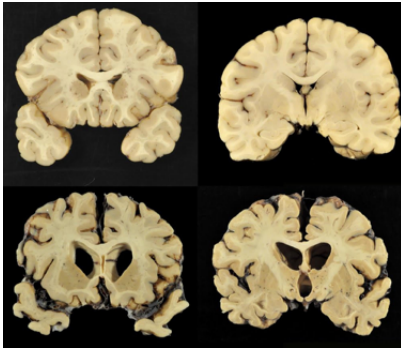


# Worth the Watch?

BY DAVID STATON



A section of a healthy brain (above) and a brain with CTE. Photo credit: Ann McKee/BU via AP

I live in a sports bar. Maybe you do, too. Mine is called Denver. Here, hard against the foothills of the Rockies, spring is marked by the crack of the bat at Coors Field, while late autumn and all through our snowfalls, the Avalanche and Nuggets hold forth in newly rechristened Ball Arena. But all year every season is Broncos season. The messaging on sports radio, broadcast television stations, as well as print and online subscription-based publications is omnipresent and relentless; seemingly, not a newscast, newspaper nor “new media” story is delivered without some Broncos tidbit 365 days of the year.

This isn’t unusual. Football in attendance, television viewership, and economic impact, dwarfs other sports. Last year, the NFL and its 32 teams realized \$15 billion in revenue (Gough, 2000). Their collegiate counterparts have revenue of more than \$4 billion just within Power Five schools, that handful of premiere football university conferences. Media are central to this cash bonanza, delivering eyeballs to advertisers through viewership and readership. It’s a push-me-pull-you symbiotic ecology that fosters sanctioned violence; the bigger the hit, the bigger the collective crowd roar. Football players, too, are big. Their prowess, strength, bulk, and skillful displays are jaw dropping and outsized made-for-media egos are almost a requirement. However, in seeming contradiction, there exists a contingent asymmetry of power—the players’ existence is dependent upon an audience. The attendant culture of that audience—and its economic juggernaut—rewards savagery. The media are proponents in its sustenance and any ethical consideration that would impede that flow of bash and cash is generally not deemed worth considering. We ought to throw a flag on that idea and one well considered approach might embrace the ethics of care.

In a late October game, the Broncos opponent at a snowy and bitterly cold Empower Field at Mile High Stadium was the Kansas City Chiefs. Hometown favorite, running back Phillip Lindsay, who played high school football at South High School in Denver and collegiate football at the nearby University of Colorado, Boulder, was concussed by a helmet-to-helmet hit in the second quarter and left the game. The injury made it unlikely he would be medically cleared to compete the following week. Following player injury, websites, and news cites too numerous to mention track NFL players’ “viability” day by day for subsequent playing availability. The kind of hit Lindsay encountered, that (literal) brain-jarring contact, is celebrated by fans and championed by the media. It was one of seven concussions reported in a league-wide injury report, penned by the NFL itself, that week. And the Lindsay collision was celebrated: popular sport enthusiast website, *Fansided*, dubbed Chiefs player Dan Sorenson, “Dirty Dan” and awarded him game MVP honors. His hit caused Lindsay’s injury. Meanwhile fans normalize this type of brutal contact in their language, the mildest of which might be a celebratory expression like, “Man, he sure got his bell rung!”

This is where the media, particularly that of broadcast outlets, is complicit. These sorts of collisions are replayed in ever exacting, ever closer grim perspective, not just during the live telecast, but ad nauseam in highlights following the contest. Televised football coverage fetishizes and realizes fans desire to be ever closer to the action and to observe it from a host of angles and temporal perspectives, from “real time” action to super slo-mo, atop, behind, and along side the action. Beginning in the 1963, with the advent of televised replay and accompanying refinements in zoom lens technology, broadcasters have shrunk time and distance between viewers and the action on the field of play. No longer do they simply watch an event, they immerse themselves in its mediated experience. And it’s not just

the actual contest being played that encourages fan participation, but numerous screen encounter opportunities with fantasy leagues, video gaming, and legal gambling sites, one of which employs a “doctor” to provide player injury reports to football enthusiasts.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but when viewers take in a game they’re watching death in slow motion. Here’s the real story behind what they’re viewing: the largest study of its kind published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (Mez et al. 2017) found 99% of former NFL players studied had a progressive neurodegenerative disease, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) brought on by head trauma. In the collegiate ranks, scientists reported 91% of college football players with CTE. The significance here is this: a player must be dead to receive this diagnosis. Currently, autopsy is the sole method for confirming CTE.

