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Catholics silent on football risks

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The Ironmen of Don Bosco Preparatory High School in Ramsey, N.J., play football Nov. 24 against the Green Knights of St. Joseph Regional High School in Montvale, N.J. (Newscom/Icon SMI/Tyler Kaufman)

Growing scientific evidence that football players can suffer permanent mental disease has so far stirred no broad discussion among Catholic colleges and high schools or national church organizations about the ethics of continuing to sponsor the game.

A sampling of Catholic groups and scholars who study sports culture and promote its moral benefits say they believe the medical hazards exposed by the research raise serious questions about the continuation of football but add that they haven?t called attention to the apparent threat, in part because it could ignite stormy protests by fans and financial backers.

Some believe more evidence is needed but concede that the existing findings are alarming.

Pope John Paul II, a former soccer player with a love of sports, provided a rationale for making hard choices. Sports could be ?a gymnasium of the spirit, a means to exercise moral education,? he told a Milan, Italy, soccer team in 1979, only if it was ?inspired by healthy principles that exclude all unnecessary risks on the part of the athlete, and the disordered emotions on the part of the fans that may occur in competition.?

Experiments conducted in recent years by Purdue University, the University of Michigan and the University of North Carolina, among others, have shown widespread brain damage to current and former players from high school through the National Football League.

While the bulk of media coverage has been on the effects of concussions, the most sensational head injury, studies have raised increasing alarm that repeated blows to the head that appear harmless can eventually result in the same chronic illnesses, among them, memory loss, depression, Alzheimer?s and dementia.

One analogy cited by some sources is the cumulative effect of smoking: No single cigarette triggers lung disease. Another is the grim image of a death by a thousand cuts.

The scientific catch name for the collection of most serious diseases is CTE, ?chronic traumatic encephalopathy,? signs of which have been found in college players. Former NFL players with brain disorders have been filing suits against the league, alleging they were kept in the dark about the risks to their mental health.

No widespread alarm over the link between football and the long-term welfare of players has emerged in Catholic circles, however, according to an informal survey. Neither the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities nor the Catholic Theological Society of America, for example, has devoted conference time or

special sessions to the subject.

Nor have church and society centers and institutes at universities such as Notre Dame taken up the cause. Instead, the problem has been largely left to athletic trainers and coaches, who are relied upon to improve strategies for treating concussed players and upgrading precautions.

Michael Galligan-Stierle, president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, says the 240 member schools are aware of the research and dedicated to player safety. Though the association?s core members, college presidents, have never convened discussions on long-term injuries, he said, a ?stronger response? would be warranted if science produces a stronger case.

But the former football player and basketball coach said it would be ?morally wrong? to sponsor football ?if it?s clear a person would end up mentally and physically impaired,? adding emphatically, ?but we?re not there yet.? For now, he said, coaches and their staffs are able to ?make the right decisions.?

A special edition of the National Catholic Educational Association?s *Momentum* magazine in 2009 reflects similar ambivalence. Titled ?Sports and Spirituality,? the issue paid legitimate attention to the legacy of Catholic belief in the virtue of sports and included debate over whether sports actually produces character. However, it contained no references to the dangers that had recently emerged in the news.

Though coaches and athletic directors at the 1,206 Catholic high schools and 46 Catholic colleges that offer football have responded promptly to the need for better care for players hit by concussions by removing them from games -- even entire seasons -- and providing more safety precautions, no school could be found that has seriously considered giving up a cherished football tradition as a compelling moral remedy.

More than a million American high school students play football every year. While only a small fraction play for Catholic schools, many teams from those schools are renowned for football, making them highly visible in the sports world. For example, a lengthy article in the Jan. 2 issue of the *New Yorker* magazine lionized the team from the Salesian-run Don Bosco Prep in Ramsey, N.J., depicting it as a vehicle for athletes? upward mobility.

Within that culture, violence and injuries have been accepted as a reasonable price for achievement and ?playing through pain? is part of the creed. A 2011 documentary on PBS?s ?Frontline? called ?Football High? estimated that 60,000 concussions alone occur in high schools. At least 50 high school players have died since 1997. The full pattern of long-term effects that may show up only decades later isn?t yet known.

Edward Rielly, professor of English at St. Joseph?s College of Maine and author of *Football: An Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, is among the legions of Catholics who feel torn by the research. Having grown up loving and playing the game, the evidence troubles Rielly, but he prefers to think that remedial action like limiting playing time or placing weight limits on players will suffice. He doesn?t foresee Catholic schools dropping football but thinks further proof that it?s ?extremely dangerous? could create ?a tipping point.?

?We can?t be Romans sending our sons like gladiators just to please folks who love football,? he said.

But, the critics say, that?s precisely what?s happening.

The roots of the resistance to such drastic options as dropping football lie deep within American Catholic memories of beleaguered immigrant Catholics proving themselves (?the Fighting Irish?) and in the public passion for the game, abetted by vast profit-making and gambling activities. Among the country?s religious adherents, none mesh faith with football more than Catholics and Southern evangelicals.

No Christian tradition has more ethical and theological resources than Catholicism to take on the challenge of

football, but there is no rush to do so. Michael Malec of Jesuit-run Boston College, who specializes in the sociology of sports, said he wasn?t aware of any ?serious, hard thinking? on whether schools should ban football but he was ?starting to think it should be addressed? as a major ethical issue. However, he said, devotion to the sport is ?so ingrained in culture? that initiating such a discussion would be difficult.

But mounting evidence might cause parents ?to be more reluctant to let their sons play? and that might prompt the question in another manner, said Stephen Pope, a theologian at Boston College who has studied sports in the framework of Catholic ethics. Knowing what he does now about the potential impact of injuries, he said he probably wouldn?t have wanted his own sons to play.

Frank Splitt, a retired telecommunications specialist who?s relentlessly pressed for Catholic colleges to spearhead a drive to ?clean up the cesspool? of bigtime sports, said progress was blunted because ?when money is involved, nothing else matters nearly as much. Nobody wants to touch this thing because it could impact their income.?

The medical red flags exist within a much larger indictment of high-profile college sports.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Taylor Branch, in a blistering attack in the November 2011 *Atlantic* magazine, accused major college athletics of operating a ?plantation mentality? by exploiting athletes and subverting education in a chase for riches. Branch has joined a rising chorus of critics who claim that greed and craving for media fame have subverted the purposes of education and the welfare of athletes. These critics have frequently targeted the National Collegiate Athletic Association for allegedly condoning bad behavior.

Scientists in brain research have also warned against complacency. Dr. Julian Bailes, a neurosurgeon who has studied former NFL players, wrote in *The Sport Digest* that a boy suiting up for football understands that risks include blown knees and paralyzing broken necks. ?Those are all known risks,? he wrote. ?But you don?t sign up to become a brain-damaged young adult.?

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