

Bryan Brimhall

Dr. Christensen

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A Brain-Rattling Experience

In a recent radio interview, Baltimore Raven's safety Bernard Pollard expressed his feelings about the current status of the NFL saying,

From what I see, we're gonna be running around with helmets and flags on in about seven year. It's getting out of hand. This is not powderpuff football, this is not flag football. This is a violent sport. And it's a fun sport — we all love playing this game. And we're blessed by God to even go out there and display our talent to the world, but at the same time you can't sit there and say, 'We want guts, we want glory, we want heart.' You can't give a player heart but at the end of the day you tell him, 'Well, hold on but be careful when you go to make that hit.' We wear helmets and shoulder pads. That means you're supposed to go knock somebody around. We ain't wearing flags. (qtd. in Smith)

Although there are many players and fans out there that agree with Pollard and his claim that the NFL is turning into flag football, as someone who has grown up around sports and has first had knowledge of the game of football, I would not go as far as to say that it is becoming "flag football." However, medical research is providing concrete evidence supporting the claims that football needs to alter its policies in order to protect its players from short term and long term life changing injuries.

Throughout history, medicine has influenced almost every aspect of society in one way or another. Tobacco, cigarettes in particular, up until the mid-20th century were socially accepted and were widely believed to have multiple health benefits and to prolong life. It wasn't until 1964, when the Surgeon General's report "Smoking and Health" was released, that the true effects of smoking started to be revealed to the public (Randall). Thanks to medical research, the tobacco industry in the U.S. has gone from being one of the most profitable and powerful industries in history to a major public health concern, even though tobacco companies long denied the claims that it causes cancer among other health problems.

The more medical evidence that is provided to prove that a certain habit or activity is harmful to our health, such as smoking, the more willing society becomes to make the necessary changes in order to preserve it. Medical evidence has drastically changed things as simple as what shoes people buy to things such as what car they drive or what food they eat. It is now even influencing the sports society choose to participate in, such as football.

The government still allows the sale of tobacco products, despite the medical evidence about tobaccos harmful effects, but it has placed certain rules and regulations that the tobacco industry must abide by in order to continue to sell its products. They have to place warning labels on almost every item produced. Football, the NFL especially, faces a similar situation when it comes to the health risks that are involved with the game, and its obligation to the players to do everything possible to insure their safety.

Pollard mentioned that football, “is a violent sport. And it’s a fun sport — we all love playing this game. And we’re blessed by God to even go out there and display our talent to the world” (qtd. in Smith). Like smoking cigarettes, there are health risks involved with the game of football, and the NFL needs to place boundaries on the game in order to reduce the amount of risk involved. In the film *Head Games*, Christopher Nowinski, a former college football player and concussion activist, stated that “this is a major public health issue. Radical measures are needed in order for football to continue safely.”

As more and more evidence is gathered proving the health risks in football, and more and more players lives are being changed because of it, the NFL has begun to recognize the evidence that the medical world is providing and the need for extreme changes to be made to policies and procedures. Thousands of injuries occur on the football field from the professional level to the local peewee leagues each season, and the most common and arguably one of the most devastating injuries suffered by thousands of players is a concussion.

The Indianapolis Colts drafted Austin Collie, a wide receiver from Brigham Young University in the fourth round of the 2009 NFL draft. Austin’s future looked bright and his checkbook looked even brighter. But after three incomplete seasons in the league and multiple concussions sustained on the field, his future and his dreams came to a brain-rattling stop. Austin had suffered from multiple concussions and, although subconsciously aware of the health risk involved with playing football, there was a lack of boundaries set by the NFL concerning concussion; consequently, medical

professionals have advised Austin to walk away from the game to preserve his personal health (Harmon).

The medical world describes a concussion as a minor traumatic brain injury (TBI) often caused by being struck in the head with enough force to rattle or shake the brain. Concussions are common injuries that occur in most sports but have become extremely common in the football and publically seen in the NFL where players constantly collide with their helmets with enough force to rattle the brain.

Before the year 2011, players suffering from a concussion were put through a series of minor tests before being allowed to return to play, not thinking twice about the potential long-term effects of the injury such as dementia and brain deterioration (chronic traumatic encephalopathy) (Sugra). Although the NFL introduced a new concussion policy in 2011, attempting to place some form of boundaries to increase player safety, the new policy still fails to address the seriousness of this particular injury and the long-term effects it has on players and their families' lives. This attempt to protect the players is similar to the tobacco companies' attempt to hide the major health effects from the public by simply stating that smoking *can be hazardous to one's health* without revealing the true effects of tobacco products.

Before the NFL instituted the new concussion policy, players who had suffered a concussion were asked to follow the finger of the team trainer with their eyes as he moved it up and down and side to side. If the player was able to follow the finger with a limited amount of difficulty and no major signs of trauma, he was cleared to return to play. In 2011, quarterback Colt McCoy suffered a violent helmet-to-helmet hit, causing a concussion. Colt was taken off the field by the team's medical staff and then returned to

the field after only two plays. Proving true the statement from Pollard that football is violent but also proving true the lack of boundaries in the NFL; similar to the tobacco companies' lack of warning before the 1960's. The failure of the medical staff to properly test and diagnose Colt's injury put him at major risk for an even more serious injury and sparked a large investigation on concussion awareness and prevention which led to the NFL's new policy on concussions.

Concussion symptoms do not always present themselves immediately after the accident, causing the medical staff to misdiagnose the player and allow him to return to play before completely knowing what the true problem is. Charles B. Brimhall, a behavioral psychologist at the Head and Neck Clinic in Provo, Utah, in a personal interview, commented on concussions by saying,

Concussions are extremely dangerous and most of the cases we treat dealing with concussions are because of sports, particularly football. Players and people in general who have suffered a concussion often present themselves with symptoms like headaches, vomiting, the wobbles or balance problems, sensitivity to light or noise, difficulty remembering and difficulty concentrating. (Brimhall)

These symptoms often present themselves days after the accident so attempting diagnosis a concussion like the one made with Colt McCoy in no way allows enough time to completely understand the seriousness of the concussion (Lovell).

