

Horrific negligence in National Football League handling of Tua Tagovailoa concussion

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On Thursday, September 29, the quarterback of the Miami Dolphins, Tua Tagovailoa, sustained a severe concussion after being tackled in a game against the Cincinnati Bengals. The injury, watched by millions of football fans, exposed the blatant disregard for the health and safety of players by the National Football League, which is controlled by billionaire owners and media monopolies.

What makes the case particularly appalling is that the injury that took Tagovailoa out of play was the second severe head trauma he suffered in less than four days. The prior Sunday, September 25, Tagovailoa was tackled and severely slammed his head against the ground in a game with the Buffalo Bills.

When attempting to stand after the hit in the game against Buffalo, Tagovailoa, unable to regain his balance, stumbled and fell. Initially he was removed from the game, but later returned, having been cleared to continue playing by a doctor contracted by the Dolphins with the approval of the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA). The Dolphins initially claimed that Tagovailoa had only suffered a minor back injury.

In the following game against the Bengals, when Tagovailoa suffered a similar tackle, he was initially unable to move at all, his hands frozen in front of his helmet and his fingers extended in different directions. The third-year quarterback had to be removed from the field by stretcher, after which the NFL admitted that Tagovailoa had sustained a concussion.

Following the Cincinnati game, the doctor who had evaluated Tagovailoa and cleared him to return to the Bills game was fired by the NFLPA, which has joint authority with the NFL over “independent” experts contracted as part of the league’s concussion protocol. While the full details of the severity of the injury have yet

to be made public, despite the passage of more than a week, the Dolphins have placed Tagovailoa on concussion protocol and announced that he will not be playing in the upcoming game against the New York Jets.

However, it seems that Miami’s coaching staff is hoping to return Tagovailoa to the field as soon as possible. He has not been placed on the “injured reserve” list, an indication that he may be sent back to play should he pass the concussion protocol requirements. The eligibility of a concussed player to return to action is determined on a case by case basis by the independent concussion expert.

Concussion experts who have not personally examined Tagovailoa have given interviews to the press after reviewing footage of the impacts, and their comments do not paint an optimistic picture.

TMZ Sports interviewed Dr. Bennet Omalu, a neuropathologist who was the first to publish findings linking chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) to football players who sustained repeated head injuries.

Omalu’s findings and his fight to have his research published were the subject of a 2015 movie *Concussion* starring Will Smith. His research found that as a result of CTE, many football players suffered from severe mood problems and dementia, and were at high risk of suicide.

In the interview, Omalu said he believed Tagovailoa “suffered severe, long-term permanent brain damage.” He stressed that in his opinion, Tagovailoa should never play again, urging the young athlete to “hang up your helmet and gallantly walk away.”

Tagovailoa’s concussion shatters the NFL’s pretense of having reversed its previous cover-up of CTE caused by football injuries and adopted a humane, science-driven policy to protect the players.

When Omalu began publishing his findings in 2005, after examining the brains of two deceased players, Mike Webster and Terry Long, the NFL attempted to suppress the information and denied any link between football and CTE. Later, it was uncovered by journalists Steve Fainaru and Mike Fainaru-Wada that the NFL had been handing out hush money to former players suffering from CTE.

After a series of lawsuits by former players and their families in 2011, the NFL was forced to admit the link between football and debilitating brain disease. The current NFL concussion protocols were established in the aftermath of the controversy.

The adoption of the post-2011 concussion protocols was a modest improvement over the NFL's previous policy of negligence and indifference to the fate of retired players. NFL officials had previously claimed that players who remained in games after suffering a concussion were *less* likely to sustain long-term injury than those who were removed and allowed to rest. One NFL committee in 2004 went so far as to argue that NFL players had "evolved" to be less susceptible to brain injury.

In a 2015 lawsuit, a judge approved a \$1 billion settlement plan to compensate former players with brain injuries.

In one Boston University study in 2017, it was found that 110 out of 111 deceased NFL players examined—99 percent—suffered from CTE. Further, the study found that when examining players at all levels, including high school and college, 87 had developed CTE.

The NFL remains the private preserve of super-rich owners who operate as something akin to feudal barons. All considerations of health and safety are subordinated to the drive for revenue and profit, which are shared between the owners, the media and various merchandizers. In 2021, the NFL generated combined revenues of more than \$17 billion, including more than half a billion dollars for the Dolphins.

Moreover, the NFL serves an important political and cultural function for the capitalist class, incessantly promoting nationalism and militarism and serving as a diversion from the massive social crisis and intensifying struggles of workers against exploitation, inequality and, for the past several years, the unnecessary death and illness resulting from the profit-before-human life response of the government to COVID-19.

Notwithstanding the ample salaries top NFL players receive, the players remain, in the end, employees, whose skills are exploited for the benefit of the corporate and financial elite. Moreover, most NFL careers last only a

few years, in many cases cut short by injuries.

Due to a serious hip injury at the end of his college career, Tagovailoa had a slower than expected start to his professional career. In the first few weeks of the 2022 season, however, he had an impressive showing, setting several personal bests and quickly climbing the quarterback rankings.

Should Tagovailoa be unable to return, it would be a major setback for the Dolphins, who would be minus their star quarterback, a situation that could potentially cost the franchise millions of dollars.

The players' union, the NFLPA, is working with the league to whitewash Tagovailoa's injury, claiming the protocol was followed. At the same time, the NFLPA announced Friday that it would be seeking changes to the NFL concussion protocol. "Our union has agreed to change the concussion protocols to protect players from returning to play in the case of any similar incident to what we saw on September 25," it stated.

The NFL quickly responded, saying it agreed with the NFLPA's proposals, which, however, have not been released to the public. Nor has a date been announced for their implementation.

The league and the players' union said in a joint statement Saturday that the Dolphins followed the league's protocol after the injury, but the outcome of the Tagovailoa case "was not what was intended when the Protocol was drafted." As a result, language addressing abnormality of balance/stability was added to the league's protocol list of symptoms that would keep a player from returning to action.'

The NFLPA, which is part of the AFL-CIO, has long collaborated with the owners, accepting uncritically the profit-driven framework of professional football.

No officials of the NFL, owners or coaches have ever been held responsible for the damage done to the thousands of former players suffering from CTE.

Moreover, the NFLPA worked hand in hand with the NFL to limit the number of games postponed due to COVID in 2021 and joined with the owners in March of this year to end all COVID protocols, turning NFL games into super-spreader events impacting players and the public alike.



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