

**Fifth Estate**  
**Chris Benoit — Fight to the Death**  
**Aired February 6 on the CBC Network across Canada**

*Synopsis:*

*In the pro wrestling firmament, there were few stars as big as Edmonton's Chris Benoit. But, on June 25, 2007, Benoit's name ricocheted around the world, suddenly more notorious than for anything he'd ever done in a wrestling ring. Inside his Atlanta, Georgia mansion were three bodies: Benoit had strangled his wife and suffocated his seven-year-old son and then killed himself. Quickly, the finger of blame was pointed at Benoit's steroid use, so rampant in pro wrestling; the deaths, it was assumed, the result of a steroid-fuelled rage.*

*But, an investigation into the deaths of Chris Benoit, his wife and son, by reporter Bob McKeown reveals that Benoit also may have been the victim of a physical condition brought on by years of undiagnosed concussions.*

**Transcript:**

Bret Hart: Monday was Saskatoon. Tuesday was Regina. Wednesday was Red Deer. Thursday was Lethbridge. Then back to Calgary and Edmonton on Saturday.

Reporter: It was 3,000 kilometers round trip each week every week for the cast and crew of the Canadian institution called Stampede Wrestling.

Jake Roberts: Crazy. Insane. Stop in Moose Jaw and get gas, stop in Lethbridge to get more fuel. Other than that, drink beer and pee on the side of the highway if it wasn't too cold.

?? Go party at the bar. Drink our faces off, smoke our brains out, get home at 5, 6 in the morning.

Reporter: Long before he became the wrestling super star known as the Hitman, a young Bret Hart learned the family business at the wheel of a ten passenger van, crossing the prairies with a full load of big men.

Bret Hart: Working for my father was no joyride. It was usually really bad weather conditions and driving in a van with suspect tires.

Reporter: I thought you were going to say driving in a van with suspect characters.

Bret Hart: Well the characters were always suspect, too, maybe more suspect than the tires.

Reporter: The van brought that traveling circus back to home base at the end of

each week to the stampede grounds in Calgary. Before anyone heard of Vince McMahon, WWE Raw, or Friday Night Smack Down, the true wrestling tradition here took place Friday nights. In the stampede ring. Some of the boys on the bus would become some of the biggest names in all of wrestling. Andre the Giant, Owen Hart, the Junkyard Dog, Davy Boy Smith, Chris Benoit. But soon one by one each of them would prematurely die, along with many other graduates of Stampede Wrestling. In the past decade and a half a dozen of them dead at an average age of just 41. Of the people who were in your immediate group, how many are deceased today?

Jake Roberts: I try not to count. Missing too many friends. Sometimes I get angry.

Reporter: Hello. I'm Bob McKeon. Welcome to "the fifth estate". Arguably the most famous of the men in that van who got their start at the Stampede Wrestling ring who died too young was Edmonton's Chris Benoit. He captured the world heavy weight championship. You don't have to be a wrestling fan to know his name because Chris Benoit will always be remembered for something else, something that happened last summer, when the bodies of the 40-year-old Benoit, his wife and their young son were discovered at their home outside Atlanta. It made headlines around the world labeled a steroid fuelled murder-suicide. On this edition of "the fifth estate" a detective story tracking down the truth about what really happened to Chris Benoit to many more who made their living in the ring. The answer could be a matter of life or death to athletes in other violent sports as well.

Reporter: To truly understand the Chris Benoit story you got to go back to the glory days of Stampede Wrestling. And whatever you think about the sport, however staged and scripted it may be, one thing is sure, there has always been real pain, no one knew that better than Stu Hart, Bret Hart's dad, Stampede's founder. Stu Hart started in the ring himself. Became a promoter importing stars like Killer Kowalski, and Billy Watson to a territory that included Western Canada, Montana and Washington. For decades to come stampede would be the definition of old school wrestling.

Bret Hart: It's the real gritty, real hard core wrestling. The way it's best sold. Good guys and bad guys were clearly defined. It was a great show for its realism. It was quite real.

Reporter: Stu Hart wasn't just a wrestling legend, he was a legendary patriarch, raising a dozen children at the sprawling Hart home at the outskirts of Calgary. Here Stampede prospects were led into the basement to see if they had the right stuff.

Bret Hart: Those who underestimated the old man with a bad back soon learned why Bret Hart and his siblings called it The Dungeon.

