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Concussions

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It is a violent game. People who play football are going to be injured and suffer long term consequences. The longer you play football, the more likely you are to suffer from some degree of disability down the road.

We have known this for years. I can remember any number of television interviews with former players in their late 40s and early 50s. Some had difficulty walking due to damage to the knees, hips, and/or back. Some were in constant pain in some region of the body.

When asked: "Was it worth it?" nearly all of them replied in the affirmative. "Would they do it over again, knowing what they know now?" Again seldom without hesitation the answer was, "Yes." The psychic and financial rewards of sport at an elite level were worth paying the price.

I suspect that if a survey of fans asked, "Would you trade places with an NFL player regardless of consequences?" the response would be an enthusiastic "yes."

In the past decade the consequences of violent sport are being revealed as much more serious than previously thought, or at least previously admitted. In League of Denial Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru have detailed those consequences. More importantly they had exposed the lengths to which the National Football League went to suppress the evidence connecting concussions to football and brain damage to concussions. The league denied any connection at all for a decade or more going back to Paul Tagliabue's tenure as Commissioner.

It is a remarkable story that most people did not know unless they had been following the news of injury in the NFL very closely. The studies surfaced and the tragic cases mounted. The tales of drug addiction, mental illness, and suicides joined the growing list of consequences.

In early 2007 former New England Patriot linebacker and ten year veteran of the NFL, Ted Johnson, told *The New York Times* and Jackie MacMullan of the *Boston Globe* that at age 34 he was diagnosed with early signs of Alzheimer's. He accused Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick of sending him

back to contact drills four days after a concussion without medical clearance. The NFL met the accusation with silence.

In June of 2007 a Subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee heard testimony from former NFL players of their "broken bodies, brain damage, and empty bank accounts." The NFL's response was denial of any connection between brain damage and football. As we now know from League of Denial the NFL had been in denial since the early 1990s and remained in denial into 2009. At the same time the NFL Disability Board approved disability payments for those suffering from football related brain injuries as early as 1999, a *de facto* acceptance of the connection the league denied.

The NFL's responsibility and liability to its players will be determined by the courts. Its future responsibility is to make certain that everyone playing the game understands the risks, and to do everything possible to make the game as safe as possible. This will require some very tricky calculus because at the heart of the spectator appeal of NFL Football is the choreographed violence of the game. From the 1960 documentary, "The Violent World of Sam Huff," to the artistic portraits of NFL Films featuring bone crushing hits, violence was glorified and marketed by the NFL as a major attraction of the game.

The consequences for those who are just beginning to play football, as well as the responsibility of parents, are clear. There is mounting evidence of the connections between football and brain damage with, in some cases, tragic consequences. Parents need to be informed about the risks, including the evidence that indicates concussions are more common among the young. Parents then must decide if the risks for their child are worth the potential rewards, realizing that the major rewards go only to the extremely talented.

As more and more cases appear, it may be that more parents will keep their children out of football and lead them to other seemingly less violent sports. Current reports indicate that the number of children playing Pop Warner football is down. As more and more ex-players and public figures announce that they would not let their child play football, the pressure on parents and the pressure on the NFL will increase. Whether this pressure will continue and whether it will translate into fewer young boys playing the

game is uncertain. As with so much else in our society the attention span for any crisis is rather short.

In the end I suspect that football will survive. The young view themselves as indestructible, the allure of the game will remain strong, and the rewards of money and fame will continue to exercise a strong pull on the nation. Too often parents share the pro dream with their children, or what is worse, foist the dream on their children. Achieving football glory through ones child is a deep and dark impulse and one that too often subsumes parents.

Football is deeply rooted in our culture, and particularly in the cultural definitions of manhood. It is seductive and glamorous. Football is now the National Pastime and millions of people are obsessed with it. This could change, but if it does it will be a very slow evolution and it will require a fundamental cultural shift.

In the meantime the League that was in Denial will go on, the television ratings for the NFL will continue to skyrocket, and the pro dream will continue to entice the young.

It is not necessary for the NFL or anyone else to deny the connections that medical research has made because it is not so much that there is a League of Denial as there is a likelihood that a large segment of the nation will remain in denial.

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

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