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NFL could have been spared the spearing long ago

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The back-and-forth this week between righteous NFL officials and indignant NFL players has given me a headache. Not an NFL-sized headache - not a [DeSean Jackson-sized headache](#) - but still.

Everyone needs to step back and take a deep breath.

Thirty-two NFL players have suffered concussions this season, that we know of. Among them are Redskins [Chris Cooley](#), [Anthony Bryant](#) and [Rocky McIntosh](#). The Eagles have lost six players to concussion. Could there be more? Absolutely. Given the outcry among NFL players, including teammates of the victims, it's likely that not everyone who takes a shot to the head is eager to report it.

At the end of this weekend's games, there likely will be still more victims. Several players have already declared their head-hunting intentions. Hard hitting cannot be fined out of the NFL in seven days, even by the powerful Roger Goodell.

But it's time the NFL stopped patting itself on the back for [recognizing the problem](#) and dealing with it so quickly. Because it's been anything but quick. The NFL enacted no new rules this week. Rather, [the league decided to start enforcing rules](#) that were already on the books. If your local police department suddenly began enforcing a previously ignored speed limit, then used the increase in the amount of tickets issued as a way to tout its efficacy, you'd be skeptical, wouldn't you?

There are a lot of rules in the NFL rulebook, yet among those we've seen rigorously enforced this season is the arcane definition-of-a-catch rule, which cost Calvin Johnson and the Detroit Lions a victory in Week 1. That one was so esoteric it had to be explained with a telestrator and claymation figures, but okay, it's in the book, so that's fair. Sunday, we saw the three-player wedge cost the Redskins' special teams unit. It sounds like something Frank Merriwell, Schoolboy, would have run, but again, it's in the book.

So were rules to prevent spearing, and leading with the helmet when hitting the opponent, and pretty much everything we're seeing in those three clips from last Sunday.

[Brandon Meriweather](#) of the Patriots was fined \$50,000 for violating Rule 12, Section 2, Article 8 (f). Atlanta's [Dunta Robinson](#) was fined \$50,000 for violating Rule 12, Section 2, Article 8 (g). [James Harrison](#) of Pittsburgh violated that one and Rule 12, Section 2, Article 8 (h) and was fined \$75,000.

Harrison was so traumatized by his rules violations and the possible harm he could have inflicted on both [Josh Cribbs](#) and [Mohamed Massaquoi](#) of Cleveland that he needed a day off from practice to ponder retirement.

Well, not quite.

"I'm going to sit down and have a serious conversation with my coach and see if I can actually play by NFL rules and still be effective," Harrison said. "If not, I may have to give up playing football."

Ah, yes, the "poor, misunderstood me" defense. As Shakespeare or the Little Rascals or somebody put it, "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, guess I'll go eat worms."

Harrison said he wasn't trying to injure Massaquoi, he was trying to hurt him. That's a perfectly acceptable distinction in the NFL, at least in the current climate, and one I can understand. But what Harrison fails to realize is that he doesn't have that kind of pin-point control when he aims his helmet at someone. It's not a scalpel, and he's not a surgeon.

The nuances involved in delivering a blow that gives someone a headache versus one that paralyzes them for life are not

under Harrison's purview. And even if Massaquoi gets up and walks away fairly unscathed, who's to say that he hasn't already suffered damage that will lead to a lifetime of headaches, mood disorders or even early-onset Alzheimer's? Those aren't injuries; those are lifetime consequences. And it's clear Harrison and other NFL players don't understand that aspect of head injuries.

"I thought Cribbs was asleep," Harrison said. "A hit like that geeks you up, especially when you find out the guy is not really hurt, he's just sleeping. He's knocked out but he's going to be okay."

Harrison is in the middle of his seventh NFL season. Had the league been enforcing these rules from the get-go, perhaps he wouldn't be trying to put people to sleep like some cruise-ship magician.

Instead, it has celebrated hard hits along with Fox and CBS and ESPN and the rest of the media, newspaper columnists included. And it has profited from that celebration as well. All those videos you can buy showing clip after clip of hard hits - who do you think licensed those, and profited from them? It wasn't James Harrison.

This week, the league sent videos to its teams showing what is and is not allowed. Players and coaches were instructed to watch them and behave accordingly. There is no question that hits like those singled out last week for fines will draw suspensions this week.

Perhaps a better video for the NFL to distribute would be interviews with former players who have memory loss, migraines and worse. Include some footage of Darryl Stingley and Eric LeGrand - not of the hits that paralyzed them, but of their lives after those hits. That might prove to be more of a lesson for players such as Harrison, and it might make the NFL reconsider its backpatting and accept some culpability for what happened last weekend.

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