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## American Football: A Truth to Tell

Louis Ascencio

*Whittier College*, [lascenci@poets.whittier.edu](mailto:lascenci@poets.whittier.edu)

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## **American Football: A Truth to Tell**

The National Football League (NFL) is the biggest sports organization in the country, while football is the most popular sport in America. According to zippia.com, the 32 franchises in the NFL generated a total revenue of 17.19 billion dollars. This number saw a great increase by five billion from a COVID impacted season in the previous year. Despite a pandemic season causing a downfall, the NFL continues to aggressively expand its brand on a global scale. Some liken our football culture to a religion, drawing similar parallels. “It would in fact be very easy to classify football as a religious faith because of the impact it has upon those who follow it with such passion,” said Illya McLellan in a Bleacher Report article in 2009. It’s almost blasphemous to not participate in the weekly ritual that is Sunday football.

Doing so often requires some cognitive dissonance. While we take in the spectacle of violent competition, we avert our eyes to some of the league's growing problems. Among these problems, lack of diversity in leadership, gruesome injuries, a growing mass of data suggesting football players suffer widespread traumatic brain injuries, etc. My research will examine why the NFL continues to have such a hold on our culture despite the mounting evidence that football is bad news. I will also look at possible solutions and alternatives to the stranglehold American football exerts on our public conscience.

It all starts with the formation of the National Football League, the league that popularized American football. The NFL started in 1920, a league that was known as the American Professional Football Association (APFA) including ten teams across four states. These teams came together in Canton, Ohio, to create this league. The league would then take on its current name, the National Football League, in the year of 1922. The league would outlast many rival organizations to survive up until now. Facing competition such as the American

Football League (AFL). In 1970, when the NFL and AFL merged together, things started to take off for the NFL. The merger between the two organizations resulted in a league consisting of 26 teams (16 teams from the NFL and 10 teams from the AFL) with six new teams being added in future years to come.

After the NFL secured its spot as “the” football league in America, its rise in popularity grew over the decades of 1960s and 1970s. The significance and impact the NFL had on America was unlike any other sport in the country. The league solidified its position as America’s top sport, it was a spectacle amongst fans. 102 years, and counting, of history for the National Football League. A league that has seen glory, spectacle, success, but also, protest and outrage over its disparity.

2023 brought the 57th annual Super Bowl event. Fifty-seven years of annual tradition where families come together to watch the most anticipated matchup of the football season. Super Bowl 57 averaged an estimated 113.1 million viewers, making it the third most-watched television show in history. Every Super Bowl since 2010, except for 2019, 2020, and 2021, have all reached 100 million in viewership. Since 2010, the Super Bowl has seen an average of 106.16 million viewers.

The Super Bowl is the sports spectacle of the year, a widely regarded matchup between the two lasting teams that millions of fans are waiting to watch. Some aren’t even fans of the game, just watching to get a glimpse of what all the hype is about. The Super Bowl halftime show is also a part of the show, which is what many non-football fans tune in to. Every year, a music star headlines the halftime show. The performer for the halftime show is not paid, but it is a great opportunity for the artist to spread their popularity and gain a new audience. The NFL only pays all the expenses required to pull off the halftime show. Even if an individual’s favorite

team isn't in the Super Bowl, it's guaranteed they will still tune in to watch the game. Industries and organizations pay millions of dollars for a few seconds of commercial time during the Super Bowl. With continued increase of annual viewership, the price of a Super Bowl commercial will rise along with it. Currently, a 30-second ad spot costs anywhere between an astounding \$6 million to \$7 million. This ties into the entertainment behind football, all leading up to the most anticipated sports event of the year.

George Will said it best when drawing similarities between football and America, stating "Football combines the two worst things about America: it is violence punctuated by committee meetings," according to columnist George Will (2006). "Punctured Football," published in 1993, by journalist Alistair Cooke compared it to a game of chess and medieval warfare. Parallels may be drawn between American society and a professional football game, particularly when considering the spirit of conflict that permeates this sport. Football and outgoing, often aggressive, American culture is no different.

The correlation between American life and what occurs on the football field is something that U.S. citizens intuitively understand. Football's appeal to American culture includes hostility and violence, both of which are parallels to everyday life. In the US, aggression is praised and is frequently seen as energy and intense motivation. Analogous to this, aggression is praised in football. Teams fight against one another, teammates compete for starting spots, and fans strive for better seats. These are all correlations between the sport and our country's identity, which is why the people love football for what it is.

