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THE TEXAS ORATOR

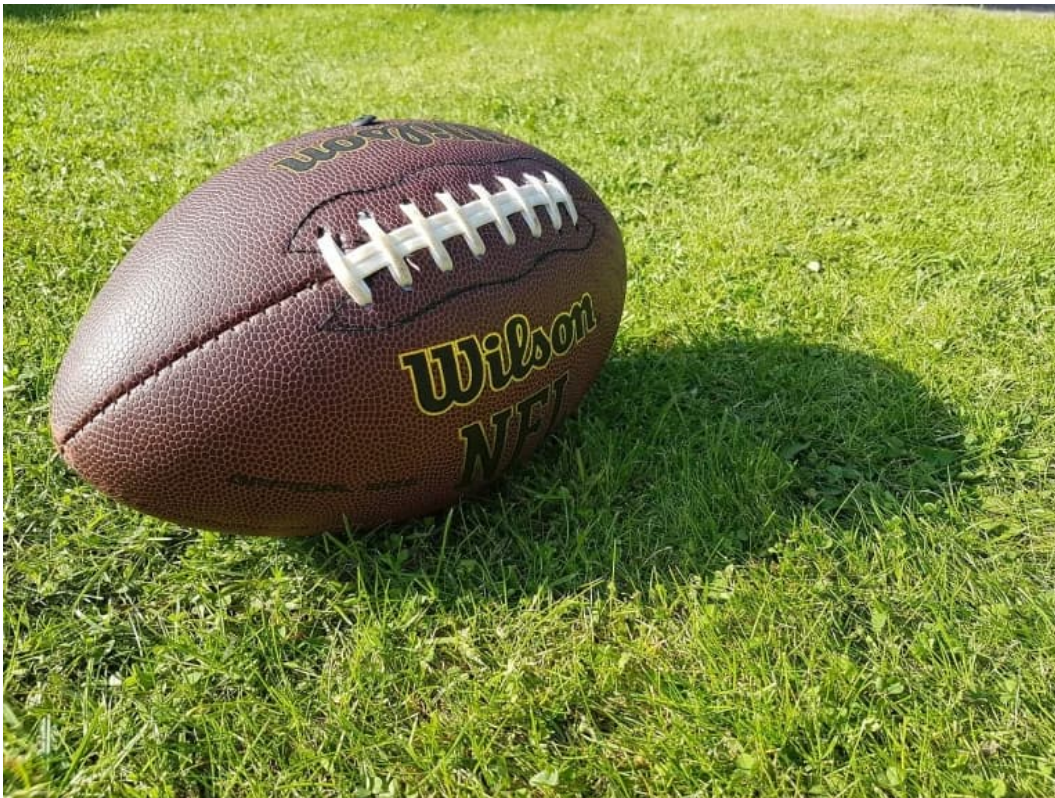
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CULTURE

It's Past Time for a New Pastime

BY OLIVIA CONWAY ON JANUARY 12, 2021 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)



On November 28, Sarah Fuller kicked a football through one of the most infamous glass ceilings in collegiate sports. Fuller, a goalie on the Vanderbilt women's soccer team, became the **first woman**

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/11/28/sarah-fuller-vanderbilt-kicker/>) to play college football in the Power Five tier, filling in as a kicker after COVID-19 quarantines left many athletes unable to play. Considering she is only the **fourth woman** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/11/28/sarah-fuller-vanderbilt->

kicker) to serve as a kicker in a college game, women across the nation celebrated Fuller's addition to the team and she is lauded as an inspiration to all young girls with dreams of entering traditionally male-dominated fields. However, adding women to football is not the direction the feminist movement should take. This is not a comment on Fuller's athletic formidability, nor a critique of inclusivity in traditionally gendered spaces, but a wary reminder of football's unique habit of destroying its players both mentally and physically. We should not be adding women to football teams, but rather removing men.

All high-impact sports come with a significant risk of injury, but few match the violent collisions and long-term neural damage associated with football. The repeated head injuries professional tackle football players suffer throughout their short careers have been **linked** (<https://concussionfoundation.org/CTE-resources/what-is-CTE>) to neurodegenerative diseases like dementia as well as depression, personality changes, impaired impulse control, and memory loss. These cognitive and behavioral symptoms are collectively known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), which has received growing publicity in the past fifteen years as neurologists continue to identify the tau protein aggregates characteristic of CTE in **neural autopsies** (<https://www.cnn.com/2013/08/30/us/nfl-concussions-fast-facts/index.html>) of former professional football players.

