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Sports Media Influence on NFL Concussion awareness and player safety

In the National Football League (NFL) the concussions that have increased and the violent nature of the sport has been showcased on television and other forms of media. This has led to an increased awareness and an influx of new information about the dangers of concussions and injuries in football. However, sports journalists’ perceptions of football players’ injuries and concussions is dependent upon their view of masculinity. This impacts the way the public and the players themselves see injury and pain. This paper will review present day sport policy, particularly in regard to professional football, in terms of injury and suggest that media coverage perpetuates a “traditional” notion of masculinity- one that sees injury as something outside of maleness.

The media coverage of Pittsburg Steelers Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger serves as evidence of media praising traditional masculinity. Roethlisberger is a player who is known for his toughness on the football field. His big 6’5’, 241-pound figure towers over many players in the NFL and because of his physical stature media professionals expect Roethlisberger to perform on the field and not be impacted by injury. ESPN Staff Writer Jeremy Fowler wrote that Roethlisberger’s “ability to withstand punishment and come back for more has added to his reputation as “an iron man”, both in Pittsburgh and around the NFL.” (Fowler, 2016, pg. 1) Fowler continues saying that the fact that Roethlisberger never misses extended playing time, returns from weird injuries and takes an enormous amount of hits throughout his career, yet still continues to play makes him a “legend” in the eyes of his teammates, coaches, and Steelers fans everywhere. Rogers (2014) states that when the ability to perform is threatened by injury players believe that part of their masculine identity is at stake and push themselves to play through the pain. (Rogers, 2014, pg. 152) Sports journalists, who observe this behavior on the field, portray the player’s actions in a positive light for sacrificing themselves and their personal health to lead their team no matter what the cost. The media perception of Roethlisberger shows how media professionals and football players have a high regard for masculinity over injury and view it as something that should not hold men back. This preserves a traditional notion of masculinity one that glorifies emotionally and physically impenetrable football players who put their personal health aside as a commitment to victory. Consequently, the public sees injury as a challenge that can always be immediately overcome. They forget that recovery is a process and steps need to be taken to insure players are healthy.

Another example of media professionals promoting traditional maleness is the media coverage of Los Angeles Rams Quarterback Case Keenum. With his team in a tied game late in the fourth quarter, Keenum suffered a concussion after he hit the ground on a sack. Immediately after the hit his teammates lifted him up and Keenum, obviously disoriented, continued to play. Keenum then fumbles the ball and loses the game in an event that showed the disconnect in communication between players and coaches and trainers in the NFL. However, Forbes Contributor Alex Reimer wrote the Rams were not the ones to blame as a result of Keenum’s injury. Reimer said “Imagine the reaction if an independent athletic trainer sitting all the way up in the press box demanded a stop to the action on the field. Suffice to say, it almost certainly wouldn’t go over well. As long as NFL coaches are judged on their win-loss records, it’s not realistic to expect them to willingly remove starters from games for precautionary purposes.” (Reimer,2015, pg. 1) Anderson & Kian (2012) defined this as masculine warrior narrative, stories of “heroic disposition, even in the face of debilitating injury or risk of death” (Anderson & Kian, 2012, p. 155) The NFL is subject to these narratives because the members of the media that cover the sport are primarily men. These male sports journalists uphold hegemonic masculinity, while covering the NFL, a male dominated sport. Reimer promotes the masculine warrior narrative and a traditional notion of maleness because he believes that it is so rare for athlete to take themselves out of the game the team should not be subject to blame. He explains that when a victory hangs in the balance all of the education and risks of chronic head trauma go away. Winning becomes the only thing that matters. With former players stepping up and suing the league for subsequently resulting in permanent brain damage to its athletes, the media is tossed front and center inside of this controversy. Media professionals continue to display a pressure to promote a masculine warrior narrative that lies within the sport. These professionals want to capture the culture of the league and the players and coaches’ way of thinking when it comes to injuries to star players, but do not understand that it is sending a message to the public that injury is not a factor in football player’s ability to win. The evidence of brain damage in former NFL player’s shows us that injury is clearly and factor and may continue to be. If the environment around the league does not change and pressure taken off trainers and coaches and put into the hands of the players the NFL may never effectively combat the concussion epidemic, it faces.

