



## Reframing concussions, masculinity, and NFL mythology in League of Denial

Zack Furness

To cite this article: Zack Furness (2016) Reframing concussions, masculinity, and NFL mythology in League of Denial, Popular Communication, 14:1, 49-57, DOI: [10.1080/15405702.2015.1084628](https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2015.1084628)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2015.1084628>



Published online: 01 Feb 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Reframing concussions, masculinity, and NFL mythology in *League of Denial*

Zack Furness

Penn State University, Greater Allegheny

### ABSTRACT

This article explores how the PBS *Frontline* documentary *League of Denial* reframes the “concussion crisis” in three ways that contest the rationalization of injury and the normalization of violence in the hegemonic masculine discourses (visual, written, oral) produced about professional football. First, the film problematizes the notion of head injury as merely “part of the game” and a risk that players ostensibly understand when they enter the National Football League. Second, the film’s depiction of Mike Webster’s “unruly” body further de-naturalizes concussions and contests the masculine ideal of bodily sacrifice in pro football. Third, the film explicitly critiques the role of sports media in constructing a mythology and spectacle of pro football that contributed to the cultural context in which the concussion crisis has emerged.

### Introduction

In 2013, 30 years after the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) public affairs series *Frontline* debuted with a controversial exposé on the National Football League (NFL) titled *An Unauthorized History of the NFL*, the series once again broadcast a contentious documentary on the NFL. Both films were directed by Michael Kirk, who has enjoyed an illustrious career with *Frontline*, winning every major accolade in the field of journalism. *League of Denial: The NFL’s Concussion Crisis* debuted on October 8, 2013, to an audience of 2.2 million viewers (1.5 million is average) and drew a record number of visitors to the *Frontline* website (Lipsyte, 2013). The film aired on the same day that award-winning journalists Mark Fainaru-Wada and Steve Fainaru published their book *League of Denial* (2013) based on years of collaborative investigative journalism at ESPN, which provided the content for the film. The initial response from NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell over *League of Denial* was deafening silence. Goodell had recently pressured ESPN to withdraw its support from the film (ESPN and *Frontline* partnered on the project over a 15-month period) and had spent the previous decade refuting the existence of the link between concussions and the degenerative brain disease, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a disease that *League of Denial* convincingly documents in lucid, heart-wrenching detail. The two-hour film begins with the initial discovery of CTE in the brain of former Pittsburgh Steeler and Hall of Fame center Mike Webster, who suffered an agonizing descent into severe cognitive disability after retiring from a 17-year NFL career. He would be the first of several ex-NFL players who were similarly diagnosed postmortem with CTE and discussed within the film. Through interviews with NFL veterans, family members, medical researchers, football experts, and the journalists who first broke key parts of this story (for *The New York Times*, *GQ*, and ESPN), *League of Denial* effectively indicts the NFL for not only ignoring the needs of ex-players with brain injuries but also for creating a contentious concussion research team—the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (MTBI) committee—that spent 16 years producing

a body of suspect research that was almost transparently designed to support the NFL's spurious denials and bolster its smear campaigns against dissenting brain researchers and critics.

Both the film and the larger *League of Denial* project, which includes the companion *Frontline* website and the Fainarus' book, provide audiences with a sobering, detailed account of a complex and ongoing story that has national consequences for the game of football. The film also does important work in terms of critiquing both the NFL's institutional and representational practices by advancing a sophisticated, conjunctural analysis that effectively contextualizes the "concussion crisis" with a matrix of economic, historical, cultural and political forces that are rarely part of public debate about professional sport in the United States. In doing so, the film opens a productive interpretive space in popular culture in which audiences can consider how and why pro football is made meaningful and through which one can identify some important themes and narratives in the film that speak directly to concerns articulated in critical scholarship on football, sport and communication. A close reading of *League of Denial* suggests that, in addition to struggles over material resources and treatment for bodies, the NFL concussion crisis also consists of overlapping and intersecting struggles over power, agency, identity, truth claims and, broadly speaking, the kinds of issues that are central to communication and cultural studies.

