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Banning college football: an urgent objective for brain health advocates

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At Risk for Huntington's Disease

HD is a genetically caused brain disorder that causes uncontrollable bodily movements and robs people's ability to walk, talk, eat, and think. The final result is a slow, ugly death. Children of parents with HD have a 50-50 chance of inheriting the disease. There is no cure or treatment.

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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 03, 2017

Banning college football: an urgent objective for brain health advocates

As more than 100 million people get ready to watch the Super Bowl on February 5, I'd like to point to the increasing number of people who express deep concern over concussions and disabling brain injuries caused by tackle football.

Advocates for Huntington's disease and other devastating neurological conditions share such concerns. I witnessed my mother's ultimately fatal fight against HD, a brain disorder that manifests many of the symptoms experienced by football players who have sustained head injuries, including memory loss, aggressiveness, and suicidal tendencies.

Because I inherited the HD gene, I face the same fate.

I do not wish HD or anything like it on anybody.

I used to like watching football, especially because the San Diego Chargers supported the HD cause. But after the revelations about head injuries, I stopped watching because doing so contradicted my commitment to brain health. I will not tune in on Super Sunday.

Along with a growing number of scientists, brain health advocates, and athletes and their families, I'm disturbed by the traumatic effects of these injuries. This situation impacts not just the players, but their families, who must care for their loved ones as they watch them struggle with and even die from brain trauma.

As an HD advocate and college professor, I have become increasingly distressed that so many colleges and universities – including my employer, the [University of San Diego \(USD\)](#) – still prioritize the entertainment and community-building value of football over the clear risks to student athletes.

If institutions of higher education truly embody academic integrity and guard their students' well-being, how can they allow football to continue? Are university administrators [in denial about brain](#)

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injuries, as were the executives of the National Football League (NFL)? How can they possibly allow students to take such a risk?

Highly paid NFL professionals now know what they face. In an admission some say echoes Big Tobacco's recognition that smoking causes cancer and heart disease, in March 2016 the NFL finally acknowledged the link between football and CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy), a disabling brain disease first seen in boxers in the mid-twentieth century. Last December, the conclusion of the historic concussion lawsuit against the NFL paved the way to potentially distribute up to \$1 billion to as many as 20,000-plus (!) former players.

College players are *not* professionals, although many coaches and athletic programs treat them as such, albeit without compensation. They are students. Colleges are *not* businesses. They are institutions of learning. They should not expose students to the possibility of CTE, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, Lou Gehrig's disease, and the other disorders caused by concussions and the numerous sub-concussive hits to the head that occur in a football game.

Unnecessary risks

Since November 2013, I have advocated at USD for player safety in light of the revelations about concussions and brain trauma ([click here](#) to read more). Other faculty members are also troubled by the risk to student health.

With the mounting scientific evidence about the dangers of football, Professor [Daniel Sheehan](#), Associate Professor [Nadav Goldschmied](#), and I (Gene Veritas, aka Kenneth P. Serbin) have proposed a resolution for the February 7 meeting of the Academic Assembly of the College of Arts and Sciences strongly urging that "the USD football program be terminated immediately."

We know some consider this premature, or would call us killjoys. But we can't ignore such a serious threat to student health.

"Knowingly putting our athletes at such risk is not consonant with the mission of the University," the proposed measure states. "Putting athletes at unnecessary risk puts the University in significant legal and financial jeopardy."

Last November 17, Prof. Goldschmied advocated for the resolution at an informal College of Arts and Sciences gathering where professors made brief presentations of their research and other activities. Referring to USD's promotional campaign as a "changemaker" university, he titled his talk "Changemakers? Why USD Football Should be Banned."

“We advertise ourselves as ‘changemakers,’” he stated. “The question is: are we going to follow, or are we going to lead in what we do with our football program?” He received enthusiastic applause.

Prof. Goldschmied said that he had met with USD President [James T. Harris III, D.Ed.](#) to recommend the football ban. Dr. Harris declined to institute a ban, stating that the university would reevaluate as further data about football injuries becomes available.

