# NFL MEANS *NOT FOR LONG*: THE LIFE AND CAREER OF THE NFL ATHLETE

by

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Abstract

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Over the past four decades, the National Football League (NFL) has become the most popular professional sports league in the U. S. Yet within this popular discourse, the NFL is usually regarded as a medium of entertainment and is rarely discussed as a tightly structured corporate organization that enjoys legal cartel status. Likewise, NFL athletes receive extensive media coverage for their multi-million dollar contracts and public behavior, yet little attention has been directed at the challenges confronting these high profile athletes both while in the league and upon retirement – in particular the fact that only a few players are handsomely rewarded with long-term fame and fortune, while the vast majority wind up economically destitute with few marketable skills after playing only a minimal number of seasons in the league.

By focusing on the daily interactions of NFL athletes and their relationship with management, my work applies the principles of economic sociology, sports psychology, and role exit theory in order to interrogate the following question: how do the structural inequalities of the NFL – particularly those of economics and race – impact athletes after leaving the game? To answer this question, the project draws on research from the league's collective bargaining agreement, archived and online sources, and, most centrally, in-depth interviews conducted with 120 present and former NFL athletes and members of the NFL community. In exploring the lived experiences of NFL athletes

grappling with such issues as labor struggles against management, economic hardship, forced retirement, physical and mental health problems, and family conflicts, my work demonstrates the ways that sports both reflects and informs core sociological issues of race, marginalization, socialization, and stratification.

FOR ROBERT AND DOLORES

*"Words can not express the love I feel for you.*
*God bless you, always."*

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* Chapter 5: Eye in the Sky: Discipline, Control and the Black Body; and Chapter 6: Forced Out: Involuntary Role Exit and the NFL Athlete are formatted for submission as journal articles.

# Introduction

I have always been a football fan. The bug bit me as a young child during the New York Jets historic run to Super Bowl III. In those days, my father and uncles would gather around the television to cheer for Joe Namath and the rest of the "Green Machine." No matter how many championships the Knicks, Mets, or Yankees brought to NY, my fate was cast when Emerson Boozer, running back for the Super Bowl Champions NY Jets, spoke at our Pop Warner football banquet. From the moment I laid eyes on Boozer's championship ring, I wanted to be a professional football player. For sixteen years, I poured every ounce of my being into fulfilling that goal. Nothing short of death could keep me from living that dream. Football players spend years preparing for a chance to play in the National Football League (NFL). Contrary to the images of pampered, self-centered athletes presented in the media, for most young men the rewards for such sacrifices are paid back in the form of broken bodies, financial ruin, divorce, and unfulfilled dreams. This dissertation is my attempt to describe the realities of life in the NFL from the athlete's perspective. I focus on the difficulties that confront the NFL athlete during various phases of his career. By examining personal histories, charting playing careers, and examining life during retirement, I offer a perspective on the NFL athlete that is rarely captured by scholars.

My first true test of adversity on the football field arrived in the form of a traumatic neck injury when I was a junior in college. Rather than quit, I became even more determined to return to the field of competition. The good news, according to the doctors, was that since no structural or permanent damage occurred, my college career could resume once I regained the strength to withstand football's intense physical demands. Nine months of strenuous weight training and physical rehabilitation helped prepare my body for the violent hits but the desire to play in the

NFL provided the psychological motivation needed to block out the fear of re-injury. Looking back on that period of my life, I can understand why it makes sense that NFL teams would pass on an injured athlete from a school that had only been playing NCAA Division I-AA football[1] for fewer than a half dozen years. All I could think about however, was keeping my career alive long enough to play at the next level. I was willing to go anywhere or speak to anyone who could help me play professional football. The disappointing days far outnumbered the rewarding days but I continued to call teams and beg for tryouts until a door opened.

My professional career did not last long nor was it distinguished but somehow I made it. Perseverance, fortitude, and luck allowed me to play professionally for four years. It became apparent that my talent carried me as far as possible, and leaving the game was just as difficult as my entry into it; teams are always looking to replace an athlete with someone younger, faster, and stronger. One of the most difficult parts of being forced to leave the game was the constant barrage of questions I received from strangers. People consistently asked, "What happened?" or, "Why aren't you playing anymore? You look like you can still play." I tried to avoid these inquiries but it was only a matter of time before someone would ask the hardest question, "Do you miss playing? I bet it's tough to watching football after playing all those years, isn't it?"

This dissertation/inquiry does not seek to answer these questions specifically. I hope instead to shed light on the struggles professional football players face during retirement. I pay particular attention to the question, "Why do so many NFL athletes struggle with the transition to life after football?"

[1] A major realignment in college football took place in 1979 when the National Collegiate Athletic Association established a Division I-AA for schools that have a strong over-all athletic programs but aren't major football powers. In 2007, Division I Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) became the new name for Division I-AA.

My intention upon entering the field was to record how NFL athletes interpret the world in which they live. Rather than being guided by a particular theory, I followed the data, which lead me to eventually settle on describing how individuals are socialized to understand the role of a football player. I am particularly interested in understanding the role that the NFL plays with regard to the struggles athletes experience after exiting the league. For example, in recent years high profile former players such as NY Giants wide receiver Mark Ingram, Cleveland Browns quarterback Bernie Kosar, and Dallas Cowboys offensive lineman Nate Newton are just a few of the ex-NFL athletes who have made headlines because of their felony convictions or bankruptcy. A quick scan of sports blogs and websites reveals that people often accuse former NFL stars of being pathological or narcissistic. My training as a sociologist directs me to investigate interactions between the athlete and the NFL rather than focus exclusively on the behavior of the individual. If NFL athletes are experiencing high rates of divorce and financial distress during retirement, the question that must be asked is, "What is it about the institution that contributes to such negative results?"

This research is designed to describe several ways in which the NFL constructs barriers that affect athletes during retirement. It is not my intention to blame or to hold the NFL responsible for the problems experienced by retired athletes, nor am I interested in trying to absolve the athletes from the role they play in creating these difficulties. My work simply tries to highlight the ways this dialectic relationship produces negative outcomes for some players. The structural obstacles that confront NFL athletes and lead to problems in retirement include: 1) a labor agreement that unequally distributes health and retirement benefits and fails to provide a substantive measure of job security for most employees. 2) The NFL is a business cartel guided by a culture of domination that refuses to relinquish or share power with the NFL Players

Association. 3) Athletes undergo a socialization process that allows them to succeed as professional football players; however, only a select few individuals actually acquire the transferable set of skills vital for the transition to retirement. 4) The racial composition of the league producing feelings of distrust and marginalization by certain Black athletes, who believe the same social dynamics that historically persist between Blacks and Whites in America also operate within the NFL. It is against the backdrop of these issues that I offer a brief discussion of the NFL, the NFL athlete, and life after the NFL, prior to outlining the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

## The National Football League

The National Football League can be described in many ways. To the casual observer the NFL is responsible for creating the Super Bowl, one of the biggest non-religious holidays in America. For those who worship professional American Football, the NFL is about tailgating, fantasy football leagues, and adults dressing up in their favorite team's colors. Over the past twenty five years professional football has continued to enjoy rapidly expanding fan base (Hall, 2010). Even in the midst of the 2009 economic downturn, the NFL sold 17,282,225 seats while hosting 256 games. These per-game attendance figures make NFL football the number one sport in the world (Harris, 2010).

As impressive as these attendance figures are, they only tell part of the story. In addition to operating a 501©(6) trade association comprised of 32 football teams, Commissioner Roger Godell is responsible for running the NFL's complex array of nonprofit, for-profit, and limited profit entities. The league's tax exempt organizations include the Professional Football Players Insurance Trust, the NFL Youth Football Fund, the NFL Non-Player Insurance Trust, the NFL Management Council, the NFL Disaster Relief Fund, NFL Charities, and the NFL Alumni Dire

Needs Charitable Fund. The for-profit business concerns Goodell also oversees are NFL Ventures LP, NFL Ventures Inc., and NFL Properties LLC.

The NFL consists of a handful of powerful billionaire owners consumed with making money. Historically NFL owners have profited from two sources of revenues: shared and unshared. Revenues shared between owners consist of broadcasting rights, merchandise licensing fees, and 40 percent of all regular ticket sales, at all away or non-home field events.

All other sales primarily generated at the stadium are considered unshared revenue. This includes 60 percent of home ticket sales, concessions, parking, and team store merchandise sales. The league also classifies club-suite level seats and luxury box ticket sales as unshared revenue if the team is paying off a stadium construction debt. Of the various revenue streams that feed into the league's coffers, none is more valuable to individual team owners than sales from luxury suites because owners have a huge economic incentive to play in new or revamped stadiums.

In 1999, the league created a loan program called "G3" to help teams build state-of-the-art stadiums that produce large revenues. The program allows the NFL to collect $1 million in television revenues from each team, along with a share of the visiting teams' club-seat revenues generated at newly built stadiums. The revenue is then used as collateral to float bonds for stadium construction. Between 1994 and 2004, the NFL administered $725 million to help build or renovate 20 stadiums. These loans are attractive because they do not require out-of-pocket expenses to borrow the money. To satisfy the loan, the NFL applies the team's revenue sharing payments to the league.

The G3 program has had a profound effect on the financial landscape of the NFL. In 1994 non-shared revenues accounted for approximately 12 percent of a team's revenues; that figure had grown to 22 percent by 2003. G3 created such a seismic shift in the economics of the

NFL that team owners began calling for a revamping of the revenue sharing formula. The tension between the old-line owners and the new entrepreneurial owners had grown such that the biggest issue heading into the 2006 labor and revenue negotiations was unshared stadium revenues. Ralph Wilson, longtime owner of the Buffalo Bills, claimed that the financial fabric of the league had come under attack. He argued that 20 of the 32 teams with new or revamped stadiums were unfairly allowed to pocket huge unshared revenues from premium seating-executive stadium clubs, box seats, and private suites. Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, countered that Wilson's refusal to sell naming rights for Ralph Wilson Stadium deprived all the owners of earning additional revenues (Yost, 2006).

After two full days of tough negotiations, a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) agreement was reached with minutes to spare before the negotiation deadline. As the session broke, former NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue announced an "Incremental Revenue Sharing Plan," whereby $500 million of local team revenues would be put in a pool and distributed to the lower revenue teams in the first four years of the six-year agreement. Over the life of the contract, the plan would ultimately cost high revenue teams between $850-$900 million, with the top five revenue teams paying the most, teams six through ten paying the second most, and teams eleven through fifteen committing a third of the revenue to a shared pool. Though Bills owner, Ralph Wilson, joined forces with Cincinnati Bengals owner, Mike Brown, to reject the plan, the remaining thirty owners voted to keep the socialist-inspired revenue sharing agreement intact.[2]

[2] In February 2006 former NFL Players Association Executive Director, Eugene Upshaw declared that the labor union would not support a new CBA until the owners settled their differences with the G3 program. According to league rules, the union has must sign off on any G3 agreement because they are funded by the gross revenue pool. Upshaw further indicated that the NFLPA would not agree to a CBA extension that did not have a new revenue sharing plan in the future. He claimed that the difference between teams with the highest and lowest revenue sharing totals had grown by as much as $100 million.

Despite whatever fractions that may exist internally, NFL owners have a long history of colluding to maintain their position of market dominance. An example of this longstanding ideological strategy can be seen in the owners' current stance on labor relations. The owners believe that players currently receive too large a percentage of the revenues without shouldering enough of the financial risks. As a result, the owners are now calling for a reworking of the 2006 Collective Bargaining Agreement (2006). The league currently generates $8 billion in annual revenues. $1 billion of this is set aside for the teams' operating expenses. Of the remaining $7 billion, the players receive 60 percent of the annual revenues and 40 percent is distributed amongst the teams. The owners are now calling for an additional $1.3 million (called an expense credit) to be subtracted from the total revenues before the players receive their cut. According to the owners, the expense credit will be used to expand the fan base, which in turn will increase revenues so players won't end up taking a pay cut. There has been widespread speculation around the league that owners intend to conduct a lockout[3] if the players refuse these demands.

## The NFL Athlete

In the 1996 Hollywood movie *Jerry Maguire*, Cuba Gooding Jr. plays Rod Tidwell, Arizona Cardinals wide receiver, who famously shouts "Show Me the Money!" This phrase, perhaps more than any other in popular culture, represents how the modern professional athlete is portrayed in public. Over the course of the movie, Tidwell blasts his agent Jerry Maguire, played by Tom Cruise, for not working hard enough to secure a new contract. Maguire responds by claiming that Tidwell is a talented athlete who cares more about fame and fortune than proving he's worth the $10 million contract he covets. By the end of the film, Tidwell learns the

[3] According to Barron's Legal Guides Law Dictionary, in a lockout the employer prevents the players from working in an effort to gain a better bargaining position in labor negotiations. This tactic was in 1995 by the National Hockey League Commissioner Gary Bettman, and three years later by National Basketball Commissioner David Sterns (Gifis, 1996).

true value of personal sacrifice and putting the team first; Tidwell leads his team to the playoffs for the first time in years and Maguire secures an $11.2 million contract for Tidwell. In true Hollywood fashion, the movie ends with Tidwell and his supportive wife receiving financial security.

Contrary to images of athletes driving exotic sports cars, living in million dollar mansions, and flashing expensive jewelry, most NFL players live far more modest lifestyles. A quick review of the league's salary structure reveals a great income disparity among NFL athletes. According to the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA), the minimum rookie salary in 2009 was $310,000 and the average league salary was $1,890,000. During that season, the median salary for a St. Louis Rams player was $541,630, well below the league median of $790,000. At first glance, these numbers seem to indicate that NFL athletes make out pretty well financially. After all, how many Americans would turn down a job that pays over half a million dollars per year? When I asked audience members at Marquette University if they would be willing to leave college early to play in the NFL for a $310,000 salary, nearly everyone answered "yes" without hesitation.

As enticing as this amount may seem, the focus on salaries makes it easy to overlook the entire story. There are several other important factors to consider when examining the life of an NFL athlete. First, the average NFL career only lasts 3.3 seasons. Second, the NFLPA reports that 65 percent of all NFL athletes endure chronic pain from permanent injury within one year of retirement. Finally, *Sports Illustrated* reports that, within two years of retirement, 78 percent of all NFL athletes are bankrupt or experience financial stress as a result of joblessness or divorce. After considering these factors, most members of the Marquette audience decided to rescind their decision to play in the NFL.

To capture the essence of life in the NFL, it is essential to understand the time constraints placed on athletes. Coaches are paid to make sure football players balance their time between school and sports; however, these training wheels come off after the final college game. From the first week in January until the NFL draft in late April, athletes spend countless hours training at private workout facilities. At the conclusion of the draft players are sent to a series of mini-camps and team Organized Training Activities (OTA) before summer training camp in late July. Sometime in June, draftees are summoned by the league to attend a four day rookie symposium, designed to help the new recruits adjust to life in the NFL. During the season, athletes generally report to work between 5:00 am and 7:00 am Monday through Friday. League rules allow for one day off from work, but teams regularly find a way to keep athletes busy for seventy to eighty hours each week. NFL teams place so many demands on athletes during the season that precious little time is available to get into trouble off the field. By the following January, first year players will have spent 18 months focused nearly exclusively on football.

Though it is impossible to keep tabs on athletes 100 percent of the time, the NFL has created a strategy to weed out athletes with character flaws. After NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell began imposing tough guidelines for bad behavior, teams responded by monitoring athletes' off-field activities. In addition to searching the internet and social networking internet site Facebook for negative reports, teams gather information on criminal convictions or admissions, arrests in pending cases, disciplinary actions while in school, driving records, and limited financial records. NFL teams have also been known to spy on athletes as a means of curbing bad behavior. Shortly after the new personnel conduct policy was instituted in 2008, NFL owners began covertly employing secret service details and designating them to certain areas deemed off limits to players. Other teams have gone as far as conducting bed checks on

road trips and placing body guards in hotel lobbies to make sure players do not stray from the premises. In extreme cases, teams have also been known to install video-surveillance equipment in lockers rooms and even censor what players can discuss when speaking with the media.

One issue that distinguishes the NFL from the other North American major professional sport leagues is the lack of job security. Unlike the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Baseball (MLB), the NFL (with a rare few exceptions) does not offer guaranteed contracts. As part of the NFL labor agreement teams have the right to release a player from his contract at any time to avoid having to pay the remainder of his salary. Prior to NFL owners selecting to opt out of their Collective Bargaining Agreement with the NFLPA for the 2010 season, the league was governed by a hard salary cap and floor that teams had to stay between at all times. During the 2009 season, teams received fines up to $5 million for violating or circumventing the cap. Other penalties included the cancelation of players' contracts and/or the loss of draft picks. Besides including the right to cut a player before the beginning of the season, another indirect effect of the salary cap was the release of many higher-salaried veterans who were replaced by lower-salaried athletes. Since a veteran's minimum salary was required to be higher than a player with lesser experience, many teams made a practice of freeing up cap space by restocking with younger personnel. This means teams tend to favor cheaper, less experienced prospects with growth potential. The aim of this strategy is to have a group of players who quickly develop into their prime while still being on a cheaper contract than their peers. To offset this tendency, which pushed out veteran players, the NFLPA accepted an arrangement so that a veteran player who waives bonuses in his contract may be paid the veteran minimum of up to $810,000 while only accounting for $425,000 in salary-cap space.

For most NFL athletes, the salary cap and lack of guaranteed contracts results in shorter careers, restricted earning potential, and job uncertainty.

The lack of job stability creates a number of problems for an athlete and his family. While high draft choices and well-established veterans can afford to plant roots in a community after receiving multi-million dollar signing bonuses, lower round selections and undrafted free agents live from game paycheck to game paycheck. When the lower round draft pick or the undrafted free agent leaves for summer training camp, his family is left behind and waits in limbo hoping he makes the roster.

