

A man with short, dark hair, wearing a blue suit jacket over a white button-down shirt, is looking out a window. The window has a decorative metal frame. To the right, a red football helmet is visible on a shelf. The background is bright and slightly blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

Football bonded them. Its violence tore them apart.

They were roommates and teammates at Harvard, bound by their love of football and each other. Then the game – and the debate over its safety – took its toll.

Chris Nowinski, the nation's leading voice on sports-related brain trauma, lost former roommate and Harvard football teammate Chris Eitzmann about a year ago. Eitzmann was diagnosed with severe Stage 2 CTE. (Scott McIntyre for The Washington Post)



By [Kent Babb](#)

May 14 at 6:00 a.m.



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About a year ago, a bunch of old college roommates met up at a tavern in rural Nebraska. Most of them had played football at Harvard in the late 1990s. Now they were in their mid-40s, their broad shoulders rounded, their hairlines giving way to the beach erosion of time. But the same nonsense made them laugh: the teammate from California who wet the bed, the kid whose family ran a traveling carnival, the time a traffic cone mysteriously appeared in their living room after a night of drinking.

Old roommates keep certain memories locked away, untouched until they're together again. If football teams are sports' biggest tribe and produce unbreakable bonds, the friendships grow that much tighter when they involve sharing a refrigerator and toilet.

The carnival kid is Harvard's defensive coordinator now. Another ex-roommate has written jokes for Jimmy Kimmel. One was a federal air marshal until he couldn't stand the boredom. And over there, near the Herbie Husker mural, was the nation's leading voice on sports-related brain trauma, the man CNN called when Tua Tagovailoa suited up after a concussion last season and Newsweek interviewed after Aaron Hernandez killed himself in prison.

On this night in Nebraska, the friends broke the seal. Stories and beer flowed. Mostly they reminisced about the roommate they had come to bury. He had been their team captain, the best of an illustrious collection of Harvard men, an almost comic assemblage of genes and charm. He had been the soft-spoken roommate. The clean(ish) one. They tried to square it with what he had become. How had he kept it all secret, even from them?

When the bartender went to fetch another case, someone pointed out the paradox of meeting at a bar to honor a man who had drunk himself to death. Some social rituals just are, and remaining a member of the tribe means never challenging its code.

“It’s just what we do,” says one of the old teammates, Brian Daigle. “At tailgates, at a wedding or party or, in this case, for a funeral.”

The bartender returned and passed out fresh cans. A little before closing time, Daigle posed a question to the group: If you had known then what you know now about football, the game that had brought them all together, would you play? Knowing it could be you in the next casket, would you still?



Friends, many of them former roommates and Harvard football teammates, gathered in Geneva, Neb., the night before Eitzmann's funeral in January 2022, (Courtesy of Scott Larkee)

Chris Nowinski was driving with his family in Florida recently, about a year after his old roommate's funeral, when his phone rang. The father of an Olympic ice dancer was calling to discuss the ongoing symptoms of his daughter's concussion. Then another call: A kid who had played seven years of football needed a psychiatrist. Another: the parents of a Division I women's basketball player whose coach insisted on playing her despite lingering concussion symptoms.

"Almost every car ride we take, we get these calls," says Nowinski's wife, Nicole. "A child, a wife, a mother, asking Chris, '*Please help.*' He has this in his head 24-

7.”

Nowinski played defensive tackle for the Crimson and still counts his old roommates as his closest friends. He lives in South Florida with Nicole and their daughter and son, 4 and 2, but he will never stop caring about what the Harvard guys think — and where he fits into a decades-old hierarchy. Several of the friends are lawyers or executives or venture capitalists, but the Crimson football team produced only one 6-foot-5 canary in the sports coal mine, constantly chirping about the dangers of his old sport. Nowinski is why most American sports fans have even *heard* of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), and his personality and bona fides are a major reason the NFL grudgingly began inching its concussion protocols beyond the dark ages. When Boston University’s CTE Center wants grieving relatives to donate a former athlete’s brain, it’s often Nowinski who suggests they make the phone call.



The gathering was at the Overtime Grill and Lounge. (Misty Prochaska for The Washington Post)

CTE can be confirmed only posthumously, so Nowinski's primary objective is connecting those who *suspect* they have the disease with the vast network of resources maintained by the Concussion Legacy Foundation, the advocacy group he founded in 2007 alongside neurosurgeon Robert Cantu. Some need an appointment with a neurologist; others require addiction specialists and support groups. Many are just looking for someone who understands.

"You can't always fix it," Nowinski says. "But if I'm able to talk to them, there's almost always a happy ending."

If his phone stops ringing long enough, sometimes Nowinski calls the old Harvard guys to check in. Scott Larkee in Cambridge, Mass.; Isaiah Kacyvenski in Boston; Daigle in North Carolina. They catch up, talk about the Crimson's chances next season, do what you do for a taste of that fleeting magic of being 20.

No one can explain this now, but for a long time and probably for many reasons, there was one topic they never discussed.

Whenever the apartment door opened back then, the polyphony of funk included hints of day-old pizza, mangled chicken parts and sweat. *So much sweat.* One summer, they had to lay down cardboard in Nowinski's car so they wouldn't soak through the upholstery.

Nowinski was 285 pounds. Tight end Chris Eitzmann was a sturdy 250. The runt, Larkee, was 225. Some years a dozen football players piled into the same suite, competing for microwave space and arguing over whose turn it was to empty the trash, which was usually overflowing with beer cans and animal bones.



Eitzmann, left, and Nowinski were among a group of friends who got together in Hebron, Neb., the night before Eitzmann's wedding in 2002. Nowinski missed the actual ceremony because he had a pro wrestling event. (Courtesy of Chris Nowinski)



Harvard football teammates, from left, Isiah Kacyvenski, Mike Clare, Eitzmann and Nowinski all agreed to shave their heads during the summer of 1999. (Courtesy of Chris Nowinski)

“They weren’t barbarians,” says Mikaela Eitzmann, the tight end’s college girlfriend and eventual wife. “But the whole place was definitely like a closet door that had shut some socks inside for a while.”

This being Harvard, football players weren’t exactly NFL-or-bust meatheads. Sure, they would deliberately eat foods they knew wouldn’t agree with them just to wage gastrointestinal war on the others. And, yes, survival and acceptance meant an onslaught of insults. Daigle was the great Texas pontificator. Alex Garcia was the slovenly Californian who showed affection to friends by choking them. Nowinski was the suburban Chicagoan who serenaded his roommates, whether they liked it or not, with favorites from when he played Diesel in his high school performance of “West Side Story.”

