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San Diego Office:
619.280.3422
Fax: 619.280.3406

DMREISS@GMAIL.COM

www.DMRDynamics.COM

Mailing Address:
P.O. Box 9684
Rancho Santa Fe, CA
92067-4684

Street Delivery Address:
12707 High Bluff Drive, #200
San Diego, CA 92130

Interviews, articles, speaking, seminars:
Media Representative
Marc Kruskol, MJK Public Relations
[\(661\) 538-1789](tel:6615381789) marc@mjkpr.com

UNEXPECTED SUICIDE IN A HIGH PROFILE ATHLETE

(media background white paper)

Results of the Autopsy of Junior Seau, as made public

The autopsy results provide no significant information that helps to understand the tragedy. There were no physiological or neurophysiological findings, no toxicology findings (drugs, alcohol, prescribed medications), and no evidence of current medical illness which would suggest contributing cause to the suicide.

This leaves three general areas that could be considered:

- 1) Subtle neurological impairment due to repetitive head trauma
 - There are theories that some acute or repetitive head trauma may cause very subtle impairment that do not appear on typical neurological examinations (including physical examination, EEG or brain scans) and would not be evident in a standard autopsy.
 - Perhaps detailed neuropsychological testing prior to death might have revealed some difficulties (“paper and pencil” type testing that can explore for subtle changes in physical coordination, perception, concentration, attention, information processes, emotional processing etc.)
 - It is possible that more detailed post-mortem neurological study may reveal some pathology that could have led to subtly impaired information processing or processing of emotions – but even if subtle

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DAVID M. REISS, M.D.

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neurological findings are revealed, it is impossible to say whether or not they contributed to any significant degree to the fatal act.

2) Psychological issues related to athletes:

- The transition from “superstar” to “retired athlete” can be very difficult, especially for a person who has functioned at a very high level throughout their career, probably since childhood.
 - Obviously, “star athletes” are treated differently from school years through professional years, and the transition to retirement can be difficult in many areas of psycho-social functioning.
- In this particular case, although Junior did not end his career with the San Diego Chargers, he remained beloved, respected and honored in his home town where he spent most of his career. Thus, it would be unlikely that he would have experienced the degree of disorientation of a player who had moved from team to team without a one particular consistent base of support, or who almost completely would lose sense of support on retirement. To what extent there was a subjective perception of loss of prestige is impossible to determine.
- The information available does not indicate that Junior was dealing with severe chronic pain – or at least as per the records released, he was not being prescribed medications consistent with severe chronic pain. However, there is no definitive information regarding that important issue.
 - Regarding an athlete who has always been a leader, some persons with strong “leadership” personality qualities learn early in life to “hide” their physical and emotional pain, both on the field and in the locker room, and they gain significant respect and reinforcement for doing so.
 - After retirement, that dynamic changes. There is no information regarding what physical or psychological pain Junior may still have been “keeping under wraps” (perhaps even to the extent of minimizing his difficulties to medical professionals) – while no longer receiving the support and reinforcement for “hiding” his pain that was present on the field and in the locker room during his career.
- Even if there were only “subtle” cognitive difficulties, that could have been a very significant issue. It is not uncommon (including in non-athletes with mild cognitive impairment), and especially true in people who are bright, relying significantly upon intellectual abilities, that a person who acquires mild

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cognitive difficulties learns how to compensate and continue to function on a high level. Their impairment is not obvious or evident to others, yet there can be significant subjective fear and/or distress as even a slight reduction in cognitive prowess is perceived as extremely frightening.

- Similarly, persons with very strong leadership qualities often are successful specifically *because* they are capable of making “difficult” decisions quickly, independently, and without needing extensive “consultation” with others.
 - The malignant side of this is that when a person with that personality configuration becomes depressed, they may similarly make a very dangerous or even fatal decision quickly, independently and without consultation – and without warning signs.

Of course, these are only theoretical considerations which may be explored, and may be totally unrelated to the tragedy of Junior Seau’s death.

- 3) In addition, there is the entire area of Junior’s personal life and any struggles he may have had in that area. These issues should remain private, and there should not even be speculation in this regard without the express permission of the family.