Reporter: Poor guy down on the dungeon. What was that guy feeling when he was making those noises?

Bret Hart: It might have been close to a religious experience for him. I think he was learning the hard way that he shouldn't smart ass my dad. My dad, fair to say that my dad was an expert of taking it right to the edge of your stress limit.

Reporter: But Stampede Wrestling was about to be taken to the edge, too, with the arrival from Britain of the Dynamite Kid, Tom Belington.

“Watch him go off the top. yes, sir, beautiful”

Reporter: Just 170 pounds with an acrobatic style he soon attracted attention from fans like Michelle Smadu.

Smadu: What a spectacular wrestler with high flying moves, like watching a ping pong ball in the ring. He was that quick.

Reporter: What the Dynamite Kid lacked in size, he more than made up in altitude, moves that ended in fearless head-to-head contact.

Bret Hart: The Dynamite Kid I always say was pound for pound was the greatest wrestler I knew.

Reporter: Why was he so good?

Bret Hart: He was like a Wayne Gretzky, he was unbelievable, he was so good and I never seen anyone that I ever thought that compared to him.

Reporter: Bret Hart wasn't the only wrestling super star to be who thought so. One Friday night a teenaged boy from Edmonton convinced his father to make the drive to Calgary to catch the weekly wrestling card at the Stampede grounds. His name was Chris Benoit. His dad's name is Mike.

Mike Benoit: When he was about 13 years old I took him and a couple of his friends down to see Stampede Wrestling, and when we were down there, he saw a fellow by the name of Dynamite Kid.

“Dynamite Kid. Dominating right now.”

Mike Benoit: He said to me later that night not only is that what I want to do for a living but I want to be exactly like him, and I said first thing you need to do is, you need to start lifting some weights.

Reporter: That first set of Christmas weights paid off. By 18, Chris Benoit was bench pressing 400 pounds.

Mike Benoit: Never missed. Never a day. Always in the gym. Always working out. At the time, all the guys were hanging around street corners and malls and that, and they'd come to the door and ask him to come out and he would say I got to lift my weights.

Reporter: And when he wasn't training Chris Benoit was waiting for Stampede Wrestling's next visit to Edmonton. Working up the courage to approach his idol.

“Dynamite, big slam, he is going to go high.”

Mike Benoit: I was sitting in the stands and Chris walked over and knocked on the dressing room door, and asked to see Dynamite, and Dynamite came out and talked to him.

Reporter: Though Benoit, on the left, was several years younger it was already becoming hard to tell the two apart.

Mike Benoit: He was just enthralled with him totally. This is exactly what he wanted to do.

Reporter: By 1984 Chris Benoit's determination had paid off. Now 215 pounds he became part of Stampede Wrestling himself. A good guy in the ring, and out of it.

Bret Hart: Chris Benoit was a class guy, just the nicest guy in the world. Kind of guy get a door for a little old lady, a gentleman, soft spoken, easy going, good sense of humor.

Reporter: Benoit also was welcomed into the extended Hart clan. By this time the brood in Calgary included eight sons who became wrestlers. Most famously Bret and Owen, and four daughters married wrestlers. They were one big family. The Dynamite Kid married Michelle Smadu, Bret Hart married Michelle's sister Julie, Bret's sister Diana married the Dynamite Kid's tag team partner, Davey Boy Smith, despite the objections of her mother.

Reporter: I don't want any of my girls to marry wrestlers. And then they all marry wrestlers.

