

Unnecessary roughness: The moral hazards of football

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [September 19, 2012](#) issue



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On New Year's Eve in 1967, my father and two cousins awaited a bus in Cumberland, Wisconsin, bound for Madison. They waited in the car not just to avoid the bitter cold, but to listen on the radio to the tense conclusion of the NFL title game between Green Bay and Dallas, the game that would be remembered as the Ice Bowl. They were so intent on the last-second heroics of Jerry Kramer and Bart Starr that they failed to notice the Greyhound pull up, load passengers and depart without them.

Like many native Wisconsinites, I inherited a religious piety that might bloom and wither but a devotion to the Packers that is evergreen. I can tell you exactly where I was during each of the team's Super Bowl appearances in my lifetime, as well as during each of their playoff flameouts. I own their victories—and their unique community-based status—with an unwholesome sense of pride, and their defeats with an equal bitterness. I've been watching football as long as I can remember.

That means that I was watching when Packers defensive tackle Charles Martin assaulted and injured Bears quarterback Jim McMahon long after the whistle ended a play in 1986. It was hard not to think of the incident last August when McMahon joined six other players to sue the NFL for negligence in handling concussions and their connection to long-term cognitive ailments. This was just one of 80 different

lawsuits related to concussions filed by more than 2,600 former players and widows.

This long wave of litigation has been punctuated by the suicides of Bears safety Dave Duerson (age 50), Chargers and Patriots linebacker Junior Seau (43) and Falcons safety Ray Easterling (62), one of McMahon's co-plaintiffs. Duerson shot himself in the chest—after instructing his wife to donate his brain to research. His brain was subsequently diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a disorder closely linked to sports like football and boxing.

Amidst the growing concern for player safety, the NFL charged New Orleans Saints players and coaches with running a bounty program to encourage sideling or injuring opposing players. The league's response was swift and harsh, suspending one time Coach of the Year Sean Payton for a full season, a defensive coach indefinitely and several players for multiple games.

You don't have to be a cynic to sense in the NFL's handling of the bounty scandal a deeper anxiety about football's precarious place in American life. While resisting the claims of the many lawsuits, the league has instituted concussion detection and treatment guidelines, along with a payout program for players with brain disease. And the NFL has donated a million dollars for brain trauma research to the Boston institute where Duerson's disease was posthumously detected. Football is cresting a 50-year climb to the peak of the American sports world. NFL and college football viewership outpaces all rivals, and youth league participation starts earlier and reaches farther than ever before. It is an inconvenient time—and for a lifelong fan like myself, a painful one—to be asking whether the whole enterprise is morally compromised beyond hope of repair.

An analogy is sometimes made between football and gladiatorial combat—typically by those who defend and romanticize the game. It's an analogy that should provoke reflection by Christians. The ancient Christian critique of the Roman spectacles—which included gladiatorial combat, athletic contests and drama—focused on three things: the physical harm to the contestants, the moral harm to the spectators, and the pagan cultic ritual that surrounded the shows. Reading such critiques today raises analogous questions for Christians who participate in the modern football industry.

The classic Christian treatment of the ancient spectacles is Tertullian's *De spectaculis*. It is a critique comprehensive enough to foreshadow virtually all future

accusations of Christian prudery. Tertullian is aghast at the cauliflowered ears and heavy scars of the boxer, which he describes as a defilement of the image of God, as well as at the whole variety of changes and enhancements visited upon the human body for the sake of contest, drama or violence. As a means of punishment, the combat punished the wrongly accused along with the guilty, and the gladiators purchased to administer such justice were made “victims of the public pleasure.”

Tertullian is more concerned, however, with the shows’ psychological effects on viewers. Describing the pleasure of the spectacle and the agitation such pleasure creates, he finds that “where there is rivalry, there also are madness, bile, anger, pain, and all the things that follow from them.” The spectacles confuse good and evil in unenlightened minds, Tertullian argues:

The man who when he sees a quarrel on the streets coming to blows will try to quiet it or expresses his strong disapproval, will in the stadium applaud fights far more dangerous; that he who shudders at the body of a man who died by nature’s law the common death of all will, in the amphitheater, gaze down with most tolerant eyes on the bodies of men mangled, torn in pieces, defiled with their own blood; yes, and that he who comes to the spectacle to signify his approval of murder being punished will have a reluctant gladiator hounded on with lash and rod to do murder.

