

3.2: Masculinities and Crime

A Brotherhood of Violence and Mutilation

The next three chapters describe the perspectives and experiences of Canadian football players, coaches, and administrators. As such, they include numerous quotes and paraphrases to capture the voices of the participants. I make an attempt throughout to reveal the dissenting voices and varying realities of the embodied knowledge of individual players and administrators. However, I also try to reveal larger trends and themes that can contribute to our shared understanding of violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use in Canadian football.

Perceptions and Experiences of Violence

Many football players in Canada do not perceive their sport to be violent. In fact, nearly half of the interview participants in this study reported that violence is unacceptable in football. This assertion reveals a shared belief among football players that the collision of bodies routinely occurring during each play on the field is not violent. While every player interviewed indicated concern over acts that happened under these conditions, a substantial minority suggested that in-game contact should not be labelled violence. For example, one junior player stated that “football is a contact sport, not a violent sport.” A player at the professional level reported that football is not violent but is rather “a game of constant collisions.” A CFL quarterback pointed out, “physicality and collisions are happening all of the time. I am not sure I would call that violence.” Likewise, a university player stated, “I wouldn’t declare football as being violent. Some teams are, but the sport isn’t. A good game of football played until the whistle every play and without cheap shots is not violent.” According to these players, violence on the field only takes place when it is outside the rules of play, and occurs either a play has been whistled down, or well away from the action of the game. On field violence only occurs when an act goes beyond the routine, sanctioned collisions involved in the sport.

In contrast to the limited definition of violence that many players and coaches hold, some perceive the routine body contact that occurs on the field as violence. For example, a university kicker stated, “violence on the field is an acceptable part of football to the extent that it is exerted in order to tackle or block a player legally.” Likewise, a junior linebacker noted, “I think it could just about be the most violent sport of all of the major sports around today.”

Players do not have a uniform opinion of how violence on the field should be defined. Many do not see routine body contact as violence, while others do. All players do, however, report that they perceive contact that occurs either the whistle, outside of the rules of play, away from the action, or with intent to injure as violence.

Three distinct types of violence emerged from players’ description of the force and collisions of Canadian football: routine contact, immoderate violence, and ultraviolence. Routine contact, such as an ordinary tackle, is commonplace, authorized by the rules of the sport, deemed consensual by the majority of athletes, and causes minimal injury. Immoderate violence, such as tackling a player from behind, is unauthorized in sport, intended to cause short-term injury, and non-consensual, but it is not so extreme that the legal system becomes involved. Ultra-violence is an extreme form of violence that is unauthorized, non-consensual, and causes severe, sometimes permanent injury. If, for instance, a player uses the spikes on his cleats to stomp on the head of a helmetless player, that is ultra-violence.

A CFL running back used the term “game-day gangsters” to denote players who deliberately inflict pain and injury on their opponents.¹ In his description, these players were perpetrators of either immoderate or ultra-violence. When they step out onto the field, they do so with the aim of intimidating the opposing team by using excessive violence and taking certain opponents out of the game with injuries to better their own team’s chances of winning. The violence these players engage in is not the

1 In this book, the term “game-day gangsters” has been broadened to refer to athletes, coaches, administrators, and owners who engage in quasi-criminal acts in the context of sport.

result of an arising temper or emotional response; it is a premeditated act of violent aggression. This behaviour is not considered to be the norm, and most players perceive the perpetrators in a negative way. While every athlete I interviewed during the course of my research knew of a player who could be labelled as a game-day gangster, none reported they had ever taken on this role or engaged in any activity that would encourage this title.

So-called game-day gangsters do not always limit their violent acts to the opposing team; at times, they attempt to inflict pain upon and injure their teammates. For example, it has been reported that several violent altercations broke out in the practices of the CFL’s Edmonton Eskimos during the 2008 season. At one point, there were six fights reported within a five-day stretch during the Eskimos’ training camp (Bennett, 2008). All of the players I interviewed indicated that they would never deliberately injure a

player on their own team and feel a responsibility to protect their teammates in the informal economy of football. But such occurrences of teammate violence do exist.

Nearly all of the football players interviewed in this study expressed negative sentiments toward players who attempt to injure others on the field. The majority of them reported that a shared understanding exists in Canadian football, where players respect one another and do not want to see anyone seriously injured. This does not mean that players are not violent and do not try to hit each other as hard as they can on every play, but rather that they try to stay within the rules and are concerned about the well-being of those who they are playing with and against.