“And I suggested, how about we do it the opposite way?” Prof. Goldschmied said. “Let’s cancel football and, if the data is promising, we will reinstate it.”

Dr. Harris reaffirmed his opposition to cancelling football at a December 8 USD Faculty Senate meeting. According to Senate minutes, he stated: “No universities have closed their football program in the last decade because of concussion evidence yet. It is a complicated issue. We have a successful and a good program. The answer is no but always open to more data and concussion information.”

Dr. Harris cited other factors for his refusal such as the team’s excellent graduation rate (higher than the university’s overall rate); football’s ability to attract male students (USD has a majority of women); and improvements in USD’s athletic program’s concussion protocols and concussion education. Of course, college presidents must also deal with pushback from alumni, boards of trustees, and fans.

You can watch Prof. Goldschmied’s presentation in the video below.



[Changemakers? Why USD Football Should be Banned](#) from [Gene Veritas](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Like crashing a car into a wall

As pointed out by researchers, football's unique danger lays in the fact that it includes subconcussive hits, which don't rise to the level of a concussion but can compound trauma. While a player might not suffer an in-game concussion, which would get him off the field, he can sustain dozens of the smaller hits.

On January 9, the day Alabama and Clemson played in the college national championship, the *New York Times* posted a highly telling report illustrating what happens to a football player's brain from both big and small hits. As a video in the report demonstrates, these hits affect the deepest recesses of the brain.

The article presented data on one lineman's hits to the head – a total of 62 (!) – while blocking during a single game. The hits had an average force roughly the equivalent to the player crashing a car into a wall at 30 m.p.h. ([Click here](#) for the article.)

Given this kind of evidence, it is alarming that football remains a sport at *any* educational level.

Bo Jackson, the only man to be a baseball All-Star and football Pro Bowler, stated in an interview this month that he would not have played football had he known about the risks of CTE.

“We're so much more educated on this CTE stuff, there's no way I would ever allow my kids to play football today,” Jackson said.

A powerful message

As one USD faculty member observed, ending the school's football program would send a powerful message to other educational institutions, perhaps helping prompt cancellation of college football across the country.

Instead of becoming a “Notre Dame of the West,” as some have suggested, USD, a Catholic institution, could uniquely project itself as a moral and intellectual leader.

Those of us in the Huntington's, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and numerous other neurological disease communities know all too painfully the vulnerability of the brain, the immense caregiving cost to families and society, and the suffering of the afflicted.

By joining the cause to protect college students from brain trauma, we can reinforce overall support for brain health and neurological research and funding.

In the final analysis, we are protecting our – and college students' – most important natural resource: our brains.

Posted by [Gene Veritas](#) at 9:39 PM



Labels: [advocates](#) , [brain health](#) , [chronic traumatic encephalopathy](#) , [concussions](#) , [denial](#) , [football](#) , [Huntington's disease](#) , [National Football League](#) , [scientists](#) , [subconcussive hits](#) , [University of San Diego](#)

1 comment:

Anonymous said...

Hi Gene, My name is Joe Peck, and I am 50 years old, married to a wonderful woman, Darcie, and the father of 3 great kids ages 16, 17, and 19. Sadly I inherited from my father a genetic flaw that leads to an illness very similar to HD called Spinocerebellar Ataxia Type 1 or SCA1. I found your blog because I have been searching for people that have been taking the supplement trehalose. I'd love to learn more about any supplements you are taking and perhaps share some of the research I have been doing lately as well. My father and my aunt both have SCA1 and are in wheel chairs. I carry the SCA1 allele, but am asymptomatic. Most importantly, I just started all 3 of us on a therapy of over the counter supplements that I genuinely believe will be efficacious, that includes trehalose and Nicotinamide Riboside. I hope you don't think I'm a quack. You can find my profile on FB under Joseph Peck. I was my high school valedictorian and graduated Dartmouth College Thayer School of Engineering with a Masters degree. I don't mean that as braggadocio but rather I hope you believe I'm not just another internet fool. In any case thanks for sharing your experiences and thoughts in the blog. I love it! Looking forward to hearing from you. Joe in NY PeckJA@aol.com

4:43 AM, February 05, 2017

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