This degradation suffuses the games and distorts the place of the athlete and gladiator in the society that claims to adore his feats. The managers and consumers of the shows stigmatize the very contestants and performers they cheer, depriving them of access to any legal rank. “The art they glorify,” says Tertullian. “The artist they disgrace.”

Worst of all, participation in the shows diminished the capacity for the distinctive Christian virtues of compassion and peacefulness. Can you imagine, Tertullian asks,

when the athletes are at work, [the viewer] will say that blow for blow is forbidden! Then he surely can be stirred by pity, with his eyes fastened on the bear as it bites, on the squeezed nets of the net-fighter! May God avert from His own such a passion for murderous pleasure!

In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes about his friend Alypius, dragged unwillingly and with eyes closed to the Roman games, only to have his curiosity piqued by the roaring crowd. He opened his eyes, “and his soul was stabbed with a wound more

deadly than any which the gladiator, whom we were so anxious to see, had received in his body.”

It is no surprise that the Roman spectacles should be hostile to Christian teachings about the image of God and the importance of gentleness, modesty and peace. After all, the arenas and all that took place therein were dedicated to a whole panoply of inferior deities. “Where your knowledge of God is defective,” Tertullian explains, “you can neither know His mind nor His adversary.” From their beginning, Tertullian argues, the games were organized to propitiate the violent divinities of the pre- and early Roman peoples, and those same divinities were believed to preside in honor over the games of his own day.

The rise of a Christian culture in the old Roman Empire and the eventual suppression of the combats and games did not resolve Christian anxiety over violent and impious entertainments. Men entering religious life in the Middle Ages were often expected to abandon such gentlemanly pastimes as hawking and hunting. During the Reformation, the amusements of Sundays and feast days became a target for those wishing to preserve the sacred character of Sabbath observances. Some of their preoccupations sound rather fussy today—it’s hard to imagine juggling on Sunday as such a terrible disorder—but the violence and competition of bearbaiting and games of football (of the European variety) were a matter of particular concern to Puritan reformers. When Charles I decreed an end to restrictions on “lawful pastimes” in 1633, he cited not only the need for amusements but the danger that a populace unused to games would be soft and unprepared for war.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, the ancient battles over the implications of violent amusements and athletic competition continue today. The issue of violence done to players is, of course, the most obvious parallel between Tertullian’s age and ours. There’s a considerable distance between the ancient gladiatorial contests and modern football. (Football is not a form of punishment, for one thing.) But the damage done to the football player’s body, while much subtler and more incidental to the game, is not so dramatically different from the depredations that befell the boxers, charioteers and combatants of Tertullian’s day.

A study presented to the NFL Players’ Association found that one player in 20 suffered a concussion in 2010, while 63 percent of players were injured in some way. As Gregg Easterbrook of ESPN.com points out, if high school football players are suffering at the same rate—and it’s not known whether they are—that would mean

40,000 to 50,000 concussed children each year. And there is mounting evidence that the gravest harm to the brain comes not from major traumas but from chronic lower-level impact, a possibility that, if confirmed, could end the game of football as we know it.

Mounting evidence also indicates that extreme regimens of prescription drug use are keeping players on the field. Those who escape brain trauma often live with other forms of chronic pain when they retire. The more disturbing possibility is that the ethic of an industry that is exempt from labor, worker safety and antitrust laws has taken root at the college and youth-league levels, where there are no big contracts or lifetime health benefits available as compensation. Even if we were able to justify this brutal, distorting extension of humanity in the case of professionals—on the grounds of its excellence, which even Tertullian acknowledged—it is likely that we can no longer confine either the exploits or the dangers of the game to those who are celebrated and paid for it.

Does Tertullian's argument about the moral harm to the viewer of the spectacles apply today? That's a more difficult question. Apart from the very real, and often deadly, phenomenon of sports-related rioting, any link between violence on a football field and violent actions or attitudes among spectators remains elusive.

The literature has its patristic echoes, however. One study finds that football fans perceive rivalry games as more violent than nonrivalry games—and links perceived violence with enjoyment, at least when one's team wins. In another study, "sensation-seeking" subjects showed greater arousal when watching violent NFL action than when watching a less violent play. These insights would have struck Tertullian and Augustine as too obvious to require study.

A sociologist might emphasize a society's need to control and ritualize violence in order to preserve the underlying order. But the church fathers weren't much for sociologists. For them, cheering violence was simply evil, apart from any utility one can claim for it. I have more than once noticed myself reproaching my children for garden-variety squabbling even as we watched Clay Matthews land a bone-jarring hit on a quarterback. As a society we may compartmentalize our bloodlust successfully, but Christian ethics has always asked more of us. Compartmentalized charity is defective charity, plain and simple.

