

Gladiators

Pain, Injury, and Masculinity in the NFL

by Katie Rodgers, Graduate Student, Sociology



In February 2011, fifty-year-old National Football League (NFL) alumnus Dave Duerson was found dead with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest. He left a note asking his family to donate his brain to research on football-related head trauma. Duerson knew something was not right with his brain and was proven correct in May 2011 when researchers at Boston University confirmed his suspicions, diagnosing him with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a disease that has been found in the brains of over twenty deceased NFL retirees. In April and May of this year, two more NFL retirees took their own lives. For some, these tragic deaths served as a wake-up call to the dangers of playing football. For others, it was merely confirmation that there is, indeed, a serious problem in the NFL.

My research documents the experiences of NFL retirees in transitioning out of football and back into the “real world,” examining the variety of obstacles they face in creating new identities separate from football. In particular, I am interested in the roles that race, class, and gender play in shaping a retiree’s experience of life in and after sport. Thanks in part to a generous grant from CSWS, I have been able to conduct in-depth, life history interviews with almost thirty NFL retirees. While their stories have been quite varied, there has been one constant theme: pain and injury.

Despite the numerous changes made in NFL rules, equipment, and healthcare programs, there continues to be inherent danger in the sport of professional football. As long as football is seen as the quintessential man’s sport and as long as masculinity is defined by the ability to be aggressively physical, injury and pain will continue to be major facets of the game. In the words of one former player, “It’s just part of the job.” Players learn to use their bodies as instruments, play through pain, and suppress any emotions that may be construed as weak, creating a disconnect between their physical and emotional selves. This alienation can have devastating physical and emotional consequences for players, but is simultaneously necessary for maintaining a masculine identity in the face of crippling injury. Football players’ relationship to pain not only shapes their lives on the field, but also their embodied experiences of life after football.

Every retiree I interviewed, ages thirty-seven to sixty-nine years old, admitted that they experience nagging physical pain in their everyday lives after football. Most also described how this pain affects their leisure activities, their overall physical health, and their family lives. Many were limited in the types of athletic activities they could pursue on their own or with their children. However, this admission of pain was often quite indirect. Many retirees responded to my direct questions about pain by saying that they did *not* currently experience any. However, as we continued to discuss their various injuries, they would go on to tell me about the various parts of their body that hurt. Often in the span of mere minutes, retirees would first deny, then acknowledge, and finally minimize the pain they experience in their lives after football, demonstrating the complicated relationship between masculinity and embodiment. As one

former player said, “Pain is a very difficult thing to talk about to football players.”

Retirees used a variety of strategies to minimize the pain they’ve experienced and the effect it had in their lives. One such strategy was to discuss the inevitability of pain and injury in the NFL (“it’s a part of the game, man”), thus normalizing their own experiences. Some also tended to depersonalize the pain referring to “the legs” or “the shoulder,” rather than connecting it to themselves by saying “my legs” or “my shoulder.” Another way in which many retirees minimized the pain they experienced was to compare themselves to others—other NFL retirees or other men of their age—arguing that all older men experience physical constraints and that compared to some of their retiree peers, they have it much better. While some retirees are, indeed, fortunate in comparison to retirees with more extensive injuries, this strategy of imagining that there is someone worse off allows them to minimize their own feelings of pain.

The experience of lingering, football-related pain was nearly universal among the retirees I interviewed. A corresponding attitude of having no regrets was almost as common. As much as these retirees go through in terms of surgeries, pain management, and making adaptations in everyday life, the majority say they’d do it all again. One retiree said that the burgeoning research on the dangers of concussions wouldn’t even slow him down: “If someone had said, ‘If you get one more concussion, you’re gonna die in ten years...’ would I have played? Yes. That’s what I loved to do. So, no, I wouldn’t have done anything different.” This professed lack of fear toward pain, or even death, was an important strategy for maintaining a masculine identity even when the body isn’t as physically powerful as it once was.

There is no doubt that football is a brutal sport, and it’s no surprise there are many injuries. While updated rules, equipment, and benefits are likely to make some difference in the lives of players and retirees, there is more that must change in order to cure the pain of football. Hegemonic masculinity, represented in its most ideal form through football, is the real source of pain for the thousands of men who dedicate years of their life to the sport. The neglect of the body, and its use as a weapon against both opponents and one’s own emotions, creates an alienation from the self, a divided identity that leaves many players and retirees suffering the painful consequences for years. Men who make it to the top of the masculine heap, those who best embody what it means to be a man, the ones that dutifully ignore pain, repress emotion, and continue to physically dominate and control on the playing field, they are the ones who suffer. The cruel paradox is that those who do it best actually lose the most. Retirees like Duerson and others end up in bodies that are broken and weak, unable to appropriately demonstrate masculinity according to our society’s expectations. If we truly want to solve the problem of injury in football, we must look beyond the sport itself and work on changing the masculine ideals it represents. ■

—Katie Rodgers is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology.