

## **Examining Media Contestation of Masculinity and Head Trauma in the National Football League**

American football has long been central to the construction of masculinity in the United States. Of the multiple masculine scripts promoting professional players' hegemonic masculine status, sacrificing one's body for the sake of sporting glory is a key tenet. Sport journalists have traditionally used their media platform to reify this social script, an act which simultaneously promotes their own masculine capital. However, this article investigates a crack in this hegemonic system.

Through a media analysis of the reporting on Aaron Rodgers' self-withdrawal (after hitting his head) from an important National Football League (NFL) game, we argue that increasing cultural awareness as to the devastating effects of concussions, in the form of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, combined with a softening of American masculinity is beginning to permit some prominent players to distance themselves from the self-sacrifice component of sporting masculinity. Concerning concussions, we conclude major sport media are beginning to support the notion of health over a masculine warrior narrative.

On February 6, 2011, the single most watched television event in United States history occurred (Deggans 2011). Over 111 million viewers watched Green Bay Packers beat the Pittsburgh Steelers in the Super Bowl. The event maintained significance not only for the size of the audience it drew, but for the way athletes and sport media discuss head injuries in America's most masculinity generating sport. This is because, earlier in the season, Green Bay quarterback, Aaron Rodgers, arguably the individual most responsible for his team's success, was named the game's most valuable player.

Rodgers may not have been able to play at all, however, if it were it not for veteran teammate, Donald Driver. Earlier in the season, Rodger's head was slammed to the field by an opposing player. Driver—a wide receiver who at the time had the longest running continuous service among all current Green Bay players—talked to Rodgers on the pitch. This was not a 'man-up' style pep-talk encouraging Rodgers to return to the gridiron. Instead, it was a discussion that contravened the warrior masculinity script long associated with football (Kian, Clavio, Vincent and Shaw 2011; Adams, Anderson and McCormack 2010): Driver implored Rodgers to take himself out of the game.

Mark Viera, of *The New York Times*, quoted Driver on that conversation with his quarterback as having said:

I was very concerned about him. I kind of whispered in his ear, walked behind him during the time he was sitting on the bench and kind of told him: 'This is just a game. Your life is more important than this game.' I told him I love him to death, and you've got to make the choice, but this game is not that important (Viera 2010, ¶ 2).

Rodgers elected not to re-enter the game, and his team ultimately lost to the Lions, 7-3. It was a rare moment of putting health before victory, in what is otherwise a game celebrated for orthodox notions of masculine sacrifice.

After the Packers' medical staff diagnosed Rodgers with a concussion (his second of the season), he also sat out the following game. With two defeats in a row, the Packers' dream of a Super Bowl appearance began to fade. Yet, when a healthy Rodgers returned two weeks later, he led his team to six consecutive victories to close out the season, including the Super Bowl, in all likelihood because he had not 'man-upped' and continued to play through a concussion against the Lions.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Hegemonic masculinity in American football*

Men's competitive, organized team sports—particularly contact sports—have long maintained utility in shaping and defining acceptable forms of heterosexual masculinity in Western cultures (Hargreaves 1994; Messner 1992). American football has been deemed the most masculine and violent team sport in US culture since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Rader 2008). Violence in the game has escalated over recent years, as improved strength and conditioning techniques and nutritional advancements have pushed younger athletes to be bigger, stronger, and faster (Sanderson 2002).

The iconography of the American football player – young, muscle-bound, and willing to commit violence to himself and others – has placed this category of athlete at the top of a masculine hierarchy of men in the US. This is true of boys, many of who view professional and college football players as role models (Messner 1992).

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Connell (1995) described the social process that exalts this idealized form of masculinity as hegemonic. Thus, hegemonic masculinity was described as a social process in which one form of institutionalized masculinity is culturally exalted above all others (Connell 1995). Key to understanding the operation of hegemonic masculinity is that almost all men exhibit either a complicit, subordinate or marginalized form (archetype) of masculinity. Yet despite very few men achieving the requisites of hegemonic masculinity, many men desire to obtain or at least be associated with the hegemonic form. Essentially, the process of hegemony influences the oppressed to maintain the rightfulness or naturalization of their oppression (Gramsci 1971).

Men at the top of a hegemonic stratification must obey certain rules in order to maintain their privileged position. Heterosexuality, for example, is compulsory (Pronger 1990); and the frequent expression or action of things associated with femininity are also taboo (Messner 1992). But it is not enough for one to simply adhere to the rules of masculinity; one must also be heard advocating them. Adams et al. (2010) called this *masculinity establishing discourse*. Here, athletes use familiar expressions invoking masculinity, denying weakness, and/or using femphobia or homophobia to 'motivate' others. Putting this discourse into action serves to (re)establish football as a masculine sport. Through a process of regulating, disciplining and policing it defines the perimeters of warrior behaviors and attitudes that constitute hegemonic masculinity.

It is these same discourses, including phrases like 'man up,' 'no pain, no gain,' and 'pain is temporary, pride is forever,' that encourage men to position their own bodies as an expendable weapon of athletic war. The discourse encourages athletes to conceal all fear in the pursuit of glory. Similarly, in the event of injury, football players must not show signs of pain or distress; instead, they must talk about returning to the game as soon as possible. Much of the iconic

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imagery of the American football player is derived from this willingness and ability to play through pain (McDonough et al. 1999).