In the NFL players in leadership positions serve as an example to the rest of the team. They feel the need to be strong and brave and not show weaknesses. Rogers (2014) writes that “emotions such as fear, compassion, and tenderness are seen as a sign of weakness and pain must be repressed” (Rogers, 2014, pg. 45) Donald Sabo calls this “the pain principle” and argues that it is present in many men not just athletes. The pain principle decreases emotional expression and leads men to see their bodies as machines, not part of themselves. (Rogers, 2014, pg. 150) Media professionals are guilty of using their influence to promote the pain principle within football and show the sports as barbaric and gladiator-like. CBS New York Writer Jason Keidel writes that “the NFL is an industry, where the military ethic endures-next man up.” (Keidel, 2015, pg. 3), Keidel continues stating that the NFL is like this by design and that fans understand what the players in the sport go through day in and day out but also understand that they can be replaced. He says that “Even knowing what these men endure, we look with haunting indifference toward the next draft to replace the very players we idolized. For better or for worse these are America’s gladiators. We sit at home from the comfort of our couch but the brutality clearly doesn’t bother us as much as it should.” (Keidel, 2015, pg.4)

Keidel’s article serves as evidence that neither the public or media has seen anything wrong with the barbaric nature of the sport and that explains the disconnect between what is real and what is shown to the public. In the golden age of the NFL (1980’s and 90’s) some of the game’s best players were idolized for playing through injuries. This is because of what the media professionals display to the public. They inform fans who are worried that for every legendary player that is damaged by the brutal nature of the NFL, there is another player that can take their place through next NFL Draft. The public forgets about the player who was injured and fixate themselves on the next player added to the team. This is essentially the gladiator mentality that media professionals promote leading to a rise in athletes wanting to play through their injuries to make sure they don’t lose their job or ability to participate in the masculinity-establishing community of the NFL.

In the article “Players still willing to hide head injuries” The Associated Press interviewed multiple player perspectives on hiding head injuries in the NFL. According to the Associated Press (2011)” 23 out 44 players said that they would try to conceal a concussion rather than pull themselves out of a game.” (Associated Press, 2011, pg. 1) Buffalo Bills Linebacker Andra Davis stated that when he first came into the league the culture was completely different. The league exemplified a “whatever goes” culture. Almost to the point that if players came out of a game with even a slight concussion they weren’t “giving their all for their team.” (Associated Press, 2011, pg. 2) Former Jacksonville Jaguars running back Maurice Jones-Drew gave the media a straight forward answer when asked about concussion reporting. Jones-Drew stated that players have no choice but to hide it. “The bottom line is: you have to put food on the table No one's going to sign or want a guy who can't stay healthy. I know there will be a day when I'm going to have trouble walking. I realize that but this is what I signed up for. Injuries are part of the game. If you don't want to get hit, then you shouldn't be playing." (Associated Press, 2011, pg. 3)

Jones-Drew serves as evidence of the hyper masculine culture of the NFL and the different ways that football players deal with life stress and injury. Jones-Drew believed that injury was an expectation during his time playing and that there are consequences to playing the sport. It is clear that football is more than just a game to Jones-Drew, it is a way to ensure his family is financially stable and that his role as the man and provider of the household stays intact. This exemplifies his own cultural understanding of injury. Petrie, Deiters, and Harmison (2013) state that football players deal with injury differently than others. They believe while some athletes will perceive certain stressors (such as injury) as threatening or overwhelming, often times football players perceive their stressors in an adaptive manner (as a challenge). (Petrie, Deiter, and Harmison, 2013, Pg. 13) Players like Jones-Drew and Davis show that the common way of thinking around the NFL is that concussions are a type of injury that should not stop a player from playing. In most cases injuries and concussions are seen as a challenge that should be overcome if players want to keep the things they value the most (family, financial security, respect from teammates, masculine identity) As men these players are expected to adjust to challenges of life without being impacted. Media professionals support these athletes, understand their struggle and are willing to portray these athletes as heroes for doing whatever is necessary to preserve their masculine role within society. This leads to a traditional notion of masculinity being spread out into the public and a decrease in understanding of injury as we now see athletes as role models for sacrificing their own personal health in the future for respect in the eyes of other men in the present.

Concussions and Injury awareness are the biggest issues that contemporary sports face today in modern day society. Media Professionals hinder the growth and development of not only the National Football League and its players but scientific research as a whole by promoting masculinity over injury. They are deceiving the nation, placing players who suppress their injuries and pain on a pedestal above those who don’t. If the media continues to promote the masculine warrior narrative, football as a gladiator sport, and the traditional notion of masculinity as acceptable no information about the dangers of concussions will ever be uncovered. The NFL will continue to suffer through more lawsuits from the families of former players stating the brutal effects of the game have caused their fathers and husbands to commit suicide. Even though the sport can be entertaining for households around the country the players that play are slowly killing themselves by the minute. No one will ever know unless the media does its responsibility and informs them clearly without their own hegemonic masculinity getting in the way.