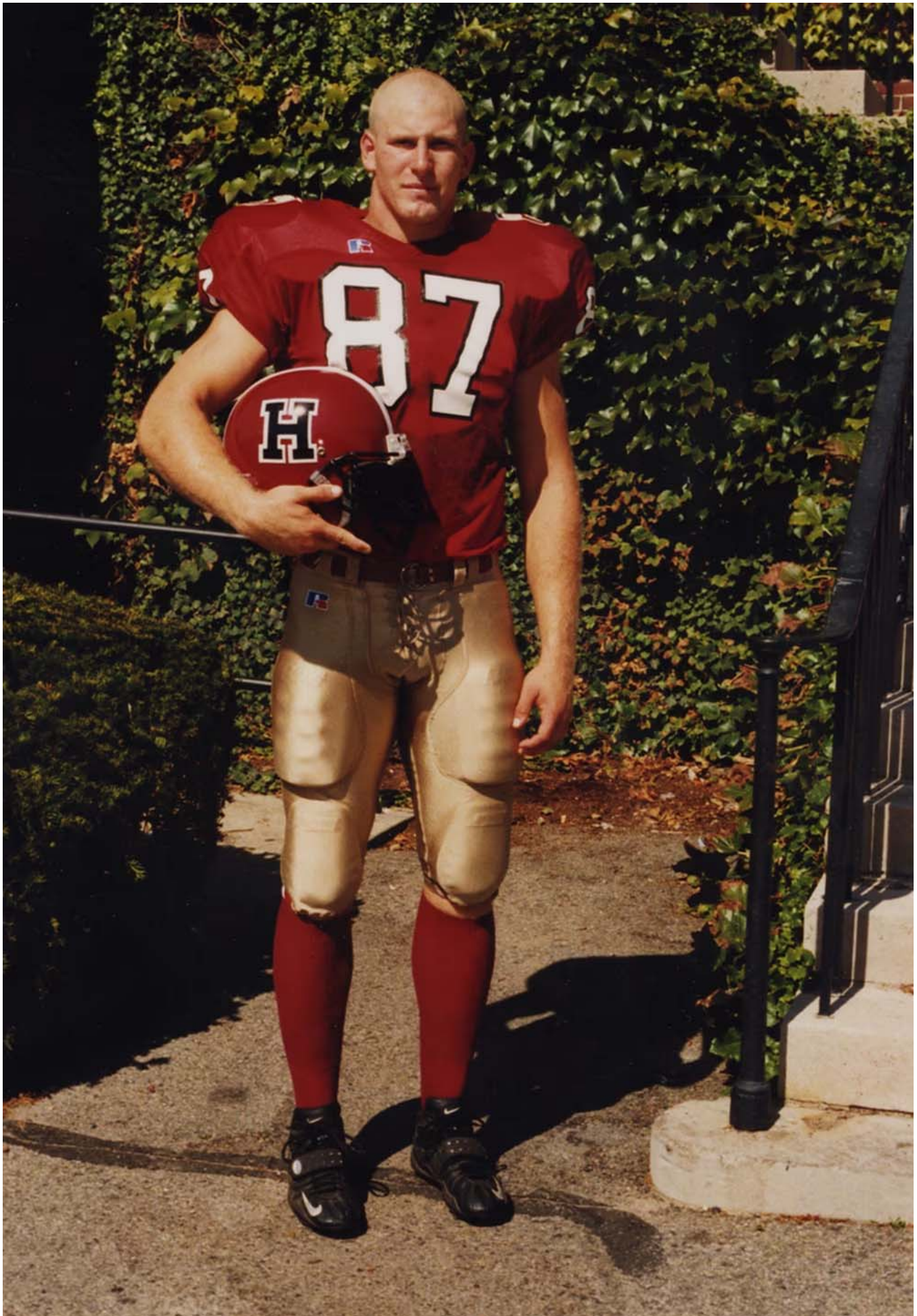
When you're a Jet

If the spit hits the fan

You got brothers around

You're a family man.

Eitzmann mostly rolled his eyes. The roommates never had much ammo on him, other than him being a slow-talking plowboy. He had grown up alongside the corn stalks and milo husks of Hardy, Neb., population 179, contemplating a future beyond the plains.



Teammates voted for Eitzmann to be Harvard football's 126th captain. (Harvard University Athletic Communications)

He was tall and blond, with piercing blue eyes and a layer of wide-eyed innocence the other players couldn't crack. Eitzmann tutored classmates and rarely missed Sunday services at University Lutheran on Harvard Square. He turned down a roster spot with the mighty Nebraska Cornhuskers to become the first graduate of his high school to enroll at an Ivy League school. This made him a local celebrity and heartthrob, so when Mikaela graduated from high school a year after Eitzmann, she moved east to enroll at Boston College.

"I was young and had a crush," she says, "probably like all girls did within a 100-mile radius."

He drank beer, but nobody remembers him losing control or puking on the sofa. Other roommates, sure. But Eitz? He had too many things he wanted to accomplish, this spit-shined drive that pushed away temptation and muffled the pressure of being the first Nebraskan to suit up for the Crimson varsity since the 1960s.

"Even his swear words were wholesome," says Will Burke, Eitzmann's first Harvard roommate. "It was like Superman landed on Earth and was like, 'I've got to figure out these Earthlings,' and he just crushes it."

The practice field is where he went into Cyborg Mode, blasting into defenders at every turn. Nobody thought much about concussions then, and there was nobody to warn players about long-term effects or urging them to sit out. Getting your bell rung was a badge of honor, every hit part of a daily competition for masculinity and bragging rights.

"If I didn't come off the line as fast and strong as I could, I was losing," says Daigle, a defensive end who often squared off against Eitzmann. "I was hitting people with the front of my head as often as I could."

Two days after Yale beat Harvard in 1998, the team gathered in Boston for its annual postseason banquet. Among Harvard's many traditions is a particularly sacred one: Since 1873, football players have voted on one teammate as captain, the locker room's leader and a symbol representing more than just talent. Joe Azelby, Dan Jiggetts and Ryan Fitzpatrick are among the luminaries.

