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Hallie Gillam

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THE CULTURE OF FOOTBALL IN THE UNITED STATES: HOW HEGEMONIC  
MASCULINITY AFFECTS AND IS EXPRESSED IN AMERICAN FOOTBALL

by  
Hallie Paige Gillam

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2019

Approved by:

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## **Abstract**

(Under the direction of Kate Centellas)

The construction of an American hegemonic masculinity has been solidified and protected since the 19th century, allowing particular groups, but not all groups, of men to wield power over others through strength, aggression, and toughness. The popularity of American football is a manifestation of society's value of this form of masculinity, accepted as an aspect of American culture. My thesis work aims to answer the following question: how has American hegemonic masculinity shaped and been expressed through football, and in what ways has the NFL responded? In order to answer this question, I utilize a mixed methods approach to investigate how hegemonic masculinity displayed through the sport of football negatively impacts players and the American public alike. I apply a theoretical framework built upon prevalent scholarship in examinations of gender, race, and risk to analyze those who are particularly affected by this cultural construct. The results ultimately indicate four dominant implications and manifestations of hegemonic masculinity on football: negative health effects, exploitation and predation of poor and marginalized groups, domestic violence, and rigid cultural and gender understanding that do not allow for deviance. My research also indicates that the NFL, using their Corporate Social Responsibility campaign and influential public relations strategies, masks these negative implications under the guise of harm reduction techniques and involvement in social endeavors or refuses to address them at all. My research will serve as a comprehensive discussion of widely held concerns about football through the lens of hegemonic masculinity. A deeper understanding of this topic will generate discourse about the moral aspects of engaging in football and will foster a discussion of responsibility, accountability, and hegemony.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Attending college in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), where college football season is celebrated each weekend with parties, tailgates, and heavy alcohol consumption, it is difficult to find an individual uninterested in the sport. We grew up listening to our fathers' stories about his high school glory days spent alongside his teammates, cheering on our brothers as they put on their pads for the first time, and gathering with our friends and families to watch our favorite teams play. Football in the SEC, and in the United States, is a culture. We take pride in our teams, wear our favorite players' jerseys, and create fantasy football leagues in which we become the coaches. In many ways, it is viewed as "un-American" to not enjoy football. If we don't cheer for our team, we are somehow excluded from an essential aspect of American life.

I have never questioned my allegiance to the game of football. I grew up traveling to Knoxville, TN to watch my parents' alma mater play teams deemed "the enemy." As a daughter surrounded only by two brothers and five male cousins, I refused to miss out on backyard football games, learning how to throw a spiral, catch the ball on the run, and tackle my siblings to the ground. When I began college at the University of Mississippi, I prided myself in being a "good" football fan. I never missed a home game, knew the positions on the field, and yelled angrily at the referees when they made "unfair" calls against my team. My male friends deemed me "one of the boys," and I was honored to have been accepted by them. Yet, I began to wonder: why is football almost exclusively associated with masculinity? As a woman who had always been interested in sports, I

became inquisitive about their origins and their generally homosocial culture. This became a sole focus on mine throughout my thesis research.

Only recently did I hear the complete, poignant story of Ole Miss' former defensive back Chucky Mullins. In Oxford, we honor him with statues and streets in his name. He came from an underserved black community in Alabama, facing adversities at a young age in a single-parent household. His athletic success and unmatched work-ethic earned him a spot on the Ole Miss football team under Coach Billy Brewer. Tragically, his career ended abruptly during a Homecoming football game against Vanderbilt, when he was paralyzed. He died in a Memphis hospital due to complications from his spinal cord injury on May 6, 1991. What many do not know, however, is that football was Mullins' opportunity to obtain a college-level education. When he arrived at Ole Miss, he had only a small bag of clothes and owned no bed sheets to cover his mattress. As a community, we forget these details, hailing him as a man who sacrificed his physical health for the good of the team. This story left me curious about the institution of football as a whole. We honor Chucky Mullins' legacy, but reject discourse surrounding the situation that led him to his death. The NCAA's website claims that the core of its mission is to provide athletes with a pathway to earn a college education, yet football players in particular are forced to sacrifice their bodies to do so (NCAA). They risk injury each time they step onto the field with an incredibly slim chance of being drafted to the National Football League. While the NCAA is not the organization that I chose to analyze in this paper, as I will explain later, it is crucial to observe it as a function of football and the ways in which all levels of the sport perpetuate harmful social, economic, and physical effects.

As I began to consider my own perceptions of football, the players, and their responsibilities to the sport and to American society, it became difficult to ignore the rigid expectations we as a society place on them and our strict interpretation of what it means to be an athlete. San Francisco 49ers' Colin Kaepernick was met with hostility and criticism in 2016, when he chose not to stand for the national anthem as a means of protesting racial oppression and police brutality in the United States. Fans who once cheered for him on the field were disgusted with his choice, vilifying him as anti-American, disrespectful, and unpatriotic (Undeclared 2016). This instance sparked a movement in which players of color chose to kneel during the national anthem as well, using their status as a way to peacefully protest social injustices in the country. President Trump, in an interview with Fox and Friends, heightened the animosity felt by football fans when he suggested those players might not belong in the country (Hunter 2018). Even recently, on the University of Mississippi's campus, a similar event occurred when black members of the basketball team knelt during the national anthem in response to white supremacy groups marching on their campus. Many long-time fans and alumni reacted furiously, calling the men a "disgrace." One said fan tweeted: "I hope they get this figured out and school won't allow this or teams to start this. No need for politics in college sports" (Calicchio, Zwirz 2018). We, as Americans and as sports fans, love and support the players that provide us with entertainment, provide our teams with success, and provide our universities with profit until they deviate from the behaviors and actions we believe they should confide by. We - especially white citizens - benefit from their talents but reject their freedoms as citizens of this country, another way in which we maintain power over the "other."



Investigating the complexities of gender, opportunity, race, and football led me to my research question: *How has American hegemonic masculinity shaped and been expressed through football, and in what ways has the National Football League (NFL) responded?* I hypothesized, and in this thesis argue, that football is an industry that manufactures physical, social, and cultural harm, and that the NFL has attempted and failed to appropriately address these implications by masking them through strategic public relations campaigns and powerful influence on public discourse.

### *Overview*

Hegemonic masculinity, the dominance of one masculinity over women and other subordinate groups, in the United States has historically involved the rejection of the feminine (Connell 2005; Pochmara 2008; Ray 2018). As the industrial revolution arose, men were removed from the private home-centered sphere and relocated to the public sphere, leaving women to take care of the children. Society's reaction to this economic and cultural phenomenon was framed in panic. Many became concerned that the male youth was becoming feminized through their mothers' influence. Women's entrance into the public workforce complicated this reaction, as men were forced to create new arenas of masculinity. Thus, the Boy Scouts of America was formed in the early 20th century, followed by the creation of male-dominated sports leagues (Pochmara 2008).

While women have certainly made progress in the realm of sports, football continues to remain a homosocial environment dominated by a narrow understanding of masculinity. As described by R.W. Connell, this understanding includes characteristics of power, physical strength, aggression, and self-sacrifice, creating a warlike dimension in

which men can not only exclude women, but prove dominance over other men.

Hegemony requires that groups be “excluded” from receiving the benefits of this type of masculinity. Obviously, this includes women, but my research has indicated that - within the sport of football - this also includes men of color, poor men, and men who do not play the game at all.

I have chosen to analyze the sport of football through the frame of hegemonic masculinity because it is a crucial element of American culture. Games attract millions of viewers, millions of dollars, and an abundance of attention from the media. While baseball and basketball arguably generate similar levels of interest, the game of football functions on aforementioned hegemonically masculine characteristics that others do not. The strongest, fastest, most violent athletes garner success over others, and self-sacrifice is honored by fans, coaches, and other players alike. Likewise, I chose to conduct an examination of the NFL’s responses to the implications of hegemonic masculinity on football because of its influential position over the sport, society, and culture. Not only does the NFL generate billions of dollars of income each year through the sport of football, but it has now extended its prominence in society through philanthropic endeavors, advocacy causes, and youth education. In this way, the NFL holds clout in many areas of American life.

Through my research, I have found that hegemonic masculinity manifested within the sport of football has resulted in a multitude of negative implications, both physically and socially. The most dangerous and infamous example of this is Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, which all players are at risk of developing. However, my research indicates that players from less affluent communities - particularly black players - are at

higher risk of negative health effects and CTE because of the increased likelihood that they will play football for extended periods of time as well as play in positions that make them especially vulnerable. Additionally, hegemonic masculinities expressed through football contribute to the widely publicized issue of domestic assault, as NFL players have historically been protected by insufficient rehabilitation and punishment methods. Lastly, the cultural significance of football creates a means of emasculating young boys who are unable or do not want to play the game, creating problematic emotional effects centered around the definitions of boyhood and masculinity. The National Football League has either addressed the effects and expressions of hegemonic masculinity superficially through the Corporate Social Responsibility Campaign and public relations strategies or has neglected to address them effectively at all. I discuss in Chapter 5 that this is likely because the NFL - and football in general - are a means of protecting a hegemonic masculinity that has yet to be truly challenged by those who are most negatively impacted by it.