Those athletes fortunate enough to stick with a team are quickly confronted with some difficult personal decisions that add to the stress of playing without a guaranteed contract. For example, if the young man is a single father, he may need to negotiate a child support settlement that can severely reduce an athlete's income. Athletes with families also have to determine the benefits of living together during the season or maintaining two separate residences.

Another set of problems arise when an athlete is unexpectedly released from his contract. While a veteran player may have enough money saved to support his family until his agent finds another employer, a young athlete just starting his career is usually not as fortunate. Unemployment is certainly a stressful situation for any family, but losing a job that pays $25,000 to $100,000 per week frequently has devastating consequences on a young couple.

Other factors that place additional stress on NFL families include traveling across the country six months out of the year and a social calendar bursting with public appearances. Wives, girlfriends, and family members are often put in a situation where they are forced to take a backseat to an athlete's career.

As a professional athlete, I witnessed another family dynamic that opened my eyes to the struggles some athletes face after leaving professional football. On several occasions during my career, I had the opportunity to visit teammates at their parents' homes. In some instances, an athlete was the primary or sole financial provider for one or both parents. A few teammates also served as the de facto family patriarch and were financially responsible for siblings, grandparents, and other relatives.

Because NFL athletes are public figures, they often feel pressure to conceal their personal struggles by projecting an image of supreme confidence. My teammates and I often used the team bible study as a safe space to confide in one another about our personal problems and insecurities. Sexual or extramarital relationships are just a few of the topics players would discuss with one another during these study sessions. On several occasions, an athlete would attend bible study with his wife and then drop her off at home and re-gather with the other men to pick up girls at clubs. If a teammate was having trouble at home, ample opportunities existed for him to sleep with other women. It did not matter if he was attending a speaking engagement at a children's hospital or attending church. Women let it be known that they lusted for sex with a professional athlete. After their careers end and the girls moved on to the next group of young studs, my teammates were then forced to deal with problems at home. The transition to retirement was stressful for several of my teammates mainly because they were not prepared to live life as anything other than as a professional football player.

## Life after the NFL

The transition to life after football is made more complicated because of the bonds that form between teammates who spend years in the trenches together. One consequence of the NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement is that a stratified system exists whereby resources are

distributed unequally among athletes. Because the NFL lacks guaranteed contracts teammates are pitted against one another in a struggle to secure the most lucrative contract possible. The income disparity among athletes on the Washington Redskins speaks directly to this issue. In 2007 the Redskins payroll equaled $123 million, 85 percent ($104.44 million) of which was distributed among 23 players. The remaining 36 athletes on the roster were left to fight over the final $18.45 million slotted for salaries. On the other hand, when athletes are thrust into a highly competitive environment they tend to cope with the stress by developing allies. When a small group of athletes spends thousands of hours together over the course of ten months, strong personal ties will typically develop. I witnessed the latter phenomenon develop when a first round linebacker was drafted by a team mainly composed of veteran players. Everyone on the team knew it was just a matter of time before a popular teammate would be cut to make room for the rookie. To make matters worse, several of the most respected defensive players felt the hot shot rookie was not talented enough to make the team. In the end, it really did not matter what any of the players felt, since the team spent a lot of money to draft the rookie and he was destined to make the team. Many of the athletes I spoke with while in the field admitted that one of the toughest things about retirement was losing that sense of camaraderie between teammates in the locker room.

Once the final snap from center, the last punt return, and the final bone jarring tackle is delivered, every NFL athlete is confronted with the reality that his playing days have come to an end. Retirement is difficult for most NFL athletes because it is a sign of mortality. For an athlete to perform at the highest level of professional football, he must be convinced that failure is not an option. Former Green Bay Packers legendary coach Vince Lombardy's slogan, "It's not whether you get knocked down; it's whether you get back up" personifies how athletes are socialized to persist at all cost. Athletes spend years preparing their bodies and minds to

overcome the mental and physical challenges of football. Unfortunately, inspirational slogans and catchy motivational phrases do not exist to for ex-NFL athlete. For certain NFL athletes getting cut or being forced out because of injury is a challenge to the master status that they were not emotionally prepared to handle.

After enjoying lengthy careers, many doctors, lawyers, university professors, and other professionals often seek to reduce the stress of retirement by planning for the future. Well before the end is in sight, many of these professionals are able to adjust mentally, financially, and emotionally to make a healthy exit from the workforce.

The career trajectory of the average NFL athlete is vastly different from that of the typical white collar professional. Most athletes enter the league in their early twenties and exit before they turn thirty. For many athletes who unexpectedly find themselves in this situation, retirement is a tough emotional, as well as financial and mental adjustment. The all-state athlete who began playing little league football at 12 years old envisions a long and prosperous professional career. Those dreams are fuelled by college coaches who seduce the starry-eyed athlete with athletic scholarships, state-of-the-art training facilities, and promises of playing on national television. Each April, the NFL hosts an annual 'coming out party' for a few hundred young men who spent every day in college dreaming of the moment Commissioner Goodell announces their names from the podium at Radio City Music Hall. The presence of ESPN sport television makes the day even sweeter as millions of fans clamor for every detail about these modern day gladiators destined to become the saviors of fantasy football leagues all across the country. Unfortunately, injuries, the salary cap, or some other unforeseen issue forces the average athlete out of the NFL after only thirty eight games. The loss is particularly difficult for

those young men whose identities and social status are so closely aligned that football blurs the lines between the two.

In addition to the emotional stress that accompanies a forced retirement, physical injuries often hamper an athlete's adjustment to civilian life. Athletes commonly develop a host of physical maladies later in life as a result of the pounding their bodies have taken over the years of play. After years of using their body as a battering ram, joint stiffness combined with chronic aches and pains often makes the most mundane tasks challenging. During my fieldwork, many athletes recounted how their lives were altered because of injuries sustained playing football. Imagine a 6'4" 250 pound man with bad knees trying to sit at a office desk designed for someone half that size for a prolonged period of time. My personal situation offers a small glimpse into the realities that confront athletes who deal with chronic pain. As any graduate student can attest, writing a dissertation requires one to sit in front of a computer screen for hours at a time. While working on my research, I started to experience some problems related to an old neck injury. Around the same time, an old knee injury began to flare up. A year earlier, I had been diagnosed with arthritis in my right knee. Because of a lack of medical insurance, I tried to ignore the pain from both injuries until the situation became unbearable. Upon securing health insurance, I immediately scheduled an appointment with a neurologist who specializes in traumatic spinal injuries. Fortunately, three months of intensive therapy helped me avoid possible neck surgery. On the advice of my neurologist, I decided to speak with an orthopedic surgeon who specializes in sports injuries about my knee. This time the diagnosis was gut wrenching. The doctor determined that arthritis had developed in both knees and an MRI revealed that a cyst in my right knee was most likely the result of a torn meniscus. Simply put, after all those years of playing football, my body was beginning to break down. Luckily I received wonderful medical

treatment; otherwise, the straightforward task of typing at the computer might have become unbearable. For many retired NFL athletes, the thought of working a white collar desk job is a scary. In addition to struggling with pain on a daily basis, knowing that co-workers are watching them hobble around the office is difficult psychologically.

## Issues, Descriptions, and Narratives

The remainder of *Not For Long (NFL): The Life and Career of the NFL Athlete* consists of six chapters that explore the dynamic processes of interaction between athletes and the social system of the NFL. These chapters focus on the affects of race, class, power, and labor on athletes' self-identity and life chances during and after their playing career. The main theoretical perspectives that underpin this research are Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Marx's principles of capitalism and labor power, and Goffman's interactionist approach, situated within the structural inequalities of sports identified by Harry Edwards. This study is guided by four major themes: the football identity, the political economy of the NFL, the NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement, and the involuntary role exit.

In Chapter Two, I introduce Phillip Bobo, a 36-year-old African-American male who continuously sabotaged his professional football career with a string of immature decisions. By all accounts, Bobo possessed the physical skills to be a first round draft choice in the NFL but he never even made it on the field for one regular season game. A series of ill-fated decisions and several reconstructive knee surgeries left Bobo as an unwanted commodity in NFL circles. I decided to feature Bobo's story as a way of introducing the numerous obstacles that can cause an athlete to self destruct if he refuses, or is unable, to seek professional mental help. In Phillip Bobo we encounter a troubled athlete who excelled in NFL Europe while suppressing the emotional damage inflicted by a domineering father. Bobo helps shed light on the dark side of an

unresolved athletic identity conflict. At an early age he learned that athletics offered the perfect stage to mask the pain of his personal demons.

In Chapter Three, high school seniors Cody and Naz, and college seniors Matt, Moe, Roland, and Tierre help explore the major transition phases in the life of a football player. Before delving into the issues that confront ex-NFL players, I first describe the life course of aspiring amateur football athletes. In this chapter, I draw from Bourdieu's concept of habitus to describe how the football culture is instilled into athletes from a young age. Football becomes such an all encompassing part of these young men's existence that they do not question the extent to which their lives are dominated by sport. Families are also often required to make lifestyle adjustments in order to accommodate the demands of the football culture. In Cody's case, we see a father bartering for a gym membership and personal training sessions so his son can pursue the dream of earning a college athletic scholarship. As each athlete illustrates the numerous ways in which their lives are shaped and altered by football, it becomes clear these young men rarely stop to question why the world of football functions in such a fashion. The narratives in this chapter provide key insights regarding how young athletes' transition from one phase of a football career to the next, as each step along the way an athlete must acquire the capital necessary to perform at the next level or his career will stall.

The primary purpose of Chapter Four is to offer an analysis of the NFL from a critical perspective. I view the NFL corporate culture as a discursive practice that legitimates the league's claim to power. As a result of political maneuvers and several court victories, the NFL is exempt from antitrust laws, which allows individual teams to act as one business in a variety of contract negotiations. With its monopoly status firmly in place, the NFL now exercises nearly unfettered control over the American professional football market. Culturally, the NFL possesses

the power to determine who and what is considered authentic in the world of professional football. International brands eagerly enter into exclusive multi-million dollar advertising and merchandising agreements with the NFL for a chance to reach a highly desirable demographic. Although four professional leagues currently exist in North American (The Arena Football League, The Canadian Football League, and the newly formed United Football League), the NFL is that only league that offers athletes the ability to perform on the biggest football stage in the world. Product endorsement deals, social prestige, and playing on national television are just a few reasons why athletes prefer the NFL over the other professional leagues. The NFL also possesses the power to define which athletes are viewed as the most talented football players in the world. Through a number of shrewd political and economic moves the NFL has transformed from a fragmented group of independent team owners into the most power business cartel in sports.

Chapter Five is concerned with the NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and the labor struggles between labor and management. After fifteen years of relative peace, the NFLPA and the NFL Management Committee are on a labor collision course that will determine the fate of the league for years to come. In the spring of 2008 the owners drew first blood by voting unanimously to exercise an option to void the final two years of the current CBA. Under the terms of the 2006 labor agreement, the players were set to receive 60 percent of the revenues in 2011, which the owners believe needs to be trimmed by 18 percent. The Players' Association Executive Director DeMarurice Smith countered by claiming that the owners have engaged in a concerted course of conduct that suggests they are preparing for a labor lockout. In Smith's view the collective bargaining process is designed for two equal parties negotiating over issues, but the NFL is engaged in actions designed to severely restrict the union while enhancing their own

bargaining leverage (Corbette, 2010). The difference between these two perspectives illustrates the conflict that players have historically been unable to resolve. Unlike their brethren in Major League Baseball, NFL athletes have never exhibited the kind of solidarity that will produce lasting change in the labor market, because the average player's career is so short he cannot jeopardize this small window of economic opportunity. Historically, NFL owners have forced the players back on the playing field after striking, more quickly than any other professional league (Bryant, 2010). Until the players learn to unite as one collective voice, their struggle with ownership will continue to center on monetary issues rather than gaining equal power to control the league.

In Chapter Six, I focus on the experience of Black professional NFL athletes who attain wealth and celebrity status. Research on the Black middle class and African American white-collar professionals demonstrates that obtaining a mainstream income often does not negate the experience of marginalization from mainstream white America. Overlooked thus far in scholarship is the experience of Black professional athletes who attain wealth and celebrity status. Based on interviews and field observations conducted with current and former NFL athletes, this chapter examines how a group of African American athletes narrate and navigate their social position in the league and throughout the wider society. Building on theories of institutional control, socialization, discipline, and the marginalization of Blacks, this chapter demonstrates that some African American NFL players experience a sense of isolation and inequity, which affects how they negotiate their athlete role. I also explain how some NFL athletes frame their views of the league's disciplinary policies through an understanding of the restricted opportunities available in society for African Americans. Though playing in the NFL is

often thought of as a privilege reserved for only the best players, this chapter offers a frame for examining how race and class refract the experience of the Black NFL athlete.

Chapter Seven scrutinizes the process of involuntary role exit by focusing on NFL athletes as a small but elite segment of the population. As members of a highly recognized status group, NFL athletes are often subjected to conflicting portrayals in the media. In certain instances they are recruited as corporate spokespersons or encouraged by the NFL to represent high profile non-profit organizations as volunteers. On the other hand, reports of handgun violations, drunk driving, drug use, and even murder charges are occasionally splashed across the national news headlines. Sociologically, these conflicting portrayals offer a unique opportunity to identify the issues confronting individuals forced to exit a highly coveted role central to one's self-identity. Specifically, this chapter illustrates the methods used by NFL athletes who struggle with, seek to delay, and even succeed in disengaging from the forced role exit. Unlike the voluntary role exit process uncovered by Ebaugh (1986), an involuntary exit from the NFL is a source of personal and social conflict for the athlete because the process does not allow for the disengagement of his former role prior to the forced creation of a new self-identity. By examining empirical examples of athletes who were confronted with the un-welcomed realization that their NFL careers were forced to end, scholars gain a deeper understanding of the impact on self-identity and social interaction when the stage of *disengagement* is omitted from the role exit process. In addition, I argue that this omission inhibits the individual's ability to re-establish a new identity that takes into account one's ex-role, and therefore causes some individuals to experience anomie (Durkheim, 1984) in the form of bitterness, embarrassment, financial upheaval, gender and family conflicts, depression, and apathy.

## Conclusion and Appendix

Following Chapter Seven, I offer several closing remarks about how the structure and culture of the NFL can lead to anomic behavior in retired athletes. This section provides a detailed discussion of how retired athletes are negatively affected by a dominant sports identity, the political economy of the NFL, the NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement, and the involuntary role exit. In addition to providing a synopsis of the major themes covered throughout this research, the concluding section maps out a plan for future research. This dissertation should be seen as a preliminary description of the issues that make sport an essential site for sociological inquiry. After the conclusion section, an appendix is provided, which contains a detailed explanation of the ethnographic methods used to collect the data included in this study. The information was gathered during four years of field observations and consists of more than 120 interviews with people that have intimate knowledge of the world of football. Throughout this study, my background as a former professional football player was an asset as well as an area of concern. The biggest challenge I faced while conducting this research was to maintain a position of neutrality. As a former athlete, I sometime fell into the trap of privileging a player's perception and interpretation of events without questioning their validity. The task became even more difficult whenever I received encouragement and support from many athletes who expressed a belief that my work would help depict the realities of life in the NFL. Fortunately, I benefited greatly from scholarly mentors who pushed me to withdraw unmerited claims not supported by empirical evidence. As a result, I spent countless hours trying to suppress personal biases only to realize that an inherent strength of this study is that my experience as an ex-football player helped me develop a set of questions that NFL athletes could appreciate and respect. I am grateful that rigorous sociological training required me to acknowledge my perceptions and values of the NFL prior to interpreting the data from a critical perspective.

## Some of the other participants

In addition to Philip Bobo and the other athletes previously introduced in this chapter, here is a list of some the key men and women that appear in this research.

**Table 1.**

| | |
|---|---|
| Matthias, Wide Receiver | 27 years old |
| Jarvis, Linebacker | 26 years old |
| Abdullah, Defensive End/Linebacker | 28 years old |
| Red, Retired-Wide Receiver | 42 years old |
| T-Bone, Red's son (College Defensive Back) | 22 years old |
| Will-Rock, Retired-Defensive Back | 46 years old |
| Juleonny, Retired-linebacker | 31 years old |
| Denise, Abdullah's wife | late 20's or early 30's |
| Rodney, Wide Receiver | 28 years old |
| Flip, Wide Receiver | 21 years old |
| Abdul-Jamal, Wide Receiver | 29 years old |
| BK, Retired-Defensive Back | 26 years old |
| Chester, Retired-Defensive End | 34 years old |
| Victor, Chester's business partner | 35 years old |
| Big Al, Retired-Tight End | 52 years old |
| Jay Maesing, Retired-Wide Receiver | 30 years old |

# Chapter 1
## *Phillip Bobo: A Life History*

When I met Phillip Bobo during the summer of 2006 I had no idea what impact his life story would have on my research. Jay Maesing, a former NFL wide receiver, invited me out for Sunday afternoon drinks at the Pelican lounge, a hip little spot that felt more like a neighborhood bar in gentrified Fort Greene Brooklyn than a watering hole in Hollywood, California. Over the course of two years Jay meticulously recounted his life as a Super Bowl champion while allowing me to observe him in his new role as a former NFL athlete. Once Jay learned of my plan to conduct research on the west coast, he generously offered to introduce a few "Ballers." As we grabbed a few drinks and settled on the patio to soak in the latest eclectic grooves laid down by the resident DJ, Jay casually introduced Bobo as "a great brother to know." After taking a few minutes to explain the project I decided to "chill," as the alcohol flowed and the aroma of marijuana wafted just above the crowd. Later that evening, Bobo passed along his number and encouraged me to hit him up sometime. Shortly afterwards he and Mayes took off for a meeting a with a few film executives about a script concept they were working on. After that initial encounter, the summer ended and I relocated back to Brooklyn to begin a different phase of my research. It took nearly eighteen months to reconnect with Bobo. As a matter of fact, I was not even sure if he would grant me an interview since so much time had elapsed.

