

Hernandez's Severe CTE is About Blame and a Pay Day, Not Medicine



By Erik Lief — September 22, 2017



Aaron Hernandez in court, via Google Images [1]

By most measures, Aaron Hernandez did not come off to the public as a sympathetic figure. But with the revelation that his brain was severely damaged from playing football – far worse than anyone's studied so far, considering his age – an attempt to make him just that is now underway.

But since this attempted rehabilitation is being done by an attorney and not a doctor, it'd be wise to look past the lawyer's spin.

In the final act of Hernandez's brief, eventful, rollercoaster life, the late NFL tight end was considered both prone to violence and unpredictability – and that was even before becoming a convicted murderer. Add to the picture that Hernandez was a hulking figure covered in tattoos, which did little to soften his public perception, and what astonished observers were left with was the task of reconciling how a Super Bowl champion with a \$40 million contract ended up in prison serving a life sentence – at the age of 25 – without the possibility of parole.

The lingering question was: How? What explained such erratic, violent and aggressive behavior, as well as the circumstances that led him to end his life by hanging himself with a prison bed sheet? Answers were elusive.

But now, a lawyer representing Hernandez's family says they finally have the explanation – a medical explanation.

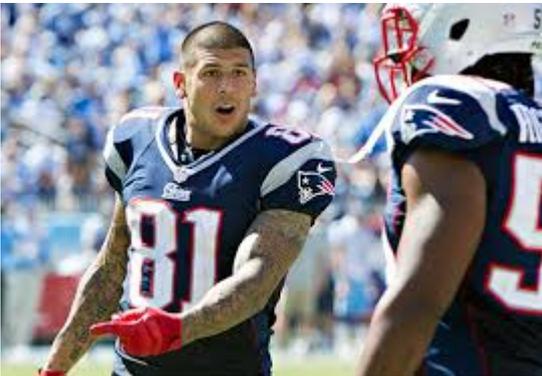
With his announcement Thursday, attorney Jose Baez is literally making the case that the discovery of Stage 3 CTE, or chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a neurodegenerative brain

disease, is a major factor to blame for the suicide. And by extension that it's the National Football League, and not Hernandez, that's actually responsible for his death, claiming the league knew and hid the dangers of the violent game that destroyed the player's cognitive abilities.

That connection, of course, is not known and most importantly – based on current science, which cannot directly connect how CTE affects behavior – cannot be proven. But because Hernandez's brain scan showed that he had damage that was usually seen in someone in their 60s or 70s, Baez appears to be leveraging this surprising discovery to springboard to a big payday.

Therefore, when Baez speaks of brain damage possibly being the root cause for Hernandez's aggressive and self-destructive behaviors, and most notably his suicide last April, remember that's a lawyer talking looking for a huge settlement. It's definitely not a medical diagnosis from a doctor.

But with the post-mortem medical announcement, Baez has apparently found a promising way to turn Hernandez into a sympathetic figure by redirecting the blame to the NFL. While alleging negligent conduct for not protecting him better, he's [suing the league](#) ^[2] for \$20 million.



Hernandez's brain was examined by Dr. Ann McKee, chief

of neuropathology at the VA Boston Healthcare System and director of the CTE Center at Boston University. She discovered a telltale buildup of tau proteins, but in such concentrations that this case rose to a Stage 3 designation, the second-most severe level. That level of brain degeneration is associated with impaired judgment and behavioral changes, as well as the inability to control aggression; bouts of rage; mood swings; memory loss and suicidal behavior.

By most accounts, this would be an extremely difficult case to prove, specifically, that the blows to the head that Hernandez suffered *only in the NFL between 2010 and 2012* caused his erratic behavior. Not the ones he took in college at the University of Florida, or in high school, or even at the Pop Warner level for youngsters.

But let's not lose sight of the fact that this attorney's quest is about collecting a settlement, not finding a medical connection between head trauma, skewed judgement and eventually suicide. So Baez doesn't have to prove it.

Presumably, all he's interested in is dragging the NFL into court – and its Commissioner Roger Goodell and possibly, Bill Belichick, the notoriously tight-lipped New England Patriots coach – to pry open files and medical charts and expose their thinking to the world. And Baez must be thinking that the best way to shut that down, an exercise the NFL certainly hopes to avoid at all costs, is for the league to give up, pony up and settle.

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[1] <http://deadspin.com/prosecutors-say-aaron-hernandez-got-a-tattoo-commemorat-1790554812>

[2] <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2017/images/09/21/hernandez.v..national.football.league.et.al.-.pacer.1.complaint.pdf>