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Ban College Football? Breaking Down a Debate

By JOHN WILLIAMS

Two prominent writers argued for banning college football on Tuesday night at New York University's Skirball Center as part of the Intelligence Squared U.S. Debates series. Their opponents were two journalists, who also happened to be former players. Buzz Bissinger (the author of the high school football book "Friday Night Lights") and Malcolm Gladwell (the best-selling author and New Yorker staff writer who compared football to dogfighting) want to get rid of football on campus. Tim Green (a former N.F.L. defensive end) and Jason Whitlock (a Fox Sports correspondent who played football in college) want it to stay.

Bissinger and Gladwell won in a romp. Before hearing the arguments, audience members were asked their opinion, and 16 percent were for the resolution to ban college football; 53 percent were against. At the end of the night, 53 percent were for it and 39 percent against. The undecided vote had plunged from 31 percent to 8 percent. N.Y.U., it should be noted, does not have a football team. (You can watch the full video of the debate [here](#).)

The vote was one reliable gauge during a night that otherwise cried out for real-time fact-checking, as both sides energetically spewed statistics — several of them contradictory — about graduation rates, hours devoted to studying, money spent on athletics and the incidence of injury in various sports.

Superficially, the splenetic Bissinger and the wispy Gladwell made an odd team. Gladwell, a Canadian, joked that in his home country "a debate isn't really a debate, it's simply an alternate mechanism of reaching consensus." Bissinger cut off his own opening remarks, which he bellowed to the rafters and which echoed a recent Op-Ed column he wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*, in a disgusted tone: "I'm done."

Green and Whitlock repeatedly said college football was not perfect, and that they would modify any number of things about it, from the number of games played to its economic structure. (Suggestions that players be compensated financially were met with applause from the audience.) But Gladwell was not amenable to modifications, calling the idea that brain injuries could be minimized by better helmets or medical care "a fantasy."

"I've seen pictures of the brain scans of people with C.T.E.," he said, referring to a trauma-induced disease, "and it looks like someone drove a truck across their brain."

Green, eloquent, self-contained and square-jawed (of Tuesday night's participants, you would undoubtedly want him delivering your closing statement on a network legal drama), said he had "grave concerns" about concussions, but also denied the problem was as widespread or severe as Gladwell implied. Citing a study from the University of North Carolina, he said there were more direct fatalities in lacrosse, water polo and baseball than football, so why not ban those sports?

Whitlock earned laughs by calling his opponents "two of the brightest minds that dabble in sports," but quickly said he did not mean that in a denigrating way. He spoke movingly about what the sport meant to him when he played at Ball State, and said college football was the "highest level of the melting pot," uniting people from varied backgrounds in a common cause ("the poor and the rich, the black and the white, the Jews and the gentiles"). Bissinger later playfully challenged him, "If you can name four Jews who played football, you win the debate."

In his closing remarks, Gladwell said, "The most surprising thing about this debate to me at the end is that we only mentioned the name Junior Seau twice. And to my mind, Junior Seau's shadow is cast over this whole evening."

Seau, an N.F.L. linebacker for 20 years starting in 1990, committed suicide last week at the age of 43. Like Dave Duerson, another former N.F.L. player who committed suicide in February 2011, Seau shot himself in the chest. Duerson's brain was later studied, and it was determined that he suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a degenerative disease caused by repeated trauma to the head. Gladwell devoted a lot of time to C.T.E., and argued that universities "should not be in the business of encouraging young men to hit themselves over the head." He also played up the image of himself as an outsider who does not understand this country's obsession with football. "Why can't they row?!" he shouted at one point. He also offered a protracted proposal for how competitive games of Monopoly could replace football as a central feature of campus life.

Near the end of the night, Green said to Bissinger: "I don't understand why opportunities for student-athletes makes you so angry." Anyone familiar with Bissinger's notorious, obscenity-laced work on Twitter knows that his anger is a subject too large and complex for any one debate. For one night, at least, all we can know is that his anger helped propel him to victory.