A recent Reebok television campaign entitled - *when did I know*? - idolizes a group of NFL athletes for recognizing at a young age that they were destined for greatness. Unfortunately this commercial, and many similar advertisements, fails to show what happens to thousands of athletes who suffer from chronic injuries, fall prey to money swindlers, or become ensnarled with the law. Chapter 1 is presented as case study of Phillip Bobo's life story because it

epitomizes the forgotten heroes who have quickly faded into football obscurity after a brief stint in the NFL. With a slight twist here or a turn there, his story is reminiscent of the tragedy that befalls the All-America athlete who earns a scholarship to "big time U" but somehow never quite achieves NFL stardom. An important aspect of Bobo's odyssey that contradicts the common perception of fame and glory is that his career consisted of a single injury beleaguered season. More sobering is that the immaturity that led to the self-sabotaging behavior displayed by Bobo is representative of many of the athletes who seek employment by the NFL each season. Another facet of an NFL caliber athlete's experience overlooked by Reebok is that Bobo spent nearly seven unglamorous years trying to re-capture that elusive dream of NFL fame. Following a brief stint with the Los Angeles Rams, football led Bobo to NFL Europa in Amsterdam, then onto three tryouts with the Los Angeles Raiders, and a second devastating knee injury with the Edmonton Eskimos of the Canadian Football League (CFL), before finally calling it quits after flirting with the XFL.[4] When Phillip Bobo sat down to share his life story there was no way of knowing it would turn into a 9 hour and 30 minute field interview. By the end of this marathon session, Bobo had exorcised the demons of guilt and shame that haunted him since high school. The interview also served as a cautionary message directed at young athletes, "I mean people know bits and pieces of my shit, but this is the first time I ever told anybody my whole story at one time. I couldn't have told you my story last year. I wasn't ready. But if you can use me, in some way, to help other people, then I'm cool with it."

## Early Life

As he settled onto a bar stool situated at the island that divides his kitchen from the living space, Bobo decided to start the conversation by describing his childhood. "I guess you could say

[4] The XFL was an American professional football league founded by Vince McMahon, owner of the World Wrestling Federation. The league only lasted for the 2001 season.

that I grew up in what you could call the hood. We were broke, poor all that stuff. We didn't have much money. I guess you could say that we were a typical product of the hood. My family was gang bangers, crack heads, all that stuff," he remembered. "My mom was instrumental in making sure we didn't go of (sic) that path by keeping us in church and keeping us in football." Born in Pasadena California, Bobo indicated that the early 1970's was an especially tough time for a single mother to raise 4 young children. "Even to this day we are a close knit family. We slept in cars. The only thing that helped us get through everything was our love for each other and our faith in God." His earliest memories of male-female relationships were also formed during this difficult period. Bobo recalls, "During that time mom had a whole bunch of hardship. My mom had just gotten out of her second marriage to a guy who used to beat her. It was just us 4 when I was 5 years old and we just had to ride it out through church and sports." About two hours into the conversation Bobo headed to the balcony for a few puffs of a thin cigar with a white plastic tip before offering an insightful reflection, "And the thing about it is that my mom was always taking the blow, like she was always the one that was being taken advantage of. People would do things to her and she would never fight back." As an adult Bobo finally recognized the profound effect his mother's actions had on shaping his views. "She was always a victim and I think that demon latched on to me."

As with all personal histories, Bobo's story is full of twists and turns, and is wrought with contradictions. The most salient theme that reoccurred throughout the discussion was Bobo's indifference towards football.

> I got to ninth grade and I go up with this crew called The Pasadena Fresh Crew, we started doing talent shows, and I was an MC. That was when Run-D-MC first hit and it was a really, really big deal. So that's where I was, that was my mind set at the time. I had no dream of football at the time. I wanted to be an entertainer.

Teenagers dreaming of becoming the next hip-hop sensation in the late eighties and early nineties were not unusual.[5] In fact, the cable television programs *Yo! MTV Raps*, and *Rap City*[6] popularized the new form of music that quickly became a worldwide phenomenon. The interesting thing about Bobo's confession is that he claims to have suppressed his desire for entertainment and reluctantly adopted a football identity. Despite his assertion, Bobo went on to have solid high school and college football careers before drifting in and out of professional football for nearly ten years. Armed with this knowledge, it was tempting to dismiss his passion for hip-hop and entertainment as youthful exuberance. After all what nine grader hasn't dreamt of being a famous entertainer? During the interview, however, it quickly became apparent that Bobo's decision to pursue football was an attempt to escape his painful past. Football empowered Bobo to become someone important. "If it were up to me, I would have went to a school of the arts and not even play football. But see, football was where I found that love that I was lacking, but it wasn't really what I wanted to be doing." With these few sentences Phillip presented a compelling justification for investigating the lives of NFL athletes.

How many elite athletes have felt compelled to pursue sports in order to fulfill other people's expectations? More importantly, how often do these athletes chase stardom only to become addicted to the attention? Most NFL athletes interviewed for this project revealed that playing professional football was a lifelong dream. Yet, Bobo's confession challenges the assumption that young athletes play because of a love for the game. His testimony reveals that a young athlete's desire for acceptance can unwittingly cause him to abandon his personal dreams. The following statement reflects this thinking, "I assumed another identity, which was a

[5] The Urban Dictionary refers to the Golden Age of Hip Hop as being roughly from the mid-eighties until the late nineties.
[6] MTV first aired the show Yo! MTV Raps in August 1988 and BET began broadcasting their version of a rap music video show in 1989. Both programs were designed to exclusively showcase hip hop.

complete football player because I tried to take a theater class [in college]. I actually did take a theater class cause my minor was drama, but they still saw me as Phillip Bobo the football player." Later during the conversation he clarified his reasoning, "That's when I started submerging into becoming a football player and forgetting about being an entertainer because nobody would give me the time of day as being that. They just knew me as a football player."

Pursuing football was Bobo's way of acquiescing to his father's disapproval of the entertainment industry. "The thing is, I told my dad years ago that I wanted to be an actor and he was like, *all these out of work actors, what makes you think you gonna make it?*" In a broader sense Bobo's action represented an attempt to understand why his father abandoned the family years earlier. The absence and neglect he experienced during that pivotal juncture in his life left Bobo questioning how his father could abruptly financially desert his family. As a child Bobo depended on the love of his immediate family and God to help him cope with the difficult times growing up on the streets of Pasadena. But the support of his immediate family did little to help resolve the conflicting feelings he had for his father. Life forever changed though, once it became impossible for Bobo to continue living with his mother after 9th grade.

> My mom eventually talked my dad into letting me come out to live with him at the start of my sophomore year. Now, keep in mind, I had no desire to be in football, my desires were to be in music and film. I wanted to be in entertainment. Now the first thing my dad did when I got there was strip me of all that. He made me cut my shag, and my Jheri Curl, all of that. He just stripped me of my identity.

As a teenager Phillip found himself thrust into a situation he was ill prepared to handle. Upon landing on his father's doorstep in Moreno Valley California, Bobo quickly learned he was not welcome. "My father used to put me down a lot. Called me the milkman's son, said I was too dark to be his kid. I think he hated my likeness, I'm a ghetto Nigger coming to that shit." Bobo claims his father viewed *black folks* from Pasadena as uncultured and stuck in poverty, which

may explain why the elder Bobo turned his back on his two eldest sons and his ex-wife. "Pops used to hate anything ghetto but the irony is that he used to live ghetto even though he denounced it. He hated so-called niggras, and he saw me as one, cause I'm not polished. I came from straight rock gut poor shit." At age thirty-six Bobo now possesses the capacity to look back on his childhood and offer an assessment of the tumultuous situation.

> At this time I'm trying to make sense of everything that's going on as a 16-17 year old. I'm trying to understand why we were living like that in Pasadena without shit, and he's living like this in Moreno Valley. Why couldn't he try to help? What he was doing to us was worst than ghetto cause that's a mental hang up that you're giving your kids. The worst part about the ghetto is what the parents give to their kids. The mentality, look what he's doing to his kids.

As emotionally compelling as Bobo's story is, it also offers a chance to understand how issues like public approval and parental influence contributed to the difficulties athletes experience in establishing their identity or in trusting others. Outwardly it seems that plenty of athletes have learned to overcome issues of abandonment or the stigma of an impoverished background, yet how many learned to cope through burying their shame and embarrassment? As Bobo meticulously recounted his struggles, subtle clues began to emerge, which offered insight into how an athlete's personal history is useful in explaining his behavior both during and after an NFL career ends.

## A father's influence

Sitting in his Afro-centrically decorated living room of this stylish two-bedroom rental in the heart of Hollywood, Phillip's story was instrumental for me in understanding how interpersonal relationships and the environment help to shape an athlete's views of the world. Though music and entertainment were his first love, Bobo was nonetheless influenced by his father's insistence that he play football. His father, Wyatt Bobo, counted several Los Angeles

Rams as acquaintances and business associates that frequented his home. "My pops was pretty good friends with Ron Brown[7] and Eric Dickerson[8], and he was trying to get them to do business with him." No doubt, a future NFL hall of famer taking interest in a high schooler's career would easily captivate most fifteen year olds. "When my father made me play football those guys became my hero(s), which was cool cause I was like, I got Ron Brown at my house, I got Eric Dickerson at my house, and I wanted to be like them guys. So I started migrating towards football, but I still kept my roots in music." Over the years Bobo learned that his father would use people to get money, cars, property, or whatever else he needed to *get over*.

> To let you know, my father was a world-class hustler; when I moved out there he had six Porches in the driveway… That's how my father got all them cars, Ron at the time had a car dealership, and so they would do deals together. At the time Ron had invested up to $400,000 with my father. That was combined with cars and money, a lot of money in 86-87.

Despite Phillip's best efforts, Wyatt Bobo continued to belittle his son, which made the move from the black neighborhoods of Pasadena to suburban life even more stressful. Success on the football field and a new rap crew to *kick it* with helped the adjustment to Moreno Valley easier to deal with. "I built a crew out there called the 89 posse. We was all football players, they were rappers, and we did talent shows and stuff. So when I went to school I was the guy in the rap group." No matter how hard he pursued a relationship with his father, Bobo never made headway in that relationship. "But when I came home [after school] I was who he wanted me to be, or at least I was trying to be, but he still wasn't paying no attention to me." After being declared too young to play on the varsity team as a sophomore, the relations between Bobo and his father began to nosedive. This was the beginning of a tremendously dark period in which

[7] Ron Brown earned a gold medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics as a member of the 4 x100 meter relay team. He also placed 4th in the open men's 100 meter dash at the same Olympic games. Brown went on to play in the NFL for the Los Angeles Rams and the Oakland Raiders from 1984 until 1991.
[8] Eric Dickerson was induced into the NFL Hall of Fame in 1999.

Bobo established a pattern of self-sabotaging behavior that plagued him throughout the remainder of his football career.

> So the turning point came during my junior year. Cheerleaders used to love my brother, and it was my first experience with white girls. I got to know a cheerleader [Joy] from my high school that became my girlfriend. And Pops was always mister flossy; he would make sure he looked good when he was doing his shit. So we used to go to the [Los Angeles Rams] games, and I got cozy with one of the cheerleaders… So my girlfriend at the time used to come see me. And my father was sitting on about 3 acres of land and he had this Suzuki Samurai in the front yard which is how I taught myself how to drive. So after awhile he saw it and he let me take it back and forth to Moreno Valley and get my girl. My father always wanted to be away from everybody. He didn't like living near people. He was never one of those guys who carried guns and all that stuff. He was more like a white collared criminal type dude. So one night he would not let me take Joy home, for whatever reason. [Long pause in telling the story]. So he took her home, and I never saw her again. She just dropped out of school. They ended up going to Vegas together and getting married. She had two kids together by my father.

Coaches teach that football is a game where the strong survive. Naturally, bigger, stronger, and faster athletes have an advantage on the field of competition. Yet, successful athletes understand that only a portion of the game is physical. The great ones quickly learn the importance of overcoming mental adversity. To develop mental toughness, coaches use analogies such as: when life knocks you down, you get back up and keep fighting. On practice fields all across America, coaches are preaching Saturday morning sermons that that testify to fortitude of Cool Hand Luke[9]; *losers lay down and quite, but winners keep getting back up to fight*. Bobo was able to use the lessons he learned in football to hide from his pain. The tough it out dictum of football offered him the perfect antidote to endure the embarrassment of his father stealing his ex-high school girlfriend. By the age of 16 Bobo had already experienced a lifetime's worth of disappointment. Living as the stepbrother to his ex-girlfriend's two children served as a constant reminder that Bobo's father had chosen not to stick around and support his mother years earlier.

[9] Cool Hand Luke is the 1967 film starring Paul Newman and directed by Stuart Rosenberg that was adopted from the novel of the same title by Donn Pearce.

> There were times when she would be there [hanging out at the house with me] and my father would send me way to go do something. I don't know how it transpired, but it came back to me that he was trying to do deals with her parents but her dad wouldn't fuck with him cause he sniffed him out. But her mom loved my dad cause he was the most charming, sweetest guy ever, who could talk you out of anything. Evidently he convinced Joy's mom to allow her {daughter} to be with him. So she actually endorsed the marriage. At the time Joy was as Senior in high school and he talks her mom into allowing him to marry her as a 45-year-old man. I'm just a kid chillen, I'd didn't know about all that shit. He's never ever mentions it to me.
>
> This is the craziest part about it all. So Pops disappears. I came home one day and there was a broken glass in the front window, when I go inside everything is gone. The house is empty. They was together for about 2-3 weeks later and they was gone. Everything in my room was gone... My clothes, the furniture, turntables, everything is gone. I'm trying to make sense of everything that's going on as a 16-17 year old. I'm trying to understand why we were living like that in Pasadena without shit, and he's living like this in Moreno Valley. Why couldn't he try to help?

Increasingly, school districts are hiring individuals outside of the teaching ranks to serve as coaches. The days when a coaching staff consisted almost entirely of teachers are rapidly disappearing. This trend has made it difficult for football coaches, with a large number of kids and a small staff, to build strong ties with individual team members. A coaching staff that only interacts with its team during practices and games is challenged to know how students are doing outside of athletics. This disconnect makes it nearly impossible for coaches to mentor more than a handful of team members each season. Coaches, school counselors, and teachers naturally pay more attention to kids who need the most help. Students who stay out of trouble and perform well athletically are the least worrisome. Success on the football field helped deflect questions about Bobo's home life while allowing him to fly under the radar. Football served as a protective layer that helped keep people from recognizing his emotionally vulnerability. "I got through by building a wall around myself. It was a defense mechanism, but it was a complete internalization. I was just living through it. Strictly numb to the whole thing. As far as having stuff, it didn't matter cause I never had shit anyway."

Phillip recalled that after Bobo Sr. ran off to marry his new bride, he went to live with his *road dog*, Charles Bibbs and his parents.[10] Unsurprisingly, Moreno Valley high school was buzzing with talk of Joy *hooking up* with Bobo's father. "One day Joy shows up to school and pulls up in a new car and she comes up to me and doesn't bother to say shit to me. Then one of my friends comes up to me and said I heard your dad brought her that new car. That fucked me up." Curiously, Bobo claims that this was the only time he ever felt anxious about his father's relationship with Joy. "I was never traumatized, it's tough to believe but I didn't care about all that shit. I was like, what could I do? I couldn't do anything about it so fuck it. They had made me an outcast already so I was a complete outcast now. "

Just as an untreated wound festers beneath the skin, Bobo's emotional scars complicated his life unnecessarily for many years. It took years for Bobo to recognize that he hid behind football and entertainment to suppress feelings of rejection and betrayal. "I felt abandoned by everyone but I didn't realize it until much later. I was just living in the moment." In addition to shutting himself off from the outside world he also learned to use a star athlete identity to guard against his emotional venerability. "I was already the shit in football, I was already an MC, already setting off parties, and I was doing my thing. After that one time nobody ever discussed that shit about my father with me."

Besides drawing further into his protective shell, Bobo also developed a deep distrust of white people. When asked to explain the roots of his suspension, Bobo responded, "In high school, the girls, the way people was jocken my brother for the way we was rollin, everything seemed manufactured when I was dealing with white people." Early success in sports coupled with overwhelming personal disappointment caused Bobo to develop a callous attitude towards

[10] During the interview Bobo proudly pointed out the artwork of Charles Bibbs senior, a famous African American artist he prominently displays on the walls of his apartment

outsiders, particularly *white folks*. "Because the closer you get to people the more questions they start asking. Especially white people, they the nosiest people on earth." Rationally, he knew it was his father that betrayed him, yet he claims that Bobo senior never gave him any reason to expect much from him anyway. These incidents caused an emotional vacuum that affected Bobo's ability to trust people throughout high school, in college, and into the pros. The knowledge that a white woman would allow her 17year old daughter to run off with her high school boyfriend's 45 year old father was incomprehensible to Bobo. By this point Phillip had already begun to reason that the only thing worthy of his trust was sports, entertainment, and his Christian faith. "At that time I was doing a lot of praying. Throughout my lifetime I always felt alone, but I always felt that God had my best interest at hand. I always stayed true to what my mom taught me and that was to stay prayerful."

