Case Study #3: Aristotle, Football & Concussion

Read the section on Aristotle in our text and the attached articles from The Washington Post and NBC News, and then answer the following questions. You may also want to watch the 2013 PBS Frontline video entitled, “League of Denial: The NFL’s Concussion Crisis.”

The completed assignment should be two pages long, (approximately 1400 words) using 12 pt. fonts and single spacing with one inch margins. Please follow the assigned format as exemplified at the end of your first case study assignment. Each answer should be separated, numbered and proportionate to the number of points possible. This study is worth a total of 60 points.

Your completed assignment is due on the 4th of May.

Please refer to the first assignment for general suggestions, grading rubrics, and a sample completed assignment!

1. Paraphrase Dr. Annibali’s argument from The Washington Post concluding that football is unethical. (5 points)

2. Asking the right questions: What facts would you need to know about this case to make a reasonably informed judgment? In this section, note that you should be raising questions such as the effects of concussion on brains, the training strategies employed, statistics on concussion in professional football, etc., but not questions about Aristotle. Provide as a bulleted list and pose in question form. For this assignment, you do not have to do all the research but you need to raise the kind of questions that would drive such a project. These should be research questions and as such should be concrete and answerable. No bias or prejudice should be evident and the questions should be non-normative (no “ought” or “should” questions). Think about facts that, if known might help determine how one should or could respond to the case. (15 pts.)

3. Aristotle’s Position: Pending the acquisition of all of this information, how do you think Aristotle would respond to this case; is football irretrievably unethical because of the high concussion rates? Be sure to provide citations from Aristotle (primary source = Aristotle’s writings and does not include secondary commentary from Rosenstand or from me) to support your answer. In citing the quote, all you need do is indicate the page from the text (see example). Note that this question carries the highest weight in points. (25 points)

4. Critical Objection: Identify one key problem with Aristotle’s theory of ethics as it applies to this particular case. (10 points)

5. Conclusion: Where do you personally stand on this question; should professional football be abandoned because of the high rate of concussion? Defend your answer without resorting to a repetition of points made in previous sections. (5 points)

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/league-of-denial/
Background: Case Study #3

As a doctor who treats concussions and a lifelong fan, I now believe pro football is unethical.

By Joseph A. Annibali January 16

San Francisco 49ers’ quarterback Steve Young lies motionless on field after suffering a concussion in a game against the Arizona Cardinals in 1999 in Tempe, Az. (Photo by Scott Troyanos/The Associated Press)

The recent surprising success of our traditionally hapless Redskins kept football excitement in the air in the Washington region deep into the season, until their playoff loss to the Green Bay Packers last weekend. Although we can still look forward to the Super Bowl, right?

But stop and think a minute. Have you noticed just how violent professional football is? Does it strike you as odd that so many are excited about a game in which players are

---

2 Please note that you are not limited to the background offered. It is expected that you will do a bit more in-depth reading to develop your thesis. You may feel free to use any credible/reliable source as evidence for your arguments. Additionally you may use additional material from Aristotle to defend your answers. Please provide full citation for all research.

knocked senseless and many are maimed? The players strike each other with such force that the collision sounds can be heard high in the stands and on TV. The quarterback position is acknowledged as the most important, but rare is the quarterback who is able to play a whole season without significant injuries.

More important than the broken clavicles, the shoulder dislocations, and even the gruesome orthopedic disasters like the career-ending injury of star quarterback Joe Theisman, are the injuries to the brain. Yes, to the brain. It is now crystal clear that high speed collisions—even when “protected” by a helmet and other gear that would make a gladiator proud—do very bad things to the brain. The recent Concussion movie helped bring the hard facts of traumatic brain injuries in football to the forefront.

Oscar-nominated actor Will Smith stars in "Concussion," a dramatic thriller based on the true story of forensic neuropathologist Bennet Omalu, who made the first discovery of the football-related brain trauma, CTE. (Sony Pictures)

As psychiatrist and a psychoanalyst whose specialty is scanning the brain using a technology called SPECT that looks at brain function, I’ve come to the conclusion that the whole football enterprise—especially on the professional level—is unethical at its core.