### *Methodology*

My research utilizes a mixed methods approach to address the question of what implications American hegemonic masculinity has on football and how the NFL has responded to those implications. I used both primary and secondary sources to garner qualitative data. Much of my primary data, which was used predominantly in Chapters 3 and 4, was collected through online sports news articles and other news outlets, including pieces by ESPN, the Undeclared, the New York Times, the Atlantic, and the Washington Post. These pieces provided specific information about injuries, domestic violence, and

racial tensions within the sport of football. Most of these pieces were written within the past ten years, though it was critical to obtain older sources to illustrate a pattern of neglect by the National Football League. My primary sources were supplemented by interviews with former professional football players Aaron Hayden and Andre Lott. I obtained approval for these interviews, which were conducted this past winter, from the University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Though I recognize the limited scope of my interviews, they helped personalize my research in a way that made my argument stronger and more relatable. I asked them a small number of questions about injury, hypermasculine rhetoric used on the field, and race. My secondary sources were crucial to obtaining my theoretic framework and commentaries on the social influences of football, which is outlined in the literature review. In order to garner secondary sources, I searched terms such as "hegemonic masculinity," "football and masculinity," "race and football," and "masculinity and sport." I then looked for applicable work on these themes and derived theories from them to frame my argument. The foundational definition of hegemonic masculinity was derived from works by R.W. Connell, who coined the term in the 1990s but has since written more elaborative pieces on the subject. I also chose to incorporate Amy Pochmara's article, *Are You a Real Man?*, as the piece was essential to my understanding of hegemonic masculinity, as well as Peter Benson's 2017 study regarding injury and harm reduction techniques implemented by the NFL, which allowed me to better understand the scope of the issue and the problematic response. Each of my sources were saved to Zotero, and the software was later used to create a bibliography. This mixed methods approach allows me to apply inductive

reasoning to my data and sources and to construct a narrative that more fully explains the dynamics between hegemonic masculinity, injury, and race within the sport of football.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### *Hegemonic Masculinity*

Hegemonic masculinity is a term that defines the cultural construction of manliness that is widely valued among society with ties to traditional gender norms. The term not only encompasses traditional and generic “manly” characteristics, such as strength, bravery, authority, and toughness, but describes also the social process of honoring and protecting a certain type of masculinity above others to ensure their continued dominance in society. The concept of a hegemonic masculinity was developed by R.W. Connell in 1995, but has since been developed further in more recent publications. He saw hegemonic masculinity as not only relative to femininities, but also to other masculinities. It follows, according to Connell, that not all masculinities are equal, but are rather placed in a hierarchy that privileges a hegemonic masculinity (Grindstaff & West 2011). This masculinity is most protected by society, because it is representative of a widespread objective masculine truth. The existence of multiple masculinities, therefore, emphasizes not only men’s control over women, but men’s control over other men as a central feature of hegemonic masculinity (Grindstaff & West 2011). Hegemony requires social, economic, and political dominance of a certain group. In the United States, this group is white males. Pochmara, in her piece, *Are You a Real Man?*, complicates Connell’s definition of a masculinity by asserting that masculinity is not only an inclusive ideal made up of characteristics, but an *exclusive* concept that requires the denunciation of the feminine, which must be enacted throughout a male’s

entire life (Pochmara 2008). Men feel pressured to prove their manhood, particularly when other men scrutinize it. Rhetoric regarding manhood in today's society emphasizes the term "real man," suggesting that there are men who are not "real" (Pochmara 2008). She argues that ensuring hegemonic masculinity is a process in which the man must reject femininity, childishness, and the homosexual, and that the process can only be validated by other men (Pochmara 2008). Dellinger added to this examination of masculinity by further clarifying hegemony, which "foregrounds the specifically *cultural* dimensions of gender inequality. Hegemony is the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains its privilege" (Dellinger 2004). Rather than using dissension through force or coercion, it is secured through consent, as particular ideologies, practices, and social relationships are made to seem as though they are natural and inevitable. Social dynamics constructed through this process are less susceptible to attack or criticism.

Thus, "marginalization" as Connell calls it, is an inherent component of hegemonic masculinity used to express the relationship between dominant and subordinate masculinities, the latter of which are often racial or ethnic groups. He writes, "marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group" (Connell 1995). Larry Ray, in his book *Violence and Society*, describes hegemonic masculinity in similar terms, writing "'Hegemonic' masculinities are not necessarily statistically normal (they might be enacted only by a minority of men), but they are normative and the most honoured way of of being a male while legitimating the subordination of women and non-hegemonic - notably effeminate, gay, and some racialized - masculinities. The intersection of race, class, and gender, then, become important in understanding the term "hegemonic" (Ray 2018). Importantly,

although the formulation of a hegemonic masculinity may benefit men as member of a biological group, it does not correspond directly to the experience of each individual man.

### *Psychological and Historical Development of Masculinity in America*

The creation of a hegemonic masculinity can be understood in terms of exclusion and rejection throughout history, made concrete through women's movements, minority movements, and the expansion of equality for all in the public sphere. The industrial revolution transformed American economy and society, facilitating a transition from farming, small business, and self-employment to an industrialized capitalist society where physical strength was less relevant to work than ever before. Family life and work life took place in two distinct spheres, and young boys were being raised by women, rather than men. This phenomenon sparked fear that males were becoming soft and more feminized (Messner 1992). At the end of the nineteenth century, women began entering the workplace, black individuals began moving to cities to find work, and minorities began fighting for more rights in the United States (Pochmara 2008). These societal changes, according to Gail Bederman, produced the need to remake the concept of Victorian manliness that had endured up until this time period. The term 'manliness' and "manhood" was replaced with the term "masculinity", which encompassed the characteristics of "aggressiveness, physical force, and male sexuality" rather than moral values connected to the term manliness (Bederman 1995). Additionally, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" in 1893. His piece, which is now recognized as one of the most significant pieces written on



American society, romanticized the idea of the American Frontier as he both called attention to its end and expressed the importance of its concept to American society. Turner's thesis is crucial to the modern understanding of American hegemonic masculinity, as he links the Western frontier to democracy and emergence of American character and implicitly asserts the link between the Western frontier and white American masculinity. Thus, the American character, which is closely identified with American white masculinity, is understood in reference to "power (masterful, dominant, powerful), physical strength (coarseness, grasp of material things), and vitality (buoyancy and exuberance)" (Pochmara 2008).

In order to stabilize the precarious concept of masculine identity under threat from female and minority progress, a number of strategies were employed. Firstly, the feminization of young boys was referred to commonly in public discourse as a "crisis." The threat of feminization by the American mother was protested publicly. Men became increasingly frightened that their sons' excess exposure to their mothers was turning them into "sissies" and "wusses" (Bederman 1995). Yet, this discourse became paradoxical, as women entering the workforce during the industrial revolution were said to be "too successful" as Joe Dubbert wrote. Thus, while the crisis of feminization criticized American motherhood and threatened masculinity, it was also being attacked through female economic independence. Solutions to the paradox included increasing the number of male teachers in public schools and, most significantly, the founding of the Boy Scouts of America in 1910 (Pochmara 2008). Bederman and Kimmel, in an analysis of the practical methods that were used to deal with this sense of crisis, found that middle-class men at the end of the nineteenth century attempted to prevent the feminization of boys

and the socialization of “sissies” through the revitalization of primitive physical strength. In turn, the stress on physical exercise and the preoccupation with the male body arose.

According to Messner, the expansion of organized sport served to emphasize the ideology of male dominance in the face of social developments (Messner 1992). Engagement in manly aggressive sports was widely publicized by men and public figures in the United States, leading to the popularization of sports such as boxing, hunting, baseball, and later football. Boxing and hunting were understood to be sports of the working-class, as they were based on a more uncivilized strength and recreations of the struggle for survival through which one becomes a man. “The savage past of potent masculinity was projected onto the lower classes and appropriated by the middle-class audiences” (Pochmara 2008). Baseball and football, both heralded as sports central to American identity, were particularly attractive to the upper classes, as they combined civilized rules with physical strength (Kimmel 2005). Sports were also used by the turn of the 20th century to homogenize immigrants into the new capitalist society. “Elites viewed the extension of sport as means of control, while marginalized groups learned to utilize sport as a means for social mobility and self expression in an increasingly structured society” (Prager 2008). The repercussions of using sports as hegemony will be discussed in Chapter 3, but it is critical to understand the hierarchy that this process created amongst men, as hegemonic masculinity refers broadly to men’s power over other men. Sports in the early twentieth century became a means of producing this societal and cultural structure.

Yet, the “crisis” of feminization was not overcome until the beginning of World War I, which brought a sense of stability into masculine gender identity. The

performative nature of war became an extreme version of the aforementioned characteristics that came to define masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including power, physical strength and dominance, and vitality. Deployment offered men an escape from civilization and femininity, which were tied together by the notion that women were solely responsible for socializing the American youth as well as maintaining jobs in the industrialized economy. This sense of escape, garnered through the participation in homosocial sports, prize fighting, and going into war can be seen as “analogical on the symbolic level.” As Mailer, in his essay “The White Man Unburdened,” wrote: “After all, war was, with all else, the most dramatic and serious extrapolation of sports” (Mailer 2003).

Thus, the process of developing a hegemonic masculinity can be seen on a physiological and historical level as based on exclusive criteria. It consists of differentiation, exclusion, and escape, marked by anxiety and phobia, and projects fear of other social groups. In this way, the American hegemonic masculinity is “performative” in nature. Performativity is a concept coined by Judith Butler, who describes gender as a socially constructed phenomenon through rhetoric and nonverbal communication, which serve to define and maintain identities (Butler 1990). Men who do not embody the performative characteristics associated with manhood are viewed as “not real,” “feminine” or “gay” (Pochmara 2008). “Because they too represent a symbolic slide toward femininity, men branded as ‘sissies, wimps, fags,’ etc. also represent subordinated masculinity” (Kimmel 2005). Modern hegemonic masculinity can be viewed as the regression of masculine values to an emphasis on aggression, self-reliance, aggressiveness, and strength, all components necessary in male sports today.

### *Hegemonic Masculinity and Sport*

Emily Clark, in her article “Go Hard or Go Home,” examines the perceptions and connotations dominating the American understanding of masculinity and its manipulation through the exposure to sport. “The hegemonic brand of masculinity establishes, enforces, and legitimizes the ascribed authority of a particular kind of male figure” (Young & Atkinson 2008). The respected status of becoming hegemonically masculine is defined by strength, courage, dominance, emotional detachment, and social power and authority, all of which are encouraged by sport and popularized by the media and fandom (Clark 2012). Today, regardless of whether they wish to participate in sports or not, men and boys in the United States are judged by their perceived ability to succeed in the sports arena (Messner 1992). In order to ascend the gender hierarchy and become “successful,” men must detach themselves entirely from femininity and contest for hegemonic supremacy. In pursuit of this goal, men often “commit violent acts against themselves, and others, to promote their masculine dominance among their peers” (Adams et al. 2010). The sports arena in which hegemonic masculinity is personified by athletes allows for self-destruction, where men recognize the limits and dangers of their actions and still conform to indulging in dangerous actions, particularly through violence, ignoring their own health as well as others. Yet, athletes often show a form of contextual morality, reasoning that these acts are morally acceptable as long as they are contained to the realm of sports. If these acts are executed within this area and regulated by rules, then they cannot be punished or criticized by society. Rather, they are respected (Bredemeier & Shields 1986). Moreover, violence within the realm of sports is considered an “occupation hazard” with practical consequences if not performed (Papas et al. 2004).

