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Writing in the Disciplines

March 17th 2016

Sports Media Influence on NFL injury awareness: Literature Review

Introduction

The influx of concussions and injuries reported by players in the National Football League, along with recent lawsuits filed by former NFL players against the league has created an increasing awareness about the dangers of traumatic brain injuries (TBI’s) in national sports media. This increase in awareness is because of the shift in the direction of players and sports journalists alike in the way they view player health and safety. Sports journalist’s perception of masculinity shapes the way they portray information about the players have to the public.

The impact of Hegemonic Masculinity and the Masculine Warrior Narrative on Sports Journalists’ perception of Sporting Injury

Sports journalists have an overwhelming need to promote hegemonic masculinity and the masculine warrior narrative in the way they report information about the NFL. Anderson and Kian (2012) considered masculinity in regard to the reporting of NFL concussions and noted a change in how men understood injury – noting that masculinity has changed, along with a cultural understanding of “chronic trauma;” however, the media continues to “uphold the masculine warrior narrative” (p. 161).

Anderson and Kian (2012) studied hegemonic masculinity in American Football and sports journalists’ need to uphold the masculine warrior narrative stating that “sports media has glorified the image of the emotionally and physically impenetrable football player and portrays athletes as heroes in the face of serious injury or death. This is seen as the ultimate commitment to sport and victory.” (Anderson and Kian, 2012, p.165). Nyland (2004) says that sports journalists support hegemonic sporting masculinity by encouraging masculinity-making practices. Instead of praising the strong-willed male athletes who put health before victory, sports journalists used the stories of fallen athletes in order to promote their own sporting prowess and masculinity. It is important to construct an idea of ways sports journalists view football players in order to understand their motivation behind displaying information about injuries to the public eye.

How Sports Journalists assessments of head trauma in contact sports impact player and public perspective.

Newspapers have consistently impacted the way the public and players themselves view head trauma. Cusimano et al. (2011) found that American and Canadian Newspapers disapproved of the needless aggression and violence in contact sports and reported that traumatic brain injuries (TBI’s) were serious, but also believed that they were a part of the game and an “essentially unavoidable occupational hazard.” (pg.54)

Cusimano et al. continued this conversation stating that American Newspapers reported aggression and brain injuries are an integral part of contact sports such as Hockey. However, they only expressed concern on the potential long-term impacts of brain injuries if the injuries involved star players. (Cusimano et al., 2011, pg. 56)

These Newspapers are justifying injuries as a part of the game and hindering growth in player safety and injury prevention by promoting the idea that nothing can be done. This is important to understand because it not only the public but also the athletes themselves that accept this way of thinking as true.

How NFL player’s perception of Pain and Injury affect media decision-making regarding health coverage.

Rogers (2014) speaks about the overwhelming pressure player’s face in the National Football League to play through injuries. They state that because of the recent media attention on the injuries of players, the public interest in men who are dealing with the effects of football’s brutality has increased

Rogers (2014) states that the athletes in the NFL believe that emotions such as fear, compassion, and tenderness are seen as a sign of weakness and pain must be repressed (Rodgers, 2014). Donald Sabo calls this “the pain principle” and argues that it is present in many men, not only athletes. The pain principle decreases emotional expression, leads men to see their bodies as machines and not part of themselves. (Rogers, 2014, pg. 123)

When the ability to perform is threatened by injury players believe that part of their identity is at stake and push themselves to play through the pain. This can be seen as simply a player’s competitive nature or love of the game but it is often these pressures that cause players to view injuries as an “inescapable part of football.” (Rogers and Oriard 2014 pg. 152)

Jones and Koonce Jr. (2015) also give valid information about the perception of injuries in the NFL stating that although the NFL has implemented rule changes to deter violent hits and decrease injuries the players continue believe that the league is restricting the nature of the game. (pg. 150)

Jones and Koonce Jr. (2015) continue this idea proving the fact that football is a violent and dangerous game is part of the appeal draws viewers in each Sunday and the injuries that result from such play leave an indelible mark on the player’s physical health and mental psyche. (pg. 132 par 4)

A key factor in why injury is viewed as outside of maleness is because mental and physical toughness factor into the athletic identity of football players. Petrie, Deiters and Harmison (2014) examine the way that college football players deal with life, stress and injury. They state sport psychologists, athletic trainers, and coaches need to continue to be aware that certain athletes will perceive their stressors, (such as injury) as threatening or overwhelming and cope with the stressor much differently than athletes who perceive their stressors in an adaptive manner (as a challenge). (Petrie, Deiter, Harmison, 2014, pg. 13)

It is important to understand the way different athletes think in order to understand why they may want to suppress the notion that they are injured to their coaches, trainers, and other medical staff.

How player leadership impacts concussion and player safety awareness with athletes and the media.

Players are told that the only way to bring about awareness of dangers of injuries is for the players to police themselves. Trainers and Coaches will never be informed unless the players take initiative in communicating with them when they are injured. Keown (2012) writes about the change in NFL player’s perception about the dangers of brain injuries by using Green Bay Packers Wide Receiver Donald Driver. (Pg.1)

Keown (2012) states in his article that although Driver's actions in encouraging his starting quarterback to leave the game after suffering a concussion greatly diminished his team's chances of winning the game, he inspired players and sports journalists alike to look at the sport differently and see that players should prioritize their health and personal well-being over the need to win. (Pg. 2)

Keown (2012) believes that more players should take on a leadership role and encourage teammates to get a player who looks disoriented in the huddle off the field and inform the training staff. He says “the buddy system” is part of the initiative to educate players on the dangers of head injuries and multiple concussions ultimately coming to the conclusion that the problem lies within the sport, the culture, and the people who reside within it. Keown (2012) feels the biggest obstacle to the NFL's concussion policy is persuading players to leave the field or seek treatment when they know they will be finished for the game and maybe the next. He agrees that attitudes are changing within sport media and concludes saying that football can still be about toughness, just a different kind of toughness in the players who are clear-headed enough to speak the truth and encourage others to listen to them. (Keown 2012 Page 3)

Klis (2013) also speaks about this change in attitude from the NFL and media alike when dealing with concussions and player safety.

Klis (2013) states that when it comes to concussions, the NFL has told its players that they need to take the issue more seriously. (Klis 2013 Pg.1.) In 2010, 218 players suffered concussions in 321 combined preseason and regular-season games and in 2013 190 game concussions were reported. (Klis 2013 Pg. 4) Klis believes that because fewer concussions are being reported because the league has been making stride to reduce the number of high-speed collisions on kickoff returns and making it easier for kickers to kick nonreturnable kicks. (Klis 2013 Pg 5.)

Klis concludes this thinking stating that in the pressurized world of the NFL, concussions can be viewed as a deterrent to the games inherit competitive nature. A coach might tell his trainer that he needed a certain player to play, no matter how dazed, in order to win. Players, meanwhile, know that if they come out because they are concussed, another player will come in to take their place.

Conclusion:

Sports Journalists have had an incredible impact on the way players and the public view the game of football. Studies show how these media professionals have displayed these athletes reflect the way the public views the athletes and how the athletes view themselves. Today we see the effect of sports journalist attempting to promote hegemonic masculinity by shaping these athletes as hero’s for playing through injury and head trauma. This leads to a culture of athletes believing pain and injury is a sign of weakness and must be repressed in order to maintain a sense of masculinity to the public. By changing the way sports journalists view concussions, it has helped in changing the attitudes of the athletes, coaches, and trainers who are part of the game thus leading to an increase in concussion awareness not only in the National Football League but in American Society as well.