



# IN THE NEWS

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## Football: The *Real* American Idol

| *What do the current NFL ethical issues say about American values?*

### Introduction

The things of the earth are not merely good; they are undoubtedly gifts from God. But, of course, if those who get such goods in the city of men are reckless about the better goods in the City of God . . . if men so love the goods of the earth as to believe that these are the only goods or if they love them more than goods they know to be better, then the consequence is inevitable: misery and more misery.<sup>1</sup>

St. Augustine, *City of God*

What does St. Augustine have to do with football? Remote though the connection may be, it is not unreasonable to suppose that many fans of professional football could say, without too much exaggeration, that for them football is a gift from God. If so, it is a gift that is causing many Christians discomfort in recent months. With the current high-profile cases of spousal and child abuse dominating headlines and the history of crippling physical damage incurred by players also receiving more scrutiny, fans may be excused for wondering if we have given our loyalty to a pastime whose values and practices conflict in important ways with those we claim as Christians.

While the situation may not be as stark as choosing between one's faith and one's local team, some

people of faith may choose to withhold their support, financial and otherwise, from professional football if the NFL as an institution cannot prove itself more in line with certain deeply held moral values. Of course, the disturbing behavior of the league and some of its players may say more about American society than about the NFL itself. We should not be so naive as to assume that domestic violence is a problem unique to or even disproportionately exhibited by football players. Nor should we be so self-righteous as to claim that the NFL is alone in treating these issues with less seriousness than they deserve. Team ownership and fan bases alike may have treated the "good" of a successful team as more valuable than the "good" of justice, with predictable consequences.

### Football Rules

Our national obsession with professional sports is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. While professional baseball dates back to the late 1800s, other professional sports leagues were founded in the first half of the last century: the NHL in 1917, the NFL in 1920, and the NBA in 1946. For much of that time, baseball reigned as the national sport of choice, but in recent memory football has become the de facto national pastime. Many sport historians trace the dominance of professional

football in the entertainment arena to the 1958 NFL championship game between the New York Giants and the Baltimore Colts, a game that was shown live on NBC television networks and that was won by the Colts in sudden-death overtime. Now often referred to as “the greatest game ever played,” this game is credited with giving the NFL national exposure.

Football has remained, throughout its life-span, an almost entirely American phenomenon. While baseball, basketball, and hockey have had widespread international success, football’s field

a complex combination of moving parts executed by a team larger than the teams of any other professional sport. The football does not usually move down the field through the work of one player.

Football is often framed as a sport that rewards hard work. Along with other professional sports, football has become central in American success narratives. Through professional sports some young people, particularly young men, believe that they can lift their own economic status and those of their families. Football and basketball in particular have been embraced as ways to escape

generations of economic hardship. The rags-to-riches stories of contemporary life are those of athletes, a significant number of whom have family roots in poverty. They have found sports as a way out.

This particular narrative, compelling as it may be, is largely unfounded in fact. The percentage of participants in youth sports programs who can hope to make it on to a college team, let alone a professional one, is vanishingly small. For football, 6.5 percent of high school athletes will compete on a college team and 0.08 percent will compete professionally.<sup>2</sup>

However, these values, taken together, provide much of the popular goodwill that surrounds football as a youth activity. As with other team sports, it teaches the value of cooperation and of sublimating individual goals and achievements for a larger common good. And as with other team sports, practice and diligence often show tangible rewards, even if those rewards are simply greater mastery of skills and not the dream of a lucrative contract.

Yet there are other aspects of football that point to values and behaviors that are less laudable, if no less a part of the culture of the United States. The violence of football is undoubtedly a significant part of its appeal, but it has also been a cause for alarm from football’s earliest days. In 1905, when football was still an amateur game, there were

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of influence has remained in North America. The professional leagues in the United States and in Canada have not been transplanted with any lasting success anywhere else in the world. So why has football become the American sport? What values and impulses does it represent that have captured the particular interests of consumers in the United States? And are some of those values contributing factors in the current spate of bad news the NFL is weathering in 2014?

### Football Values and American Values

One of the most lauded values connected to football is that of teamwork. It can be argued that no other professional sport relies so heavily on the combined effort of a team as football. In baseball, an overwhelming pitcher can sometimes make up for a weak hitting lineup. In basketball, a gifted shooter can sometimes “put a team on his (or her) back.” But football, while at times a game of spectacular individual play, is heavily weighted toward team effort. The average player in football is

nineteen fatalities nationwide, a situation that caused then-president Theodore Roosevelt to meet with representatives of the three most prestigious football-playing universities—Princeton, Yale, and Harvard—to find ways to limit the violence.

