Concussion specialist warns of football's hazards

By Linda Fine Conaboy

RENO – No child under the age of 18 should be allowed to play contact sports, forensic neuropathologist Bennet Omalu states in his clipped, fast-talking, often humorous manner.

Ranging from one side of the stage to the other, without notes, he continues talking to an audience of nearly 1,000 who have come to hear the doctor whose science is the subject of the recent movie, "Concussion", starring Will Smith and Alec Baldwin. Last week Omalu was speaking at the UNR Medical School's Healthy Nevada Speaker Series.

Bennet Omalu

"Children are prohibited from smoking and drinking until they are 21, but not from contact sports," he muses. "We have a duty to protect our children. When they play this game [football] they have a 100 percent chance of exposure to brain injury. We should not be afraid of the truth—it's child abuse."

Strong words, but this man has become a leading expert on traumatic brain injury, and through shear doggedness, has made his findings familiar to at least a good part of the population. Most football fans know of Omalu, the guy who autopsies the brains of football players and has found that

there really is a reason for the sometimes erratic and unconventional behavior exhibited by some former gridiron jockeys.

Omalu autopsied Pittsburgh Steeler and Kansas City Chief center, “Iron” Mike Webster’s brain after his untimely death. Although he was disabled before his retirement from football, after retirement, it was obvious Webster suffered from amnesia, dementia, depression and acute bone and muscle pain. He lived out of his pickup, and in 2002, died of a heart attack.

“Concussion” graphically depicts Webster’s shattered life after football, his death and his relationship to Omalu, who examined his brain tissue and determined that amazingly, his brain was a fairly normal one, even though there is speculation that Webster exhibited the effects of someone who had been in 25,000 auto accidents over 25 years of playing football in high school, college and professionally.

But Omalu’s road to Webster and international fame as the person who finally discovered what was killing football players was a bumpy one.

Born in 1968, Omalu has six siblings and is a Nigerian-American physician, forensic pathologist and neuropathologist who was the first to discover and publish findings of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in American football players while he worked at the coroner’s office in Pittsburgh.

He said as a child he discovered his imagination and also discovered the power of education. “If I’m educated,” he thought, “I have power over you. I studied hard and became a physician at 21. I was a simple man leading a simple life.”

But life at university wasn’t easy for him. “At med school I became extremely depressed and dropped out of school. Even though I was suffering, my parents punished me. To be myself, that’s all I wanted to be.”

He said he learned about the United States from the media; he arrived in Seattle in 1994 with $200, only to come face-to-face with racism, a subject previously foreign to him.

“I knew nothing about slavery, but then I discovered another Bennet and learned it’s OK to be him,” he said with a chuckle. “I must be true to myself. I’ve only got one life to live. No one could tell me what to do, it would be a denial of myself. If I was not true to myself, I would deny society of Bennet.” Again, that hearty chuckle.

It was in Pittsburgh that he learned about Webster and other football players who died mysteriously, many of them destitute, mentally ill and bankrupt, all with the common denominator being football. It was during this period that he asked himself, “Why do you need to wear a helmet to play a game?”

After their deaths, upon examination, the brains of these men all seemed fairly normal, leading Omalu to wonder why the erratic behavior? Although he didn’t know what he was looking for, he suspected football was the culprit.

When he lost his job, he found a way to take brains home with him, examining them on his kitchen and dining room tables, all the while struggling greatly with depression, a malady that began as a child as he watched the horror of war.

This is when he was finally able to make his CTE discovery. This is also when the National Football League denounced him. His fellow doctors called him a dangerous physician, saying he was disreputable.

“We Americans are infatuated with football,” he said. “We all look the other way; football cannot be harmful—the evidence was denied.

“I studied death and studied death,” he said. “I examined brains. There is a spirit that lives in everyone and is shared

by everybody. We are members of one another. What I do, I do for all of us. When I look at myself, I see all of us. I want the NFL to do well, but the life of one player is worth more than the NFL."

Before he officially ended his talk, Omalu mused, "What are we afraid of? Believe that faith causes the impossible to become possible. Always dream the impossible dream. Do the autopsy."

Omalu later moved his family west, becoming chief medical examiner for San Joaquin County and professor at UC Davis' Department of Medical Pathology and Laboratory Medicine.