It is with this larger context in mind that this article specifically examines how *League of Denial* reframes the concussion crisis in ways that contest the rationalization of injury and the normalization of violence in the hegemonic masculine discourses (visual, written and oral) produced about professional football. After briefly explaining where these discourses arise and which values and assumptions they reproduce, I discuss how the film problematizes the notion of head injury as merely "part of the game" and a risk that players ostensibly understand. Second, I show how the film's depiction of Mike Webster's "unruly" body (DeLuca, 1999) further de-naturalizes concussions and contests the masculine ideal of bodily sacrifice in pro football. Third, I look at how *League of Denial* explicitly critiques the role of sports media in constructing a mythology and spectacle of pro football that contributed to the emergence of the concussion crisis.

### Hegemonic masculinity in football and sports media

Football in the United States is both heralded and criticized as the "standard bearer of masculinity in sport" (Butterworth, 2014a, p. 874) that, among other things, teaches young men to value "competitiveness, asceticism, success (winning), aggression, violence, superiority to women, and respect for and compliance with male authority" (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990, p. 115). Scholars have long suggested that the representations and discourses of pro football play a key role in affirming the game's reification of *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and they draw attention to the prevalence of such trends in a wide range of sports media texts and practices including newspaper reporting (Anderson & Kian, 2012); live broadcasts of games (Real, 1975; Trujillo, 1995), coverage of the NFL Draft (Oates, 2007; Oates & Durham, 2004), commemorations of former pro players and national events (Butterworth, 2014b; Kusz, 2014), video games (Oates, 2009) and reality TV shows devoted to NFL fan culture (Veri & Liberti, 2013). A common theme in the research is the way that such discourses habitually frame masculinity with respect to injury by both explicitly and tacitly supporting a "warrior narrative" (Jansen & Sabo, 1994) of pro football that valorizes the acceptance of pain and risk (Sabo, 2004) and normalizes viewing bodies as weapons (Messner, 1990) and "sacrificing one's body for the sake of sporting glory" (Anderson & Kian, 2012, p. 153). In addition to regular sportscasts, highlight shows, radio programs and TV specials that often reinforce such trends, the myriad institutional and cultural relationships between the NFL and the military (Fischer, 2014) are also seen as further articulating pro football to a violent form of masculinity that reaffirms dominant ideas about bodily sacrifice, pain and injury.

Despite the validity of such critiques or the nuanced manner in which they are made, this body of scholarship tends to foster a rather reductive view of sports media that does not adequately account for the recent circulation of critical perspectives about masculinity and sport produced in online venues (for ex. the website *Deadspin*) and in the intrepid journalism of unorthodox reporters who

work both inside and outside the bounds of what could formally be called 'sports media' (for ex. Zirin, 2013). It is within these emerging domains that one can find rather different, if not oppositional, narratives of pro football than those traditionally fostered within the sports/media complex (Jhally, 1984). But much has also changed in mainstream sports media due to the persistence of concussions, football-related brain injury, and broader recognition of the various physical and mental problems faced by droves of NFL retirees since the mid-1990s. Even the most conservative corporate venues for sports journalism and broadcasting are beginning to set a different tone in their coverage of pro football that expresses "softer views" about violence (Anderson & Kian, 2012, p. 168) and more compassionate portrayals of ex-NFL players who are living with pain (King, 2014). For example, a recent study of sports coverage of NFL quarterback injuries finds that journalists working in print media, in particular, tend to discuss the injuries in ways that privilege players' health over masculine ideals (Sanderson, Weathers, Greivous, Tehan, & Warren, 2014). With respect to the issue of head injury in the NFL, Anderson and Kian similarly find that "major sport media are beginning to support the notion of health over a masculine warrior narrative" (2012, p. 153) and this is part of a larger trend that includes changes in how concussions are covered in other professional sports, such as the NHL (McGannon, Cunningham, & Schinke, 2013).

Nevertheless, one can hardly ignore the uncritical role that sports media largely continue to play in reproducing hegemonic masculine attitudes toward injury in pro football, which is undoubtedly why critical, investigative coverage of concussions in programs like *Real Sports*, *Outside the Lines*, *60 Minutes*, and especially *League of Denial* stands out so starkly from a televised football landscape that is institutionally committed to the preservation of football as an American cultural institution (seemingly at all costs) and, by and large, too focused on statistics, game analysis, and sporting celebrity to seriously grapple with the NFL's policies and practices. Further fortifying this insulation from critique is the presence of a large number of former NFL players working in sports journalism and broadcasting. Bleacher Report estimated their number at 71 in 2012 and it is likely much higher today (Levy, 2012).

