Chronicle of a (Football) Death Foretold: The Imminent Demise of a National Pastime?


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Football today, most conspicuously at the professional level (National Football League) is the economic and cultural colossus of American spectator sports. To speak of its “life cycle,” then, would seem nonsensical: although it has a clear “birth,” to speak of its “death” might seem ridiculously premature. Yet recent developments make imagining such a death possible. This essay will explore two current controversies—over “athletes’ rights” at the collegiate level and the dangers of traumatic head injury at all levels—that have the potential to destroy American football at least in the form we know it today. And it will trace the factors behind those controversies—the insistent and persistent “amateurism” of American college athletes and the fundamental violence of the game itself—back to their origins. What might end American football as we know it was present in the game from nearly the beginning.

To speak of the “life cycle” of American football would seem premature. While the American version of the world’s game has a distinct birth—a contest between Princeton and Rutgers on November 6, 1869—it conspicuously continues to thrive. The National Football League today generates over $9 billion in annual revenues and utterly dominates American television. Seventy-five of the 100 most-watched sporting events on American television in 2011 were NFL games (including the top 17, and 23 of the top 25). For all TV programming, nine of the ten highest-rated shows were NFL games; the
Academy Awards came in at #6, behind the Super Bowl, both conference championship games, and two playoff games. [As of March 18, 2013, “2011 Numbers Game (100 Most-Viewed Sports Telecasts of the Year)” on the website of Sports Media Watch; and “Top 10 TV Programs - Single Telecast” on the website of Nielsen.com.] Big-time college football in the U.S. does not come close to NFL-size revenues and ratings (though trailing only the NFL and Major League Baseball in popularity), but new television contracts and networks for individual conferences mean that a mid-level program such as Oregon State University’s will see its annual conference income jump from less that $7 million to more than $20 million, and a football playoff is coming that will more than triple the current revenues from the Bowl Championship Series.¹

Football dying? Hardly. But football’s current thriving is actually precarious, for reasons out in the open but not yet fully registering with the general public. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell clearly understands the precariousness. The president of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Mark Emmert, and some university presidents and athletic directors might also know, although their actions and inactions make that less certain. I also realize that I might be overstating the precariousness. But there are compelling reasons to think not.

To consider American football’s “life cycle” is intriguing because if the sport’s “death” is not quite imminent, only possible in the not-too-distant future, it will come about for reasons that have been present since its “birth.” Viewed in this manner, the life cycle of American football might be defined by two fundamental tensions. The first, in relation only to the big-time collegiate version, derives from its artificial code of amateurism—the necessity of permitting only amateur athletes, defined in highly
artificial ways, to compete in what quickly and increasingly became a lucrative entertainment business run by professionals in every aspect except for the actual playing. (This “tension” is one aspect of that deeper contradiction at the heart of big-time college football that I have written about elsewhere—in the competing demands of its supposed educational purpose and its role as popular entertainment. 2)

The second, and more fundamental, tension inherent in the game at all levels lies in its violence, which must always be real, and seem real to spectators, but without becoming so destructive that it would alienate fans and keep boys and young men from playing.

Today, big-time college football is on the verge of implosion, or explosion, I’m not sure which, due to issues of compensation for so-called student athletes (the term consciously adopted in the 1950s to signal their amateurism). It could survive on altered terms under a different structure, but only if the more fundamental issue of the long-term consequences of traumatic brain injury can be satisfactorily resolved. If not, college football’s continuation is untenable—how could educational institutions possibly sponsor a sport known to damage its participants’ brains, not just their bodies, to the degree that, say, prizefighting does? The National Football League, on the other hand, might survive as a dangerous sport without claims to any purpose beyond profit, but as a niche sport like boxing or Ultimate Fighting, nothing close to the truly mass-cultural phenomenon that it is today. American football might indeed have a life cycle, then, and to think about the sport in this way leads to recognizing that what might destroy football in the foreseeable future was present at its birth as a sort of slow-growing virus, a fissure in the foundation.
Part One: Amateurism

Too much has been written about the National Collegiate Athletic Association and amateurism to warrant a full account here, but I want to highlight certain aspects of the issue that seem particularly relevant to the implosion/explosion that may rock the NCAA someday soon.

