

Billy Kelly

Story of Football

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One of, if not the most talked about topic in the game of football today- more specifically the NFL, is player safety. The NFL is one of, if not the most dangerous league to play in when talking about the health of your body and mind. Players are getting hurt often and this has led to rule changes to try and prevent as many injuries. However these rule changes have their positives and negatives as most changes do. The rule changes put into place by the NFL have made the game less physical. The positive to this is obviously that players have a better chance of not getting injured. Some changes that have helped prevent injuries include penalizing blindside hits, defenders not being able to lower the crown of their helmet when attempting to make a tackle/hit, and basically having to perform a perfect tackle on a quarterback to avoid a roughing the passer penalty. That's just a few. While these changes have helped the NFL avoid injuries by players making less vicious and dangerous plays, it also impacts the gameplay drastically. One bad tackle and the game/momentum can swing to the opponent. Teams have lost games on terrible roughing the passer calls (just ask Clay Matthews). It is almost a guarantee that after the weekend games are played multiple players will tweet on Twitter or criticize the league/officials in a post game interview for a "soft" call or a play where they were penalized where they couldn't avoid whatever action they took. Let's go back to the origin of football and where the concern for player safety began.

Walter Camp, known as "The Father of American Football" has addressed the player safety topic numerous times. In Walter Camp's and Lorin Deland's book "Football" he talks about this in depth. "It may be claimed, however, that the violent exercise of football is too great

a strain upon many young men who attempt to play it. It must not be forgotten that the strength and vigor of young men varies greatly in proportion to their age and bodily measurements. Consequently, in view of the possible injury to a student from playing the game before he is strong enough for its demands, the authorities of nearly all the colleges and schools have for years insisted upon a physical examination of every candidate who desires to play football, and have prescribed by strict regulation the strength and capacity which a student must attain before he can be permitted to play” ([Camp/Deland 41](#)). Camp also describes how we as viewers who don’t have the same physical stature as the players, can’t find ourselves comparing us to them. The players undergo a course of football training and tests that makes sure they are able to play the violent game.

Another main point Camp talks about is that severe injuries are the result of accidents and not just specifically football. Camp wrote to Dr. Morton Prince of Boston in 1896 to investigate the inquiries into possible injuries to the nervous system from playing football. His response was: “You must know that persons who are subjected to violent concussions, physical and nervous shocks (whether the shock be slight or severe) are liable to suffer from certain nervous accidents which are technically known as traumatic neuroses; they used to be called spinal concussion and “railway spine,” the latter term being derived from the fact that such injuries are very common after railroad accidents. They may follow almost any accident in which there has been a severe physical or psychical shock. For example, they frequently are caused by falling from a height, or tumbling down steps, or indeed simply slipping and tumbling backward onto the ground; they are not uncommon as a result of carriage accidents, collisions, etc” ([Camp/Deland 44](#)). Following this, Camp wrote to surgeons at the principal collegiate football teams in the country asking whether they had ever known a player to suffer from a traumatic

neurosis as a result of a football accident. According to Camp, all of his correspondents stated that they had never seen any injury of the kind he described resulting from football accidents. In this early age of football, injuries like the one we saw to Ryan Shazier were far from a common occurrence. At this point in time (late 1800's-early 1900's), injuries were not as big of a deal as they are today. Back then it was more about "building up a new race of men."