The body, as athletes construct and build upon their physical strength, becomes a “fabricated and manufactured product” (Clark 2012). The athlete becomes dehumanized and reduced to an object, numbing himself to the consequences of their violence (Horrigan 2006). The athlete’s body becomes a weapon and pain, injury, or even death are made more ordinary. They are expected to wear their injuries with pride, considering them a badge of honor for their violent behavior (Guttman 1997). I assert, however, that this notion is more true and problematic for athletes of color, who become even more so dehumanized than the white athlete and are, therefore, subjected to greater danger. This theory will be discussed further in Chapter 3. Sport is a potent cultural force primarily because it appears to be rooted in the “natural” expression of male dominance. Michael Messner, one of the most widely known scholars on issues pertaining to sports and masculinity, reasons that sports exist as a way for men to impose hegemonic masculinity, and one of the last arenas in which a male’s physical size and strength can be used to assert power over others without societal or legal repercussions (Messner 1992).

Men who are the “strongest, most powerful, and most aggressive” benefit by exuding that power over other men in sports and are praised by the media, coaches and owners, and fans for doing so. For example, in his article “The Televised Sports Manhood Formula,” Messner examines sports media using a content analysis. In doing so, he found themes in both sports programming and commercials that directly promote the ideals encompassed in hegemonic masculinity. The content examined showed explicit equations of sports to war, as well as the glamorization of “playing through pain” (Messner 2007). Toughness, strength, and male superiority are celebrated by the media, which can be partially blamed for the construction and continuation of toxic hegemonic

masculinity today. Though, the media is not solely to blame, as owners, managers, fans, and players alike encourage these problematic ideals. Violence in sports is sensationalized and normalized in the United States, promoting the misguided belief that violent acts are desirable and even admirable within the arena of sport. For example, Peyton Manning suffered from multiple injuries in his back and neck during the 2011 NFL season, keeping him from playing quarterback for the Indianapolis Colts. Upon his return to practice, coaches, teammates, the media, and fans alike hailed him as heroic for his strong return (Jussim 2019). Ron Mix, on the other hand, is recognized as one of the greatest tacklers of all time for his ability to inflict severe hits on his opponents. As a former player for the San Diego Chargers and the Oakland Raiders, he was even enshrined to the Pro Football Hall of Fame as a reflection of his ferocity on the field (Brandt 2017). Violence, thus, is a way of attracting spectators, following that coaches and players encourage violence as a way of gaining stardom, social prowess, and economic success.

### **Chapter 3: Findings**

#### *1. Negative Health Implications and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy*

Football centers on a milieu of competitive, hypermasculinized, status-laden physicality where ‘collisions are glorified’ (McLeod et al. 2014). Additionally, as previously mentioned, athletes are expected to “play through pain” and often face consequences when they do not want or are unable to do so. Football demands a certain degree of intimacy and inclusivity, as players refer to one another as “brothers” and “family,” patting one another on the bottom to celebrate successes. While seemingly contradictory to the aforementioned rejection of femininity involved in masculinization, this sort of interaction is a complicated reinforcement of male affirmation needed to attain true masculinity. Yet, football also demands that players act in hypermasculine, violent, and dangerous ways toward themselves and others in order to demonstrate toxic hegemonic masculinities that are expected of them by American society. Coaches often perpetuate hypermasculine rhetoric, such as “man up” and “no pain no gain.”

A critical component of football involves “promoting professional players’ hegemonic masculine status” and sacrificing one’s body to obtain sporting glory (Anderson & Kian 2012). Football romanticizes the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, requiring that players “portray a tough persona and refuse to show weakness in any capacity” (Anderson & Kian 2012). Because of the expression of masculinity in professional football, researchers have found that players are less likely to report even the

most dangerous injuries: those to the head. They do so in order to keep playing the game and will sustain more head trauma as a consequence (Anderson & Kian 2012). In an interview with Andre Lott, who played college football at the University of Tennessee and was drafted in the 5th round to the Washington Redskins before being traded to the Pittsburgh Steelers, I asked if he had ever continued to play after sustaining a hard hit to the head. He responded saying, “Of course! From the time we are just boys playing in elementary school, we’re taught to ‘brush it off’ and keep playing... if we can tell the coach what our name is and where we live, we were all good to go back out there for the next play” (Lott 2019). This lack of reporting has led to an increase in concussive and sub-concussive head injuries among NFL players, contributing to a rise in CTE among professional American football players. Studies have shown that sports involving heavy and constant contact, particularly American football, have left long-lasting brain damage to those who have endured repetitive hits to the head. This damage is referred to medically as “Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy,” or CTE, and is used to describe the pathologic changes found in autopsies in athletes’ brains who have suffered repeated hits to the head and concussions. Its symptoms include headaches, trouble concentrating, confusion, emotional instability, aggression, and loss of memory (Williams 2017). Additionally, epidemiological studies conducted by Boston University demonstrates a connection between playing football and increased prevalence of depression and other cognitive diseases. In examining the brains of deceased players, their study found that 96 percent of former professional football players and 79 percent of former players at any level suffered from CTE. A number of former NFL players who committed suicide were also diagnosed with CTE (Boston University CTE Center 2015). In an interview with



Aaron Hayden, a former safety who played for the Washington Redskins, Chicago Bears, and Pittsburgh Steelers, I asked him whether or not his coaches used phrases such as “toughen up,” “play through the pain,” “don’t be a sissy” or other phrases of the sort. He responded, “Oh, yeah! I mean that’s just part of it...If you’re not playing or you fail, you’re going to lose your job. At the end of the day, you have to perform” (Hayden 2019). Hayden, who sustained multiple concussions and a hamstring tear with which he played, articulates the internal drive to succeed in spite of physical barriers he faced that many other football players feel. He, Lott, and most other athletes possess a desire to propagate warrior-like sentiments and characteristics in order to earn success and social prowess. They, therefore, are evidence of Pochmara’s modern definition of masculinity, representing power, physical strength, vitality, and self-sacrifice.

Football is played from ages as young as seven through college and even into adulthood for a very talented few. From the ages of 12 to 17, the human brain develops at a very high rate and is extremely susceptible to outside stressors and to substance abuse (Brody 2015). Young developing brains are especially susceptible to concussions, with “sports-related concussions account[ing] for more than half of all emergency room visits in kids aged 8 through 13” (Brody 2015). The effects of these injuries are often underemphasized and dismissed as an unavoidable part of growing up and playing sports. Oftentimes, colloquial terms such as ‘ding’ or ‘bell-ringer’ are used by parents and coaches and serve to “minimize the seriousness of the injury...” (Brody 2015). The information and experiences taken in by children and teenagers during this time period will undoubtedly affect their personality and lives and should be protected as such. In fact, a Boston University study that took place in 2017 indicated that athletes who begin

playing tackle football before the age of 12 have twice as much of a risk of behavioral problems later in life and three times as much of a risk of clinical depression as athletes who begin playing after 12 (Boston University CTE Center 2017). An additional study from Wake Forest University found that boys who played just one season of tackle football between the ages of 8 and 13 had diminished function in part of their brain (Benson 2017). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the dangerous implications on young athletes in addition to those playing at the professional level.

However, even if the seriousness of concussions is fully realized by all, often times the concussion goes undiagnosed by doctors due to self-diagnosis from the players themselves as well as their failure to report symptoms of brain injuries to coaches, parents, or physicians. This causes notable issues; “some studies have estimated that over 50 percent of concussions go undiagnosed, in large part due to athletes failing to report symptoms. This is especially problematic as athletes experiencing concussion symptoms and continuing to participate in their sport both prolong the recovery from their initial injury and put themselves at greater risk for magnified neurological consequences” (Baugh 2014). Each concussion that an athlete endures exponentially increases their chances of developing long-lasting brain damage. When athletes continue to play in an effort to “brush it off”, another hit to the head could even cause “second impact syndrome” in which “rapid catastrophic swelling of the brain [occurs] that can cause lifelong impairments, coma, and even death” (Brody 2015). High school and college players specifically have been undiagnosed at alarming rates. “More than 50 percent of high school athletes and 70 percent of college athletes failed to report concussions sustained while playing football” (Brody 2015). The current test used on an athlete that is

suspected of having a brain injury misses “about 40 percent of concussions” (Brody 2015).

Further, players suffering from head injuries and concussions, especially at high levels, are often encouraged to continue playing even after reporting symptoms, though some consequences and mental changes may take place without the players experiencing common symptoms of a concussion at all (Cartensen 2014). An example of negligence by a coach can be seen at the University of Michigan, where former head coach Brady Hoke refused to take out a player that had clearly suffered a severe concussion and had lost cognitive functions (Schultz 2014). As exceptionally gifted college athletes move into the National Football League (NFL) after graduating, the concern for the minds of the players seems to diminish even more as the sport becomes their occupation despite research that suggests that those players are at even greater risk for developing CTE.

For years the NFL remained dismissive about the magnitude of the issues at hand. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, “there is no scientific evidence that supports that “harm reduction” techniques reduce brain injuries. Like the Big Tobacco industry, the NFL is using these strategies as a way of continuing harm under the guise of improving health. In promoting new tackling techniques through programs such as “Heads Up Football” and marketing helmets with “improved” technology, the NFL perpetuates the notion that football can be made safer (Benson 2017). The inherent nature of the game, however, rests on the unavoidable dangers that follow hard hits by strong men. This is likely due to the fact that many in the league attribute brain injuries to violent, forceful, exceptional blows to the head, when in fact autopsies show “it’s the repeat, more minor head trauma...that may pose the greatest risk” (Breslow 2015). Therefore, while data released

by the *Player Health and Safety Report* advertises optimistically that concussions have reduced due to the new technology in helmets, the report unfortunately ignores the true factors that lend to traumatic brain injury (NFL 2015).