As if his junior year was not tumultuous enough, Bobo moved to three different residences during his senior year. After residing with his surrogate father Charles Bibbs Sr. for most of the school year, Bobo moved back into his father's home. To most people it seems improbable that Bobo would return to live with the one person who continuously betrayed him. Yet, the move underscores the incredible importance that this young athlete placed on gaining his father's approval. "Even with all of this going on between me and him, he still has a big influence on me cause he's still my dad. Actually, he has a good heart, it's just that he just sees things differently." In Bobo's case, the sting of his father's rejection took on an even greater significance. While crowds cheered him and newspapers raved about his talents, the stands remained empty of Bobo's family members. His mother was busy raising a new family, while his older brother spent much of his time fighting a nasty viral infection. This made the absence of his father even more disappointing. Bobo senior was the one who demanded that Phillip play

football; introduced his son to the glamorous side of the NFL lifestyle; relished the attention of NFL athletes, then turned a blind eye to his son's accomplishments. What good are press clippings or awards if an athlete cannot share them his loved ones? Since his mother and brother were too busy and his father did not care, Bobo turned to his girlfriend for comfort. Bobo had a terrific senior season, despite his unstable living arrangements, and an over possessive girlfriend who was blamed for driving a wedge between the 89 Posse. He believes that the more he struggled to shake loose from the psychological grip of his father and the shame of his past, the more he focused on football.

> In spite of all the shit that was going on in my personal life, football was taking all of that away. And nobody saw that, nobody could judge me cause my mom was broke as a mother fucker, my dad had taken my girl, my dad was a world class hustler. Nobody saw me that way, and nobody talk to me about that. NOBODY. I was Phillip Bobo. Football gave me one leg up on everybody, even though my personal life was embarrassing. I could keep all that other stuff a secret cause I was pretty good in football. I'm sure everybody knew but they would never ever talk to me about it, and I was cool with it. Cause I'm over here doing this, because for me, I'm becoming my own shit. NOBODY ever came at me with that shit.

Crafting an identity as a star football player served multiple purposes for Bobo. Rather than simply allowing him to bask in the glory as the big man on campus, and protect himself from un-welcomed inquiries into his personal life, Bobo also used his identity to exude an air of confidence. He learned to portray an image of cockiness to keep people from encroaching on his personal space. By excelling in football and performing with the 89 Posse, Bobo appeared to be in control of his life. Unfortunately, many adults misread this polished image as a sign of confidence rather than identify it as cry for help. "See the thing about it was that adults, and maybe it was because my personality was too arrogant for them or what have you, but they saw it as a kid who was too arrogant, as opposed to somebody who was trying to reach out, or what have you." A high school athlete who maintains solid grades and earns a college scholarship is a

considered success in the eyes of the community. Yet Bobo's story challenges the image of an athlete whose content with pursuing the goals society deems as important. "So when you see a kid who's excelling in the manner that I was, I had the 3.0 or whatever. It looked like I had it all together, so they just figured, we don't have to tell him too much. He's got common sense enough to know that these are the steps that are necessary, but I didn't have that common sense." Bobo never viewed football as a means to get to college or as the vehicle to deliver him from a dire financial situation. "As far as having stuff, it didn't matter cause I never had shit anyway." The sport simply allowed him to be somebody special. "I stuck with football cause I was submerged in it now. I was Phillip Bobo the football player. The reason is because of what it brought to me, I was engulfed in that." Despite all of his success, Bobo desperately longed for someone to step in as a mentor. "No one in my surroundings, no coaches or counselors bothered to look and see what kind of family support or lack of support I had at home, not once, no teachers or no one." Eventually Bobo came to realize that his well-honed identity only helped to alienate him.

## Top High School Recruit

Football offers plenty of opportunities for an athlete to formulate opinions and reinforce stereotypes about masculinity. Kids are taught early on that football is a man's game, that it requires toughness, and a never say die attitude. Analogies of war and references to gladiators are just a few of the images used to describe the ultimate tough guy sport. Besides being able to withstand physical pain, and displaying mental toughness, a football player must know how to conduct himself in the presence of other men. He must not cry in public; nor fear is his enemy, but most of all; he must be strong enough to endure pain. In short, a football player must always be a man. But where is a young athlete supposed to turn if he begins to question the values of the

system? How does he respond to doubts? Who will be there to help pick him up when he falls? Isn't that the time when a coach steps in or a father figure offers a reassuring pat on the back? In Bobo's case nobody fulfilled that role. "Everybody assumed that football was my thing. And its crazy because there were many times I wanted to have conversations with a man to help me with this stuff, but maybe it was like I said, I was just too arrogant for anyone to approach me."

Adolescence is a difficult time for all young people, but it is particularly challenging for the star athlete who is supposed to have it all together. He is the one coaches call on to be the team leader. Underclassmen want to play like him, women want to date him, and the community expects him to be an ambassador. Bobo explains that rather than rejecting this role as a leader, insecurity kept him from opening up to people who could help him realize his potential. "At times when somebody might try and approach me I might say something to turn them off. But even so, I'm still a 16-17 year old kid. I didn't know shit." With so much pressure to excel athletically and academically, an athlete could be hurting emotionally. But who would notice?

> But they were so enamored with my football that I guess they just over looked that other shit. From the outside and you looking in, here is this good looking guy, girls are digging him, I ran for class president, they say I lost by one vote, which was bullshit, they just didn't want me in ASD, plus I was wining all these talent shows.

This façade served Bobo well, perhaps too well, since he successfully walled himself off from everyone except his girlfriend who found a way to exploit his emotional vulnerabilities. In stark contrast to images of the popular athlete who views female conquests as a right of passage, Bobo developed an uncanny loyalty to his high school sweetheart. For at least a short period of time she successfully filled the void created by the absence of his father's love.

> [I signed] when Dennis Erickson was the head coach at Washington State. He came to my mom's house and everything to recruit me. When he was leaving to go to [University of] Miami [to become the head coach] he asked me to come with him, and I was going to go but then my girl started fuckin with my head and shit, so I said no... My girl was

> giving me a hard time say that Miami was too far, so I didn't go. I would have felt all bad if I would have left, she was a virgin and she had mad game on me. So, quite frankly up to that point she was the only one that I had ever know who was down for me. I was even to the point that I was even telling Erickson that I wanted to bring my girl with me, and that was the first time I ever heard, "never bring a sandwich to a banquet."

H.G. Bissinger's best selling book, *Friday Night Lights* (1999), offers a non-fictional account of the culture that has developed around high school football in west Texas. The book investigates both the positive and negatives aspects of the intense relationship a community has with the local high school team. Social pressure is also a poignant theme throughout the book. By following a handful of players, the story shines a spotlight on the often-confusing contradictions produced by the lofty ambition and unrealistic dreams of the athletes. Overall, *Friday Night Lights* is memorable for exploring the impact the football team has on the town, and how that relationship affects people both on and off the field. Whereas Bissinger's work examines relationships on a broader level, Bobo's story offers a chance to detail the travails of a high school athlete's dating relationship. Just as Bobo began making plans to escape his painful existence, his one and only significant high school relationship turned sour. After months of complaining that he would go off to college and forget about her, Bobo's girlfriend delivered the bone chilling news that she was pregnant. Numerous situations could have derailed Bobo's chances of playing big time college football. Injury, poor grades, or even family illness are just a few of the better-known issues to undercut athletes' dreams of football fame. But because of his impoverished background, Bobo's pregnant girlfriend was a constant reminder of his dire financial situation. If a college scholarship represented his best chance to escape the hardships of life, then becoming a young father and being forced to stay in Moreno Valley was a grave cause for concern. Like many other teenager parents, Bobo initially wondered if he would have to pass up his scholarship offers and begin working to support his child. Even if his family was able to step in and help, Bobo would have had to contend with the stigma of leaving his child behind to

pursue dreams of athlete stardom. Rather than pressing for an abortion or blaming her for their predicament, Bobo decided to accept his fate and begin college with a pregnant girlfriend by his side.

> So after I sign my girl gets pregnant in July. In this whole time I was just gonna ride it out and break for school, cause I didn't really want to dump her like that. And I just wasn't really feelin her no more after the honeymoon period was over… And I know she got pregnant on purpose, only because the 4th of July was the day she got pregnant and for some reason I felt, do not have sex with this girl. Cause we was having unprotected sex, and I felt in my gut, do not have sex with her but she damn near tackled me and just raped me… She knew she was ovulating. So we was having sex and I was saying "can I pull out, or something" and she was like "no, it's not love" she was just killin me, so I was like all right. After I nut, I get off her, I roll up, and we just sat there, I looked up in the sky and I just knew she was pregnant. That was the voice of God telling me what was up. Now that I have learn to recognize when it comes, I know it was him. I looked up and I just knew. A month later, she's crying, I'm pregnant. Abortion was not an option. She was a girl who was talking about going to the Peace Corps after high school. She didn't have no aspirations to do nothing, so this baby gave her a reason for living, and she gets to be stuck with me. So I'm trying to figure out, how am I going to get her up with me for the start of school?

Deciding which college to attend is a source of anguish for many top rated high school athletes. Sometime during their junior or senior years college football coaches begin courting young men for their respective football programs. The competition for talent resembles a modern day blood sport as coaches are under increasing pressure from the administration and alumni to build winning programs. For these reasons the recruiting process is a pivotal juncture in a young athlete's life. The process requires patience and thorough understanding of how big time college football programs operate. Without the guidance of a parent, coach, or mentor, a young man could easily become overwhelmed by the fanciful allure of playing in front of 100,000 raring fans. Under the best circumstances many athletes come to learn that a choice that felt right coming out of high school may turn disastrous with a head coaching change or if his position coach leaves for a better coaching opportunity. Once an athlete commits to attend a particular university, he has little leverage to control his destiny. On the other hand, the football program is

in a perpetual state of change. Coaches get fired, athletes become hurt, or the school may get placed on probation. Under any of these circumstances the athlete must learn to make the best of the choice he made as a 17-18 year old high school student. Bobo's desire to play in the prestigious Pacific 10 athletic conference was the single factor in selecting a college.

> I was never one to think about going to college, but the recruiting letters started heating up so I took my first trip to Utah, and I had a ball! Then I got invited to San Diego State, New Mexico State, then Washington State came aboard. Then after they came aboard I canceled San Diego State and New Mexico State cause I was going Pac-10. I had my mind made up already that I was going Pac-10. And when I went to Washington State I didn't even like it but they was Pac-10. And then they was going to move me to receiver which I was liking. New Mexico was mad at me, they was really just getting at me, and I was like man look, come on, I'm going to Washington State. So I'm doing all this in February when I was signing my letter of intent. USC was on me for a minute then Larry Smith said I couldn't play in the Pac-10, then they dropped me. Those the only schools that offered me scholarships. That was when Dennis Erickson was the head coach at Washington State, he came to my moms house and everything to recruit me. When he was leaving to go to Miami he asked me to come with him, and I was going to go but then my girl started fuckin with my head and shit, so I said no.

In recounting this story, Bobo felt that race also played an integral part in influencing which school he ultimately decided to attend. After Dennis Erickson resigned from Washington State to take over as the head coach at Miami, the newly appointed WSU head coach sent a black coach to convince Bobo to stick with his initial commitment. "When Mike Price who took over as head coach he sent a black coach down who played that race shit on me pretty hard and it worked." The ploy was particularly affective with Bobo given his apprehension with white people.

> I didn't really want to go to Pullman [WSU], it wasn't shit out there. If any one of them other Pac-10 school, Arizona, or even if Washington would have recruited me, hell yeah. Then they sent coach Carr down, and in my eyes he was a possible mentor that I was looking for. Because he came down and he showed me all the love, he was cool and that's what made me go with him, otherwise I was going with Miami. That's what made me make my final decision.

As an athlete progresses from high school to earn Division I college football scholarship, the physical, emotional, and mental expectations to perform intensify immensely. Normally an athlete rises up the ranks through high school by outshining everyone else on his team, in his county, and most others in the region. Like all top football prospects in the state he will have a scrapbook full of press clippings and a case full of trophies somewhere in his 'mommas' house. By the time he arrives on campus, enthusiastic alumni eagerly anticipate the day when he helps deliver 'their' team to the college football promise land. Certain athletes accept the challenge by earning immediate playing time while others find success after a redshirt[11] freshman season. Some athletes quickly learn that the competition in college is too strong and the pressure is too great. This group of "can't miss" athletes often end up forfeiting their scholarships or put in just enough work to maintain their spot on the team. Imagine the disappointment of having to explain to people back home how it is possible to go All-State to All-Scout team[12] in a matter of two short seasons. Besides dealing with homesickness and other adjustments to college life, the scholarship athlete has to deal with the added pressure of proving his worth on the football field.

## College Turmoil

For a select few, playing football is the easiest part of the adjustment to college. As some athletes struggle to recognize that their talents are not as unique as they were in high school, the special ones set themselves apart by outshining the competition. For this later group the challenge then becomes gaining and maintaining control over their personal lives while excelling in football. Once an athlete falls victim to an over inflated ego or his identity becomes overly consumed by his athletic accomplishments, he is in jeopardy of a serious letdown if his career

[11] The term "reshirt" is used to describe a student-athlete who does not participate in competition in an entire academic year.
[12] Scout team players have a tremendous workload and the most thankless job on the team. They are tasked with learning and running the opposing team's offense or defense while going up against the first-team players in practice.

begins to falter. For all the physical attributes Bobo possessed, he admitted wasting them by unknowingly sabotaging his athletic career. After a relatively uneventful freshman year, things began to spiral out of control. His girlfriend disappeared with his son and married another man; he lost interest in school and was placed on academic probation every semester after posting a 2.7 GPA as a college freshman, and his relationship with the WSU coaching staff soured. "Keep in mind, a lot of the shit that was happening was because of self-sabotaging, mainly cause I really didn't know who to trust."

Bobo attributes his academic underachievement to two primary factors: his parent's inability or lack of interest in helping him appreciate the value of a college education, and an academic counseling program more committed to keeping him eligible to play football than encouraging him to pursue a useful education.

> If you don't have either parent who's experienced the process of going to college, you're automatically doomed to fail. I was the first person ever to experience college from my family. When I got to Washington State, the counselors were more interested in me playing football then in me learning a trade, so I became a social science major, or whatever the fuck that means. They asked me what are you interested in and I said movies and music, and they said, ah well you have to do xyz. You asked me what I was interested and that what I wanted to do. And their thing was to make sure I played. You just lumped me into this shit, and at that point I was done with school. Remember in high school I had over a 3.1 cum, but when I went to college I was like, I'm not interested in none of this shit. I want to do music and I want to do film. I was like, why are you teaching me this shit, "*cause you have to graduate, and you have to stay eligible*?" My first year I got a 2.7 and I got it because I needed a 2.5 to pledge Omega. And that was my motivation to do well in school. After that I got a 2.0 the whole time. I wouldn't go to class at all, then I would do something at the end of the semester, and then the teachers would do something to change my shit so I could stay eligible. I didn't even earn that shit. I didn't do shit, for 4 years, cause I red shirted. I just did enough to keep them off my back. I got one A my whole time in college, that was in psych 101, sex education [laughing out loud] and that's it. I just felt not interested. None of my high school coaches or counselors mentored me about college at all either.

Rather than pursuing his passion as an entertainment, communication or theatre major, it seems that Bobo chose to accept his fate and adopt an identity as a football player. "Everybody's thing

was like, man look what you doing in football, why don't you stick with that? My thing was that football is just where my life happened to be going so that's where it is." Perhaps Bobo experienced so much disappointment in early life that he could not handle another rejection, or maybe it was just easier to succumb to the unwritten code that big time college football programs recruit athletes to play football. "When it came to the counselors at school, they not trying to explore what else I wanted to do. They were trying to keep me eligible to play football." Either way, Bobo suggests that he never received encouragement to be anything other than a football player. "I had nobody who would try and help me get there. I never took it upon myself to say *what the fuck are you telling me*, *I want to do this, or how do I do this*? The exploration of trying to attain goals outside of football was non-existent. The way my life was built up, being an actor was never an option for me. My shit was football. But I was dying inside."

Over the past several years the NFL has increasingly become concerned with player character issues. While many NFL teams have long taken into account character prior to drafting prospects, a new level of emphasis arose after commissioner Roger Goddell said teams could lose future draft picks or be fined based on criminal behavior of their athletes. This new initiative has resulted in a trickle down effect as college and high school programs increasingly examine athletes' backgrounds for indiscretions before granting scholarships. Teams find it particularly challenging when evaluating highly rated athletes who come from a harsh set of circumstances. In essence, coaches and administrators are asked to determine how athletes from troubled backgrounds will mature and represent their programs in the future. Just as institutions face unique circumstances dealing with character issues, athletes are often ill equipped to handle the demands confronting them. For some young men, the transition from an unstable home environment to a highly structured college setting is overwhelming. Stories of college athletes

breaking into dormitory rooms or getting caught with stolen goods sometimes make headlines in local and national newspapers. Yet these published stories rarely examine the details of personal tragedies that may have an influence on producing the behavior in question. Nor do journalists spend much time addressing why a particular athlete may resent speaking in public or conducting interviews. Bobo's story is an illustration of the personal tragedies that can beset gifted athletes and the missteps often made in handling these tribulations.

His redshirt freshman year was sort of a coming out party for Bobo and quarterback Drew Bledsoe, future #1 overall pick in the NFL. The two rookies combined to set several WSU freshman passing and receiving records during the season. For his part, Bobo recorded 54 catches on the way to earning a starting wide receiver position in the 5th game of the season. "That was really the beginning of my name getting out there in college. I played three years with Bledsoe. That's when I started to submerging into becoming a football player and forgetting about being an entertainer." In spite of his early athletic accomplishments, Bobo's first self-sabotaging act came as a result of his success on the football field. Attention from the national press, and the notoriety around campus combined with the invincibility he felt on the football field, kept Bobo from developing a respect for the game.

