The NFL meat grinder: US pro football player dies in training camp

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The death July 30 of National Football League player Korey Stringer, who collapsed of heat exhaustion following practice in Mankato, Minnesota, demonstrates how the billion-dollar enterprise that is American professional sports devours and discards human beings in the interest of the bottom line.

Stringer, a 27-year-old offensive tackle with the Minnesota Vikings, collapsed of heat stroke on the second day of pre-season practice. Temperatures that day reached the mid-90s F (35 degrees C), and high humidity created a heat index of 109 degrees F (43 C). Stringer's body temperature rose to 108 degrees (42.2 C) and he died at the hospital 15 hours later, never regaining consciousness.

He was the first professional football player to die from heat stroke in the NFL's 82-year history. However, since 1995, 18 high school and college football players have died from overexertion in the heat during training. Only five days before Stringer's death, 18-year-old University of Florida freshman Eraste Austin collapsed and died at training camp. And then on August 5, Rashidi Wheeler, a starting safety for Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, collapsed during preseason conditioning drills and died shortly afterward. A preliminary coroner's report gave the cause of Wheeler's death as bronchial asthma, but his family has called for a further investigation.

The death of this talented athlete was a tragic waste of human life which was unquestionably preventable. Stringer had been unable to complete practice the day before, exhausted from the heat. His teammates reportedly needled him about a photograph that appeared in the following morning's *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, which showed him bent over and gasping for air. He continued practice the next day, despite vomiting three times and showing clear signs that he was suffering the effects of heat exhaustion. No one intervened to insist he stop training, get out of the heat and rest.

By continuing to participate in the practice the young player was following the ethos promoted by professional football: push the body to the limit and beyond. Any other behavior is considered soft and not worthy of the game. This beyond-macho ethic is cultivated by team owners, enforced by coaches and trainers, and perpetuated by an understanding among the players. In this case it was a philosophy that directly resulted in a man's death.

A number of NFL superstars earn huge salaries. But billions of dollars more are generated by their performances, in the form of ticket revenues, television rights and advertising. The media plays a particularly pernicious role in cultivating an appetite among fans for violence on the football field, sensationalizing the brutality. But in order to continue to deliver on this, the game needs more players like Korey Stringer.

Stringer was six-feet four inches tall and weighed 335 pounds (152 kilos). His bulk is not unusual among offensive linemen in professional football today, whose job it is to ram into opposing defensive linemen—typically of similar size—to clear the way for running backs or protect the quarterback, the lighter, faster "skill players." Line play is frequently referred to as being "in the trenches," in keeping with the militaristic terminology of American football, but the description has a certain accuracy, suggesting a resemblance to the brutal, pointless battles of World War I, in which thousands died to gain a few yards.

Players in this position have become bigger and bigger over the last two decades. While players of Stringer's size were once merely overweight, today the majority of them have a high muscle mass and body fat of 15 percent or lower. Their bodies are the result of intense conditioning; and it is well known that this is helped along in many cases by the use of anabolic steroids, which pose grave health risks.

These players are not only bigger, but faster as well. Much of the action on the football field involves collisions between these dense, heavy bodies, including direct helmet-to-helmet contact at high speeds. These collisions have resulted in numerous concussions and spinal cord injuries, leaving players permanently disabled. Even those who manage to escape catastrophic injuries spend only a relatively short

time in professional football, averaging just over four years in the NFL. While some players sign multimillion-dollar contracts, more than half of them earn less than $500,000 a year during their brief careers. The long-term toll on the athletes' bodies has been little studied, but there are plenty of anecdotal accounts of gifted athletes barely able to walk by age 50, because of loss of cartilage in the knees, and of premature deaths from a variety of causes.

While football involves brute force, speed, athletic skill and strategy are also required. Some talented athletes have seen their lives tragically transformed, as a result of injuries suffered on the field. One of these men is Mike Utley, an All-American from Washington State University who was drafted by the Detroit Lions in 1989.

Utley became the starting right guard for the Lions his rookie year. In the fifth game of that year, he suffered an injury that put him on the injured reserved list for the rest of the year. In his second year he fractured two ribs in the third preseason game, sidelining him for a number of games. Later that same season he dislocated his shoulder. This type of wear and tear is not unusual for an offensive lineman.

On November 17, 1991, however, in a game against the Los Angeles Rams, Mike Utley suffered a far more serious injury. His 6th and 7th vertebrae were fractured, leaving him partially paralyzed and wheelchair-bound, ending his football career. With intense rehabilitation and personal determination he has been able to regain some movement in his legs.

Then there is the story of Lyle Alzado, an All-Pro defensive lineman who played with the Denver Broncos, Cleveland Browns and the LA Raiders. Alzado was extremely versatile, playing both end and tackle in the front four, beginning his career with the Broncos in 1971. Like many other professional football players, to enhance his performance and increase his body mass he took steroids. The chemicals caused him to develop brain cancer, and he died in 1992.

Shortly before his death, Alzado commented, "I started taking anabolic steroids in 1969 and never stopped. It was addicting, mentally addicting. Now I'm sick, and I'm scared. Ninety percent of the athletes I know are on the stuff. We're not born to be 300 pounds or jump 30 feet. But all the time I was taking steroids, I knew they were making me play better.

"I became very violent on the field and off it. I did things only crazy people do. Once a guy sideswiped my car and I beat the hell out of him. Now look at me. My hair's gone, I wobble when I walk and have to hold on to someone for support, and I have trouble remembering things. My last wish? That no one else ever dies this way."

But the steroid use unquestionably continues, as does the brutal training which took the life of Korey Stringer last month. And few regulations have been put in place by the National Football League to prevent such abuse and tragedies from happening again.

NFL coaches and trainers are supposed to follow the guidelines established by the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) to prevent injuries and avoid health emergencies such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke. In the aftermath of Stringer's death, one of their recommendations is that teams "avoid workouts during hot temperatures." But there are still no league-wide rules covering such heat issues or the treatment of heat-related injuries.

In fact, coaches welcome the extreme heat as a weapon to push players to the brink of their endurance and beyond. At a practice session only days following Stringer's collapse, New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick complained that the weather in Massachusetts hadn't been hot enough, commenting: "You need the heat to get into condition." Extreme conditions produce athletes pushed to their topmost limits, which means more weight, speed and power on the field. This translates into increased profits for team owners, advertisers and the media.

Coaches and trainers are well aware that players are being pushed to the edge of their physical endurance. At practices conducted in intense heat, nurses are on hand to hook players up to IVs when they show signs of dehydration. After treatment, they are often sent back into practice that same day. Teams have medical specialists traveling with them at all times to tend to the inevitable injuries, including doctors specializing in spinal cord damage. This high level of medical supervision is testament to the inherent dangers of the sport, as practiced in the NFL today.

Many boys in America, particularly from working class areas, dream of a career in professional football as their ticket to athletic stardom and financial success. From a very young age, they are taught that if they are to have any chance of making it to the NFL they need to adopt the kind of super-human attitude which dominates college and professional football training regimes. Korey Stringer grew up in Warren, Ohio, in the northeastern part of the state, an industrial area which has produced football players as regularly as it did steel and automobiles. Stringer was buried there last Monday, one more victim of the NFL meat grinder.