Players themselves are even becoming concerned with their own safety and the safety of their youth. Chris Borland, former player in the NFL, retired after only one year because of the risk of brain injury. He was quoted saying, “if there were no possibility of brain damage, I’d still be playing.” He also called the sport “dehumanizing” because of its gladiatorial nature and dependence on violence. After retirement, he was asked to join groups tasked with teaching enhanced tackling techniques, but no tackling technique can make violence “safe,” a notion I will elaborate on in Chapter 5. Borland declined, explaining that he refused to be a part of a committee that made a sport so dependent on brutality “safer” (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada 2015). This concern has been voiced by many NFL players. In a 2014 survey, a quarter of professional players said that they were concerned most about head injuries, while half claimed they were concerned about injuries to the lower limbs due to targeting rules, naming Rob Gronkowski as an example of someone who had endured one. This notion reiterates Borland’s concern in general - that precautionary efforts and different teaching styles will not make the game safer. Rather, players and coaches know that while a torn ACL or ankle injury will leave the injured individual unable to play, a hit to the head can be overlooked without any delay of the game (Barzilai & Brady 2014).

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy is a disease that football players at all levels are at risk of developing. The nature of football is inherently violent, and the measures taken by the NFL will not be enough to keep their players safe. Though the league,

coaches, players, and the public have begun to take the issue more seriously, the game itself requires a brutality that borders on exploitation of the human body. Football is an American staple, offering entertainment to millions of citizens across the United States. Yet, in incentivizing football through college scholarships, incomes of several million dollars, endorsements from companies, fame and recognition, are Americans glorifying a career path that leaves many mentally ill for the remainder of their lives? I will speak to this further in Chapter 5.

## *2. Socioeconomic and Racial Exploitation and Predation*

Racial and ethnic discrimination in sports can be traced back to the fourth century C.E., in which Roman gladiators and other sports celebrities from ethnic background groups were regarded with simultaneous admiration and fear - seen as almost inhuman - and were owned by private groups of wealthy white male elites. In essence, these athletes were enslaved to those who owned them, and their freedom came with limited legal rights and the inability to reintegrate into society. Besnier, Brownwell, and Carter, in their book *The Anthropology of Sports: Bodies, Borders, and Biopolitics*, note that “their condition is far too similar to the status of black and African athletes in their contemporary sport” (Besnier 2017).

The hypermasculine, violent, and gladiatorial-like demeanor that football players are forced to undertake on the football field is common among players of all colors. Yet, I argue that players who are less-affluent, of color, or who face compounding implications by being both, are harmed most by this social construction. Young players are taught to adhere to this warrior-like character in an effort to “accrue social and symbolic capital

and are promoted in teams and leagues, perhaps obtaining access to private schools, higher education, and a career” (Benson 2017). As a consequence, American football is exploitative in several ways. The sport is introduced as an incentive structure in which young men - particularly poor men and men of color - engage in dangerous behavior to gain status and capital in order to gain social upward mobility and defy the compounding obstacles American society has placed on them.

Amanda Morris and Michel Martin examine the phenomenon of socioeconomic exploitation in a National Public Radio article titled “Poor Kids More Likely to Play Football, Despite Brain Injury Concerns.” They report that, while many more affluent families in Illinois are choosing to restrict their sons from playing, low-income boys are continuing to participate in football. “Over the past five years in Illinois, the proportion of high school football rosters filled by low-income boys rose nearly 25 percent – even as the number of players in the state has fallen by 14.8 percent over the same period” (Morris & Martin 2019). This trend can be seen across the United States, according to Albert Samaha, who wrote a book on the subject entitled *Never Ran, Never Will: Boyhood and Football in a Changing Inner City America*. Samaha concurs that the assessed risk of playing differs immensely between low-income, primarily black and brown families, and higher income white families. Football offers a more promising trajectory for low-income students - often those who are also students of color - than any other extra-curricular activity, while white children are more often able to reach socioeconomic, educational, and occupational goals through other means.

A reason that football remains attractive for less affluent communities is that the odds of receiving a scholarship for football are significantly better than any other sport.

Football scholarships at NCAA and NAIA schools far outnumber those allocated for other sports, reaching numbers close to 26,000. High school football programs are investing large amounts of money as well. A high school located outside of Katy, TX, for example, recently spend over \$70 million on a new stadium and facility (Samaha 2018). Samaha commented on the trend, saying “as long as the money is going into this activity, this is where the opportunities are going to be” (Samaha 2018). However, only the most elite athletes earn places on NFL teams and the high availability of players endanger those who become injured. Only 1.6 percent of NCAA football players are drafted into the NFL, and hundreds of talented players hungry for their opportunity to play at the professional level are given it when NFL athletes get hurt and are unable to play (NCAA 2018). Big Football, therefore, is a competitive industry, in which athletes are forced to sacrifice their bodies and health to impress organizations. Violence is normalized, legitimized, and accepted on the field, where these “radically unjustifiable” acts are tolerated nowhere else in other athletic and workplace environments (McLeod et al. 2014). Nowhere else in the professional world is it appropriate to use physical violence against others, use foul language against opponents, or dance in celebration of the physical dominance over another body. Increasingly, low-income children are being encouraged to enter into an industry in which violence is profitable for corporations, industries, and universities, and they are in turn exposed to injuries that “do not similarly affect advantaged populations” (Benson 2017).

While all players are certainly at risk of injury, it is important to examine the socioeconomic and racial predation the NFL executes in order to maintain its future labor source and fan base. In 2018, black athletes and athletes of other ethnicities made up 53

percent of Division I college-football players, which is up from 41 percent in 2008.

Alternatively, white athletes made up 47 percent, down from 59 percent in 2008 (NCAA 2018). Likewise, a recent study of 50,000 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students conducted by *Monitoring the Future* showed that nearly 44 percent of black boys play tackle football, compared with 29 percent of white boys, and the level of participation in high school football is growing in states that are predominantly black and declining in majority-white states (Semuels 2019). A steady amount of research has been conducted over the last decade that indicates that, because communities of color are those who are often the most socioeconomically disadvantaged, they are the ones who continue to allow their children to play football. For these communities who have been exposed to systemic racism and institutionalized economic disadvantage, football is a more palatable option for their children than it is for their white, affluent counterparts. In simpler terms, the benefits are perceived as greater than the cost.

Alana Semuels wrote a piece in *The Atlantic* using two rural Georgia families living only neighborhoods apart, one white and one black, to elaborate on this phenomenon. In interviews with Shantavia Jackson, a single black mother of three young boys, Semuels was able to identify the reasons that black families continue sending their children up for the sport. Jackson discussed the benefits of keeping her children out of gang related trouble, the influence of extended family and mentors in coaches, and the prerequisite of maintaining good grades. Another mother, Hope Moore, who started her son in football when he was only six years old, said that she wished to keep her child off the couch and away from video games. The most compelling reason, however, was the opportunities football present for social and economic upward mobility. Robert W.



Turner II, a professor at George Washington University and former NFL player, importantly noted that since 1988, the NCAA has added 62 Division I schools to the list of those eligible to offer full-ride football scholarships (Semuels 2019). Other sports, by contrast, are played in fewer schools with the ability to offer full scholarships. Turner II predicts that “If [universities] started giving boys the same amount of scholarship in swimming, you’d see a whole bunch of poor kids jumping in the pool” (Semuels 2019). The incentive structure for the aforementioned families, therefore, is skewed because of the ways in which universities, the NCAA, and the money involved in football incentivize lower income students more so than do other sports. Additionally, the so-called “activity gap” is widening between more and less affluent communities. Wealthier communities are able to provide their children with more extracurricular activities, and parents in these communities are able to pay for their children to master them. Less affluent communities, alternatively, are unable to provide these resources to students, contributing to the growing amount of poorer, black children continuing to play football (Wong 2015). Thus, while middle and upper class white families have the ability to assess risk based on the notion that their children will attend college regardless of their involvement in football, poorer black families do not have the same privilege.

Additionally, positions on the football field are segregated in a way that puts certain bodies at higher risk for injury. These positions are also those that are not paid as much as others. “Skill” positions, those which appear more responsible for scoring, are the positions of quarterback, running back, and receiver. These are the highest paid positions on the field. Linemen, on the other hand, earn much less money for their performance and are put at much greater risk for CTE, accounting for 40 percent of all

cases according to data collected (Jenkins et al. 2013). One defensive lineman was quoted saying “the game is safer for certain positions,” and those are often the positions filled by white players. There are a number of rules that protect the quarterback, a majority of whom are white. For example, quarterbacks are allowed to fall to the ground before being tackled, and players who collide with them too aggressively can be penalized. Several players explained that this is due to the fact that linemen are seen as more disposable, while quarterbacks and others who play in “skill positions” are valuable marketing resources and are, therefore, better protected (Jenkins et al. 2013). These circumstances can be attributed to a long history of double standards, where black quarterbacks were asked to switch positions and, therefore, paid lower salaries than their equally-skilled white counterparts. According to Sean Lahman, a few black athletes played in the NFL every year from 1920 to 1933. In 1934, an unofficial ban was placed on black athletes, largely due to the racist efforts of George Marshall, owner of the Washington Redskins (Deadspin 2014). When the ban was lifted in 1946, black athletes entered back into professional football but were forced to play in what was referred to as the “non-thinking” positions. In order to succeed, teams must have astute decision-makers and leaders in center positions, and the belief was that black players were not capable to perform well there. This belief was rooted in the period of slavery in the United States, in which white individuals created a narrative that depicted the black population as unable to think for themselves, subservient, and animalistic. Today, the rhetoric has softened immensely around black quarterbacks, middle linebackers, and other positions requiring strategic thinking. Yet despite this, black players continue to be underrepresented in these positions. The center positions remain predominantly white within the league, despite the

fact that the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) at the University of Central Florida, along with the emergence of young superstars such as Russell Wilson, Cam Newton, Dak Prescott and others, have proved the racist ideas about leadership and intellect are no longer applicable. Although some may argue that this reflects the self-selection of positions, this argument ignorantly ignores that black high schools and colleges have long had their own quarterbacks, guards and centers. When these individuals move to professional football, they tend to be reassigned to non-central positions. Examples of this can be seen through players such as Pete Hall, who played quarterback at Marquette and then was switched to receiver when he made it to the NFL. Likewise, Tennessee State's quarterback Eldridge Dickey was drafted to the Raider in 1986, but was switched to utility player and punt returner (Stuart 2013). *In Never Give Up on Your Dream: My Journey*, Warren Moon, the only African-American quarterback inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, chronicles the racism he encountered during his time as a player. He writes:

“Despite the fact that there were a lot of African-Americans playing in the National Football League in the '50s, '60s and '70s, there was a stereotype that we weren't capable of succeeding at certain positions. If you played those positions in college and you got drafted, you knew you were probably going to get moved in the NFL. Supposedly, we weren't smart enough or had the leadership qualities or whatever it took. At every position, for African-Americans, conquering that myth at quarterback was so important” (Moon 2009).