Football more pointedly than any other sport reflects American values. Visitors to the United States can learn everything they need to know about American culture and society's values, attitudes, and concerns by watching just a few games. Some of this ideology comes from

Frank Hoffmann, Gerhard Falk, Martin J Manning in “*Football and American Identity.*” (Taylor & Francis, 2013) *Football and American Identity* addresses the social and cultural implications of football's core subcultural ideals, including competition, conflict, fair play, power, economic success, and patriotism. This book goes beyond the typical fare on football tactics and history or the stories of famous players and coaches to investigate why football is the epitome of the American spirit.

The fact that the game is extremely unpredictable is equally significant. It's possible for one team to dominate the game in the first half before succumbing to fatigue or to the opponent's reenergized offensive and defensive/aggressive performance in the second. One of the world's most unpredictable sports is football. In any given week, one NFL team can beat the other in the right circumstances. The odds may be in a team's favor, but nothing is certain. The NFL's win or go-home playoff's make it for the audience's pleasure of seeing one team upset another. The overall audience strives for a game where the winner is not certain. People want to see a dogfight between two teams where any one of them can come out victorious. NFL's attendance numbers have soared once fans were allowed back in. In the 2022 season, ESPN reports that the team with the highest average attendance numbers for home games was the Dallas Cowboys with 93,465. The team with the lowest average attendance numbers was the Washington Commanders, sitting at 58,106. Even so, tens of thousands of fans filling up these billion dollar stadiums on a weekly basis is an extraordinary feature.

What America loves is true patriotism for the United States. The NFL is mostly about aligning its brand with the military and patriotism. In the annual Super Bowl event, we see the fighter jets fly over the stadium just as the National Anthem concludes. Just one example of the many forms in which the NFL exhibits the opportunity of showing our pride in being Americans.

Military personnel in uniform, fighter aircraft flyovers, field-sized banners, and NFL jerseys with red, white, and blue insignia have all been included into the ambience of the game over time. Despite worries that it is politicizing sport, the league has persisted in supporting patriotic symbols. Under the leadership of its commissioner and Navy veteran Pete Rozelle, the NFL made a concerted attempt to identify itself with patriotism throughout the 1960s as it rose to prominence. In 1968, Rozelle oversaw the first-ever military flyover during a Super Bowl. Consequently, honor guards and other military customs became regular features at many of the biggest NFL events as well as those in other leagues.

A particular story that has made recent headlines, yet again, was the one centered around Pat Tillman Jr. After the events of 9/11, Tillman decided to give up his NFL career for the chance to represent his country as a U.S. Army Ranger, serving multiple combat tours in his stint. The Army then reported that Tillman was killed by friendly fire in the mountains of Afghanistan. However, it was soon revealed that he was killed by friendly fire whereas the Army tried to cover this story up. At Super Bowl 57, the NFL presented a segment centered around Tillman. The segment introduced Tillman as a man who died “in the line of duty,” portraying him as a hero for giving his life to serve his country. However, this segment received backlash for the exploitation and intentionally misrepresenting the story.

Additionally, the NFL has its Salute to Service. “Salute to Service is the NFL’s year-round commitment to Honor, Empower, and Connect with our nation’s service members, veterans, and their families. It is grounded in deep partnerships with military and veteran support organizations which include the Bob Woodruff Foundation (BWF), Pat Tillman Foundation (PTF), Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), United Service Organizations (USO) and Wounded Warrior Project (WWP). Since 2011, more than \$58 million has been raised for

these Salute to Service partners,” according to the NFL. When watching a football game becomes a political statement, as it has for some in recent years, the patriotic pomp can have unexpected repercussions. When coinciding sports with politics, it becomes exhausting to watch for the average fan. Although some may love this relationship, there are many who don’t care for it at all.

Agendas aside, the racial difference between players is apparent, as well as in leadership positions. Let’s look at the players themselves, those who have participated in the game of football. According to the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida, in 2021, only a quarter of NFL players were white and roughly 71 percent of them were persons of color. When you move up in positions, the number sees a decline. The NFL Inclusion and Diversity Report details the numbers in the previous season, along with the statistics to show for the past decade and further.

Six people of color currently hold head coaching positions: Black coaches Mike Tomlin of Pittsburgh, Demeco Ryan of Houston, and Todd Bowles of Tampa Bay; biracial coach Mike McDaniel of Miami; Lebanese-American coach Robert Saleh of the Jets; and Hispanic coach Ron Rivera of Washington. This is one up from the previous season where only five head coaching jobs were filled by people of color. 32 head coaching jobs in the NFL with only six of those jobs filled by people of color. Towards the latter end of the 2022-23 NFL season, six head coaching jobs became open due to the lack of team success, etc. Of those six available positions, only one of them was filled by a person of color, Demeco Ryan with the Houston Texans.

