

Concussions and Football

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
Concussions and Football
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It is a story that won't go away. No matter how much many people would like it to, it will not. For several decades now the issue of concussions has been discussed, debated, lied about, and studied. The scientific studies, except those paid for by the National Football League and done by NFL employees, have shown some correlation and/or connection between head trauma, various symptoms of brain dysfunction, and football.

In the last few years, the connections have become more certain and dramatic, and the NFL has moved slowly and reluctantly away from outright denial to hedging their bets. Dramatic suicides, public revelations of memory loss by former players, and high profile lawsuits, have put the squeeze on the NFL commissioner. Still, the acceptance of the science by the NFL has been qualified and under the radar.

There have been some players leaving the NFL well before retirement age concerned about the future of their cognitive and motor skills. This has been primarily among those players who have experienced multiple concussions. Some have tried to stay on, but pressure from doctors, family, and friends have convinced some of them to leave.

Last week, John Urschel, an offensive lineman for the Baltimore Ravens, made his decision to retire after three seasons in the NFL. Apparently, he was moved by two developments. Two days prior to his announcement a study conducted by Dr. Ann McKee and her research team was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. It showed that of 111 brains donated by former NFL players

for the study, 110 had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (C.T.E.) which causes memory loss, confusion, dementia, and may be linked to a range of other disorders.

The other development that pushed Urschel to his decision was a severe concussion that he suffered in an on-field collision in 2015. Urschel is a mathematician who operates at an extremely high level and who is working on a Ph.D. at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the off-season. What initially disturbed him was that for several weeks after the concussion he could no longer exercise his mathematical skills at the highest level. His cognitive skills were impaired, and it frightened him.

Despite the scare, he returned to football for another season, but he did not forget what had happened to him. He was fully aware of the risks and even wrote a piece for *The Player's Tribune* explaining why he continued to play football. He wrote that he loved the game and loved hitting people. It gave him a rush to physically dominate the player opposing him. He didn't need the money, he didn't need the fame or celebrity. He needed the game. He also said that he knew objectively he should not be taking the risks he was taking.

Two days after the *New England Journal of Medicine* published the McKee Study and it was reported in the mainstream press, John Urschel decided it was time to walk away from football. He said that this was the right decision for him at this time, so he was returning to work on his Ph.D., and he would not be giving interviews.

Urschel is not the first NFL player to walk away from the game, nor will he be the last. How many more will leave

remains to be seen. How many it will take to have a major impact on the game also remains to be seen.

What is already impacting the NFL is the first of what will be a parade of lawsuits brought against the league by former players and their families. There has been a major settlement reached in the first of these cases involving hundreds of players and billions of dollars. It may be that the NFL is so awash in money that it can sustain these losses without being irreversibly damaged, but that remains to be seen.

By virtue of terms of the settlement, the NFL has been able to escape having to admit to any wrongdoing involving withholding information from its players. The NFL can also skate over the fact that did its best to discredit any studies suggesting the concussion/brain trauma connection inherent in football and that it did its best to spread disinformation on the issue.

Meanwhile, Roger Goodell continues to speak piously about his concerns for player safety and the need to attack the problem with rule and equipment changes. This will not make football a "safe" activity. Football and many other sports cannot be made "safe" because they are inherently violent, and their appeal is built upon the violence and risk it embodies.

So, it was interesting the other day when Roger Goodell was a participant at a fan forum run by the New York Jets. During a question and answer session involving fans, Goodell was asked about the recent C.T.E. study. He delivered the usual line about his concern, that much remains unknown, and cited rules changes to reduce risks. Sitting next to Goodell was Jets rookie Jamal Adams who

said that he understood safety concerns, but as a defensive player he felt the changes were going too far.

Adams then went on to say that he lived and breathed football and that he was passionate about the game, adding, "Literally, I would – if I had a perfect place to die, I would die on the field." Some in the crowd applauded. No one pointed out that the likelihood of dying on the field was extremely small compared to the likelihood of dying a slow excruciating death or having a severely impaired life in his later years. As for Roger Goodell, he showed no reaction, and when asked about it later said Adams was simply expressing his passion for the game, and the fans their enthusiasm for it.

So what can be made of these developments of the last few days? I doubt there are any clear answers. It is interesting to me that in both the case of John Urschel and Jamal Adams the linchpin of their comments is their passion for the game of football. As for the C.T.E. study, it remains the "canary in the mine-shaft" bearing a warning about the risks and costs of head trauma.

Each player or parent of a player will have to assess the meaning of the study and weigh the risks.

As for the NFL, transparency would be a positive development, but decades of dissembling probably have put that ideal out of reach.

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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