Anderson (2009) described the socialization of young players into this ethos as a matriculating process of de-selection, which begins early in sport. Those who overly-adhere to warrior narratives are selected for promotion over those who do not. Thus, by the time men make it to the professional level, swiftly returning from injury is standard hero-making practice. These moments of exalted masculinity are glorified by fans and reproduced through sport media (Trujillo 1991).

*Sport journalists upholding the masculine warrior narrative*

The image of the emotionally and physically impenetrable football player has been reified by the dominant sporting media (Nylund 2004). Media-portrayed sporting narratives of heroic disposition, even in the face of debilitating injury or risk of death, are produced as part of orthodox notions of commitment to sport and victory (e.g., Pedersen 2002; Vincent and Crossman 2008). This is for several reasons. Foremost it is because the preponderance of individuals in sport media are men (Hardin 2005; Kian 2007).

Highlighting men's over-representation in sport media, Lapchick, Little, Matthew and Zahn (2008) surveyed 300 US daily newspapers, finding that men comprised 94% of sports editors in newspaper sports departments, 90% of assistant sports editors, 94% of columnists, 91% of reporters and 84% of copy editors/designers. Similarly, Nylund (2004) documented that 80% of US sports-talk radio hosts are men.

These male sports journalists have been shown to uphold hegemonic masculinity by primarily covering men's sports (which are construed as more masculine), and providing

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negative stereotypes of female athletes (Duncan 2006; Kian and Hardin 2009). Sports journalists have also provided less coverage of male athletes and men's sports that do not meet ideal characteristics of orthodox masculinity, such as figure skating and gymnastics (Vincent, Imwold, Masemann and Johnson 2002).

Anderson (2009) theorized that the masculinization of sport media exists because sport journalists are comprised largely of former athletes who did not reach the level of sport they aspired to; or they are ex-professional athletes. Thus, they are men who either desire to be associated with those in hegemonic position, or retain their social status. Accordingly, their analysis of sport is a conduit for promoting their own masculinity (Nylund 2004). Stepping out of line with masculinity-establishing discourse, or (worse) criticizing masculine practices in sport, diminishes the masculine capital of the individual journalist, potentially polluting their ability to access elite level athletes (Hardin and Shain 2006). Thus, these are men who symbolically flirt with hegemonic masculinity; men Connell (p.79) describes as 'complicit.' Sport journalists support and reify hegemonic sporting masculinity as worthy.

Heavily invested in masculinity-making practices, rather than countering the cultural practice of praising strong-willed male athletes who put health before victory, sport journalists have long used the stories of fallen athletes in order to promote their own sporting prowess and masculinity. This action simultaneously promotes sporting masculinity to yet another generation of susceptible American youth, particularly those from disenfranchised backgrounds (Kian, Vincent and Mondello 2008). It is these youth, emerging through their local systems of masculine stratification, that then desire to bounce back up, to be put back in the game, despite possibly having suffered what is a traumatic brain injury in the course of play.

*Head trauma as a social problem in sport*

Whereas this study examines the narratives US print media used to cover the Rodgers-Driver concussion conversation, it is important to contextualize the study in light of rapidly emerging research into the detrimental effects of concussions, as well as the simultaneous academic and cultural awakening of viewing concussions not as temporary incidents resulting in having ‘your bell rung,’ but instead for what they are, medically: traumatic brain injuries in the form of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

Many sport fans associate the life-long, debilitating, and deadly head trauma caused in sport primarily with boxing and other combat sports, with the false assumption that the helmets worn in American football protect from such trauma. Whereas improved helmet design does reduce risk of concussion (Viano, Casson and Pellman 2007), a phenomenon known as *risk compensation* suggests that athletes wearing headgear may in fact play more recklessly, based on the misguided belief that helmets protect them from injury (Hagel and Meeuwisse 2004). Thus, this suggests that helmets could even increase injury rates, particularly in younger athletes, who are less skilled in tackling.

CTE is a progressive neurological disorder caused from blows to one’s head that can occur even when wearing a helmet for protection (Viano et al. 2007). Having similar symptoms as Alzheimer’s, CTE begins with behavioral and personality changes. It is followed by disinhibition and irritability, before the individual moves into dementia. It takes years for the initial trauma to give rise to nerve-cell breakdown and death, but chronic traumatic encephalopathy is not the result of an endogenous disease like Alzheimer’s (McKee et al. 2010). It is the result of traumatic brain injury—the type routinely occurring in contact sports.

Football, ice-hockey, lacrosse, and rugby, all report similar rates of concussion, and Delaney et al. (2007) suggest that there are over 60,000 annual reported concussions in American high school sports alone. However, these numbers are vastly under-representative as they only reflect medically-diagnosed concussions. Accordingly, Colvin et al. (2009) reported that because only about 20% of those recipients are aware of their concussions, there could be as many as four million sport-related concussions per year in America.

