

Concussion: Highlighting the perils of American football

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Concussion, written and directed by Peter Landesman, is a dramatized account of the discovery and revelation that repeated head blows sustained by American football players can result in serious and lethal brain damage.

The film takes place in Pittsburgh, and is based on the 2009 GQ article “Game Brain” by Jeanne Marie Laskas. In that article, Laskas detailed Dr. Bennet Omalu’s discovery of a connection between playing football and brain damage. This same article was also the subject of the 2013 PBS Frontline documentary, *League of Denial*.

Dr. Omalu, played effectively by Will Smith, is a Nigerian-American pathologist who, while working in the Allegheny County coroner’s office in 2002, performed an autopsy on Mike Webster, a former National Football League (NFL) center for the Pittsburgh Steelers and a member of the Hall of Fame. Webster, who died at age 50, had been living in his car, suffering from dementia-like symptoms, and had taken to using Super Glue on his rotting teeth and to stunning himself into unconsciousness with a Taser gun to relieve his back pain.

Puzzled by Webster’s disturbing behavior and the seemingly inexplicable cause of his death, Dr. Omalu begins studying Webster’s brain in the hopes of finding an answer. What he finds is that Webster had suffered from progressive degenerative brain disease. He ultimately determines that Webster died as a result of the long-term effects of repeated blows to the head—a disorder called chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE).

Omalu calculates based upon the years Webster played, and how as a center he had head contact on almost every play, that he had sustained over 70,000 blows to his head. With the help of former Steelers team doctor Julian Bailes (Alec Baldwin), and County Coroner Cyril Wecht (Albert Brooks), Omalu publishes a paper on his findings, which is initially dismissed and ridiculed by the NFL.

Over the next few years, Omalu discovers that two other former Steelers players, Terry Long and Justin Strzelczyk,

who both committed suicide, as well as Andre Waters, a former Philadelphia Eagle, who also committed suicide, all had all experienced symptoms very similar to Webster’s and all had CTE. These findings were then used to further support and confirm the relationship between repeated head trauma experienced by football players and CTE.

Aside from a stereotypical Hollywood love story between Omalu and his soon to be wife, played by Gugu Mbatha-Raw, the remainder of *Concussion* focuses on the efforts of the NFL to discredit and intimidate Omalu and his supporters, particularly his boss, County Coroner Cyril Wech.

Omalu finds it incomprehensible that the NFL would deny what is clearly uncontroverted science. Wecht has to explain to the football naïve Omalu that he is going to war with a corporation that owns a day of the week. “Sundays once were the province of the church, but now belong to the NFL.”

Wecht, who refuses to denounce or fire Omalu, is soon subjected to a politically motivated Federal criminal indictment charging him with 84 counts of public corruption and has to resign.

Meanwhile Omalu and his wife, who are subjected to repeated insults and harassment, anonymous threats, and being followed in cars by mysterious men, are forced to leave their dream home outside Pittsburgh and move to Lodi, California where Omalu assumes a similar position with the local Coroner’s Office.

Omalu is vindicated a few years later, however, when retired player and former NFL Players Association (NFLPA) executive Dave Duerson, who had opposed Omalu’s findings, and who had denied the aforementioned Andre Waters’ disability claim, commits suicide as a consequence of his own growing cognitive problems. In his suicide note Duerson admits that Omalu was right and requests that his brain be examined. The

subsequent examination confirms that he too suffered from CTE.

Omalu is thereafter invited to address an NFLPA conference on concussions and CTE. Amid growing scrutiny from Congress, the NFL is forced to take the concussion issue more seriously and take steps to make the game safer.

In September 2015, a few months before the film's Christmas release, news reports appeared regarding dozens of hacked Sony Studio emails. These emails purported to show how Sony executives; director Peter Landesman; and representatives of Will Smith, discussed how the studio which produced the film could avoid antagonizing the NFL by altering the script and marketing the film more as a whistle-blower story, rather than a condemnation of football or the league.

The most damaging email was from Dwight Caines, the president of domestic marketing at Sony Pictures, who declared, "We'll develop messaging with the help of N.F.L. consultant to ensure that we are telling a dramatic story and not kicking the hornet's nest."

In response Landesman stated, "We don't want to give the N.F.L. a toehold to say, 'They are making it up,' and damage the credibility of the movie.... There were things that might have been creatively fun to have actors say that might not have been accurate in the heads of the N.F.L. or doctors. We might have gotten away with it legally, but it might have damaged our integrity as filmmakers. We didn't have a need to make up anything because it was powerful and revelatory on its own. There was never an instance where we compromised the storytelling to protect ourselves from the N.F.L."

The NFL has had a number of run-ins with Hollywood over the years. In 2003 the ESPN drama "Playmakers" lasted just one season before former league commissioner Paul Tagliabue contacted Disney head Michael Eisner to complain of the subject matter depicted in the fictional league (drugs, domestic violence, paralysis, homosexuality, to name a few), according to the *New York Times*. Tagliabue deemed the show "one-dimensional and traded in racial stereotypes, and I didn't think that was either appropriate for ESPN or right for our players."

Disney is the parent company of ESPN, which has several broadcasting contracts with the NFL. Eisner decided against green lighting the series for a second season. "How would (Disney be) like it if Minnie Mouse were portrayed as Pablo Escobar and the Magic Kingdom as a drug cartel?" Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie told the

Philadelphia Inquirer, referring to the infamous Colombian drug lord.

It must be said that in viewing the film, the NFL is depicted as being cold, ruthless, and manipulative, and it assumes the role of a "Big Tobacco" like entity.

Moreover, Landesman's connection of the political prosecution of Wecht as a product of NFL intimidation was likely untrue. Wecht's indictment actually came before Omalu's most important findings were published. It is widely believed that the indictment was motivated instead by a number of controversial statements and rulings that Wecht had made during his years as coroner, including his findings that the cause of death of several people killed by the police were homicides, which meant the police should have been prosecuted, something that the District Attorney refused to do. Eventually all charges against Wecht were dismissed.

Most players who have seen the film have been supportive of the film and disturbed by its conclusions. Keith McCants, the fourth overall pick in the 1990 draft who played six years in the NFL said, "... I watch this movie and I know we were paid to hurt people. We were paid to give concussions. If we knew that we were killing people, I would have never put on the jersey."

In a Federal Court class action suit brought by former players, the NFL admitted in 2014 that it expects nearly a third of retired players to develop long-term cognitive problems and that these conditions are likely to emerge at "notably younger ages" than in the general population.

Despite its limitations, *Concussion* serves to bring before a mass audience the grave risks inherent in playing America's most popular sport, as well as exposing the NFL as a multi-billion industry that promotes and profits from these risks, and its efforts to conceal or minimize the catastrophic and deadly consequences that occurs to many of those who play it.



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