GAVIN PUBLISHERS

Journal of Sports Injuries and Medicine

Smith RA. Sports Injr Med 01: JSIMD-102
DOI: 10.29011/2576-9596.100002

Short Communication

Football Concussions and a 1905 "Crazy" Episode: An Early Doctor-Treated Medical Event at Harvard

Ronald A. Smith

Penn State University, Department of Kinesiology, Lemont,USA

*Corresponding author: Ronald A. Smith, Penn State University, Department of Kinesiology, 121 Dale Street, Lemont,USA, Tel: +814 238-1288; E-mail: ras14@psu.edu

Citation: Smith RA, (2017) Football Concussions and a 1905 "Crazy" Episode: An Early Doctor-Treated Medical Event at Harvard. Sports Injr Med 01: 102. DOI: 10.29011/2576-9596.100002

Received Date: 5 February, 2017; **Accepted Date:** 13 March, 2017; **Published Date:** 22 March, 2017

Abstract

The pathological study of former Pittsburgh Steeler football player, Mike Webster, was a breakthrough in understanding the impact of concussions and their relationship to Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) [1]. Yet the 2002 discovery by pathologist Dr. Bennet Omalu came nearly a century after the effect of concussions in football was discussed by a Harvard team physician, Dr. Edward Nichols, and brought to the attention of head football coach, Bill Reid. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the richest sports' organization in the world, the National Football League, would deny that concussions and CTE were related in the illnesses of many of its professional athletes. Yet in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Harvard team physician, after a careful examination of the football captian, who clearly had a concussion, took him out of the key Harvard-Yale game.

For more than a century, the medical profession has known of concussions and the danger of playing those who had been concussed, but throughout the twentieth century the football community refused to adequately recognize the danger. A reporter-writer-professor, Jeanne Marie Laskas, brought the medical disaster to the attention of a larger public when, in 2009, she wrote for GQ magazine the following opening to her influencial "Bennet Omalu, Concussions, and the NFL" article:Let's say you run a multibillion-dollar football league. And let's say the scientific community-starting with one young pathologist in Pittsburgh and growing into a chorus of neuroscientists across the county-comes to you and says concussions are making your players crazy, crazy enough to kill themselves, and here, in these slices of brain tissue, is the proof. Do you join these scientists and try to solve the problem, or do you use your power to discredit them? [2]

The National Football League, under the leadership of its Commission Roger Goodell, chose to cover up the evidence and discredit science. It was much like the Roman Catholic Church discrediting Galileo's early 1600s belief in heliocentrism rather than the Pope's belief that the sun revolved around the earth until the Church finally reversed itself at the end of the twentieth century. The NFL stance, in denying concussive effects, was similar to those who denied the nearly unanimous scientific community in the early twenty-first century that humans were greatly responsible for the warming of the earth.

Concussions in football were actually recognized a generation before Harvard team physician, Dr. Edward Nichols, ruled a player with a head injury out of the important Yale game in 1905. A survey was completed of 250 former football players at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Wesleyan from 1881, when rugby football was played, until 1890, after rugby's transformation into American football. Of the 28 head injuries reported, two were "concussions of the brain [3]." This report was included in an 1894 book compiled by Walter Camp, the "father of American football," in an attempt to defend the dangerous game. Camp compiled letters from prominent Eastern players and administrators to counter commentaries about the brutal nature of American football. Camp's less-than-honest Football Facts and Figures: A Symposium of Expert Opinion on the Game's Place in American Athletics came about, according to Camp, because of "the stir that had been created last fall by the wholesale attacks upon football [4]." In the 1893 season, various forms of the newly invented "flying wedge" play included 9 or 10 of the football eleven running as much as 25 yards full speed and ending in a "V" formation aimed at a particular player on the opposing team. Following that season in which the "flying wedge" was first used by many institutions, there was a call not only to eliminate the "flying wedge" but to ban football and its mass momenturm plays. Yale's Camp came to the defense of the game with testimonials by those who had played the game at the highest level.

The threat to football has been called "Brutality and the Crisis of 1894." Even before the "flying wedge," several players

reported to Camp that they had concussions in the early years of rugby football that began after Canada's McGill University introduced the sport to Harvard in 1874. The rugby game caught on quickly, replacing soccer which was played by a number of institutions, including Yale and Princeton. By the early 1880s, due in great part to Walter Camp's suggestions for changing rugby rules, the nature of rugby was transformed into American football. First, a team was allowed to keep possession of the ball, unlike rugby, when the player with the ball was tackled and "down." The rationalized "scrimmage" line replaced the more chaotic "scrummage" of rugby. Then, needing a rule to prevent one team from continually possessing the ball, Camp devised the three running attempts or "downs" to gain five yards or lose possession of the ball. The five yard, three downs rule brought about five-yard chalk lines on the field, creating the gridiron effect and thus a new name for the American game [5]. Gaining only five yards in three attempts moved the game into mass momentum plays, more than open field running, to continue possession. Injuries still piled up, including head injuries.