Supporting this contention, McCrea et al. (2004) showed less than half of football players who receive a concussion report it to their coaches or medical personnel. Moreover, because most university athletes who receive concussions see the team's physician, it is likely there is pressure on this physician to clear an athlete to play before he or she is medically sound.

Concussions also affect certain types of players more than others. For example, in one study of British soccer players, aged 12-17, 47.8% of the athletes experienced a concussion in the year of study (Delaney et al. 2007). This means that an average player is likely to experience a concussion every other year of play. But the study also found that of those who experienced a concussion, 69% experienced more than one that same year (Delaney et al. 2007). This indicates that certain players are more prone to use their heads in dangerous ways.

Concussions have a deleterious effect on cognitive function. For example, recent research on soccer players (Colvin et al. 2009) found that among youth aged 8-24, those with at least one concussion performed worse on neuro-cognitive testing than those without. More so, women who report the same amount of concussions as men do worse than males on tests. Thus, sex may account for significant differences in post-concussive neurocognitive test scores and may play a role in determining recovery. These differences do not appear to reflect differences in body mass between sexes, and may be related to other sex-specific factors that deserve further study.

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Initially it was hypothesized that this type of damage was caused solely by concussion. However, the aforementioned neurological damage is increasingly recognized as potentially being a result of not only concussions, but perhaps from less significant trauma to the head as well (Mckee et al. 2010). Whereas there is no conclusive evidence, this idea has recently been brought to public attention.

This occurred after a 21-year old collegiate football player, Owen Thomas, committed suicide. His brain was donated in 2007 to Boston University's Sports Legacy Institute. According to their website ([sportslegacy.org](http://sportslegacy.org)), Thomas showed early signs of CTE. Significantly, he had never been diagnosed with a concussion. If a 21-year old, with no history of concussion, can show CTE, one must consider the impact of the disease on professionals who have their head routinely hit as part of their sport.

This concern was highlighted in February of 2011, after ex-NFL player Dave Duerson, committed suicide at the age of 50. Prior to shooting himself in the chest, Duerson sent a text to family members requesting that his brain be analyzed for CTE, as it has been found in multiple other deceased NFL players. Results later revealed that CTE was indisputably in Duerson's brain, with no evidence of any other disorders (Schwarz 2011a). The *New York Times* reported that thus far, 20 former NFL players have been found to have CTE (Schwarz 2011b). They died unaware of how the disease deposits proteins and damages neurons leading to diminished functioning.

This is a new understanding in the sport of American football, as hard evidence from deceased football players' brains has only been documented since 2002. Even so, this article is not primarily concerned with documenting CTE; nor are we concerned with making a case for whether there is a cause and effect relationship between tackling in football and CTE. Rather we

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are interested in the phenomena of a growing cultural awareness of concussions and CTE. We are interested in the social response to the perceived threat, particularly in coverage of this problem by mainstream sport media.

### *Social reaction to CTE*

There has been a swift but limited response to practice and policies concerning using the head as a weapon in sport. The American Association of Pediatrics has issued new guidelines for concussions. Likely in response to these publicized studies showing significant long-term brain damage for former NFL players (Smith 2009), the NFL has instituted new rules on tackling, and recently changed helmet design. The NFL also revised, multiple times, its concussion policies between 2009-2011. As it stands, a player who is diagnosed with a concussion during a game is prohibited from playing again in that same game and he may only play in a following game once cleared by a physician that is not employed by the NFL (Smith 2011). This is because a player who is concussed before a previous concussion is healed stands is at risk of death.

One reason the NFL has continuously been altering its rules in recent years is probably due to the threat of litigation. For example, in February 2011 ex NFL linebacker, Fred McNeil, filed suit against the NFL for occupational dementia. But as it stands, tackling is still part of the game: This is also true at all levels of tackle football, including the dominant youth league Pop Warner Football, where U.S. youths can begin playing organized and competitive tackle football as early as age 5 in the 'Tiny-Mite' division.

It is likely that removing tackling (by changing the game to flag football) would be viewed by most football players, coaches, and fans as a preposterous solution. Yet we highlight that structural rules to sport do change when financial interests are at stake to professional sport. This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by SAGE in *Men and Masculinities*, available online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1097184X11430127>. It is not the copy of record. Copyright © 2012, SAGE.

Illustrating this, the three-point line and shot-clock were both brought into the National Basketball Association in order to add excitement to the game and thus increase franchise income. Over time those same rules then trickled down to lower levels of play (Rader 2008).

With knowledge of the long term impact of concussions, reluctance to remove from the game tackling above the waist leads us to conclude that head trauma results from a masculinization and glorification of violence, guised as protecting the history of the sport and not the athletes who play it. Accordingly, whereas CTE is a medical condition, concussions in sport are essentially a social problem.

With an understanding that head trauma is not an inevitable part of American football; that it is instead produced by a masculinization of the game which encourages tackling high and hard, this article investigates the role of media in reproducing masculine discourse in football. Whereas media coverage of sport has long assisted in formulating the notion of heroic athletes who overcome pain and adversity (Messner 2002; Trujilo 1991), it is unclear how modern sport media might frame narratives regarding concussions in relation to three social factors: 1) emerging evidence of the damage caused by using the head in American football; 2) a cultural softening of orthodox requisites required to be considered masculine, and; 3) the increasing threat of civil litigation against the NFL by players affected by CTE.