Elaborating on this sentiment, a CFL centre explained, there is kind of a gentleman's pact in football. . . . We want to hurt each other, but generally we don't want to see anybody's career ended. That is why you see everybody is concerned about it when a guy goes down and an ambulance has to come out on the field.

Along similar lines, a CFL quarterback said,

In a sport like football it is up to the players to police it and have respect for each other out on the field, and [to] know that you have the ability to take away the person's livelihood; as a player you would hate to have somebody do that to you, so you have to use that same sensibility and not go after another player.

Describing the importance of respectability on the field, a university player stated, "You have got to have some class." In some instances, even though an act is allowed within the rules of play, football players will often avoid it out of concern for the safety of their opponents. For example, a CFL offensive lineman claimed, "pile tipping is technically within the rules, but you don't want to do that to a guy. You don't want to take food out of families' mouths by injuring a guy on purpose, regardless of the rules." The term "pile tipping" refers to hitting a player who is standing by a pile-up of other players. The risks of pile tipping are that the player could easily get tipped over, seriously injuring his head and/or neck, or he could land on the pile and injure those beneath him.

Players describe a number of reasons for having this shared understanding of acceptable contact in football. First, most do not want to end anyone's career because they recognize the vulnerability of their own employment. They expressed some empathy for injured players, drawing on their own experiences of injuries to identify with them. Second, athletes often see plays on the field that are intended to injure as an unnecessary addition to an already violent game. As one CFL player stated, "it is a violent enough sport as it is; it is a shame when guys take it on top of that. . . . I don't get that." Third, players are given the opportunity to be aggressive within the rules in ways that are meant to hurt, but not injure, opposing players. A coach and former player described this approach:

If you want to get him back, just hit him really hard next play. You've got a whole bunch of opportunities. You run 60 or 70 offensive plays, so the offence and defence is on that amount of time, plus your special teams, I mean you are going to find that guy at some other point in time.

Fourth, for a minority of players, superstition dissuades violent acts. One player claimed, "I do not want to end your career because the football gods shine on you, and if you do something dirty it is going to come back and get you." A fifth deterrent is that players view guys who are out on the field trying to injure others as "hotheads" who "can't control themselves" and as such are exploitable because they are not concentrating on the game. Sixth, acts intended to injure opposing players can ultimately hurt one's own team with penalties that can lead to first downs, a better field position, and the ejection of key players from the game.

Although Canadian football players articulate this shared understanding that it is inappropriate to deliberately injure one another, they openly report a desire to hurt their opponents within the rules of the game. Nearly two-thirds of players differentiate between injuries that take players out of the game, and those that only cause physical pain but do not limit their ability to keep playing. While the line between these two types of injuries appears to be clear in the minds of many players, they could not explain how they kept themselves from crossing it. The only explanations offered were that they had a "feel for the game" based on experience, and held a belief that the rules exist to ensure safety on the field. In other words, if an action is within the rules, then it is perceived as being unlikely to result in injury.

Illustrating this division between hurting an opponent and injuring him, a university linebacker reported:

As a defender, I do everything in my power to stop whoever has the ball. The goal is to make the play. The goal is to hurt the person. However, the goal is not to injure him. That is the clearest distinction I can make. I would never intentionally try and injure someone else, or end their career. However, I want them to fear me, to remember my hits, to try and avoid me, to think about me. Violence is a part of the game. The key is to keep it on the field. Hurt versus injury is the most important difference to keep in mind. (emphasis added)

Another university linebacker claimed, “I love seeing big hits, dishing out big hits, and even getting crushed myself. But there is a line between a big hit and a dangerous hit that could cause a serious injury.”

Athletes are most attuned to this difference between hurting and injuring when tackles are made on players in vulnerable positions. For instance, in the pile tipping example, opponents see the player standing by the pile as someone in a vulnerable position, and so they will not hit him as hard, or at all, because the likelihood of injury exceeds the likelihood that he and the other players involved would be hurt. Similarly, most players report that they take extra care when tackling receivers who are attempting to catch the ball, because their bodies are in a vulnerable position as they concentrate on making the catch, rather than taking a hit. In CIS football, you can tackle a receiver even if the ball has been overthrown and is nearly impossible to catch. However, such a tackle would be perceived negatively. As one university defensive lineman stated, “you should never try to injure someone in a vulnerable position, like a receiver who is stretched out trying to catch the ball. You want to punish a guy, but you don’t want to injure him.”