> I started getting attention beyond belief because I was in front of the camera. It was national. I was the shit on campus. At Wazzu its only 2% black so all the white girls and everybody was on some Phillip Bobo shit. Everything just fell right. It all felt like it was suppose to be. But I still wasn't respecting the game though, because I wasn't lifting weight, now I would run and condition with the team, I was excellent at that, but when it came to going inside and working out myself, I'd go to the gym, punch my time card and bounce. During the season and off-season workouts they'd look at my card and it looks like I was working out. I would go in the gym and make it look like I was doing a little something but I wasn't doing shit. It was that arrogance that perpetuated the lack of respect I had for the game, which even deeper, was about the lack of love I had for the game.

Bobo's narrative also challenges the commonly held notion that successful athletes dedicate hours of hard work perfecting their craft. Hollywood movies and media outlets such as ESPN seem to regularly portray athletes spending countless hours in the weight room training to seeking a competitive advantage. Yet Bobo delivers a vision that undermines these traditional images. His is a story of someone who relies upon natural ability to secure a starting position early in college and dominates the competition. Ultimately, this laissez fare attitude led to ongoing confrontations with the coaching staff. Rather than accept the challenge of leading by example, Bobo stubbornly rejected numerous overtures by the coaches to play a bigger role in developing team harmony.

> Coach Zimmer brought me into his office and he explained to me the position of leadership that I had for this team, and I all but denounced it. Saying I don't really expect anything from this other than what you guys expect from me on the field. I didn't really have the intellect or the maturity to corral the team like I could. I wasn't really a pillar for the team as I could have been, even as a freshman. I just basically just denounced it, I wasn't mature enough to handle it and my answer to him was whatever you guys expects then if somebody believes in me then I'm cool with it, and even though the coaches believed in me it just wasn't enough, because I didn't really believe in it. I was just out there playing, football wasn't nothing really serious to me.

Talent will carry an athlete only so far in the game of football. Great high school, collegiate, and pro athletes can rely on sheer talent for a short time. At some point they will loose a step due to injury, the competition often gets stiffer, or age will begin to erode their skills. Football is a ruthless game that eventually demands that even the most talented athletes put in the work necessary to maintain their competitive advantage. Immaturity and an inability to trust cost Bobo the opportunity to develop his talents to the fullest. "Football was just something, you know, I never really worked for it. But I had a lot of success; I had as much success that not working for it would take me. When you get to the pros you got to work thought." The wide receiver coach at WSU recognized that Bobo was a talented troubled young man who lacked direction. For all his

efforts, Bobo continuously rejected his coach's overtures and eventually alienated himself. It took years for Bobo to realize the damning impact of his misguided anger.

> Me and the receiver coach Mike Levenseller always butted heads cause I always saw him as wanting to take credit for as good as I was, but he always saw himself as making me better. And to this day, he is the only coach that I credit as making me a better football player. But I would never give him that. We were butting heads, whereas we could have had a hell of a relationship. I'm the kid; I've got to humble myself to what he knows. He could have been everything I needed but it was two things: I saw him as a mother fucking white man. And to this day, I tell my son when he's having beef with his coach, you need to humble yourself to this man's knowledge of the game cause he's been there a lot longer then you have. But I didn't have that; I didn't recognize that back then. All I saw was this white man trying to get something from me, which is what I feel like everybody was trying to do. I know I damaged our relationship. There were times he would call me and just give it to me. And one time in the middle of it he was like, "you don't care about none of this I'm saying about do you?" and I said, nope, I don't care about this football; I don't care about none of this.

Though Bobo now stresses the importance of mentorship and positive role models, his story is cautionary tale of how racist attitudes can cause psychological barriers that prevent troubled athletes from accepting mentors. During the interview Bobo also indicated that he initially looked to coach Carr, the African American coach who helped recruit him to Washington State University, as a male role model. Yet by the time his redshirt season rolled around Bobo gave up hope that Carr could ever fill the void created by his father. "Coach Carr tried to talk to me, but I saw him for what he was. He was fucking with the little college kids and I didn't respect that at all. He was asking me to hook him up with girls and shit and I just lost all respect for him." The man that Bobo had hoped would serve as his role model ended up being a painful reminder of the hurt his father imposed on him a few years earlier. "Carr is this grown man and he ain't doing nothing different than what my father was doing."

Even when an athlete from a troubled background adjusts quickly to college football he may still remain emotionally vulnerable to off the field difficulties. If an athlete lacks the necessary coping skills he may eventually find it hard dealing with whatever adversity awaits

him on campus. Because the pressure to win is enormous in major college football nearly every athlete is destined to face a trying situation at some point in his career. Challenge may arise in the form of injury, poor academic performance, or by simply associating with the wrong people. The question confronting coaches and administrators is how to best support an athlete during times of personal crisis. A quick scan of several websites indicates that most colleges offer a wide range of psychological services to students at little or no cost. But what if an athlete chooses not to seek out these professional services? What if counseling is perceived as a weakness to his peers or the athlete is worried that the stigma of needing psychological assistance will somehow hurt his chances of playing in the NFL. An athlete may even feel that seeking outside help is a betrayal of his faith in God. How an athlete deals with these issues has far reaching ramifications for the rest of his life.

During college, two life-changing events caused Bobo to develop an unwarranted resentment towards the Washington State University football program, and to question his desire to continue playing the game. In a matter of a few minutes Bobo's life took on new meaning during the summer between his redshirt sophomore and junior year. While traveling down a long stretch of desert highway, his closest high school friend, Duncan Boyd, fell asleep at the wheel just outside of Las Vegas. Bobo recalls that the car halted on the passenger side door after running off the road and flipped over several times. "I see it like it was yesterday. We skidding and tumbling in the dirt and we crash. The whole time we're tumbling I'm just sitting there with my eyes wide open, and neither one of us has our seatbelts on." After a short stint in junior college, Duncan was set to become the only other homeboy from Bobo's high school football team to play major college football. "Duncan just graduated from Snow College, he got his AA and he got a football scholarship to Oklahoma State. He was the only one out of the 89 posse

who actually made it. He had just signed his letter of intent to play football." The trauma of having a close friend die in his arms was overbearing. In addition to grieving for his friend, Bobo was burdened with the responsibility of explaining how the accident took place. "I had to make the phone call to his dad and it fucked me up. We was all like family, every time they'd see me they was like, 'Bobo what's up.' I had to tell them that, and all my friends."

When time came to return to school for the start of a new football season, Bobo slipped back to his familiar place of acting like everything was under control. "My mom called coach Price and told him what happened, he called, gave his condolences or whatever, and I went back to school. Once I got there it was like it never happened." The years of constant disappointment and resentment had taken such an emotional toll on Bobo that he slipped into survival mode without recognizing the extent to which he shielded himself from the outside world.

> I shut the whole world off. I shut the whole world off my sophomore year in high school. I shut everything off, even my girlfriend. Then it got even worse after Duncan died, then it was like it don't even make no sense. Life don't even make no sense. What the fuck, what is this? You know what I'm saying? I'm watching my best friend die and I have to explain, I have to take the responsibility to handle all this shit, but I'm not mature, I'm still tore up inside. I still got shit I haven't even dealt with. It was just suppressed. Everything was suppressed. Nobody was close to me, not my boys, nobody. I shut out everybody after Duncan died.

The violence of football teaches athletes that mental and physical toughness are an integral part of the game. By the time an athlete earns a football scholarship he has had to deal with a fair amount of physical adversity. The ability to play through pain is one way an athlete is able to set himself apart from the competition. The old adage, you can't make the club in the tub, rings true in every locker room across the country. If an athlete is constantly in the training room receiving treatment rather than practicing, he runs the risk of losing the respect of his teammates and coaches. The challenge confronting an athlete is to know when to play through the pain, and when to be smart and seek treatment for a malady. Not being able to recognize when to speak up

and ask for help exposes an athlete to unnecessary health risks that could ultimately jeopardize his career. To compensate for athletes trying to ignore pain, coaches rely on trained medical professionals to properly evaluate injuries and determine the appropriate course of action. Unfortunately, it is more difficult for untrained professionals to recognize when an athlete is suffering from emotional issues. The same code that says football players must tough it out and play through pain applies to psychological trauma. In Bobo's case it was probably even more difficult for people to recognize warning signals since he learned to mask his true emotions early in life. Nonetheless he still wonders why no one ever sought to relieve him of the misery.

> To me, I was like damn; motherfuckers couldn't see the signs back then? Couldn't somebody, you know, come and rescue this little kid way back then? None of all them grown-ups couldn't see what I was going through back then, or ya'll just didn't give a fuck? All the people are just gonna assume cause you have that ability then you alright. But see, I was so good at having the façade cause that's what I learned from my mom and dad. My dad would always tell me that no matter how broke you are, make sure nobody knows. There would be times that he would be negotiating deals for millions of dollars, and I'd be like, "we ain't even got no money, so how you gonna talk?" you know what I'm saying? With all the things I went through and had pent up inside of me, all the secrets that was holding me and was tearing me apart. There was no way in the in the world I could tell anyone that my father was in prison, or that he fucked my girlfriend. I mean, all those things because they held me in such high degree out there [in Pullman], because on the surface I handle myself really well. But with handling yourself like that comes a certain responsibility that I just wasn't mature enough to handle.

A year later a second event took place that caused Bobo to develop a deep seeded resentment towards Washington State University and the people of Pullman. Every so often a college athlete will make headlines for stealing, smoking marijuana, or some other type of criminal activity. Minor infractions are sometimes handled internally by the school administration, where the athlete ends up being admonished for exercising poor judgment. More egregious offenses can lead to an athlete losing his scholarship, coaches getting fired, or the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) may even sanction the program. In the wake of these scandals, the administration, alumni, and the college football community are left

wondering why a scholarship athlete would be willing to risk a bright future for such a stupid act. Bobo suggests that his destructive behavior was a result immaturity.

> You need the preparation to become a man. You can do it like I did, learn through life's lessons how to become a man or you can get proper tutelage, cause 18 years is plenty of time for you to become a man. You still have some growing up to do but it's still plenty of time to learn how to get the basics of what a man does. The first is take care of your responsibilities, learning to be responsible for what you do, taking care of your actions. I didn't get none of that.

When a high profile athlete finds himself in hot water his first reaction is usually to blame others. This response makes it difficult for him understand the far-reaching implications of his situation. The more star treatment directed at an athlete, the more likely he will feel that the rules of society do not apply to him. So why would he worry about the consequences of his actions? The pressure to win may also seduce coaches and administrators to look the other way when a first string player lands in trouble. However, a player's draft status may take a serious hit when his character is called into question. By slipping from high draft status to the middle or lower rounds, an athlete could easily lose millions of dollars in signing bonus money. If a player is too big of a character risk he will slip from the draft board and his chances of signing a free agent contract could be jeopardized. Given the present climate of the NFL, and with so much at stake, it is a wonder why any athlete would step out of line. Yet each year college football players across the country find themselves having to explain how they became involved with the law.

Bobo claims that the irony of his story is that he swore that he would never do anything stupid enough to ruin his own football career. "When I used to see Lawrence Phillips[13] I used to say, I'd never be like that. Little did I know that I was sabotaging my shit in my own way." Going into his redshirt junior year Bobo says that he had worked hard to prepare for a great

[13] Lawrence Diamond Phillips is a former star running back for the Nebraska Cornhuskers, and a former NFL first round draft choice of the Saint Louis Rams who has had numerous troubles with the law. His troubles first began in college when he assaulted his ex-girlfriend by grabbing her by the hair and dragging her down a stairwell.

season. He started the season off with 20 catches over the first three games and as the Arizona State game rolled around he was the leading wide receiver in the Pacific –10 Conference. On the Thursday before leaving for the Fresno State football game, Bobo made what at first appeared to be a minor mistake in judgment.

> I go to *Dissmores*, I see these batteries (Chuckle), I was collecting stuff for the away trip. I went and paid for everything but the batteries. I just stole them but I had the money to pay for them. Then the dude just came up and said 'man I can't let you get away.' Dude just came out and said 'I know you put the batteries in your pocket.' I was like come on man let me get away. He says I saw you stealing more shit a couple of weeks ago but I let you get away with it cause of who you are but this time I can't. So we go back and I was like man you don't have to make a big deal of this shit, and he says ok, 'but I have to file a report for the store.' So he calls the cops and the cops come do what they got to do, but when you call the cops it's gonna go over the wire and go to the press. So they in there and come and talk to me or whatever, I'm like, look man, this is real stupid can I just pay for the batteries and get out of here? So they let me pay for the batteries and I went. So I figured it's all done. I mean, my excuse is I forgot to pay for the batteries.

In the days that followed Bobo learned a lesson that many athletes in similar situations eventually realize. Once the press caught wind of the story, things rapidly escalated out of control. Bobo was finally confronted with a situation he could not manipulate. Rather than confiding in his coaches, Bobo stubbornly chose to reject their advice. "Right when I got home the phone rings, it was my position coach and he was like, what the hell did you do? Did you steal something? I was like yeah but I paid for them, it's no big deal. He was like ok but don't answer the phone. And my dumb ass answered the phone, one reporter after another." Instead of coming clean and telling the truth, Bobo decided it was better to lie. "The next day they called me into the office and told me to be truthful. I made up something, and they knew I was lying because they talked to the store and my story didn't match up." For the first time in his life Bobo was forced to face the music. He was suspended for the one game he yearned for since the season began. "They suspended me for the Fresno State game and it crushed me. First time I was about to cry over a football game."

The coaching fraternity is a close-knit community in the higher ranks of competitive football. Besides using this professional network to seek out job opportunities, coaches can use the system to disseminate information about athletes. When a college athlete lands on the NFL radar teams will tap into their network to gauge both his character and athletic ability. As Bobo was going through his ordeal he did not realize that his college coaches were trying to protect him from damaging his reputation. In calling a team meeting the coaches offered Bobo an opportunity to admit his mistakes, and assert himself as a leader. Instead, Bobo took the easy way out again, "They made me stand up in front of the team to explain to them why I was suspended and I lied. I said that I didn't really try to steal the batteries but they was just there and I put them. It just sounded like some stupid shit, but I still lied to them." The better an athlete is, the more likely he will get a second or third chance to get back on the playing field. It is also true that high profile athletes tend to attract the most media scrutiny. Besides news reporters incessantly calling his home, Bobo soon found just how prickly things could get when his name flashed across the ESPN TV network.

> I was at home Thursday night watching Cal against Kansas State. I had invited a lot of people over. The team had left already to go to Fresno, nobody ever knew that I was suspended, I just told them I was hurt. So we sit up there watching the game, we was about 10 deep in my crib and they cut into the middle of the game. On ESPN, "this just in from Pullman Washington, Phillip Bobo has been suspended for shoplifting stay tuned." So I turn around and everybody is looking at me. And the dude made it seem-like it was TV and shit- like it was a bid deal. Then my phone just started ringing off the hook. My fraternity members that I met who lived back east was calling me, "what the fuck you done did? You on parole or some shit?" I was just looking at these people and I said, there you have it. See cause from where I grew up, my dad didn't take responsibility for whatever he did, so I didn't get it. I was used to finagling my way out of it as opposed to handling it.

NFL bylaws require an athlete to be at least three years removed from high school before becoming eligible to apply for the draft. When faced with deciding whether to return for his senior year of college or leaving school early, an athlete needs accurate and reliable information.

Since the athlete is generally not in the best position to adequately gauge his value in the market place, he is forced to seek outside counsel. In this situation an athlete usually consults with NFL certified agents for advice. Because agents must compete to represent the best college talent, their success hinges on accurately evaluating talent and predicting an athlete's worth. For an underclassman thinking of leaving school early, the consequences of selecting the wrong agent are particularly devastating. An unscrupulous agent concerned with making a quick buck might exaggerate an athlete's value and persuade him to leave early. Besides relying upon agents for advice, some athletes occasionally turn to family members or trusted associates for guidance. In many cases these novices will not have sufficient industry ties to access information regarding how NFL teams rate the athlete. For the consensus All-America athlete who is actively recruited by the top agents and has access to NFL scouting reports, the decision to stay or leave is generally based on accurate information. But the gullible athlete is vulnerable to self-serving agents and friends looking for a free ride on his coat tails. For every underclassman drafted in the first round, hundreds of others have either been bypassed completely or lose millions in potential earnings by being selected in the later rounds. Similar to the pressure experienced by a prized high school recruit trying to decide which university to attend, the jump from college to the NFL is full of uncertainty for the college underclassmen. By returning to school an athlete runs the risk of injury, but a reckless decision to leave early could cost millions of dollars in potential salary.

On the heels of the *Dissmores* battery incident Bobo completed an otherwise forgettable season on a high note. A conflict with the press, a lingering injury, and perhaps a bout of undiagnosed depression led to Bobo quitting school early and filing for the NFL. Leading up to this decision Bobo served his one game suspension and became ensnarled in an antagonistic

battle with the local press. Whether justified or not, athletes in situations similar to Bobo's develop an aversion to the media when they feel mistreated. Usually this disdain develops because the athlete naively believes journalists are obligated to write stories that reflect the athletes' perspective.

> So I went out and had 8 catches just doing the most against Temple. Then after the game they wanted me to do an interview and I didn't want to so you know, that was my way of getting back. Then the next day in the newspaper my name wasn't even mentioned, which was their way of getting back at me. My name wasn't even mentioned. But see, they knew, that was the kid in me, you know what I'm saying? You playing with a monster, that the media, ain't no way in the world you can fuck with them, the big monster. Because why? You really want the big monster. You really want your name in the papers, why you treating me like this? You know what I'm saying? My coach came up and said they want to do an interview and I said do I have to go? He said no, and I was like fuck them then. That's how I was back then.