Perhaps most discouragingly, we seem to have made little progress on the scandalous distinction between the gladiator's status in the arena and out of it. When the NFL owners locked the players out in 2011, a large swathe of the football-watching public turned—almost in an instant—from celebrating the feats of preposterously gifted men to disdaining their demands for guaranteed contracts and long-term health coverage. The perception lingers that football players are overpaid, whatever that means in a putatively free-market society in which pay is a function of demand. But since the league is essentially a cartel that can use a variety of mechanisms to prevent competitive bidding for players' services, NFL player pay is much lower than it would be if they were allowed to sell their labor freely.

The median player's salary in 2010 was \$770,000, which means that half of the players were earning less. After taxes (levied at a higher rate for the players than for the owners, whose income is derived from equity rather than wages) and over the course of a short career, this is hardly a ticket to a life of rank luxury. If it were, the plight of retired players wouldn't be so severe. And the sport wouldn't find itself engaged in a massive public-relations battle for its own survival.

American football has survived crises in the past. After a Union College student died in a game against NYU in 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt is credited with rescuing the sport from public outrage. He urged some reforms for the sake of safety, while reiterating Charles I's argument that football cultivated manly virtues needed by the nation. And ever since football's Wild West days, changes in rules and equipment have continually been enacted to limit the game's direst harms.

During this long evolution from brawling match for collegiate hooligans to billion-dollar industry, football—perhaps not coincidentally—has also become an emblem of American identity. Baseball and basketball are Olympic sports with mass global followings and professional leagues, but football seems to attract little following outside the U.S. and Canada. The sport's pseudomilitary tactics, creative deployment of specialized players and strict governance by a clock mark it as the creation of a modern economic and military superpower.

Unlike the circus games castigated by Tertullian, football is not dedicated to the cult of any gods. The stadiums bear the names of corporate sponsors rather than Mediterranean deities, and indeed football players are notable in the sports world for their Christian piety. (It is a sight both dreadful and moving when two opposing teams kneel in prayer while a fellow player is examined for a potentially devastating

injury.)

Even so, NFL football has arguably become the central liturgical act of American civic religion. The Super Bowl, its winter festival, commands more participation than a presidential inauguration, a midterm election or an Oscar broadcast. It opens with at least one sung anthem to the nation. Prime-time broadcasts are introduced with military images, and games often include recognition of the state's military personnel and the sport's emeritus legends. Football is not adorned with the statues of officiating divinities, but it is adorned with the symbols of commerce and power. It draws people together into groups of loyalty that cross boundaries of race, religion, class and even region, and it binds these competing groups into a common sabbath observance with its own distinctive rituals. (Who makes or eats nachos apart from football viewing?) The spectacle even re-creates the hierarchy of American life, from the skybox seats of magnates and politicians (now even at the blue-collar temple of Lambeau Field), to the equestrian ranks in the all-inclusive scout seats, to the relatively privileged ticketholders elsewhere in the arena, all the way down to the groundlings watching on television.

The spectacle of football has a useful and perhaps necessary role in American life, so Christians should critique it with some care. There are few enough public events and spaces at which a diverse nation can gather to participate in a comparatively low-stakes communal ritual—low stakes, that is, for everyone who is not playing the game.

There are many examples of pastimes that have fallen out of favor with the culture that once nurtured them. Boxing and horse racing were preeminent sports in the 20th century, and they have declined for some of the same reasons that bearbaiting and gladiatorial combat declined.

Some of football's defenders point out that the players know the risks of the sport, and they argue that lawsuits should founder on this point. But how can anyone know and understand what it will mean to live in chronic pain and perhaps mental disability for decades? Social ethics, especially Christian social ethics, does not wait upon the letter of the law or defer to the judgments of 22-year-old men when deciding which things should be embraced and which things shunned.

I grew up pounding my snowy backyard into ice with games of pickup football. So I find it hard to accept that the time may have come for Christians to exercise what remains of our culture-shaping power by turning away from a game whose dangers

are grave even as their extent is not fully known. As Tertullian wrote, no one dilutes poison with gall. It is by definition difficult to turn away from an entertainment—as history shows, even entertainments that come to shock the conscience of a later age. Christians, too, need pastimes and diversions. The question is which ones honor the image of God and the call to justice and equity.