Although players typically do not intend to injure one another on the field, nearly all of them acknowledged that getting injured is a part of the sport of football. One CFL player said, “you always have the thought that you might get hurt in the back of your mind every time you step out onto the field.” A junior coach reminiscing about his playing days explained, “everything just hurt so bad that it kind of blended into one big hurt.” He described the injuries he sustained during his playing career at the junior, university, and professional levels:

I don’t regret anything and I would do it all over in a heartbeat, but I have a steel plate, four pins and two screws in my left ankle, tore my MCL in my right knee, a stress fracture in my right femur, I’ve broken both ankles, all of my fingers, ribs, slipped a disc, separated my left shoulder, bruised my tailbone ridiculously bad and it still bothers me to this day, and that was six years ago, and have badly dislocated my elbow. Your body hates you a lot.

His list is a typical one of the injuries described by many players who have been involved in the sport for several years.

Most players not only expect to receive minor injuries (such as sprained ankles and jammed fingers) but also know they could experience catastrophic ones that would end their playing careers and result in health repercussions later in life. A junior player indicated that, people want to hit you as hard as they can and then move on, but we are all aware of the potential that your career could be over [with] the next snap because some guy rolls up on you from behind and you blow every ligament in your knee.

While players acknowledge and accept the possibility that they might be seriously injured during play, they do not perceive injuries resulting from violent acts that are outside the rules as a voluntary part of the game. A university cornerback confirmed this: “when guys are going at each other as hard as they can there is going to be some injuries, and accidents do happen. It is expected. As long as it is not a cheap shot, it is expected.” As one player who had just retired from professional football due to an injury sustained from an illegal hit on the field stated, “If my injury had occurred during a play, or had been an accident, I would be okay with it. I have been injured pretty badly before, but the way my last injury went down was not like that.”

Several players suggested that technological developments in equipment have decreased the general concern about injuries. For example, a CFL player claimed that it is “difficult to injure a player nowadays because of all of the padding.” Football equipment is now being developed that can absorb and distribute the impact of full-body contact. With these developments has come an increased faith in new medical technologies and procedures to get players back on the field faster, enabling them to recover from injuries that most likely would have ended their careers several years ago.

Some players expressed great confidence in new equipment and medical technologies to prevent and heal injuries, while others were less sure about the benefits of these advances. The modern medical establishment has developed new treatments for injuries sustained on the field, but it has also revealed the damaging effects that football can have on young men, particularly in the form of concussions. Many players reported a real concern about the possibility of long-term damage resulting from head injuries sustained on the field. University players noted that they experienced difficulty concentrating on schoolwork as a result of head injuries from football. While new equipment helps to absorb impact, a helmet can only do so much; the player’s brain still crashes into his skull with every tackle, causing swelling and tissue damage. Former CFL quarterback Matt Dunigan (2007) revealed his continuing struggle with the long-term consequences of head injuries that he sustained during his career. He reports that he once flew to another city to visit his family without notifying anyone, a trip that he could not recall taking after the fact.

One university player expressed concern that new medical procedures are actually more harmful to players because they “give the illusion that the body is fine and well” before it has a chance to fully recover. He described an incident involving another player who had undergone surgery to repair an injury to his knee. During the procedure, the surgeon placed screws behind the knee to reconnect a torn anterior cruciate ligament. The player was able to walk out of the hospital shortly after the surgery and began rehabilitating the knee, gearing up to return to football. However, while the knee felt and appeared to be healed externally,

internally the tissue was still damaged. The wound inside the knee became infected, requiring emergency surgery to save the player's leg. Now in his early twenties, the young man is on a waiting list for knee replacement surgery, and he will never play football again.

New equipment and training technologies are also factors that change perceptions of the level of violence in Canadian football. A clear contention exists over whether the game has become any more or less violent in recent years. One university referee, reflecting back on his experience, remarked that the amount of violence had remained constant since he began officiating twenty-six years ago; however, he also stated he has noticed a change in the type of violence that is occurring. "More players seem to use their head as a point of attack. I think this is due to better helmets and the same aura of invincibility that teenagers had for decades, and still have."