With so many NFL vets serving as analysts, game announcers, guest commentators, talk show hosts, and the subjects of stories, the issue of football-related brain injury (when it is actually discussed) is often framed within and constrained by the same masculine discourse that, according to Katie Rodgers, retired pro football players commonly use to discuss their own personal experiences with pain and injury. Rodgers' (2014) work, based on in-depth interviews with NFL veterans, suggests that, as a strategy for coping with postcareer injuries and pain, ex-players commonly attempt to minimize, if not trivialize, "the pain they experience and the effects it ha[s] on their lives" by talking about the "inevitability and commonality of pain in the NFL" (p. 155). Injuries, in other words, are rationalized as a "part of the game" and thus naturalized as a burden every player must bear, ostensibly without complaints. Indeed, NFL vets often declare that they have "no regrets" about their time in the league as way to assert and maintain a "tough masculine identity," (Rodgers, 2014, p. 156) regardless of the severity of their injuries or the intensity of their pain.

I contend that this ensemble of motifs, which I am henceforth calling the *informed soldier* trope is used by ex-players and others to frame discussions of injury and pain (including concussions and football-related brain trauma) in pro football. While this trope provides ex-football players a vocabulary with which to normalize and rationalize their individual experiences in everyday conversation, it serves a distinctly rhetorical function when deployed in the public sphere—whether by NFL vets on television or by other sportscasters (Sanderson et al., 2014, p. 10) and journalists (e.g., King, 2011)—where it can dramatically shape cultural common sense about the meaning of pain and injury in pro football. One of the implicit assumptions of the informed soldier trope is that players clearly understand and accept all the physical risks involved when they enter the league. Since they accept the premise that injury is inevitable, it is essentially a retroactive decree of informed consent. This is especially problematic with respect to concussions and it is compounded by the way in which cognitive injuries in pro football are often equivocated with more typical injuries related to the skeletal and muscular systems.

What we see in *League of Denial* are people actively contesting the rationalization of concussions as inevitable injuries by drawing some productive distinctions between what NFL players and others deem to be acceptable vs. unacceptable risks in professional football, particularly those that result in head trauma and brain disease. Pam Webster speaks to this point clearly in reference to her deceased ex-husband, former Pittsburgh Steeler Mike Webster:

We did not know the risk. At that time, you come out of football thinking, well, I've probably blown my knees; my ankles are bad; I'm going to have some arthritis. But nobody ever thought, my brain's going to be mush [...] You know, that was a risk that was unknown to us. (Kirk, 2013)

Hall of Fame players Harry Carson and Steve Young similarly parse out the difference between the perceived inevitability of injury via football vs. the perceived inevitability of *brain injury*, but they also trouble one of the underlying assumptions in this formulation, which is the premise that players' on-the-ground, corporeal expertise inherently provides them with accurate tools for self-evaluating both injury and risk itself. Carson says:

As players, you're trained to think about the physical aspects of your body—your knee, your back, your ankles, whatever. You know about that. You also know about your mental well being sometimes. But from a neurological standpoint, players aren't trained to understand exactly what's going on with them. (Kirk & Carson, 2013)

Carson highlights how the nature of risk is fundamentally different when the brain is involved not because players lack awareness of head injuries or substantive knowledge of their bodies but because players are simply not capable of accurately assessing such risk in the first place. Carson's seemingly obvious point—that football players are not neuroscientists—is nevertheless important for how it directs attention toward an institutional policy problem. Because the whole notion that football players with brain injuries “knew what they were getting themselves into,” relies on reproducing a line of inquiry in which the key question becomes whether an NFL player did or did not know the risks, rather than asking whether an NFL player *should* be solely responsible for knowing the risks. Ex-NFL agent Leigh Steinberg, whose former clients included at least two Hall of Fame quarterbacks (Steve Young and Troy Aikman) who retired due to excessive concussions, echoes Carson in his own *League of Denial* extended interview: “It became clear to me [...] that players didn't know enough about what constituted a concussion to be able to self-diagnose” (Gilmore & Steinberg, 2013). The issue for Carson and Steinberg is not whether players were or are informed about the real risks of the game, but that football players are simply not capable of making that call in the first place, especially when the science is still new and the league long denied that the most severe risks even existed. While culpability clearly rests with the league given what they knew and when they knew it, the dominant masculine trope of the “informed soldier” not only obfuscates the real issues, it robs injured retirees of a language that is even suitable for describing their conditions let alone changing the cultural discourse in which their conditions are made meaningful.