The underclassmen wrote names on slips of paper and passed them to the coaches. That night Coach Tim Murphy announced Christopher John Eitzmann as captain of the 1999 Harvard Crimson.

"First of all, how in the world did I ever get to Harvard?" Eitzmann told a Nebraska newspaper reporter later. "I never could have dreamed all this would have happened to me."

There was no honorary kegger or roommates-only whiskey toast — not for Eitz. All anyone remembers is the pride that one of them, the obvious one, had made it. It was a feeling they knew they would be talking about — and probably ribbing him about — when they returned to campus as old men, their bond everlasting and shatterproof.

When you're a Jet

You're a Jet all the way

From your first cigarette

To your last dyin' day.

The friends scattered after graduation: Larkee to Paris to play for a club football team, Burke to Hollywood to try comedy, Daigle back home to guard the Texas-Mexico line for the Border Patrol.

Eitzmann did what they all expected: overachieved and earned a roster spot with the New England Patriots. He moved in with two new roommates not far from Foxboro Stadium. Defensive end David Nugent was all right, but what a stiff the other guy was. When Burke visited, he pleaded with Eitzmann to keep their plans secret from Tom Brady, a robotic and humorless rookie quarterback.

“Let’s ditch this f---ing loser,” Burke says he insisted more than once. “God, he was boring.”



Eitzmann and future wife, Mikaela, sat in Tom Brady’s new Jeep in 2000, when Eitzmann shared an apartment with Brady and another Patriots rookie. (Courtesy of Mikaela Eitzmann)

A thousand miles south, Nowinski was searching for a place of his own. He had worked for a pharmaceutical consulting firm in Boston his senior year, but he wasn’t passionate about it. A colleague suggested that with his size, athleticism and big personality, he would make a great pro wrestler. Before Harvard, he had never followed the sport. But his roommates did, and during wrestling’s late-

1990s golden age, Monday nights belonged not to the NFL's weekly prime-time game but to Stone Cold Steve Austin, D-Generation X and the New World Order.

Nowinski enrolled in wrestling school in Atlanta and landed a spot on a reality show in which the winner received a contract with WWE. Two contestants were named Chris, so producers called Nowinski "Chris Harvard." He finished second but earned a spot anyway and made his televised debut in 2002, playing the role of an elitist pretty boy in a Harvard letterman's jacket.

He insulted the audience's intelligence, thrashed competitors with a book of quotes, delighted in the crowd's chants of "Har-vard sucks! Har-vard sucks!"

"He got a taste of being the bad guy and just loved it," says Kacyvenski, a former Crimson linebacker who was the only former roommate drafted by an NFL team.



Nowinski, CEO of the Concussion Legacy Foundation, had a card from his pro wrestling career at his office.

Nowinski got his buddies free tickets and backstage passes. They watched as he took a “Singapore cane” to the face, a power bomb from the Undertaker, a beatdown from Scott Steiner after Nowinski criticized the Iraq War during an in-ring political debate. It was all scripted, of course, but Nowinski occasionally took real bumps and bruises with him to the bar afterward. Still, as he greeted fans and signed autographs, a few longtime friends believed he had never been happier.

During a match in 2003, Nowinski charged toward an opponent named Bubba Ray Dudley, expecting the painless kick they had rehearsed. But he reached the corner an instant early, catching Dudley’s boot just under his chin. He crumpled to the mat and felt pain ripping through his head. He’s still not sure what happened next.

A trainer asked whether he was okay, and Nowinski lied and said he was fine. Later, he lay on the locker room floor for a half-hour and again told the trainer he was okay. Days passed. WWE’s next show was in New York, and he was still experiencing nausea and memory loss. There were no concussion protocols then, in wrestling or anywhere. Nowinski planned to report his symptoms to WWE’s medical team, but upon arriving and seeing wrestlers being treated for “real injuries,” he says of knee and back and shoulder problems, he left, kept silent and prepared for the night’s match, which he lost after being dropped through a table.

He just lived with it because that’s just what you did. Wrestling legends didn’t complain; they jumped off cages and spit out cracked teeth. Football players didn’t sit out because they saw stars after a big hit; they modeled their games after Jack Tatum’s and Ronnie Lott’s because that earned you a spot on highlight montages and a bust in Canton, Ohio. A *man* didn’t tell his bosses or even his friends that he was in agony because that meant he was soft.

“I’m not going to tell them I had a headache,” he says. “I just didn’t want to say anything.”

One night in 2003, Nowinski was in Indianapolis when he saw his then-girlfriend falling and leaped forward to catch her. But Nowinski was actually asleep, acting out a dream in a hotel room. His brain was so injured it was conjuring visions without waking him. When his eyes opened, he had no idea why there was broken glass on the floor, why the nightstand was busted, why he had been clawing at the wall as his girlfriend sat on the bed crying, horrified by what she had seen.

For years after they graduated, the roommates would return to Cambridge each fall. A few would pound beers at Harvard football tailgates, do shots, sip from a flask. Never Eitzmann. He was the Golden Boy, just sickeningly perfect. Even after a hip injury ended his NFL career in 2002, he came out on top.

He married Mikaela, completed his master's requirements at Dartmouth, got a job as a hedge fund manager in Boston. The couple had their first son, and three more children would follow, all healthy and beautiful. They adopted a Vizsla, went on ski trips to New Hampshire, bought a six-bedroom house in Wellesley, Mass., and a cabin overlooking New Hampshire's Squam Lake. Eitzmann raced bicycles on weekends, went elk hunting in Colorado, kept Mikaela laughing and never feeling unsafe, a live-action postcard from a utopian life.

"The dream couple," Nicole Nowinski says. "These beautiful people with the beautiful love story, and they were both so humble and lovely. They really were these Harvard Barbies."



Mikaela and Chris Eitzmann took a trip to Maine in 2006. (Courtesy of Mikaela Eitzmann)



The Eitzmanns were “the dream couple,” Nicole Nowinski said. (Courtesy of Mikaela Eitzmann)



“They really were these Harvard Barbies,” Nicole Nowinski said. (Courtesy of Mikaela Eitzmann)



Mikaela and Chris Eitzmann got married after a hip injury ended his NFL career. (Courtesy of Mikaela Eitzmann)

Chris Nowinski's path had become rockier. He never wrestled again. He had nightmares and dizziness, and if his heart rate increased, a wave of nausea would hit. He became sensitive to bright lights and friends who asked when he would return to the ring. Doctor visits alternated between confusing and pointless, with Nowinski being assured his symptoms would disappear. Weeks, though, became months. Depression set in.