Whereas the Society of Professional Journalists and the National Press Photographers Association have codified ethical tenets, the strictures (and there are some) governing what is said and seen on screens is less clear, particularly more so when such material is intended for entertainment purposes. In the face of media coverage which amplifies and magnifies injurious content, a scaffolding offering an ethical approach that seeks to minimize harm may offer guidance in the ethical production and consumption of contact sports such as football. Black (2006) notes that in one such framework, care ethics, its deployment seeks “a fuller, richer media system ... that can and will consider such concepts as compassion, subjectivity and need” (91). The ethics of care mandates everyone ought to care about the well-being of athletes (perhaps particularly so given collegians’ amateur status) and not just their game-time physical readiness, in-game performance, or ability. An ethics of care holds and affirms the primacy of the body in moral reasoning; it is hard wired into our beings to be cared for and attended to (Gilligan, 2011). And, too, Slote (2009) points toward empathy as the cement of the moral universe. If we care about something, if we care about one another, that concern must embrace protection and safety ensuring, as best possible, a life well lived. Let us, as Hossain and Aucoin (2018) suggest, *care for and care about*.

To be somewhat less expansive, we might best view the intertwined relationship of the stakeholders (broadly considered: viewers, players, media companies) in televised football through an ethics of care, which is loosely enacted at present. Specifically, Tronto and Fisher (1990) identify four care-related virtues: responsibility, attentiveness, competence, and responsiveness. Those first two qualities align with Hossain and Aucoin’s care edicts. Caring for, or the virtue of responsibility and caring about, the virtue of attentiveness, are inherent in the NFL’s stewardship of the game through its use of concussion protocols, protective rules changes for vulnerable players, and technology-infused development of safety gear. All these measures seek to minimize risk. In its vested (and heavily invested) interest in presenting the games, networks and other producers of mediated football content responsibly advocate for the care of its athletes and pay attention to its administering of related ideals. This fulfills a demand by the fans/viewers that the best product be put on the field under the best conditions. And, in the unspoken contract upon which this billion-dollar industry functions, viewers care for, pay attention to, and purchase sponsored products and those featured across football’s multiple platforms. The inherent goodness of competence is nowhere more on display than in team product, or the football players themselves. For them, every physical need is ministered to or cared for by legion (trainers, coaches, physical therapists, physicians, highly specialized surgeons, nutritionists, etc.) who ensure that work is done well. Television and other content production services are closely monitored and follow strict protocols (guidelines governing televised sport are voluminous, easily running into well more than 100 pages) so as to best, and most safely, bring to life action on the playing field. The final virtue identified by the pair, responsiveness, speaks to efforts by conferences and leagues to intercept any threat to the well-being of the game, which, by extension ensures the well-being of its players. Responsiveness by football “care staff” is drawn into sharp relief by the media; sideline shots of injured athletes (now patients) being publicly provided medical care are common. Who has not seen the camera linger as an injured player is loaded onto a medical cart to be wheeled away, sometimes giving a “thumbs up” to the audience to indicate everything would be okay? This camera exposure of often brutal injury and its aftermath is one of the signature, high drama narratives of the game. In 2017, the NFL began using small, popup medical tents on sidelines to accord player and doctor confidentiality some measure of

privacy; collegiately, the idea was introduced two years earlier (it's important to note that the Department of Health and Human Services formalized the HIPPA privacy regulations in the United States in 1999.) Responsiveness, in the media is often a matter of "care" in doses quick and close—how quickly can providers replay the action and how close can viewers get to the field of play? Herein lies a paradox of sorts: are athletes and audiences, or media companies for that matter, vulnerable and in need of care?

