The Ethics of Playing Football While Injured

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The game of American football, by its nature, is violent and dangerous. By simply choosing to step on the field of play, an athlete risks serious injury. Injuries to football players have included paralysis, brain damage and even death. Those, of course, are the most severe results. As it is, concussions, torn ligaments and broken bones are as much a part of the sport as touchdowns, field goals and kickoffs. Thus, playing the game with such injuries and various others is common practice for athletes. It occurs at every competitive level of the sport, and it occurs every weekend during football season. In many instances, playing the game of football with some degree of injury is an expected practice.

With the dangers already attached to playing the sport at 100 percent health, one can wonder what possesses an athlete to participate under the obstruction of injury that is more substantial than a bump or bruise. Is it pride? Is it competitive spirit? Is it ego related? Is it pressure from teammates, coaches, fans and/or the community? Is it fear? Perhaps, the choice stems from a combination of factors. But who, ultimately, makes the decision when an athlete decides to play injured? Is it the athlete or outside forces?

Whatever the case, football players make the call to play injured and seemingly will continue to do so as long as the game is played at highly competitive levels. But under what conditions is it ethically acceptable for an injured athlete to participate in a treacherous game such as football? In attempting to provide answers in the following pages to these various questions, I also intend to develop arguments in opposition to those football players use to justify playing injured.

Sports psychologist Roland A. Carlstedt has concluded that two groups of athletes are prone to playing injured: 1) Those whom subconsciously adopt “repressive coping.”

(These athletes have high pain thresholds, high self-esteem and perform well in high-pressure situations.) 2) Those who have a personality trait called neuroticism, where the person is full of self-doubt. Carlstedt noted that an athlete from the first group plays because he thinks he is invincible, while one from the second group plays to convince himself that he is invincible (Sanserino, 2009). In a sense, the personality types outlined by Carlstedt are exact opposites. In another sense, it is human nature to experience varying degrees of both confidence and doubt, sometimes at the same time. Thus, it would seem any number of personalities would be susceptible to giving in to playing injured under varying circumstances.

To that end, the environment that exists outside the athlete is a key factor in coming to a decision to play injured or not. Tunch Ilkin, a former Pittsburgh Steelers offensive lineman, said playing injured was simply an expected practice during the 1980s, and was even "considered a badge of courage" (Sanserino, 2009). Former NFL lineman Ross Tucker cited various reasons why football players play injured, among them a brotherhood among teammates and a perceived responsibility to gut it out for the team. Tucker also points to fear and pressure as considerable factors that will be examined more closely later.

Despite opposing opinions held by many teammates that he should play, Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger opted to sit out a game against rival Baltimore in 2009 after suffering a concussion. ESPN analyst and former NFL player Merrill Hoge referred to the Roethlisberger's decision as "historic" (Sanserino, 2009). But such an example may fail to portray an accurate view of how many high-level football players approach injuries. Roethlisberger, for one, is a highly compensated NFL star and had no

reason to believe he would lose his starting position by opting to sit out. Many players in the league, however, do not have guaranteed contracts and are constantly fighting for their jobs. To aid in their cause, the only option may be to play injured. Pressure from organizational front office and coaching staff oftentimes also exist, according to Tucker, who wrote that "a missed practice or game because of an injury is every bit as bad as actually having a bad play or game in the coaching staff's book. Maybe even worse" (Tucker, 2009).

Money, fame and other selfish reasons also must be considered as arguments athletes use to play injured. Pro football players are paid handsomely for their work on the field, as well as in endorsements. College scholarships handed to football players annually are also substantial in value. And, for a high school player, being the star on Friday nights can lead to the role of "Big Man on Campus." These benefits are less likely to be accrued by an athlete sitting on the bench with an injury. As it is, football players at all levels are lionized by the media and fans for playing through injuries. Sports columnist Phil Sheridan noted that Dallas quarterback Tony Romo somehow ascended to a new level of greatness after leading the Cowboys to victory a week after suffering from two fractured ribs and a punctured lung this year. Sheridan, himself, admitted to mistakenly glorifying NFL quarterbacks Philip Rivers and Donovan McNabb in his columns for playing through various substantial injuries (Sheridan, 2011).

Though these players may have been glorified for their efforts and even perhaps awarded financial and personal gains, were their decisions to play wise? Evidence would suggest no. The long-lasting dangers of playing football have been exhaustively highlighted through documented examples of former National Football League players.