Eventually, in 2003, a friend with WWE got him an appointment with Cantu, the renowned Boston-area neurosurgeon whose analysis of a concussion was different from that of the NFL. The league office at the time considered it a singular, "trauma-induced" event. Cantu, though, believed a concussion was less an injury than the first link in a longer chain of mental malfunction — a continuing process in which cells experience an outage and hastily attempt to rewire themselves and get back online as quickly as possible. This can take weeks or even months. When the new connection is made, the injured neurons

and nerve cells are abandoned, left to die by the brain's own survival blueprint. With enough injuries, the brain can become a graveyard of scar tissue that can cause chronic symptoms and dramatically alter judgment and behavior.

Reporting on America's favorite game – and its toll

Washington Post reporter Kent Babb has written for years about the popularity and casualties of football, America's most-loved sport, including stories about [former star Larry Johnson](#) and an ex-player's [killing of six people in football-obsessed Rock Hill, S.C.](#)

Cantu asked Nowinski how many concussions he had had. He had no idea. Zero? He had never been formally diagnosed, neither at Harvard nor by WWE. So Cantu asked whether he had ever blacked out, had double vision, felt dizziness after a hit, gotten his bell rung? Nowinski thought back and counted more than a half-dozen such instances. Potentially far more.

“I had been banging my head for 19 years without any real consideration for what it could be doing to me,” Nowinski says. Cantu diagnosed Nowinski with post-concussion syndrome, and Nowinski says some effects never went away. He and Cantu kept talking.

“Shouldn't athletes know about this?” Nowinski asked.

“People don't listen to doctors,” Cantu said.

“Maybe I'll take a crack.”

Now set adrift professionally, Nowinski spent his newfound free time reading concussion studies and interviewing athletes and doctors. He analyzed the work of [Bennet Omalu, the controversial pathologist](#) who discovered unusual protein buildup in NFL legend Mike Webster's brain, the first link between football and CTE. Nowinski compiled his findings into what would become a book titled “Head Games.”

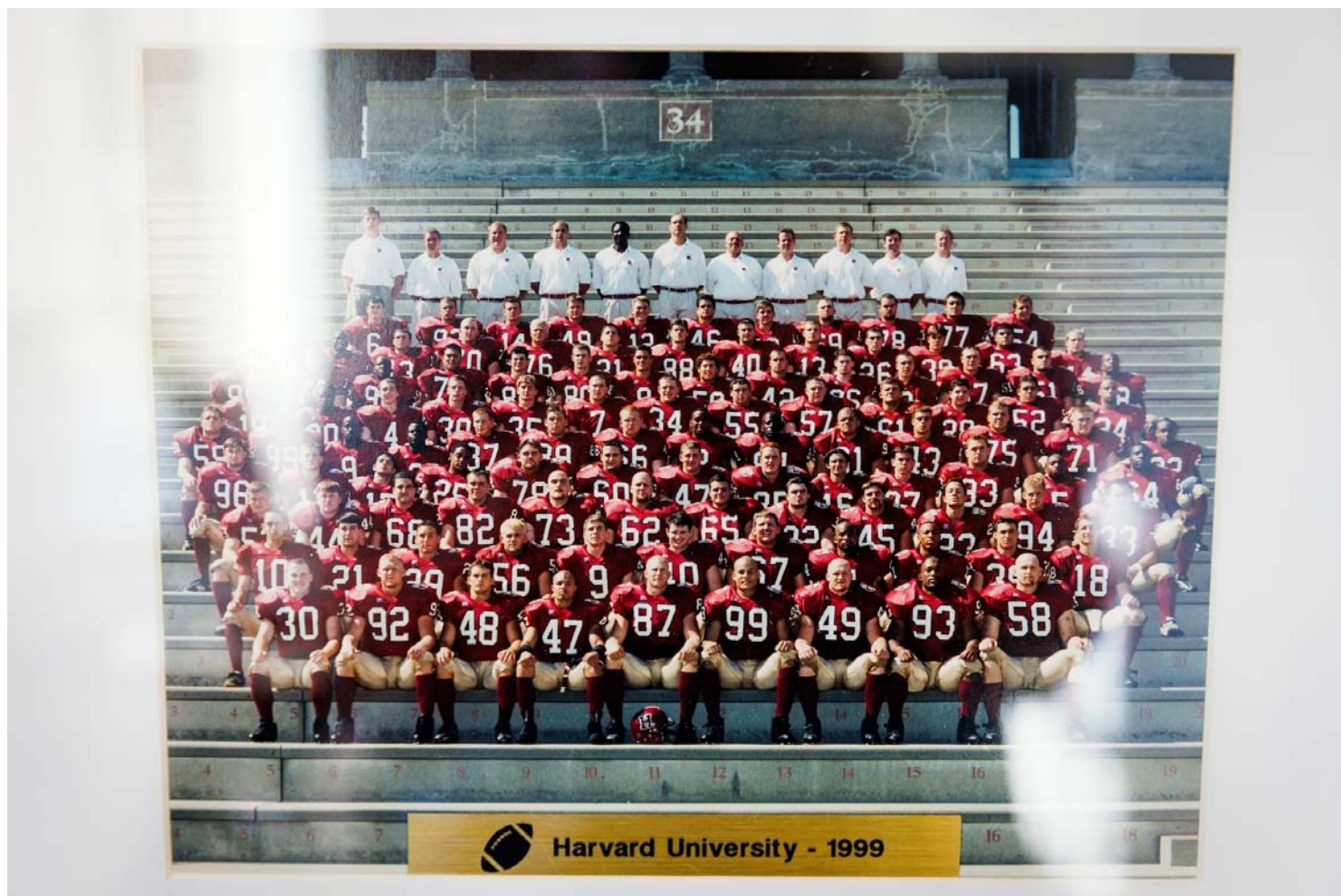
As he wrote, Nowinski called his former Harvard teammates to share his discoveries and ask for their experiences. Some were intrigued. Others, not so much. The NFL disputed Omalu's findings, with a league-appointed neurologist saying Webster died not because of brain trauma but because he had been a smoker, suffered from depression and been in generally poor health. Omalu also found evidence of CTE in the brains of former NFL players Justin Strzelczyk, Terry Long and Andre Waters, the latter two of whom died by suicide.