Walter Camp, however, was not honest when he came to defend his game from major criticisms of brutality the 1890s. A former University of Pennsylvania player, William Harvey, wrote Camp that he considered "football one of the grandest games that is played [6]." Camp included this in his Football Facts and Figures, but Camp purposely left out Harvey's description of a concussion in a game played between Harvard and Penn in 1883. Crayoned out of the letter from Harvey and purged from the book (but not from the Camp Collection at Yale) was Harvey's description of being "knocked insensible, but recovered in about fifteen minutes" in a scrimmage play [7].

Roger Goodell's covering up the relationship of football head injuries to CTE, or Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, in the early 2000's National Football League, was similar to what Walter Camp did to help preserve the collegiate game in the 1890s. Yet, Camp was not entirely untruthful in divulging head injuries in his book. The testimony of Ralph Warren, a Princeton player in a Thanksgiving Day game against Yale, was reported by Camp. "I received the blow on the head as I was attempting to block off [William, "Pudge"] Heffelfinger from one of our half-backs." wrote Warren. "My head collided with the lower part of his body. I was stunned for a few seconds, but the play was not stopped. After the game," Warren continued, "I was in a very nervous and weak condition. . . for the next few days. . . ." [8] At about the same time, a Penn player reported to Camp about an1891 game against Princeton, that being hit in the head "'put me out of the game' as I did not know where I was for fully five minutes [9]." This was another concussion Camp did include in his book. Clearly, Camp was not entirely truthful when he concluded his book stating that the testimonies of players and administrators were "published in full in this book, both those favorable and those unfavorable to the sport."[10]

One 1894 letter, central to the question of injuries and concussions, was from the father of the future Harvard coach in 1905, Bill Reid, Jr. Headmaster of a preparatory school, Reid, Sr., wanted Camp to help bring about a game "modified or replaced by one less violent." Camp chose to completely eliminate this letter from the published collection while retaining it in his files [11]. Camp neither wanted readers to see the word "violent" nor to have his game "replaced." Four years later, the headmaster would send his son to Harvard where Bill Reid, Jr. would star as a running back in an 1898 football game against Yale and be successful beating Yale in baseball three of his four years as the Harvard baseball catcher. In 1905, Bill Reid, Jr. would become probably the highest paid football coach in America and ending the season with Harvard's nationally reported game against Yale [12].

It was concussion time for Harvard and its medical doctor, Edward Nichols. Harvard had just played Dartmouth before the important Yale game. The day after the Dartmouth game, Dr. Nichols and coach Bill Reid discussed the condition of star running back and captain, Dan Hurley. Reid knew that medical student Hurley had a slight ankle injury, but the doctor told Reid that during the game, Hurley was "a little out of his head." Furthermore, Reid noted, "Hurley was blaming men for not being where they ought to be, when, as a matter of fact, they were doing just what they ought to do [13]." The next day at practice, Dr. Nichols told the coaches "to watch very carefully and see if we could not discover something wrong" with Hurley [14]. At practice, Reid, for the first time thought Hurley "acted queerly in my presence. . . frequently repeated sentences. . . ." Hurley was kept out of the scrimmage that day. In the evening, after Hurley asked only for a bowl of crackers and milk, Dr. Nichols arranged that an individual would continually stay "with him, in order to prevent any possibility of accident through the chances of temporary insanity [15]."

On the Wednesday before the Saturday Yale game, Dr. Nichols pulled Hurley out of the training table meal and brought in a specialist to examine the team captain. Where upon Hurley was told that he needed to go to a medical facility in Boston to be kept quiet for the night. Following the meal, Reid told the team, "if the team plays on Saturday without its captain, it will nevertheless, play for its captain and for the university." However, what he didn't say to the team, but wrote in his diary, is significant to our understanding the background of concussions. "Since football is being severely criticized just at present," Reid wrote, "a case of concussion on the brain would be very serious [16]." The coach saw a concussion principally for the impact it might have on the

existence of football--a physician saw the importance of a concussion on the individual player.

Hurley remained in a hospital bed while Harvard played before 43,000 at the Harvard Stadium, the first steel reinforced concrete stadium constructed in 1903. Probably the largest football crowd up to that time paid $2.00 for a ticket that was being scalped for upwards of $30 [17]. That Harvard lost, 6-0, in a rather brutal battle is significant, for out of that game came a vote by the Harvard Overseers and faculty to ban football at Harvard for its brutality and questionable ethics [18]. The aftermath resulted in Harvard's Bill Reid being involved in the forming of a new football rules committee, out of which came reform rules such as forward pass and penalties for brutal acts and the formation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association [19].