Thus, as we analyze football, we must consider the dichotomy of black versus white players in order to understand the greater risks imposed on bodies of color. In 2016, Bill Simmons refers to this lens of analysis as the “precarious political-racial-social tightrope that the league [has] been walking for decades.”

More obvious and disturbing evidence of the remnants of racism in Big Football can be viewed through the NFL combine, an annual week-long showcase of players' skills and strength (NFL 2019). Here, "athletes' hand size, arm length, and wingspan are measured...and players are asked to stand naked but for their workout shorts so that team recruiters can see how they are built" (Boylan, McMahon, & Monroe 2017). NFL executives, who are mostly white, evaluate the bodies of players in their decision to make an investment. A statistical model of the language used during these events are telling. Language used to describe a minority quarterback is typically discussed in terms of "physical characteristics, to be judged erratic and unpredictable, and to have his successes and failures ascribed to outside forces" (Boylan, McMahon, & Monroe 2017). His hands, weight, height are reported. Often, he is described as hesitant, less of a leader, or impulsive. In contrast, a white player is more likely to be described by characteristics beyond his physical build in a more positive light. "He is smart, displays intelligence, and understands the game...is a leader...consistent, calm, and poised" (Boylan, McMahon, & Monroe 2017). In fact, researchers found that for a white player weighing 223 pounds, there is a 6 percent chance that his report will use the word "weight," while there is a 27 percent chance a 223-pound minority prospect's report will use the same word (Boylan, McMahon, & Monroe 2017). This is further evidence of the subtle, but important, expressions of hegemonic masculinity manifested in the game of football. The combine is essentially comprised of a panel of predominantly white men who discuss the physicality of black bodies and decide their worth based off of those qualities. It is difficult to ignore the parallels to American slave auctions of the nineteenth century. While white men are also judged, they are done so in a way that emphasizes intellectual and leadership

capabilities, independent of their physical features. This experience reinforces the dominance of white men over other men of color and serves as a poignant reminder of the systemic racism that endures still today.

The racial divide on the football field is indicative of persistent and institutionalized inequality in America due to poverty and disenfranchisement. Health disparities across all areas of American society continue to affect black and colored communities unproportionally. These are remnants of a long history of racial inequality and unequal access to healthcare. In the early 20th century, black Americans were unable to buy homes in well-off neighborhoods, excluded from trade unions and many areas of the job market, and paid less than white individuals. Segregation has resulted in long-term and devastating health implications for black Americans. Today, low-income black boys are much more likely than their white counterparts to live in neighborhoods with chronic poverty and violence. These communities are also those with less access to nutritious foods (Semuels 2019). Despite the economic and social benefits that football can provide, it also worsens the racial disparities of health. Families in these neighborhoods have poor access to healthcare and are typically uninformed of the risks that football places on their children. These factors obscure the long-term dangers of the sport. Shantavia Jackson expressed this notion with a fatalistic attitude, claiming that her children could be injured or killed in a car accident or drive-by shooting or with a lack of access to food (Semuels 2019). Harry Edwards, a civil-rights activist and professor at the University of California Berkeley, said of low-income black communities that “nobody advises them as to the long-term medical risks [of playing football]...They are out of the loop” (Semuels 2019). Those who lack access to the news about brain injuries from

football are less likely to encourage their children to play football than those who do not, according to a study conducted by Lindner and Hawkins. Therefore, both scarce resources to healthcare and other necessities coupled with little access to information about the risks associated with football contribute to the increasing number of black children playing.

As black boys are disproportionately entering the violent sport of football, white individuals are profiting off of them. Close to 70 percent of NFL players are black, but only 9.9 percent of managers are. Only two individuals of color are majority owners of NFL teams: Pakistani American Shahid Khan, owner of the Jacksonville Jaguars, and Kim Pegula, the female Korean American who partially owns the Buffalo Bills (Semuels 2019). Likewise, black coaches are grossly underrepresented, as only two hold head coaching positions in the NFL (Gibbs 2019). It is difficult to ignore, then, the gladiatorial and arguably plantation-like structure of Big Football in America. White people - mostly men - choose to invest in black players, subjecting them to the risk of CTE and other injuries as they profit from their success. Meanwhile, the NFL chooses to ignore the racial dynamic on the field and fails to facilitate an open dialogue, masking the injustices of predatory and exploitative methods of recruiting by championing black role models for black youth to admire, new tackling techniques, and helmet technology, as will be discussed in Chapter 4. Millions of Americans continue to watch football. Ratings were up in the 2018-2019 season (Semuels 2019). Yet, if this trend continues, viewers of all colors will perhaps only be watching black players collide violently for entertainment value, further perpetuating the health disparities the black community faces.

### *3. Domestic Violence*

Domestic violence has long held the attention of football fans and media alike, as seemingly every season presents another accusation of domestic violence committed by NFL players. In 2014, Baltimore Ravens football player Ray Rice knocked out his fiancée in a hotel elevator. The incident was caught on video, which went viral on TMZ. This was one of many such stories. Jon Shuppe of NBC News reported that between 2004 and 2018, there were as many as 87 arrests for domestic abuse involving 80 NFL players (Evans 2018).

As discussed in Chapter 2, American hegemonic masculinity consists of aggression, power, and superiority. In football, these characteristics manifest in forms of violence. Importantly, consistent blows to the head contributing to CTE have resulted in behavioral problems for many football players, as discussed previously. For example, Aaron Hernandez, former tight end for the New England Patriots, was found guilty of murdering another semi-professional football player in 2015. Two years later after being convicted, he committed suicide (Aaron Hernandez 2019). Upon his death, autopsies of his brain showed many signs of advanced Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy. Though an extreme example, Hernandez is one of many former football players who express violent and aggressive tendencies resulting in domestic abuse, depression, incompatibility with society, and even suicide in several cases.

However, aside from the psychological and mental damage football places on individuals, the inherent nature of football encourages violence, which several studies indicate may make it difficult for individuals to separate from the field. Clinical psychologist Dr. Stanley Teitelbaum, author of “Sports Heroes, Fallen Idols and

Illusions,” asserts, “Elite football players are trained to be very aggressive and violent on the field, that’s the nature of the game and that’s how they become important players. And sometimes it’s difficult for athletes to turn that off when they go back to their regular lives” (Evans 2018). Countless reports on domestic violence committed by professional football players is evidence of this truth.

The trend of violence against women, however, is not confined to the professional realm of football. It begins much earlier - in college or even high school. A recent study conducted by Gordon Forbes, Leah Adams-Curtis, Alexis Pakalkaand, and Kay White in the journal *Violence Against Women* analyzed dating aggression, sexual coercion, and aggression-supporting attitudes among college men as a function of participating in high school football. The authors studied 147 college men who had self-reportedly partaken in dating aggression and sexual coercion. “The study indicated that these men engaged in more psychological aggression, physical aggression, and sexual coercion toward their dating partners. They caused more physical injury, were more accepting of violence, and held more sexist attitudes and hostility toward women than young men *not* involved in football and violent sports” (Evans 2018). Though there is no assurance of causality, the study solidified a strong correlation between those who participated in aggressive high school sports and those who have committed acts of violence in a relationship. David Evans, a psychologist and author, suggests that “football is a zero-sum-game with a winner-loser paradigm. It is a symbolic universe with two opposing sides, where the mandate is the violent invasion into the opponent’s physical space for the purpose of domination and conquest. The goal of football is to penetrate the opposing side’s defenses and score a goal” (Evans 2018). Football players are taught at young ages to



transform aggravation and anger into aggression, and aggression into violence. This model is dangerous for teenage boys to internalize as they are beginning to interpret the roles they will take on as members of society. “Guided by the highly idealized model of football players, boys are likely to see interactions with girls as challenges to reach a goal, instead of explorations to build relationships” (Evans 2018). When faced with obstacles or challenges to that goal, boys - like football players - may use aggression and violence to attain success in a given situation.

The issue of domestic abuse is one that harms not only the public image of the player, team, league, and victim, but one that may also result in harm for all women, particularly survivors of domestic abuse. As players continue to face few consequences for their crimes, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4, and victims continue to go unheard, toxic hegemonic masculinity in the form of violence is perpetuated and normalized. Young men watch as their favorite players indulge in harmful, hypermasculine behavior in order to exhibit power over women, while women watch as those in the public eye are able to escape appropriate repercussions because of their social status.

#### *4. Rigid Societal Structures and Gender norms that Do Not Allow for Deviancy*

Not only are hegemonically masculine ideologies dangerous to the physical health of males, but they ignore the dangers to to American society and the psychological development of our nation’s male youth. Studies conducted by Prager and Woolock have analyzed the facilitation of American hegemonic masculinity within the game of football. It has been found by these scholars that football programs, independent of wins and losses, is viewed societally as a way to create future male community members that

adhere to, and deeply believe in, normative hegemonic masculinity. Football itself, then, is used as a way of socialization and also an important component of social capital. By using football as a means of social capital, defined by Woollock as “encompassing the norms and networks facilitating collective action for mutual benefit,” boys are exposed at a young age to value aggression, male superiority, and physical strength (Woollock 1998). Football can only be used in this way in societies that believe these characteristics to be essential to the function of society as a whole. “Success” under these circumstances is defined in terms of how well males adhere to the “natural” social order perceived to help society as a whole succeed. Daniel Prager conducted a study on this concept and found that football “revealed a community praise for traditional masculinity, exemplified by strength and aggression over all other kinds of masculinity, reinforced by the social capital that surrounds football in the communities” (Prager 2018). He also found that “coaches acted as influential socializers, training their players to not only win football games, but to become men that the community can be proud of, future ‘husbands, workers, and fathers’” (Prager 2018). Thus, from a young age, boys across the United States are subject to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, defined and accepted by the community at large. In his book *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Texas*, Foley presents an analysis of the masculine socialization associated with football, finding that communities often encourage sports (particularly football) as a way of making them “good kids” that do not participate in deviant activities but rather succumb to the natural aggression that accompanies manhood on the football field (Foley 1994). Boys who are not interested or unable to participate in this sport, thus, lack the “normal” socialization that football provides. They may be considered to be less of a male. As

novelist Zane Grey writes, “All boys love football. If they don’t, they’re not real boys” (Kimmel 2005). Thus, boys - particularly those of low socioeconomic status and color - are being harmed both physically and emotionally from football due to the ways in which it reinforces hegemonic masculinity both on and off the field.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion of NFL Responses to Findings**

### *1. Negative Health Implications and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy*

In recent years, the NFL's inability to address the issue of traumatic brain injuries was met with legal consequences. More than 2,000 former retired NFL players who showed signs of mental disorders, brain diseases, and other neurological problems believed to be caused by concussions during their professional careers entered into a class action lawsuit based on the notion that the league has deceptively hidden the risks of playing. The NFL chose to settle, costing them upwards of \$500 million between the years of 2016 and 2018, nearly a decade earlier than the league officials estimated they would reach that amount (CBS News 2018). The league is now using the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) campaign to relinquish their liability in these circumstances. The components of the CSR campaign can be viewed on the NFL's "Community" webpage, which states, "there exists a powerful NFL-wide commitment to giving back. The NFL embraces its role in unifying our communities, addressing key social issues and serving as a force for positive change" (NFL Community 2019). However, as discussed below, they have done so in a superficial and ineffective manner.

