In 1994, the NFL organized what it called a “TM4 Traumatic Brain Injury Committee” — but the physician then-commissioner Paul Tagliabue put in charge wasn’t a neurologist — instead, he was a rheumatologist. The committee published a number of scientific papers between 2002 and 2003 that concluded “no NFL player” had experienced chronic brain damage as the result of repeat concussions. In one notable 2005 paper — published in the journal Neurosurgery — the committee wrote that “professional football players do not sustain frequent repetitive blows to the brain on a regular basis.”

There was plenty of evidence, however, that suggested NFL players did suffer chronic brain damage over time.

In 2012, neuropathologist Dr. Bennett Omalu had examined the brain of Hall of Fame center Ken Stabler and found chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, Webster, who had spent most of his career with the Pittsburgh Steelers, had died that year after suffering injuries had not declined over the years. The NFL was researching the problem. Goodell assured the committee the league’s lawyers it needed to “do the right thing” and the union would have to agree. In August 2011, former Atlanta Falcons safety Ray Easterling filed a suit in federal court seeking compensation for his severe headaches and health problems. Easterling accused the NFL of researching the problem. Two months later, an NFL spokesperson told the New York Times “it’s quite obvious from the medical research that’s been done that concussions can lead to long-term problems.”

The league began tweaking its on-field protocols to evaluate players who sustained blows to the head before they could return to play. In August 2015, former Atlanta Falcons safety Ray Easterling filed the first CTE lawsuit against the NFL. His suit would later be joined by more than 4,500 other retirees.

On Aug. 29, 2015, the NFL agreed to pay $100 million to settle the lawsuit. The league refused to admit wrongdoing but Goodell told the league’s lawyers it needed to “do the right thing for the game and for the men who played it.”

In November 2015, the settlement was revised to remove the cap on the amount the NFL might have to pay. It wasn’t until April 2016 that the Third Circuit Court affirmed the settlement. The league agreed to pay $75 million for baseline medical exams for retired players and another $10 million for concussion research and education. Retirees who were found to be injured by former NFL careers were promised an uncapped amount of damages.

The family of a player who died in 2014 was awarded a judgment as high as $4 million. Players suffering from dementia could receive as much as $5 million. Those suffering from Lou Gehrig’s disease could qualify for $5 million.

The total amount the NFL might have to pay out had fedselection to nearly $1 billion. PB2 Frontline pointed out, however, that figure was about what the league makes in a single season from sponsorships alone.

In the meantime, the league had begun to implement a number of rule changes aimed at reducing the number of head injuries and properly evaluating players who had suffered concussions.

A 2020 study found the league’s changes “have been proven to be too weak to make the NFL game safer,” stated a team from the University of California-Irvine, the University of Houston and the Baylor College of Medicine. The number of athletes suffering chronic injuries had declined and there was a “strong increase” in the number of games missed due to head injuries.

The brain is cushioned inside the skull by an envelope of cerebrospinal fluid. The shock of the blow may exceed the protection from of this cushion. The shock wave passes through the brain and bounces off the back of the skull. The concussion usually occurs at the opposite side from the point of impact. The impact can cause bruising of the brain, tearing of the blood vessels and nerve damage.

THE NFL AGREES — FINALLY — TO ‘DO THE RIGHT THING’

By Charles Apple • THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Ten years ago — after years of denying links between on-field concussions and permanent brain injury and downplaying the need for removal from games of players suffering head injuries — the National Football League agreed to pay $765 million in a settlement with more than 4,500 retired players who had sued the league.

The NFL was at that time admitting no guilt by agreeing to the settlement. But it adopted new concussion protocols to evaluate on-field head injuries. Some of those protocols have been helpful. Some, not so much.