African American head coaches have excelled in their opportunities as leading a team to success on the field, but the problem is the lack of opportunities they are given. N. Jeremi Duru writes, in his book “*Advancing the Ball*” (Oxford University Press, 2011), “African American

head coaches bested their white counterparts in seemingly every measurable category. In their first season as head coach of a team, African Americans soundly outperformed white first-year head coaches, averaging 2.7 more wins over the sixteen-game regular season.” The differences may seem marginal, but it is a huge difference in terms of how many games are in the season. A game or two makes a huge difference on a team's standing. This also offers an argument for Black coaches to receive more opportunities due to the evidence supporting their impact on a team's ability to succeed.

Fritz Pollard is widely regarded and recognized for being the first African-American to play in the early years of the NFL in 1920. Notwithstanding the overt racism of the time, Pollard continued to achieve "firsts" as a professional athlete. He was one of the league's top gate draws and one of the first African Americans to play in the APFA and NFL. In the 1920s, seeing a Black guy play football in a setting with a large white population was unusual. In 1920, Pollard, along with Bobby Marshall, were the first two African-American players in the NFL. Pollard was the first African American coach in 1921.

The NFL owners enacted a "gentleman's agreement" prohibiting the signing of additional black players in the years following Fritz's departure, though. The NFL's reintegration in 1946 is attributed to some of the men who achieved greatness and created a stepping stone for the future. Out of all the leagues history, they seem to pass over the time period in which the NFL seemingly banned black players. Most of the notable owners during the time had a silent agreement to ban black players from playing. This took place for 12 years, between 1934 to 1946. No one really knows about this, it has rarely been uttered. This old school mindset kept minority players out of the league for just over a decade.



The Fritz Pollard Alliance's mission statement is "The FPA exists to champion diversity in the National Football League ("NFL") through education and providing its members with resources that will help them succeed at every level of the game." Through this, the Alliance aims to teach in an effort to create a more diverse environment in the benefit of all.

In the NFL's entirety, it's seen plenty of "firsts" to accomplish various historical achievements. Kenny Washington, James Harris and Art Shell are regarded as doing what Pollard did but in the "modern era." Washington is deemed the first black player of the NFL's "modern era." Harris was the first black quarterback to start an NFL game. Shell was the first black head coach. All of these accomplishments were recognized for doing what they did in the "modern era" of the NFL. All of these "firsts" would not be given those chances if it weren't for Pollard. Despite all of this, there is one man who achieved such an achievement back when the NFL first began, that man being Fritz Pollard. Pollard was a staple in the NFL's illustrious history, leading the way for African-American culture in the league. Pollard's accolades include being inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1954 and his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame 2005 class.

In an effort to increase the number of minorities holding head coaching positions, the NFL introduced the Rooney Rule in 2003. Dan Rooney, who served as the league's Workplace Diversity Committee's chair at the time, inspired the Rooney Rule's moniker. Throughout his lifetime, Rooney owned the Pittsburgh Steelers team and oversaw many of its activities. The policy originally stipulated that before selecting a new coach, every team with a head coaching vacancy must interview at least one or more people of color.

For NFL teams, the Rooney Rule has grown in size over time to present a greater range of jobs. In 2009, the rule was revised to mandate that each club conduct at least two interviews

with outside minorities for general manager jobs and related front-office positions. A plan to reward teams that produced minority talents who later went on to become general managers or head coaches throughout the league was accepted by team owners in November 2020. For two years, a third-round compensatory pick was given to the team that lost a minority executive or coach to another one. A team would earn three years' worth of third-round compensatory picks if it lost both a player and a coach.

According to changes approved by the NFL in 2021, each team must interview at least two minority candidates from outside its organization for open head coaching positions and at least one external minority applicant for a coordinator role. At least one minority or female candidate must be interviewed for senior-level positions. After the 2022 Spring League Meeting, NFL teams must conduct in-person interviews with women or people of color for available quarterback coach positions. Because many prospective coaches begin their careers in the quarterback room, the move is anticipated to contribute to a surge in the employment of minority head coaches in the future.

The Rooney Rule has received numerous modification suggestions from the NFL's Workplace Diversity Committee. Clubs will now be required to interview at least two diverse candidates from the panel's list of career development specialists or a diverse candidate who is not one of the organization's present employees, according to the NFL Football Operations website. Any club that has at least one external minority applicant for a face-to-face GM or head coaching interview. Clubs must continue to consider a variety of candidates. Clubs must maintain thorough records and present them to the league upon the commissioner's request. The individual who will make the final selection must be involved throughout the entire hiring process if they are involved at the beginning.