Matt Dunigan (2007) suggested that new equipment technologies have contributed to more contact in the game:

We are talking here about a game constantly being altered by the laws of physics: bigger, stronger, swifter, more muscular people wearing lighter, stronger equipment that allows them to move faster and hit harder and thus collide with greater force and impact than ever. (Dunigan, 2007, p. 21)

Likewise, a university administrator pointed out,

players now are bigger, stronger, faster, at a younger age than they used to be. I think this is due to better nutrition, and better training than there used to be. The result is a lot more violence at younger playing levels.

Others, however, suggest that immoderate and ultra-violence in Canadian football has lessened in recent years with the development of new social norms governing coaching techniques. A former CFL player who is now a university coach agreed.

I think the game has become less violent. When I played, coaches used to say "Rip their heads off," "Take them out," and that kind of thing. You never see that anymore. Coaches now teach skills and techniques. They evaluate their players based on technique, which could mean a hard tackle or block. But poor sportsmanship and dirty plays are generally perceived more negatively today.

Despite the disagreement about whether or not football has become more violent within the rules of the game, the individuals I interviewed revealed that less tolerance exists for violent acts outside the rules. Where coaches once encouraged their players to go out and injure athletes on the opposing team, both now perceive this type of behaviour more negatively.

The "Bounty Program" scandal in the National Football League is a controversial case highlighting the acceptability and promotion of immoderate violence in football. In the Bounty Program, players from the New Orleans Saints were paid additional wages to deliberately injure players on the opposing team. After a lengthy investigation and review, many players and coaches received suspensions ranging from several games to expulsion for an indeterminate amount of time from league activities. The existence of such a program suggests that some coaches and players continue to promote acts of immoderate and ultra-violence, but the stipulated penalties handed to those found guilty indicate that levels of tolerance are shifting. Interestingly, however, the acts of violence that led to injuries of opposing players were not punished by the league when they occurred. The suspensions given were for paying "bounties" to players who inflicted injuries on their opponents, forcing them to leave the game. It was the existence of an explicit bounty program that was deemed unacceptable by league administrators, rather than the acts of extreme, injurious violence.

Drawing the Line of Consent

The players I interviewed identified a number of criteria for what they considered consensual violence on the field. While not every player identified all of the criteria, each described at least one, if not more. The most common response from players was that any contact that occurs within the rules of the game is consensual. Another common response was that for on field contact to be consensual, it must occur between whistles. That is, it must take place while the play is live, rather than after a referee has blown the whistle to signal the end of a play. A third common conception of consensual violence was that the act must occur as part of the play. That is, even if a hit is within the rules and occurs between whistles, it must be part of the play to either move or stop the ball from being moved forward; players suggest that tackles should not be made twenty yards away from the action, regardless of the rules. In keeping with this sentiment, the CFL has recently instituted a "tourist" rule that now bars players from hitting others away from the play.

These three criteria form the most common understanding of the limits of consent pertaining to on field contact: (1) it must be within the rules, (2) it must occur during active play, and (3) it must occur as part of the play. There are three other criteria reported by several players: (4) the hit or tackle must occur within the confines of the playing area, and not out of bounds or in the end zone, (5) the player must use only bare hands to hit or tackle, not his helmets or cleats with the intent to injure, and (6) a player must know that a tackle is coming, and not be blindsided or hit from behind. These six criteria form a broad, comprehensive list of the limits to which the players interviewed in this study consider violence on the field to be consensual.

Most players consider any acts that go beyond the limits described here as non-consensual. The Canadian football players who participated in the interviews provided specific examples of plays in football that they do not consider to be consensual:

- taking a shot after the whistle
- hitting players in vulnerable positions
- hitting someone who is already down
- teaming up to hit a single player
- hitting a player who just scored a touchdown
- tackling a player who has run or caught a ball out of bounds
- hitting a player twenty yards away from the play
- attempting to deliberately injure a player
- hitting from behind
- stomping on a player when he is down
- hitting a player whose attention is elsewhere
- ripping someone's helmet off
- throwing helmets
- punching or kicking
- low shots at or below the knees
- shots to the groin
- poking an opponent in the eye
- a shot to a known injured spot

While game officials commonly penalize players for some of these infractions, for many they do not. There appears to be a set of informal rules in football that extend beyond the official regulations dictating what is and is not considered consensual violence on the field.

