

Has Football Reached its Peak?

(The Daily Record – Unabridged Op/Ed)

Are sinking football viewer ratings indicative the sport has now reached its peak?

I read a compelling article early this month by the distinguished Yale law professor, columnist and best-selling novelist, Stephen L. Carter, published in Bloomberg. The author poses the question: are sinking football viewer ratings indicative the sport has now reached its peak?

Mr. Carter begins by expressing three possible reasons why there has been a recent drop in football's viewership ratings: interest in this year's presidential campaign; the "Kaepernick effect;" and the prohibition of National Football League teams from posting video to social media during games. It is conceivable all three may have contributed to the game's lower ratings, but in my estimation, only to a small degree.

My own theory for the ratings dip, however, is completely in line with Mr. Carter's latter comments where he discusses medical evidence uncovered in the last several years involving concussions and brain damage as a result of playing this increasingly dangerous sport. I concur with the economists, Kevin Grier and Tyler Cowen, asserting that football has peaked. The most reasonable explanation for the significant viewer drop off is related to the serious concern about chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and the NFL's earlier refusal to admit that the brain injuries suffered by many players were attributable to violence in the sport. It has come to the forefront that not only linemen are developing these permanent cognitive disabilities, but also quarterbacks, running backs and receivers. Furthermore, they are being diagnosed in high school and college athletes. It is no wonder that parents are worried and participation in high school football has fallen.

The more unsettling issue is the fact that CTE cannot be diagnosed in athletes while they are living. Autopsies have been performed on the brains of deceased players with the permission of family members. The results have revealed that in the majority of cases where CTE was suspected, the deceased players were, in fact, found to have been suffering from CTE. The current projections are that it may take more than ten years before scientists can formulate a medical diagnosis of CTE while the player is alive.

I believe that professional football as we know it today, has finally reached its pinnacle. In the same respect, this is not an insinuation that the sport is in decline and its time has passed. Far from it. The game of football has been woven into the American fabric and consciousness like no other sport since major league baseball reigned supreme during the first half of the twentieth century. Let us also recognize an extremely important dynamic. Football is a cash cow for the National Football League and the future of the sport will be protected at all costs.

Although diehard baseball fans do not wish to admit it, baseball is our national pastime in name only. I can recollect those bleak days in the nineteen-seventies when so many fans complained about the slowness of baseball and how the game needed to be speeded up. It was a time when pitchers dominated the hitters, batting averages and home runs dipped, pitching mounds were lowered, stopwatches were employed to demonstrate the insane number of seconds that eclipsed between pitches, and team owners ordered that the fences in their ballparks be moved in, all in an effort to assist the batter and liven the game. This, of course, occurred a number of years before the steroid age assaulted so many cherished records.

Baseball has continued to retain a certain sentimental quality because it is probably the first sport many of us learned to play as children, and that sense of fondly recalling our youth remains. And it is perhaps the one athletic endeavor that people can reasonably attempt to play from ages 5 to 95. The game also exhibits a kind of nurturing where parents and grandparents can bond with their offspring in the backyard without seriously injuring themselves. While considering all the pleasantries associated with this sport, the reality is that the recent upswing in Major League Baseball's popularity attributed to this year's

exciting post-season is a mere blip on the radar screen. The bigger picture is that baseball is much less physical and adventurous to the spectator's eye than most sports today. This is only heightened by the increasing speed and almost daily advancements in technology. To be blunt, the game has been under siege for the greater part of thirty years as simply b-o-r-i-n-g.

Baseball's slow decline ushered in the upheaval period where football was crowned king and proudly continues to hold on to the title. Since the advent of the Super Bowl followed by the early days of Monday Night Football with Cosell, Meredith and Gifford, professional football has enjoyed a flight of astronomical proportions. Sunday NFL football has become more of an "event" and a reason to socially gather with family and friends in living rooms, bars and at tailgate parties. And until the NFL cover up surfaced, opening a floodgate and bringing CTE into the headlines, it seemed that there would be no end to its meteoric rise. Now I am not too certain.