Updates "bolster the current Rooney Rule requirements" and "are intended to generate additional possibilities for diverse candidates to be recognized, interviewed, and ultimately hired when a vacancy becomes available," according to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. The committee also backed new accountability measures to guarantee that all teams adhere to the rule's instructions. At first, the implementation of the Rooney Rule was both apparent and effective, increasing a diversity hire from 6% to 22% in the first three seasons. Since then, there has been no significant progression. The NFL continues its journey in creating a diverse culture, at least improving its numbers from their low percentages. Multiple efforts continue to be made, adjustments and modifications made to the Rooney Rule are all for progression.

It's no question that minority coaches have had the more difficult path to securing a job as a head coach or being put in a leadership position. In Week 6 of the 2022 NFL season, Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin and Buccaneers head coach Todd Bowles faced off in a season matchup. To the media, this event was something notable that deserved to be talked about, since it hadn't happened in over a decade before. Bowles was not amused by the story behind this regular season matchup.

"We don't look at what color we are when we coach against each other. We just know each other," said Bowles. "I have a lot of very good white friends that coach in this league as well. I don't think it's a big deal as far as us coaching against each other. I think it's normal... we coach ball, we don't look at color." Bowles reiterated the fact that the story was not as big as it needed to be, saying "I think the moment you guys stop making a big deal about it everybody else will as well."

Bowles is focused on his work rather than politics in the NFL and as he ought to be. Even if it might be true that representation matters, the NFL has made very little progress in that

regard. It has been 16 years since two black coaches last competed against one another. Of course, the media is making a huge issue out of it precisely to highlight the discrepancy. Although less than 10% of coaches in the NFL are black, almost 70% of the players are. Bowles' issue with this is that although two black coaches are making history in head-to-head competition, it does nothing in fixing the problem at hand. While we can celebrate a historic accomplishment that occurs on rare occasions, it does nothing to progress the league.

“I know what color I am. I wake up every day. It’s funny because I wasn’t a black defensive back coach. I wasn’t a black coordinator. But now I’m a black head coach,” said Bowles. “So the responsibility there is to do the right thing, be the right person, not to go out and say, ‘I’m Superman, here I am, look at what I’m doing.’ It’s to lead. And always have your hand out to pull somebody up. If that helps them be successful, I’ll try my damndest.”

On the other hand, a dubious head coaching candidate made news in the midst of the 2022–2023 NFL season. The hiring of Jeff Saturday by the Indianapolis Colts in the middle of the season angered and uproared the NFL community. Coaches and executives throughout the league, especially those of color, were incensed by Colt's owner Jim Irsay's decision to name an interim head coach without any prior collegiate or professional coaching experience. On Saturday, an unemployed white man with little to no prior experience as a head coach found himself suddenly in the spotlight as the coach of a team. But, there were many other qualified applicants for this job.

As a result, black coaches and executives raised concerns about the league's diverse hiring policies, which they believe continue to be a problem. Even though the league frequently modifies the Rooney Rule and implements initiatives like the Quarterback Summit in 2018 and Accelerator Program to put up-and-coming personnel in front of decision-makers, there are only

six minority coaches in the league. All NFL teams are required to interview at least one minority candidate for a head coaching post, according to the Rooney Rule. Since then, more roles and provisions have been added to it.

The NFL hasn't had a head coach without collegiate or professional coaching experience since 1961, which makes Saturday's hiring unique. In addition, there have only been two interim outside hires for coaches since 1986. Saturday marks only the third outside interim hire in 35 years, and no coach has ever led a team with "high school" at the top of their coaching resume. Notwithstanding all of this, the Rooney Rule was not broken by the Colts when they chose Saturday since it does not apply to interim jobs. Yet, questions about the hiring procedure were raised with the right reason to do so.

Brian Flores was Head Coach for the Miami Dolphins for three full seasons, from 2019 till 2021. Flores was ultimately fired and relieved of his duties as the Dolphins coach. Following his release, he filed a lawsuit against the Dolphins, New York Giants, Houston Texans and NFL as a result of the hiring process and discrimination that was on display when in pursuit of a new coaching opportunity. Flores was joined by both former Tennessee Titans coach Ray Horton and former Arizona Cardinals coach Steve Wilks in his racial discrimination lawsuit. In the hiring procedures of the league, particularly for head coaches, the case claims a pattern of racial discrimination. Flores disclosed in his lawsuit, Dolphins owner Stephen Ross allegedly encouraged Flores to deliberately break league tampering rules and offered to pay Flores to lose games on purpose in order to get a higher draft pick.