Rule changes starting in the late 1800s and early 1900s made the game safer and changed the style of play. According to the ["Chronology of Major Rule Changes That Transformed Rugby into American Football, 1876–1924"](#), starting in 1890, an injured player who has been replaced may not later re-enter the game. Obviously in today's game, if players are deemed healthy enough, they may re-enter the game. In 1903, no shoe leather, papier-mâché, or other hard material may be used in head protectors; other protective devices must be padded, so as, at the discretion of the official, not to endanger other players. Starting in 1906, rules were implemented to introduce passing into the game. Beginning in 1906, a pass may be thrown forward once per scrimmage provided that if the ball touches the ground before being touched by a player of either side, the opponent shall be awarded the ball at the point the pass was thrown. The following year the rule changed to where the penalty if a forward pass touches the ground before touching a player of either side, changed to fifteen yards instead of loss of possession. Then three years later in 1910, a forward pass may be completed only within twenty yards of the line of scrimmage, and the pass must have been thrown from at least five yards behind the line of scrimmage. The following year the rule adjusted to a forward pass touched by either side but falling to the ground uncaught shall be considered incomplete, without penalty other than loss of the down. These changes made the game safer as passing opened up the field and prevented the game from simply being men stacked up at the line of scrimmage wrestling each other.

While rule changes throughout the years made the game safer, the game was still extremely violent. “To the uninitiated watching a football game, the smashing and haphazard collisions of human bodies at fast speeds seems to indicate chaos and anarchy. Football players run back and forth, fall down, get up, and fall down again. In reality, preparation for and playing of the game is more like a violent chess match being played on a large field” ([Miller 102](#)). The schedule of the NFL work week starts off slowly which allows players to rest up and heal. Then, by game time either Thursday, Sunday or Monday, “The players are geared and hungry for contact and aching to blast the opponent” ([Miller 104](#)).

The very act of competition in such a physical sport can cause an injury at any time. Some athletes have a higher threshold for pain, some feel the precariousness of their job status and try to play through the injury, and others challenge management's decision for them to receive pain killing shots, which later in life may cause irreparable damage to the affected body part. The effects of injuries are always problematic. Some athletes cannot play hurt. Some can, but often with a reduction in quality of performance. The psychological effect of an injury on an athlete plays a crucial role in athletic performance and serves as another variable in the playing of the game and in dealing with injury in sport. The ability or inability to achieve and maintain the proper mindset for athletic competition is a significant aspect of game preparation and game performance.

A great example of players playing through pain and injury is described in the book “[Slow Getting Up](#)” written by former NFL player Nate Jackson. Jackson played six seasons in Denver, appearing in 41 games and making four starts while fighting a constant battle against injuries. Jackson talks about having a conversation with his coach Mike Shanahan telling him that he's quitting football. However, every time he pulled into the parking lot, he wouldn't be

able to tell his coach that he was quitting because he would say “I am a warrior and this is my war” ([Jackson 2013](#)). That is exactly what football is. A war. And warriors won’t quit because of their pride and love for the game. Jackson goes into detail about how even though he was in constant pain, he didn’t see it that way because pain was a choice; a weakness of the mind and something that can be fixed by painkillers. He would flip a switch that would not allow his pain to affect him. Jackson talks about how he was able to play through pain and this is something I feel is common amongst NFL players; “As I run on the field before each play, I ask myself: how are you going to get through this? And after each play, I ask myself: how are you going to get through the next one? Eventually the game is over” ([Jackson 2013](#)). NFL players like Jackson play through constant pain and are constantly at risk for life-long injuries and setbacks, but for them, they see their pride being more important than their health and fight through it because they are warriors and football is their war.

Besides player safety, one of the other most talked about topics in football from the past is the exclusion of Black players. Nowadays-with the exception of coaching and front office personnel-discrimination in professional football has virtually disappeared. Today 55 percent of National Football League rosters and 62 percent of all starters are African Americans. Blacks also constitute 81 percent of starting skill position athletes (quarterback, wide receiver, running back, cornerback, and safety).

