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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu



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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - DAMAR HAMLIN'S CARDIC ARREST
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The exact cause of Damar Hamlin's collapse following a tackle in Monday's night's NFL game between Cincinnati and Buffalo is not known. He remains in the Intensive Care Unit at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center. Millions of football fans watched this tragedy unfold on television along with all those in the Stadium. Millions more have seen replays and listened to discussions and reactions to the incident. What is known is that Hamlin experienced cardiac arrest and is now fighting for his life.

Football is a dangerous game. At the NFL level it is a violent game, a collision sport involving bodies of men of abnormal size and speed. Concussions, broken bones, and damaged organs are frequent and occasionally deadly.

Millions of football fans watch the NFL for entertainment. It is the most popular spectator sport in the United States, and violence is integral to its popularity. NFL Football is a multi-million-dollar entertainment in which large profits are made off the violent sport well beyond the confines of the stadium and the television networks.

In the 1970s, football surpassed all other sports and took over the title of "America's National Pastime." Since then, it has become a national obsession. From pee-wee football up through the NFL it is a game that is a more than a game but, in fact, a significant expression of American ideals. Concepts of masculinity are central to football. Coaches and parents call for players to "be a man," as they push young boys to play the game.

In the past decade or so the concern over brain injuries in contact sports, often focusing on football, has increased considerably. The studies of the brains of former players indicate that many of them suffered from Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) and the evidence strongly suggests that head trauma, such as concussion and repeated lesser pounding of the head, is the cause of CTE. The results can lead to an array of brain related diseases and behavior modification including violence, depression and suicide.

There is a long history of deaths in football that go back over a century. The football crisis of the early 20th century developed because of several deaths at the college level. This led to some reforms in the game. The NFL and other football

leaders have in recent years tampered with the rules and the equipment to make the game safe, or less dangerous. There have been incremental improvements as a result of these changes, but the basic violence of the game precludes ending the dangers.

There is some evidence that some parents of young boys have moved their children away from football. Whether this is a long-term change is not yet known. Despite warnings from doctors and researchers that pre-adolescents should avoid games with heavy contact, a large majority of parents continue to ignore the warnings.

As for the NFL, there have been changes. Rules and equipment have changed, and there is some evidence that these have reduced certain injuries. In addition, the NFL no longer markets the violence of the game. The slow-motion replays with musical accompaniment are no longer part of the television or NFL Films presentations. Television analysts are less inclined to dwell on the hard hits and collisions. And yet, the "violent hit" remains a reality, and players themselves often celebrate on the field following a hit that immobilizes an opponent.

Michael Oriard, in his large and excellent body of work on football at the college and NFL level, points out two factors that mitigate against change. First, is the size and speed of players. The 300-pound lineman is no longer an outlier and is 300-pounds of muscle. Second, the speed of the players has also increased. The simple rules of physics mean any collision will be more violent regardless of rule or equipment changes.

Oriard also points out the difficulty that faces the NFL or others holding a financial stake in football. Because part of the appeal of the game is its violence, its big hits and its dangers, any reduction of the violence could negatively affect the popularity of the game. The calculus of change presents a delicate balance between the appeal of the game and the safety of the game. For the NFL and others making a profit off the game, safety and popularity are often at cross-purposes.

This circles back to the fans. If the fans leave the game, the bottom line for many, well beyond the NFL, will be negatively impacted. So, what of the fans? Are they complicit in the injuries and deaths in the games? What of parents? Are they responsible for the injuries and deaths of their children in the game. Do fans have an obligation to walk away from the game? Steve Almond's *Against Football* is one of several books calling for fans to give up the game on moral grounds. If you go to Google there are hundreds of articles by fans explaining why they have stopped watching football. Does this mean that

America's obsession is ending? TV ratings and other sports polls do not lead to such a conclusion.

Listening to former player and ESPN analyst Ryan Clark commenting shortly after Hamlin's collapse was a sobering moment, reminding everyone that the dangers are many and that human beings are putting their lives on the line as entertainers. Among other things Clark said:

"I think football brings out the humanity in some of us some of the time," Clark said. "Not all of the time. Because we're asked to be barbaric. We're asked to have a certain level of machismo. We're asked to watch people lay on the ground that may not be able to get up themselves and step over them and be able to play the next snap. That's where we get to where we are. And for the first time, I think both teams and all of the people in the stands had to finally say, 'You know what? That little ball made of pigskin is the least important thing in the world to all of us right now.'"

Clark also talked about his love of the game that began when he held his first football at the age of four, and knew at that moment that football was his destiny. For Clark, it is the game; and more than the game, it is his teammates and his love for them that made football so important in his life.

Clark's extensive comments on ESPN are worth seeking out.

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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