



# Dr Katie Liston

## Concussion





**Concussion:**  
**Culture eats protocol for breakfast**



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## Funded PhD Opportunity

# Sports-Related Concussion: A Socio-Historical Analysis

Subject: [Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism](#)

## Summary

Social epidemiology is broadly concerned with the ways in which social, political, cultural and economic structures, institutions and relationships influence health. In that regard, the sports-related brain injury known as concussion has both a neurological and social basis: it being the only injury that one international sports board (the IRB) seeks to define, and along with blood injuries, is subject to specific regulation. This project sets out to rebalance the information asymmetry associated with concussion in sport, that is, the predominance of the bio-scientific approach.

The project will redress this imbalance by examining the injury from a socio-historical perspective with a number of possible research avenues: an examination of the historical, medical and scientific literature related to head trauma in one or a number of competitive sports played in Ireland and Britain; archival research around one or a number of chosen sports to trace the growing awareness and understanding of sports-related brain injury over time and whether/how this has prompted reform efforts; a longer-term analysis of civilised bodies and the culture of risk in one or a number of sports, including changing discourses (in popular media, within various sports) around the diagnosis and treatment of concussion; interviews with current and former sports competitors, coaches/managers, medical personnel and the like.



### KEY DATES

**Submission Deadline**  
Monday 18 February 2019

**Interview Date**  
mid-March 2019

### CAMPUS



**Jordanstown campus**  
The largest of Ulster's campuses



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# THE BUSINESS AND CULTURE OF **SPORTS**

SOCIETY, POLITICS, ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT

## CHAPTER 9

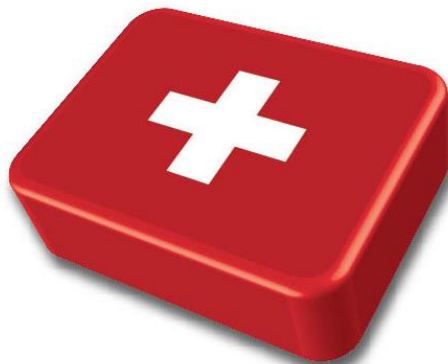
### **Sports, Pain, and Injury**

**Katie Liston**

Senior Lecturer, School of Sport and Sport and Exercise Sciences  
Research Institute  
Ulster University, Northern Ireland

## **VOLUME 1: FOUNDATIONS**

JOSEPH A. MAGUIRE, EDITOR IN CHIEF  
MARK FALCOUS AND KATIE LISTON, ASSOCIATE EDITORS





# 'Three or four of us jumped... that's all I remember'

Updated / Monday, 3 Dec 2018 13:09



Conor Shanagher: "As an amateur organisation I don't think concussion is taken seriously enough."



Source: James Crombie/INPHO



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**Concussion seemingly  
generates more debate than  
all other sports injuries  
combined**



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# Denial culture hides extent of concussion

KATIE LISTON



**O**N Saturday, I tackle the question of whether there is a concussion crisis in sport at Trinity's Sport and Ethics conference. The easiest response is either yes or no – an alluring simplicity and a quiet Sunday read. In that scenario, you pour a cup of tea, recline the armchair and rely on the paper for the answer.

Do so at your peril, however, for your full undivided attention. Some of the neurologists spoke at the second National Symposium at Croke Park would have us believe that any crisis is education. They will ensure that hysteria dies in the face of increasing awareness of brain injury in sport.

The take-home message from UPMC's sports medicine experts is that brain trauma is like any other injury. Ergo, it can be diagnosed – not through rest, as in the Berlin Consensus was questioned, but through graduated physical, psychological and cognitive tests and return to 'get kids back in the game'.

For this simple message, a potentially heavy price is being paid in understanding the injury. What is symptomatic of a potentially greater crisis, an existential one of too much information and not enough knowledge.

Coaches, physios and players can feel inundated by the abundance of workshops, apps, protocols and posters about concussion. There are the added challenges of varied symptoms and their complex manifestations. We see regular updates to the latest on- and off-field tests and the quest for the silver bullet of biomarkers (saliva, blood tests, the build-up of blood proteins and the role of immunotherapies, for instance).

Recommendations vary on how to manage such sports-related brain trauma. There is the question for physios of

whether and how informed consent is given, freely or not, in a return-to-play scenario, especially where the denial of pain and injury is validated. In addition, there are the potentially life-threatening consequences of missing this injury that open a Pandora's Box in socio-legal terms.

But as long as we position concussion solely in bio-medical terms, we omit half of the picture. Concussion has a social epidemiology and its manifestation, diagnosis and management are heavily mediated by its cultural context.

Even the very meaning of the injury is different for sports people compared with the general population. This is be-



Playing hurt is deeply ingrained in the cultural DNA of competitive sport at all levels

As a result, their tolerance levels adapt to these demands. They typically deny the existence of pain and even develop an irreverent attitude to it.

**Sports people continue to train and compete when in pain**

As a result, their tolerance levels adapt to these demands. They typically deny the existence of pain and even develop an irreverent attitude to it.