### The body of Mike Webster

One of most explicit ways that *League of Denial* contests the warrior narrative of masculine toughness and bodily sacrifice is through the film's depiction of “Iron” Mike Webster. Webster is significant not merely for being the first diagnosed case of CTE but for embodying virtually every characteristic one could associate with football glory and American sports heroism. Simultaneously, he symbolizes nearly everything tragic about the game, its ideological assumptions, and the colossal industry built upon the backs of its players. *League of Denial* captures the details and nuances that were part of Webster's ascendancy in the league as well as a dramatic post-retirement demise in which he lost his livelihood, identity, sense of self, and grip on reality. The segment, which kicks off the film, runs for around twenty minutes and composes a snapshot Webster's life through candid interviews with his surviving family; game highlights; clips of newspaper stories that ran during and after his career; and close-up shots of documents that detail both his physical condition and his fight against the league for disability

benefits. A short video clip from one of Webster's post-retirement television interviews effectively reveals the faltering mental state described by his family members—we see a visibly older Webster respond incoherently to a reporter's question and then look obviously disoriented while he fumbles for words. After a few unsuccessful starts and stops he begrudgingly concedes: "Hell, I don't know what I'm saying. I'm just tired and confused right now" (Kirk, 2013). The Fainaru brothers paint an even fuller picture of the confusion and memory loss that marked Webster's degenerative condition and plagued the final years of his life. Their book quotes incoherent, delusional and disturbing passages from Webster's journal (p. 92) and also details his sad Hall of Fame induction speech, which was rambling, embarrassing and, at times, nonsensical: "it was no longer Mike Webster" (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013, p. 61). Webster's son, Colin, conveys this same sentiment in the documentary, following the clip of his father's botched interview:

Maybe the saddest [thing] I ever heard him say was when someone saw my dad and, "Aren't you Mike Webster?" And he said, "I used to be." I think that really was how he felt because he really was. He wasn't the same person. It was—it was like, you know, a picture of him that was just shattered into a million pieces. (Kirk, 2013)

This loss of self is further emphasized through the film's inclusion of symbolic still shot: it is a photo of an aging Webster (background) who is shown holding up a black and white picture of himself in his Steelers' uniform (foreground)—the Mike Webster he used to be.

The eventual publicity of Webster's demise and his unwillingness to accept the league's calloused treatment of ex-players made it increasingly difficult for the NFL to manage the unruliness of his body when he was alive. With his death and the subsequent discovery of CTE in his brain, this situation was amplified to an astounding degree. As both the book and documentary clearly reveal, the NFL attempted to manage the 'problem' of Webster's body with PR damage control and legal challenges (to Webster's disability claims), but also via the intentional exploitation and manipulation of both scientific research and publishing as a means to occlude the meaning of Webster's posthumous body. *League of Denial* puts both these processes and Webster's body on display. In one of the most disturbing scenes in the film, the extent of Webster's physical deterioration at the time of his death is described in detail and interspersed with actual black and white photos taken during his autopsy; we first see his torso and face, followed by posterior shots of his mangled legs and feet, and then a close-up of his forehead. Doctors, journalists, family members, and other witnesses attest to the deplorable state of his body: He had, they recounted, disfigured feet and legs and many serious back and shoulder injuries. Webster's teeth were falling out, and his son explains that he would super-glue them back in place. The skin on his forehead was mostly scar tissue from repeated pounding. As Dr. Bennet Omalu, who conducted Webster's autopsy summarizes, "Mike looked older than his age. He looked beat up. He looked—he looked worn out. He looked drained. If I had not been told his age, I would say he looked like 70" (Kirk, 2013).

Michael Butterworth notes that the body "holds the potential to constitute public arguments and affect social attitudes" (2008, p. 261) and one can see this process at work in the mobilization of testimony, video clips, and images concerning Webster's physical condition. Through the presentation of the autopsy photos, the film effectively positions Webster's body as "the site and substance of the argument" (Deluca, 1999, p.10) that pro football is brutal and deadly. The violence etched into Webster's flesh, bones, and brain demand an accounting of the institutional regimes that sanction and condone such brutality. At the same time, the NFL's denial of both the proper care to ex-players and the validity of their medical claims seemed to indicate that the league viewed all treatment-seeking, mentally disabled veterans of America's Game as liars or frauds. How many other bodies, the film seems to ask, would need to be ignobly destroyed in the name of NFL glory?