The unique role of sports in the American education system has repeatedly sparked controversy at home, as well as seeming strange abroad. American collegiate sports’ earliest and longest enduring disputes have involved eligibility, from Yale’s protest over Harvard’s use of a graduate as coxswain in 1855, as documented by Ron Smith, to the “tramp athletes” of the 1880s and 1890s in football, to the repeatedly revised rules for “initial eligibility” in recent decades. The grounds for objecting to tramp athletes who moved from school to school for the best offer, or showed up for football season and then disappeared, seem obvious. But eligibility was also tied to a British definition of “amateurism” that was class-based and incompatible with American democratic principles. As it has played out in American college sports, it has also proven incompatible with basic American rights and principles of fairness. And while the definition has been astonishingly flexible, whatever definition currently prevails has been fiercely defended as the essential basis for collegiate competition.

In the 1890s and early 1900s, one of the most common causes for one school’s challenging the eligibility of another school’s athlete was his having played summer baseball. In the 2012 Fiesta Bowl, Oklahoma State University was led by a twenty-eight-
year-old quarterback who had played five seasons of minor league baseball before enrolling in college. College football players in the early 1920s were also barred from playing on Sundays as ringers for professional teams. That ban has persisted, but the rules governing the eligibility of OSU’s quarterback have obviously changed. Today, “summer baseball,” in effect, is allowed for football players, though not for college baseball players. Amateurism has been redefined by the NCAA to allow one to be a professional in one sport but remain an amateur in the one played for the university.

In the early years of college sports, any payment to an athlete of fees or expenses was a mark of “professionalism.” Today tuition, room, and board, along with a bit of spending money, constitute an athletic scholarship, which is fundamental to collegiate amateurism. Today instead, the NCAA is wrestling with a proposal to provide an extra $2,000 toward the athlete’s Full Cost of Attendance, as determined by universities’ financial aid policies for all students. (Non-athlete students are currently eligible for more financial aid than athletes are.) In 2011, the NCAA’s Division I Board of Directors recommended adoption of the $2,000. The proposal was then withdrawn over the objections of the majority of institutions already losing money on athletics.\footnote{5} For decades, the NCAA insisted that any compensation beyond tuition, board, and room (along with textbooks and a small amount for incidentals) would violate collegiate amateurism. Now, while high- and low-revenue athletic programs wrestle with the potential economic impact of paying additional stipends, the NCAA has implicitly taken a position that compensation up to the full cost of attendance would still be within the bounds of amateurism. Anything beyond would constitute professionalism.
These events have transpired amidst sharp criticism in both the mainstream media and the outer fringes of the Internet blogosphere, and in fact the proposed stipend was the NCAA’s belated response to that criticism. The “hypocrisy” and “distorted priorities” of American college athletics have been enduring themes, nearly as old as the NCAA itself. Today’s critical chorus can seem just the latest iteration of those themes, but economic, political, and legal circumstances today suggest that it might become more than just the background noise against which collegiate sports seasons play out.

Despite strict insistence on amateur purity and opposition to professionalism, as early as the 1880s young men were lured to college football programs with offers of tuition, expense money, and other financial benefits. It was not “professionalism,” however, but the brutality of a game in which several boys died each season, that led to the first major effort to reform college football in 1905-06, out of which also came the organization that became the NCAA. The top priority was to make football safer, as with rules to legalize the forward pass and separate the opposing lines before the ball was put into play. But the new organization also declared a set of basic principles, including the prevailing principle of “amateurism.” The nascent NCAA, however, claimed no regulatory powers to enforce policies that it could only recommend. Individual institutions reserved the power both to establish and to enforce their own specific policies, unless they ceded that power to a conference. The Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association had been formed in 1894, the Western Conference in 1895. These were joined by the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association in 1907, the Pacific Coast Conference in 1915, and the Southwest Athletic Conference in 1920 (none
of these still exist in their original forms). Nonetheless, by the 1920s the practices of recruiting and subsidizing were so deeply embedded in college football that eliminating them had become virtually impossible.