For the first time in his career Bobo experienced an injury that threatened to keep him off the playing field. At midseason of his redshirt junior year, Bobo injured his hip and received a shot of some unknown substance from the team's medical staff that made his leg go limp. With so much at stake why would a world-class athlete willingly accept a needle filled with some unidentified substance? Without a parent or a mentor to intervene, a college athlete is vulnerable to the coaches and the medical staff. If he wants to get back on the field quickly he has little choice but to hope that these authority figures have his best interest at heart when determining medical treatment. In Bobo's case the coaching staff felt the risk of further damage was worth taking to keep his pass catching record intact.

> Against Oregon I got hurt with a hip pointer or some shit but I still played. The next game they took me down to Stanford and I really wasn't ready to play but they shot me with some shit then my whole leg went numb. The trainer hit a nerve and my whole shit went numb. I sat out the first half so the shit could wear off. They put me in one play so I could catch one pass and keep the streak going.

By season's end, Bobo had totaled the lowest number of receptions and receiving yards of his three-year collegiate career. After the Stanford game Bobo admits that football started to weigh

him down to inexplicable depths. “The rest of the year I was just out there catching two, three passes a game, and no touchdowns. I was just going through the motions not really even trying.” When a scholarship athlete suffers from fatigue or lacks the emotional stamina to play at the top of his game, he does not have the luxury of taking time off to deal with his problems. Once his eligibility clock starts, he is awarded four seasons to make the most of the athletic opportunity available. In addition, with the stigma that depression carries within the football community, and the general lack of training received by coaches to recognize the signals of the condition, an athlete can slip into a state of depression without anyone noticing the problem. In retrospect Bobo believes this is what happened during his career. “I think I was depressed. Yeah. As a matter of fact I think I was depressed the whole time I was there. From the end of high school through college bro, the whole shit.”

## Turning Pro

After a memorable regular season finale against instate rival University of Washington Huskies, former Los Angeles Ram Ron Brown reappeared and began pitching the idea of Bobo turning pro. In fact, an agent by the name of Doc Daniels first raised the idea of Bobo declaring for the NFL earlier in the season. “He called me like after the Temple game and started planting in my head, ‘man if you come out now you go second round easily.’ All that shit.” I told Drew Bledsoe, “man they said I could go second round” and ‘he said man you be careful with that.’ In addition to Ron and Doc, Leo Dickerson, brother of Hall of Fame running back Eric Dickerson, called to suggest the idea of representing Bobo in the upcoming NFL draft. Admittedly, the thought appealed to Bobo just as it would with most 21 year olds who grew up dreaming of playing in the NFL. Even though his own family was not available to offer much guidance, at

least one family member did their best to dissuade Bobo from making the mistake of leaving school early.

> Drew left school early but he was a whole different ball game. He's the prototype for this shit. He's mature, got family around him and everything. It was a couple of times his mom and his dad had me over for dinner and shit. They was trying to embrace me but I just wasn't having it because I was too embarrassed to tell them about my life.

At this point in his life, Bobo's racial attitudes continued to overtake his sensibilities and prevented him from trusting the Bledsoe's. "There was true love from the Bledsoe family. And I can say that with all honesty. The thing is, I just couldn't receive that from no white man. Like I said, I'm coming from a lot of stuff that I have suppressed. So nobody knows what my true motivation for my fucked up attitude was." Race also influenced Bobo's misguided decision to place his future in Ron Brown's hands. "The way I'm looking at it was I'm still looking for a mentor. I'm looking for somebody to be what my dad wasn't. So when I get a call from Ron, I'm figuring that this is my man, he's not gonna ever do anything to harm me. But see, Ron is a world class hustler, like my father, and he just put it on me."

When a scholarship athlete decides to forego his final year of college for the NFL, he instantly becomes a target for criticism if the move backfires. With increasing media coverage, the growing number of draft prognosticators, and sports blogs cropping up all over the internet, athletes rarely escape the scrutiny football fanatics. It takes years of positive reinforcement for an athlete to develop an attitude of invincibility. Often he is introduced to organized football in elementary or junior high school. By the time the NFL is within his grasp, he has spent well over half his life perfecting his skills. Success on the high school level serves as the morsel that leaves him hungry to dominate on the next level. Not until he is able to don the yellow jacket worn by Hall of Fame inductees will an athlete feel as though he has reached the pinnacle of the sport. All of his experiences both on and off the field have shown him that he is destined for NFL

greatness. Frat brothers, girlfriends, and family members all play a part in helping to reinforce this idea. By the time he has determined that he possesses the talent to make the NFL it is impossible to convince him otherwise. Psychologically an athlete of Bobo's caliber could never allow himself to contemplate failure. If an athlete were ever to concede that he might not be good enough to play in the NFL, his competitive edge would be lost. Ron Brown masterfully tapped into Bobo's emotional longing for a mentor while stroking his ego in order to convince him that the NFL was his destiny.

> So I go up and blow up this U-Dub game, which pretty much revitalized me again. The last game of the season and the first time we beat U-Dub in years, and I had this snow catch, it was on EA sports commercial voted as one of the best catches in the history of the school up there. We was diving, me and CJ (CJ Davis the other receiver), Drew threw it in the middle, he dove high I dove low, I caught the rock, he fell on top and kind of hit me but I still caught it and slid into a snow bank. Touch Down. It was nice. But then, we went to the Copper Bowl, I had 7 catches for two hundred and something yards against Utah. And after that, I call Ron. So on the bus after the Copper Bowl game we headed back to the hotel, Mike Price turns to me and looks at me like, you gonna be our leader next year. The first thing I thought in my mind, I'm not coming back. So I go see Ron during Christmas break and he put it on me. It was when the Cowboys was playing the Steelers, over here at the Rose Bowl (I think). But that whole week had bitches, money, just livin it, doing the most. He was just pumpin in my ear, you know, that's when Death Row, Sug Knight and them first touched down. And Ron was down with all them. So I said, "I got to get back into music," I mean all this stuff was in my lap, and this man could control all of it. And all this stuff was happening, and that week he was always feeding it to me, giving me money and all that kind of shit. And then he asked me was I gonna leave school, so yeah. I was like, you think I'm ready? And he was like, yeah. You know what I'm saying? I asked him was I, (just) dumb shit. But I didn't see it. This was Ron Brown, he ain't never gonna let me down. He brought me to his crib. All that shit. And during this time, my baby's momma calls, out of the blue, three years later, and I want to see my son. So I can help my baby's momma, my dad, all these people. All I got to do is leave school. Besides, I don't even like being up in this motherfucker anyway.[14]

The harmful combination of a dysfunctional childhood, having a best friend die in his arms, and an abnormal distrust of outsiders left Bobo vulnerable to a skillful con man. When Ron

[14] According to The Seattle Times article the results for the Washington State fan favorite Apple Cup play was the 1992 game in which Phillip Bobo threw caught a 44 yard touchdown pass from Drew Bledsoe while sliding into a snow bank during a 42-22 win.
The official Washington State Cougars football website indicates that Phillip Bobo caught 7 passes for a total of 212 years and 2 touchdowns against Utah in the 1992 Weiser Lock Copper Bowl.

Brown proclaimed 'fuck Washington State' it fit perfectly within Bobo's framing of the world. A lifetime worth of resentment left Bobo suspicious that outsiders wanted something from him, and Ron Brown found a way to tap into this neurosis. By the time Bobo reached the decision to leave school years of anger and frustration spewed from him in a sea of rage.

> So I go up there and did the second worst shit in my life. I bashed the newspapers. I bashed the school in all of the newspapers. I had a press conference in Washington State, when I went up there to get my stuff. I told them how much I hated Washington State, how much I didn't like the coaches, how much I didn't want to play football. I told them who much I wanted to leave, how much you know, I was just tired of Washington State. I didn't want to be there. It just fucked everybody up. The next day I was in this restaurant eating with my boys when the papers came out. They was like 'damn man, why you got to, you know?' I said, fuck this place, I'm going. You know, it's on. And this was a restaurant where they loved me. But nobody said shit to me. I just left.

Years later after returning to school to earn his degree, Bobo would come to understand the error of his ways. "That school really cared about me; those people at that school truly cared about me. Even though I was like whatever, those people really cared about me and I didn't know it until I left."

Exploitation is another common theme that causes underclassmen to leave school early and head for the NFL. The top collegiate teams play in stadiums that house anywhere from 45,000 to 110,000 fans per game. These numbers do not include the millions of people who view games on regional or national broadcasts each week. The doldrums of weight room training, study hall, and locker room "bull" sessions offer athletes time to contemplate the inherent contradictions of the sport. Athletes quickly come to clearly recognize the enormous amount of money the football program generates for their school. For some, the disparity of the system is never more prevalent than when a stadium is packed with 80,000 supporters who pay $50 per ticket, yet some mothers of the athletes cannot afford to make the to trip to campus and watch them play. Particularly frustrating for some Black athletes is the realization that a sparse number

of minorities are enrolled on campus. Football players also recognize that they get tucked away in isolation the night before a big game while regular students play host to their families, and alumni flood back to campus and reminisce about old times. Though athletes are viewed as ambassadors of the college, the demands of big time football rarely offer time to benefit from school resources in the same fashion as the general student body.

For some athletes, college represents the first time they can interact daily with people of different races, ethnicities, and a socio-economic statuses. When an athlete from an underprivileged background attends a college where students have access to spending money, credit cards, and other signs of material wealth, he may feel a sense of alienation from those students. These conditions could produce feelings of resentment, which may cause an athlete to rationalize that taking a computer or an iPod from a student who can afford it is justified. And others might view a college scholarship as the pathway to an education they otherwise would never able to afford. Yet, even the most levelheaded athlete must grapple with whether free tuition, room and board, and books is adequate compensation for the risks they undertake playing big time college football.

For Bobo, the issue of black athletes being exploited by the school was further compounded by the huge racial disparity of the student body population on campus. In attending a university where greater than ninety percent of the students were white, Bobo encountered plenty of firsthand experiences that reminded him of his status as a black athlete on campus. Rather than break in a dorm and pinch something or steal from a store out of necessity, "I stole them batteries but I had the money to pay for them." He chose to exploit his minority status for personal gain. Once he was an established celebrity on campus, Bobo sought to level the playing field by using women for and recruiting them to do his schoolwork.

> So my sophomore year everything happens and I'm oblivious to life, and everything is like fuck school, I was fucking bitches, playing football, and I go to classes when I felt like it. It just so happens that every semester after Duncan's death I had to get reinstated [for failing out of school] every single year since. The team didn't really have nothing to do with it, it was more or less just me hustling and talking to the teachers. "I need this grade man, what do I need to do?" He [the professor] would tell me to write a 2 page paper on this subject, so I'd call up one of my white girls, then boom, reinstated. They would turn the failing grade into just enough so I could be eligible. They was just giving me grades, basically.

When a promising young athlete like Bobo is bombarded with thoughts of turning pro, it is difficult for him to objectively make a responsible decision about his future while people are constantly feeding his ego. A successful athlete who views college as a stepping stone to the NFL is particularly susceptible to agents who want to convince him to take that leap. Unless an athlete has access to knowledgeable people who can be trusted to guide him through the draft process, he is gambling with his financial future. To the casual observer, the decision to enter the NFL draft may seem straightforward, but it requires both patience and the maturity. Whereas administrators and coaches understand that college is a time for athletes to mature athletically and emotionally, NFL teams expect athletes to enter the league as mature adults.[15] In addition to providing access to the best academic resources available, major college football programs go to great lengths to keep track of athletes when they are not actively participating in sports. [16] Once an athlete declares himself eligible for the NFL the umbilical cord is essentially severed. For some athletes this newfound freedom comes as a rude awakening. After spending his entire athletic career being told what to do and when to do it, overnight he is expected to carry himself as a professional. Upon declaring himself eligible for the NFL an athlete's first order of business

[15] Clarrett vs. The NFL, Lawyers argued that three years of college provided athletes with the necessary time they needed to mature emotionally to handle the rigorous demands of the NFL.

[16] The New York Times reports that the nations' more that 100 major college athletic department employ some type of academic support program which amounts to at lest $150 million annually. In addition to these support programs, colleges use class checkers to ensure that athletes are where they are suppose to be

is usually selecting an agent. Next, he will have to decide who will train him for the upcoming draft. This decision is of vital importance since it will have a direct bearing on his draft status. Dozens of training facilities across the country offer 8-12 week pre-draft combine camps; if an athlete is not in shape or does not perform well for the NFL scouts his draft status will plummet.

In nearly every aspect Phillip Bobo's march towards the NFL reads like a classic case of what not to do. Rather than pick an agent and work with trusted advisors, Bobo unwittingly selected a former athlete who had a score to settle with his father. Instead of filing the necessary paperwork with the NFL to declare an athlete eligible for the draft, Ron Brown contacted the press to announce Bobo's departure. This led to some confusion regarding whether Bobo actually intended to leave school. Since Ron Brown was not officially recognized as an agent, NFL teams did not know who was officially representing him. "Ron didn't do shit, he wasn't doin what he was suppose to. When agents take athletes they give them workouts regularly, they mould you. They do your shit. But I didn't have none of that shit. I was sitting at home with him [Ron] drinking 40's and shit." During the pivotal four months leading up to the draft in April 1993 Bobo fired two agents before settling on someone without any prior NFL experience.

> Before the draft Robert Demoff[17] calls cause he wanted to represent me but Ron have a problem with Demoff cause of some shit that happened before. Ron was like 'you could go with Demoff if you want but I don't really like him, you could do this and that.' So he really deterred me from making that decision. And I didn't know that Demoff was Demoff. Like I talked to Randall Cunningham one time and was like 'whose gonna be your agent, and he was like, Demoff, what you waiting on? Get with Demoff, that's a no brainier.' Ron convinced me to take his agent his agent Steve Arnold, who really didn't do shit in the pros. He was basically his agent from track. I turned down Demoff because of Ron. I'm just a product man.

Bobo's grip on his own career continued to weaken the more he placed his faith in Ron Brown. After catching over fifty passes and gaining national recognition the prior two seasons, Bobo was

[17] A google.com search and subsequent fact checking reviled that Mr. Demoff's first name is Marvin rather than Robert. He is the longtime agent of Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Marino and has a long history of working with top NFL athletes.

easily persuaded to declare for the draft. "This man Ron Brown was everything to me at the time. He had this thing on me that was fucking crazy. Man I just put up the lowest numbers. It was the first time I didn't get honorable mention, the first time I didn't get over 50 catches in a season and it didn't matter cause I blew up the Copper Bowl. So to me, yeah why not?" Typically, a drop off in production is cause to worry as far as the NFL is concerned. Yet, as the primary target for Drew Bledsoe, the top rated quarterback coming out of college; Bobo was an intriguing prospect for many NFL teams. On the strength of his overall career at WSU Bobo was invited to the 1993 NFL Combine as one of the top 330 prospects available in the upcoming draft. Above all else NFL teams look for speedy pass catching targets. The more explosiveness a wide receiver displays running the 40 meters, the higher his stock rises in the draft. On the other hand, a poor showing causes teams to shy away come draft time. A time of 4.3 seconds generates a fair amount of excitement, while scouts view 4.5 seconds as ordinary.

> I did well at the combine but everybody thought I was going to run faster. I ran a 4.5 but I didn't put in the work. I was catching the rock. I didn't drop shit. But all that matters is speed. Man, no way was I prepared for the pros. It was all bad! When I got to the Combine everybody was on my nuts. All them wanted interviews and stuff. I remember one time everybody was getting weighed right, and I got off the thing, all of the sudden I hear, Phillip, Phillip. All the football coaches want to talk, and I'm like, ok, hold on. So I'm sitting there talking to one of them and I took too long for somebody else, and they was like, 'I'm just gonna leave. I'll catch up with you later,' and I'm like, hold on, hold on. You know, it was like that. Until I ran that 4.5 [*he busts out laughing while telling the story*], Bobo ran a 4.5, you know what I'm saying? They jumped off my nuts quick, all of 'em.

After the NFL Combine fiasco in Indianapolis, the best Bobo could hope for was a big college pro day performance. Each year in between the Combine weekend and the NFL draft, NFL coaches and personal staff travel around the country visiting various colleges to conduct pro day workouts. These events are not as all encompassing as the Combine but they are important nonetheless. For more than a month, key league and team decision makers run talent through a battery of athletic drills, and ask questions designed to judge an athlete's character. Pro days

offer an athlete a second chance to erase doubts and leaves scouts with a great impression going into the draft. Unfortunately, when Bobo blasted the local Pullman press he killed his chance to participate in WAZZU's pro day workout. Bobo's fate was then placed in the hands of his agent and Ron Brown to contact NFL scouts and conduct private workouts. Instead of the Combine experience serving as a wake up call, Bobo continued following Brown's prescribed training schedule. "Now I did have teams call afterwards. I ran 4.4's but between then and the draft I wasn't doing nothing. We was running but I wasn't doing what I was suppose to do. We basically was doin his little shit that we did every morning. But it wasn't the regiment that you need to get into the NFL."

Even in the face of multiple missteps, Bobo naively clung to the belief that he was destined to be a second round draft choice. "The draft comes and I go undrafted. I call the family over [for a draft day celebration], we watch the whole thing on ESPN and I go undrafted the whole day. I'm disappointed as shit." With the devastating events of the first draft day behind him, Bobo regrouped, believing his name would be called early on day two. Supreme confidence quickly turned into desperation once he realized his dream of becoming a high draft choice had slipped away. A day that was supposed to be filled with tears of joy and congratulatory handshakes was suddenly overtaken with prayers of desperation, hoping that some team, any team would select him.