The rhetorical power of images is not based solely on whether they win over the public, but that they impact the arguments and discourses constructed around specific subjects and controversies. In this sense, one can certainly not measure the effect that Webster's body, or the narratives around it, has had or will have on debates over the safety of football. But in a media environment where displaying photographs of the dead is taboo, even in broadcast journalism (Silcock, Schwalbe, & Keith, 2008),

the appearance of Webster's corpse in *League of Denial* provides an incisive counter to the informed warrior narrative. In doing so it "opens a space" (Deluca, 1999, p.14) for challenging the received wisdom that sacrificing human bodies is somehow heroic when done in service of professional football. To the contrary, Webster's body suggests that such sacrifice is merely part of a process in which players are systematically exploited and ultimately left behind. NFL Hall of Famer Harry Carson reinforces this point vividly in his extended *Frontline* interview: "Once you're out of the league, you don't have a voice. Nobody cares about you, except your family. To be honest with you, nobody gives a shit about you. They want you to go away and just be quiet" (Kirk & Carson, 2013).

In an extreme sense, the bodies of Mike Webster and other disabled and deceased ex-players render the NFL visible as "a unique *corporeal formation* systematically replete with, if not made into an enterprise of, processes of dehumanization, exploitation and, in a radical sense, death" (McLeod, Lovich, Newman, & Shields, 2014, p. 224). *League of Denial* thus serves as a forum through which we are meant to see football players in the NFL, and beyond, as potential victims of hegemonic masculinity—as other "bodies at risk" (Deluca, 1999, p.14).

### Confronting the mythology and spectacle of the NFL

*League of Denial* is by no means the first film to show the fragility of football player's bodies and the brutal consequences of playing the game in ways that contrast with the image of football glory cultivated in popular culture for so many decades. The 1985 HBO documentary *Disposable Heroes: The Other Side of Football* (Couturie and Else) did similar kinds of work by featuring NFL game footage cut with interviews conducted with host of NFL players who speak candidly about the pain and trauma of playing professional football. The film, which was produced for HBO's America Undercover series and aired in the weeks leading up to Super Bowl XIX, focuses extensively on the tribulations of two retired players including Jim Otto, who, despite being 30 years younger than he appears in *League of Denial*, graphically documents his astonishing number of injuries, surgeries, and maladies. In addition to episodes of video news programs devoted to concussions and head injury, fictional football films such as *North Dallas Forty* (Yablans & Kotcheff, 1979) and *Any Given Sunday* (Donner et al., 1999) similarly offer commentaries about the physical dangers of football albeit in ways that send mixed messages to audiences (Baker, 2014). But what seems unique about *League of Denial's* depiction of injury is how media representation is explicitly problematized and critically examined as part of the CTE controversy.

*League of Denial* does not attempt to establish a causal relationship between violence in sports media and behavior. Rather, the documentary locates the proliferation of football violence within a set of representational strategies that emerge through the development of specific institutional and financial relationships, such as the creation of *Monday Night Football* in 1970, which Mark Fainaru-Wada says "marked a turning point in the game's popularity and its revenues" (Kirk, 2013). It is against this economic backdrop—and with respect to league's contemporary status as media and financial juggernaut—that we are to assess the glamorization of mediated football violence as part of the NFL's strategy of "marketing itself and turning itself into a spectacle, a sort of cultural part of our lives" (Kirk, 2013). This cultural dynamic is one of the focal points of the film's dedicated segment on media and the marketing of NFL violence.