In October 1929, the Carnegie Foundation issued its landmark bulletin on college athletics, which reported that just 28 of the 112 institutions examined did not in some way engage in recruiting and subsidizing football players. The Carnegie report pricked the consciences of a few college presidents, but it was mostly met by the press and the public with a collective shrug, less denial than, as the sportswriter Westbrook Pegler put it, a waste of time, “substantiating conditions which have been commonly known to exist.” With no external pressure to reform, most university leaders also shrugged, and continued their football business as usual.

To amateur purists, “professionalism’s” twin evil was “commercialism,” most conspicuous in the mammoth steel-and-concrete football stadiums, seating 40,000 or more, that sprouted across the American landscape in the 1920s. The football stadium became the largest and grandest architectural structure in many towns and small cities where major football-playing universities were located, and on Saturday afternoons in the Fall the population inside some of these stadium exceeded that of the community itself. Professionalism and commercialism were routinely criticized in the journals of opinion and intellectual monthlies and quarterlies, but the more popular daily and weekly press—and presumably the general public to and for whom the popular press spoke—were largely indifferent. Like professionalism, college football’s commercialism proceeded unchecked, constrained only by the economic circumstances of the Depression.
Over the 1930s, while recruiting became quietly normalized, the college football world splintered into factions over the subsidizing of athletes. A few institutions attempted the quixotic purity espoused by the Carnegie Foundation. The rest split along geographical (and philosophical) lines, with the Big Ten (formerly the Western Conference) and the Pacific Coast Conference banning direct payments to athletes, either by the institutions themselves or by their alumni and boosters, while the three major southern conferences (Southeastern, Southern, and Southwest) permitting athletic scholarships. The northern and western schools accused the South of professionalism. The southern schools accused the North and West of hypocrisy—for providing “jobs” that required little or no work. (The more loosely aligned eastern universities—including college football’s original “Big Three” of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton—aligned with the North and West.)

The Big Ten (actually Big Nine by this time) and Pacific Coast Conference seemed to win the war against professionalism (or for hypocrisy) at the 1948 NCAA Convention with the passage of the so-called Sanity Code, requiring financial aid to be need-based and earned by work “commensurate with the services rendered.” But the victory proved short-lived, and by 1956 the NCAA for the first time embraced the concept of the athletic scholarship. The term “scholarship,” however, as opposed to something like “athletic grant,” preserved the necessary fiction of amateurism on new terms. For the next seventeen years, an athlete could not lose his “scholarship” for athletic incompetence or even for quitting the team. That changed, decisively, at the 1973 NCAA convention, where the membership replaced the standard four-year scholarship with a one-year grant, renewable at the coach’s discretion. From this time
on, college athletes were effectively employees of their athletic departments, but without the rights of employees (professionals), because they remained students (“amateurs” by yet another new definition). It is this system that, some forty years on, now threatens to implode/explode.

Nothing of real substance has changed in the compensation of college football players since 1973. What has changed, and spectacularly, has been the compensation of coaches (from 30 or 40 thousand to millions) and the enormous revenues for the institutions (now exceeding $100 million at the top, but very unevenly distributed) from television, merchandising, and premium seating in mega-stadiums, along with arrangements such as the Bowl Championship Series. This disparity, and widening outrage over that disparity, are what threaten the future of college football in its present form. A nascent athletes’ rights movement emerged in the early 1980s but did not gain much momentum until the new century, when it moved from the margins to the center of critical commentary and, more important, into legal and legislative arenas. Several state legislatures—California’s, Iowa’s, Nebraska’s, South Carolina’s, and Texas’s—introduced student-athletes’ bills of rights, and three former college athletes (two football players and a basketball player) filed a class-action lawsuit in February 2006 that challenged the NCAA’s cap on financial aid on antitrust grounds. *White v. NCAA* could have brought the entire system down, but a settlement in January 2008 (for $10 million in various payments) kept the system intact. The plaintiffs could not afford the legal fees that a series of appeals by the NCAA would have required.

But a new lawsuit promises to deliver what *White v. NCAA* only threatened. The suit in the name of former UCLA basketball star Ed O’Bannon, challenging the
commercial use of former college athletes’ names and likenesses without compensation, is scheduled to come to trial in July 2014. The difference this time is the apparent resolve of the plaintiffs and their attorneys not to settle with the NCAA but to win, initially and through the inevitable appeal process. A victory could prove to be just the beginning of complete upheaval, if the courts establish not just athletes’ rights in the specific case but their broader entitlement to the fundamental rights enjoyed by all workers.

