

Concussion the Film

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Several months ago there was a minor flap over the fact that the National Football League was given the right to delete parts of the film "Concussion" before its general release to the public. At the time many, including myself, feared that the NFL would defang the bite of the film. It did not. In fact it's hard to imagine what the NFL censored in "Concussion" given the devastating nature of the final product which is now in release.

Will Smith has the lead role as Dr. Bennet Omalu, the Nigerian doctor, who made the initial discovery of the existence of CTE in the brains of former NFL players whose lives had collapsed and ended at a relatively young age. The other major character in the film is Mike Webster whose life spiraled out of control. His eighteen year career as a center for the Pittsburgh Steelers endeared him to the football fans of that city, but his post-football life led to a major personality change, alcoholism, drugs, and lesser addictions, and destroyed his family life. His death was officially termed a heart attack but as the New York Times reported the psychological turmoil and physical problems were the result of repeated blows to the head.

Dr. Omalu worked as a forensic pathologist in the Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, coroner's office where he first encountered Mike Webster when he conducted the postmortem on Webster. In an examination of Webster's brain Omalu found "tau," a substance that strangles the brain and often personality changes as those experienced by Mike Webster. Omalu linked Webster's tragic end to the head trauma endured by Webster during his football career.

"Concussion" opens with a painful depiction of Webster's descent into his personal hell. Dr. Omalu is introduced at work where he will first encounter Mike Webster. From here the story opens out from Omalu's discoveries and into the world of science and the world of the National Football League. Omalu's life and work are the major focus of the film as he comes into conflict with the power of the NFL, the cult of football in America, and the corruption within the scientific community. It is a potent mix.

What is revealed is the fact that for close to two decades the NFL did its best to prevent any connection between the

concussions, the collapse of the lives of former players, and football. The NFL was aggressive in its effort to discredit any research making that connection. Repeatedly the film pounds away in subtle and not so subtle scenes of head-to-head hits on football practice fields, in game highlights from the NFL, and within the lives and deaths of former players.

As Omalu's analysis gains traction the push back by the NFL grows. Omalu's boss is threatened by the FBI and IRS. Omalu's life in Pittsburgh is battered by threats to his employment that could lead to his deportation. He is subjected to threatening phone calls and his wife is harassed. Essentially what the NFL tried to do to Omalu was to dismantle his life in ways the lives of former NFL players were dismantled by brain diseases.

The story moves forward at a good pace, there is tension aplenty, and above all what comes roaring off the screen is both the power and the corruption of the NFL. If you think that it is unlikely that the NFL had the ability to get the IRS, FBI and immigration authorities to act on their behest you are an innocent. The NFL has strong connections with the political establishment and a very close relationship with the FBI through its security division which is populated by ex-FBI agents and administrators who maintain their connections to the Bureau.

In the end "Concussion" succeeds in telling the story of Bennet Omalu, warns of the dangers of concussions and football, and displays the power of the NFL and its willingness to sacrifice people's lives in the maintenance of their cultural dominance. "Concussion" will not destroy football in America; it should damage the credibility of the NFL, and lead everyone to understand the dangers inherent in this American sport and entertainment in which violence is an essential element.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you a Happy New Year and reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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