The National Football League's (NFL) strategy in combating disease and fatalities from brain-related injuries and shaping public discourse has remained limited in the recent past in light of increasing evidence suggesting the dangers of the sport. In 2016, the *New York Times* reported several comparisons between "Big Football" and "Big Tobacco". They showed "a long relationship with little in common beyond the health

risks [of] their products...including shared lobbyists, lawyers, and consultants...and the use of ‘questionable science’ to conceal risks” (Schwartz, Bogdanich, & Williams 2016). As tobacco industries responded to evidence indicating the harmful effects of their products by creating “lower risk” tobacco products, the NFL has put forth several interventional methods, including safer helmets, improved tackling techniques, and harsh penalties for targeting fowls. The league, in essence, is “pushing modest reforms to parry prohibitionist impulses such as those expressed in the *New York Times* by Bennet Omalu” who was the first neuroscientist to draw a connection between brain related injuries and the sport of football. Similar to the age limits placed on tobacco, Omalu calls for the prohibition of tackling before adulthood in order to allow adolescent brain development to take place without deterrence. This, however, is problematic for Big Football, which targets youth in order to solidify a future labor source and fan base (Benson 2015).

The NFL also does little to draw the innate connection between football, culture, and politics, as recent scholars have done. Rather, they mask the inherent issues of the sport under a veil of civic engagement through philanthropy and the notions of family, teamwork, and camaraderie. In doing so, the league perpetuates positive public discourse by indicating the sport is “harmless” and “inoffensive,” while the reality is that football is “a sport that inexorably causes disease and death, disproportionately affecting men of color” (Benson 2017). As a result of Omalu - and other scientists’ work - the NFL created the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee in 1994 (Benson 2017). However, the committee is now critiqued due to the bias of members, who worked for the league, and the bias of scientists testing the new safety equipment, who were consultants of the league (Benson 2017). The articles published by the scientists, in turn, vastly under-

emphasized the prevalence and severity of brain injuries within the sport of football. Years later, in 2015, the NFL settled the aforementioned class-action lawsuit of over 5,000 players, striking uncanny resemblance to the Big Tobacco industry, which was sued for injury and deception (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru 2013). PBS aired a commentary on the subject entitled *League of Denial: The NFL's Concussion Crisis*. They explain that over the last several years, the NFL has undergone a public relations transformation in order to maintain its high profitability and value-centered reputation.

The league now expresses unwavering commitments to player health and safety and has implemented a regulated concussion diagnosis and treatment protocol. Additionally, medical professionals are present at every game who are tasked with monitoring concussion risks. "Targeting" - defined by a tackle above the shoulders exhibited on a defenseless player - is penalized strictly, and funds from the league are even allocated to scientific research including the Heads Health Challenge (NFL 2016). However, even recently the NFL remains opaque in its efforts to protect their players. The league suspended a pilot program using helmet sensors to measure the force of collisions, claiming the data is "unreliable." The *New York Times* attacked this decision and implied that the reason for suspending the research program was more likely due to negative implications on the league's public image if the data were to be released (Belson 2015).

The NFL has stated that concussions among both professional and youth players have declined by one-third due to these efforts, though reporting at the youth level has been deemed unreliable (Jenkins 2013). In fact, concussions may be misrepresented at all levels because of the little understanding players and coaches alike have of head injuries

as well as the fear of being removed from the game (McCrea et al. 2004). There is no scientific evidence that supports that “harm reduction” techniques reduce brain injuries. Like the Big Tobacco industry, the NFL is using these strategies as a way of continuing harm under the guise of improving health.

The chair of the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury committee, Dr. Elliot Pellman, even claimed that “concussions are part of the profession, an occupational risk” (Ezell 2013). Additionally, similar to coaches in college football, NFL coaches have expressed a flippant concern in the past for their own player’s mental wellbeing. Dallas Cowboys’ owner, Jerry Jones, stated – in reference to the 1994 injury of Troy Aikman—that “he’d push [him] to ignore concussion concerns if it was a key game ‘since all data that we have so far don’t point to lasting effects, long-term effects from the head trauma’” (Ezell 2013). The lack of concern for long-term implications by coaches, players, and the NFL itself is problematic in that brain injuries during play manifest themselves in the future. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 3, concussions themselves are not necessarily the issue at hand, while minor and repetitive hits to the head are the cause of CTE.

## *2. Socioeconomic and Racial Exploitation and Predation*

As a critical component to hegemonic masculinity in the United States is the marginalization of certain groups - particularly groups of color - it is critical to understand the intertwinement of hegemonic masculinity and institutionalized racism. Consider Connell’s example of black-celebrity athletes in the United States, in which particular black athletes appear to exemplify hegemonic masculinity. Yet, as a marginalized group, not all black men benefit from the social benefits of being a male.

The fame and wealth of these individual athletes do not “trickle down” to yield societal authority to black men generally because of structural unemployment and poverty as well as institutionalized racism that shapes black masculinity as a subculture of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995).

In analyzing the league’s “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) campaign, scholars such as Maese, Heath, and Benson have implicated the organization in perpetuating conscription and depending on a socioeconomically and racially marginalized labor force while advancing a “socially responsible” agenda. The NFL’s public relations strategies have also ensured a devoted fan base of white upper-middle class families who are complacent in the reproduction and facilitation of America’s social order. The problem with the NFL’s narrow approach to addressing brain injury is embedded in the moral contours of racial capitalism and the means through which corporations are able to capitalize on racial and gendered stereotypes that are deemed acceptable in American society. The CSR campaign has perpetuated a veil of positive philanthropic and social endeavors in order to hide racial and gender exploitation and predation.

The NFL has chosen to ignore the racial dynamic on the field, masking the injustices of predatory and exploitative methods of recruiting by championing black role models for black youth to admire, new tackling techniques, and helmet technology. Millions of Americans continue to watch football, and seasonal ratings were up in the 2018-2019 season (Semuels 2019). Yet, if this trend continues, viewers of all colors will perhaps only be watching black players collide violently for entertainment value, perpetuating the health disparities the black community faces.



### *3. Domestic Violence*

In reaction to mounting criticism regarding domestic assault within the league, the National Football League has manufactured a type of “softer masculinity” and gender awareness in its efforts to connect players to relevant societal matters through their CSR campaign and public relations strategies. Highly visible in their current public relations campaign is the phrase “Football is Family.” This is the league’s new motto and plays an important role in the discourse of football. One specific advertisement depicts a mother walking with her daughter, each dressed in jerseys. The campaign strategy illustrates the NFL as an organization that values women, family values, parental support, and domestic comfort. In doing so, the league is seemingly more inclusive and socially aware, although the sport itself is comprised of exclusively men. Moreover, the league has participated in “pink-washing,” in which players both black and white wear pink equipment to convey their support for breast cancer awareness, invoking refrains about health, responsibility, and care (Benson 2017). Throughout October, players wear pink gloves, cleats, sweatbands, etc.. These types of campaigns humanize and feminize the players in a certain context: while hegemonic masculinities are present on the field, the players seem as though they maintain what Melanie Heath refers to as “softer masculinity” when considering social and health issues - particularly ones affecting women - outside of the sport (Heath 2003). In doing so, the brand image conveys sensitivity, compassion, and charitability - characteristics typically associated with femininity - to counter the stereotypes the league is accused of facilitating. Likewise, the NFL has recently launched commercials publicizing the co-ownership of a Gigi’s cupcake franchise by professional football players Michael Griffin and Brian Orakpo. The commercials show them wearing

pink aprons and frosting cupcakes, mimicking the anachronistic depiction of a housewife. In an interview about the commercial and their budding business, Griffin says of his co-owner Orakpo, “He has a stance to sack the quarterback but he also has a stance to decorate the cupcakes” (Smith 2019). While this is likely a business endeavor taken by Griffin and Orakpo independently of the NFL and its public relations tactics, the NFL has nevertheless used the commercials to communicate the perception of “softer masculinity” that players are capable of showing off of the field. Viewers are able to perceive the men as sensitive, modern, and creative business partners as opposed to the brute athletes they depict on the field. Other, less official tactics are used by NFL public relations as well. For example, Rob Gronkowski is a commonly-mentioned receiver in sports media. Recently, he has been shown in an ad called “Football is Family: Rob Gronkowski Suiting Up” in which he is depicted as clean cut, smiling, jovial, and personable, vastly different than the way he is perceived on the field. These scenes are intermixed with children waking up with smiles on their faces in two-parent, financially comfortable, white, suburban households (NFL TV Commercial 2019). While injuries have placed Gronkowski on the sideline for seasons at a time, the ad distracts from this, framing the player as one who adheres to a wholesome, family-oriented masculinity. Other ads serve to further soften Gronkowski’s masculinity off of the field. In a spread for *ESPN Magazine*, he is seen wearing a tank top and cuddling an armful of kittens in order to display his “softer side” (Patriots Tight End Rob Gronkowski Poses 2014). However, these efforts only mask the dire need for appropriate policy and procedural changes in regards to domestic violence.