For most of the twentieth century, sports journalists (and presumably their readers) seemed to regard the compensation of college football players—the long-term financial benefits of a college education more than their immediate tuition and living expenses—commensurate with the commercialism that rewarded their coaches and institutions more directly. But as that commercialism has exploded (for top programs), while the compensation for the players has not changed—or perhaps diminished enormously, as the long-term future benefits for academically-marginal college football players has become profoundly uncertain—this general sense of commensurability has eroded. American college football has always had its critics, but the current state of criticism (regarding basketball as well as football players) is unusually intense, has unusually distinguished spokesmen, and is fed by the Internet’s unrelenting chatter. A searing essay in the Atlantic on “The Shame of College Sports” by Taylor Branch, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Martin Luther King, Jr., resonated more powerfully than the criticism of earlier decades because of Branch’s authority on issues beyond sport. A string of stinging editorials by New York Times columnist Joe Nocera has also kept the issue of “athletes’ rights” before the public. Branch and Nocera are just the
most notable critics among a large and loud chorus within the older sports media (newspaper sports columnists, *Sports Illustrated*, ESPN’s *Outside the Lines*, HBO’s *Real Sports* on) and newer online sources as well.

Such criticism is as traditional as cheerleaders and bowl games, and has not mattered much in the past. In addition, a survey of sports fans conducted by the Marist College Center for Sports Communication in March 2013 found that just 21 percent favored paying college athletes beyond their scholarships, while 45 percent approved paying college coaches as much as or more than pro coaches. Also, while 67 percent believed that college sports programs regularly break NCAA rules, 72 percent felt that the athletes, not their coaches or universities, should be held accountable for these violations. And 95 percent wanted athletes to attend classes rather than concentrate full-time on their sport. In other words, fans in general apparently accept the current system of professional college football played by “amateur” athletes, who should do what their elders tell them. If the system’s critics do not in fact speak for the broader public today, ultimately the popular view would seem likely to prevail. But the courts are not governed (entirely, anyway) by public opinion, and both antitrust law and employment law would seem to be squarely on the side of “athletes’ rights.” (I also wonder if survey questions phrased differently would generate different responses on the relative compensation and responsibilities of athletes and their coaches and institutions, to the advantage of the athletes.)

My primary point about the growing consensus in the media, if not among the public, that the system of big-time college football is irreparably broken is that the fissure
has been there from the beginning, when “amateurism” was first defined on economic rather than academic terms. And this definition has been contested since the beginning, long before the emergence of millionaire coaches and an entertainment industry generating billions. In November 1905, amidst the grown sense of crisis that eventuated in the creation of the NCAA, the dean of the divinity school at the University of Chicago wrote an essay for a liberal religious journal about reforming college sports. Shailer Mathews’ chief argument was that “Amateur status must be put upon an academic basis.” He declared bluntly, “Multiplying restrictions looking toward debarring men who have at some time made money by using their athletic skill, has been overdone.” What he chiefly had in mind was summer baseball—college athletes earning expense money by playing for teams sponsored by summer resorts—but also activities such as coaching the local high school team. As Mathews put it, “[T]here is no reason in the nature of things why a bona fide student should not earn money by coaching the team of some high school or college just as he earns it by tutoring.”14