## **Methodology**

### *Textual Analysis*

In this research, we conducted a textual analysis of all print media articles that mentioned Rodgers, Driver, Rodgers' concussion, and the conversation between the two on Rodgers' concussion that were published in three national newspapers and seven popular sport Internet This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by SAGE in *Men and Masculinities*, available online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1097184X11430127>. It is not the copy of record. Copyright © 2012, SAGE.

sites. Textual analyses generally do not include numeric equations found in the more commonly published quantitative content analyses of sport media coverage (Sparkes 1992). Instead, textual analyses are unobtrusive and non-reactive tools that uncover both explicit and subtle meanings within content (McKee 2001). Textual analyses, however, are both interpretative and subjective, so the use of more than one coder is essential (Vincent 2004).

### *Sampling Selection*

The three newspapers examined in this study were *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* which, per the Audit Bureau of Circulations (Shea 2010), ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup>, among the most circulated newspapers in the USA. Topping that list was *The Wall Street Journal*, which was excluded from this study as it is a business-specific newspaper.

The seven Internet sites were chosen because all provide a great deal of coverage on American professional football. Four of those sites, *AOL Sports*, *CBSSports.com*, *Fox Sports.com*, and *ESPN Internet* are considered mainstream, broad-based sites that provide detailed coverage for a variety of sports. In contrast, *Deadspin* is a non-traditional sport media site that has emerged as one of the most influential and popular sport blogs in the world. The final two sites examined in this study were popular blogs, *Pro Football Talk* and *Kissing Suzy Kolber*. These were selected due to their singular and extensive focus on American professional football.

Two researchers searched for and downloaded all articles published in the 10 outlets that included references toward players, Rodgers and Driver, Rodgers' concussion, and made some mention of the conversation between the two players on Rodgers' concussion. Subscriptions

allowing for access to all content were attained for ESPN Internet, the only online media outlet examine that did not make all of its content freely available on its website.

The time frame covered December 12, 2010, the day that Rodgers sustained his concussion against the Lions, through to December 20, 2010, which included all articles published after the Packers' next game against the Patriots, in which Rodgers ultimately sat out due to the concussion he sustained against the Lions. However, because Green Bay advanced through the post-season to the Super Bowl, where the mainstream US media are famous for lavishing a plethora of coverage during Super Bowl 'media week,' we also examined articles falling under the criteria above published from Sunday January 30, 2011, through February, 7, 2011, which was the day after the Packers defeated the Pittsburgh Steelers in Super Bowl XLV.

#### *Coding Procedures and Data Analysis*

The two researchers examined how masculinity was constructed and framed in articles on Rodgers' concussion and his conversation with Driver through media articles. In our textual analysis, we used open and axial levels of coding in analyzing all words within examined articles (Creswell 2003). The inductive coding practices created differing levels of data, which were then interpreted according to larger theoretical frames falling under Anderson's (2005) constructs of inclusive and orthodox masculinities.

All words of each article were read by the two coders, who initially worked independent of each other. Content related to the broad headings under masculinities in articles were highlighted and each coder wrote theoretical memos to better explain commonalities within text they highlighted (Turner 1981). After comparing notes, an initial database was created by the two researchers. Open coding was utilized in analyzing posts multiple times to identify dominant  
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themes (Glasser & Strauss 1967) as well as counters to the primary narratives within the data. We then incorporated axial coding as a means of linking previously-identified themes and categories within the data to larger theoretical frameworks on masculinities, with a focus on inclusive and orthodox masculinity (Anderson 2005).

### *Validity/Trustworthiness*

References and particularly themes relating to masculinity within articles were given greater importance in the coding process. Therefore, this methodology did not aim to re-produce the content of posts or uncover dominant themes consisting of football-specific information (e.g., how the loss of Rodgers would affect the Packers' passing offense). Specifically, our goal was to uncover the textual constructions related to masculinities that permeated dominant themes on masculinity that emerged from the coding process related to the experiencing of injury (Sparkes 1992). This process is subjective and interpretive (Creswell 2003). However, using two researchers resulted in a dynamic and layered analytical framework.

## **Results**

All but one of the ten articles published within the examined periods focused on the significance of Driver urging Rodgers not to continue to play against Detroit. Four dominant themes emerged from our analysis: (1) Media attitudes toward concussions are changing; (2) Media contend players' attitudes generally lag behind others; (3) The event was not newsworthy; (4) Views of risk widely vary.

### *Media Attitudes toward Concussions Are Changing*

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The dominant theme from the data was that Driver received universal praise from the media. Journalists portrayed this as a selfless act – a commendable feat of putting the health of his quarterback over his own interest (of making the playoffs and posting his best possible statistics as a receiver). *New York Times* writer Mark Viera framed the discussion as trend-setting for football as a whole, writing in his *The Fifth Down* notebook that, “It can be seen as another sign that N.F.L. players’ attitudes toward concussions are changing” (Viera 2010, ¶ 2). Tim Keown of ESPN Internet went further, writing:

with one act of humanity and one public display of perspective, Packers receiver Donald Driver did more than a thousand studies or a million speeches. He accomplished what no one had yet managed to do in this era of heightened awareness of head injuries in the NFL: He made it OK for a teammate to leave the game because of a concussion (Keown 2010, ¶ 1).

