

Saturday's Child: Why We Should Ban College Football....

By JA Allen (Featured Columnist) on May 18, 2012

Most of us relish the spectacle of college football on crisp Saturday afternoons, sitting in the stands at a mammoth football stadium in the heart of the Big Ten or the SEC.

We love the marching bands, the half-time entertainment and the spontaneous camaraderie in the stands.

On game day, whether Division I or II, or III, college football remains as much a part of post-secondary academia as libraries, classrooms and puny-sized dorm rooms.

It comes from our rich heritage—the love we have for our respective alma mater. All this enhanced by football hoopla, beer foam, and online bets with bookies. These incentives—along with the added bounty of bone crushing hits—make us all look forward to the gridiron experience each and every Saturday after Labor Day.

College football IS America in 2012. It is what we have evolved to since the 1950s. Athletes have become bigger, stronger, and faster. Effective training has shaved seconds off scoring dashes downfield, while increased duration and strength training make the player from 60 years ago seem almost comical by comparison.

We are assured by experts that modern equipment plus critical changes in football rules provide the modern player with adequate protection on the playing field. Yet, because of the current size and speed of college athletes, the brute force inherent in being tackled or tackling remain exponentially greater than they were even 20 years ago.

Still the thought of banning college football seems—well—it seems preposterous. It would be like banning *Little League* or the *Pinewood Derby*. Life just would not be the same. How could it be?

But consider this. According to Malcolm Gladwell, well-known author and columnist for the New Yorker magazine, the most compelling reason for banning college football is the number of head injuries college football players sustain in the course of a game, compounded over a season—additionally many seasons.

He is not simply referring to head concussions, which are now recognized and, to the best of our knowledge, adequately treated. Rather Gladwell focuses on multiple "repetitive sub-

concussive impacts." He contends that it is the cumulative effect of being hit day in and day out that does the most damage—damage that may be revealed only after death.

The author speaks about CTE or Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy which he presents as the linchpin in his argument during a debate hosted by *Intelligence Squared U.S.* The debate topic was whether or not to ban college football.

Everyone who loves college football and the young men who play the game needs to watch (College Football" href="http://fora.tv/2012/05/08/Ban_College_Football">click here) this exchange.

For the proposition *Ban College Football* were Buzz Bissinger, a Pulitzer Prize winning author and Malcolm Gladwell, a well-known, distinguished author currently writing for the New Yorker Magazine.

Opposing the proposition that college football be banned were Tim Green, an NFL great who played defensive end for the Atlanta Falcons—recruited out of Syracuse University. Joining Green in opposition to banning college football was Jason Whitlock who played his college football at Ball State as an offensive lineman—now a national columnist for Fox Sports.

Gladwell, in opening the debate, continued his premise that banning is necessary based on the staggering number of head injuries in the sport. Linemen, he stated, get hit on almost every play as do running backs, unless they score a touchdown. This does not occur just once a week on game day, but every day in practice.

These sub-concussive repetitive hits accumulate, causing substantial irreversible damage.

In a previous article, Gladwell had compared college football to dog fighting where the ultimate thrill for fans comes in the potential maiming of the participants, dog or man, neither of whom is paid for his participation in the sport [The New Yorker, October 19, 2009: Offensive Play: "How Different are Dogfighting and Football?"]

Ultimately, Gladwell predicts that colleges will be sued much as NFL players today are suing their league for repeated concussions that went undiagnosed and untreated. Ultimately, CTE will bring about the decision of colleges and universities to ban the sport in its current format.

Buzz Bissinger—the author of the renowned Friday Night Lights which detailed the obsessive mania surrounding a season of high school football in Odessa, Texas—also had his reasons for promoting the banning of college football.

According to Bissinger, competitive football has nothing to do with the main purpose of college. If the primary focus of higher education is to educate, then football on campus serves no useful purpose. Ultimately, it may detract from basic academic pursuits, especially when football sucks up a disproportionate amount of major resources offered by alumni and administration.

In this current era of austerity, while other college department budgets are cut and tuition is hiked to cover short-falls, football budgets remain substantially intact.

Bissinger points at the exorbitant wages earned by some college football head coaches—who sometimes make five or six times what the president of the respective higher educational institute earns.

The author alleges that some major college coaching compensation packages—like those for Nick Saban of Alabama and Bob Stoops of Oklahoma—border on the obscene for salaried personnel paid by tax-supported educational institutions.

Bissinger contends that American is sinking out of sight in the current global market which itself teeters on the brink of bankruptcy. U.S. jobs have dried up and moved overseas.

Yet, our major colleges and universities continue to fail to provide a realistic educational background for those seeking to compete in a fiercely competitive world.

Our universities need to return to their primary function as leading educational centers offering high quality instruction to the youth of today who must shoulder the burden of turning our nation and our economy around—instead of caving in to alumni and illustrious coaches who demand winning football programs.

Many proponents of the college football experience try to fall back on the argument that college football pays the way so that other needy college sports that generate little or no revenue can field teams. You may be shocked to learn from Mr. Bissinger that according to the NCAA, 43 percent of the 120 major football programs lost money.

That represents revenue unrealized when attendance at games dropped so low that football could not support itself—because these schools continued to field losing teams. Alumni demand the college or university showcase a winning football team.

The answer for many regent boards is to allocate more for football by cutting in other areas—even other sports. According to Mr. Bissinger, the University of Maryland cut eight other sport programs, endeavors like track and swimming, so that the university could prop up failing football and basketball programs.

Think about it. What else of value does college football offer? Certainly the players get nothing except, perhaps, an education of questionable value. Of the millions of dollars generated by gate receipts and television rights, the players get no compensation while serving their time in a huge unpaid farm club for the NFL.

The scandals, the violence of the sport, the distraction and the lack of pay for the athlete should add up to an immediate ban, according to Mr. Bissinger.

But it will not.

Speaking against the ban, Mr. Green and Mr. Whitlock, trumpeted their traditional view about the value of team work learned as the dedicated student athlete earns his education through scholarship.

Both Gladwell and Bissinger agree that paying the athlete would make sense. That way, the potential player, after fully understanding the risks, accepts the compensation to play football—instead of pretending that this game is simply a part of the greater college experience.

Bissinger recommends removing the football program as a part of any college or university's academic endeavors. Some other format could step in and replace the current system.

Off-campus teams might become part of an NFL farm club system associated with a particular university, even marketed as such, but not part of the tax-supported or privately supported educational system.

In one scheme discussed, players would not be required to enroll in classes. It would be optional. Footing the bill would be the NFL, who would pay players and coaches at a minor league level.

All participants agreed that changes in college football were imminent. Players need to be paid. The CTE issue must be addressed. Primarily, impacts sustained by players on both sides of the ball need to be reduced.

The moderator of the debate polled the live audience prior to the start of proceedings. The results of that initial poll were 16 percent for the proposition calling for the banning of college football, with 53 percent against and 31 percent undecided. Those results were reported once the debate concluded.

At the conclusion of the debate, the moderator polled the live audience again. Once the debate ended 53 percent favored banning college football while 39 percent were against such a ban. The remaining 8 percent were undecided