In fairness, the NFL is now making considerable efforts to address the concerns of the public and insure the game is "safer" for its players. The question is whether they can really make it that much safer given the athletes today are bigger, stronger, and faster. These qualities, in themselves, would reasonably equate to a more aggressive and menacing physical contact and ultimately a more violent game. My wife, who loves to watch football as much as I do, has repeatedly remarked that she has never seen so many time-outs with athletes lying on the field due to serious year-ending injuries.

Has it now come down to a moral question? Is football unsafe to play on any level? Retired professional athletes like the New York Giants Hall of Fame great, Harry Carson, believe the game is unsafe. Mr. Carson has publicly stated that he would not want his grandchildren to play football in the way it has evolved today. Harry Carson was a strong, tough and gifted athlete. He does not have to take a back seat to anyone, but he demonstrates honesty and concern for the health of young people and their eventual quality of life after retirement.

Let's face it. Football is here to stay. It's not going anywhere. Anyone who calls to abolish it, is only kidding themselves. For years, there were calls to abolish boxing after fighters died in the ring. Howard Cosell gave up doing ring commentary because of the brutality. And as we all know, boxing is still around although clearly no longer in its heyday. Football amounts to a form of present day gladiator fighting. It is one of our most popular types of recreational entertainment and sports fans love it! As my brother-in-law, Guy, once remarked to me, if the players weren't wearing those brightly colored padded uniforms and shiny helmets, would there still be the same appeal to watching football? In all probability, the answer would be no.

As a freelance journalist, I attended the Forum on Law Culture & Society panel discussion at the 92nd Street Y on February 2, 2016 in New York City. The topic of discussion was the mass tort civil litigation NFL concussion settlement recently approved by the Federal judge. The panelists included the renowned trial attorney, Arthur Miller; the plaintiffs' attorney for the Class Action lawsuit against the NFL, Christopher Seeger; the ESPN investigative reporter, Mark Fainaru-Wada; and the aforementioned Mr. Carson. The only party missing from the panel discussion, and not surprisingly, was a representative from the NFL.

Near the conclusion of the discussion there was a Q. and A. segment. The final question to the panel was my submission, which was read by the moderator, law professor, novelist and essayist, Thane Rosenbaum. It was addressed by Mr. Fainaru-Wada, who along with his brother, Steve Fainaru, wrote the groundbreaking best-seller, *League of Denial*. My question, plain and simple, was: "Do you believe football has finally peaked and while asserting it is not yet in decline, has it seen its best days? To which he responded: "There's no sign ... It's hard to imagine that it has really peaked." He cited how the sport has turned itself into a total spectacle and a media frenzy. He stated football is now a \$10-billion-dollar industry, with a goal by the NFL to reach \$25-billion within the next ten years.

I must disagree with Mr. Fainaru-Wada's opinion that football has not yet peaked. I believe that the sport has definitely reached its pinnacle, but by no means is football in a serious state of decline. Of course,

only time will tell. Something much better will have to come along to take its place, that's for certain. But as we all know, very few things last forever.

John Esposito is a freelance journalist who lives in New Providence, NJ. The writer's previously published articles and blog page are viewable on his website: www.PieceworkJournals.com His Facebook page is "Piecework Journals by John Esposito."

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[The complete Grantland, Bloomberg View, and New York Post articles referenced in my commentary can be viewed by clicking on the four downloads below.]

"Grantland" web article link (October 13, 2012):

<http://grantland.com/features/cte-concussion-crisis-economic-look-end-football/>

"Bloomberg View" article pdf link (October 12, 2016):

http://www.pieceworkjournals.com/uploads/4/4/7/9/44797685/bloomberg_view_article_-_nfls_video_ban_wont_slow_its_ratings_tailspin_-_october_12_2016.pdf

"New York Post" article pdf link (October 15, 2016):

http://www.pieceworkjournals.com/uploads/4/4/7/9/44797685/new_york_post_-_behind_the_nfl%E2%80%99s_sinking_ratings_-_october_15_2016.pdf

"New York Post" article web link (October 15, 2016):

<http://nypost.com/.../behind-the-nfls-sinking-ratings-have-w.../>



Behind the NFL's sinking ratings: Have we reached 'peak football?'

While Major League Baseball is enjoying one of the most exciting post seasons in its recent history, the National Football League is losing viewers. So low are this...

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