

# Football-related brain injury claims another life, this time a high school linebacker

Close

Dylan Thomas, a 16-year-old linebacker at Pike County High School in Zebulon, Ga., died from a brain injury two days after getting hit during a football game. (WSB-TV)

By [Allyson Chiu](#)

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The lights were bright. The grass was green. Fans filled the rows of bleachers lining Pike County High School's football field in Zebulon, Ga. On the gridiron, the home team, the Pirates, decked out in red and black jerseys, faced off against the Peach County High School Trojans. It was time for Friday night football.

Two days later, hundreds wearing the school's colors would again flock to the same field. Only this time, when the home team stepped onto the grass, they walked in neat rows, arms linked and faces somber. Two players gripped a Pirates jersey bearing the number 32.

The jersey belonged to Dylan Thomas, a 16-year-old linebacker, who had been rushed to the hospital in the middle of Friday night's game after

suffering an injury and becoming unresponsive. The high school junior was in critical condition after undergoing surgeries to relieve brain swelling, and many had gathered Sunday to pray for his recovery, WAGA [reported](#). “We know it’s in God’s hands,” Thomas’s uncle Nick Burgess [told](#) the crowd. “He’s still in the business of miracles. He can do anything regardless of what the physicians say or what it may seem.” Burgess added, “We know Dylan’s a fighter.”

Hours later, his family received tragic news. Thomas had succumbed to his injuries and died, according to an [announcement](#) Monday from Pike County Public School officials.

October 1, 2018 Dear Pike County Family: I am saddened to inform you that Dylan Thomas, a Pike County High School...

Posted by [Pike County Public Schools](#) on [Monday, October 1, 2018](#)

It all began during the second half of Friday’s game.

“It was a normal Friday, I’m cheering for him and I’m laughing with other parents and then it all goes black,” Thomas’s mother, Shannon Thomas, told [WGXA](#).

In the third quarter, a referee stopped play as Thomas came off the field to the sideline, his head coach, Brad Webber, told reporters at a [news conference](#) Monday. Thomas, Webber said, was the “heart and soul” of the team’s defense and had just earned a spot in the starting lineup this season. Thomas, according to [MaxPreps](#), was 6 feet and weighed 150 pounds. The roster of the opposing team [lists](#) several players at 225 and above, up to 265 pounds.

Webber said he was told by the team’s athletic trainer that Thomas had been injured. Something appeared to be wrong with his leg.

“He was talking and fine and just things went bad,” he said.

Thomas’s family members described a much more dramatic account.

“I heard that he was saying that he wasn’t feeling right and then that’s when his left leg and left arm went numb and he pretty much fell off the bench,” Burgess [told](#) WSB.

Within minutes emergency services were on scene, the school’s athletic director, James Stanford, said Monday.

Though Burgess told WAGA he believed his nephew had taken a hit during the second quarter, school officials have yet to determine exactly when and how Thomas was injured, Webber said. He added that video of the game is being reviewed to “pinpoint one area this occurred,” but said he hasn’t noticed anything unusual.

The head injuries commonly sustained in brutal contact sports such as football have become a point of concern at every level of the game ranging from high school to the NFL, sparking debates over safety and whether young children should even be allowed to participate. Concussions and, more recently, [hits to the head](#), have been linked by researchers to the onset of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a neurodegenerative disease common in people with a history of repetitive brain trauma, for example football players.

*[\[A new study shows that hits to the head, not concussions, cause CTE\]](#)*

The day after Thomas was hospitalized, a strikingly similar scene played out at a college game in Nashville. Christion Abercrombie, a sophomore at Tennessee State University, who like Thomas is also a linebacker and from Georgia, lost consciousness during a game against Vanderbilt University, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution [reported](#).

Abercrombie was able to walk off the field himself and told the team’s trainers he had a headache. Moments later, he collapsed, according to the AJC.

“It was just a football play,” Tennessee State Coach Rod Reed said Sunday on [WNSR’s coaches radio show](#). “He was taking on a block, and it wasn’t anything malicious or dirty or anything like that. Just an unfortunate situation.”

Abercrombie underwent emergency surgery and remains in critical condition, the Tennessean [reported](#).

On Monday, Webber, who has coached for 30 years, said he still believes football is a safe sport, citing improved strength and conditioning regimens and the attention placed on safety equipment, namely helmets. During Friday’s game, he said Thomas had been wearing a brand new Riddell SpeedFlex helmet, “the best helmet . . . money can buy.”