In early 2022, just over a year ago, 30 of 32 head coaching jobs were filled by white men. "Black Out," an investigation done by the Washington Post uncovered that "In the NFL, 58 percent of players are Black and just a quarter are White. As recently as last decade, nearly 70

percent of the players were Black. But just 11 percent of full-time head coaches since 1990 have been Black. During that time, 154 White men have served as an NFL head coach, compared with 20 Black men. In each of the past four seasons, including this one, just three of the league's 32 head coaches have been Black. And almost two decades after the Rooney Rule was implemented, 13 teams have never hired a Black full-time head coach." This research was done last year, although numbers have changed it's not been in the greatest improvement.

When a minority coach is given an opportunity, it's not with the highest regard. One reason for the failure of minority coaches in the NFL is the fact that many are put in the worst situations when it comes to the chance of coaching a team. Usually, these coaches are hired in a position to be a head coach for a team that may not be as talented and are not predestined to succeed. As previously mentioned, most of these coaches overcome adversity to succeed given the circumstances. But, the other coaches get fired for doing the best they could in the situation they were given. Coaches that are hired are put in a position to fail from the very beginning. Teams that are looking to tank for the following NFL draft are the worst situation for coaches like this. What occurred with Flores further backs the narrative of minority coaches being put in horrible situations, situations that do not reflect well on their future as coaches.

The National Football League is bigger than football, it is much more. The NFL replicates America's structure and culture, even drawing parallels to being like religion. The weekly celebration that occurs every Sunday, coming together for the NFL, the same day many people celebrate for Sunday Church. These characteristics are displayed throughout the NFL and its wide supporting audience.

It's apparent with fan behavior centered around football. The fans wear jerseys or colors of their favorite teams, buying banners or flags to set up in their homes just for the love and

support of the team. When attending football games, people come together to cheer and participate in events that take place at these games. In unity, fans sing the National Anthem that kicks off a football game. The passion we show for football is as big as anything else, rooting for our team to win it all. It is a different level of devotion when talking about the love you have for your football team, it's like no other. Celebrations occur when a team wins, or a player achieves a historic accomplishment. We celebrate in unity over an event that transpired. The similarities are uncanny, but it is what makes American football the phenom that it has become in our country's culture.

There's no doubt the physical toll that football leaves on an athlete. Getting beat up on a weekly basis puts a lot on a person, but the effects it leaves on an individual do not go unnoticed. A prominent story in the NFL was Ryan Shazier. Shazier only played four seasons in the NFL until his life was altered for the foreseeable future. He tried making a routine tackle on an opposing player which left him temporarily paralyzed from the waist down, from a spinal cord injury. There was little to no hope for Shazier's ability to ever walk again, doctors gave him only a mere 20% chance. But, he overcame these obstacles and learned how to walk again. Shazier's story is just one of the many, hundreds of athletes who have felt the lasting impact of football know the consequences that are in the grueling sport.

Due to the sheer volume of athletes involved and the nature of the game, football has the greatest incidence of concussions in the US. The question of whether helmet design can also lower the incidence of concussions is still up for debate, despite the general consensus that rules adjustments and instruction on good tackling technique can reduce concussion incidence.

Being the biggest sports organization in America, the NFL has always had its hands full with concussions amongst its players. The main concern in such a sport should be about the

safety of the players and ensuring that there will be no lasting effects for their lives beyond football. Football is very violent, which makes it brutal and dangerous, but there are rules and policies in place to ensure that these players are protected. Although the NFL has made adjustments, there is still room for a vast improvement for the future of the NFL and football altogether.

Concussions are much more severe than people may imagine them to be. The brain is sensitive and any heavy hit to the head can cause damage to it. Although a concussion can occur from a blow or hit to the head, it can also be caused by a fall that causes the brain to move back and forth. Due to the physical impact on your body, there has been a continued decrease in high school students playing football. Fewer young people do not want to take part in football; their families do not want them playing football due to the consequences that will come with playing the sport for so many years.

According to nfl.com, there have been a combined total of 1,809 concussions since 2015 across preseason, regular season games and practices. Between the 2015 and 2019 seasons, there were at least 200 concussions amongst NFL players, with the most being 281 in the 2017 season.. However, the past two seasons have seen a slight improvement in avoiding concussions, with 172 concussions in the 2020 season and 187 in the 2021 season. But this progress soon turned around when 213 concussions were recorded in the 2022 season. When talking about the regular season alone, there were 149 concussions suffered over 271 games in the 2022-23 season. That's an 18% jump from 2021 (126) and 14% higher than the three-year average (130) between 2018 and 2020. This date is in accordance with the league.

A topic of discussion in relation to concussions has been the focus of CTE. Chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) is a degenerative brain disorder that is the effect of constant



head trauma and concussions. CTE has been commonly found in those who have been involved in contact sports such as hockey, boxing, and football. The case of former Tight End Aaron Hernandez made headlines, he was found in his prison cell after committing suicide by hanging himself. Hernandez showed a variety of symptoms from CTE, including depression, anxiety and aggression. A post mortem brain scan presented that Hernandez suffered from the brain disorder. His scans showed that there was clear damage to the brain, of course from his time in football.

