

The NFL's Alternative Facts

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - The NFL's Alternative Facts
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One of the new buzz phrases spreading across the nation out of Washington is "alternative facts." For those of us who have lived through several administrations and any number of sporting scenes, "alternative facts" are quite a familiar commodity.

Going back to the Vietnam era, there was the now infamous claim, "we have turned the corner in Vietnam." When American troops were sent to Vietnam in massive numbers, they went as advisors not combatants. With Bill Clinton, we learned that a blow job was not sex. The Bush Administration complained that their critics were using "reality based facts." The number of examples from politics are infinite.

Advertising too, uses "alternative facts" routinely. Doctors recommend this or that elixir. Celebrities use only this toothpaste, unless of course they are paid more to use that toothpaste. Purveyors of lotions, colognes, and after shave guarantee that the man who uses these products will attract an endless array of beautiful women.

Then, there were the representatives from the tobacco industry who assured us all that smoking did not cause cancer, even though any number of medical studies showed otherwise. The tobacco industry had its own studies that had "alternative facts" that proved that there was no link between smoking and cancer.

This is pure and simple "lying." Some prefer the more polite term, "dissembling." Others call it spin. And now "alternative facts" has become the new operational term for lying.

This style of public discourse permeates Sportsworld.

For example, there is the football coach whose team is undefeated and about to play a team that is yet to win a game. We have heard this coach go on and on about how tough his upcoming opponent is and how his team will have to play their best to win. No one believes that, but the coach feels he needs these "alternative facts" to motivate his team.

For several decades now the National Football League has been a major dispenser of "alternative facts." This has been demonstrated on any number of issues, but probably the best known of them is their stance on concussions. The NFL has been described as "A League of Denial" on its position on concussions and that denial was supported by a constant use of "alternative facts."

One of the vehicles for denial was the NFL "Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee" formed in 1994 by then Commissioner Paul Tagliabue. The seriousness of this committee was signaled by the fact that it was chaired by a rheumatologist and there was not a single neurologist on the committee. Its primary function turned out to be denying that there was any connection between football, concussions, and brain diseases.

The Committee published a "medical" journal, *Neurosurgery* that filled its pages with studies showing that there was no connection between concussions in football and brain diseases

such as dementia or Alzheimer's. After Bennett Omalu and two others published an article connecting CTE and football, the NFL demanded a retraction and, failing to get one, mounted an attack on the professional qualifications and personal character of Omalu and his colleagues.

The more evidence that accumulated the more the NFL refused to acknowledge any connection and had plenty of "alternative facts" to show that there was no connection, or at least that no one had yet proven a connection. Denial and use of "alternative facts" continued even though the NFL knew there was a connection.

At a particularly stunning Congressional Committee hearing following the publication of a University of Michigan Study, Commissioner Roger Goodell testified that the NFL had been studying the issue for fifteen years and could find no connection between football and brain diseases. One committee member told Goodell he reminded her of those from the tobacco industry who had repeatedly come before Congress and denied any connection between tobacco and cancer. Remarkably, it has only been in the last year that an NFL spokesman has been willing to definitively say that there is a connection between football, concussions, and brain disease.

Another study in 2004 from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health showed that NFL offensive and defensive linemen, whose average weight has risen to over 300 pounds, had a 52 percent greater risk of dying from heart disease than the general population. The NFL response was that obesity was a problem beyond sports and affected all of society.

The league offered a different set of statistical measures, "alternative facts," to deny that 300 pound-plus linemen were obese.

So it is not surprising that in the last few weeks since the NFL issued its report on concussions and other injuries in the league, the numbers were greeted with some skepticism. The League reported that concussions were down 11.3 percent this season compared to last season's record high number. Over the past five years the decline in the number of concussions has been a more modest 6.5 percent.

To some, the fact that the numbers have declined is a red flag. With the increased awareness and scrutiny on concussions in the league, the expectation was that the numbers would increase. Among skeptics, there is a suspicion that some teams are under-reporting or that diagnostic practices are faulty.

If you have seen Cam Newton getting hit in the head repeatedly without a concussion, and if you saw Matt Moore of the Dolphins take a vicious hit in a playoff game with Pittsburgh with no concussion reported, you might be left to wonder about the accuracy of the numbers across the league.

As Groucho Marx's character in "Duck Soup" said, "Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?"

It's a tricky world in which we live.

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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