- Bret Hart: I don't know, maybe it was the water. I think it all goes back to my father. I think my sisters all married men that they thought were like my father.
- Reporter: Back on the road in the Stampede van, Chris Benoit learned the ropes from the Dynamite Kid literally. Perfecting the next snapping head jarring high wire act that the Kid brought from England. It was a hard life for hard men, and the Dynamite Kid was certainly that, though he seemed to have a soft spot for young Chris Benoit.
- Smadu: Tom always had affection for him. I wondered if it was because they looked so similar, and Chris could imitate Tom's style perfectly.
- “Stu hart predicted big things for this young Chris Benoit and we are getting them already.”
- Mike Benoit: Basically he followed in Dynamite's footsteps the way he wrestled, the flying head butts off the top of the rope, even the way he walked, he emulated dynamite Kid.
- Reporter: As you will see there would be more dangerous ways in which Chris Benoit imitated his idol. By now the Dynamite Kid had wrestled in Canada for seven years with the scars to show for it.
- Smadu: Tom had many injuries. Taking percocet, percodan, quaaludes, all kinds of drugs, self medicating himself to live with the pain.
- Bret Hart: A lot of these guys got taking pain pills, Dynamite Kid, and so many of these guys, I don't think they ever realized -- ever saw them as a bad thing, saw them almost harmless, not going to hurt anything.
- Reporter: As Stu hart taught them pain went with the territory. Constantly on the road so does alcohol and a wide range of pharmaceuticals. According to Jake the Snake Roberts ...
- Jake Roberts: I couldn't go to sleep at night because I want to keep thinking how much better can I be, what I can do, what would be a better way to do this, just a craving to do the perfect damn thing. Can't go to sleep, man...you self medicate.
- Reporter: In a line of work where one not only needed to be strong but to look it, there were, of course, steroids. They, too, were seen as harmless at first, then came the outbursts known as roid rage. The Dynamite Kid's wife Michelle.

Smadu: The first sign I saw was when he hit me because I had accidentally spilt an ashtray. The moment the ashtray spilt and I bent over to pick it up he hit me in the middle of the back. I was shocked. I never saw that side of him. That's when he told me he was taking steroids and they tended to make him angry.

Reporter: But the steroids continued and the Dynamite Kid's rages kept getting worse.

Smadu: He put me in some holds. He popped my jaw out dragging me by the hair, this is all the while my daughter Bronwyn and Merrick are watching.

Reporter: According to other Stampede wrestlers steroids were part of the job for everyone. Including Chris Benoit.

Mike Benoit: He probably looked at himself in the mirror and say, boy, I'm starting to look small, I better juice up some more. It's my own personal belief that was leading to maybe his excessive use of steroids.

Reporter: When we come back, the fairy tale career of Edmonton's Chris Benoit becomes a nightmare.

“Police say Benoit murdered his wife and son on the weekend, then killed himself.”

Reporter: It is everything that Stampede Wrestling was not. Loud, profane, hugely profitable. The astounding TV success of the WWF, the World Wrestling Federation. Now known as the WWE, would spell the demise of regional wrestling like Stu Hart's mom and pop operation in Western Canada. Under owner Vince McMahon, the opposite of old school, world wrestling would also promise wealth and fame for Stampede's top talent. Like Jake Roberts.

Jake Roberts: In my day, it took you 10, 15 years to establish yourself nationwide. A-- Vince McMahon can do it in three-weeks. Power of television.

Reporter: By the late 1980s, Roberts and other Stampede stars like the Dynamite Kid, Davy Boy Smith, even Stu Hart's sons Bret and Owen made their way to the big time. If Stampede with that old van, world wrestling was a stretch limo.

Bret Hart: WWF was an airplane every day, a different city every day. That became an adventure. Working for my dad, going back to Saskatoon every Monday, the adventure in that had been worn out a little bit.

Reporter: But for the up and coming Chris Benoit the best was yet to come. When

his mentor the Dynamite Kid left Calgary, his final act was to hang his wrestling shoes around Benoit's neck, a sign that young Chris's time had arrived. Wrestling journalist and author Irv Muchnick.

Muchnick: He had a chance to actually fulfill his dream of following in the Dynamite Kid's footsteps and be a star at Stampede Wrestling and ultimately around the world.

Reporter: But the wrestling world was becoming a much different place thanks to Vince McMahon. Not only had he transformed wrestling from the small time traveling circus that Stu Hart ran, into a multinational merchandising and broadcasting empire, but he also did something far more fundamental, in a sport where the old school philosophy was always to try to make what happened in the ring look real, even if everyone knew it wasn't, McMahon did precisely the opposite, proclaiming it was all an act.

Muchnick: There was a reason for that. He wanted to get out from under state athletic commission regulations and taxes.

Reporter: Irv says Vince McMahon believed he could avoid government scrutiny by making the case wrestling wasn't a sport but entertainment.

Muchnick: He put out the story that wrestling was not real, that, in fact, it was predetermined and choreographed, and the old school promoter said this is going to kill the business. As we all know, nothing of the sort happened. It became bigger than ever.

FANS: It's not sport. It's sport entertainment. There to fulfill your needs to give you something extra to look forward to.