One of the more recent players to have been found to have CTE was Demaryius Thomas. Thomas died in his home due to complications from a seizure. He was six months out from officially retiring as an NFL player and was only 33 years of age; his family later revealed that Thomas had CTE. Hall of Fame linebacker Junior Seau was another display of former NFL players having CTE. Seau played in the NFL for 20 years with three different teams. In 2012, Seau died by suicide when he shot himself in the chest; he was only 43 years old. Eight months later, the Department of Health and Human Services had disclosed that Seau did suffer from CTE. Several other players became victims of football's CTE problem, players like Frank Gifford, Andre Waters, Ken Stabler and Rick Arrington. All these men suffered the horrible effects of CTE, many of them claimed to have headaches and other common symptoms such as memory loss, confusion, etc.

What makes it tricky for understanding CTE is that it can only be identified during an autopsy, but can be observed with no positive answer. Recently, the Boston University CTE Center reported that 345 out of 376 (91.7%) of the NFL players they had evaluated had CTE found in their brains. In contrast, one (0.6%) of 164 donated brains examined in a Boston University study from 2018 had CTE, that one person was a former college football player. This data shows the drastic effect of football on an individual, only finding out its effect when it's too

late. These numbers highlight that it's not common for the normal person to have CTE, whereas signing up for football guarantees the chance at CTE. As the disorder can only be conclusively identified through a brain autopsy after death, it is unknown how many people continue to suffer from it. This issue is in comparison to a similar study done in 2017, by Mez J, Daneshvar DH, Kiernan PT, that evaluated CTE on players at different levels of football. In the UNITE brain bank, CTE was found at a high number through the various levels of football play. 99% of NFL players were diagnosed with CTE, 91% of college football players, and 21% of high school football players.

2011 saw the creation of the NFL Game Day Concussion Diagnosis and Management Protocol by a consortium of outside medical experts and researchers with connections to the NFL, including consultants for the NFL Players Association. After receiving a blow to the head, a player enters the concussion protocol if one of the following things happens: the player exhibits or reports symptoms or signs that point to a concussion or stinger (a nerve pinch injury); or the sideline Unaffiliated Neurotrauma Consultant (UNC) start the protocol. There is no established period of time for a player to return after a concussion. The player must, however, pass the protocol's five stages and receive a clean bill of health from the team doctor.

Over the years there have been modifications by the NFL in aim to protect the players, made in design to get rid of potentially dangerous activity that could result in injury: rule changes to decrease the extremity of hits by players to each other, the advancement of equipment such as their helmets and reducing head impact severity, as well as millions of dollars funded towards medical research done to better understand and prevent concussions and other injuries.

In the third week of the 2022-23 NFL season, Miami Dolphins starting quarterback Tua Tagovailoa was pushed to the ground by an opposing player from the Buffalo Bills at the end of

a play. As he fell, his head snapped back as it hit the ground. Tagovailoa then got up and immediately was wobbly and needed assistance as he tried to walk off the field onto the sideline. The signs seemed obvious that he had suffered a concussion or serious head injury of some sort. However, after being taken to the locker room he then came back to play in the second half of the game and help win the game for the Dolphins.

It was revealed that Tagovailoa had apparently only suffered a back injury and that he would be ready to go for their game versus the Bengals four days later. In their next game, Tagovailoa was sacked and as he was thrown to the ground, he was laid flat with his arms rigid and his fingers curled up in what seemed to be a “fencing response.” He had to be taken off the field on a stretcher as all his teams came to his side and hoped for the best. Tagovailoa was quickly taken to the hospital where it was later revealed that he had a head injury and suffered a concussion. When asked about the incident, Tagovailoa said: “There was a point where I was unconscious. I couldn't tell what was going on.” What’s more, he did not remember being tackled and stretchered out following his concussion versus the Bengals.

In recent weeks following this situation, the NFL was put in the midst of making change happen by public pressure. People wanted answers; they wanted solutions as to what was going to happen going forward. If there was something to come out of this, it highlighted this widespread problem that has been prominent in the NFL for decades. The NFL decided to make adjustments to their concussion protocol. They revealed that players showing any signs of ataxia, the absence of full control over one's body's movements, will be prohibited from continuing play.

