him. Yes, it takes a man to do the logical.