

Concussions: The Marketing Nightmare that Faces the NFL and Youth Sports

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Abstract: On August 22, 2013, the National Football League and the NFL players association settled on their concussion lawsuit for \$765 million dollars. On January 14th US District Judge Anita Brody, denied the settlement on grounds that the agreement didn't do enough to address players not named in the original lawsuit which included 20,000 retired players (Rovell, 2014). The judge eventually cleared a revised settlement which eliminates a cap on claims and raises the payout to 870 million.

According to recent research done on the brains of deceased NFL players the long term effects of concussion is more serious than thought. "Concussions that were once thought of as part of the game and a minor injury are only now being understood in terms of their long term issues as many ex-athletes are having severe problems with brain functioning." (Jamieson & Orr, 2009). The mentality of playing through injuries and the push to make young athletes bigger, faster and stronger in hopes of a future pay day has led to a trickle-down effect of concussions at the youth level. Concussion research has shown that young athletes have an increased risk for long-term side effects of concussions which is even more problematic for youth sports (Valovich, Schwartz, Bay, 2007; Field, Collins, Lovell, & Maroon, 2003).

The future of the NFL as an economic juggernaut amongst its peers will have a major impact from how it handles this problem. The court of public perception does not want to see the NFL abandon its players and they also want to know about the safety of children and non-professionals who play sport. The NFL, High School Coaches, and youth league directors do not want to read headlines like, "Parents Weigh Risks of Youth Football Amid Concussion Debate", as the *USA Today* proclaimed in a pointed article (Mihoces, 2012). The *Wall Street Journal* stated that, Football faces another hurdle: growing concern that concussions and other contact injuries can cause lasting physical damage" when they ran an article entitled, "Youth Participation Weakens in Basketball, Football, Baseball and Soccer." (Wallerson, 2014).

This meta-analysis focuses on the impact concussions may have on NFL and Youth Sport Marketing efforts. We will also consider other youth sports that have concussion injuries and how the atmosphere of a team and the hubris of the athletes relate to incident rates. Potential financial implications and marketing strategies to mitigate the damage along with other solutions to the core issue will be discussed. Further analysis will be provided in the paper, along with a question and answer session.

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Key words: NFL; concussion movie; Adrian Peterson; youth sports; sport violence

JEL codes: I, K, O

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For many years the National Football League (NFL) held a position that did not recognize the serious issues surrounding concussions. Financial pressure was applied to the league by a group of players who had gained a greater understanding of concussions and their horrific consequences. On August 22, 2013, the National Football League and the NFL players association settled on their concussion lawsuit for \$765 million dollars. On January 14th US District Judge Anita Brody, denied the settlement on grounds that the agreement didn't do enough to address players not named in the original lawsuit which included 20,000 retired players (Rovell, 2014). The judge eventually cleared a revised settlement which eliminates a cap on claims and raises the payout to 870 million. This settlement is not being supported by the family of Dave Duerson and many other key stakeholders and does not appear to be conclusive or the end of the judicial process.

Researchers uncovered a myriad of serious health issues related to head trauma and concussions. According to recent research done on the brains of deceased NFL players the long term effects of concussion is more serious than thought. "Concussions that were once thought of as part of the game and a minor injury are only now being

understood in terms of their long term issues as many ex-athletes are having severe problems with brain functioning.” (Jamieson & Orr, 2009). Suicides and abuse issues associated with current and former athletes have triggered speculation from many sources that these consequences have deadly consequences.

The mentality of playing through injuries and the push to make young athletes bigger, faster and stronger in hopes of a future pay day has led to a trickle-down effect of concussions at the youth level. Parents saw their children as an investment, as big pay days were thought to be the reward for the many hours of supporting children playing sports. Parents were willing to pay for special instructors, camps, all-star leagues, trips for extra tournaments and top sport gear and equipment. Sport retailers and production companies were able to bask in profits and many companies such as Nike, Adidas, and Under Armor have enjoyed a prominent position amongst non-sport related peers for their business successes on aggregate and individual levels. Parents found room in their budgets, or found credit to make sure that their children were able to keep up with the competition.

Parents basked in reflective glory and hoped to achieve fame and fortune as their children could potentially reach all of the goals they had not reached in their own lives. BIRG Theory (Basking in Reflective Glory) explains this concept and many examples are found in the sport milieu. “If the child has the same passions and drive this situation may work out very well. Unfortunately, when looking at cases of burnout, or worse, parents living vicariously through kids’ experience, can often be found as a reason that too much pressure was placed on the athlete. The child that is already on a path of systematic pursuit of becoming a professional through serious sport and leisure should be a concern to those who care about that person’s long term moral, personal and even athletic development. Participation in sport should not be viewed as a career for young athletes.” (Jamieson & Orr, 2009, p. 165).

The pursuit of team success, accolades, statistics and big plays to showcase to coaches and potential scouts create an incredible need for players and parents to want their kids to play as much as possible. Personal pride and general fitness could also be seen as a reason to insist in more playing time. Learning how to fight through injuries and accomplishing your goals with resiliency can be seen as a very strong benefit of playing youth sports. Scenes of Olympic athletes fighting through injuries or MLB stars like Kirk Gibson limping around the bases or Curt Schilling and his bloody sock resonate in culture and contribute to the sport ethic to play through pain and injury in order to be the hero. Concussions have made even the most hardened coaches re-consider this attitude as second impact syndrome and skull fracture issues become prevalent. Concussion research has shown that young athletes have an increased risk for long-term side effects of concussions which is even more problematic for youth sports (Valovich, Schwartz, Bay, 2007; Field, Collins, Lovell, & Maroon, 2003).