Athletic ability is only one factor that determines who will be drafted by the NFL. Teams are constantly evaluating athletes on their rosters to decide which positions need to be upgraded. Each off-season, winning teams with a strong core of veterans add very little new blood to their rosters. Losing teams, on the other hand, have a bigger incentive to replace their aging veterans and upgrade their talent. All this adds up to a fierce competition to make an NFL roster. When a

fresh batch of wide receivers exits school to head for the NFL, teams spend thousands of man hours ranking them based on factors such as: internal needs, athletic ability, and character issues. Of the two hundred and fifty two draft picks allotted each year, roughly thirty-two are used to select wide receivers.[18] This number is whittled down from the approximately seventy-five wide receivers ranked by NFL teams each spring. At the start of the second day of the draft Bobo was offered a chance at redemption.

> So Cleveland Browns call me on the second day, seven in the morning. This is the 4th round, they say *hey we're gonna draft you*. And this is the fourth mistake I made in football, ok, right now (I'm angry). Man how come you guys didn't draft me yesterday? Man I had all my family here, and everything. He says, *I don't know, that's just what happens in the draft*. Alright then, I hung up. FUCK YOU PHILLIP BOBO we ain't drafting you. The fifth round comes and goes, they take some other receiver. I still had a chance until that phone call. Self-sabotaging shit.

Apparently, word of his hostile attitude spread quickly: not only did the Browns pass on Bobo, he went undrafted for the remainder of the final day.

Being passed over in the NFL draft is one of the loneliest days of an athlete's life. For year's family, friends, and acquaintances anticipate that day when their *boy gets the call*. In Bobo's case, the draft represented a new beginning, one that would absolve him from years of suffering. Instead, the 1993 draft only served to compound the disappointment that plagued Bobo throughout his young life. Once an athlete realizes that all the names have been called and ESPN has made its final draft analysis, he immediately focuses on trying to secure a free agent contract. A series of nervous calls to his agent consume the remainder of the day. Busy signals, being placed on hold, and countless friends asking *whaz next, who'd you sign with,* helps turn a difficult day into a nearly unbearable one. By evenings end, 450 to 500 college athletes will have

[18] According to nfldraftscout.com an average of 32 wide receivers were drafted each season between 2004 and 2008. 78 Free Agent wide receivers where invited to training camp along with the 35 draft selections in 2008. Over the course of 2007 football year, 160 wide receivers were invited to try out for the NFL.

signed to a free agent contract and join the 252-draft selection to pursue their NFL dreams. For thousands of others, Monday after the draft represents the first day of life without football. Without a shot at the pros, the end of college eligibility means an athlete will hang up his cleats. For those fortunate enough to get drafted or offered a free agent contract, the journey has just began.

Because the odds of actually making an NFL team are so slim, it represents little more than a pipe dream for the vast majority of NFL caliber athletes. With so little margin for error, and so much at stake, how a ball players enters the league has a huge impact on whether he has a realistic opportunity to secure one of the of the eighteen hundred NFL jobs up for grabs each season. The future is nearly guaranteed for athletes drafted in the first or second round. Barring injury or any unforeseen malady, these sixty-four athletes will each sign a multiple year contact that contains a lucrative signing bonus. In order for mid to low round draft choices and free agents to make it, the dice need to roll in their favor. Contrary to popular belief, the talent evaluation process is as much about the business of football as it is about athletic ability. An athlete's reputation as a college football player, which agent is representing him, and who is in charge of making draft decisions on a particular team are important factors in determining who gets a realistic shot at making it. As much as an athlete wants to believe that talent is all that matters, rarely is that the case. Preference and bias are built into a system that does not operate as a meritocracy. Between the conclusion of draft in April and the last week in August, teams host a series of camps to evaluate the talent they have under contract. At various points during this process a team can decide to cut an athlete by terminating his contract. Even when an athlete attends a big time college program, possesses exceptional football skills, and signs with a competent agent, there is still no guarantee that the NFL is within his grasp.

With the draft behind him, Bobo set his sights on making the league by climbing up from the lowest rung on the ladder. "So the Rams get me after the draft. Nope, I never got drafted." Instead of accepting the advice of his coaches and returning back to school for a shot at becoming a million dollar receiver, Bobo now had to make the best of his situation. "I could have went to Kansas City, which is where I should have went probably, cause James Hasty was there and he pledged me (Omega Psi Phi fraternity). That was somebody from grass roots that I know. You know what I mean?" With only a few options on the table, Bobo decided to sign with the team that put the most money on the table. "He (agent Steve Feldman) got the Rams to give me $20K and Kansas City was only giving me $5K. So I get $20K for staying at home." Bobo soon learned that his problems at Washington State and that negative Cleveland Browns phone call caused teams to shy away from him. "It came to me by Steve Feldman that I got black balled in the draft. Cause of what I did up at Washington State, in the papers and stuff. I didn't know those type of things existed. I was just a kid expressing my feelings, so I thought. But you just don't do it that way."

## Injuries

Once training camp began, Bobo claims he was able to put all the negativity behind him and focus on playing football. "Training camp? I was killing them, I was really doing good." For a young athlete trying to make an NFL team, gaining the approval of veteran ball players is a key to success. If veterans label a player as a camp guy it is nearly impossible for him to shake off that image. Within the hierarchy of the NFL, the inner circle is comprised of veterans while some other guys get invited to camp just so established pros can take breaks. Since these camp guys are given very little chance of making the final roster, *Vets* don't bother spending time with them. When a young guy gets *props* from the veterans, it becomes his badge of honor.

Acknowledgement from the most respected veterans on the team is the greatest way for a rookie to measure his status on a team. "Todd Lyght came up to me all happy and shit and said, *man we finally got a receiver.* Me and Jerome Bettis was best boys, roommates and shit. That's when he was their first round draft pick. Shit, Henry Ellard was telling me how good I was doing."[19]

In the NFL, the brightest future can turn into a sad and dreary past in just a matter of seconds. Since the standard NFL contract does not include a guarantee clause, the risk of injury is significant. To prevent against this type of tragedy, agents for high draft choices and established veterans push to secure as large a signing bonus as possible. Because rookies and journeymen veterans have little bargaining leverage, they receive small to modest bonuses when signing a contract. As an undrafted free agent, Bobo's first year contract was for $150K with a $20K signing bonus—a humbling figure for an athlete who expected to make millions as a second round draft pick. Rather than focus on the money, Bobo committed himself to proving the critics wrong. Then all of the sudden disaster struck down his opportunity for redemption. "I tore my ACL, MCL, and PCL.[20] I blew the whole shit out. I was making a cut against Darrell Henley[21], and snapped the shit. A week before we started preseason. They put me on Injured Reserves (IR). I would have made that Rams team too." When an athlete is placed on IR his season is over. He is prevented from playing for the remainder of the season even if he recuperates from his injuries. League rules stipulate that the team is obligated to rehabilitate his injuries but once the season ends they can either re-sign him to a new contract or release him altogether. Because injured reserves means a team will be without the athlete's services for an

[19] Todd Lyght is a former first round draft selection by the Los Angeles Rams in 1991; Jerome Bettis was drafted in the first round by the Los Angeles Rams in 1993; Henry Ellard played for the Los Angeles Rams from 1983 to 1993 and qualified for the 1992 Olympic trials in the triple jump.
[20] He needed a total knee reconstruction.
[21] Henley, who was drafted by the Los Angels Rams in 1989, is currently serving a 41 sentence for trafficking cocaine and for attempting to murder the federal judge from his trial by hiring contract killers.

entire season, IR is considered a last resort. The NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) stipulates that an athlete on IR will be compensated 65% of his yearly contract. Accordingly, the Rams paid Bobo a total of $89 thousand in salary in addition to the $20K signing bonus and bid him farewell. "I got $89K but spent it in 4 months. I don't know what I spent it on. Family, friends, flossin, my chick, It should last more that 4 months."

At age 22 Bobo's football career was not only in limbo, but also in jeopardy of ending altogether. The Rams released him after the season and the rest of the league viewed him as damaged goods with a bad attitude. "One and done. You get that IR year and that's it. I ain't got shit, so I'm like, what am I suppose to do? It was all bad." To make matters more difficult, Bobo received an unexpected call from his baby's mother. After an absence of nearly four years she decided to press him for back child support.

> As soon as they say that I was coming out at the end of my junior year I get a phone call from my baby's mother. Guess whose coming to dinner type shit. Apparently her mom sees it on TV and she automatically gets a divorce. All of the sudden I get court papers, I owe for child support for 4 years. I was like, DAMN I DO? I BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU (he was looking for his ex after she disappeared with his child four years earlier). IT DON'T MATTER. COME ON. I JUST WANT TO SEE MY KID. AS A MATTER OF FACT, LET'S TRY TO MAKE THIS WORK AT THE SAME TIME.

In addition to the disappointment and confusion Bobo was already experiencing, Ron Brown abandoned him at his darkest hour. The constant phone calls and reassuring words were now distant memories. Heading into the draft, Bobo's world was full of promise. Football served as a magnet that drew people to him. But once he was cut the girls vanished, access to those sweet cars was cut off, and Ron Brown began looking for a new payday. "Ron shook me. Ron just disappeared, stopped fucking with me. I just became a nigger on the street to him. The whole crew as a matter of fact. He wouldn't return my phone call. I was just that nigger, cause I didn't have no money." Bobo's intense desire for a male role model and father figure blinded him to

Ron Brown's true motives. Football is a big business in which NFL athletes are paid handsomely. No matter how much the league tries to guard against unscrupulous characters, some athletes are still easy marks for elaborate schemes. Bobo recalls how he learned of Brown's deception, "And it turned out that Jackie Slater[22] brought this to me, he was like, *that boy* (he called Ron *Shyster* Brown) *did you wrong. The reason he brought you out of college and was trying to do all that stuff is because he was trying to get money from you that your dad took from him.* I had no idea at the time. My dad took him (Ron Brown) for over $400K."

When an athlete gets cut one of the most difficult things for him to deal with is the loss of team camaraderie. Football is a fraternity that allows athletes to develop a bond not shared by outsiders. Guys who battled against one another in high school and college finally get to play together in the NFL. Athletes from smaller colleges test their skills against the biggest names in the game. The NFL brings together the old and the young, the quick and the strong: it is a place where an athlete earns *mad respect* from the best in the game. Over the course of spring workouts and summer camp athletes spend countless hours training together. Guys begin to develop strong ties with one another by *cutting it up* during team meetings, practices, and functions. By the start of each new season 53 personalities pull together for the common goal of winning a championship and earning a paycheck. An overwhelming sense of emptiness sets in once an athlete realizes he was left off the final roster. Suddenly, those monotonous workouts with the *fellas* were not all bad. The finality of getting cut means his *boyz* will march out on Sundays to battle without him. His stomach churns and a sense of loss returns every time his former team plays on television. The NFL season is a constant reminder of what should have

[22] Jackie Slater played his entire NFL career with the Los Angeles/St. Louise Rams from 1976 to 1994.

been. But the most difficult pill to swallow is not being able to hang out with teammates and share stories about special times.

## A Second Chance

With no back up plan, Bobo was left wondering what happens now? All the people who wanted a piece of Bobo when he was on top were suddenly nowhere to be found. "Everybody that was in my life that year in '93 was gone, all of them. As a matter of fact it didn't even take until the New Year, they was all gone. I ain't have nothing, nobody. I had this Raider Cheerleader girlfriend and I know she was fuckin around on me. Know what I mean? She ended up leaving me too." The one place Bobo could turn to for support was a football buddy in similar situation. "As a matter of fact, Mario Bailey[23], you remember Mario? He went to U-Dub, came in second for the Heisman behind Desmond Howard. He was the truth too. We was friends, so I went up to Seattle shaken it with him. He was gracious enough to let me in." Bailey and Bobo provided each other the emotional support needed to deal with the disappointment of being released from the NFL. Both receivers had big reputation coming out of college and held out hopes of making it in the league. Rather going out in public and getting inundated with questions about being cut, the men worked together and lay low trying to figure out their next moves. "I went to Seattle to see what I could do to survive." In summarizing what he was feeling during about that phase of his life, Bobo commented, "Football? I didn't know what to do but I knew that I couldn't go out like that."

After taking cover in Seattle for a few months, Bobo received an invitation to live with his father in Southern California. The decision to move back was particularly difficult

[23] Mario Bailey was a 6th round draft pick for the Houston Oilers in 1992. Though he never played in the NFL, Mario went on to become the all-time leading receiver in NFL Europe playing for the Frankford Galaxy from 1995-2000.

considering that Bobo senior had recently spent four years in prison for committing a white-collar crime. Just a few months earlier Wyatt Bobo tried warning his son about dealing with Ron Brown, but his admonition fell on deaf ears. "Actually my dad, I talked to him while he was in jail. All he said was *man you really shouldn't mess with Ron.* That's what he said. But I mean, my dad's influence? He was in jail, how you gonna tell me what's right and wrong? He just said you really shouldn't mess with him. But I did, and that's what happened." With nowhere else to turn, Bobo decided to try living with his father one last time. "My dad resurfaces. He gets out of jail and flies me back down there. He got those two little bastard kids with him (Wyatt's children with Joy, Bobo's ex-girlfriend), so it was all bad back there." In making the decision to leave college early, Bobo never envisioned that he would soon be *moochin off* of family and friends. The NFL was supposed to erase the memories of Bobo's father's scandalous ways; instead, Bobo was now back where he started. Compared to the harsh reality of the NFL, and living at his father's house, Washington State University was starting to sound like a good option.

Before heading to Seattle or moving in with his father, Bobo underwent treatment to rehabilitate his surgically repaired knee. The NFL player contract requires teams to provide medical and hospital care during the terms of an athlete's contract for as long as the Club physician may deem it necessary.[24] In theory this provision protects both the athlete and the team. Since NFL teams generally do not offer no-cut contracts, health is a major concern for an athlete. Once an athlete suffers a season ending injury, his position on the team will be in jeopardy if he is not able to fully recover before the start of the following season. As a result, he will either be forced to retire, or prove to other teams that he is physically sound enough to play in the NFL again. Teams, on the other hand, invest millions to secure and develop talent. This

[24]Article XLIV of the the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the NFL Management Council and the NFL Players Association, March 8th, 2006

agreement inherently suggests that both sides have a vested interest in taking advantage of the best medical treatment available. Lost in this arrangement is the subtle ways in which the team and the athlete can manipulate the system. A conflict of interest arises whenever an athlete sustains an injury that requires extensive rehabilitation. The team physician is employed to get an athlete back on the field as quickly as possible. The arrangement puts an athlete in a vulnerable position since the club's physician has the power to determine the length and type of medical treatment. If the team's physician opts for a rehab that treats the symptom but ignores the problem, the athlete may be able to get on the field quicker but he will also be at significant risk of suffering long-term damage. In an attempt to protect the athlete, the NFLPA ensures his right to seek a second opinion from an independent physician. Ironically, for the non-tenured NFL athlete[25], this option opens the door to another set of problems that leaves him equally vulnerable. A lengthy recovery process is cause for a team to immediately promote the injured athlete's backup or use a high draft choice to replace him next season.[26] Ultimately, an NFL athlete is under tremendous pressure to stay healthy or recover from injury and return to the field as quickly as possible.

Conversely, a serious injury that requires extensive rehabilitation will challenge an athlete's will to continue playing football. Instead of practicing and hanging out with *the fellas*, he will put in countless hours working with therapists and participating in a grueling rehab regiment. Mentally, he must determine if the desire to play is strong enough to put his body

[25] I use the term *non-tenured NFL athletes* to emphasize the stratified nature of the league. Teams do not view all athletes as equal. Early round draft picks and highly regarded free agents receive substantial signing bonuses, while average players are typically offered relatively small or no signing bonuses. The more a team has invested in an athlete, the more likely it is to accept an outside medical expert's rehabilitation program without penalizing the athlete.

[26] Drew Bledsoe is an example of a star NFL athlete who famously lost his starting position due to injury. Tom Brady, who was called upon to replace Bledsoe, went on to lead the New England Patriots to 3 Super Bowls while being named the game's MVP twice. Brady preformed so well the Patriots ended up trading Bledsoe to the Buffalo Bills before the following season.

through the torture required to make it back on top. A serious injury offers an athlete an escape route from football without anyone ever questioning his manhood. Depression, the loss of desire, or the fear of not being as good as before the injury, are just a few of the reasons that will prevent an athlete from committing 100% to his rehabilitation program. Throughout Bobo's entire reconstructed knee rehabilitation, he struggled with all these emotions along with the realization that Ron Brown had deceived him. "They (The Rams) rehabbed it until after the season, but they are obligated to do it afterwards. I could have taken them to court cause they didn't rehab it properly, but I played on it so much afterwards that I really didn't know. I really didn't take advantage of the rehab, and when I did rehab it I was just going through the motions." To make matters worse, Bobo later learned that he was deceived into believing that he was insured against a career threatening injury. "Ron never had that insurance policy he told me he was getting."