Images on screen:

Edge hitting Undertaker with a chair

Kane choke slamming Sabu through a table

Cena hitting Umaga with a TV monitor

Orton performing an RKO

Umaga going through the announce table

Reporter: Before long the push for more fans and more profits resulted in more violence in wrestling matches. Still staged and scripted but increasingly dangerous.

Muchnick: The break that use -- break that used to be on this business automatically, whether it was through regulation or self regulation, just isn't there anymore, and the money, the riches, the glory is making people do things that they never used to do.

- Reporter: But the British Bulldog's, the Dynamite Kid's, were known to fit perfectly with Vince McMahon's new direction. When Dynamite arrived in Calgary, weighed 170 pound. Now as a world wrestling headliner he gained 50 pounds of chemically induced muscle. In his years with World Wrestling Bret Hart says if steroids weren't an official policy, it was only because they didn't have to be.
- Bret Hart: No one came out and down right told you that you had to take them or you should take them; maybe thought it might be in your best interests to take them.
- Reporter: Jake Roberts never gave it a second thought. The man nicknamed the Snake says he told Vince McMahon he would do anything to get to the top.
- Jake Roberts: I've bent over the desk and asked him to shove it right up my bazoo. If that's what it was about. He's a businessman... I wasn't.
- Reporter: And Chris Benoit was living his dream. Bound for greatness. After Stampede Wrestling closed he again followed in the footsteps of his idol, the Dynamite Kid, wearing a mask to wrestle in Japan. Back in North America, his athleticism and moves like his trademark flying headbutt helped him win almost every major title and championship belt, as well as the respect of fellow wrestlers.
- Muchnick: He was not regarded by his fellow wrestlers in the way that the Dynamite Kid was. He was respected and even loved.
- Reporter: The Kid from Edmonton seemed to have it all. Married to his second wife Nancy, father of Daniel, the son he adored, living with them in a gated home near Atlanta. In 2004 he reached the absolute pinnacle, becoming World Wrestling Heavyweight Champ. But privately that success had a price. Benoit told his father he had come to depend on drugs, amphetamines, painkillers, steroids and more.
- Mike Benoit: And my words to Chris at that time were, Chris, you are very accomplished wrestler, you have the ability to go in and wrestle, why are you doing these things, his response at the time was, dad, if I want a job I have to.
- Reporter: There weren't only the pressures of wrestling. Benoit's marriage was falling apart. His wife filed for divorce, charging he had threatened her and broken furniture at their home.



Mike Benoit: She was seeing behavior problems. Was she sharing that with me? To some extent. We had conversations about it. I think there was an alcohol problem in the house.

Reporter: There was something else that Chris Benoit knows. In the wrestling profession could no longer ignore. In the decade before he became world champion, it's estimated as many as 100 wrestlers died without reaching their 50th birthdays. They included many of the men who shared that life on the road with Stampede Wrestling. The physical punishment, the alcohol, the steroids. Now they were dead, along with dozens of others. Such causes as drug overdoses, suicide and premature heart attacks, a death rate from seven to ten times higher than the same age group in the general population.

Bret Hart: A lot of these wrestlers got so addicted that they couldn't stop even though he knew so many died from them. They were addicted and they didn't know who to talk to about it.

Reporter: The role of deceased Stampede Wrestlers exemplifies the problem. apparent victims of wrestling, its high risk lifestyle or both. Bret Hart's younger brother Owen plunged more than 70 feet to his death in Kansas City during a daredevil stunt to repel into the ring from the roof. Among those who had fatal heart attacks, Andre the Giant, Biff Wellington, Gary Albright, Greg Gilles, all in their early or mid 40s. Brian Pillman's coronary at 35 was attributed to drug abuse. David Sheldon collapsed and died at 43 of unknown causes. The Junkyard Dog had a well-known drug problem, and was killed in a car crash. And then there is Davy Boy Smith, the Dynamite Kid's partner, dead of a heart attack at 39. Steroid abuse was identified as a likely factor. As for the Dynamite Kid he would become a mere shadow of his former self, no longer able to wrestle, reduced to watching his old matches all day on television.

Smadu: When that wrestling ability diminished, so, too, did his self-esteem, his self worth. I remember him watching especially the Japanese tapes, tiger mask matches, just over and over, it was an obsession with him, and just regretting that he couldn't do that anymore. It was quite sad actually.

“Weighing 229 pounds, Chris Benoit.”