Disciplinary Perspectives on Violence

None of the junior players interviewed expressed any concern over how their conference review boards handled matters pertaining to violence on the field. Some suggested that the on-field officiating could be improved with increased consistency on rulings, but overall the players perceived disciplinary reviews to be fair and effective. No players reported that the conference rulings on violent acts were either too harsh or too forgiving.

At the university level, players had a different view of disciplinary rulings; the majority reported that the CIS review process is inadequate and ineffective. In one example, a university player reported that he had been violently tackled outside of the rules of play. His coach lodged a complaint against the player who made the tackle, informing the athletic director of his university. The athletic director ruled that the incident was not serious enough to warrant a report to the regional level, and as a result no penalties were imposed on the player. The injured player expressed concern that he had no recourse to address violence committed against him on the field.

Other university players suggested that the officials ignore too many cheap shots, especially hits after the whistle. One university wide receiver stated, "I think officials need to throw a lot more unnecessary roughness flags for late hits." A university quarterback expressed similar concern over rules and officiating decisions that ignore violence on the field. He explained:

There are twenty-seven teams, with let's say an average of seventy players on every team, so about 1,900 CIS football student athletes. Out of these, a maximum of about 250 will ever play football after university. So there is no reason for these athletes to have to suffer major injuries that will plague them the rest of their lives because their league didn't protect them. Accidents will happen, but playing the sport you love should be about playing the sport you love, not about having to deal with the consequences of loosely enforced rules. Any intent to injure should be more strongly [punished] than it is now.

A large number of university players expressed similar concern over "loosely enforced rules" in CIS football, and the lack of severe penalties for incidents of excessive violence on the field. This suggests that in CIS football, a disjuncture exists between the players' concern with violence on the field and the organization's typical disciplinary responses to these acts.

Players at the professional level had similar concerns about the apparent tolerance of league officials for acts of excessive violence on the field. Several players expressed anger over a particular incident, where a BC Lions lineman, Jason Jimenez, broke the leg of a Calgary Stampeders' player, Anthony Gargiulo, in a tackle that was perceived by most as illegal. Gargiulo was unable to see the hit coming, was pulling up because the play was ending, and the hit occurred well away from the game action. Jason Jimenez was

suspended for a game, appealed, and had his suspension revoked. Commenting on this incident, a CFL quarterback said, “There was a situation last year where a BC lineman hit a Calgary player in the back of the knees and blew his knee out; that type of thing has no place in football.” A CFL fullback criticized the league’s response, stating, “I think the league has done a poor job of handling incidents like Jason Jimenez’s away-from-the-play hit on Anthony Gargiulo last year that ended his career. We need more suspensions for players that act out violently on another player. Miniscule fines are insufficient and not a good deterrent.” Similarly, an offensive lineman in the league claimed,

In the CFL they have just brutal policies on that. There is a recent incident with Jimenez from BC. He took a shot at a Calgary defensive lineman way behind the play and ended his career, pretty much. He will probably never come back. It kept getting sent to arbitrators, and now he didn’t even get suspended because there was no good evidence. It was just ridiculous. That is a situation where it had no effect on the play and the guy is taking a cheap shot. Yeah, there should be serious repercussions there.

Expressing similar sentiments, another player added, “situations occurred this past season where a player was fined less for a very illegal hit [than] another player who publicly criticized the officiating [at that game]. Suspensions should be handed out.”

A CFL offensive lineman raised the concern that the lack of disciplinary punishment for acts of violence on the field encourages some players to deliberately injure others:

I think they should change the way they penalize guys. Suspending someone for one game is ridiculous. In a league like the CFL, where your hopes ride extremely high on one player like a quarterback, if a team could pretty much guarantee their spot in the Grey Cup by injuring that quarterback, if their only punishment is a one-game suspension, there are guys out there that would do it, because you get a lot more money for playing in the Grey Cup than you do for one random game. The reward-to-risk ratio is pretty good for intentionally injuring players in the CFL.