Keown argued that, for exhibiting such selflessness, Driver should be considered for the NFL’s Walter Payton Man of the Year, an annual award honoring a player for his volunteer and charity work, as well as excellence on the field.

What Driver did was bad for the team but good for the person. You know how much easier it would have been for him to sit back and hope Rodgers could clear his head fast enough to get back into the game? That's what Rodgers wanted to do, and it seems as if the Packers' trainers were either unaware of the situation or otherwise occupied immediately after the injury. Rodgers didn't want to hear what Driver was telling him, so he stood up and stared back at him... What Rodgers saw -- legitimate concern from a respected veteran who cares about him -- was

enough to make him realize Driver was right... The importance of Driver's actions

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can't be overstated. The NFL should be trumpeting Driver as the league's man of the year. It should be booking him on every halftime show of every NFL Network game from now 'til the end of the season. Somebody should be filming a public-service announcement with Rodgers and Driver, as soon as Rodgers feels better. Their picture should be on the door of every locker room before the playoffs start (Keown 2010, ¶ 11-13).

Whereas all articles praised Driver, a report on *Pro Football Talk* also placed blame on the Packers' medical staff for not intervening, contending that Driver:

shouldn't have had to keep Rodgers from playing. Doctors should have immediately checked Rodgers after his head hit the turf, and Rodgers' fate shouldn't have been left in the hands of a receiver who was willing to put Rodgers' best interests ahead of the team's (Florio 2011, ¶ 2).

The praise Driver and Rodgers received for pulling out of play is more notable because it is likely that Rodgers' removal cost the team a victory over the Lions. Indeed, most of the articles were clear to highlight this. One concluded: "The injury to Rodgers comes at the worst possible time for the Packers, who are in need of a win against the NFL's hottest team to keep their playoff hopes alive ("Report: Rodgers Unlikely to Play," 2011, ¶ 12). This makes the transgressive act of voluntary withdrawal from a game a more serious violation of orthodox masculinity than had the team been points ahead.

*Media Contend Players' Attitudes Generally Lag Behind Others*



Whereas writers lavished much praise upon Driver and Rodgers for the courage they exhibited in recognizing the seriousness of Rodgers' concussion, some also noted that change will likely occur slowly in a sport that values intrepid men playing through pain.

Players are competitive. They're also stubborn and independent. They believe they should have a say over whether they can play with an injury, working under the premise that no one can look inside their heads and determine how they feel. That libertarian streak does not lend itself well to looking down the huddle and telling a teammate to leave the field because his eyes look a little glossy.

It's the sport, it's the culture, and it's the people who reside within it. The biggest obstacle to the NFL's concussion policy is persuading players to leave the field or seek treatment when they know they -- like Rodgers -- will be finished for that game and quite possibly the next. The blackout concussions are an easy call because there's no hiding them. Brett Favre flat-out on the frozen plastic of TCF Stadium, for example, can be diagnosed from the living room. But those that are less severe, when a player gets his bell rung but manages to hide it well enough to stay in the game, present a loophole that can lead to multiple concussions and more serious problems (Keown 2010, ¶ 15-16).

This theme was best exemplified not directly from a journalist, but through a quote one author used from Packers' defensive captain and standout cornerback, Charles Woodson, who said he expected Rodgers to play against the Patriots the following week despite his concussion.

“He's a football player, and that's how we are,” Woodson said. “We're going to

play. I know if the doctors say, ‘Hey, we don't think there's a problem,’ he's going  
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to play. [If not], I guarantee he'll lobby to play. That's how we are. That's how we're cut" ('WR Says He Urged QB to Sit' 2010, ¶ 19).

However, based on their actions, players' desire to play is evidently becoming less important than their long-term health. One article also noted that the number of concussions being reported during the 2010 season (up to that point) was up more than 20% from 2009 and more than 30% from 2008 ("WR Says He Urged QB to Sit," 2010). Several articles compared how the culture seemed to be changing within the traditional masculine confines of professional football.

When Driver came into the league as a seventh-round draft pick in 1999, those who sat out with a concussion might have had their toughness questioned.

"That's changed tremendously," Driver said. "It's not about being tough any more. I look at myself and injuries, I've always tried to fight through injuries. You've got to get to a point where your body tells you, you can't fight through that injury anymore and you have to shut it down. And when you get to that point, you have to feel comfortable that you can just shut it down and feel good about it ("WR Says He Urged QB to Sit," 2010, ¶ 9-10).

One reason players' attitudes may be slow to change would be due to media discounting the heroism of athletes who freely elect not to play when concussed. One way of doing this is by ignoring athletes who voluntarily sit themselves out.

### *This Event Was Not Newsworthy*

Sport journalists not only frame the narratives that assist media consumers in defining the news, but they also shape attitudes by determining what events are worthy of news coverage or not

(Kuypers 2002). Sport media "symbolically annihilate" news and people they deem less  
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important merely by not covering them (Tuchman 1978, p. 17). Thus, sport media tend to ignore stories that challenge dominant and long-standing social constructions (Vincent 2004).