Reporter: Though Chris Benoit was still on top of the wrestling world, by 2005 his past seemed eerily like that of his former idol. He reconciled with his wife, but Benoit's father says his son suffered severe depression, fuelled by steroids, taking painkillers after a broken neck with frequent bouts of paranoia.

Mike Benoit: Chris was totally paranoid. They said that the chauffer that used to drive him home from the airport said Chris would tell him take a different route. I don't want people to follow me home. They had their son in a lockdown school so no one could kidnap him. They moved into this new house with large fencing all around when -- two trained German shepherds to protect the house because people were after them.

Reporter: By the end of 2005 Benoit had attended the funerals of over a dozen former wrestling colleagues. But there was one from which he wouldn't recover. His best friend in wrestling was Eddie Guerrero. In November that year he died and collapsed of heart disease after a history of substance abuse. He was only 38. For Chris Benoit it was more than he could take.

Mike Benoit: All of a sudden Chris starts quoting scripture, which is so unlike him and how did I find out about that? By reading his diary back in 2005.

Reporter: That diary begins just days after Guerrero's funeral. Weaving biblical passages with dark thoughts. Written directly to his dead friend.

Muchnick: I think we can see that the Eddie Guerrero death was the beginning where he started to lose touch with reality. He was writing letters to Guerrero from the beyond. Some of it has tings of Christianity, anxiety and depression are seen.

Reporter: The diary also contains repeated references to his wife and son, but where Benoit seems in despair addressing Guerrero, he writes lovingly about Nancy, his best friend, and little boy Daniel, the light of his life. What do you believe might have been the role of Daniel in this?

Mike Benoit: Chris loved Daniel. He didn't love him. He adored him. Absolutely adored him. Chris would be out on the road, he would be dragging his rear end. You'd talk to him, he would seem down, depressed, just, you know, and you would say, boy, this life you know is sure taking it out of him. I don't know why he doesn't get out. He would say how is Daniel doing and his demeanor would change. It would light up because he loved that kid so much.

Reporter: For Mike Benoit, it would make what happened next even more incomprehensible. On June 25th, 2007, police in a suburb of Atlanta were called to the Benoit house. Inside they found Nancy Benoit and seven year-old Daniel strangled in their beds. Chris Benoit was hanging in his home gym, suspended from the neck by the steel cables he used for his workouts.

Mike Benoit: My world was extremely black. Our family, I mean, it was unbelievable. It was horrific. I just -- I can't tell you how bad it was.

Reporter: If the untimely deaths of so many other wrestlers hadn't grabbed public attention this one would.

Newsreader: Police say Benoit murdered his wife and son on the weekend, then killed himself.

Police Chief: It struck me as somewhat bizarre, perhaps that he would be in the home with deceased bodies for some length of time.

Reporter: To those who knew him best an agonizing mystery. Even with his wife's accusations of domestic violence.

Mike Benoit: That was plausible. But his son, something was very wrong.

Reporter: And friends like Jake Roberts also believed there had to be more to the story.

Jake Roberts: When I go to heaven, wherever I go, and god looks at me and I say, god, devil, did he do these horrible things that the public and the press, whoever is saying he did that, you know what I am going to tell you, you are a liar, I don't believe that. Not the man I knew.

Reporter: Jake the Snake may be on to something as we'll show you after the break when doctors begin to unlock the secret hidden inside Chris Benoit's brain.

Vince McMahon: Last night on Monday Night Raw the WWE presented a special tribute show recognizing the career of Chris Benoit. However, now some 26 hours later, the facts of this horrific tragedy are now apparent.

Reporter: The day after the discovery of Chris Benoit's home in Atlanta, world wrestling boss Vince McMahon began to distance himself from his former champion. The police now knew it had been a double murder and a suicide, that unfolded over three days. Benoit killed his wife, then his child, placed bibles next to their bodies, then stayed in the house before hanging himself.

Vince McMahon: Therefore, other than my comments there will be no mention of Mr. Benoit's name tonight.

Reporter: On the world wrestling web site Benoit highlights were erased, merchandise with his name removed from sale.

Nancy Grace: Did anabolic steroids play a role in the deaths of Benoit and his family.

Reporter: Speculation about what happened and why was rampant.

O'Reilly Factor: Few years ago she filed a domestic violence complaint against Benoit. Also, anabolic steroids found in the house.

Reporter: The public consensus seemed overwhelming, It was the steroids.