Reflect on the following insights from amateur rugby players who, having undergone concussion education in the past two years, confided to us that they continued to apply their own lay

substitutions, owing either to a regulation by the governing body or to the size of the team. "It's very easy to bluff your way through a test" and, in big games, players "would probably work the system because they know what to do and what to say about concussion".

These self-exempting beliefs are neither surprising, shameful nor infrequent. They are a product of the deeply embedded set of values in competitive sport that foster the reproduction of some health compromising beliefs and behaviours. Such beliefs act as a shield, giving false reassurance and allowing sports people to avoid thinking too

experts compared with those heavily invested in the sports industry (players, administrators, former players turned journalists, sponsors and so on). This paradox lies deep in the cultural DNA of our society.

Lest you conclude that I must be a sports heretic intent on disrupting everything that you hold dear, let me assure you that I, too, have been socialised into this culture and know it intimately. However, this immersion should not hold us back from asking the hard questions in the interests of players, especially about the claim that education is the answer

competitive sport from a young age, their active socialisation into a culture of risk buffers the effect of education about injury and concussion. Put a spoonful of sugar in that cup of tea because you're going to need it.

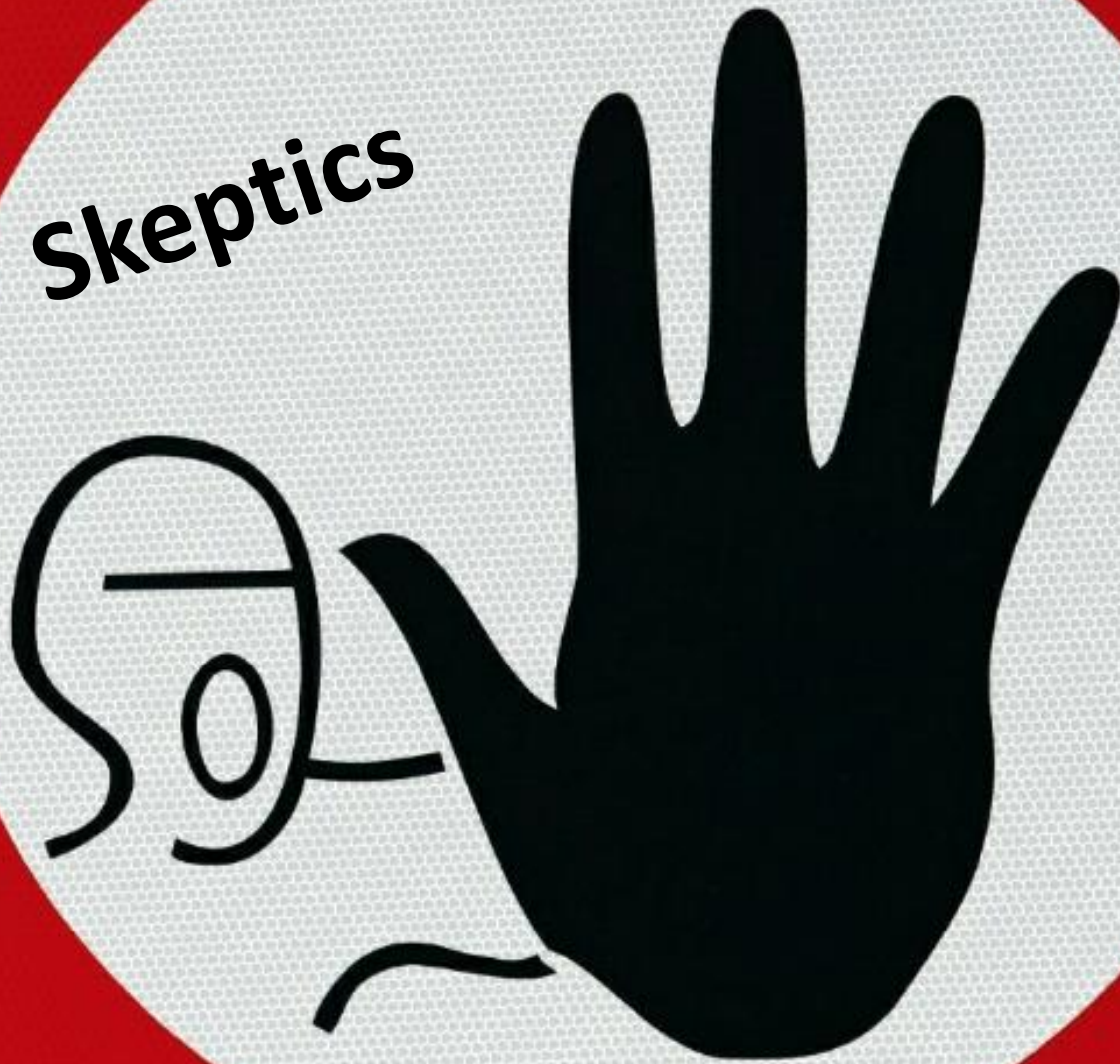
*Dr Katie Liston works at Ulster University. She is author of 'On being "head strong": The pain some and concussion in non-lite rugby union', published as a research article in 2016; she is a former international soccer and rugby player, and an All-Ireland medal winner and All Star holder for Kerry (@kliston14)*

