

Men's Health News

Should College Football Be Banned?

by Clint Carter May 11, 2012, 05:00 am EDT

Ban college football? Blasphemy!

Except that's exactly what more than half of the (fortunately non-policy-making) audience voted to do earlier this week at the Intelligence Squared debate at NYU.

Before the debate began, only 16 percent said the sport should be banned. By the time the arguments had been presented, that number had more than tripled to 53 percent. In other words, more than half of the audience left the auditorium convinced that football undermines education and inflicts long-term brain damage on players.

Football: Enemy to Academics?

Math, reading, and science scores are down in the U.S., and the time we spend studying is at its lowest point in decades. In the 1960s, the average student studied 40 hours a week, but today that number is 13 hours.

Football is to blame, *Friday Night Lights* author Buzz Bissinger argued during the debate. It's the primary distraction working against education, he said. As a school's football team wins more games, grades drop and drinking rises among male students.

Allocation of funds is another issue, as athletics—primarily football—diverts money away from academics, Bissinger said. In the Division 1 Football Bowl Subdivision, schools spend an average of \$13,471 per student. When you hone in specifically on athletes, that number jumps to \$91,053. Coaches, for their part, receive an average salary of \$1.47 million a year, far more than college presidents and 500 percent more than coaches earned in the mid '80s.

College Football Is Dangerous for Players

Perhaps more significant, however, is what happens to players on the field. Over the course of a single football season, a college football player will take about 1,000 hits to the head. Each hit causes the brain to swish around inside the skull, stretching and occasionally tearing the soft tissue between nerve cells. "It is not unusual in the course of a game for a player to sustain hits to the head of between 40 to 100 Gs," said author Malcolm Gladwell, who's covered football injuries in *The New Yorker*. That's the equivalent of driving a car into a brick wall at 25 mph and smashing your head into the dashboard. Do this 4,000 times, and you've just simulated a 4-year college career.

The cumulative effect of these hits is chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain condition that manifests itself through memory loss, confusion, and depression. CTE can only be diagnosed with a brain autopsy, so until a person dies, there's no way of knowing if he

or she has it. By some estimates, 20 percent of football players are inflicted, and there's speculation that CTE is to blame for the recent suicide of Junior Seau.

The Counterpoint: Football Opens Up Opportunities

On the flip side, football provides scholarships for low-income students and builds character in those who play, other panelists argued. "Football is a brutal game," said Tim Green, best-selling author and former linebacker for the Atlanta Falcons. But that's what makes it great: learning to get back up after a big hit and overcoming personal differences with teammates.

What's more, Green said, football players graduate at a higher rate than the general student body, and every year, 23,000 students are given the opportunity to study through scholarships they earn playing football.

As for dangers, they're overblown, Green said. Compared to football, there are more direct fatalities every year from equestrian riding, female downhill skiing, lacrosse, water polo, and baseball.

Jason Whitlock, FOXSports.com columnist and former Ball State University player, noted that football is a deeply entwined into the fabric of American freedom. "You can put football right in there with cigarettes, alcohol, porn—things that we tolerate and enjoy here in America," he said. In other words, we can't ban it simply because we don't like it.

The Verdict

The arguments swayed voters, and they agreed that America's favorite sport was dangerous, frivolous, and potentially hazardous to education. It's worth noting that no football programs were actually harmed in the staging of the debate. It was purely rhetorical.

But the question now lingers: If banning college football would make our universities safer and more efficient, should we do it? Leave us a note in the comments.