Under the current collective bargaining agreement, CFL players are paid \$20,000 by the league, in addition to their contract salary,² if they are on the active roster of the team that wins the Grey Cup. This is a substantial sum considering the salaries of most players, so it may be an incentive for some to deliberately injure those who are important on the opposing team. The financial compensation of winning far outweighs the light penalty imposed for inappropriate violence by the league.

The majority of players I interviewed suggested that the police and legal system should only become involved in certain circumstances of violence on the field. Only two players thought that legal officials should never become

2 According to one CFL player agent interviewed for this book, the average contract salary among CFL players is just over \$40,000 a year.

involved in matters pertaining to football, regardless of the infraction. One of them stated, “What happens on a football field should stay on the field. Police should never be involved.” The other player, a university kicker, said, “no matter how violent something is in a game, I think it should only be punishable by the officials or by the league, nothing on the football field should be punishable by law.” Among the players who thought there should be legal intervention for incidents of ultra-violence in the game, ideas of when this should occur differed.

Most players stated that criminal charges should only be considered for acts not directly related to playing football. That is, while the act might have occurred on the field, it must have little to do with the game to be deemed criminal. One professional offensive lineman describes this sentiment:

Just because it is a football field does not mean that anything can go. I’ll give you an extreme case: if I conceal a knife on the field and stab a guy in the neck that would be illegal. It doesn’t matter that it is on the football field. Even if I were to punch a guy in a huddle, then that is assault and I should be charged because it isn’t part of the game.

Along similar lines, a junior wide receiver stated, “as soon as the player’s actions don’t resemble one of a football player, then yes. If he has no intentions of playing football, and is more concerned [with] assaulting another player then yes, he isn’t playing football anymore.”

Some players argued that criminal sanction should only be considered when equipment and tools are used to harm an opposing player. Some examples of this were stepping on a player with cleats, hitting a player with a helmet, or carrying illegal equipment with the intent to cause harm, such as wearing brass knuckles concealed under a glove. A junior player described such a scenario: “Ripping a guy’s helmet off and stomping on his head with a cleat has nothing to do with a football game. In that kind of circumstance, a crime has absolutely occurred and should be prosecuted.” Similarly, a CFL quarterback claimed: “If I saw a case where a guy was stomping on a helmetless person or something like that, then I would think that would be a case.” A CFL fullback noted, you can’t assault people with a potentially dangerous weapon at work and not be held accountable. Athletes should be held

to the same standards. The football field is a workplace. Having said that, I can't think of any recent events in the CFL that warrant[ed] criminal prosecution.

Like the fullback, while most players suggested that legal sanction should be used for incidents of on field violence, few reported having ever witnessed or being involved in an act that warranted such attention.

During the interviews, players and administrators named four groups of individuals who could be held legally liable for incidents related to on field violence: opponents, coaches, officials, and teammates. Most of the players suggested that if an opponent engages in deliberate, injurious violence, he should be held legally liable for his actions in either a criminal or civil court. Most also reported that the coach should be held liable if he instigated the player's actions, instructed the player to commit the act, or allowed his team to get out of control. A university cornerback asserted, "Yeah, I think coaches should be [charged]; if they are telling the players to hurt people, then they are definitely liable." Likewise, a professional offensive lineman stated, "there is going out and playing hard and doing little things to try to take shots at guys, but if a coach tells you to take shots at guys after the play, then that is garbage and he should be penalized." A junior coach said,

I never played dirty, and I don't accept dirty. I don't coach guys like that. I never have and never will. Coaches have a responsibility to ensure that their players are not playing dirty. If I saw a guy repeatedly trying to do something dirty, I would bench him or pull him. Allowing that stuff is unacceptable.

The majority of players and administrators agreed that referees should be held liable if poor officiating leads to a catastrophic injury from on field violence; however, only one administrator thought this could go as far as criminal liability. The university administrator commented that if a referee ever attacked a player on the field and caused serious bodily harm, he should be held criminally liable. Otherwise, most interviewees suggested that referees should be liable, but only to the extent that they receive a fine or lose their officiating credentials. As one university running back claimed, "even though I don't always like their calls, the refs are doing the best they can to enforce the rules. You can't see everything." Agreeing with this point, a university linebacker argued, "referees are certainly liable, but as far as criminally liable, I don't think so. Their jobs are on the line, and that should be enough." Every referee I interviewed reported that he would stop officiating if a precedent was set in Canada that game officials could be held legally liable for incidents of on field violence. A referee at the professional level explained,

we do the best job that we can, but at the end of the day, this is a hobby for us. It doesn't pay the bills; it's not our main profession. If we start to be held legally liable because of alleged poor game control, I think many of us would quit and it would deter others from entering officiating.