“Just because [suicide] happened to a few football players,” the league's top concussion expert, neurologist Ira Casson, said in 2007, “doesn't mean it's linked to football.”

So, Nowinski's old roommates wondered, why was he attacking the game? Was he so bitter that he hadn't gotten a shot at the NFL that he was going to bring down the entire sport? Or was this just Nowinski the heel, an attempt to regain his bygone WWE attention?

“To put it bluntly,” Mikaela says, “I think everybody thought it was bulls--t.”

One former roommate refused to read an early draft of his manuscript. Another accepted a copy but never opened it. Larkee, by then a coach at Harvard, had no interest. So when he and Nowinski talked, they just avoided the topic and suppressed their feelings. If Nowinski brought it up, Larkee walked away.



Chris Nowinski keeps a photo of the 1999 Harvard football team at his home office in Boynton Beach, Fla. (Scott McIntyre for The Washington Post)

“I’m right there with these young college-aged kids, putting them through tackling reps, so we *could* have had that conversation: ‘What are we doing? What’s the best thing for these guys?’ ” Larkee says now. “But I think we both know we would disagree on pretty much everything.”

At the Harvard tailgate in 2006, not long after “Head Games” was published, Nowinski brought books to give friends gathered around a fire. Many rolled their eyes at Nowinski being Nowinski, proselytizing about the evils of football at a football tailgate to a bunch of ex-football players.

“He was screaming,” Daigle says. “But nobody was listening.”

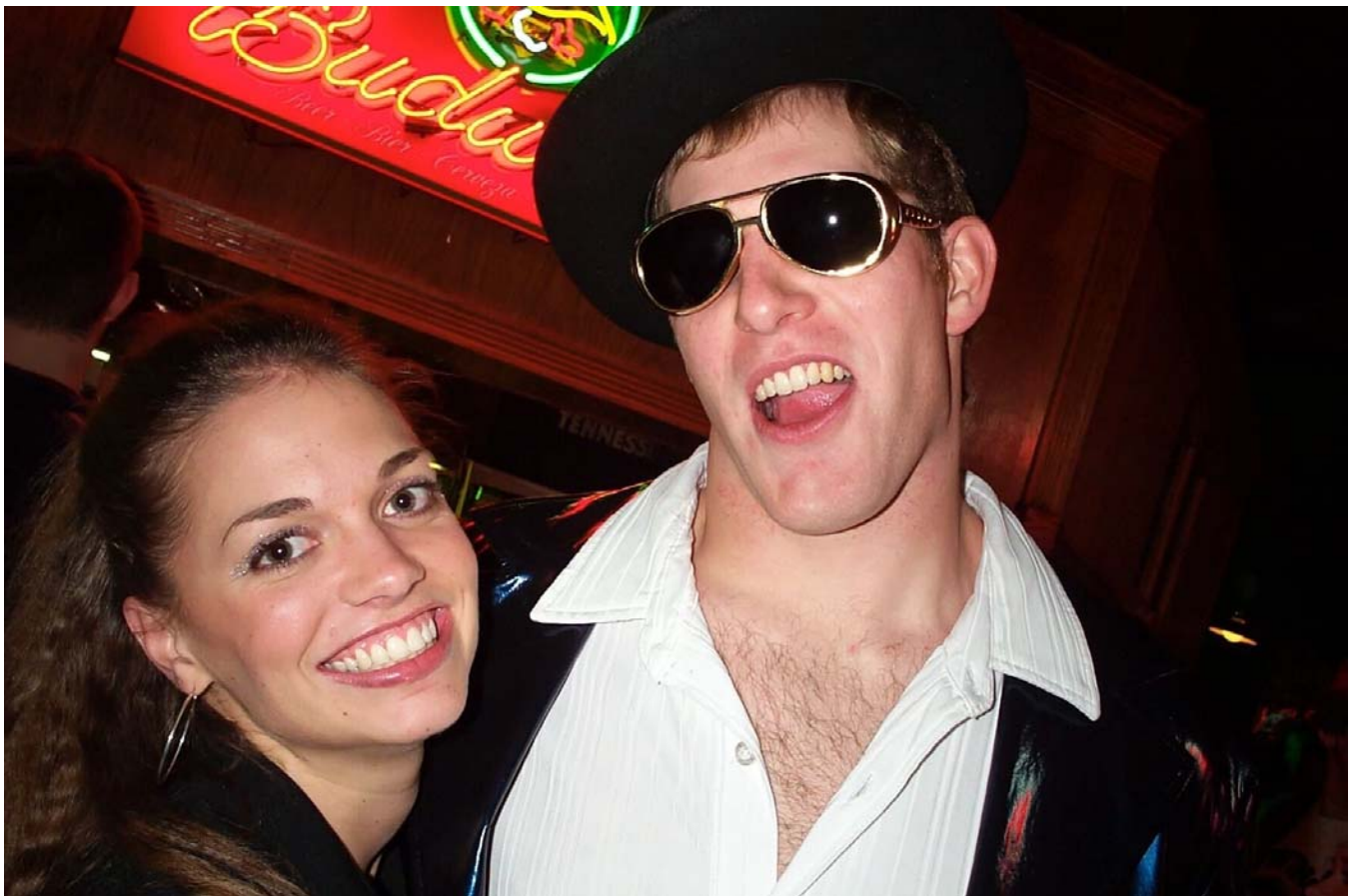
Daigle had helped Nowinski edit chapters of his manuscript and grown curious about his former roommate’s conclusions. Daigle’s father and grandfather both

played college football; his grandpa died of Alzheimer's disease, and his father is 72 and has dementia, Daigle says.

"How much of that is genetic? How much of that is football?" Daigle says. "My future is definitely clouded by, what have I done to myself?"

He would regret this later, but Daigle climbed into the bed of a pickup during the Harvard tailgate. Emboldened by a few beers and the promise of a laugh from his ex-teammates, he raised a copy of Nowinski's book. Has anyone here suffered a concussion? he asked. Should any of this spell the end of football?

Then Daigle climbed down, took another long pull off his beer and tossed the book into the fire.