Brain SPECT is ideally suited to reveal brain damage caused by blows to the head. In my clinic we have seen many football players, at all levels, who have suffered serious brain injury caused by the sport. Plus, we’ve done the largest study on retired NFL players, which revealed remarkably high levels of brain injury and many associated problems.

The good news is that brain injury often can be ameliorated with aggressive treatment. The bad news is that most individuals who suffer brain injury, including professional football players, are not appropriately assessed, diagnosed, and treated. How many former football players have ruined lives because of brain injury? And consider remarkable individuals like Junior Seau, the former San Diego Charger, who took his life by a gunshot to the chest, so that his brain would remain intact after death and available for study.
My conclusion about football has been painful. I’ve loved the sport. Even during the many years of their mostly mediocre performance on the field, I’ve avidly watched each Redskins game. And other football games, too. I feel like a hypocrite. But the reality is that I grew up in football-crazed rural Pennsylvania. I played in a midget football league for boys age ten to twelve. Full contact. I loved it. And I played on my high school team too. I know the “thrill” of hitting another player so hard that they are knocked unconscious. Sigmund Freud wrote about human beings having both loving and aggressive instincts. It is well-known that the positive, loving instinct is called libido. My psychoanalyst colleagues and I—in a play on words—have nicknamed the aggressive instinct “destrudo.” Nickname or not, it is clear that we all do have aggressive, destructive drives within us. For centuries, this instinct has been showcased in sports around the world. Think of the gladiators in ancient Rome, the bullfighters of Spain.

A key appeal of football and other rough sports is that they provide a channeled and sublimated outlet for our aggression. Regressive tribal instincts (us vs. them) are strengthened. And we don’t have to put ourselves at direct risk, it’s our hired gladiators, err, football team. Is football violence a kind of “safety valve” for society, in which we spectators put others at risk in order to vent our aggression by proxy?

Can’t we find another way to channel our aggression? Is it fair to have our young people—typically young men whose prefrontal cortices are not even fully myelinated—put their bodies and brains at risk to that we can watch at home from our recliners? Or watch in the stadium? My experience attending Redskins games in person is that they seem like a drunken orgy at which a sporting event broke out.

Is it ethical to seduce our young men to put their mental stability, emotional welfare, and their whole futures at risk, by offering them dollars and fame to risk maiming the most important organ in their bodies? The brain is key to everything we are, everything we do. As a society, we shouldn’t get our aggressive rocks off through our hired hands—our football players—even if they are paid handsomely to endanger the soft tissue in the cranial vault. It’s not right. And, that many of the players are from minority communities makes it even less right.

Can’t we do better as a society? Can’t we do better as humans? Let’s find another way to handle our innate aggression. Let’s end this football madness. We look back at Roman gladiators and are repulsed. My prediction is that future generations will look back at our obsession with our violent national pastime—professional football—with similar incredulity and repulsion.
If football at all levels is to survive, it will need to evolve into a sport in which athletic grace becomes key, rather than jarring and brutal tackles that risk life-shattering injury. Will tackle football evolve into flag football? And would the rooting public accept a version of football in which life and limb are not constantly at risk? I hope so.


'Concussion' Shines Light on Brain Injuries and Football

BY BLAKE MCCOY, LINDA CARROLL AND JANE DERENOWSKI

The new movie "Concussion" tells the story of a Pittsburgh pathologist who took on the National Football League in his efforts to spotlight the dangers of repeated jolts to the head. Along the way, it paints a very unflattering portrait of the men who run America's favorite sport.

Will Smith plays Bennett Omalu, the Nigerian-born doctor who was the first to recognize in a football player the same kind of brain damage that had been seen in longtime boxers. The brain disease had originally been given the name "punch drunk syndrome," and more recently it has been called chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE.

In 2002, Omalu performed an autopsy on Pro Football Hall of Famer Mike Webster, who, before his fatal heart attack at age 50 in 2002, had been drifting in and out of lucidity, overwhelmed by dread, depression and paranoia.