The mishandling of Tagovailoa’s situation was a disaster. People had every reason to get angry at the NFL for putting this young man’s career and life at risk. After taking the past few weeks off, for obvious reasons, Tagovailoa made his return in Week 7 hoping to finish the season

off and help lead the Miami Dolphins to success. That was until Tagovailoa suffered the same fate in Week 15. After a game against the Green Bay Packers, Tagovailoa was diagnosed with a concussion the following day and was ultimately put in concussion protocol yet again. He had suffered his third concussion of the season in the span of a few months. The handling of this situation, given that the ATC spotters did not step in for two of these instances, put the NFL in hot water. Tagovailoa's life after football will be in jeopardy going forward, given whatever decision he makes about his future. It's not about his career anymore, it's about his health for the rest of his life.

Throughout the course of the NFL's history, hundreds of players have felt the wrath of football's brutality. There is more at stake with football, it's not just head injuries and concussion that these players are worried about. On January 2nd, the Buffalo Bills and Cincinnati Bengals faced off in a Monday Night AFC matchup, but nearly half way through the first quarter of action, the world of sports was shaken to its core. Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin collapsed to the ground after taking a hit from Bengals receiver Tee Higgins. Hamlin, a 24-year old who had already spent two years in the league, was having a spectacular season while replacing injured teammate Micah Hyde. Medical personnel were quick to arrive on the field and come to the aid of Hamlin as he laid on the grass. Players from both teams were horrified by what they had witnessed, and were told to head back to their locker rooms while Hamlin received medical attention. Buffalo Bills assistant trainer Denny Kellington was the individual who administered CPR to Damar Hamlin and most likely the one to save his life, given the situation. The speed and skill it took him to be able to administer CPR immediately was beneficial to the ultimate well-being of Hamlin.

The Bills sent out an update later that night at 10:48 PM PST, via Twitter, that Hamlin had suffered a cardiac arrest as a result of the hit he took in the game. In the update, the Bills added, “His heartbeat was restored on the field and he was transferred to the UC Medical Center for further testing and treatment.” Hamlin remained in critical condition following the events that transpired.

After days spent in medical care, Hamlin continued to show signs of improvement. This news was significant to the entire football community, while millions of people waited for answers on Hamlin’s health. On January 9th, Hamlin was officially discharged from the hospital, per the Physicians at the University of Cincinnati Health. Ultimately, after attending the Buffalo General Medical Center for further testing and reassurance of health, he was discharged on January 11th from their care and allowed to continue his rehab at home and with the Buffalo Bills. In regard to Hamlin, Jamie Nadler, MD, critical care physician and Chief Quality Officer at Kaleida Health said, “We have completed a series of tests and evaluations, and in consultation with the team physicians, we are confident that Damar can be safely discharged to continue his rehabilitation at home and with the Bills.”

These two instances from Tagovailoa and Hamlin display the heavy impact that football has on athletes who are human beings. Of course, these people sign up for this sport knowing the consequences that come with it, but there’s policies and better protection that should give these athletes the best chance at a future with no limitations. Examining these athletes every second of the game, after any hit, is to protect players. The fans do not love how these things make the game slow paced, but it’s for good reason. It is important in understanding that these athletes are human beings just as anyone else, they are vulnerable in any given situation.

It was in December of 2011 when the NFL implemented ATC Spotters, independent certificate athletic trainers, to serve as “another set of eyes, watching for potential injuries from inside a stadium booth high above the field” per the NFL. This transpired after Colt McCoy, the quarterback for the Cleveland Browns at the time, endured a helmet-to-helmet hit yet continued playing without being evaluated for any potential head injury. The Browns organization ultimately confessed that the team's trainers missed the hit because they were assisting another player. News was soon revealed that McCoy did have a concussion. As a result, The NFL immediately added the position of ATC Spotters for that extra pair of eyes and ensured no injuries go unnoticed. In doing so, the extra set of eyes helps detect any little thing that occurs on the field during play.

Per the National Football League itself, the NFL Bridge to Success program “is designed to empower and equip eligible former players and their significant others through the transition from the NFL mentally, emotionally, physically, financially and equip them for the next season of life.” This program is both beneficial and crucial to the future of football. Ensuring the future of players who sacrifice their body for the sport, giving back to them is just a part of showing appreciation for what they’ve done. The NFL’s Bridge to Success program is in an effort to help these athletes for what they’ve sacrificed to the sport. There are instances where these athletes are put in unlikely positions post-NFL, with nowhere to turn. The NFL's efforts to help these ex-players is an incredible step.

For the many problems that have arisen throughout the decades of football, there’s possible solutions in an attempt to solve these problems. Rule changes have been a controversial topic in football, but it’s mostly been to the displeasurement of the audience. Modifications made to the game in order to protect players and avoid disastrous circumstances. The “Use of the

Helmet” rule is the most notable, where a player is not allowed to make contact with another player by directly lowering their head with malicious intent.