A college student could tutor high schoolers in math or chemistry, but not in football. Another parallel case today is the talented theater major who can tour with a Broadway musical company in the summer, then return to classes and campus productions in the fall; or the music major who plays in a band on weekends for money and in the school orchestra for academic credit. These student performers can also have agents to book their performances and manage their careers; admirers can wine them and dine them. But the football star cannot have an agent, or sell his game tickets or his jersey, or accept a free meal or transportation home at semester break—while his coach makes millions and his institution makes tens of millions.
Matthews noted in 1905, “As the case now stands, the requirements governing an artificial amateur status put a premium upon deceit and falsehood,” as if he foresaw the next hundred-plus years of NCAA athletics. He also noted that, by insisting on financial purity, “We are setting up the undemocratic standard of English sport,” which banned not only open professionals but also manual laborers. In contrast, Mathews preferred this: “The way to be sure that college students are amateurs in the proper sense of the word is to make it certain that they are college students.” The NCAA did, in fact, attend to academic amateurism, but by the 1920s that case was settled: a *bona fide* student was one who was admitted to the university, took a reasonable course load, and progressed toward graduation. Although specific rules changed, the principles have remained the same ever since. While the NCAA never let up its vigilance over economic amateurism, however, in the 1970s it basically abandoned its requirement that “student athletes” be *bona fide* students. The academic scandals that naturally followed in the 1980s and after—college athletes reading at a fourth-grade level, athletic departments cheating to keep athletes eligible, athletes “clustering” in the easiest majors, African American athletes in particularly exploited rather than given a genuine opportunity for an education—forced the NCAA into what has become a continuous cycle of scandal and reform. In the meantime, commercialism has continued unchecked, the economics-driven system so embedded that to willingly alter it has become unthinkable. Even now, the NCAA remains more vigilant in policing recruiting violations and improper payments from boosters than assuring that athletes are *bona fide* students.

During what might be termed American college sports’ long age of austerity (from the 1930s through the 1970s), revenues were relatively modest and coaches’
salaries not too far out of line with those of top administrators. Beginning with the age of abundance for top programs in the 1980s, then superabundance for increasingly fewer programs in recent years, athletes remained (economic) amateurs while their professional coaches, administrators, and institutions reaped the benefits of a full-blown entertainment business. The sheer magnitude of the revenues in big-time college football today, and their radically uneven distribution, pose enormous challenges apart from issues of fairness to the athletes. Most athletic programs lose money overall, despite their modest or even not-so-modest profits from football. However fair, compensating their athletes is unaffordable. On the other hand, how the top programs that can easily afford to compensate their athletes more fairly could do so while preserving the fiction of “amateurism,” on which the appeal of college football seemingly depends, is profoundly uncertain. But this challenge would be more easily met if not following a long history of defining amateurism chiefly on economic rather than academic terms.

The NCAA today finds itself at an impasse of its own making, whose solution may be beyond its making. The blow that comes from outside, perhaps from the O’Bannon case, would radically remake American college athletics, but not in ways that university leaders would, or could, choose on their own.

Part Two: Violence

Unlike soccer and rugby, the two versions of football most available to American collegians in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, American football is fundamentally a
collision sport. Initially that aspect of the game was an accidental consequence of rules with other purposes, and the stages by which this happened are familiar to football historians:

- The first documented intercollegiate football game, on November 6, 1869, was in fact a soccer-type game—played with a round ball, 25 on a side, and no carrying the ball—won by Rutgers over Princeton, six goals to four.

- Harvard’s preference for its own carrying game, then its introduction to proper English rugby by McGill University, then its persuading Yale to try this version, eventuated in the agreement at the end of the 1876 season to organize the Intercollegiate Football Association around a rugby-type game. The soccer-type game did not instantly disappear, but colleges (and the secondary schools that copied them) quickly shifted to the new rules.  

- The transformation of English rugby into American football was then due to the influence of Yale’s Walter Camp, beginning with two decisive rules, in 1880 and 1882: first, assigning the ball to one side at a time, instead of putting it in play through the rugby scrum; then, requiring the team with the ball to advance it five yards, or lose ten, in three tries.

Camp’s intentions, as he expressed them and as the early chroniclers of football continually reiterated, was primarily to rationalize the game, to eliminate the randomness of the scrum and create opportunities for tactics and strategy. It appears to have been wholly unintentional that Camp’s new rules also made American football a collision sport. The scrimmage line separated the teams into two sides, facing off for combat. Set
plays, initiated by putting the ball in play from the scrimmage line, could take the form of either assault or evasion. Here it seems that intention as well as accident came into play. Evasion—runs around the end—was all but eliminated by a subsequent rule that permitted tackling below the waist and took away the advantage of the lean, swift runner. Hammering the ball into the middle of the line with power and bulk became more effective. Camp proposed this change, and his colleagues accepted it, undoubtedly without foreseeing all of the consequences. “Interference” (what we now call “blocking”), on the other hand, was approved less by choice than necessity. Assigning the ball to one of the two sides immediately put everyone on the scrimmage line “off sides” once the ball was heeled back to a player behind the line. Frustrated by repeated failures to eliminate off-sides play, Camp and his colleagues agreed to allow it. By 1888, American football had become a game of blocking and tackling, as legendary Green Bay Packer coach Vince Lombardi would still be describing it 80 years later.

