

Tackling The Problem

The NFL is under stress about visibly increasing player violence and the apparent increase in player concussions. There are calls for fundamental changes to running gear and rules. Those types of problems are easily fixed, I think. What's not so easy to fix, however, goes much deeper into the whole NFL culture.

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“Is it safe? Is it safe?”
(Christian Szell asking Babe, just before torturing him in the 1976 thriller, [Marathon Man](#).)

Nobody would deny, I think, that violence is part of our condition as human animal. Equally, contact sports are another aspect of our animalism, much like we see other animals that play. Hence, it follows that there will always be some measure of violence during such sports. Forty years ago, when I began to watch American and Canadian sports, a much quoted joke is the one where the guy watching TV says: “Hey, I was watching a fight on TV and it turned into a hockey game!” Quebecois, particularly, rolled in their seats at that one as I recall.

So, when I saw the headline [Does Football Have a Future?](#) by Ben McGrath at the New Yorker this week, I felt certain that football violence would be the theme. Not quite, however: the real issue is the incidence of concussion and its apparent increase within the NFL. Violence between players, of course, is the necessary precondition.

Contact sports are inherently dangerous. Collisions between players will sometimes be unavoidable. Injuries, big and small, are constant companions for most players. Very occasionally, players are seriously injured; a few are sometimes killed. All of this is well known, and the aforesaid article provides some relevant statistics going back forty years or more. A sampling of other online articles provided similar information and opinion.

For example, [Dave Zirin](#) at The Nation thinks “there is no making football safer” because, among other aspects, “for a sport built on violent collisions...Anytime you have a sport that turns the poor into millionaires and dangles violence as an incentive, well, you reap what you sow.”

[Matt Bowen](#) at The Chicago Tribune explicitly agrees that “Unavoidable collisions can't be controlled”; but emphasizes he's fingering the purely accidental situation, not deliberate attempts to hurt.

Along with McGrath's New Yorker piece above, [Jerome Solomon](#) comes closer, I think, to the core problem when he opens with this: “The NFL is a factory whose product is violence for the masses” and continues to talk about the “billions in profits”

resulting from violence. Further down the track, he poses a key question: “Are concussions on the rise? No one knows.” He’s probably correct, both times, I think.

At this point, I’d suggest there are only two certainties: the incidence of concussion is receiving more press than it did thirty years ago, as various online news timelines showed; and I’ve read very few professionals who write about the fact that **the NFL is a business, first and foremost**. That aspect seems to be left to football fans to address in online commentary with, for example, Gabbydog who correctly, in my opinion, claimed that the “NFL is strictly profit driven. They will change the rules if it appears to make more money” and Blogger361 who feels that “Proper tackling techniques need to be re-introduced and taught” in order to reduce the incidence of player concussions.

Now, of course, as many writers note, player concussion exists in other sports like baseball, hockey, boxing, basketball, rugby, soccer and so on. And, each of those sports operates as a business, as it must. Rugby in Australia, for example, which is controlled by the National Rugby League (NRL), has its **fair share of concussions** but appears to have less than that experienced in the NFL. For the record, players in the Australian NRL use very little, or no protective gear.

Over and above all of that, however, is this: No legitimate business wants bad publicity. Arguably, no business can *survive* continued bad press. Moreover, there are legal issues looming. Hence, with continued exposure of player concussions related to football, the NFL must change or take the consequences. So, the question now becomes: what to change?

Suggestions abound: more fines for players who break tackling rules; better helmets; removing face guards on helmets; better training, especially about tackling; changing the line of scrimmage; changing play rules to avoid contact/violence; imposing draconian punishment for repeat offenders; and others you’ll discover in that New Yorker essay (no – I’m not getting any kickbacks for plugging it; it’s simply a riveting read).

However, I think that what I’d read so far avoids the real problem – the one to which I alluded a few weeks back in **Black Men Can’t Kick?**, and which left me with a major puzzle: **Why are there no black kickers/punters in the NFL?**

Well, that continued to puzzle me right through this season as I watched the regular and play-off games on TV. However, when I finished reading that New Yorker article, the door opened, the penny dropped, the light finally came on: I’d been looking at the anomaly from the wrong perspective. My question should have been: **in the NFL, why are all kickers/punters white?**

The answer came to me after I got to a comment by ex-Kansas City Chief Michael Oriard, who mused whether the game is evolving to the point where “rich white guys [are] cheering on hits by black guys and a Samoan or two, Jesus, I hate to imagine we’re indifferent to that.” According to McGrath, that point has been reached already: now, two-thirds of NFL players are African-American – a level that’s five to six times the national black population distribution of ten to twelve per cent.

Hence, checking the [history of the NFL](#) since it got going, business-wise, in the 1930s, and the [history of black participation](#), it's clear that, yes indeed, whites have been gradually leaving the NFL over the previous twenty to thirty years as more African-Americans, and other non-whites, have stepped up to the plate. And, there are strong suggestions that "racial profiling" exists, preventing whites from playing at half-back, for example; implicitly, that race-based attitude could affect other positions.

So, to put all of the above into blunt perspective, consider this: either by attrition or design, are owners and managers allowing the racial mix in the NFL to change, as it has, to avoid potential white backlash about rising violence, concussions and fatalities?

Whatever the truth of the matter, though, I reckon the NFL still has a future, and despite McGrath's valid concerns about concussions; because there is just too much money involved and too many people dependent upon the income. Quite apart from those considerations, there is an over-arching need for government to continue to allow spectator sports for public consumption – if for no other reason than to keep people off the streets – in a stadium or at home, glued to the TV.

Put the biggest American spectator sport in jeopardy and, in short order, the result would be financial chaos across the entire sporting business. Ergo – the NFL is safe; but, it must change further.

Which brings me, finally, to the issue of *why* all kickers and punters are white. Considering the mounting evidence about the presence of concussion in linebackers, running backs, defensive backs, quarter backs and tight ends, a ready and likely answer about the all-white kicker/punter puzzle is simply this: **it's safe, when compared to other positions on the playing field.**

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