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College Athlete Died of Head Trauma, Father Says

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Published: August 30, 2011

A 22-year-old football player for Frostburg State University in Maryland has died from [head trauma](#) sustained on the field, his father said.



Frostburg State University
Derek Sheely, a football player at Frostburg State University in Maryland, died on Sunday, nearly a week after passing out during a routine practice.

Nearly a week after passing out during a routine practice, fullback Derek Sheely died late Sunday at the University of Maryland R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore.

Kenneth Sheely, Derek's father, said in a telephone interview from the family's home in Germantown, Md., that he was told by doctors that Derek had sustained "severe head trauma."

Kenneth Sheely added: "I don't know how it happened. It doesn't really matter how it happened, personally. It's not going to change the situation with Derek. But I want to let it be known that he didn't have some kind of heart condition or other kind of condition. It was severe head trauma."

Liz Medcalf, a spokeswoman for Frostburg State, said Sheely had been participating in "regular drills" with his teammates Aug. 22 when he began feeling woozy. He was being helped off the field when he collapsed.

Kenneth Sheely said his son did not have any documented

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[concussions](#) or other head injuries that he was aware of, and he did not know if the death was a result of one or multiple blows to the head.

Two to five high school football players die each fall as a direct result of on-field brain injuries, but such deaths are rare among college players, according to research by the University of North Carolina National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research. Teenagers are known to be more susceptible to having multiple hits to the head result in brain bleeds and massive [swelling](#), a condition known as second impact syndrome, in large part because the brain tissue has not yet fully developed.

“There have been some older boxers who die from multiple blows leading to vascular engorgement,” said Dr. Robert Cantu, a neurosurgeon in the Boston area who is the medical director of [the North Carolina research group](#) and a recognized expert in athletic brain injuries.

“But the overwhelming majority of the world’s classic second-impact-syndrome cases are people 18 and younger,” Cantu said.

Given the rarity of second-impact syndrome among players of Sheely’s age, a different cause of death could be identified as facts of his case emerge.

Sheely was first taken to the emergency room at Western Maryland Regional Medical Center in nearby Cumberland and was later transferred to the shock trauma center in Baltimore when the severity of the injury was recognized. He was listed in critical but stable condition last Wednesday after multiple operations, according to hospital officials. But the pressure in his brain from swelling could not be alleviated.

“From my experience, the trauma team in Baltimore seemed to be outstanding; they did everything possible,” Kenneth Sheely said. “My son was a fighter, and he didn’t give up on any challenges. He had a very strong heart and a very strong will. And he fought as hard as he could against this head injury and we did everything we could, but ultimately the head trauma was too severe and the pressure couldn’t be controlled.”

The Sheely family notified university officials of the death in an e-mail late Sunday.

“Derek was a senior history and political science major, a student-athlete, a fullback on the Bobcat football team and a truly exemplary human being,” Jonathan Gibraltar, the university president, said in an e-mail statement. Coach Tom Rogish, Gibraltar continued, “told me that Derek was one student he never had to worry much about because he excelled both in the classroom and on the football field.”

Sheely transferred from Penn State after one year to play football at [Frostburg State](#), a

Division III program. He was named to the Atlantic Central Football Conference all-academic team in 2010. He was an honors student and was named a team captain for the coming season.

“My son was incredibly healthy,” Kenneth Sheely said. “He trained all summer. This was his senior year; this was going to be his last opportunity to play football. He was passionate about it. He drove himself to try and be as good as can be.

“We’re not blaming anybody; that isn’t our mission right now. But hopefully, somebody does make sure that if there’s a lesson to be learned and it can help protect somebody else, then that should be done. I wouldn’t want my son to just die in vain, and if something can be made better, through education or equipment or whatever it is, that would be helpful.”

Alan Schwarz contributed reporting.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 31, 2011, on page B16 of the New York edition with the headline: College Player’s Death Caused By Head Injury, His Father Says.

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