The Eitzmanns loved Halloween, and Chris dressed up as Al Capone in 2002. (Courtesy of Mikaela Eitzmann)

The Eitzmanns loved Halloween. One year they dressed as a 1920s gangster and flapper, Mikaela in a dark suit and fedora, Chris in a sequined dress and heels. Mikaela carefully applied his mascara. Another year, he was Wilt Chamberlain, short-shorts challenging the limits of comfort and decency.

In 2008, Chris dressed as Axl Rose, but because Mikaela had to watch Coen, their infant son, before her nursing shift the next morning, she skipped the Halloween party at a bar in Boston. At 3 a.m., Chris still wasn't home. He didn't answer Mikaela's calls. She called hospitals and police departments, eventually learning her husband had been arrested for drunken driving.

When he got home, Chris made excuses. He hadn't had *that* much. The officer was just a jerk. All he had really done was roll through a stop sign.

Chris was a social drinker, Mikaela says now, but he was always in control. He had never put himself or anyone else in danger. But was that true? Had she spent years ignoring signs of a worsening problem?

"He was so good at telling me, 'I'm all right, I'm all right,' " she says.

Now on alert, Mikaela began to notice lipstick on his shirt and charges for \$500-a-night hotel rooms. He would disappear to the lake house sometimes, claiming he needed to focus on work. Why couldn't Mikaela understand that? Why wouldn't she give him space? He couldn't be reached for hours or days, again saying he needed to work late.

"He was slowly unraveling," she says, "and I just didn't see it."



“I just talked myself into believing him and believing it was all going to be okay,” said Mikaela Eitzmann, here at her home in Shickley, Neb. (Misty Prochaska for The Washington Post)

She ignored evidence Chris had been with another woman because, she says, it wasn't worth the explosion. She waited until after he had coached Coen's flag football game one morning to tell Chris his breath was a thick fog of rum. He calmly walked into their baby daughter's room that day, gave her a hug and drove away. An hour later, Chris called and said he was in a hotel in Woburn, a half-hour north, about to kill himself.

“I was paralyzed,” Mikaela says. “I had no idea what to do. No one would believe me. Who *would* believe me?”

She called the police, who took him into custody and tested his blood alcohol concentration. It was 0.44, Mikaela says. When a taxi later dropped him off, Chris apologized, hugged Mikaela and begged her not to tell anyone. When she

agreed, he put on his suit and left for work carrying a bottle of wine. A gift for his assistant, he assured his wife.

“I didn’t really believe that, but I was so terrified of making him mad,” Mikaela says. “I feel like this major wuss, and I’m really not like that. But I just loved him so much, so I wanted our marriage to be okay and I wanted *him* to be okay, so I just talked myself into believing him and believing it was all going to be okay.”

Months could pass without arguments or threats, a sign Chris was improving. Mikaela kept telling herself that. Their life was peaceful, loving, as perfect as everyone believed. She told herself that, too. They went to Harvard alumni events and socialized with old friends. If Chris had alcohol on his breath, Mikaela just smiled and kept their secret. Then one day in 2016, when Chris was 39, he came home and announced that he was planning to drive off a bridge. Another time he said he was going to Colorado to veer off an embankment.

After Mikaela’s father died in 2017, they agreed to go home to Nebraska and take over the family farm. A change would be good for them. Then, in 2019, Chris got drunk and buckled the kids into the car to go boating, and Mikaela stopped him. She insisted he enter rehab, and he agreed to report to a facility in Arizona. They flew there together, Chris in the window seat and Mikaela on the aisle, and soon after takeoff, Chris fell asleep as the two held hands.

Fighting tears, Mikaela unlocked her phone and took a picture. This, of their clasped hands, would be the “before” photo, back when things got crazy that one time. She told herself a dream life built once could also be rebuilt. Soon Chris would be sober and recalibrated, and they would be smiling in their next picture together, their bond stronger for this, and looking happy, just as they always had.

ehab doesn’t always work the first time, and for Eitzmann it didn’t work the second, third or fourth times, either. He would commit to it, get on a plane, then

R discharge himself or escape after a few days and go looking for a bar. Then he would come home.

As a way to cope, Mikaela and their preteen son, Coen, developed a code for when Chris was drunk. It wasn't Dad who would come through the door. It was "Earl." And they must tread carefully because Earl might get loaded and go driving. He might threaten suicide or slide a pan of fish sticks into the oven and pass out.

"Earl still had Chris's memories, and he still had Chris's desire to be part of a family. Chris was still in there, so we had to protect Chris," Mikaela says. "We couldn't make him upset, because then Earl might leave for good and Chris might never come back."

Mikaela and Coen hid Earl's credit cards and keys, but he always found them. He accumulated five DWIs and would later fly to Boston to meet up with a woman he had met in rehab. He would spend \$6,000 on a vacation to Costa Rica but never go, or he would disappear without announcement and sleep in a camper near the Kansas line.



A photo wall shows the Eitzmann family in happier times. (Misty Prochaska for The Washington Post)

CTE had by then become ubiquitous, and an alarming number of former NFL players — Dave Duerson, Junior Seau, Aaron Hernandez — had taken their lives after unexplained behavioral changes. The NFL had implemented new rules to protect players from the most devastating hits, but for families across the country, the damage was done. Mikaela read about their symptoms, about the mysterious spirals that now felt familiar, and didn't Chris complain years earlier of headaches and dizziness? Had he been experiencing depression when he refused to get out of bed all day? Had she ignored these signs, too?

One evening on the sofa, Mikaela told her husband they could get through this — whatever this was — together. She suggested they call Nowinski, his old roommate. By then he had a doctoral degree in behavioral neuroscience and had testified before Congress; he had been nominated for Sports Illustrated's sportsperson of the year in 2010 and ultimately pressured the NFL into

acknowledging, for the first time in 2016, the connection between football and CTE.

Nowinski was also a longtime family friend, so obviously he would be willing to

“I’ve taken care of it,” he said.

But this was Earl, not Chris, and this is how fiendish he could be. Mikaela wanted to believe him when he said he already had spoken with Nowinski, and so she did. As she did when her husband claimed he had visited Nowinski in Boston and been put through a battery of tests and even an MRI exam. Nowinski had assured him, he insisted, that all of it had come back clean.

There were two dozen former teammates on the group text, but when it came down it, only three could make it to Nebraska on short notice. So one day in January 2021, Larkee, Joe Mattson and Ryan Kauppila formed what they playfully called “The Extraction Team.” Their all-too-serious mission: Get Eitzmann to his fifth — and hopefully final — stint in rehab.