Whereas authors who wrote about this event unanimously praised Driver's discussion with his quarterback that led to Rodgers taking himself out of the game, most media gatekeepers evidently did not believe this event newsworthy. Even though most online sites publish hundreds of wire stories (such as one Associated Press story on the conversation between Driver and Rodgers included in our study), the three newspapers and seven Internet sites in this research combined to only produce nine articles during the week after the Green Bay-Detroit game that mentioned the conversation between Driver and his quarterback.

Internet outlets AOL Sports, ESPN Internet, and FoxSports.com were the only media in this study that had multiple stories on the event, with each publishing two articles. *USA Today*, which proclaims itself as "The Nation's Newspaper" did not publish any articles on the event. In fact, the only article it published over that week that included the search terms 'Driver,' 'Rodgers,' and 'concussion' was a fantasy football notes column that discussed the statistical impact of Rodgers possibly not playing against New England and made no mention of the conversation between him and Driver. Therefore, that article was not included in our study.

Because the Packers ultimately qualified for the playoffs and advanced to the Super Bowl, both researchers assumed the importance of Driver's selfless act during the Lions game would be recounted regularly by media during Super Bowl week. However, the only article published in any of the 10 outlets during Super Bowl week that discussed Driver's conversation with Rodgers against the Lions was a story in *The New York Times* that compared the differences in attitudes toward concussions by the two participating Super Bowl teams (Schwarz 2011c).

*Views of Risk Widely Vary*

Concussions in professional American football were a major news story throughout the 2010 season, even before that December game between the Packers and Lions. However, there was considerable backlash from many players, and some media members, against the NFL's new 'get-tough' policy on illegal hits against 'defenseless' players; hits which league officials claimed result in a greater chance of major injuries, including concussions (Battista 2010). At the forefront of this debate were the Steelers, the only team to win six Super Bowls, as well as a franchise whose players and national fan base have long relished their blue-collar, physical, and tough reputations (O'Brien 2004).

No member of the Steelers received more media attention in stories on concussions during the 2010 season than standout linebacker James Harrison, the 2008 Associated Press NFL Defensive Most Valuable Player. In helping lead Pittsburgh to the Super Bowl XLV, Harrison was fined four different times for a total of \$125,000 in 2010 by the NFL's league office for 'illegal on-field hits.' This was highlighted by a \$75,000 fine levied against Harrison for a helmet-to-helmet hit he delivered on Mohammad Massaquoi of the Cleveland Browns. Both Massaquoi and fellow Cleveland receiver Josh Cribbs left that game due to concussions derived from Harrison's hits, although Harrison's hit on Cribbs was deemed legal by league officials (Bouchette 2010).

After the Steelers' win over the Browns, but before he was fined, Harrison was quoted by ESPN as having said, "I don't want to injure anybody. There's a big difference between being hurt and being injured. You get hurt, you shake it off and come back the next series or the next game. I try to hurt people" ('James Harrison OK with dishing pain' 2010). Harrison also publicly threatened to retire from the NFL after being fined by the league office for the Massaquoi hit. This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by SAGE in *Men and Masculinities*, available online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1097184X11430127>. It is not the copy of record. Copyright © 2012, SAGE.

Several players from other NFL teams came to the public defense of Harrison. Dolphins' linebacker Channing Crowder told reporters, "If they're going to keep making us go more and more and more like a feminine sport, we're going to wear pink every game, not just on the breast cancer months (Battista 2010, ¶10).

Another Steeler receiving concussion-related press in 2010 was Hines Ward, who vehemently complained about new league policies after he sustained a concussion in a key regular-season game against New England. After being hit by two Patriots on a single play, Ward received assistance as he stumbled off the field. He was diagnosed with a concussion by team medical personnel, who under the new NFL rules, prohibited Ward to re-enter the game. As a result, Ward watched from the sidelines for the rest of the game. This meant that he saw his franchise record of making at least one catch in the prior 186 consecutive regular-season games come to an end. He also watched his team lose to New England in the process. "It's football. You get your bell rung," a frustrated Ward was quoted as saying after the game. "It's my body. I feel like if I want to go back out there, I feel like I should have the right" (Brown 2010, ¶4).

Despite playing wide receiver, a glamorous offensive position where players put their bodies at risk more than in any other position, Ward is famous for issuing much more punishment on the football field than he receives. In fact, in 2008 the 205-pound Ward hit an unsuspecting Keith Rivers so hard that it broke Rivers' jaw and ended the rookie season for the 245-pound linebacker for the Cincinnati Bengals. There was no penalty on the play. That offseason, however, the NFL adopted what has since been dubbed 'the Hines Ward rule,' which "makes illegal a blindside block if it comes from the blocker's helmet, forearm or shoulder and lands to the head or neck area of the defender" (Bouchette 2009, ¶2). Later that fall NFL players voted Ward the league's 'Dirtiest Player' in a poll conducted by *Sports Illustrated* magazine, and This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by SAGE in *Men and Masculinities*, available online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1097184X11430127>. It is not the copy of record. Copyright © 2012, SAGE.

sport media regularly lavish Ward with the tag of being one of the toughest pound-for-players in NFL history.