One lesson that many appear to be taking away from the pandemic, after concerted health awareness campaigning and, in some cases, governmental intervention, is the embodiment of an ethic of care; we should "care for and care about" to sustain lives and adopt behaviors that enable this ideal. For instance, in response to COVID19, one of the aforementioned Power Five conferences has promoted a "Cheer Safely" public service announcement blitz. The campaign offers health tips (social distancing, washing hands and the like) for football fans from "the couch to the patio." Perhaps it's time for football in tandem with its media partners to capitalize on a particular moment at a particular time and emphasize that this credo might well apply to livelihoods. We ought to care for and about football players by more directly adhering to the guiding good of ethics. An ethics of care, herein applied provisionally to some aspects of televised football coverage, doesn't offer a neat mapping of this considered approach to a particular, popular media entity, but rather suggests a number of roads in search of a destination. A clearer path to better sort this journey ought to consider some actionable items directed toward embracing a care of ethics:

- **Require a rating** - if you want to watch *Dancing with the Stars* or a re-run of *Law and Order* you'll see a parental advisory label superimposed on the screen before and during it's airing. You won't see such a warning on a sport associated with violent impacts that cause brain damage. The TV Parental Guidelines exclude sporting events from ratings.
- **Require an ombudsperson** - An ethical ombudsperson should be in the employ of practitioners and profiteers of violent sport, as some print publications used to employ and, more to the point, as ESPN once did. Through communication and concerted effort, this may embrace a more holistic approach to the health of the powerful industry.
- **Revisit football oversight commissions** - The NCAA, that billion dollar-non-profit agency charged with governing collegiate athletics, ought to immediately embrace and endorse the current (November, 2020) House Subcommittee's advancements of the College Athlete Bill of Rights, which contains provisions for the extended healthcare of collegiate athletes.
- **Revisit rules** - By the midway point of the 2020 NFL season, just 10 player ejections had taken place for rules violations in the same league that noted 224 concussions the prior year. The rules implicating violators of helmet-to-helmet contact, governed by various articles in NFL rule 12 section 2, need better be clarified not just to players and officiating crews, but particularly to its mediated audience. A well-crafted media message of awareness explaining why such rules are in place, with sustained airing and publication may aid in creating a recognition among viewers of rules significance and how it can aid in both the longevity of the sport and the long-term health of its athletes.
- **Re-aim the spotlight** - Additional mediated audience education efforts might focus on the nuances and strategies of the game: big hits have impact, but the long game (coaching, special teams, chess-like manipulation) are the biggest variables at play. If the NFL writ large (to include collegiate and semi-pro leagues) highlights those game aspects, explains them, and makes them integral to how the sport is televised, viewing behaviors, over time, may shift.

The economic power encompassing the totality of football is galactic. As such, those within its media sphere should strive to protect and preserve that spirit and its economic engine. Truth be told, it can foster a sense of community, provide entertainment, and, for many, offer sustenance and income. However, if an intervention does not take place, the sustainability of the sport is at stake. Anecdotally, for reasons including and aside from the potential of grave

danger players may incur, participation in youth leagues and televised ratings of competition are both shrinking. Those content providers associated with the sport and, of course, the leagues themselves, have the buying power to shift conversations and opinions to include ideals of ethical dimension. Reason and rationale should be the guiding force. Those are the same, according to Lord (2017): “what you ought to do *just is* what you are rationally required to do.” The numerous powerful entities that make football available to consumers ought to play smart and embrace and functionally install further measures of care. I realize this might spell last call for some sports bar chatter, but doing so would be a considered toast to health.

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- *David Staton is an Assistant Professor of journalism and media studies at the University of Northern Colorado. He is the former holder of season football tickets at two different Division I universities.*