Nancy Grace: Even Congress, believe it or not, is poised to act to bring down the hammer on steroid use within pro wrestling.

Reporter: Chris Benoit's physician was arrested for improper prescriptions. It reportedly been given Benoit almost a year supply of steroids every month. The loss of his daughter-in-law and grandson at the hands of his only child was more than Mike Benoit or any parent could bear.

Mike Benoit: I wish he would have died of a heart attack or a car crash or anything. It would have been much easier to handle than what we were given.

Reporter: At the time, like almost everyone else, he believed it could have well been the steroids. But some who knew the wrestling world from the inside weren't so sure. Like Chris Benoit's old friend Bret Hart.

Bret Hart: Well, personally I have seen wrestlers that were on steroids and had short fuses and stuff but the kind of temper and rage that would come out, kind of guys that tip your car over in a parking lot, but they wouldn't actually fight you or do anything to you physically. I don't think steroids made you lose your sense of right and wrong.

Reporter: The week after the murders, full of anguish and doubt was the longest of Mike Benoit's life. Then for what must have seemed like the millionth time the phone rang. Someone else offering condolences. The caller introduced himself as Chris Nowinski. He said he was a former wrestler and he had a question about Mike's son.

Chris Nowinski: I actually spent the first two days trying to get somebody who already knew to make the go-between to make the introduction. I didn't think he would answer the phone.

Reporter: Nowinski was apprehensive because what he wanted to ask was could he have Chris Benoit's brain.

Mike Benoit: And I kept looking at the phone thinking is this the National Inquirer. Who Is this.

Reporter: Chris Nowinski wrestled under the name Chris Harvard. He was in fact a Harvard graduate. His career ended by a devastating boot to the chin.

Nowinski: It ended up basically cleaning my clock, giving me a concussion and progressively got worse to the point I couldn't hold a conversation.

Reporter: Now Nowinski suddenly suffered from violent nightmares that he often acted out.

Nowinski: I jumped off the bed and went into the wall and fell through the night stand. I didn't wake up for another 20 seconds. That's when I realized that I need to stop until I figure out what was going on with my brain.

Reporter: It wasn't until he visited his eighth doctor, a renowned neuro surgeon in Boston that he learned he had been suffering a series of undiagnosed concussions of the brain.

Nowinski: I found out, I didn't know what a concussion was. I called them dings and bell ringers when I would black out in the ring or see the sky actually go orange on me, the ceiling and I just always thought those were normal things.

Reporter: Nowinski's medical odyssey finally led him here, the University of West Virginia where he met Dr. Julian Bailes who'd studied athletes with concussions, thousands of them, along with Dr. Bennet Omalu.

Julian Bailes: What surprised us was the amount of mental and cognitive problems that they were having, and also depression.

Reporter: In Chris Benoit diary the musings on death, the paranoia about his son being kidnapped, his nightmares and constant fatigue were all depressive symptoms Dr. Bailes had found in many others. But Bailes and Omalu took the study of concussions further than anyone had. Searching for physical evidence in the brains of dead athletes who suffered head injuries. Not wrestlers, but football players.

Julian Bailes: If you read their life story, you will see a very common thread of failure in their personal life, failure in their business life, depression, suicide attempts, and then suicide completion, so they had a very common thread.

Reporter: The catalyst was the case of legendary Pittsburgh Steeler Mike Webster, winner of four super bowls, a coach with the Kansas City Chiefs. Towards the end of his career Webster couldn't remember where he lived and often slept in the chief's locker room. He wound up living in his truck, frequently zapping himself with a taser to try to stop his constant pain. Mike Webster was only 50 when he died of a heart attack. And the toll of other football fatalities the doctors found echoed the litany of dead

wrestlers. Among them former Steeler Terry Long, Pittsburgh lineman Justin Strzelczyk, former Philadelphia Eagle, Andre Waters. None had a history of depression. All committed suicide in the past few years after sustaining head injuries. Analysis of their brain tissue revealed the presence of a protein usually seen in the brains of elderly people with dementia, but almost never in normal middle aged men.

Reporter: Doctors say the probability of that abnormal brain protein being found in someone in their 30s or 40s is one in 100. But the researchers found it in every football player they studied who suffered concussions of the brain and then committed suicide. It was a groundbreaking discovery and subsequent peer review of the work done of Bailes and Omalu has been overwhelmingly positive. The conclusion football players are at great risk of profound behavioral changes caused by head injuries. Now Chris Benoit's suicide opened the door to include wrestlers.

