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## Denial

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - Denial  
FEBRUARY 14, 2017

It seems that by now most everyone, except Patriot and Falcon fans, should have fully recovered from the Super Bowl. As someone who has seen all fifty-one of these championship games, this one certainly ranks among the most exciting, if not the best played game.

Having sufficiently talked about and digested this phenomenal display of football and all the attended madness of Super Sunday, it is now time to return to the normal madness of Sportsworld before once again plunging into the extreme madness of March.

With hockey season now in full blast the NHL Commissioner has offered his unconventional wisdom on the subject with which he should have plenty of familiarity, concussions. At the recent NHL All-Star game Gary Bettman reiterated his position that there is no proof that concussions in hockey cause any serious brain injury. The science, he says, has not yet made a definitive link.

It now appears that the torch carried so long by the tobacco industry, then passed to the NFL, has now been taken up by the NHL. The response of the NHL to a lawsuit against the league is to attack the science and harass the neurologists at Boston University. The NHL, reports the *New York Times*, has demanded information on their CTE research, unpublished data, and the names of those whose brains were donated for study, including those who did so on the condition of anonymity. This information

is protected by medical privacy laws, apparently not an issue for the NHL.

A few months ago Commissioner Bettman stated his position clearly: "The science regarding C.T.E., including the asserted 'link' to concussions . . . remains nascent, particularly with respect to what causes C.T.E. and whether it can be diagnosed by specific clinical symptoms. . . The relationship between concussions and the asserted clinical symptoms of C.T.E. remains unknown." This level of deliberately obtuse ignorance, or use of "alternative facts," although not unprecedented, surely puts Bettman in a category occupied by a select group of "know nothings" in the history of sport in North America.

Someone needs to pull the plug on this failed leadership by the Commissioner and the NHL Board of Governors. Now!

As noted here a week ago, the NFL reports that the number of concussions this season is down. Whether that drop is statistically significant or part of a trend is doubtful. In addition to concussions, career ending tears of the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) are down slightly, while those of the medial collateral ligament (MCL) are up slightly.

Meanwhile a number of NFL players attending a conference in Houston argued that they need marijuana to help manage the pain that they suffer each week and that accumulates over the course of a season. Ex-players say that pain killers were essential to survival in the NFL and that overuse often leads to addiction. Marijuana would be a way out of that conundrum.

In addition there is growing concern by parents over youth football. A number of neurologists are recommending that no one be allowed to play tackle football before the age of twelve. The reason is that the brain is still developing before that age and children in this stage of development are in greater danger of brain damage. Perhaps this is one reason why the numbers in youth football have dropped by 20 percent in the past six years.

Several recommended changes in football include reducing team size to between six and nine players, ending kickoffs and punts, decreasing the size of the field, and replacing the three-point stance with a crouch. Flag football is another option being used to try to reduce injuries while retaining the mental and some of the physical aspects of football.

These alternatives are seen by parents and football organizations, including the NFL, as important developments in trying to encourage continued participation and interest in youth football. The drop in participation is not good news for the NFL or the colleges who depend on this source for players.

There are others like Jon Gruden, ESPN Monday Night Football analyst and former head coach of the Oakland Raiders and Tampa Bay Bucs, who have not moved the discussion forward. At a recent presentation to high school coaches and administrators Gruden pulled out the "manliness" card. "There are a lot of geniuses that are trying to damage the game, and ruin the game. Do you feel it? There are a lot of geniuses that want to eliminate all sports, including recess. . . Not on my watch," proclaimed Gruden, distorting the argument with his set of "alternative facts." The group responded with "loud applause."

Meanwhile there has been a futile search for those trying to eliminate recess and all sports. Shame on you, Jon Gruden, you are better than that. Do you not have any of your former players suffering from some form of brain disease?

At his annual State of the League press conference and performance art, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell continued to maintain his near constant state of denial. This time around denial was delivered on several subjects including his relationship with Patriot's owner Robert Kraft and Tom Brady. Things are just fine on that front according to the Commissioner.

On the poor ratings for Thursday Night Football, everything will be fine going forward. As to the decline in television ratings this season, it is a bump in the road due to some extraordinary circumstance such as the Cubs run to the World Series and high interest in the presidential election. On the use of marijuana Goodell avoided the subject when asked about it.

Most remarkable of all no one asked a question about concussions or even mentioned the subject. Is the sporting press as negligent as the league on this subject? Or have they decided this issue is old news? This may be as big a failure as any of Goodell's transgressions. No doubt the Commissioner and NFL officials are quite happy not to have to talk about this dicey subject.

The Commissioner continues to exhibit his wooden personality at these events, although as Peter King of *Sports Illustrated* notes Goodell has generally stayed out of public view. This may be the best thing he can do for his own public image.

As to his relationship with Kraft and Brady, all that anyone needed to know could be seen when Goodell forced a handshake on Robert Kraft and Tom Brady. Facial expressions and body language spoke volumes in the general category of "Well, that was awkward."

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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Addendum: I want to reiterate my admiration for the University of Connecticut team and Coach which I expressed a few weeks ago.