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Web Roundup: NFL Concussion Risk and our Chronic, Traumatic Entertainment

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By Kathleen Lynch

As the NFL continues to dominate headlines in both sports and politics, there was a renewed focus this month on CTE and its impact on the lives of players from youth to professional football. CTE, or Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, is a degenerative brain disorder resulting from repeated, sub-concussive blows to the head causing the buildup of an abnormal protein called tau. While CTE can currently only be diagnosed post-mortem, neuropathologists report that during life CTE can [manifest](#) in depression, short-term memory loss, and increased aggression. In July, the New York Times published a [report](#) detailing a Boston University study examining the brains of 111 former NFL players: 110 exhibited evidence of CTE. While this is certainly a non-random sample, as the report mentions, “110 positives remain significant scientific evidence of an NFL player’s risk of developing CTE, which can be diagnosed only after death.” In late September, Boston University published a [second](#) study which found that players who began playing youth tackle football before age 12 had a twofold “risk of problems with behavioral regulation, apathy and executive function” and a threefold risk of “clinically elevated depression scores.”

Growing evidence of CTE risk and its impact on individual behavior has caused the condition to enter into the legal consciousness. In a recent New York Times Op-Ed, two legal scholars contend that the Boston University report would have been enough to convince a jury of “[reasonable doubt](#)” in the Aaron Hernandez murder trial (in an autopsy performed after his suicide, examiners found that Hernandez, a former New England Patriots player, had an advanced form of CTE). This week, pathologists will be examining the brain of the perpetrator of the Las Vegas mass shooting for [signs of CTE](#), presumably to better understand a motive for his actions. However, with the use of CTE in the courtroom, there is a danger that the search for this diagnosis will become a “scapegoat”, obscuring productive conversation about the prevalence of mass violence in American society.

These recent findings on the increased prevalence of CTE in the NFL, and the deleterious impact of even limited exposure to sub-concussive blows, has also led to an outcry this month among both players and their families. The mothers of two football players diagnosed with CTE after sudden,

violent deaths (motorcycle accident and suicide) are [suing](#) Pop Warner, a popular youth football league, for not taking proper precautions to ensure youth safety and adequately warn parents about the potential risks of participation. DeAndre Levy, linebacker for the Detroit Lions, [testified](#) on October 13 before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce and the House Committee on the Judiciary, in a forum on TBI and Sports, that the NFL has tried to silence him from talking about brain injuries and CTE risk saying, “It’s not my shoulder. It’s my brain. It controls everything I do. It controls everything we think, we feel, and if I don’t have the right to speak about that as a player, I think it kind of really speaks about the culture of the NFL, what the conversations are. I think that’s indicative of the conversations that we don’t hear, the closed-door conversations between the owners. They still are trying to find ways to silence us.” Chris Borland, a linebacker who left the 49ers this summer after his rookie season over concerns about CTE risk, published a one-minute video this month accusing the NFL of [actively](#) suppressing information about the risks of the disease. While team owners and the NFL have denied these claims, a football focused exhibit opening at the Boston Museum of Science this month—whose content is controlled by the NFL—makes [no reference](#) whatsoever to CTE.

The NFL is pervasive in mainstream American culture and—as recent developments have shown—a flashpoint for national and cultural identity. Since it is unlikely that America will end its love affair with the sport, recent innovation has focused on ways to make play safer and medical care more precise. There were a number of articles this month profiling recent medical and technological advances to more effectively diagnose brain injury and promote smart tackling. High school football players in Omaha, Nebraska public schools are currently testing “smart” [football helmets](#), designed to detect hard blows to the head. Viewing the data through a handheld device, coaches can identify players to remove from the game, evaluate for concussions, and determine who needs additional review of safe tackling protocols. The Boston University research team who released the breakthrough CTE study published a paper in [late September](#) identifying a possible biomarker that could make it possible to detect CTE during life. The startup [Quanterix](#) is seeking to develop a standardized blood test to detect concussions, to support the management of neurodegenerative conditions such as CTE, and help determine how long an athlete should stay out of play.

While the NFL has actively funded a number of these research initiatives, it remains to be seen how proactive they will be about changing policy as evidence mounts: just this month, Green Bay’s star wide receiver Davante Adams was [cleared](#) to play less than a week after he was sidelined from a concussive hit—he returned to the field without missing a single game. This month team owners have already been criticized for expressions of [hollow](#)

[solidarity](#) with players who kneel during the national anthem in peaceful protest; one of the many ways they (and the viewing public) can actually support players is by recognizing, and productively reacting to, the health burden athletes must submit to by participating in the sport.

Mounting clinical evidence and player accusations bring up thought-provoking questions for how anthropologists and other social scientists frame issues of risk, responsibility, and complicity in the realm of concussion research. While it is becoming harder to tune out the injury risk inherent in tackle football, families continue to sign their children up for youth leagues, athletes continue to play the game they love. This month, the daughter of a former Chicago Bears player, who watched her father suffer from CTE, revealed that she still made the [decision](#) to let her high-school age son play football. The 2017 Superbowl was the fifth most-watched program in television [history](#) and fantasy football continues to [grow](#), with 59.3 million players in the US and Canada. When talking about head injuries and football, a common refrain is “there needs to be a culture change.” Yet this discussion of “culture” often focuses on behaviors that play out at the individual level: athletes who refuse to pull themselves out of the game, coaches urging their players to “power through” injury, and resistance to migrating towards [safer helmets](#). There is space for anthropologists to more productively unpack the way “culture” is employed in conversations about sport, examining the social, familial, community, and economic factors that continue to drive the participation in and popularity of high school Friday Night Lights, College Game Day Saturday, and NFL Sunday.

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