

THE TEXAS ORATOR



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America's Favorite Bloodsport

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Image: **Flag, player, gladiator**

Westlake alumnus Nick Foles led the Philadelphia Eagles to a 41-33 win against the New England Patriots Sunday. Those who could afford a ticket, attendance was around 67,000, and brave the cold, gathered in the sold out U.S. Bank stadium to watch the players collide for a total of 143 offensive plays. Patricians could pay as much as \$700,000 for a suite to view the game, while plebes could expect to pay an average of \$4,316 for a chance to stand in the cold and watch the game. Well over 100 million viewers tuned in via television, and if the numbers match last year's game, over \$2 billion will have been spent on beer, cider, wine, and spirits in the two weeks preceding the game.

The victorious Eagles will carry their standard home for their triumph in Philadelphia on Thursday, and Bud Light seems to be making good on its promise to provide a brew to of-age fans along the parade route. However, as Philly celebrates its heroes, fans across the nation face the sobering question of how to watch a game that is destroying the minds of its players.

The gladiatorial dressings of this article are hyperbolic, at least to an extent. To date only one NFL player, Chuck Hughes, has died on the field, and the autopsy thumbed a coronary thrombosis as the cause of death. Americans are not flocking to the local stadium or pub to watch a deathmatch. Nevertheless, a growing body of research shows that repeated contact can be ruinous to a player's mental health, leading to a condition known as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE).

As awareness of this research increases, viewers are forced to make the increasingly blurry distinction between games that are a direct threat to life, i.e. gladiatorial matches, and are anathema to Enlightenment values, not to mention illegal, and games that are a direct threat to the ability to live one's life. This question fundamentally asks whether destroying the means by which someone sustains life, in this case the player's mind, is simply a lesser form of destroying their lives. And the answer could determine whether one of America's favorite sports is simply our circus du jour--with the motion already, apparently, resolved that Bud Light is our bread.

Deciphering the issue of whether football transgresses fundamental American values requires a look at the philosophical foundation of our country. To the extent that America has a cohesive philosophical foundation, it is pretty clear on the issue of self-propriety. Self-ownership is a natural right, not conferred by any entity,

and as an extension of your self-ownership, you also own the lawfully acquired means of sustaining your life, your private property.

This is pretty intuitive, the right to own yourself would be facile if you didn't also own the means of sustaining yourself. However, a consistent application of rights theory also means that by infringing on a person's property you are impairing the ability of another to sustain life, and thus also infringing on that person's life.

Given the research into CTE it is pretty apparent that playing in the NFL has a good chance of negatively affecting at least some bit of the player's personal property, their brains in this case, and by extension negatively affecting their lives in that respect. However, if that is the case, and everyone on the field is going around damaging the property of everyone else on the field, why is football still legal?

The answer is obviously that the players chose to work in the NFL. Which is perhaps, as far as I can tell, the most substantive difference between the gladiators of Rome, who were predominantly slaves, and the modern day NFL player. But simply saying that supporting a bloodsport, one that negatively affects the player, is okay because it is voluntary is inconsistent with how we approach many other voluntary instances of self-harm.

In fact the same argument could be just as easily be used to justify a gladiatorial match, given that both fighters voluntarily chose to participate. And if you would be quick to condemn deriving pleasure from the loss of life in a gladiatorial match, then to be consistent you ought to also condemn the lesser loss of life in the form of brain damage in football.

A common redress to this would be that the substantive difference is that the violence in a gladiatorial match is the end, while the violence in the NFL is the means to the end. This argument is true to an extent, but is contingent upon the violence being a necessary to achieve the goal. I don't have the facts, but I am willing to say that flag football players are not suffering from CTE at similar rates.

The truth is, we like to see people get hit. And sometimes, we like to see people get hit really hard. We try to figure out ways to pad those people, or the things they are hitting each other with, and think that we have found a way to see people get hit, but to not see violence or loss of life. And for awhile that's what everyone was seeing. Before the promulgation of CTE research, viewers had no reason to think that we were supporting a sport that was maiming its players.

The football helmet was meant to protect players from the repeated blows they would face throughout their career, and for the most part it does. But the helmet has also shielded viewers for decades from the knowledge

that gladiators still walk among us, dealing irreparable harm to each other in front of millions of fans. But now that the knowledge of CTE's effects has become widespread, the question of how to square supporting a bloodsport with American values still looms. And it makes one want to ask, how much progress towards a fully civilized society have we really made, and how much is left to go?

However, to suppose that philosophical coherence and consistency are the norm amongst people would fly in the face of history. People are fully capable of holding logically inconsistent views, and to expect everyone to approach viewing football with the same consistent analysis as we do our laws is absurd. I am still going to buy my Big Ticket and go watch UT play football, but I am going to do it knowing that some part of me likes to see people get hit really hard, and so long as there are people willing to get paid to do that, I, and the rest of America, will most likely watch.

Culture

football, health



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