

Football: Combat as Spectator Sport

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Football is the modern-day equivalent of violent chariot races in ancient Rome, the most popular "sport" at the time, mano a mano, no holds barred.

Extreme violence defines modern-day US and Canadian football, especially at the professional level – what television doesn't show, what major media don't discuss, including longterm physical damage to many players.

Some experience disabling injuries, others traumatic head ones caused by concussions. Powerful bodies smashing into each other disrupt normal brain functioning, affecting learning, thinking and other cognitive abilities.

Affected players are at greater risk of developing Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia.

Short-term fame and fortune are poor compensation for spending later years dependent on others for care – a deplorable state.

Mike Boryla is a former Philadelphia Eagles Pro Bowl quarterback in the 1970s – now passionately opposed to the sport he excelled in.

His Disappearing Quarterback one-man 75-minute autobiographical play on why he walked away from the game he loved is a scathing account of how it brutalizes players.

He finished law school he left to play pro football, later became a lawyer and mortgage banker. He suffered three concussions during his playing days, euphemistically called getting "dinged."

Since retiring from the game, he saw former teammates and other NFL players suffer from the longterm effects of serious injuries.

Boryla left the game after five years in the NFL to avoid debilitating injuries many others sustain, including disabling ones and shortened lifespans.

A 2013 Harvard University study showed on average former NFL players die nearly 20 years younger than the US average for men.

The study examined the effects of repetitive brain traumas, torn knee and other ligaments, other serious injuries, post-career arthritic joints, along with damage from longterm acute pain and chronic use of potent painkillers.

It's not a pretty picture, serious health issues far more commonplace than most people outside the game realize.

Many former players struggle with debilitating joint pain, requiring longterm use of powerful painkillers to control.

“(P)rofessional football players in both the United States and Canada have life expectancies in the mid-to late-50s,” Harvard researchers explained.

How much pay is enough to risk life and limb on the gridiron? How much is a 20-year shorter lifespan on average worth? How much is enough to compensate for longterm pain and/or disability?

In the 1960s, Philosophy Professor Emeritus John McMurtry played professional football in Canada. In 1971, he wrote a scathing indictment of the sport, titled “[Kill](#) ‘Em! Crush ‘Em! Eat ‘Em Raw,” saying:

Football “is a sport in which body wreckage is one of the leading conventions...(B)ody shattering is the very point of football.”

Football lingo is the language of combat.

“Players and fans alike revel in the spectacle of a combatant felled into semiconsciousness, ‘blindsided,’ ‘clothes-lined’ or ‘decapitated.’ ”

Crowds roar when players are “smeared,” “knocked silly,” “creamed,” “nailed,” “broken in two,” or even “crucified,” the more violent, the more fans love it, mindless of how destructive to human bodies.

McMurtry had torn knee ligaments at age-13, explaining that “injuries came faster and harder. Broken nose (three times), broken jaw...ripped knee ligaments again.”

“Torn ligaments in one ankle and a fracture in the other...Repeated rib fractures and cartilage tears...More dislocations of the left shoulder than I can remember.”

“Occasional broken or dislocated fingers and toes. Chronically hurt lower back...Separated right shoulder (needled with morphine for the games). And so on.”

“The last pro game I played...I had a recently dislocated left shoulder, a more recently wrenched right shoulder and a chronic pain center in one leg.”

“I was so tied up with soreness I couldn’t drive my car to the airport. But it never occurred to me or anyone else that I miss a play as a corner linebacker.”

“By the end of my football career, I had learned that physical injury -giving it and taking it - is the real currency of the sport. And that in the final analysis the ‘winner’ is the man who can hit to kill even if only half his limbs are working.”

Football is combat by other means, “a warrior game with a warrior ethos...smash and be smashed.”

McMurtry left pro-football in 1962. An academic career teaching philosophy followed.

In June 2001, he was named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (FRSC) by his peers for outstanding contributions to the study of humanities and social sciences.

Professional and college football may be more violent today than decades earlier – players bigger, perhaps stronger and faster.

The game is big business at both levels, culminating for the pros on Super Bowl Sunday annually.

It's the most over-hyped entertainment spectacle of the year, audience size far exceeding Oscar night.

Players come and go. Profits for wealthy owners continue. The human wreckage from America's game goes largely unreported and unnoticed.

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