Reporter: It was ex-wrestler Chris Nowinski who convinced the families of many deceased football players to grant permission for the doctors to study their brains. It's why he called Mike Benoit days after the death of his son Chris. Mike said he would get back to him. The next day he did.

Mike Benoit: I said, yes, I have decided and that's when it started.

Reporter: Chris Benoit's brain was driven from Atlanta to the University of Pittsburgh, and delivered to Dr. Bennet Omalu, who is amazed by what he saw.

Omalu: Chris Benoit's brain looked like the brain of an individual suffering from a specific type of dementia, and this type of dementia you see in people in their 80s or 90s, which was extremely unusual.

Reporter: That finding was consistent with each of the other athletes they studied. But what's more remarkable, and what's now being submitted for peer review before publication in a major medical journal is that the damage they found in Chris Benoit's brain was so extensive that the doctors believe he cannot be held responsible for the terrible deaths of his wife and son.

Julian Bailes: We think maybe that brain was in a behavioral sense disconnected, no longer able to cope with the normal life's events and stressors. We don't think it was roid or steroid rage. We think it's a different syndrome than that.

Nowinski: Every finding has been confirmed by other neuropathologists. I don't know one that came forward that said this isn't true.

Reporter: That didn't stop world wrestling boss Vince McMahon from going on CNN and rejecting the new research.

Vince McMahon: The findings themselves say Chris Benoit had the brain of an 85-year old man with dementia, and I would suggest to you that from a layman's standpoint Chris Benoit could not do what he did for a living, he could not function as a normal human being, he couldn't go to the airport. If, in fact, that report were accurate.

Reporter: For now the only specific response to all of this from Vince McMahon and world wrestling has been to ban hitting an opponent in the head with a chair. We wanted to ask about the alarming death rate among wrestlers and the issues raised by the new head injury research but the WWE refused our request to talk to Mr. McMahon. But the fundamental question raised by the research is potentially huge for wrestling. What exactly does vast revenue centre like the WWE owe its gladiators who bring in the fans, the ratings and the money and if the science and statistics are correct as they appear are systematically sustaining severe physical and mental damage to do it. Even those who survive carry scars from life in the ring. Bret the Hitman Hart retired in 2000. Shortly afterwards he suffered a stroke. Doctors say multiple concussions are a probable cause.

Bret Hart: The concussion was like saying you sprained your thumb. Tape it up and get out there. That will be okay. They don't take into account the fact that body slams or any kind of move when you have a concussion is another concussion.

Reporter: Back In Britain the man Chris Benoit emulated his entire career has so far survived too, though these days the Dynamite Kid is confined to a wheelchair in near constant pain. He admitted to CNN that he once put a shotgun under his wife's chin and threatened to pull the trigger. He now insists it didn't constitute violence.

Dynamite Kid: I don't think it was violence. I mean, I put a shotgun under her chin once, but I had no shells. I only pretended that.

Reporter: His ex-wife Michelle says life with him got so bad she not only contemplated suicide but taking her children with her.

Smadu: I went to get one of Tom's guns. Kept thinking what if one of us lives. Because number one, I didn't want any one to live with him anymore.

Nowinski: So we kind of...losing my train of thought here.

Reporter: Former wrestler Chris Nowinski whose own concussions were the key that unlocked Chris Benoit's secret found himself losing ground.

Nowinski: I thought I was getting over the 4 ½ years of headaches, and now they are getting worse again, and it's really -- can't work a full week anymore, losing entire days, it's not good.

Mike Benoit: I can't change what happened. I cannot change it. Can't bring my son back. Can't bring my daughter-in-law back. Can't bring my grandson back but I can make changes going forward.

Reporter: As for Chris Benoit's father, Mike, he knows whatever the doctors say happened to his son there will always be many others just like him, willing to do whatever it takes in a wrestling business too profitable to stop them unless forced to do it.

Mike Benoit: The wrestling industry will change and they will change dramatically because of what happened to Chris Benoit, and why will they change? Because it's going to make good business sense to change. They will not be able to afford the litigation that's going to take place over this. Period. End of story.

Reporter: There is more about a fight to the death on our web site. It's easy to access. Go to [cbc.ca/fifth](http://cbc.ca/fifth). A lot to see and watch there. Hope you will check it out.