

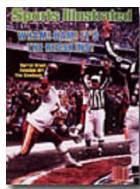
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This Author Says Blame Spearing, Not Helmets, For Grid Neck Injuries

James M. Galbraith

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In 1979 sports illustrated Senior Writer [John Underwood](#) published a book entitled The Death of an American Game, based on a series of articles that appeared in this magazine in 1978, in which he predicted the demise of football unless something was done about catastrophic neck injuries. He was right that changes must be made, and it's time to set the record straight about the cause of these injuries. In a case cited by Underwood, the jury held the helmet manufacturer responsible for a disabling neck injury because it believed the rear rim of the helmet could contribute to this type of injury by breaking a player's neck in "karate chop" fashion. This is now judged by experts to be physically impossible.

Until August 1982, I was associated with Riddell, Inc., a manufacturer of football and batting helmets and one of the few companies that have remained in the business and are contesting a flood of similar lawsuits. In the mid-'70s there were 14 helmet manufacturers; now there are only five. And even though I've left the industry, I'm still anguishing over my inability to help bring about a solution to the vexing problem of neck injuries in football.

Invariably, players are injured in the act of "spearing" with the helmet. The spearing player hits with his head down and his neck in partial flexion. His forward momentum is suddenly stopped on impact, but his body mass below the neck continues forward, placing a force on the neck it cannot fully absorb. The neck fractures and/or dislocates, and, if the broken vertebrae pierce or sever the spinal cord, the result can be paraplegia, quadriplegia or death. This mechanism of injury will occur with or without a helmet, according to one of the preeminent authorities on football neck injuries, Dr. Voigt R. Hodgson, director of the Gurdjian-Lissner Biomechanics Laboratory at Wayne State University and the principal investigator for the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment. The committee was formed in 1969 by seven organizations, including the [NCAA](#) and the National Federation of State High School Associations. Hodgson has been researching these injuries for five years and has concluded that not one he has investigated has been caused by a blow by the helmet to the neck in hyperextension (head back) as postulated in the "karate chop" theory. He explains that for such an injury to happen, the neck must be forced down, as may occur if one dives into the shallow end of a swimming pool. One way to reduce these injuries, Hodgson says, is to vigorously enforce the rules against spearing.

Eliminating spearing isn't an easy task. Spearing is favored by an uninformed minority of coaches, players and fans who look upon football as a "man's" activity in which the risk of serious injury is just part of the game. Ironically and tragically, it is the players doing the spearing who are catastrophically or fatally injured as many as a dozen times each year.

Penalties against spearing have been instituted in recent years, resulting in reduced injuries. But spearing continues and threatens to make [Underwood's](#) book prophetic. There must be more stringent prohibitions against spearing at all levels of the game. Enforcement of the rules also must be more rigorous than has been the case. In the rule books for the [NCAA](#) and the high schools, whose players are most likely to be seriously injured because their bodies aren't as developed as those of [NFL](#) players, spearing is defined as "the intentional use of the helmet in an attempt to punish an opponent," and is punishable by a 15-yard penalty and an automatic first down in the [NCAA](#) and 15 yards in the high schools. But officials shouldn't have to judge whether spearing was intentional or not, and players should be penalized even for unintentional spearing if it's to be eliminated from the game. The [NFL](#), on the other hand, makes no distinction between intentional and unintentional spearing and also assesses a 15-yard penalty. A coordinated campaign against spearing would have the effect of greatly reducing these injuries.

And what about the many players already catastrophically injured and those who might still be injured under new rules? There is now no adequate remedy to help victims and their families deal with skyrocketing medical costs and loss of future earnings, probably the single most compelling reason that juries have rendered verdicts against helmet companies. But the average sales (not profits) of each of the few remaining football helmet companies is about \$4 million per year, which is hardly a sufficient base to support the injured for life. Football, however, is a

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billion-dollar business and has the means and the obligation to address this problem. Care for these injured players on a no-fault basis would cost an estimated one to two million dollars per year (or less than one dollar for each of the two million participants in the game).

A solution exists. The new National Sports Rehabilitation Foundation, with the growing support of those close to football, is dedicated to the rehabilitation, care and support of catastrophically injured athletes. Once funded, whether by players' membership fees, ticket surcharges, charitable contributions or industry sources, it would eliminate the need for the tangle of legal proceedings we have now. It would also accelerate the educating of coaches, players and fans about the need for new rules and about proper tackling, blocking and running techniques.

Football cannot be played without helmets, yet the helmet industry cannot survive without a sensible solution to the injury problem. The American public is likely to prefer safer, saner football to the extinction of the game. This new foundation promises to commute football's death sentence.

1

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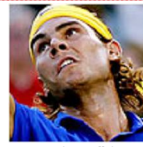
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