

## The Washington Post

# Amid football's sound and fury, tragedy can strike at any time

By Mike Wise

Friday, October 22, 2010; 9:08 PM

On a football field in Prince George's County during a November afternoon in 1993, a 16-year-old boy lay motionless. Sam Washington rushed onto the field when his son, Dion Johnson, didn't get up after making what appeared to be a routine tackle.

"Dad, I don't feel anything," Dion said.

After Johnson's limp body was taken by medevac to Washington Hospital Center, his family piled into a red Nissan Maxima for what Washington called "the longest ride of our lives."

At the hospital, the attending physician told Sam and his wife, Wanda, that Dion was paralyzed. He never walked again; he died six years later.

"I second-guessed myself right after it happened, you know, 'Should I have had my son play football? Was this partially my fault?' " Washington said. "I had that soul-searching moment every parent would have."

In the middle of the NFL's disturbing brain-jarring week, many parents are questioning whether they should let their kids put on a helmet and pads. Others have resigned themselves to the risks.

That's the reality for Leslie Daniels, the wife

of Redskins defensive end Phillip Daniels and mother of DaVaris, a Notre Dame-bound wide receiver. Phillip Daniels called the current furor over violent hits "ridiculous," saying, "This ain't no cupcake league."

Leslie Daniels has learned to live a life in which her husband and sons voluntarily put themselves in harm's way.

"It took me a while, but I had to understand that's what he signed up for if it ever happened," she said.

"My 6-year-old DaKendrick was asking questions about the Rutgers player who was paralyzed last week. He's already playing tackle football with older kids because of his size. When I told him what happened, I said, 'You still want to play?' He said, 'Yeah, I won't get hurt. I'm on defense, Mom.' I used to tell DaVaris to lay down after you get hit

Advertisement



We focus on automating Marriott® Hotels' global invoice process. So they don't have to.

Learn more at [RealBusiness.com](http://RealBusiness.com)

xerox  
Ready For Real Business

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/22/AR2010102206673\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/22/AR2010102206673_pf.html)

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

## The Washington Post

# Amid football's sound and fury, tragedy can strike at any time

when he was that age. But I eventually accepted the risk."

Sam Washington, almost two decades later, is fine with his decision too. He is now the junior varsity defensive coordinator at Douglass, where he once coached Dion's younger brother, Derrick. And he knows what you're thinking.

"How does my younger son want to play football when he saw his brother get paralyzed? I mean, Derrick was in the stands that day," Washington said. "But it didn't stop him from playing. It didn't stop me from coaching.

"You have to let your kid play if that's what he wants to do and know that those risks are there for everybody."

Remember a year ago, when Bengals quarterback Carson Palmer predicted a fatality in the sport? "The truth of the matter is . . . somebody is going to die here in the NFL," Palmer said. "It's going to happen."

After Commissioner Roger Goodell spent the past week managing what took on the air of crisis following an abnormally violent Sunday, can anyone really say with certainty no one will die on an NFL field?

Still, the messages continue to be mixed, no? At the same time we lament the risks, we're seduced by the dangers. We wince at the collision before exulting in the athleticism

before falling silent when one of the participants doesn't get up. The replays we've seen countless times this week elicit the same mixture of fear, adrenaline and regret.

But when a kid such as Dion Johnson is cooped up in a room for six months, heavy weights hanging from the back of his head so the swelling in his spine would go down, the risk is painfully driven home.

"We used to touch his feet and toes," recalled Sam Washington, who met Dion when he was 3 years old before becoming his stepfather. "He said he could feel us touching him, but he saw us doing it. He was trying to make us feel better."

When Dion finally went home in a wheelchair the next March, he had to be cared for 24-7. His father said the most humiliating life change after the hit Dion suffered was his mother having to place a catheter inside him,

Advertisement

HEARTLAND QUALITY  
**OMAHA STEAKS**  
SINCE 1917

**SAVE**  
up to **64%**

Plus, get  
**3 FREE Gifts**

Special Code: **45069ZWN**

To order: [www.OmahaSteaks.com/print71](http://www.OmahaSteaks.com/print71)  
or call 1-877-586-4455

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/22/AR2010102206673\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/22/AR2010102206673_pf.html)

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

## The Washington Post

### Amid football's sound and fury, tragedy can strike at any time

to disimpact her son's bowels.

For a teenager approaching manhood, Dion adjusted courageously. He graduated from high school and later from Bowie State with a degree in communications, even interning at WABC, interviewing people on the street.

After he died in August of 1999 of heat exhaustion - his wheelchair had gotten stuck near a park where he went to pen a poem before an uncle's funeral - Sam Washington started the Dion Johnson Foundation for the boy who turned every negative into a positive, whose motto after the injury was, "May your mind see further than your eyes."

Today, Sam Washington's players at Douglass are taught to hit a player "number to number." Anyone who leads with the crown of his head gets counseled and put through a series of proper tackling drills. If that doesn't work, they sit.

"I still miss him," Washington said before Douglass's practice Thursday.

He added that his guilt over letting Dion play began to subside when he walked in the National Rehabilitation Hospital and realized his son was the only one there with a football-related spinal-cord injury. The other patients ranged from bike riders to people who had been in serious car accidents.

"It can happen to anybody; it doesn't necessarily happen to be football players," he

said. "I won't say it soothed my conscience, but it made me realize it's hard to tell your kids no if they love something like Dion loved football."

It's America's pastime now - the pageantry, the sound, the fury.

There's also the inescapable, sad truth that you actually can love a sport to death.

Advertisement

**Help people in need.**

---

**Donate your car, boat or RV**

**Free Towing • Tax Deductible**

**FREE**  
3 day vacation  
to over 80  
destinations



Call Toll-Free

1-877-225-9384



[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/22/AR2010102206673\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/22/AR2010102206673_pf.html)

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™