Currently, the NFL's Personal Conduct Policy states that a first-time offense of domestic violence will result in a six-game suspension without pay. However, despite of the many accounts of sexual assault that have occurred amongst its players, the league has enforced the six-game suspension only once in the case of Ezekiel Elliot. The Personal Conduct Policy also states that second-time offenders will be banned permanently from the NFL, though the term permanent has been implemented incredibly loosely. In fact, a second-time offender of sexual assault may petition for reinstatement after only a year. Dayana Sarkisova writes in an article commenting on the NFL's inability to enforce consistent, meaningful consequences that "the common saying goes that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. But the NFL isn't insane — it's simply ruthless. Because they've made their disinterest in enforcing an adequate policy very clear" (Sarkisova 2018).

Many have criticized the NFL for allowing players to return to the field so quickly after accusations of domestic assault arise. One case involved Reuben Foster, who was arrested on an assault case in November of 2018, released by the San Francisco 49ers, and then was signed by the Washington Redskins (Springer 2019). Following his signing, the Redskins' Senior Vice President of Player Personnel, Doug Williams, released a statement claiming that Foster would be forced to take the necessary steps of the Commissioner's Exempt List before he was allowed to play (Sarkisova 2018). Another case involved the Chiefs' wide receiver Tyreek Hill, who was accused of strangling and striking his pregnant girlfriend. He was removed from the Oklahoma State football team, but was signed by the Chiefs in the 2016 draft (Springer 2019). In these cases, NFL teams

have emphasized their desire to win over their obligation to employ players with no record of domestic violence.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell has received a large amount of criticism for the role he has played in allowing domestic violence offenders to continue playing in the league. Since taking office in 2006, he has continually ignored the issue of domestic violence that has long plagued the NFL. In 2014, USA Today Sports found 50 cases of domestic assault under the leadership of Goodell. Of them, 43 legal resolutions were found (Schrotenboer 2014). Eighteen cases were resolved through diversion programs that allow players to avoid charges or prosecution upon completing rehabilitation or probation. Nine pleaded guilty or were convicted by a judge. Twelve were met with dropped charges, typically because the alleged victim denied cooperation with prosecutors. Three were acquitted, and one - Jovan Belcher - killed himself after fatally shooting his girlfriend (Schrotenboer 2014). It is clear that the problem has only escalated in more recent years, as evidenced by the aforementioned cases of Foster and Hill. In spite of the increasingly publicized cases of domestic abuse taking place in the NFL, Goodell has remained enthusiastic about the league's process of handling accusations. In response to a video of Kareem Hunt assaulting a woman in February of 2018, Goodell praised the NFL's actions, saying "I think what we're doing as a league is extraordinary. We have, I think, some of the highest standards of any organization. We take this seriously. We have zero tolerance for violence against women. As a league, I think we responded very quickly" (Springer 2019). When questioned about domestic assault and the NFL, Toni Van Pelt, the president of the National Organization for Women, said that "this has been an ongoing problem for years" and that Goodell "has refused to implement

effective systemic change” (Maske & Kilgore 2018). Continually, the NFL has failed women in its leniency towards domestic violence offenders.

The NFL continues to use its policies and processes regarding domestic assault as a shield to mask its lack of interest in protecting women and enforcing appropriate consequences for its players. Offenders are allowed to be signed to a team before completing a full legal process, investigation, and disciplinary action. Additionally, the use of diversion programs to rehabilitate players is insulting. Goodell refuses to uphold justice while praising the NFL’s inadequate attempts to address these situations and only truly punishes them when public evidence is circulated. The NFL has failed time and time again in the same manner, and they continue to do so even today. Evidence of these failures can be seen through Ray Rice in 2014 when a video of his assault was released and in 2016, when Josh Brown’s police reports were made public (Clayson 2018). While domestic violence is certainly not solely an issue within the NFL, it is the most glaring example in professional sports and popular culture. As an influential aspect of American society, the NFL should take responsibility for its failures and adopt new policies and procedures that allow for justice to be delivered in order to portray a new zero tolerance position to the public.

There are a few recommendations that the National Football League could adopt to prohibit mishandlings of domestic assault cases. Philadelphia Eagles’ defensive end coach, Chris Long, suggested that the league should find a way to let investigations take their course without interference (Maske & Kilgore 2018). Conflicts between the league’s investigations and the justice systems have long been criticized for their lack of transparency and overlap. Alternatively, others have said that the problem lies within the

difficulty in prosecuting cases of domestic assault. This is due to the fact that “not only is the evidence in such cases often based on he-said, she-said accounts that are hard to verify, but the alleged victims often don't want to cooperate with law enforcement because it could lead to negative consequences for their family and security “ (Schrotenboer 2014). Additionally, a Department of Justice report conducted in 2000 found that over half of domestic assault cases in a large, midwestern region were dismissed. The report cited the reason for dismissal in 70 percent of those cases to be lack of cooperation from alleged victims (Schrotenboer 2014). The NFL, then, can be viewed as an organization that depends *too much* on the American justice system, disregarding cases that are too difficult to prosecute as ones that should garner no discipline or attention. In understanding why victims assaulted by professional athletes tend not to cooperate, ESPNW's Adrienne Lawrence stated that often, when high-profile athletes are the subject of assault cases, the stakes can be too high and the rewards too low to make cooperation worthwhile (Lawrence 2016). “Cooperation often leads to a loss of privacy, increased attention from national media and reduced feelings of safety because of threats from ‘fans’...the victims risk physical and financial retaliation from the abusers. And they often face the best defenses money can buy...All of these factors become even more complicated if children are involved” (Lawrence 2016). Additionally, victims must relive their traumatic experiences in depositions, trials, and sometimes appeals before potentially losing the case. If they do win, the offender may only receive a light sentence or an order to attend a diversion program. With high risks such as these, a victim may find it is not worth going forward or seeking a pay out.

One example of this can be seen in the case of Carolina Panthers' Greg Hardy. Hardy was accused of beating his girlfriend, who pressed charges. She underwent a grueling testimony, and Hardy was found guilty. However, he appealed the decision, forcing his girlfriend to testify again in order to place him in jail for only 60 days. In assessing her risks and rewards, she agreed to a payout (Lawrence 2016). Fortunately, victim cooperation is not necessary to prosecute, as seen in the case of Ray Rice. However, allowing the complexities of our justice system to determine the actions taken by the NFL is irresponsible and harmful, particularly within a culture in which victims are often not believed. The National Football League should punish players appropriately regardless of a victim's willingness to cooperate, conducting a full investigation and taking into account necessary evidence.

Additionally, it has been suggested by Jane McManus that domestic violence be included in the Collective Bargaining Agreement. According to McManus, Goodell has received criticism widely among the players since his term began. Goodell essentially serves the one-man punishment enforcer for the NFL, though it is clear he has shown his inability to uphold justice. She suggests "If Goodell were to propose a revised CBA that includes standardized penalties for domestic violence and positive HGH tests, he could offer in exchange to turn over final jurisdiction on all player penalties to an independent arbiter" (McManus 2014). In doing so, he would appease players while ameliorating the league's poor public image in regards to domestic assault cases.

Aside from suggestions for the National Football League, several sports journalists are calling for fans, the media, and even Congress to hold the league accountable for their cavalier attitude towards assault (McManus 2014). The NFL has

proved its incompetence in enforcing strict punishment on players accused of domestic assault. While the necessary steps are on the players, the media must do a better job in holding the league, individual teams, and individual players more accountable. Fans must ensure that their voices be heard when an offender is placed on the roster. American culture must adapt in order to allow assault victims to come forward by believing them. Changes must also be made at the federal level. As an organization deemed controversially as a nonprofit, Congress holds more authority than they have traditionally exhibited. Federal policies must be put into place to ensure that no offender is able to step onto the field or signed to a team without a proper, independent investigation and acquittal. The NFL perpetuates a culture of hegemonic masculinity when they allow powerful, successful men to take advantage of women by allowing them to continue their career with few repercussions after being accused of domestic assault. As a \$13 billion industry, the NFL is unlikely to feel pressure to alter the way they operate in regards to domestic violence (Clayson 2018). If they continue to show little interest in adopting the aforementioned changes to policy, then it is the responsibility of society to discontinue their interest and financial contributions until they do so.

#### *4. Rigid Societal Structures and Gender Norms that Do Not Allow for Deviancy.*

The National Football League has propagated a rigid social structure in which femininity is normative and boys are pressured to adhere to an American hegemonic masculinity. As discussed in Chapter 3, this can lead to negative psychological effects on young boys and negative cultural effects in regards to the understanding of gender. However, as hegemonic masculinity has dominated American society for more than a



century, there is little pressure on the NFL to react to this toxic societal structure. In fact, the league's Corporate Social Responsibility campaign emphasizes the "positive" influence they hold over family and gender structure. They do so through the aforementioned "Football is Family" campaign, in which they emphasize a heteronormative environment in which the family unit centers around attending football games, wearing matching merchandise, and proudly observing their sons playing football. The campaign also produces "heteronormative ideals of family and femininity" through an "intense focus on motherhood" (Rugg 2016).

Likewise, the NFL website features a video titled "How to Decide Whether Your Kids Should Play Football" with a roundtable of women, including a Heads-Up Football representative. The women in the video discuss the notion that mothers make these decisions out of fear rather than fact, reiterating the commonly held notion that women act based on emotion and brash impulse rather than logic. A neuropsychologist clearly affiliated with the league advises the women of the need to make informed decisions - the preferred decision being to let their child play football (Benson 2017). Further, a woman wearing pink shares her concerns about the boys being "so little...so young." The video's primary concern, however, is addressing the social difficulties faced by young boys when their parents prohibit them from playing football while their peers play. They discuss exclusion, emasculation, and the missed opportunity for teamwork, camaraderie, and brotherhood.

These examples, coupled with the many other ways in which the NFL perpetuates hegemonic masculinity (i.e. by taking a lax stance on domestic violence) suggest that the league understands its influence on gender and social norms. However, as their CSR

campaign has been well-received among the American public, it is likely that they will continue to adhere to the narrative of rigid cultural structures through captivating marketing campaigns that implicitly place boys on the field, women as unjustifiably hysterical, and fathers as proud role models for their sons.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

Hegemonic masculinity in the United States is a social construction that permeates all aspects of American life. The sport of football is one that illuminates society's value and protection of this type of masculinity. As mentioned in Chapter 2, hegemonic masculinity is not only a function of men's power over women, but also men's power over men. As an exclusively-male sport, football relies inherently on a homosocial power asymmetry, rewarding men who are able to dominate physically over other men. Players are encouraged to show aggression, strength, and cruelty on the field, receiving money, fame, and social prowess for hard hits and unmatched speed. The implications, however, of hegemonic masculinity on football in the United States are far more harmful and grim than the NFL, media, and public depict them to be.