Head injuries are most prominent. A 2000 survey of 1,090 former NFL players concluded that 60% had at least one concussion in their careers while 26% had suffered three or more. Not surprising, those who had suffered concussions indicated "more problems with memory, concentration, speech impediments, headaches and other neurological problems than those who had not." Similar studies of retired NFL players have demonstrated that head injuries suffered while playing have led to increased cases of depression and Alzheimer's disease (Head injuries, 2010). The players studied and surveyed played in an era when knowledge of head injuries and the dangers they posed was limited. Ultimately, players suffering concussion symptoms often took to the field without thinking twice about the short- and long-term ramifications.

The deaths of retired NFL players Andre Waters, Mike Webster and Dave Duerson have each been linked to football-related head injuries. Perhaps the most noted is the case of Waters, a former defensive back who committed suicide at age 44. Waters' brain damage and subsequent depression ultimately led to his death (Brown, 2007). The doctor who studied Waters' brain concluded that the damage discovered was consistent with that of a 80- to 90-year old suffering from dementia (Habib, 2010). Such risks aren't exclusive to the professional football level. Thirteen high school athletes have died from a brain injury sustained through football since 2005. Including college and youth players, there have been 18 such deaths since 2005 (Castillo, 2011).

Long term effects of playing injured, of course, reach beyond the head. Former NFL linebacker Reggie Williams, a Dartmouth alum who played injured to prove to his teammates that be belonged, is now attempting to save his right leg from amputation. Williams has endured approximately 20 knee operations (Sanserino, 2009). Former NFL

defensive lineman Dave Pear walks with a cane, when he does walk, and suffers from vertigo and memory loss. His entire body aches throughout the day (Pearlman, 2009).

Pear and Williams aren't the only ones who are suffering. In a survey of 644 NFL players who retired between 1979 and 2006, only 13% reported that they were in excellent health. As a result, the study determined that 7% are taking at least one prescription opioid painkiller. That rate is four times higher than that of the regular population. The survey also showed that 52% of the players used painkillers during their careers, and 71% said they misused the drugs. Beyond that, about 15% who misused drugs during their careers were still doing so after retirement (Melnick, 2011).

Williams, the former NFL linebacker, said that, depending on the intensity of the pain, he would play his career the same way if he had to do it again. Pear certainly would not. Athletes who play with injuries must continually assess the risks and rewards. To some, incessant excruciating pains may be worth it. To others, that may not be the case. Ultimately, life outside of football is more important than the one that exists within it. To that end, the NFL, pushed by recent studies and research, has introduced new rules for managing concussions and has tried to eliminate dangerous tackling. Colleges and high schools, meanwhile, have instituted protocols in an effort to better protect football players, such as taking them out of the game after violent impacts. Additionally, the Ivy League opted this year to limit full-contact football practices to no more than twice a week (A. O'Connor, 2011).

In time, many men who play the game of football have also shifted their views on playing injured. Former Pittsburgh Steelers Tunch Ilkin and Mike Wagner, who admitted to often playing injured during the 1970s and '80s, supported Roethlisberger for sitting

out the 2009 game after suffering a concussion. Ilkin played with various injuries, saying it "was just the culture" that existed in football at the time when players and coaches were less informed and less careful about injuries.

Though perhaps misguided, football players will continue to be motivated to play injured as a result of many of the points already cited. What can be lost in the equation is that football is merely a game and should be treated that way, even by those who play the sport for a living. It can be stated with all certitude that sports cannot love athletes the way some athletes love sports. By exhibiting an overdependence of the virtues of sport and viewing it as an end-all means to making a living, enjoying success and experiencing happiness and fulfillment in life, one is almost certainly setting a standard that will fail.

A similar stance should be made as it pertains to playing through injury for teammates, coaches, administrators, fans, etc. The loyalty and dedication demonstrated by athletes who play through injury will almost never be repaid. The athlete may be initially be praised for his courage, but more often that praise results from external rewards accrued from the player's efforts. As sports commercialization has grown significantly, many have argued that the athlete has become more of a product that can be bought and sold, instead of a human being. The athlete's health can simply become a secondary concern. Once the athlete has retired, graduated or moved on, their gutsy efforts will most often be forgotten forever. Their nagging pains will not.