The league's focus on stricter enforcement of rules to better protect player safety was a major news story during Super Bowl media week, with much debate centering on if the Steelers were being signaled out and unfairly punished for rough plays, which Pittsburgh players deemed legal hits. Whereas Harrison's fines were frequently mentioned in articles published during Super Bowl week, only one article appeared that week in any of the 10 examined media outlets that specifically mentioned the concussion Rodgers sustained against the Lions and the resulting conversation between Driver and Rogers.

In the *New York Times* article, published two days before the Super Bowl, author Alan Schwarz opened by praising Rodgers and Driver for their conversation: "A professional player telling another to put his long-term health ahead of the team — a once and, to some, still-heretical idea — thrilled those who are trying to temper the sport's win-now, regret-later ideology. Neurologists nodded. Parents cheered" (Schwarz 2011c, ¶ 3).

Schwarz then contrasted the Packers with the Steelers, a team he framed as having an archaic attitude toward concussions:

As for the rebuttal in football's continuing debate, that was gladly delivered this week by none other than the Packers' opponent in Sunday's Super Bowl — the Pittsburgh Steelers, whose stars stumped as football's defiant traditionalists.

The hard-hitting linebacker James Harrison mocked the N.F.L.'s crackdown on head-to-head tackles, suggesting that the league 'lay a pillow down where I'm going to tackle them, so they don't hit the ground too hard.' Receiver Hines Ward

questioned all the fuss about brain injuries, and said that advising his own oft-

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concussed quarterback, Ben Roethlisberger, about health was all but preposterous (Schwarz 2011c, ¶ 4-5).

After the first five paragraphs, Schwarz framed the remainder of the article decidedly in favor of the Packers' actions and attitudes, quoting a sports psychologist who warned of the negative impact on youth players who model their games after Steelers' players and Dustin Fink, a high school athletics trainer who said he was rooting for the Packers due to messages on concussions delivered by each team.

### Discussion

American football has long been the most masculinized team sport in the USA. This is a status supported by the sport media, who exist as a group of heterosexual men desiring to be associated with a hegemonic form of masculinity (Nylund 2004). Part of the production of this hegemonic form of masculinity has traditionally included self-sacrifice to keep players in-line with the ethos of sacrificing tomorrow's health for today's glory, even in the face of debilitating injury or risk of death (e.g., Pedersen 2002; Vincent and Crossman 2008). There is, however, growing cultural awareness about the use of contact sports in promoting chronic brain injury, and in this article we have shown that some of this comes from sport media. We suggest that this is a reflection of a larger cultural shift in the type of masculinity that young men value; and this includes team sport athletes.

Anderson (2009) described four recent trends among heterosexual university athletes: 1) increased physical tactility among same-sex peers; 2) increased emotional bonding between same-sex peers; 3) less peer-aggression; and 4) the adoption of feminized clothing styles and body posture. Anderson (2009) described these attitudes as 'inclusive masculinity' and theorized This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by SAGE in *Men and Masculinities*, available online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1097184X11430127>. It is not the copy of record. Copyright © 2012, SAGE.

there emergence through his notion of decreasing cultural homophobia (p.7). Principally Anderson's theory maintains that whereas there are a number of social factors that re/shape cultural constructions of idealized heterosexual masculinity, homophobia is the most significant. Homophobia—described as heterosexual men's fear of being publicly homosexualized by violating rigid gendered boundaries—situates levels of homophobia temporally and spatially, recognizing that cultural homophobia has different effects dependent on the social context. Accordingly, homophobia is a useful theoretical tool for understanding the significance that homophobia maintains within particular cultures.

Anderson (2009) contended that in temporal-cultural moments with high levels of homophobia, masculinity and homosexuality are viewed as incompatible, meaning that heterosexual men go to great lengths to avoid being perceived as gay. Here, homophobia is used as a weapon to stratify men in deference to a dominant hegemonic force (Connell 1995). This is particularly effective because anyone can be suspected of being gay (Anderson 2008).

Important to this research, homophobia not only promotes homophobic attitudes, and discourages physical and emotional intimacy (Ibson 2002), but in a period of high homophobia, men are encouraged to risk their health, and (in sport) to do as one is told without questioning. It is when men are overly-concerned with proving their masculinity as a way of distancing themselves from homosexual suspicion that men will act in hypermasculine, violent, and dangerous ways toward themselves and others. Accordingly, Anderson (2009) called traditional notions of homophobic masculinity 'a public health crisis' (p. 46).

However, recent sport-focused research (Adams 2011; Adams et al. 2010; Anderson and McGuire 2010) showed that as cultural homophobia decreased, so did cultural homophobia.

These studies showed young male athletes as unconcerned about whether people perceive their This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by SAGE in *Men and Masculinities*, available online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1097184X11430127>. It is not the copy of record. Copyright © 2012, SAGE.



actions as feminine/gay, and that this made the expression of femininity acceptable among university teamsport athletes. Whereas only limited evidence is provided of this, Adams et al. (2010) theorized that this might give heterosexual men less reason to accept unnecessary risks in sport, in that there is less shame in denouncing it.