Violence, and the resulting damage to players, continues to be a concern even as crushing tackles remain popular and often become “plays of the week” on television and internet sports outlets. The incidence of concussions among professional football players has become the central health issue currently, leading to some rule changes as well as to a legal settlement between the NFL and some of its former players. The danger of concussions has even caused some former players to speak out in surprising ways. Terry Bradshaw, a former quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, is one of several high-profile NFL stars who have said that they wouldn’t want their children to play the game.<sup>3</sup>

There are recent indications as well that the physical damage players undergo as part of their careers is a significant contributing factor to the emotional problems some players have faced. These problems have sometimes exhibited themselves in suicide and murder. In 2012 former San Diego Chargers linebacker Junior Seau committed suicide and former Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Jovan Belcher killed himself and his domestic partner. Both men suffered from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative condition associated with repetitive head trauma. The close connection between CTE and severe depression is increasingly clear.

It is less easy to get a handle on an increasingly important issue in the wake of the domestic violence cases that have plagued the NFL in recent months: the hyper-masculinity of the NFL, which some have called out as misogyny. There are connections to be drawn here with the issue of violence, but the ways in which football has contributed to a certain American version of masculinity are important on their own. Football is an almost exclusively male arena. Its professional players are all men, as

are its professional coaches. Its executive ranks are nearly absent of women as well.

In a recent blog post, Presbyterian minister Marcia Mount Shoop writes, “The NFL is the quintessential exemplar of male dominance. It is American football at its most extreme. And women take up space only in very marginalized and diminished ways.” She goes on to say that “women are most often either decorations or distractions in the NFL. Women do not have access to formal channels of power. And our proximity to that world is often limited to a supportive role—wives, office assistants, cheerleaders, or fashionably dressed sideline reporters for TV.”<sup>4</sup> Writing out of the experience of being married to a former NFL coach, Dr. Shoop says that violence toward women is an unsurprising result of male-only communities where the outward display of aggression is handsomely rewarded and where gender stereotypes are rarely challenged.

The NFL has come to the realization that while women may not occupy its boardrooms and locker rooms, they do increasingly occupy its stadiums. Women currently make up approximately 45 percent of the NFL fan base.<sup>5</sup> And the league has made very public efforts to support issues of concern to women, particularly through its high-profile support for breast cancer awareness. To date it has shown no similar interest in raising awareness about domestic violence. Perhaps the league could consider throwing its considerable weight and support behind the United Nations Orange Days initiative, designating the twenty-fifth of every month as a day to wear orange in support of ending violence against women worldwide.<sup>6</sup> Such a show of goodwill might be a tangible step forward, placing the NFL in the leadership of the national conversation rather than lagging woefully behind.

## **The NFL’s Domestic Abuse Crisis: Assessing Blame**

It may be argued that the recent attention paid to the domestic violence cases among NFL players is

misdirected. Even given the worry that the “culture of violence” in professional football is a contributing factor in the current abuse cases, there are no definitive studies suggesting that the level of domestic violence is higher among NFL players than among the general public. Are professional football players being unfairly stigmatized for the high-profile crimes of a few players?

This argument has some weight and may help us to open up the national conversation on domestic violence. It is a national problem, touching all segments of society, not just the NFL. However, even if we accept that professional football players are not especially prone to this type of criminal behavior, the response of the league to the recent cases is still cause for concern and raises uncomfortable questions about how the league understands the issues. Commissioner Roger Goodell was widely criticized for his initial response to the case involving Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice. Rice’s initial penalty was a two-game suspension, a significantly lighter penalty than, for example, those handed down for marijuana use by players.

To many observers, the lack of appropriate response by the league is indicative of a lack of understanding about the seriousness of domestic violence. Rice’s case is not an isolated one. After the Rice penalties, Carolina Panthers defensive end Greg Hardy, who has been convicted of domestic violence and is appealing, was still being allowed to play. He has since been removed from competition after the Carolina Panthers received a storm of criticism for their decision to play him. Even if the league isn’t harboring a disproportionate number of violent offenders, it has, until very recently, seemed unable or unwilling to take

appropriate action against those whose crimes do surface. It may be that the NFL’s former lax policies concerning domestic violence, especially toward high-profile players, is more damning than the existence of offenders within its ranks. The league may not be able to eliminate the possibility of drafting domestic abusers, but it can (and hopefully will, in the future) respond swiftly and decisively when such behavior is discovered.