Certainly, every player, healthy or not, runs the risk of serious injury. Yet, by playing with broken ribs, Tony Romo put himself in increased danger of suffering more substantial injuries, which, in turn, might have caused him to miss more game action than if he had simply opted to sit out one contest. If Roethlisberger had decided to play

shortly after suffering a concussion, he would have been jeopardizing not only the rest of that season but the entire balance of his football career. And for what? To participate in one big game that has now been long since forgotten. Essentially, football players who use the fear of losing their jobs as an argument to play injured, may in fact best be served resting their injuries and coming back stronger the next day or week. Simply stated, playing injured can end a career just as well as sitting out.

As it is, the lifespan of a football career is short. Most do not play beyond high school. Most who play in college do not play professionally. The average NFL career runs less than five years. In the case of Romo, it appears as though he was focused squarely on the immediate future in coming to the decision and didn't give much, if any, consideration to the long term. In justifying his stance, Romo said: "As you play the position, and you've been here a while, you just know how precious each game is, how important each season is. You just don't want to miss a game" (Watkins, 2011). But what about life after football? The results of the various studies conducted are galling and eye-opening. Even a bad back or creaky knees may prevent a former football-playing father from playing in the backyard with his children. It may prevent him from simply taking a walk around the block. Ultimately, it may prevent him from leading a healthy and productive life after football.

Certainly, there are cases when it is acceptable for an athlete to play football while injured. For one, not every injury is created equal. Obviously, a broken hand is a much different injury than a concussion. Dallas running back Emmitt Smith, for example, played through a first-degree (least severe) shoulder separation during a 1994 game, and enjoyed one of his finest days as a pro (Moore, 2010). Chiefs quarterback

Steve DeBerg played with a broken pinky for several weeks in 1990 (Penner, 1990). Those injuries didn't pose significant long-term health dangers to Smith or DeBerg. Using examples in other sports of acceptable participation, Willis Reed, Kirk Gibson and Kerri Strug competed with injuries in periods of time that were brief, at the ends of their seasons and in the pinnacle events of their sports. Reed said he only played in Game 7 of the NBA Finals because it was the last game of the season, and he knew he wouldn't suffer any long-term effects. Said Reed: "I wouldn't have played in a Game 3 because it probably would've knocked me out of a Game 4" (I. O'Connor, 2011).

Another acceptable condition is when the athlete possesses a certain maturity. Some players make decisions for themselves, but may lack the maturity to make good decisions for themselves. That leads into another acceptable condition: When the athlete is properly educated about the short and long term risks of playing injured. A group of 75 retired NFL players sued the league this year, alleging mismanagement of their concussions and the league's failure to warn players about the long-term dangers of concussions (Belson, Schwarz, 2011). During a different era, it is all likely that Roethlisberger, due to lack of knowledge, would have taken the field shortly after suffering a concussion. If team doctors, coaches and other personnel aren't entirely forthcoming with information, a player cannot make an appropriate decision. To that end, former NFL defensive lineman Warren Sapp said: "When I deemed I wasn't healthy enough to play, I didn't play. I didn't give a damn what the team doctors said" (Sanserino, 2009).

If an athlete can compete at, or near, 100 percent of his abilities, playing injured may also be acceptable. The athlete owes as much to himself, his teammates, the

opposition and sport in general, which Simon defines as a mutual quest for excellence involving cooperative effort by competitors to create the best possible challenge to each other (p. 27, 2010). If the injury prevents the player, as well as those competing with and against him, from improving, prospering and growing morally as athletes and human beings, he should not participate.

The short- and long-term dangers tied to playing football are palpable. The risks are compounded when injuries are involved. Though it appears that the "tough-guy" nature of football is slowly disintegrating, players will continually be placed in a position where they must decide to play injured or not. In doing so, the athlete must appropriately and maturely weigh the consequences of his decision, and closely assess how those consequences will affect not only himself, but the other close spheres in his life.

The player must ask himself various questions: How significant is the injury? How will it affect my play on the field? What are the long- and short-term dangers of playing? What is to gained by playing? What is to be lost? If the answers purely reflect motivations such as winning, security, wealth and pleasure, the player's intentions may have to be reconsidered. Indeed, playing injured is acceptable under certain conditions, but not when it undermines and challenges the moral values of not only the person and others playing the sport, but also the sport itself.

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