

When is the Price of “Winning:” High Schools are Putting their Athletes in Danger

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Who can deny the compelling drama of sports, where we can all get caught up in the moment, forget everything else, and consider that one catch or one tackle can change the course of events, leading to glory and joy or heartbreak. There is no question that sports at any level provide key benefits to human development, from learning discipline and dealing with setbacks to teamwork. But sports at the amateur should be about just that, helping young people to develop physically and mentally. All too often, the interests of the athletes get subsumed under the glory of the coach, the school, and the fans.

Such is the case with football, which the NFL has reluctantly admitted may cause long-term brain damage. The images of boxers such as Mohammed Ali with Parkinson's are now matched by the equally haunting images of retired football players who are unable to cope with the brain injuries, living tortured physical, mental, and family lives. If the suicide of stars such as Junior Seau is not enough to wake people up to the dangers, what is? We continue to be in a collective denial about the sport, to the detriment of a generation of young athletes.

The medical science around concussions has updated considerably in the past decade. Concussions, we were taught, were temporary symptoms including tremors and mental confusion due to a trauma to the head. They would go away after some rest. The fact is that we now know that repeated traumas to the head can have cumulative effects, leading to the term chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) as documented in a number of ex NFL players. Brain damage in boxers was found some 75 years ago, however evidence only came when in 2005 when a few deceased NFL players' bodies were autopsied given their unexpected and sudden deterioration. Autopsies of deceased players showed lasting brain damage due to the number of head traumas they suffered during their career. In a 2013 paper by McKee et. al, of the post-mortem brains of 85 athletes, including 50 football players, 5 hockey players, 8 boxers, and one wrestler, 68/85 were found to have CTE, or 80%! In all cases of CTE, the victims suffered repetitive head traumas. This has led to discussion about stopping the use of heading among young soccer players, but the implications are much larger for head contact sports such as football and hockey.

There is still some debate about how many blows are required to cause CTE, and one can not say that all who play such sports will end up with CTE, Alzheimer's, dementia, or some of the other debilitating conditions seen among NFL players and boxers. However, we also know that young developing brains are more susceptible to later effects; this is backed up by a number of emerging scientific studies which find that the earlier the head trauma, the greater the susceptibility to long-term damages. They also find possible short-term effects, such as hyperactivity and conduct disorder. Even though these studies need to be replicated on a larger scale, there is sufficient evidence to err on the side of caution until and unless we see some evidence on the other side. Because the damage tends to happen later in life, parents may

dismiss the effects in the short-term. See the references below for a starting point on the emerging science.

Taking care of our kids should be the sacred duty not just of parents but every school. But the evidence does not seem to matter to people who should know better because of their selfish ego. If potential future brain damage is not motivation enough, consider that some 3,000 retired NFL players filed a lawsuit against the NFL and were awarded an estimated \$765 million in 2015 (\$5 million/player with symptoms). However, many others did not accept the terms, and legal action is pending. Simply put, they point out that the NFL knew about the risks years ago and did nothing about it, the same situation now facing those in our schools. It is one thing to have an adult NFL player sign his potential future health away in a waiver form, and another to expect that a kid can make such a decision, or a parent for them. And what kid is going to turn down the glory and pressure of their coaches if everyone else is doing it? Not many.

We don't have to give up the glory of sports to keep our kids safe. But at some point, coaches, school administrators, and parents need to realize winning isn't the end all be all. How you win is important, but even more important is, what is the lasting value for the vast majority of kids in amateur sports who will not become professional athletes? We should not sacrifice their lasting health for our fleeting perceptions of glory.

Selected References

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