Wondering whether some sort brain disease might have caused Webster's mental decline at such an early age, Omalu took a close look at the former player's brain. There, Omalu found clumps of the same abnormal protein that had been seen in the brains of boxers who had developed early dementia.

The pathologist was certain he had found proof that the big hits in football were causing the same kind of permanent brain damage that had been linked to punches to the head. And his first instinct was to alert the NFL.

His warnings weren't welcome, however.

In a scene from "Concussion," Omalu tries to explain his findings to the NFL.

"I want to solve the problem," he is depicted as saying.

"Who are you?" a league official asks "You're a pathologist. You perform autopsies."

"If you continue to deny my work, the world will deny my work," Omalu says. "But men, your men, will continue to die!"

It would take a long time before the league accepted the possibility that there might be a connection between big hits and permanent brain damage.

And over the years, there would be many more football players found to have CTE during autopsy — the only current way to diagnose the disease. Among them: Junior Seau, Dave Duerson, Frank Gifford.
Their CTE was identified only in autopsies after they died. Last week, the federal government announced that nearly $16 million will be earmarked to find ways to diagnose CTE in living patients. The hope is that early diagnosis might lead to treatments and a way to identify people at a higher risk of developing the disease.

Researchers at Boston University are part of the group that will get those federal dollars.

"CTE is a degenerative brain disease that's similar to Alzheimer's disease, but it's a unique disease that is associated with having a history of repetitive hits to the head," said Robert Stern, a professor of neurology, neurosurgery, and anatomy and neurobiology at the BU School of Medicine and director of the Clinical Core of the Alzheimer's Disease and CTE Center.

"So it's a progressive disease that starts earlier in life, somehow related to that exposure to the repetitive hit," Stern said. It "gets worse and worse as one gets older, as the disease spreads through the brain and destroys brain cells."

Stern listed symptoms of CTE:

- Changes in mood, like depression and apathy.
- Changes in behavior — such as impulse control problems, rage and aggression.
- Problems with thinking — memory problems, difficulties with planning and organization.
  And eventually, if someone continues with the disease, the cognitive difficulties get bad enough to impact daily life. And that's when we refer to it as dementia."

One of the big mysteries is why some players develop CTE and others do not.

"A history of hitting your head over and over again is a necessary factor to develop this disease, but it's not sufficient," Stern said. "In other words, not everyone who hits their head over and over again is going to develop a brain disease.

"So it's really important for us to understand more and more about this disease so we can, number one, figure out if it's common, and, number two, why do some people get it and others not," he said.

For many Americans, the first real lessons about lasting damage from blows to the head may come from the new movie. At the very least, it appears to be sparking a discussion.
Neither Stern nor Omalu hope that discussion will lead to the end of football or other sports.

"This is not anti-football or anti-sports," Omalu said on MSNBC's "Morning Joe." "This is about any human activity whereby your head is exposed to repeated blows."

The NFL, for its part, has implemented changes to help make the game safer.

"We welcome any conversation about player health and safety," said Catherine Boyle, a spokeswoman for the league.

"Broader and deeper awareness of these issues will positively impact all athletes," she said. "The NFL has made numerous changes to the game to enhance player health and safety at all levels of football. These include nearly 40 rule changes in the last decade, strict concussion protocols and better training and sideline medical care.

"We are seeing measurable results, including a 34 percent decrease in concussions in NFL games since the 2012 season," she said. "Additionally, we are funding independent scientific and medical research and the development of better protective equipment to advance further progress. The game continues to change, and player health and safety remains our highest priority."

Moviegoers may not feel that's enough after watching "Concussion."

"It's just very frightening," Adrienne Harris said. "If I were a parent, I would not want my son or daughter to play contact sports like that."

Football fan Haylon Harroo said the movie has opened his eyes to the dangers of head hits.

"This movie changed my perception as far as football's concerned in my understanding of how much these guys go through — they take a lot of damage," Harroo said.

"If there are measures that could be put in place to make sure these guys don't unravel, that would probably make the sport a little bit more palatable," he said. "You have to meet in the middle for all of this. You can't just get rid of the sport."