Michael Oriard, whose work has widely influenced the way scholars understand the cultural role of football in the United States, is featured in the segment which, for all intents and purposes, is organized around his analysis of the modern NFL as a media entertainment spectacle that "amplif[ies] football's epic or mythic power" (2007, p. 26). Oriard specifically describes the influential role that NFL Films historically played in cultivating a *mythology* of pro football, which he describes elsewhere as something that speaks to deep-seated American cultural values and sentiments that are both legible and unconscious (1981, p. 34). His comments are spliced between brief snippets of NFL Films' *Big Blocks and King Size Hits*—a prime example of the league's highly-crafted aesthetic violence; it contains all the trademark features of an NFL Films' release: the

integration of classical music, slow motion shots of players grappling, and the famous voice of John Facenda, who famously narrated dozens of NFL Films titles in the 1960s and 1970s and became affectionately known as “the voice of god”:

Facenda (voiceover, with music): *On this down and dirty dance floor huge men perform a punishing pirouette. The meek will never inherit this turf because every play is hand-to-hand and body to body combat.*

Oriard (voiceover): NFL Films captured the essence of football itself, that tension between the violence and the beauty...

Facenda (voiceover, with music): *In the pit, there is more violence per square foot than anywhere else in sport.*

Oriard (on screen): ...the sense of football as something powerful and elemental and mythic and epic. (Kirk, 2013)

*League of Denial's* accessible presentation of Oriard's analysis helps to explain the work that media representations can do in terms of normalizing violence and shaping a cultural context in which concussions, head injury and the destruction of player's bodies are rationalized as part of the game, if not seen as a natural phenomenon. Significantly, this is one of the issues specifically highlighted in the massive class action currently pending against the league (Vogan, 2014, p. 71). The legal complaint, which was filed in 2011 on behalf of ex-Atlanta Falcons safety, Ray Easterling, and later joined by thousands of NFL vets, devotes four full pages to the league's glorification of violence through NFL Films (Vogan, 2014, p. 200).

*League of Denial's* critique of the NFL's mythmaking is made not only through the explicit commentary of experts, but also through the film's own visual and stylistic strategies. For example, the entire opening montage that introduces and synopsisizes the film (a convention *Frontline* includes at beginning of all its documentaries, before the title sequence) is cut almost verbatim like an NFL highlight reel, with aggressive, loud hits juxtaposed between short bursts of commentary from the films' interview subjects—the only major difference is the audibility of both *Frontline's* theme song and the voice-over narration that sits atop the music and diegetic sounds. The first clip presents a close-up, slow motion shot of players' game-weathered hands placed on the ground at the line of scrimmage, just prior to a snap. In *Keepers of the Flame*, Vogan notes that, along with the audible “grunts and groans of players,” such shots became “one of the signature ways the company showcased pro football's power and intensity” (2014, p. 21). Indeed, throughout the nearly two-hour documentary there are numerous short sequences of player collisions in which *League of Denial* echoes, if not mimics, the trademark stylistic techniques of NFL Films' artistic visionary, Steve Sabol, whose films famously captured the intensity, emotion, and aggressive hits that came to define the visual and aural aesthetics of professional football. This association is arguably heightened by the fact that *Frontline's* exclusive narrator, Will Lyman, has a distinctive baritone that, within the context of this particular *Frontline* program, brings to mind the booming voice of NFL Films' John Facenda.

But unlike an NFL Films production or the pantheon of related NFL television programs, *League of Denial* is not gesturing toward Sabol's filmic vision as an homage, but rather as a means for critiquing—or, at the very least, radically re-contextualizing—the mythology and spectacle of pro football that Sabol spent his life meticulously crafting. In addition to the film's segment that explicitly targets NFL Films for its role in marketing and commodifying football's most violent attributes, Kirk's stylistic choices in the documentary seem specifically aimed at re-presenting that same sporting violence—those same clashing bodies—not as dramatic stanzas in a heroic saga, but as a series of monodies in a grotesque tragedy. In his film review for *Grantland*, Andrew Sharp describes the effects of this visual/emotional technique in the documentary: “Every hit that used to look awesome in 1998 is cringeworthy in 2013, when you have a crystal-clear shot of some helpless receiver having his head snap back as his body crumbles to the ground. The suspension of disbelief we used to enjoy with NFL Films has been replaced by hyper-reality” (2013). Sharp further describes

what he sees as a watershed moment in the transformation of the NFL's carefully crafted image, which is when the famous ex-San Diego Charger Junior Seau, who recently shot himself through the heart (and whose girlfriend's 9–11 call aired in the film just minutes earlier), appears in a clip from an NFL Films documentary using almost erotic language to describe what it is like to deliver the “perfect hit” on an opposing player—the kind of hit that may have contributed to his brain disease and eventual suicide: “In a movie full of gut-wrenching images and themes, that sequence is right near the top. Regardless of what happens from here, football will never go back to the days of NFL Films and Sam Spence music turning this stuff into violence poetry [...] *the NFL Films Era is over*” (2013).

