

“Concussion”: David and Goliath

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I am not a football enthusiast. It’s because I simply do not understand the sport.

This may sound strange since I grew up in Indiana and Hoosiers love football and basketball — especially on the collegiate level. As a young girl, I enjoyed watching basketball because I understood the game. But football was another matter altogether.

As a member of my high school marching band, I had to play at all football home games. Imagine

sitting there in the stands cheering our football team to victory yet not having a clue as to what was happening on the field. Tight ends, quarterbacks, safeties, wide receivers, centers, first and down; and what about those numbers that a player is shouting out before everyone goes head to head in the scrimmage. It was all Greek to me. Football just did not make sense to me.

And of course, my brother and father camped out in the living room on weekends rooting for (yelling, more like it) their favorite collegiate or professional football team. Needless to say, I had no clue who was winning or how they could win. My freshman year at Indiana University was much the same. All I learned about football that year was that the late John Pont, the head coach for IU’s team, was one of the top college coaches in America and that the varsity football players received special meals every day and drove around in brand new sports cars.



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Though I still don’t understand football, I do know it has captured the attention and loyalty of millions of fans. I also understand there are billions of dollars tied up in the game and thousands of people earn their living from the sport, one way or another, and that football means millions of dollars in revenue for the cities that host a professional team. This does not begin to scratch the surface of the popularity and economics of the Super Bowl, where television advertisers pay millions to promote their product.

I also understand the furor caused by a quiet, unassuming forensic neuropathologist from Nigeria when he discovered what came to be called “chronic traumatic encephalopathy,” or CTE, after conducting autopsies on

several former NFL players beginning in 2002.

And I certainly did not have to understand football to appreciate the film “Concussion,” released this past Christmas, that depicts this story of pain and courage in bringing CTE to the public’s attention.

The film is a worthy David and Goliath story with the Nigerian forensic neuropathologist as “David” who confronts the leadership of the NFL or “Goliath.” Starring Will Smith as Dr. Bennet Omalu, the movie traces Omalu’s struggles to convince the NFL leadership and the public that CTE is real and the lives of professional football players are at stake. Not having grown up with American football, the film portrays Omalu’s naiveté and shock at people’s reactions to his science-based revelations. As a doctor, he assumed that science would win the argument but he quickly discovered that emotions run high when talking about one of America’s favorite and most lucrative sports; that when it comes to football, nothing will derail the game.

The film’s storyline is bolstered by taking us behind the scenes of the two initial cases that presented with CTE. We’re given a glimpse into the life of Pittsburgh Steeler Mike Webster, and Omalu’s first CTE autopsy, as he descended into madness, struggling to make sense of what was happening to him. Webster knows something is very wrong with him but with the standard tests revealing nothing, he cannot be helped. He dies homeless, alone and in pain.

We are also given a glimpse into fellow Steeler Justin Strzelczyk as he too struggled to remain sane and whole, ultimately killing himself when he crashed his truck at high speed on a major highway. After his autopsy on Strzelczyk, the insightful Omalu saw a pattern emerge that set him on a collision course with NFL leadership.

It is particularly significant that the film opened at the height of the football season, just before the college and professional playoffs. If nothing else, anyone watching the film should find it difficult to watch the

playoffs without at least thinking about the dangers of CTE.

However, the strength of the film is it is not just about the reality of CTE and how the economics of professional sports in America can prevent us from recognizing problems that need to be addressed. The film also highlighted the challenges of racism. We like to think that as well-educated Americans living in the 21st century, we have overcome our racist and discriminatory thoughts and attitudes. But we have not — at least not on a broader international, intercultural level.

In Omalu's case, the racist views were expressed very subtly initially because they were not focused on him as a black man, but rather as an African black man. Whether or not Omalu was aware of the racist attitudes of his co-workers in the beginning is unclear. However, as things progressed with CTE, the level of racism became far more overt as the NFL leadership fought back against Omalu focusing on his Nigerian nationality and ethnicity as a way to discredit him and his findings. He was Nigerian, therefore his education was substandard. In the eyes of his detractors, he was an African, and so his "tribal identity" translated into a lack of the experiential and cultural aptitude required to make such a scientific finding. And as a neuropathologist, he did not practice "real medicine." Such was the nature of the attacks on Omalu's credibility.

When that did not deter him, a plan of intimidation against he and his wife was followed, resulting in the miscarriage of their first baby on a personal level and the FBI bringing specious charges against his boss, Dr. Cyril Wecht, just because he supported Omalu when Omalu was also threatened with investigation by the FBI. Yet through it all, Bennet Omalu's indomitable spirit and commitment to what was right and to saving lives did not waver. It took a little over three years of insults, ridicule and intimidation before he was finally invited by the NFL Players Association to share his findings with them.

The film is well done and, beyond highlighting the very serious issue of sports safety and racial attitudes, "Concussion" also sheds light on the challenge all popular sports face: the economics of professional sports in America.

What remains to be seen is the impact this movie will have on the public conversation surrounding these key issues. Certainly a conversation as to how to protect players in contact sports is a given from this film. As Omalu notes in the film, he was not anti-football. He was pro-knowledge and pro-safety. He was not seeking to end the sport. But he was seeking to be heard so that those in a position to make decisions regarding player safety and health had the knowledge necessary to make critical changes in how the game might be played.

The other conversation that needs to take place concerning the economics of professional sports is a more difficult one. The power and influence of money in professional sports can interfere in making the right decisions — decisions that directly impact players' health and safety. Youth who dream of making it big in sports quickly learn such dictums as "work through the pain," "no pain no gain" and "the end justifies the means." The more they can push through such challenges, the greater the possibility of making it big and earning a seven-figure salary. Hopefully, "Concussion" will be able to take on this challenge and be the catalyst for such an important conversation.

I know when I see Eli Manning, Adrian Rogers or Tom Brady on the field, I'll be wondering if they may eventually develop CTE. If I read about the strange behavior of a former NFL player, I'll ask myself if he's showing early signs of CTE. Or when I pass a high school sports field, I'll be wondering, "Do those teenagers understand the real risks of playing football?"

While I still don't understand the game of football, "Concussion" has challenged me to be more aware of the sport and the dangers these amazing athletes face. I'm not sure I can ask much more of a good movie.

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"Concussion" (PG-13) is now playing in select theaters. Running time: 123 minutes. Directed by Peter Landesman; screenplay by Peter Landesman and Jeanne Marie Laskas. Main cast: Will Smith (Dr. Bennet Omalu), Alec Baldwin (Dr. Julian Bailes), Albert Brooks (Dr. Cyril Wecht), and Gugu Mbatha-Raw (Prema Mutiso). See IMDB for full film details.

Photo at top: Will Smith as Dr. Bennet Omalu in a scene from "Concussion" (courtesy Sony Pictures). Smith is joining a boycott of this year's Oscars because no actors, actresses or directors of color were nominated for the second year in a row.