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Concussion's Memory Problem

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By Emily A. Harrison

In the lead-up to this year's Superbowl, a surge of [scientists](#), [celebrities](#), [athletes](#) and everyday citizens all weighed in, many with tongues-in-cheek, to a so-called [scandal](#) about the deflation of game balls prepared by one of the competing teams. While popular media bubbled with the latest news for nearly two weeks, a simultaneous commentary was launched by [some](#) who were appalled at the intensive attention to so small a matter while major issues with the NFL itself were left silent. The frenzy, they argued, was not merely surreal or even harmless, but rather an intentional distractor from the serious, fundamental and unresolved problems in the game and the league today.

This counter-discourse has been slowly but steadily building a critique that, in a number of instances, NFL politicking is masking these problems. Questions accumulated this past year, for example, about the settlements proposed in suits raised against the [NFL](#) and [NCAA](#). But one of the most crucial considerations in the present crisis and response has not received nearly enough press: Namely, that people knew over a century ago that head injuries in American college sports were dangerous. This present distraction and these proffered settlements are not the first time that the serious issue of head injury has been brushed under the rug.

It's a common misconception today that the concussion crisis now simmering in American sports comes on the dawn of new knowledge that concussive and sub-concussive head injuries are dangerous. In a New York Times [article](#) that ran in May of 2014, for example, the former city commissioner of Marshall, TX claimed that we have only recently learned of football head injuries' long term health impact. The article quotes him explaining that "once a society gets to know something is unsafe, we forget there was a time that we didn't." The comment, though well-intended, fumbled the real story about what has been forgotten. Historical evidence shows that even in the late 19th and early 20th century, in the earliest days of college football, players, doctors, coaches, administrators, and fans all knew that concussions were unsafe.

This is a crucial thing to be aware of in the current crisis and proposed reforms, because what was once forgotten can be forgotten again. American society today has the benefit of a massive media industry

keeping track of the concussion crisis; but the popular and scientific media published widely on the concussion crisis in the early 1900s. There is a culture sensitive to risk and safety today; but these characteristics defined the Progressive Era during which football's popularity surged. And there are scientists right now studying the pathophysiology and long-term behavioral health associations of concussion and sub-concussive hits; but ample evidence existed at the turn of the 19th century to make a convincing case of concussion's dangers at that time.

Society forgot what it knew because significant work was done by football's supporters to hush up evidence in the media and other popular discussions, to discourage scientific research, and to legitimize football by allying it with morally-reputable institutions and with cultural ideals of manliness that carried great weight at that time. What was known was unlearned, forgotten, pushed away into a corner. Over time, the first surge of the concussion crisis settled away into the storage bins of history.

There are, of course, differences between the first emergence of the concussion crisis and the resurgence of concern today. What was a medical problem among elite college men in football's early days is now a public health problem whose impact has spread across the population and raised particular alarm for its effects on children. And today's concussion crisis is bolstered by advocacy groups that have developed substantial infrastructure that did not exist in the past.

These advocacy groups, individual writers, and citizens in everyday conversations, are working within an implicit imperative to keep clear eyes on their goals of honest and multi-faceted risk reduction, not to be placated by band-aid solutions, reforms that only delay the problem, claims that more skilled play will adequately solve it, large financial payoffs and the blinding effects of corporate partnerships with science. Settlements and distractions with smaller matters all threaten to damp down motivation for more trenchant action. In the long history of the concussion crisis there is a story, that once a society comes to know something is unsafe, those with a stake in its perpetuation prefer that people forget.

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