Likewise, a university referee claimed, "if [officials] face legal liability, you would not have any referees." He later commented, "It is my job to make sure the field goal posts are wrapped, not to keep violence from happening on the field. It is my job to penalize; it is the coach's to keep violence from escalating."

Several players noted that a responsibility of teammates on the field is to keep each other safe. While few players thought teammates should be held legally liable for on field violence, one player provided an interesting example. In football, players often block for the player who has the ball; the ball carrier is protected by teammates as much as possible. Players can, however, deliberately slip up or stumble when blocking to ensure that their teammate is hit hard. A similar example is what one professional player termed a "club rush," where the offensive linemen deliberately allow the defence to rush by and sack the quarterback at full speed. This is done as a penalty, of sorts, to the quarterback for something that happened on the field, or because the players are not content with the quarterback's passing selection.

Despite players' agreement that criminal liability has a place in the game, there are no real legal penalties for on field violence at the professional level of football in Canada. As a player who was injured in a game from a hit outside of the rules stated,

As a member of the Canadian Football League Players' Association I have no right to file any kind of suit against the opposing player, coach, official or the league. Players who injure others have a right to appeal fines or suspensions, but the guy who is injured basically has no rights, is what it comes down to, unfortunately. When you sign a CFL contract you sign away the right to hold the CFL, its coaches, or other players liable for any injury that might occur during play.

After this player was injured, he received no compensation from the CFL for his injuries, and had no legal grounds to hold anyone liable for the injuries he sustained from an illegal hit.

Players' perceptions of consent with regards to contact and violence on the field do not relate directly to their beliefs about when the law should become involved. The majority of players I interviewed suggested that legal investigations should only take place for acts of ultra-violence that have nothing to do with football, or where a weapon is used. Despite this, players stated they do not

consent to acts that take place outside of the rules and active play, away from the play, on the field, involving more than bare hands, or acts that are initiated from behind or outside the line of sight. Such violence is perceived as unreasonable and deserving of league penalty, but not criminal prosecution.

Legal cases involving violence on the field of play typically rest on discerning consent. Yet contrary to many legal arguments, the players I spoke to stated that they do not give their consent to be injured simply by stepping onto a field and agreeing to play football. A disjuncture therefore exists between player perceptions of violence on the field and Canadian legal discourse. In the interviews, players listed six main reasons for why they do not consent to violence on the field. However, for players, the issue of consent is not a factor that determines whether a crime has occurred on the field. Instead, players examine the intent of the accused, and the manner in which he carried out the violent act.

In relation to other aspects of Canadian legal discourse on violence in sport, the majority of players enter the field with the knowledge that they could be seriously injured. However, they do not expect that such an injury will occur from a deliberate act of injurious violence. The notion that athletes give voluntary consent by virtue of stepping on the field does not resonate with the players I interviewed.

summary

Contrary to current Canadian legal opinion, the consent defence is an invalid excuse for on field violence from the perspective of the athletes themselves. The Canadian football players I interviewed outlined six conditions necessary to consider violence on the field consensual: the act must (1) be within the rules; (2) occur during active play; (3) be part of the play, not separate from it; (4) occur within the confines of the playing field; (5) use only the body and bare hands; and (6) occur in the line of sight of the player involved. Players do not consent to acts of violence that fail to meet any of these provisions. Opposing players who engage in these acts are labelled “dirty” or “cheap” or as “game-day gangsters.” Even so, while players might not consent to acts of violence that do not include these provisions, they do not perceive all such acts as criminal. For the majority of players, an offence must be extreme, over-the-top, ultra-violence before legal officials should become involved.

The majority of players want league administrations to give more severe penalties to players engaging in immoderate violence on the field. According to them, administrators are not doing enough to prevent and penalize excessive violence. The majority of players do not, however, suggest that this should be the responsibility of the police and legal system, except in extreme circumstances that have little to do with the game of football.

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