Athletes who are tested and cleared to play using inadequate tests are oftentimes at risk for a second concussion, or what is known as Second Impact Syndrome, due to the effects from the first concussion on the brain and is caused by the slightest jarring or movement of the head. Because of the fragile state of the brain from the first concussion,

the second impact stops the brain's ability to regulate the amount of blood that is pumped through it. This causes a build up of blood that can lead to a herniated brain and death. The player might not show signs or symptoms of Second Impact syndrome right away, but because of the seriousness of the injury, medical attention is needed immediately. Unfortunately, medical attention is often times not administered because of the "importance of the game," exposing once again the desperate need for stronger boundaries to reduce such risks (Zeigler).

Effects of concussion on the brain can occur instantly or they can also present themselves years after the player has retired from the league. Jim McMahon knows all too well what a concussion feels like, having suffered from multiple diagnosed concussions during his career in the NFL. Much like Austin Collie, Jim McMahon made a name for himself as a player at Brigham Young University. In the early 80's he led the football team to two Holiday Bowl appearances, and twice being selected as an All-American. His achievements at the college level led him to a promising 15-year career in the NFL and two Super Bowl championships. But Jim's achievements in football came at a heavy price, and he is now facing an uphill battle with dementia as a result of the countless brain-rattling blows he received while playing (Roselle).

McMahon has not battled on the football field since 1996, but battles every day with short-term memory loss because of the many concussions he suffered during his career. McMahon is among a large group of both former and current NFL players who have filed a lawsuit against the league claiming, "The league failed to properly treat concussion and concealed information about the long term effect." McMahon said the whole reason behind the lawsuit is because "the league knew the effects of concussion

and kept the information from the players” (qtd. in Smith). Similar to the lawsuit filed against the tobacco companies because of their failure to recognize and warn about the health effects that come with smoking.

Effects like the memory loss that Jim McMahon is suffering from can be considered minor compared to three cases of players whose head trauma led them to take their own lives. Among those three was one of the most respected and loved players of all time, Junior Seau. Seau was found dead in his home in San Diego California on May 2, 2012 by a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest and was later diagnosed with a degenerative brain disease caused by brain trauma known as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Similar to Junior Seau, Dave Duerson, a former teammate and close friend of Jim McMahon, was found dead with a gunshot wound to the chest and a note asking that his brain be donated to the research of football head injuries. Seau and Duerson were both part of the lawsuit against the NFL (Bishop).

In 2009 the commissioner of the NFL, Roger Goodell stood in front of the House Judicial Committee and was heavily scrutinized on the NFL’s concussion policy, which led Goodell to make several drastic changes to concussion protocol and concussion research and development. The NFL pledged one million dollars to concussion research and instituted a rule stating, “Each team was required to make an independent doctor available to examine players and determine whether a player should return to play after sustaining a concussion (Hanna).”

These changes led the NFL to finally release a statement linking concussion sustained on the field to long-term brain problems saying, “It’s quite *obvious* from the medical research that’s been done that concussions . . . lead to long-term problems.”

(Hanna). Like the tobacco companies and their product's link to cancer, medical evidence led to the NFL take full responsibility for the link between football and major health problems. Even though this statement was long overdue, and changes had been made concerning concussions, the NFL's new policy still does not acknowledge the seriousness of concussions and the effects they were having on players' lives.

When Colt McCoy returned to the game two plays after he had suffered a major concussion, the NFL once again reviewed its policy and made drastic changes to it in order to protect players even more. In addition to the team trainers, the NFL now requires a third-party athletic trainer to exam the player before he is cleared to return to play and has hired personnel specifically to monitor for illegal hits, and players showing signs of a concussion. If a player has been diagnosed with a concussion and has not been cleared by the third party, he is then required to sit out one game or until cleared to play by the medical staff.

The medical world has just begun to understand the true effects of concussions on the brain and as more evidence is gathered, more people are beginning to question the safety of such activities and whether or not it is worth it to participate. In the movie *Head Games*, Dr. Douglas Smith was asked how many concussions were too many. His response was that "one is too many" (*Head Games*). Although Dr. Smith expresses his opinion and supports it with medical evidence, millions of Americans continue to participate in football, shrugging off the warnings that have been provided by the medical world.

Because of the seriousness of concussions and the strength of the medical evidence that has been shown linking head trauma sustained during football to short-term

and long-term medical issues, the NFL has fortified its efforts to protect and prevent such injuries from happening. But like Pollard said, “This is a violent sport. And it’s a fun sport — we all love playing this game” (qtd. Pollard). Too many people across the country and throughout the world enjoy the violence that is involved in football and, although there are serious health risks involved, they are still willing to go out and compete. Like the tobacco companies’ efforts to warn consumers about the harmful effects of smoking through direct messages printed on the package and nationwide media, millions of people continue to willfully consume tobacco products despite the warnings and definitive medical evidence on the harmful effects.

Some level of health risk will always be involved in sports, especially football. Despite the medical world’s efforts to persuade the NFL to change in order to reduce these risks, there is nothing that can be done to eliminate them completely. As more medical evidence is gathered, more boundaries must be set like has been done with the tobacco industry in order to protect players at all levels from such life changing injuries. Football has not changed enough to support the claim that it is turning into “flag football,” but medical evidence is causing certain changes to be made, leading the NFL and ultimately all of football in a safer direction (qtd. in Smith).

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