Mikaela had finally broken. She could no longer believe her husband’s lies — or the ones she had told herself. But a side effect of covering for Eitzmann all these years was that now nobody believed how bad things really were. His work friends in Boston distanced themselves. Eitzmann’s parents and siblings accused Mikaela of giving up too early. Chris was gaining weight, looking good, getting better.

“No, he’s not; he’s really bad,” Mikaela says she told them.

“Because I had kept it a secret for so long, there was just no way I was ever going to get him the help he needed,” she says.

So when Eitzmann needed one final assist, it was the old roommates who came through. One picked up the tab for the treatment. Another, a lawyer, checked state laws and arranged for Eitzmann to be admitted to the facility. Others chipped in money for gas and food, and a few more plotted the quickest route from Omaha to Boston.

The evening before the Extraction Team deployed, the roommates remained skeptical that things were as dire as Mikaela had indicated. “I was completely in the dark,” Burke says, “because he wanted me to be.”

When Eitzmann emerged from a restaurant alongside his parents, the trio almost didn’t recognize him. The muscular tight end was gone. In his place was a gaunt and pale figure wearing clothes that swallowed him.

“A bag of bones,” Larkee says.

They set off in a rented Tahoe, toward Des Moines and Chicago. The plan was to stop only for essentials. But the rehab place said that someone with Eitzmann’s level of dependency couldn’t just go 24 hours with zero alcohol. So, counterintuitive as it seemed, the friends were advised to limit him — but to let him drink.



Mikaela Eitzmann pointed out Chris in a photo of his senior class at Harvard. (Misty Prochaska for The Washington Post)

The friends talked trash, laughed at old stories, pointed out how fat and bald and gray they had become. Eitzmann alternated between grand proclamations about getting his family back and questions about his friends' children and jobs. He talked to Larkee about the Crimson's hopes against Yale the following season.

"The exact normal Chris," Mattson says. "There was some joy of being together and feeling the real love that existed between all of us."

They were somewhere in Ohio when Eitzmann fell quiet. He was sweating, and a tremor in his hand spread throughout his body. The Tahoe parked at a store, and Larkee had to physically block Eitzmann from going inside. Instead, Mattson and Kauppila went in and returned with cans of high-test hard

lemonade. Eitzmann drained them, his tremor eased, and eventually he went to sleep.

“We were all thinking: Just f---ing keep driving,” Mattson says. “Take a deep breath, keep the doors locked and see what happens when he wakes up.”

After 24 intense hours, the SUV stopped outside a hospital in Brighton, Mass., just three miles from their old Harvard apartment. Someone came to help Eitzmann inside, and the three ex-roommates watched him disappear from within the idling SUV. They waited a while, the three of them, in case their friend tried to make a run for it, joking about who was still athletic enough to make a tackle.

The 126th captain of Harvard football died alone, surrounded by bottles, on the couch of his \$3,500-a-month apartment in South Boston. The medical examiner determined that Eitzmann’s heart and liver gave out, no longer able to defend against a daily assault of alcohol.

Mikaela had last heard his voice five days earlier, when the kids called him on Christmas Eve. Eitzmann was slurring and unintelligible, and he ended the call after speaking with only two of his four children. That fifth rehab stint had ended almost immediately, after Eitzmann tested positive for the coronavirus and was discharged. The detox place in Millbury couldn’t hold him, and neither could the halfway house in Chestnut Hill. One night Mikaela got an alert that Eitzmann was trying to use his credit card at a restaurant in Boston, and Larkee agreed to go looking for him. He found his ex-roommate on Boylston Street, having a steak dinner and an old-fashioned.

He drove him to a facility in Worcester but feared it was pointless. “He’s going to have to do it on his own,” Larkee remembers thinking.

After Eitzmann’s death, his friends began looking for something to blame. Some of his hedge fund friends decided he had suffered from mental illness. A few

relatives pointed to a family history of addiction. His brother wondered whether decades of seeming so put together, of trying to be the hero of every story, had gradually ripped him apart.

“It looked like he was so good at everything, that it all came easy,” Nate Eitzmann says. “But he must’ve put an intense amount of pressure on himself to succeed, and what he was feeling inside versus what we were seeing on the outside were probably two different things.”

During a Zoom call with the Harvard roommates later, Nowinski said Eitzmann’s family had donated his brain to be analyzed for CTE. The response startled Nowinski. A few of the men issued unequivocal rejections that football could be responsible, a vigorous defense of a game that remains a precious ingredient to both identity and social matrix.

“Just look at the evidence: We’ve been playing football for a hundred-plus years. What are we talking about here?” Larkee says. “He had a drinking problem for other reasons, some classic reasons. Some childhood stuff, high-pressure job, just general depression and personality issues and those type of things, like any normal person in their mid-40s would become an alcoholic and lose their family. Football player or not, that classic horrible, tragic story.”



Harvard defensive coordinator Scott Larkee said of former teammate Chris Eitzmann, “We’ve been playing football for a hundred-plus years. What are we talking about here? He had a drinking problem for other reasons.” (Nic Antaya for the Boston Globe/Getty Images)

He continues a moment later.

“For his loved ones, if it makes them feel better that that was his problem, that it wasn’t his fault, then that’s fine. I think it *was* Eitzmann’s fault.”

For more than a decade now, this tension has coursed through the friend group as Nowinski insisted that CTE would eventually “get one of us.” In response, friends say, the former roommates established a separate text thread that doesn’t include Nowinski. That’s where they sometimes call him an “opportunist,” one ex-teammate says, and compare him to an ambulance-chasing attorney.

“There’s still so much unknown,” says a different friend, speaking on the condition of anonymity to protect his privacy and relationship with Nowinski. “Genetics and trauma, the effect of alcohol on the brain — it probably *is* a blend. That’s not a good enough story for him.”

Some are willing to concede Nowinski’s contributions to accountability and football player safety, which one friend calls a “blessing.” The NFL reported a 30 percent reduction in concussions from 2015 to 2020, and the National Institutes of Health acknowledged for the first time last fall that repetitive traumatic brain injuries cause CTE.

For the most part, though, they do what men their age do: They just don’t talk about it.

“We are sort of beating around the bush of directly asking each other: Where do you fall on this?” Daigle says. “Chris sees CTE everywhere he looks because that’s his life. Scott sees a lack of evidence of CTE because he sees hundreds of football players a year.