In light of these findings, we suggest that the practice of accepting traumatic injury for the sake of team victory may be under assault for three reasons. First, there is growing cultural awareness as to the significant, debilitating, and oftentimes life-ending impact that concussions (and even repeated hits to the head that do not result in immediate concussions) have on players (Colvin et al. 2008). Highlighted by the suicides of several ex NFL players, and the appearance of CTE in the brain of a university player who had never suffered a concussion, media, players, coaches, and especially National Football League officials are seemingly awakening to the very real dangers that using the head for sport causes.

Second, young athletes have been socialized into a rapidly changing culture: one that fosters emotional intimacy between men, and the expression of feelings, including fear and pain (Anderson 2008). This means that NFL players might increasingly be risk-adverse, in part because inclusive masculinity does not require men to sacrifice health for the sake of sport (Adams et al. 2010; Anderson and McGuire 2010) the way previous researchers (Messner 1992; Trujillo, 1991) found decades ago. Accordingly, as the once orthodox image of the teamsport athlete loses its cultural hegemony, multiple types of masculinity are permitted to flourish without the hierarchy necessary in a hegemonic system (McCormack 2011). This means that those who once used to flirt with hegemonic masculinity, those Connell (1995, p. 79) described as ‘complicit,’ have less reason to build their masculine capital by upholding the ‘heroism’ of

playing through concussion as they once did. Accordingly, men who write about sport maintain more freedom in decrying this type of self-violence, too.

Third, and largely out of scope of this paper, it is likely that governing bodies of sport are increasingly concerned about being held accountable for the health and safety of the players they govern. Injury in the NFL can, for example, be viewed as an occupational hazard. If the NFL does not protect players from this, they could be opening the league up to considerable punitive damage should the courts agree with players whom file suit. Former player, Fred McNeil, is currently suing the NFL for occupational dementia, and former player, Eric Shelton, is suing the NFL over the league's long-term disability plan allegedly not covering injuries he sustained from helmet-to-helmet collisions (Schwarz 2010). Recognition of head injuries in sport is also prompting a call for reform from outside sources. Ex-presidential candidate and consumer rights activist, Ralph Nader, has been working with Dr. Ken Reed, a sports columnist and policy directory for the United States Sports Academy, to bring attention to the issue of concussion in sport – calling for mandatory implementation of King-Devick Concussion Test in high school and youth sports. They recognize that playing with a concussion can lead to death if one sustains a second injury to the head before the initial injury heals (the brain swells, shutting down the brain stem, resulting in respiratory failure). Thus, better legislation is required to identify concussions and remove athletes from play. Recent laws in Texas, Washington and Oregon have mandated such, requiring better concussion training and medical services in youth sports.

Collectively, this means that the warrior scripts of masculine sacrifice, once so valorized in the NFL, may be contested through a triangulated causal model—concern for safety, a weakening hegemonic model, and liability issues. Whatever the causes, change is already stemming from official NFL policies, which during the 2010 season made progressive changes in

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an attempt to lessen the likelihood of concussions occurring. The promotion of softer attitudes toward violence we document in this research are also significant. This is because they are promulgated by many of the foremost sports media venues, including ESPN.

Still, our research found an absence of discussion about this issue from the majority of sport media sources. Four of the 10 examined outlets never wrote about this discussion and only four of the 10 had more than one article that mentioned the conversation between Rodgers and Drivers. Whereas we cannot ascribe other journalists as shunning the Driver/Rodgers incident, their silence on the matter is significant, as sport media tend to ignore stories that challenge dominant and long-standing social constructions (Duncan 2006; Kian, Mondello and Vincent 2009).

These results are resonant of the two competing versions of masculinity at play among ex-high school football players-turned university cheerleaders in Anderson's (2005) research. In this case, comments made by NFL players (reported on in these media accounts indicated) suggest a similar division might now be occurring in the most masculinized, professional team sport: those ascribing to orthodox (hegemonic) views of masculinity and those desiring more inclusive, feminized versions. On the inclusive side, in a crucial moment of athletic struggle, Driver proclaimed to his teammate that, "It's just a game. Your life is more important than this game" (Viera 2010, ¶ 2). Conversely, players like Harrison, and those who support him, take a different view.

If a division does exist—or is beginning to emerge—between players, the duo of Driver (a celebrated veteran of the Green Bay Packers) and Rodgers (a Super Bowl MVP) is important in that it provides the voices of two individuals, both of whom maintain high masculine capital

because they are champions. This gives them more social capital for the promotion of health over complicit violence.

The same is true of sport media. The importance of the position of the sport journalists, who did report (positively) on the Rodgers-Driver discussion, should not be underestimated. As one ESPN reporter commented, “He made it OK for a teammate to leave the game because of a concussion,” and that likely made it okay for journalists to find Driver’s act so refreshing (Keown 2010, ¶ 1).

It is too early to determine what broader implications the Rodger’s incident might have for other levels of play. However, in light of this emerging evidence, we should highlight that some positive change to youth sport has already occurred. For example, the national youth sport league, i9 Sports, already plays flag football (where there is no tackling). Whereas the NFL will most likely always be a contact-based sport, it does appear that players’ safety is beginning to be taken more seriously.

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