An [academic article written by Thomas Smith](#) on the exclusion of black players from the NFL goes into great detail about this issue. Only a few decades ago, professional football was a “popcorn” sport-played only by whites. Talented minority athletes performed for predominantly white colleges, but they were excluded from the professional game. Owners denied the existence of a color ban, but no blacks played in the NFL from 1933 to 1946. During the 1920s, Fritz

Pollard (a standout Black player) has observed, fledgling NFL teams may have signed black All-Americans to gain recognition and fan support. Having gained popularity and stability during the 1930s, the league no longer was willing to sign “name” black players. And during the depression decade it was bad public relations to hire blacks when so many whites were without jobs. Some owners, like George Halas, lamely attributed the absence of blacks in the NFL to the lack of quality college players. Others, like Art Rooney, claimed that financial constraints prohibited NFL teams from developing adequate scouting systems. Financial realities no doubt discouraged owners from scouting black colleges, but there were several standout minority athletes on major college teams in the 1930s. Since white players were scouted and signed, it seems reasonable to expect black athletes who played in the same conferences to have been discovered. But none were. Kenny Washington was ignored in the NFL draft despite setting UCLA records in career rushing and passing. “NBC broadcaster Sam Balter blasted the NFL’s black ban. In an “open letter” over the airwaves he asked NFL owners why “nobody chose the leading collegiate ground gainer of the 1939 season.” Those who had seen him play agreed that he was “not only the best football player on the Pacific Coast this season, but the best of the last ten years and perhaps the best in all that slope’s glorious football history-a player who has reduced to absurdity all the All-American teams selected this year because they did not include him-and all know why.” NFL scouts, he continued, all ranked Washington the best player in the nation but “none of you chose him.” Balter expressed bitter disappointment “on behalf of the millions of American sport fans who believe in fair play and equal opportunity.” He concluded by offering air-time to owners to explain why neither Washington nor Brud Holland were “good enough to play ball on your teams.” The offer was not accepted” ([Smith, 268](#)). The democratic idealism sparked by World War II, the protests of writers and fans, the emergence of the AAFC,

and the success of several minority athletes in college football all account for the collapse of professional football's racial barrier.

An example of this exclusion of Black players includes David Showell-a halfback who played at Lafayette in 1948. In 1948, Lafayette refused an invitation to the Sun Bowl because the bowl did not allow black players, striking a blow against college football's silent segregation. Lafayette broke an unspoken pact in early 20th century America by refusing an invitation to the 1949 Sun Bowl because the bowl did not allow African American players. Lafayette's halfback David Showell was African American. "The school's president, Ralph Cooper Hutchinson challenged the accepted practice of the day and made a vow: if Showell couldn't play, Lafayette wouldn't play" ([Carpenter 2015](#)). And that is exactly what happened. Lafayette did not play in the bowl game and they never ended up going up to a bowl game. After the year, Lafayette began to de-emphasize football. It was no longer big enough to compete at the highest levels. Even when football rose again at the college in the 1980s it was in the lower tier Division I-AA. But Lafayette's stand against the Sun Bowl's racism had an impact on college football. "Lafayette was not a major earthquake in the sports world but it was just another reminder that the times were changing" ([Carpenter 2015](#)).

While discrimination with players in the NFL has virtually disappeared, there is still discrimination in regards to coaches and front office personnel. Brian Flores-who is African American- most recently head coach of the Miami Dolphins, was fired at the end of the last NFL season. Flores filed a lawsuit alleging racial discrimination by NFL teams. The lawsuit uses an accidental text from New England Patriots head coach, Bill Belichick as evidence. This text contends that the New York Giants and 2019 Denver Broncos conducted sham interviews with Flores just to meet diversity requirements. The NFL's Rooney Rule stipulates that teams must

interview minority candidates for open positions. After the end of last season, Flores was set to meet with the Giants for the head coaching job. Before he got the chance to interview, Brian Daboll (who got the job) had already interviewed. According to the lawsuit, just before he was to interview with the Giants, Flores received a text from Belichick congratulating him on getting the job, news the Patriots coach said he had heard from both the Bills and Giants. Apparently, Belichick thought he was texting with Daboll. When Flores identified himself, Belichick wrote: “Sorry — I f----- this up. I double checked and misread the text. I think they are naming Brian Daboll. I’m sorry about that. BB” ([Farmer 2022](#)).