**Bulletproofers**





**Skeptics**



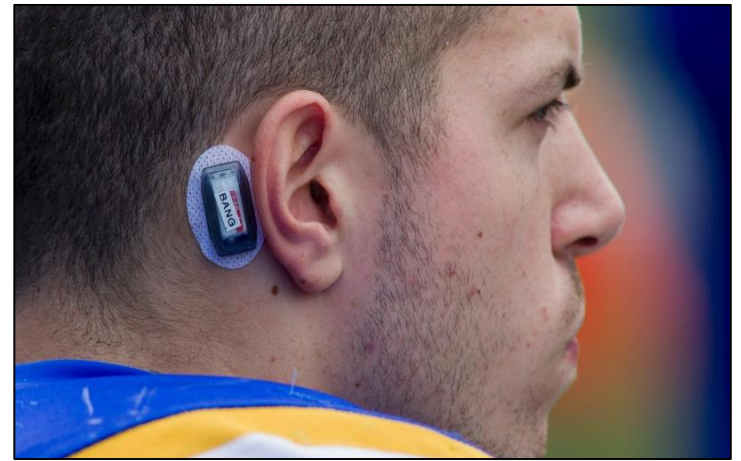
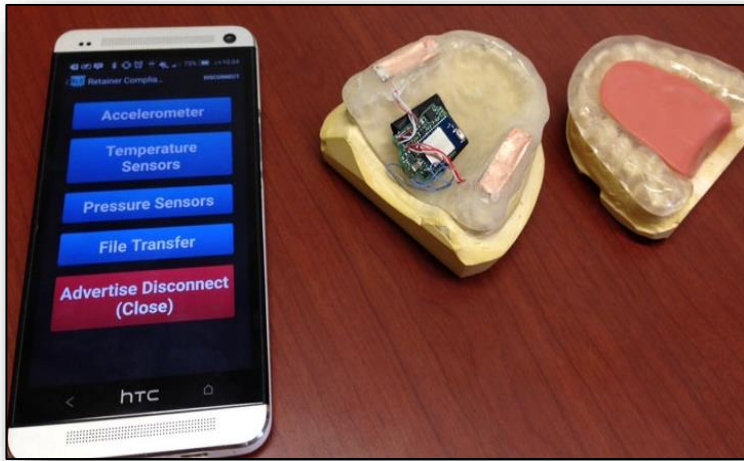


**'Worth It'**





**Dig beneath the skin and  
examine what passes as routine**



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## AWAY WITH BRUTAL FOOTBALL

So Says Mr. Henderson Hallman in a Pointed Letter Yesterday.

"Editor Constitution—Prize fighting is prohibited in the state, but I desire to know the consistency of a law that prevents two toughs meeting with padded gloves to contest for money and yet permits twenty-two sons of gentlemen to rush upon each other on the football field and crush limbs and kill, all for the glory of the college they represent—a law that permits a brutal sport in which the taking of a life is not merely an accident, but a reasonable and looked for consequence."

"The people of Georgia would be shocked with the horrid casualties of the ball game as many as those of the football field where young gladiators in the frenzy of a so-

OCTOBER 30, 1897

Richard Von Gammon  
College Football Tragedy

## NO MORE FOOTBALL GAMES

Chancellor Boggs Says the Faculty Will So Decide Now.

Athens, Ga., October 31.—(Special.)—There will be no more football contests this year engaged in by the University of Georgia eleven.

The tragic death of Von Gammon in Atlanta ends the record of the 'varsity team this year.

OCTOBER 30, 1897

Richard Von Gammon  
College Football Tragedy

Chancellor Boggs, when asked about the



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Torn ligament

Tendonitis

Broken arm

Dislocated shoulder

Abdominal bruising

Dead leg

Groin strain

Pulled muscle

Broken ankle

Hamstring tear



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# On being 'head strong': The pain zone and concussion in non-elite rugby union

International Review for the  
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1–17

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**Katie Liston and Mark McDowell**

Ulster University, UK

**Dominic Malcolm**

Loughborough University, UK

**Andrea Scott-Bell**

Northumbria University, UK

**Ivan Waddington**

Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Norway

“Minimal time loss from training and playing”



“It’s like a **setback** for three weeks and then  
you’re back again”

“You like to be **manly** about playing and you’ll  
play at costs”

“I’d become wise how to **beat the tests**”



“I knew I was concussed but I wanted to  
**play on**”

“At **club** level it wasn't an issue [to play on] because  
there wasn't a lot of **medical staff**”

“Well as I know, scientifically and  
**logically**, it’s very negative ...

You should be looking after your body and  
health ...

You **shouldn’t be risking** anything  
that’s going to be a threat for you in the  
future”

But as a **player**, it's good. It makes you  
a **stronger** player and better in the  
future ... It sounds so petty but what  
**doesn't kill you**  
does make you stronger"



**For the county,  
parish and club?**



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