The major change has been in the athlete’s helmets, evolving the technology and models over the course of decades. Over the years, there have been tons of changes and adjustments made to football helmets to make them best fit for the safety of athletes. The NFL constantly makes advancements on the helmets used by their athletes for the most protection possible. Whether it be every year, or every other year, the league releases new information on the changes made to helmet design. Due to the advancement of technology, different variations of helmets are offered for the benefit of players. The layers of padding added to the helmets are for the protection of the head, specifically the brain.

The Q Collar has made its way to football, a C-shaped collar that compresses the neck and boosts blood flow in an effort to lessen any movement of the brain that might take place amid head traumas. The Q Collar’s main job is cushioning the brain, ensuring some extra level of safety for those who use it. More players, in college and the NFL, have been seen wearing these devices in the past year. Although it is not fully capable of ending head injuries altogether, it is able to help prevent them. The Q Collar has been adopted by high school football players, more than a dozen college teams, and over half of the NFL teams.

The FDA assessed the safety and effectiveness of the Q-Collar through a number of trials, including a prospective, long term study in the United States with 284 patients 13 years of age or older who were involved with their high school football team. 139 competitors wore the Q-Collar throughout the athletic season, whereas 145 did not. Also, each participant wore an accelerometer that recorded every head contact made during play. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans were performed on each competitor both before and after each competition. These

MRI scans were used to create a specific MRI image of the brain called Diffusion Tensor Imaging, which allowed researchers to compare structural changes in the athletes' brains following a season of play.

The deeper brain tissues (white matter regions), which are involved in the transmission of electrical nerve signals, underwent substantial alterations in 106 of the 145 (73%) participants in the no-collar group, but not in 107 of the 139 (77%) people in the group that wore the Q Collar. These variations seem to point to brain protection brought on by device use. But, using the Q Collar is not so simple, there's precautions that should be taken before making this part of your play. An athlete must be medically cleared before using the Q Collar. Although the Q Collar does not ensure the full capabilities to prevent concussions or other head injuries, it is a step in the right direction for the protection of football players.

Maybe the most obvious choice, further educating the athletes on these issues at hand. These injuries will not go away but they can be prevented to an extent. Investing in the future of player safety should continue to be the main focus of football, continued research is pivotal to progress and a decline in serious injuries.

It's no argument that the NFL has lacked any strength in creating a diverse culture amongst its organization and aiming to please players. When comparing it to other sports organizations in America, the differences are a major factor. The National Basketball Association has done an excellent job in creating equal opportunities amongst candidates for any positions in a franchise. From the 30 franchises in the NBA, half of those head coaching positions are filled by an African-American. In addition, Miami Heat head coach Erik Spoelstra is the only Asian-American head coach in the league. Therefore, more than half of head coaching positions in the NBA are filled by a person of color.



NBA Commissioner Adam Silver is the epitome of how to run a sports league. Silver emphasizes both the success of the league and the players' satisfaction make for a smooth sail. Silver is serious in creating an astounding atmosphere in the effort of pleasing all parties within the league. There's no greater benefit to organizational success than pleasing all those involved. There's no comparing the two in terms of field play and brutality since they are completely different sports and require different levels of physicality. Some may say that basketball is not near the level of entertainment that football provides, due to the physical violence. However, it's a much more universally loved sport while being able to maintain a less problematic environment within the league. In 2022, statista.com reported that 71.8 percent of NBA players were African-American. The NBA has the highest percentage of African-American players of all four major sports leagues in the United States. However, the significance lies in the leadership positions that display equal diversity.

The NBA has continually increased in total revenue across the 30 teams that make the league. In the 2021-22 season, the league accumulated a total revenue of 10.02 billion dollars, per statista.com. The average revenue per team in the NBA stood at 334 million dollars, in comparison to NFL franchises that, on average, are valued at 4.47 billion dollars. Of course, the NBA still needs time before cementing itself as the league of America. However, the sport of basketball is already loved internationally.

It's without question how important American football is to its country, it all starts with the National Football League. The audience loves football for all the wrong reasons. Given all the controversy within the league, it has remained the most popular sports league in the country. The NFL is nowhere near perfect, but there is always room for improvement. Its representation of America ties into its increased popularity through the decades. Clear evidence suggests just

how vicious and violent football is, but the American audience lives for it. Coaching concerns and diversity struggles are just some other topics that arise in the debate of the NFL. The NFL is at its highest with billions of dollars in revenue being accumulated after every season and there's no doubt it will keep growing. However, the problems within this league must be addressed for the benefit of America altogether. Despite the league's issues, it remains successful and popular with American society for good reason. It's a powerhouse unlike any other, its impact and parallels to this country gives it a formula for success.

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