Although the data indicating a clear link between CTE and tackle football remains controversial among those with economic investments in the sport, several former players have filed **lawsuits** (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ncaa-wrongful-death-lawsuits-cte-head-injuries/>) against professional and collegiate football organizations for allowing these severe injuries to occur. A **recent lawsuit** (<http://proathletelawgroup.com/dangers-of-concussions-in-the-nfl/>) against the NFL by over 5,000 former players resulted in a \$900 million settlement and a program for offering cognitive assessments to the players who had suffered concussions. CTE cannot be officially diagnosed while players are living, but it has been linked to several **suicides** (<https://www.cnn.com/2013/08/30/us/nfl-concussions-fast-facts/index.html>) among former professional players, who often suffered behavioral changes and cognitive difficulties in the years preceding their deaths.

The risk of developing CTE later in life increases with each year of tackle football played, resulting in a dark prognosis for professional, collegiate, and youth players alike. Children can join tackle football leagues from the **age of five** (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/exactly-how-dangerous-is-football>), and the ability to continue playing through repeated hits on the field is treated as a measure of a good player rather than a sign that the sport needs reform. This toxic combination of youth and forced resilience leads to teams of older players who not only have suffered perhaps a decade of subconcussive events but also have learned that sitting out due to injury indicates weakness. Both the NFL (<http://proathletelawgroup.com/dangers-of-concussions-in-the-nfl/>) and the NCAA (<http://ncaa.org/sport-science-institute/concussion-timeline>) have implemented rules in the

past several years to make football safer — forbidding players from using certain tackle techniques and outlining stricter protocols for assessing injuries — but it is unclear if these reforms will be enough considering one of the major appeals of football is its violent full body contact.

Despite all who celebrated her history-making kick, Fuller was not without her critics and haters. Those angry with her addition to the team took to social media to voice **discontent** (<https://twitter.com/ClayTravis/status/1333462985268981760>) with her performance, **sexist remarks** (<https://twitter.com/Lavinebetta/status/1333605400789266433>), and **wishes** (<https://twitter.com/kileyrose27/status/1333217815386460160/photo/4>) that she would get roughly tackled while on the field. Is this really what we want for women? An increased risk of cognitive and behavioral issues with little treatment? Is this what we want for anyone? Fuller's reception has prompted renewed discussion regarding who should play on a football team, but rather than deciding whether to include women, we should be considering whether to continue football leagues at all. How many more players will have to suffer or sacrifice their lives before the sport is deemed too dangerous? Adding women to this growing body count is not the answer to addressing sexism and misogyny in sports.

A good place to start instead might be the high incidence of sexual harassment and domestic violence perpetrated by football players. In 2018

(<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/dec/07/the-nfls-problem-with-violence-against-women-a-story-of-profit-and-apathy>), a player was arrested twice for domestic violence against his girlfriend before his team ended his contract, only to be selected by another team not long after. In the past several years, other players have committed similar offenses and faced a similar lack of discipline by the NFL, often escaping repercussions unless video evidence surfaced. Former Special Counsel Robert Mueller even **investigated** (<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/dec/07/the-nfls-problem-with-violence-against-women-a-story-of-profit-and-apathy>) the NFL's handling of a domestic violence case in 2015 and suggested potential solutions in his report that the NFL has chosen not to implement.

These instances of violence against women are not limited to the professional league. Nine players at LSU have faced reports of **sexual misconduct** (https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/30329382/report-lsu-ignored-sexual-assault-complaints-football-players) since 2016, yet only two were dismissed from the team. An **attorney** (https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/30329382/report-lsu-ignored-sexual-assault-complaints-football-players) at LSU revealed that LSU did not discipline four of the players in response to the accusations, and even some who were dismissed found opportunities on other teams. The lack of support for female victims of domestic violence and sexual misconduct is an issue that the feminist movement should address, but it is unclear if adding women to football will solve that problem. The NFL has gradually increased their numbers of female employees, yet women still report experiencing **sexual**

harassment (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/sports/football/sexual-harassment-washington-dan-snyder.html>) during their employment. Perhaps the brutality and violence admired in football carry over into the players' personal lives, encouraging a culture of toxic masculinity and physical harm. The best option might be to do away with football leagues, diminishing the focus on violence and preventing the CTE-related behavioral issues that may contribute to interpersonal conflicts long after players conclude their football careers.

Sarah Fuller made history and she should be celebrated accordingly, but football should be stopped rather than diversified. This suggestion is incredibly controversial considering the economic and social role football plays in American society, but we must take action to protect young athletes. Fuller provides us with an opportunity to consider both how the feminist movement should effectively advocate for women and what we see as the future of football. We can be competitive without being violent. We can encourage inclusion and diversity without subjecting additional people to the dangers of football. There are other ways to spend our weekend leisure hours.



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