The culture of football is especially interesting in the context of concussions, as noted in a research article in *The Sport Psychologist*, “The sport of American football is believed to perpetuate ideologies of masculine superiority by valuing, encouraging, and sanctioning instrumental aggression” (Gage, 2008; Messner, 1990, 1992; Pringle & Markula, 2005). According to Kreager (2007), “Masculinized sports then become socially sanctioned stepping stones toward privilege and power — sites where coaches, peers, parents, and the media encourage masculine identities founded on physical aggression and domination” (p. 706). As a result, football provides myriad opportunities to explore on-field aggressive sport behaviors among the young men who participate in this influential institution of masculinity socialization (e.g., Foley, 2001; Steinfeldt, Steinfeldt, England & Speight, 2009; Wong, Steinfeldt, LaFollette, & Tsao, 2011) (Steinfeldt, Rutkowski, Orr & Steinfeldt, 2012).

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also want to know about the safety of children and non-professionals who play sport. The NFL, High School Coaches, and youth league directors do not want to read headlines like, “Parents Weigh Risks of Youth Football Amid Concussion Debate”, as the *USA Today* proclaimed in a pointed article (Mihoces, 2012). The *Wall Street Journal* stated that, Football faces another hurdle: growing concern that concussions and other contact injuries can cause lasting physical damage” when they ran an article entitled, “Youth Participation Weakens in Basketball, Football, Baseball and Soccer.” (Wallerson, 2014).

This meta-analysis focused on the impact concussions may have on NFL and Youth Sport Marketing efforts. Brand equity of the NFL has been under review by their fans and many stakeholders. Brand equity is; “The added value, or equity, that a certain product has by the virtue of its brand name.” (Mullin, Hardy & Sutton, 2014, p. 155). With the suicide murder of Javon Belcher preceding the violence and abuse issues of Adrian Peterson, Ray Rice and Greg Hardy, the NFL has some serious issues to deal with when it considers sponsors and the impacts of poor behavior off the field coupled with the problems of concussion and their potential role in influencing the behavior of the athletes.

Seventeen million fans attended NFL games in 2010 and paid 54 to 117 dollars per ticket (Burke, Hendrickson, & Roberts, 2011). “The total “gross football product” from everything from naming rights and broadcasting rights to sponsorship and ticket sales was estimated at \$9.3 billion, which was almost as much as the combined financial impact of the other three major professional leagues (MLB \$6.7 billion, NBA 3-4 billion, and the NHL 1 billion).” (Fried, DeSchriver, Mondello, 2014, p. 34). Sponsors like Budweiser and Papa Johns generate big pay days on game day and also contribute back to the NFL by purchasing sponsorship in exchange for visibility and access to customers. Budweiser was very vocal about their desire to have the NFL keep their image up when they faced multiple scandals including the concussion issues and lawsuit. The threat of losing sponsors and fans did appear to impact the way that players were punished for transgressions and several rule changes have been geared at protecting players from concussions. Many other rules remain debatable such as eliminating kickoffs and other dangerous plays.

The number of football participants not in the NFL far outweighs the number of participants in the NFL and further magnifies the risks and opportunities for individual law suits. There was an estimated 3.1 million touch football players and 3.8 million tackle football ages 6 and above in the United States during the 2012 year. (Pederson & Thibault, 2014). These numbers demonstrate the need for safe training and equipment for athletes who are at risk for head injuries and concussion. Flag football is looked at as a potential alternative at the youth levels but the entertainment of the big hit would be a tough loss at the collegiate and professional levels of play. When we allow our youth to learn how to hit is a debatable topic with pros and cons of each side being present. We do not want athletes to suffer concussions at an early age and start their concussion clocks early and deal with long term health consequences.

New concussion helmets and protective equipment should be of high quality and leagues will have to find a way to pay for it so that their core product is safe. Training programs that allow athletes to build neck strength and build physical traits to avoid concussions are helpful. Learning how to avoid taking a big hit at a young age is helpful. Testing procedures to make sure athletes are safe before returning to the field should be used and all care needs to be taken so the athlete or coach cannot manipulate the test in order to return to the field. It is important that a medical trainer can decide to pull a concussed player and not face retribution from a coach. Each of these safeguards need to be implemented so that the marketing campaign of these organizations can be honest and ethically align with a marketing message that conveys football as a safe and reasonable sport to play and watch.

Potential financial implications and marketing strategies to mitigate the damage along with other solutions to the core issue are important for the NFL and youth sport providers to understand and enact. We have also considered other youth sports that have concussion injuries and how the atmosphere of a team and the hubris of the athletes relate to incident rates. Football is on an economic perch and represents the deepest pockets of the major sports and has been the first target of concussion lawsuits and medical review. Paying nearly a billion dollars for a lawsuit may only be the start of the problems for the NFL as highlighted in this paper. Other professional sports will eventually face scrutiny, as will the NCAA and their member organizations, high schools, youth sport clubs, and the myriad of related sport organizations. Any weaknesses and exploited areas of the NFL and sport of football will be used against other organizations who do not take head of the precedent being set and each will be at risk of equal or greater condemnation if appropriate.

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