Additionally, Flores took action against the Denver Broncos due to an interview he had in 2019 for the head coaching job where he believed that Broncos executive John Elway and others arrived at the meeting an hour late looking disheveled and “it was obvious they had been drinking heavily the night before” ([Farmer 2022](#)). The lawsuit contends it was obviously a sham interview by the Broncos, who wound up hiring Vic Fangio, who is white.

A federal judge has ruled in favor of former Dolphins head coach Brian Flores in regards to his deadline to respond to the NFL's motion to compel arbitration. According to Daniel Wallach, legal analyst for The Athletic, a judge delayed the July 22 deadline for Flores to respond to the NFL "until his motion for discovery from the NFL and Goodell over the fairness of the league arbitration process is decided by the court” ([Farmer 2022](#)). While he and his counsel continue their work on the ongoing lawsuit, Flores is now the senior defensive assistant and linebackers coach for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

The game of football and the NFL will continue to satisfy the American demand for a game of ecstasy and violence amid changes to make it safer for the players. The NFL is the richest league in the entire world. The NFL generated above \$16 Billion in 2021, while its

revenue is expected to grow by \$25 billion by 2027. The revenue for the same is distributed equally amongst 32 teams. The cost to broadcast every game of the NFL is believed to be at least \$36 billion ([SportyReportStaff 2022](#)). And that would not have been possible without the work of Roone Arledge. Arledge is indisputably the most important person in the history of sports television. In a manner of speaking, he invented sports television. “Simple things like ambient sound, the tight, intimate shot--up close and personal!--and identifying graphics were his ideas” ([DeFord 2002](#)). Additionally, The National Football League has finalized its new 11-year media rights agreement with a pact that will run through 2033 and could be worth over \$100 billion with Amazon Prime for Thursday Night Football ([Sherman/Young 2021](#)). Amazon Prime wouldn’t make such a deal if the NFL wasn’t going to hang around and entertain the country every Thursday, Sunday and Monday.

The rise of fantasy football will also continue to satisfy Americans. Fantasy sport participants represent a sizable portion of the media-dominant sport fan population. “Currently, the business of fantasy sport is estimated to generate over \$800 million annually, and includes over 32 million unique participants over the age of 12 in North America” ([Dwyer 445](#)). Recent research has found that fantasy sport has created a new, more diverse sport fans with a significant interest in a group of individual players in addition to their favorite team. In addition, fantasy sport allows fans to simultaneously follow their favorite sports while actively competing and interacting with family, friends, and acquaintances. I can speak from personal experience that I am addicted to fantasy football. I am in five leagues and it is one of my most used apps. I live on that app and while I watch football on Sunday’s, NFL Redzone is always on so I can monitor the players on my fantasy teams. This habit is common amongst people my age who are fans of the NFL and it is something I don’t see diminishing anytime soon.

The game of football has come a long way from being simply a game of blocking where men would just pile up and try to push a ball forward through strength and grit. Rules were passed to help prevent player injuries and that included passing which changed the game forever and never looked back. While injuries can't ever be fully prevented in such a violent game as football is, the NFL has done everything it can to help diminish them. Actually to the point where players and fans are getting angry with how less physical the game has become. In my opinion, I'm not sure how much more the game can evolve for player safety as many rules were changed and it has gotten to the point where some fans can't even watch due to the egregious calls that are called for players safety. As I stated earlier, players themselves have gotten disgruntled with how the game is called now and it isn't like the players don't know what they are signing up for. These players have played their whole lives. They most likely played college football. They understand what is on the line and they line up facing the opponent who is ready to slam them to the ground every play. Some call it a career early because of the pain they have suffered, like Andrew Luck and Calvin Johnson. However for most others, as Nate Jackson said, pain is a choice for these guys. They are warriors and football is their war. They can't quit.

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