While American football became a collision sport not altogether by intention, it was embraced, by both players and spectators, not despite the resulting violence but to a considerable degree because of it. Historians’ consensus on the forces behind the embrace of this violent game requires little comment here: the economic and social transformation of the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century—industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, and technological advances—that threatened the traditional virility of American males and of the nation over all. Football’s violence always provoked concern, but that concern was always countered by celebrations of the manly courage and vigor that the game required. There was general agreement on the need to eliminate extra-legal “slugging”—a slugger was a ruffian
perverting a “gentlemen’s” game—but for many commentators, the bruises and broken bones that resulted from the brutal give-and-take within the rules were acceptable, even welcome, however much denounced by others.

No consensus on the boundary between necessary and unnecessary roughness, and how to preserve the one but eliminate the other, was reached in the 1880s and 1890s, or any time since. A selective survey of the newspapers of the 1880s and 1890s, with sensationalized images of carnage and mayhem, might suggest that football was irredeemably brutal. But these images and stories appeared alongside others that conveyed a very different sense of the violent game: the players were heroic, larger-than-life, the descendants of Greek heroes and Roman gladiators. The violence of football was essential to its heroism. And defenders of the sport often identified “newspaper sensationalism,” not the violence itself, as the new game’s greatest problem. Newspapers competing for circulations by ratcheting up their sensationalism—as they did with crimes and natural disasters and political chicanery—exaggerated football’s dangers to thrill their readers.

In an unusual twist for Americans typically ignorant of their own history, the story of President Theodore Roosevelt’s intervention in the football crisis of 1905 has entered popular consciousness in discussions of football’s current crisis over head trauma. The game was so brutal in its early years, the usual telling goes, that President Roosevelt himself had to step in to make it safer and save it. Well, yes, and no, as football historians know. Roosevelt viewed “professionalism” as the college game’s greatest problem, but he knew that its violence was the only issue that would arouse university leaders and the general public against it. And he valued the game’s legitimate
violence enormously. As he told Harvard’s graduating class in June 1905, in words that would be quoted repeatedly during the following football season, “I believe heartily in sport. I believe in out-door games, and I do not mind in the least that they are rough games, or that those who take part in them are occasionally injured. I have no sympathy whatever with the overwrought sentimentality which would keep a young man in cotton wool, and I have a hearty contempt for him if he counts a broken arm or collar bone as of serious consequences, when balanced against the chance of showing that he possesses hardihood, physical address, and courage.”

When the new season opened with the usual carnage, Roosevelt summoned the football leaders of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton to the White House. After he won their pledge to make the game safer, the press celebrated the President with his Big Stick as a tamer of the football slugger (as he had tamed opposing sides in a coal strike and the Russo-Japanese War). The press overstated, however, and this historic meeting actually might have had no impact at all had Union College’s Harold Moore not been killed in a football game played against New York University a month later. The immediate actions taken by NYU’s chancellor and Columbia University’s president, not Roosevelt’s intervention, led to the revision of the rules that “saved” football, and to the creation of the NCAA to oversee the game.

To this story well-known to football historians I would add just two points. The first is that the crisis of 1905 did not turn the public against the violence of football. Rather, it resulted in yet another, neither the first nor the last, attempt to make football safer but not too safe. What made football violent, after all, was what made it heroic: football built character through testing the players’ physical courage and manly forbearance. A cover of the humor magazine Judge in the spring of 1906, as various
institutions and organizations were hammering out new rules (most importantly, legalizing the forward pass), perfectly captures the competing values and the dilemma facing those who would make football safer. Titled “Football in 1906 Under the New Rules,” the cover shows two beribboned and top-hatted fops, one in pink (for Harvard’s crimson) and looking a lot like the President, a Harvard grad, the other in powder blue (for Yale), doffing their hankies and bowing to each other before the start of the game. On the field lies a list of the game’s new rules: “No Pinching,” “No Slapping,” “Hug Easy,” and so on. Football was the manliest of American sports, and any hint of emasculating it raised alarm or derision.