Through my analysis of primary and secondary sources - supplemented by interviews - I found four common implications of hegemonic masculinity on American football. Firstly, and most overtly, I found that the type of masculinity in football causes negative health implications on players, particularly in the form of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy. While most assume that concussions are the primary cause for CTE, scientists and medical professionals have found that it is the lesser-emphasized repetitive hits to the head that are causing this degenerative brain disease. This concern is not confined to football at the professional or even collegiate level, but can affect high schoolers, middle schoolers, and even players at the elementary level in a similarly debilitating manner. Players are taught to play through pain for the good of the team, to

“toughen up,” and to reject the label of a “sissy,” reiterating themes of toughness, power, priority of the physical body, and the rejection of femininity.

While CTE and other injuries certainly affect all players at all levels, I found that a second implication of hegemonic masculinity on football is the perpetuation of exploiting colored populations (specifically the black population) and those from less affluent communities. Increasingly, collegiate football teams and the National Football League are becoming more black. The “white flight” from football due to concerns about injury and the socioeconomic ability to obtain other extracurricular, educational, professional opportunities has resulted in a stronger reliance on black, lower-income communities to fill rosters. The black population’s youth and young adults, then, are being subjected to the violent nature of the sport, while their communities receive little benefit from their success on the field. Studies have shown, also, that these players are placed in the positions of the field that are hit the hardest and most often, and they are segregated from the “decision-making” positions. This is evidence of a long-held racial stereotype that black individuals feel less pain, are unable to hold leadership, and are “built” for physical labor. The rhetoric and narrative of black athletes in the media and fandom is also deep concern, as they are described most often in terms of their physique and seen as somehow deviating from ordinary athletic ability. The ownership of white men over black men within the National Football League suggests plantation-like comparisons that are hard to ignore. As the demographics of football are shifting to be predominantly made up of black athletes, the overwhelming majority of team owners, coaches, and staff remain white.

Moreover, I found that the construct of hegemonic masculinity and its manifestation within the sport of football have resulted in high incidents of domestic violence with few repercussions for offenders. The NFL has been historically criticized for the number of accusations against its players for domestic abuse and, more recently, its curt approach in addressing the issue. Players are taught to act violently on the field from their youth, expressing their aggression through physical harm to other players. Their coaches punish deviant actions using physical punishment, such as running, weights, pushups, etc.. Football players are socialized into reacting to anger in a purely physical manner. This sort of behavioral tendency, however, has extended beyond the field and into the relationships of many athletes, as new stories about a player strangling, hitting, and even killing their girlfriends or wives circulate every year. Studies have indicated that football players at even the high school level have used violence or force in relationships, displaying the hegemonically masculine trait of using physical power over women in their lives.

Lastly, in examining the literature, I found that hegemonic masculinity displayed in football is a means of creating rigid cultural and gender structures that allow for little deviance. Young boys are taught to believe that boyhood and masculinity can only be solidified through playing aggressive, homosocial sports. Parents, coaches, and communities bolster a narrowly defined masculinity, instilling it in boys as young as 6 years old. Strongly held by many is the assertion that football fosters teamwork, ambition, discipline, and work ethic, preparing boys to be acceptable workers, husbands, and fathers. Those who do not wish to or are unable to play the sport evidently “miss out” on these critical lessons and character development. In these circumstances, boys cannot

reject femininity and, therefore, cannot be considered truly masculine. Football is evidence of society's circumscribed definition of masculinity. It creates a dichotomy of strength and weakness through a lens of physical aptitude.

My findings have revealed that not only has hegemonic masculinity practiced through the sport of football a public health issue, but it is a social justice issue as well. Players are facing long-term health implications, specific groups are being preyed on and exploited by those in power, violence against women is prevalent and generally ignored, and boys are being psychologically harmed through society's emphasis on obtaining masculinity through playing.

In Chapter 4, I address the ways in which the National Football League has failed to ameliorate this issues by using its Corporate Social Responsibility campaign, public relations strategies, and harm management techniques to mask the underlying negative implications of the sport on public health and social concerns. I chose to examine the NFL because of its influence on American culture as a whole. While the 2019 Super Bowl attracted only 98.2 million viewers, the lowest audience since 2008, the number is still around 4 times higher than those who watched the National Championship between Alabama and Clemson earlier this year. The NFL dominates American pop culture and has even adopted philanthropic and educational agendas, establishing itself as a multifaceted force in all aspects of American society (Reisinger, 2019; Paulsen, 2019). In my discussion of the NFL's responses to the implications of hegemonic masculinity on American football, I found that they have either failed or neglected to recognize the harm that football has inflicted physically, culturally, and socially.

Upon assessing the literature, I have deliberated on several suggestions to address my findings in order to reduce harm. In order to address the physical harm of players, a suit of interventions - new helmets, tackling techniques, and deterrent rules - have been implemented by the National Football League, and others have recommended additional advances in equipment technology as well. The issue, however, is that the game of football is inherently dependent on violence. As discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, however, no research demonstrates that harm reduction techniques reduce brain injuries. Rather, my research has indicated that new safety equipment works to maximize hegemonic masculinity and reinforce a feeling of “immortality” among players, resulting in more aggression and harder hits. They simply mask the perpetuation of harm under the perception of health improvements. Additionally, there is no science to support the claim that innovations in tackling techniques reduce head injury. Harm reduction techniques are critical to shaping public discourse. No innovation in safety equipment or technology will change the violence inherent to the sport, though an alternate discussion of a more accurate risk frame for players that cannot be mitigated without a transformation of the game itself may generate a more critical view of football from the public. Even prohibiting tackling until adulthood, as suggested by Benet Omalu, is problematic in that adults may also develop CTE and are at risk of other injuries as well. Most extreme recommendations include removing tackling from the game of football all together. This, however, is unlikely. As the authors of *League of Denial* write, the “essence of football” involves “the unavoidable head banging that occurs on every play” (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru 2013).

Additionally, discourse surrounding the racial and socioeconomic exploitation of football programs is growing. Many suggest that discourse itself may result in positive steps towards equality, such as increasing the number of black owners and coaches and the movement of black athletes to “thinking” positions such as quarterback. This, however, fails to recognize the growing number of black athletes that are preyed on by the NFL and other football programs and, in turn, are subjected to the health risks mentioned above. One recommendation to aid this issue proposed by Peter Benson is for the NFL to introduce “redistributive policies and reinvestment projects [that] would undercut the ability of Big Football, which funds youth leagues in ‘underserved communities’ to take advantage of ‘precarious life’” (Benson 2017). In working to end the drug war, providing alternate social pathways, and investing in education and housing for poor and marginalized communities, the NFL could truly adopt a more corporately responsible method for reducing harm. Moreover, I mentioned in Chapter 4 several ways in which the domestic violence crisis of the NFL could be addressed and alleviated. They include harsher punishments imposed by the league, specifically by Roger Goodell, including domestic violence in the Collective Bargaining Agreement as proposed by Jane McManus, and increased pressure from the media and fandom to voice concerns about offenders who are allowed to continue to play. I have found, however, that the primary issue is the way that the NFL, our justice system, and society in general responds to victims in these circumstances. Cases in which the victim refuses to cooperate are likely to be dismissed, allowing the offender to continue his career in the NFL. Yet, as previously discussed, the cost of cooperation often outweighs the reward. The culture of hegemonic masculinity in American society places more value on the words of an



offender than they do on the account of the victim. A shift in this culture is what will ultimately allow for progress to be made in the area of domestic violence, though independent investigations regardless of victim cooperation, longer probation of accused offenders, the elimination of diversion programs, and harsher punishments for convicted offenders may help significantly. Lastly, the NFL and American society as a whole has failed to address the rigidity of gender norms that football reinforces. This is likely because of the aforementioned value and protection that is placed on maintaining a hegemonic masculinity. It is unlikely that this will improve until discourse on the subject becomes more prevalent and ideals about masculinity become less narrow. While advancements in understanding gender have been made recently through women's and LGBTQ+ movements, football offers a sort of defense mechanism that serves, as it historically has, to resist femininity. Until resistance and hostility has subsided, the cultural hegemony used by the NFL - and by sport in general - is likely to remain unchanged.

This paper does not ignore that American football does not offer positive societal implications as well. Success in football gives individuals - predominantly those of lower socioeconomic status and those of color - the opportunity for social and economic upward mobility through college scholarships, education, and even millions of dollars in income for a select few. For many, the game of football for many presents a better alternative to drug use, drinking, gang association, and video-games, and can cultivate teamwork, discipline, and a society-approved arena to express aggression. Additionally, the league supports close to 110,000 jobs in cities where NFL teams are located – not only players, but hotel workers, restaurant and sports-bar employees, and taxi companies.

Collectively, the games add around \$5 billion to the economies in NFL cities, according to an analysis by Edgeworth Economics (Wiseman). Most obviously, the culture surrounding football and NFL teams provides unity for American citizens, as they sit side-by-side cheering for their favorites among others with whom they might not share commonalities.

Yet, we must ask ourselves: did ancient gladiatorial games not offer the same benefits? Americans now face a moral dilemma in assessing whether the love of the game should outweigh the physical and social dangers of football. As evidence continues to mount, we must acknowledge the game of football, and the NFL in particular, for what they are: an industry that manufactures harm, perpetuates conscription of the poor and people of color, reinforces domestic violence, and devalues less physical forms of masculinity. They do so by framing what is normal and legible with regards to race, gender, and risk under the proclamation of social responsibility. Unfortunately, we are likely to make the wrong decision. The game of football is so deeply rooted in a hegemonic masculinity that was constructed and has been evolving for over a century. Any threat to this social construction is a threat to our understanding of the world and to our values. Until hegemonic masculinity is challenged by those most harmed by it, the game of football field will remain the same: a modern day gladiatorial arena, a plantation, a refuge for criminals, and a microcosm of a country that honors physical sacrifice above all else.

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