## Conclusion

*Frontline's League of Denial* not only interrogates the institutional practices and cultural norms at the heart of the NFL's concussion crisis, but it also challenges the dominant discourses that normalize and naturalize the violence of the game. Like the Fainaru's book, the documentary's engagement with head trauma and brain disease effectively undermines hegemonic masculine warrior narratives and contributes to a progressive shift in the way that injury and vulnerability in professional football players is both discussed and remembered in popular culture. Indeed, the perpetual accessibility of the film online will undoubtedly help to ensure that football-related brain injuries will not simply be “purged in league memory practices as dramatic shocks that did not signal systemic trouble” (Grano, 2014, p. 32). Finally, *League of Denial* also constructs a critical counter-narrative of the complex and constitutive relationships between media, football and culture that actively contests the mythology of pro football cultivated through NFL Films and the league's spectacular representational strategies.

## References

- Anderson, E., & Kian, E. M. (2012). Examining media contestation of masculinity and head trauma in the National Football League. *Men and Masculinities*, 15(2), 152–173. doi:10.1177/1097184X11430127
- Baker, A. (2014). Masculinity, race, and violence in *Any Given Sunday*. In T. P. Oates & Z. Furness (Eds.), *The NFL: Critical and cultural perspectives* (pp. 160–167). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Butterworth, M. L. (2008). “Katie was not only a girl, she was terrible”: Katie Hnida, body rhetoric, and football at the University of Colorado. *Communication Studies*, 59(3), 259–273. doi:10.1080/10510970802257705
- Butterworth, M. L. (2014a). The athlete as citizen: Judgement and rhetorical invention in sport. *Sport in Society*, 17(7), 867–883. doi:10.1080/17430437.2013.806033
- Butterworth, M. L. (2014b). NFL Films and the militarization of professional football. In T. P. Oates & Z. Furness (Eds.), *The NFL: Critical and cultural perspectives* (pp. 205–225). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859. doi:10.1177/0891243205278639
- Couturie, B., & Else, J. (Directors). (1985). *Disposable heroes: The other side of football* [Documentary]. Los Angeles, CA: H.B.O. Productions.
- Deluca, K. M. (1999). Unruly arguments: The body rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 36(1), 9.
- Donner, R., Stone, O., Halsted, D., Donner, L. S., Townsend, C. (Producers), & Stone, O. (Director). (1999). *Any given Sunday*. [Motion Picture]. USA: Warner Brothers.
- Fainaru-Wada, M., & Fainaru, S. (2013). *League of denial*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Fischer, M. (2014). Commemorating 9/11 NFL-style: Insights into America's culture of militarism. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 38(3), 199–221. doi:10.1177/0193723513515889
- Gilmore, J. (Interviewer), & Steinberg, L. (Interviewee). (2013, March 29). *The frontline interviews: Leigh Steinberg*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sports/league-of-denial/the-frontline-interview-leigh-steinberg/>
- Grano, D. A. (2014). The greatest game ever played: An NFL origin story. In T. P. Oates & Z. Furness (Eds.), *The NFL: Critical and cultural perspectives* (pp. 13–39). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Jansen, S. C., & Sabo, D. (1994). The sport/war metaphor: Hegemonic masculinity, the Persian Gulf War, and the new world order. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 11(1), 17.
- Jhally, S. (1984). The spectacle of accumulation: Material and cultural factors in the evolution of the sports/media complex. *The Insurgent Sociologist*, 12(3), 41–57.