My second point is that the new rules made the game only marginally less violent. After 18 died from injuries in 1905, the death toll dropped to 11 in 1906, and the same number in 1907, then climbed to 13 in 1908 and jumped to 26 in 1909, prompting the next crisis. More rule changes, then more again in 1912—most importantly, removing many of the restrictions on forward passing—largely completed the evolution of American football to the game we know today. But they still did not make football all that much safer. The question of how much violence was necessary for football to be football was not answered, only postponed.

Football’s death toll before 1931 has been documented from reports in the New York Times and other newspapers. In 1931, the American Football Coaches Association began tracking deaths and serious injuries more systematically: 31 fatalities in 1931, 24 in 1932 and 1933, 23 in 1934, 28 in 1935, and so on. The provocation to begin tracking them in 1931 was the death of Army Cadet Richard B. Sheridan, from a broken neck suffered in a game against Yale, played again in front of sportswriters from the leading
New York newspapers. This time, unlike in 1905, what’s remarkable is the absence of a resulting crisis. A flurry of articles followed on football’s dangers and making the game safer, but nothing much happened, and for this I would offer two primary reasons: first, football by this time had become too important to too many individuals and institutions in too many ways to be radically changed, let alone abolished; and second, among those institutions was the popular press (newspapers and magazines), plus the new media of radio and film. By 1931 the media depended on football (and other sports) as much as football (and other sports) depended on the media. Unlike the sensationalizing and muckraking press in the 1890s and early 1900s, the media in 1931 covered the tragedy of Cadet Sheridan’s death for a day or two, then returned to the business at hand, the big national games and local contests coming up the following Saturday.

Americans in the 1930s still wanted their football violent, just not too violent. “Football” in this era, and into the 1950s, meant predominantly college football on the national level, with the high school game ruling locally and the professional game barely registering in public consciousness. No one cared about pro football outside the handful of large cities that had NFL franchises until the 1950s, when television made it possible for the pro game to reach a national audience. TV was essential, but the terms on which the professional football was embraced in the late 1950s and 1960s were deeply connected to the game’s necessary violence.

Pro football into the 1950s was widely regarded as merely brutal and mercenary, without the compensating values of school spirit and character-building. To use terms from Teddy Roosevelt’s era, it fostered “low cunning,” not manliness. A story in Life magazine in 1955 titled “Savagery on Sunday” and featuring several photographs of
slugging and other dirty play captures this viewpoint. Just a few years later—notably in the season immediately following the 1958 NFL title game that is widely viewed as marking pro football’s ascendance to national prominence—sports journalists were still describing pro football as brutal but, in a remarkable reversal, brutal now in a way that compensated for the softening and deadening routines of postwar American life. “Savagery on Sunday” in 1955 became “sanctioned savagery” in 1959, “an escape from or a substitute for the boredom of work, the dullness of reality,” in the words of Thomas Morgan in Esquire magazine. Over the next few years other magazines celebrated “The Controlled Violence of the Pros,” “Madness on Sunday,” and “Sunday’s Gladiators,” while television added special programs on “The Violent World of Sam Huff” (CBS, 1960) and “Mayhem on a Sunday Afternoon” (ABC, 1965). Pro football went from near-dismissal in the early 1950s to Americans’ favorite spectator sport in a Harris poll in 1965. From the 1960s into the second decade of the twenty-first century, the routine and sometimes spectacular violence of pro football has been central to its popularity and cultural power.

Football’s violence always had consequences, but popular understanding of those consequences was only anecdotal—the once all-pro fullback who was now too crippled to run on the beach with his kids—until the 1990s, when surveys of former players began suggesting that mildly or severely crippled bodies were the norm rather than the exception. But the crippled former players invariably said that the cost was worth it, and that they would unhesitatingly do it again. The football-loving public had no
compelling reason to feel very bad, or parents to worry very much about letting their kids play football . . .