And perhaps those of us who make up the fan base for professional football in the United States need to ask ourselves what our role may be in this crisis. We have been just as culpable in allowing domestic violence to go unpunished. While the negative national response to the Ray Rice case has been fairly consistent and widespread, that

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has not always been the case. Those of us who cheer for a particular team may have been more concerned with the value a player brings to our chosen team than with his off-field crimes. As powerful as the NFL is within our culture, it holds that power because of the loyalty and the revenue given to it by dedicated consumers.

The history of league actions concerning domestic violence is important evidence that potential fan response has helped to dictate those responses. The penalties given to star players, particularly those who play at high-profile “skill” positions such as running back, have been statistically less severe than those given to marginal players, suggesting that indeed value on the field



is more the determining factor in punishment than the severity of the crime.<sup>7</sup> Fans demand a successful product on the field and may withdraw their support for a team if its best players are removed.

If it is true that potential fan reaction has played a role in league discipline policies, the obvious question is where our fan reaction to criminal behavior has been. When we withhold our financial support from a team that is not performing well on the field but continue to support a team that continues to use players convicted of domestic violence, we send a signal to the league about what we value. As Christians, we are told that where our treasure lies there our heart will be also. If our hearts are so bound to professional football that we lack the ability to act justly in our consumer behavior, then we are part of the problem.

And while some may point to the national upheaval about the recent cases of abuse as evidence that we, as a public, are taking the issues seriously, it remains to be seen whether the league will suffer any financial damage from its recent mishandling of these cases and for its apparent indifference to the victims of past crimes. Our voices may be raised, but our pocketbooks are still open. And for victims of domestic violence, talk is indeed cheap.

## Conclusion

Christian doctrine has a word for that pattern of behavior in which we abandon our core values because some object has enticed us. This is called idolatry. It is what St. Augustine is pointing to when he writes about the dangers of the goods of the earth. We need not reject all that football is and all the happiness, even joy, that it brings to many people to still have serious reservations about its hold on American culture. We can be passionate about football while recognizing its shortcomings and working toward eliminating some of them. And where the practices and values of our most profitable professional sports league come into

conflict with the practices and values of Jesus Christ, Christians must be clear where their allegiance lies. For us, football cannot occupy a position of ultimate value. For us, that position is already taken.

## Endnotes

1. St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Gerald Walsh et al. (New York: Image Books, 1958), 328.
2. "Probability of Competing beyond High School," NCAA.org, Sept. 2013, <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/research/probability-competing-beyond-high-school>.
3. Cindy Boren, "Terry Bradshaw: In the Next Decade, 'We Will Not See Football as It Is,'" *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/early-lead/post/terry-bradshaw-in-the-next-decade-we-will-not-see-football-as-it-is/2012/06/14/gJQAbAPUcV\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/early-lead/post/terry-bradshaw-in-the-next-decade-we-will-not-see-football-as-it-is/2012/06/14/gJQAbAPUcV_blog.html).
4. Marcia Mount Shoop, "What the NFL Can Teach Us: Intimate Partner Violence in America," Sept. 25, 2014, <http://blog.thethoughtfulchristian.com/2014/09/what-the-nfl-can-teach-us-intimate-partner-violence-in-america.html>.
5. Numerous sources cite percentages between 40 and 45 percent. See, for example, David Broughton, "Report Spotlights Female NFL Fans," *Sports Business Journal*, Oct. 14, 2013, <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2013/10/14/Leagues-and-Governing-Bodies/NFL-women.aspx>.
6. For information about Orange Day and other programs in the UN Unite to End Violence against Women campaign, see <http://endviolence.un.org/action.shtml>.
7. Bill Pennington and Steve Eder, "In Domestic Violence Cases, N.F.L. Has a History of Lenience," *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/20/sports/football/in-domestic-violence-cases-nfl-has-a-history-of-lenience.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/20/sports/football/in-domestic-violence-cases-nfl-has-a-history-of-lenience.html?_r=0).

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# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. If you are a football fan, have you considered withholding your financial support from the NFL because of its handling of the Ray Rice case and other cases? If not, can you imagine a scenario when you would stop supporting your chosen team?
2. Can you imagine the United States without football as the dominant sport? Do you think it is likely, or even possible, that concern over the physical damage football may cause to players will lead to a smaller place for football in American sports?
3. Should the NFL be held accountable in more significant ways than simply public opinion for its perceived mishandling of recent cases of domestic abuse? For example, does this warrant the elimination of the league's tax-exempt status?
4. What role does the church have in the national conversation about domestic violence? What ways does your church use its voice on this issue? What actions can you imagine your church taking in the future?