“If we were skewing, it would probably be to Chris’s side but with a bias toward saying we are not ideologues like Chris is on this. If he could ban football, he would.”



Linebacker Isaiah Kacyvenski was the only roommate selected in the NFL draft. A fourth-round pick by the Seahawks in 2000, he also played for the Rams. (Kevin Casey/NFL Photo Library)

Last September, Nowinski traveled past the Overtime Grill and Lounge, where, over beers that night, he had been one of the only friends to say he regrets playing football. He continued past the cemetery where Eitzmann's remains are buried, alongside dense cornfields, eventually turning off the paved road.

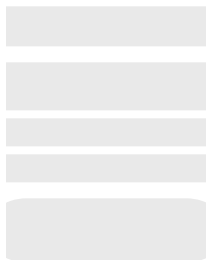
When families donate a loved one's brain, the neuropathologist who studies it conducts a virtual meeting to explain the results. Nowinski doesn't usually sit in, but this time he did.

"I didn't want to treat Chris as another research case," he says.

Nowinski and Mikaela sat on the family's L-shaped sofa, and Ann McKee, director of the brain bank at Boston University, appeared on a laptop screen.

Coen, who turned 15 last month, watched from the cushion between them, while the other children were at school. Coen is looking more like his father each day. He stands like him, shoulders back, and has the same jaw line and curiosity Eitzmann once brought from Nebraska to Cambridge.

Coen witnessed many of his father's worst moments, so Mikaela believed he had earned the right to know their source. McKee explained that she had found severe Stage 2 CTE, or a considerable amount of scar tissue in his brain. It could have been the cause of his alcohol abuse and impulsive behavior, along with Eitzmann's deteriorating cognitive function. Eitzmann's fried circuit board had become a wasteland.



“There was nothing we could’ve done,” Mikaela says. At first this was a relief, she says. But as she processed McKee’s diagnosis, Mikaela realized she had actually lost her husband long ago. She believed that photo she had taken of their hands in 2019, just before dropping him off at the rehab place in Arizona, documented their true end.

“Looking back now,” she says, “I never really had my real Chris back. He was just never himself ever again. I don’t think he was himself for a really long time.”

After McKee signed off, Nowinski turned to Coen. The boy just stared. His father had been a great man, Nowinski said, and Eitzmann’s death had shattered him. They all had idolized him at Harvard, where everyone was a big shot but none as big as Chris Eitzmann. He had just been born into a town, a state, a country in love with a violent game, as addictive and culturally important as it is brutal.

But what happened, Nowinski continued, wasn't inevitable for Coen or his three younger siblings, and neither did it suggest either of them would —

Mikaela interjected. She thanked Nowinski for coming, for bringing understanding and closure, for retelling a few stories from happier times. But it was getting late, and Coen needed to head out soon. It was fall in Middle America, and the young man had a football game that night.

Nowinski and Nicole were coming back from a beach trip with friends recently, their kids asleep in the back seat. The topic of Chris Eitzmann came up. Nicole saw her husband's face tighten, his skin turn red, that common sight of a middle-aged man using everything within him to avoid crying.

“It just hits so close to home,” Nowinski said once the wave passed.

He had felt many emotions after Eitzmann's death: sadness, regret, guilt. He talked about none of them. It wasn't just that Superman was dead; it was that helping people is Nowinski's job, and even he couldn't save him. If only Eitzmann or Mikaela had asked. Or if Nowinski had checked in more frequently. Or paid closer attention.

“It broke Chris, and he's still very, very, very broken,” Nicole says. “He kind of just handled it like, unfortunately, like you guys tend to do: just crawled into a hole.”



The Eitzmanns had four children and adopted a Vizsla. They are shown here in 2018 at Squam Lake in New Hampshire. (Courtesy of Mikaela Eitzmann)



Chris Eitzmann's mother made a pillow from his jeans. (Misty Prochaska for The Washington Post)

By the time Nowinski emerged, so had a different emotion: fear. Two decades after his last wrestling match, Nowinski still takes prescription medication to ease headaches that can last all day. Though he discontinued his sleepwalking medication a few years ago, he still has vivid, disturbing dreams. Still, if he wakes in the night or feels foggy or forgets something, this is evidence, Nowinski says, that he has CTE. Be it soon or years from now, a fate similar to Eitzmann's — and his family's — is inevitable.

"I've seen this pattern," he says, "over and over and over again."

Mikaela admits she enabled Eitzmann, lied for him, helped him keep his secret. "I protected him for a really long time," she says. It's a regret she will live with

forever.

Nicole says Nowinski rarely drinks and has never been aggressive or menacing. She says she watches and “charts” her husband’s every move, comparing them with those from 15 years ago, when they first met in Boston.

“I run my little science experiments all the time,” she says. “How has Chris changed? If he gets angry about something, is this just typical Chris behavior or is this a new type of anger? Or if he just forgets something, is this something he *normally* forgets? The headaches scare me, the sleep scares me, but that’s also been an issue since Day 1.”

But what if Nowinski were to hide the severity of his symptoms, as Eitzmann did? If he knows how to address them, it stands to reason he also knows how to conceal them.

“Chris is the love of my life and my best friend,” she says. “But I have to put my children first. His connections in the science field, they’re my connections as well. I’ve always been, in the back of my head, prepared for that, if it’s pretty or not. That’s my plan, just kind of go to his people —”

She pauses, considering what it would mean to actually do what she’s describing.

“— behind his back,” she continues, “and just ask for help.”

For now, Nicole says, her objective is to listen and be supportive, even if Nowinski doesn’t want to talk. It’s to make him feel safe, she says, when he feels insecure or afraid and assure him they’re in this — whatever *this* is — together. On this late afternoon, Nowinski turned off the interstate as twilight approached. Nicole sat in the passenger seat of their SUV and leaned over. She looked at the sky and pointed out the orange and pink and purple streaks emerging.

She gripped his hand as they drove, and Nowinski seemed calmer now as they listened to music and searched for new colors. Nicole squeezed tighter, a gentle reminder to her husband that she was there, would stay there, and that a day's earlier moments don't necessarily foretell how vibrant and lovely the sunset can sometimes be.



Chris Nowinski fears CTE will send him down a grim path, and wife Nicole monitors his behavior. (Scott McIntyre for The Washington Post)

By [Kent Babb](#)

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