- King, P. (2011, December 12). One team, 25 years on. *Sports Illustrated*, 115(23), 74–77.
- King, S. (2014). Beyond the war on drugs? Notes on prescription opioids and the NFL. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 38(2), 184–193. doi:10.1177/0193723513515890
- Kirk, M. (Director). (2013). *League of denial: The NFL's concussion crisis* [Documentary]. Boston, MA: Frontline.
- Kirk, M. (Interviewer), & Carson, H. (Interviewee). (2013, September 4). *The Frontline interviews: Harry Carson* [Interview transcript]. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sports/league-of-denial/the-frontline-interview-harry-carson>
- Kusz, K. W. (2014). For the love of national manhood: Excavating the cultural politics and media memorializations of Pat Tillman. In T. P. Oates & Z. Furness (Eds.), *The NFL: Critical and cultural perspectives* (pp. 226–248). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Levy, D. (2012, January 20). Which TV network has the most NFL talent? (A flag football analysis). *Bleacher Report*. Retrieved from <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1032095-nfl-which-tv-network-has-the-most-talent-a-flag-football-analysis>.
- Lipsyte, R. (2013, October 15). Winning ugly: ESPN journalism prevails. *ESPN Ombudsman*. Retrieved from [http://espn.go.com/blog/ombudsman/post/\\_id/176/winning-ugly-espn-journalism-prevails](http://espn.go.com/blog/ombudsman/post/_id/176/winning-ugly-espn-journalism-prevails)
- McGannon, K. R., Cunningham, S. M., & Schinke, R. J. (2013). Understanding concussion in socio-cultural context: A media analysis of a National Hockey League star's concussion. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 14(6), 891–899. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2013.08.003
- McLeod, C., Lovich, J., Newman, J. I., & Shields, R. (2014). The training camp: American football and/as spectacle of exception. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 38(3), 222–244. doi:10.1177/0193723514520997
- Messner, M. A. (1990). When bodies are weapons: Masculinity and violence in sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 25(3), 203–220. doi:10.1177/101269029002500303
- Oates, T. P. (2007). The erotic gaze in the NFL draft. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 74–90. doi:10.1080/14791420601138351
- Oates, T. P. (2009). New media and the repackaging of NFL fandom. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 26(1), 31–49.
- Oates, T. P., & Durham, M. G. (2004). The mismeasure of masculinity: Enumerative politics and the NFL draft. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 38(3), 301–320. doi:10.1080/0031322042000250475
- Oriard, M. (1981). Professional football as cultural myth. *The Journal of American Culture*, 4(3), 27–41. doi:10.1111/jacc.1981.4.issue-3
- Oriard, M. (2007). *Brand NFL: Making and selling America's favorite sport*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Real, M. R. (1975). The Super Bowl: Mythic spectacle. In M. R. Real (Ed.), *Mass-mediated culture* (pp. 170–203). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Rodgers, K. (2014). “I was a gladiator”: Pain, injury, and masculinity in the NFL. In T. P. Oates & Z. Furness (Eds.), *The NFL: Critical and cultural perspectives* (pp. 142–159). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Sabo, D. (2004). The politics of sports injury: Hierarchy, power, and the pain principle. In K. Young (Ed.), *Sporting bodies, damaged selves: Sociological studies of sports-related injuries* (pp. 59–79). London, England: Elsevier.
- Sabo, D., & Panepinto, J. (1990). Football ritual and the social reproduction of masculinity. In M. Messner & D. Sabo (Eds.), *Sport, men, and the gender order* (pp. 115–126). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Sanderson, J., Weathers, M., Grevious, A., Tehan, M., & Warren, S. (2014, May 28). A hero or sissy? Exploring media framing of NFL quarterbacks injury decisions. *Communication & Sport*. Retrieved from <http://com.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/05/27/2167479514536982.abstract>
- Sharp, A. (2013, October 9). League of denial and the crisis that never ends. *Grantland*. Retrieved from <http://grantland.com/the-triangle/league-of-denial-and-the-crisis-that-never-ends>
- Silcock, B. W., Schwalbe, C. B., & Keith, S. (2008). “Secret” casualties: Images of injury and death in the Iraq war across media platforms. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 23(1), 36–50. doi:10.1080/08900520701753205
- Trujillo, N. (1995). Machines, missiles, and men: Images of the male body on ABC's *Monday Night Football*. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 12(4), 403–423.
- Veri, M. J., & Liberti, R. (2013). Tailgate warriors: Exploring constructions of masculinity, food, and football. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 37(3), 227–244. doi:10.1177/0193723512472897
- Vogan, T. (2014). *Keepers of the flame: NFL films and the rise of sports media*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Yablans, F. (Producer), & Kotcheff, T. (Director). (1979). *North Dallas forty* [Motion Picture]. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Zirin, D. (2013). *Game over: How politics has turned the sports world upside down*. Boston, MA: The New Press.