. . . until, 2002, when tau proteins indicating Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy were found in the brain of Mike Webster, the Hall of Fame center of the Pittsburgh Steelers, dead at the age of 50. Or rather, three years later, when the pathologist who discovered CTE in Webster’s brain reported his findings in a medical journal. Or rather, four years after that, when to Alan Schwarz’s reporting in the New York Times since early 2007 on subsequent cases of CTE were added major stories in GQ and the New Yorker, and the general public, as well as Congress, became aware that football endangered not just hips, backs, and knees, but brains, too, with potentially devastating long-term consequences. 26

Uncritical acceptance of football’s necessary roughness has become no longer possible. But exactly how football will change is still playing out. American football is violent, has always been violent, and has always been loved and valued for its violence. But now we know that football’s violence has more serious consequences than we ever imagined. Just how dangerous it is, to what portion of those who play it—not just in the NFL but at the high school and college and even youth-league levels as well—will remain uncertain until much more research can answer fundamental questions about the causes, duration, prevention, and long-term consequences of traumatic brain injury. 27 In the meantime, organizations that sponsor football—led by the National Football League but extending downward through the NCAA and the National Federation of State High School Associations, all the way to youth organizations such as Pop Warner and the NFL-sponsored USA Football—are changing the rules of play to lessen the frequency
and force of head injuries, and mandating new protocols for managing concussions after
they occur.

But with certainty about the degree and extent of the risks still in the future, and
perhaps never fully grasped, parents today are having to decide whether or not to let their
young sons play tackle football based on the available information. The media, as
always, have a key role in determining what citizens know. Today, “the media” include
not just local newspapers, magazines, radio, and three broadcast stations, but also 24/7
cable television along with countless online sports websites and non-stop blogging. And
while mainstream media still have their news cycles, the Internet provides news on every
football tragedy everywhere in the country, and it keeps stories alive well beyond their
normal cycle. The current crisis over traumatic head injuries in football will not go away.
In addition, while there’s still plenty of room for sensationalizing and posturing and
imposing ideological biases in the media, at the heart of football’s current crisis is
something real and unambiguous—those tau proteins in the brains of former NFL players
who died demented, or by suicide after grotesquely erratic behavior; those lower scores
on cognitive tests after a concussion in a high school football game.

The NFL remains the financial and cultural colossus of American sports, and it is
doing everything possible to reassure its vast audience that its game is safe to play, and
therefore safe to watch. But apart from its own efforts to make football safer, the
decisions made by parents of teenagers and pre-teens will affect the NFL’s future, too.
The “pipeline” of young athletes that feeds into American colleges and eventually into
the NFL could dry up, or become severely constricted, at its source. Saying no to
football will often not be easy—belief in the benefits to boys from the playing the game
remain widespread—but in the absence of medical certainties parents will make risk assessments for their own sons. The parents who say no to football for their sons will be disproportionately those whose sons have alternative opportunities for rewarding lives.

One grim scenario is easy to imagine for the not-too-distant future: a game known to be horribly self-destructive played at the highest level only by the underprivileged.

The positive alternative is to make football truly safe. But for now, whether football can be safe enough and still be football is not at all certain.

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Notes

1. “Pac-10 Announces ESPN/Fox TV Deal”; “College Football Playoff Revenue Distribution Set.”
2. Oriard, Bowled Over.
3. See, for example, Sack, Counterfeit Amateurs; Smith, Pay for Play; Thelin, Games Colleges Play; and Oriard, Bowled Over.
5. Wieberg, “NCAA to Modify $2,000 Stipend Proposal.”
8. Watterson, College Football, p. 209.
11. Wheel, “Ed O’Bannon vs. the NCAA.”
15. Falla, NCAA: The Voice of College Sports, pp. 128-29, 137.
16. In 1876, 46 colleges teams (varsity and class teams) played by soccer rules, 17 by rugby rules. In 1877, 27 played soccer while 43 played rugby; and in 1878, it was 21 soccer, 52 rugby. See Smith, “1876/77 College Foot-ball Summary.”
17. See, for example, “Amenities of Football”; “Law to Make Football a Crime”; “Twelfth Player in Every Football Game.”
18. See, for example, Saltus, “Rome Brought up to Date”: “Football Player of ’97 Armed Like a Knight of Old”; “Modern Gladiators.”
21. Watterson, College Football, p. 401
22. Watterson, College Football, p. 402.
23. “Savagery on Sunday.”
27. For an historical overview of an immense topic, see Shurley and Todd, “Boxing Lessons.”

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