

July 15, 2014

Mr. Joseph Blatter
President
Fédération Internationale de Football Association
FIFA-Strasse 20, P.O. Box 8044 Zurich, Switzerland

Dear President Blatter:

We are writing to encourage you to address the Fédération Internationale de Football Association's (FIFA) inadequate approach toward traumatic brain injury (TBI). Over the past month, billions of people around the world watched the World Cup in Brazil, and while there was much enthusiasm and excitement around the tournament, there were also serious concerns about players' safety. As Chairmen of the Congressional Brain Injury Task Force, we urge you to re-evaluate FIFA's policies and their implementation in light of what modern medicine has taught us about head injuries.

In the U.S. Congress, we co-chair the Congressional Brain Injury Task Force, which works to increase awareness of brain injury in the United States, supports research initiatives for rehabilitation and potential cures, and strives to address the effects such injuries have on families, children, education, and the workforce.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as many as 3.8 million sports- and recreation-related TBIs are estimated to occur in the United States each year, ranging from relatively mild concussions to fatal head injuries. Though symptoms may appear minor, the injury can have life-long effects on an individual's memory, behavior, learning, and/or emotions. With respect to soccer, 24,184 head injuries were attributed to that particular sport in 2009, and soccer ranks among the top ten sports that cause head injuries among children ages fourteen and younger.

This threat was on full display during the World Cup, where several players were left in obvious pain after receiving blows to the head. Of note, Álvaro Pereira, Javier Mascherano, and Christoph Kramer all endured brutal head injuries during play. Unfortunately, their pain wasn't the only thing that these players had in common: each of them returned to the field almost immediately after a brief, sideline evaluation by a team doctor. In the case of Mr. Pereira, the team doctor even signaled to the manager that a substitution was necessary; however, the player insisted that he continue and he was reintroduced to the game. While Messrs. Pereira and Mascherano continued to play for the remainder of their matches, Mr. Kramer collapsed on the field after fifteen minutes and was finally substituted out. He stated the next morning that he had little memory of the game.

The handling of these incidents raises serious questions about FIFA's policies regarding head injuries, and has resulted in extensive public discourse about whether these rules live up to FIFA's own stated standards. As you know, the guidelines posted on FIFA's website state, "Do not take a head injury lightly. No match is that important." Despite this caution, we are concerned that the actions on the field during the World Cup did not reflect the gravity of head injuries or prioritize players' health and safety.

Unlike in many other professional sports, following a player injury, the decisions of team doctors, who are rarely neurologists, can be overruled by coaches or the players themselves. This flies in the face of everything we know about TBIs, inadequate diagnosis and treatment, and the severity of this condition. Even after his team's doctor advised him to leave the field, Mr. Pereira refused. This strategy is not sufficient in adequately diagnosing and treating players who have sustained head injuries. In the National Football League, for example, an independent doctor, unaffiliated with the team, must be present to evaluate all potential head injuries and make final decisions about whether it is safe for a player to return to the field.

We strongly urge you to take action to adequately address TBI in your organization. We witnessed the immediate effects of head injuries during this World Cup, but the long-term implications are rarely broadcast on international television. Most importantly, we encourage FIFA to set a positive example for young fans who aim to emulate their favorite players. If young fans see their favorite players treat head injuries with such little regard, they too will not treat head injuries with the gravity they deserve. Every concussion is brain damage and must be diagnosed and treated by appropriate medical personnel, who prioritize players' health, safety, and well-being.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to your response regarding FIFA's consideration of and implementation of policies that prioritize player safety in the event of a brain injury.

Sincerely,

Bill Pascrell, Jr.
Member of Congress
Thomas J. Rooney
Member of Congress