As important historically, though not noticed then, was a medical doctor deciding that a key player in football's most dominant game, Harvard v. Yale, needed to be kept out because of a concussion. With a concussion, it sometimes only takes a minute or so to come to one's senses--it often takes a century or more for society to do so. Dr. Edward Nichols of Harvard, wrote a scientific article in the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal on the injuries suffered by Harvard football players during the fall of 1905. He noted 19 Harvard concussions among the 145 reported injuries. "Concussion" the article noted, "was treated by the players in general as a trivial injury and rather regarded as a joke, . . ." but warned with the "possibility of serious after effects [20]." Nichols, unlike NFL Commissioner Goodell a century later, was far more concerned about injuries and medicine than the Commissioner. Dr. Nichols should receive recognition for his action to prevent further injury to Dan Hurley, who, shortly after graduating from Harvard, became a medical doctor [21].

References

1. Omalu BI1, DeKosky ST, Minster RL, Kamboh MI, Hamilton RL,et al. (2005) "Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in a National Football League Player," Neurosurgery, 57: 128-134.
2. Jeanne Marie Laskas (2009) "Bennet Omalu Concussions, and the NFL: How One Doctor Changed Football Forever," GQ, 14 September.
3. Walter Camp (1894) (ed.), Football Facts and Figures: A Symposium of Expert Opinion on the Game's Place in American Athletics (Harper & Brothers), New York, 40-47.
4. Walter Camp (1894) (ed.), Football Facts and Figures: A Symposium of Expert Opinion on the Game's Place in American Athletics (Harper & Brothers), New York v.
5. For a fuller account, see Ronald A. Smith (1988) "The Americanization of Rugby Football: Mass Plays, Brutality, and Masculinity," in his, Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics. Oxford University Press, New York 83-98.
6. Walter Camp (1894) (ed.), Football Facts and Figures: A Symposium of Expert Opinion on the Game's Place in American Athletics (Harper & Brothers), New York, 167-168.
7. Emile A. Harrison (2014) "The First Concussion Crisis: Head Injury and Evidence in Early American Football," American Journal of Public Health, 104, No. 5, 822-833, discovered in the Camp Collection at the Yale University Archives that Camp had left Harvey's concussion testimony out of his 1894 book.
8. Camp, Football Facts and Figures, 198-199. Heffelfinger, on Walter Camp's first all-American team, was probably the greatest player of the nineteenth century, starring at Yale from 1888-1891.
9. Camp, Football Facts and Figures, 166-167 Heffelfinger, on Walter Camp's first all-American team, was probably the greatest player of the nineteenth century, starring at Yale.
10. Camp, Football Facts and Figures, 234. Heffelfinger, on Walter Camp's first all-American team, was probably the greatest player of the nineteenth century, starring at Yale.
11. William T. Reid, "Belmont School, California (1894) letter to Walter Camp, 28 March, Camp Papers, Box 20, Folder 572, Yale University Archives, California.
12. Ronald A. Smith (ed.) (1994) Big-Time Football at Harvard 1905: The Diary of Coach Bill Reid (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), xv, xvii, xxi, xxviii.
13. Ronald A. Smith (ed.) (1994) Big-Time Football at Harvard 1905: The Diary of Coach Bill Reid (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 296.
14. Ronald A. Smith (ed.) (1994) Big-Time Football at Harvard 1905: The Diary of Coach Bill Reid (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 301-302.
15. Ronald A. Smith (ed.) (1994) Big-Time Football at Harvard 1905: The Diary of Coach Bill Reid (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 303-306.
16. Ronald A. Smith (ed.) (1994) Big-Time Football at Harvard 1905: The Diary of Coach Bill Reid (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 306-308.
17. The Boston Daily Globe (1905) 25 November, p. 8.
18. The Overseers voted "to permit no further games of inter-collegiate football," until major rule changes were approved. The Harvard faculty, at the same time, voted to ban football. See "Records of the Overseers of Harvard College," Vol. 14 (1900-1906), Harvard University Archives; "Harvard Athletic Committee Minutes," 14 February 1906, p. 555, Harvard University Archives; and New York Times, 16 January 1906, p. 8.
19. 19. Smith, Sports and Freedom,191-208 in his chapter titled, "Brutality, Ethics, and the Creation of the NCAA."
20. 20. Dr. Edward B. Nichols and Dr. Homer D. Smith (1906) "The Physical Aspect of American Football," Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, 44, No. 1 (4 January), 1-14. Only two games were played that season without a concussion by a Harvard player.
21. 21. For Boston radio station WBUR's "Only a Game" account of early history of concussions and the Reid Diary, see Karen Given, "111-Year-Old Diary Connects Two Turning Points in Football History," 11 November 2016 [www.wbur.org/onlyagmae/2016/11/18/harvard-football-concussions-nowinski] (accessioned 3 January 2017).