With the rehab, Seattle, and the mess at his father's house behind him, Bobo decided to return to the only place he could count on for *some love*. "I go back to Washington State, which was the humblest shit I ever did." Even though he had cursed Wazzu several months earlier, Bobo slowly came to realize that his former coaches and the rest of the *cougar nation* truly cared about him. "I walk my ass on campus and I still got love, its fuckin crazy to a degree though. I'm still, according to the campus, Phillip Bobo. But we know the real. Then one of the guys comes up to me and told me the coaches was happy about me. They said it showed a lot of heart: a lot of guts for me to come back and all that shit." For an ex-athlete returning to campus, t*he real,* refers to the shame and embarrassment of failing to make the NFL. Bobo was well aware that he would have to *face the music* after the tongue-lashing he leveled upon the school months earlier. He knew that some people would look upon him as typical dumb jock hanging around campus with nowhere else to turn. Bobo also had to deal with a constant barrage of people

wanting to know what happened, and if he was planning to try out for the NFL again. Another aspect of the *real deal* that the former star encounters is learning how to be an average student. As a scholarship athlete he registered for classes early, received free tutoring and unlimited academic support, and a representative of the football team was always nearby to offer assistance. Additionally, the scholar athlete always has the best *hook ups* in town; along with perks from alumni his living arrangements are *phat*, and meals are always free. But, once he leaves the team, those little niceties dry up. All of the sudden, the former athlete must learn how to fend for himself like the general student body. The toughest pill for an ex-college star to swallow is the realization that his star no longer shines as brightly it once did. By returning back to school, Bobo learned that he was precariously stuck in *no mans land*, somewhere in between being a great former college player and outside of the NFL.

Rather than rush and attempt an immediate comeback, Bobo decided to take the next season off and rest his knee. "In '94 I didn't even try out for the NFL. My knee was still too messed up." Over the next 3 semesters he attended classes and managed to obtain a degree. "I had to take the whole year off anyway so I went back to school and graduated with a social science degree or some shit like that." With such emphasis being placed on graduation rates, colleges now spend millions building sophisticated tutorial centers designed to assist athletes.[27] To further combat the problem, the NCAA also adopted measures to ensure that high school athletes have at least a 2.5 grade point average in the core subjects before they can receive an athletic scholarship.[28] Despite these efforts, college football continues to experience its share of

[27] According to 2006 New York Times article more that 100 major college athletic departments supply some type of academic support program. The National Collegiate Athletic Association said Division I athletic departments spend at least $150 million annually on such programs.

[28] NCAA requirements state that before a high school athlete can be eligible to play Division I sports, he or she must successfully complete 16 core courses. Additionally, a sliding-scale exists that is comprised of a combination core course grades and standardized test scores. For example, if a student earns a 3.0 in core courses, that individual must

academic casualties. Graduation is only one half of the academic equation for the major college football player: the other side of the scale pertains to the quality of that education. Bobo's college experience suggests that even when an athlete does graduate, the value of education suffers when a lack of commitment exists on the part of the athlete or the school. "Hell no, I couldn't tell you shit about what I'm suppose to be doing with it (my degree). I could tell you about life though. My degree don't mean shit, but I got one though (boisterous laughter)! No way in the world does it make sense having what I have." Instead of graduation representing a new beginning, the lack of confidence in his diploma meant that football was the only marketable skill Bobo possessed. "I didn't have anything else, and I didn't have any money either."

When an NFL caliber athlete performs well in training camp then abruptly gets cut, football becomes a drug that seduces him into *giving it one more shot*. Life turns into a monotonous circle of waking up, working out, and trying to figure out how to survive until some team calls with an offer. The best-case scenario happens when an NFL team calls because they need to fill a roster spot immediately. If that option never occurs, financial need will sometimes force an athlete to compromise his NFL dreams and sign with the Arena or Canadian Football Leagues. At other times an athlete will sit out the entire season in hopes of another chance at the NFL. When an athlete gets cut more than once, his disappointment turns to frustration, which produces a sense of helplessness until ultimately he is convinced that the deck is stacked against him. Bobo's second training camp left him convinced that talent had little to do with determining who makes the NFL and whose sent home packing.

> '95 the Raiders sign me; I did a hell of a good job in the preseason. I should have made that team. They called me, I played in every preseason and I scored a couple times. I should have made that team no question. Because according to what I saw,

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score at least 620 on the SAT or 52 on the ACT. As the GPA increases, the required standardized test score decreases, and vise-versa.

> motherfuckers was out to get me. Nobody gave me the truth. It didn't have nothing to do with me not working out and doing what I'm suppose to do to make it. Everybody was setting me up to fail.

The longer a free agent or lower round draft choice survives in training camp, the more difficult it is for him to determine whether he actually has a legitimate shot. As the days past and the competition gets weeded out through injuries or cuts, his outlook becomes even more optimistic. Performing well in preseason games offers him plenty of reasons to believe his stock is rising as coaches and teammates begin receiving him into the fold. Regardless of how things appear on the surface, an athlete's fate can turn at any moment. When the hatchet does drop unexpectedly, an athlete will craft a narrative that helps to make sense by giving order to the situation. For the second camp in a row Bobo was challenged to explain why things had not gone according to plan. "No question, because my attitude, and I was acting like a vet. Cause I was out there cocky as a motherfucker. Only receiver out there that I was giving props to was Tim[29] cause he was undeniable, the rest of them, they couldn't fuck with me. And I wasn't that shy about it, you ain't suppose to do that. But see that was my thing, he can't do what I'm doing. I'm doing it and all that shit." For Bobo and others who went through similar disappointing experiences, it is more important for the explanation of the situation to be plausible than to be accurate. Bobo has always understood that his peers know when someone *be bullshittin* about their NFL credentials, when some got *shafted*, and when an athlete has the legitimate talent to *ball*.

## Life Without Football?

By the time a young athlete signs a professional contract, so much of his life has been spent playing football that the lines between personal identity and athlete are easily blurred. In

[29] Tim Brown played wide receiver for the Los Angeles and Oakland Raiders from 1988 to 2003.

addition to the grueling physical workouts, an aspiring NFL athlete invests tremendous emotional energy becoming immersed in the role of a football player. Much like a Hollywood actor who takes on a character and stays there until filming is complete; the young athlete eats, breathes, and sleeps football. Every time he lifts a dumbbell or runs a wind sprint it reinforces the idea of what it means to be an NFL athlete. His workout partners constantly remind him that the competition is putting in extra time trying to out work him. In between weight lifting and running sessions he closes off from the rest of the world and visualizes what it will be like playing in the NFL. His mind is consumed with thoughts of putting on a NFL uniform and playing on Monday Night Football. At this stage of his career an athlete has learned to embrace the idea that each hour of everyday must be ordered by the physical and mental demands of the sport. Because the NFL represents the pinnacle of professional football, the emotional disappointment of getting cut stings long after the equipment manager blurts out those dreadful four words *turns in your playbook*.

Getting cut by the Raiders in '95 was more difficult emotionally for Bobo than his previous tryout with the Rams. Since his knee failed him the first time, Bobo reasoned that it was not meant to be. But the second go around left Bobo feeling that politics and money determines who makes the NFL and not talent.

> Willy Brown had a cousin [Sean] who was competing in the same position that I was. He was good but he wasn't that good. The GM at the time, I forget who that was, called me to come sign a practice squad contract. They want me on the practice squad and Willy Brown said, "what are you doing here?" I said, they just called me, He said, "nawh, we gonna get Sean." They sent me home.[30]

The politics of football is a common theme for athletes cut by NFL teams. When a self-assured athlete is cut, he will rack his brain for months trying to understand how that could

[30] Willie Brown was inducted to the NFL Hall of Fame in 1984. Brown played from the Oakland Raiders from 1967 to 1978 and was appointed as the Director of Staff Development in 1995.

happen. One of the cleanest ways for an athlete to assuage the frustration and disappointment is to find a scapegoat to blame. Politics, nepotism, and favoritism are the perfect anesthetics to relieve the sting of rejection. After getting cut, it may take years before an athlete is able to look in the mirror and reflect on the situation honestly. Psychologically, it is easier for an athlete to conclude that he was short changed; if he had been given a real shot, the coaches would have seen he was the most talented. In Bobo's case, it is difficult to know exactly why the Raiders released him. Maybe politics did him in, or maybe his cocky attitude made the difference. The one thing that is for certain, NFL coaches get paid to win, which presumably means athletes are selected based who gives the team the best chance at victory. Bobo's confession that he offended the Raiders by coming to camp and acting like a vet highlights a challenge faced all newcomers. The superstar can get away with acting like a prima donna, but the free agent or the lower round draft pick better keep quiet and let his talent do the talking.

Bobo was both jaded and broke after his experience with the Raider in '95. "By this time I think, as a matter of fact, I know, there was nothing you could say and get a positive response out of me." With no money in his pocket and few options in hand, Bobo decided to accept the Raiders offer to play in Europe. "So later that year they called me and said 'we want to send you to Amsterdam.' I had a ball over there, and I still got the record for most yards, which will never get touched cause the league is now defunct. I was all world over there."[31] After suffering a major knee surgery, going through an extensive rehab program, and two disappointing NFL preseason training camps, Bobo was growing exceedingly tired of riding the emotional roller coaster known as professional football. "My brother would call me and be like, 'man do you even want to play football' cause he would see me on TV, and I was like *nawh*. He said, "why

[31] A search on the Internet revealed that Bobo led his team in receptions and yardage. Given that the league is now defunct it could not be verified that Bobo holds a team or league record for most yardage in a season.

you playing?" I said, *what else am I gonna do*?" Whatever love Bobo had left for the game was rapidly being stripped away, and concentrating on the game was becoming a chore.

> I was good enough to have 50 catches, 800 something yards, and nine touchdowns. Sometimes I would come out of the game and I wasn't even sweatin. But it wasn't about football. And one of the coaches tried to grab me, and he was like, "Phillip do you consider yourself a leader on this team?" I was like, *no*. He said, "why, causes you're saving yourself for the Raiders?" I was like *no*. I don't know-- I was just totally 100% unreachable.

Besides providing a paycheck, the only other thing football now offered Bobo was a way to escape the boredom of Southern California. "I was kicken it in Amsterdam with them girls, and they loved me too. But it wasn't about football." Essentially Bobo had become trapped. Without a passion for the game to sustain him, Bobo was now just going through the motions, hoping that something better would one day come along. The self-sabotaging antics Bobo was able to get away with in high school and college were beginning to catch up with him in the pros. For the second time in his football career a coach pulled Bobo aside and asked if he thought he was as a team leader. Rather than learning from his previous experiences, Bobo arrogantly dismissed the coach's' advances and continued his cavalier approach towards football.

On the professional level, coaches, athletes, and front office management are constantly crossings paths as they move from team to team. A coach or a general manager that works a pro team one season can bounce around the NFL, the CFL, and college over the course of a few years. Likewise, free agency offers athletes the ability move around testing the market seeking out the best deal possible. The fluidity of the football community is an indication that the influence this social network has extends well beyond the borders of a single league. In similar fashion to other capitalist markets, the football network is used to secure jobs for some while limiting opportunities for others. A coach looking to sign a free agent or draft a rookie will dig into this network to get the lowdown on particular athletes. Similarly, an athlete and his agent

depend on the network to identify key contacts that can open doors or *get him a chance*. Once an athlete has success playing for a coach, he will keep that relationship in his *hip pocket* in case he needs an *in* one-day. For the NFL caliber athlete, coaches occupy a critical role as a gatekeeper in the football network. A strong recommendation by a college coach, for example, will cause NFL scouts to take a serious look at an athlete. If that coach one day moves to the NFL he may even be in a position to sign *his guy*.[32] Conversely, the gatekeeper can hurt an athlete's chances by simply labeling him as a bad seed or a head case. Four years of college football and two NFL tryouts failed to impress upon Bobo that attitude matters every bit as much as athletic ability. Bobo was so blinded by his own personal demons that he failed to recognize the importance of the football network. "Not realizing it's a whole big circle, not realizing that I don't control my own destiny. I only control my own preparation, and I wasn't even doing that well." The European league was established to give athletes like Bobo exposure to NFL quality coaching with the hope of developing into top rated talent. Instead of viewing the time in Amsterdam as a chance to redeem his character, Bobo defiantly continued to try and play the game by his own rules.

In spite of his boisterous attitude and apathetic behavior, Bobo displayed enough ability for the Raiders to bring him back to training camp in '96. "I was still ballin in Amsterdam. You know that I'm saying? I ended the year with accolades. The Raiders picked me up. I decided to go cause I made peanuts in Europe; it was like a $15K contract or something like that." Once again, an injury cut short whatever opportunity Bobo actually had to make the team that season. "In '96 I got hurt and they cut me. There was only two weeks before camp starts and I'm tired. I'm tired of football and I'm tired physically after playing a full season in Amsterdam. Physically

[32] Lane Kiffin coached wide receiver Mike Williams at the University of Southern California. When Kiffin took the job as head coach of the Oakland Raiders he signed Williams to a free agent contract.

and emotionally tired of football. At this point I don't give a fuck about football." In describing this phase of his career, Bobo offers a rare glimpse into the ways in which an athlete's mental state affects his overall perception of the game. Though Bobo was nearly four seasons removed from Wazzu, he continued to harbor resentment towards the way he was treated in college.

> Football to me man, we was playing it cause we was lovin it when we was little. I loved it when I was a kid, then when all this shit started happening I stopped loving it. It manifest in my junior year in college, that battery incident really. I thought they could have (pause), I thought they were all against me, they didn't throw me the ball because of what happened. I was seeing things that weren't even there, but that's how I was livin it. And from that point on football wasn't fun anymore. Anytime after that it wasn't fun anymore.

The economic realities of the NFL also caused Bobo to question his desire to continue playing football. Rather than letting go of the past and approaching the '96 camp as an opportunity to finally cash in on his talent, Bobo grew further disenchanted with the business aspect of game.

> After the Raiders cut me I saw the politics of the business. And when my coach called me, my head coach Mike Price (from Washington State) told me, "Phillip, your not going to like the pros," I was like aright, so what. After '95 and I saw the bull shit, I was like this is bull shit! There was people I knew that was better than the other guy, but he makes more money then this guy so he's playin? That's bullshit. So when I started seeing all that I'm like "man this ain't fun." Because when you go to the pros it not a game anymore, this is a job man. Your trying to take care of your people with this shit your doin.

Not every athlete gifted with the talent to play professional football has the temperament to excel on the next level. There is immense pressure to win in the NFL, which means teams have very little patience for head coaches who do not win Super Bowls.[33] In turn, when a team signs an athlete they expect him to be mature enough to handle the rigorous demands of the NFL. Unlike college, the NFL is a structured work environment where an athlete spends countless hours, days, weeks, and months participating in team related activities. Therefore, an athlete must learn to adhere to the business aspects of the NFL or he will quickly find himself

[33] The San Diego Chargers fired head Coach Marty Schottenheimer after recording a 14-2 record in 2006. After the Chargers lost to the New England Patriots, team president, Dean Spanos, commented that he must take whatever steps that are necessary to deliver a Super Bowl trophy to San Diego.

unemployed. People of the football community knew Bobo possessed the athletic ability to play in the NFL. In fact, Dennis Erickson, the former head coach of WSU that left to take over the Miami Hurricanes program, acknowledged Bobo's talent in proclaiming, "Phillip you are a first round receiver." During the same conversation Erickson encouraged Bobo to return to school for his senior season. Few in the football community challenged Bobo's talent, but questions lingered throughout his career regarding the maturity to conduct himself as a professional athlete. When Coach Mike Price called Bobo to forewarn about life in the NFL, he was trying to get his former pupil to understand the mental preparation required to succeed in the pros.

Injury is another major factor that causes an NFL athlete to question the worthiness of pursuing an elusive NFL career. If he is having success on the field and is getting paid well, the little bumps and bruises are worth dealing with the pain. On the other hand, an athlete will question his commitment when a hyper-extended knee requires him to constantly apply ice and take ibuprofen just to get through a week of practice. As a young athlete, Bobo knew he could rely upon natural talent for success on the football field, but eventually his body started to break down. Instead of taking preventative measures to protect against injury when he was younger, Bobo felt he was invincible and could excel on physical talent alone.

> Once this thing messed up (his surgically repaired knee) I never played a season complete without injury. That absolutely goes back to me not working out hard enough when I was younger. 100%, it goes back to that. I mean, all this stuff, its trickling down from the embryo stages of the whole shit. You know what I'm sayin? If you ain't serious, then you ain't manning up for your shit.

After suffering injuries during both of his previous training camps, Bobo understood that it was only a matter of time before the team released him. The earlier concerns expressed by coach Price were beginning to ring prophetic. Bobo did not have the stomach for the politics of the NFL. The allure of professional football no longer captivated him as it once had.

With the Raiders in '95 I never thought I'd get cut. In '96 I was like fuck it. I don't care if I get cut or not. Like when he called me I was up. When they call you at 6:00 in the morning I was up. He called me, my shit was packed and I already knew I was getting cut cause I was hurt. I was like peace; football can leave me the fuck alone now. Don't bother me, FOOTBALL do not bother me.

## Self Reflection

Athletes are driven to play sports for a host of reasons. For some, athletics is a lottery ticket to fame and fortune: for others, a love for the game seduces them into competing athletically. In Bobo's case, football offered an escape from the embarrassment of having a world-class hustler for a father and being homeless as a child. Ironically, the more Bobo relied on football to exorcise his personal demons, the deeper he sank into depression. Bobo's mother steered her son to the sport in hopes of protecting him from the mean streets of Pasadena. Bobo senior viewed his son's success as an additional opportunity to scam professional football players out of money. Well before Bobo had the chance to pursue his own goals and dreams, he felt pressure to accept the identity of a football player. The fact that success in football came effortlessly, only served to exacerbate Bobo's resentment of this unwanted role. Only after years of denial and personal struggles was Bobo able to begin to understand his love-hate relationship with football.

> But see the thing is, and I hope you can instill this in your dissertation; you have to do what you feel inside. What you really want to do, without the pressure of doing what they want you to do. I can honestly tell you that the reason I stayed in football so long is because I loved coming home and seeing my mom brag about me. I love my brother telling me that he's sitting in a bar next to some random white cat and he says he's there to watch Phillip Bobo, and then my brother says "oh that's my brother." You know, shit like that. And the way that they would just light up when they tell me that. But, you cannot fall prey to it. Even though you loving your family, but that's not you. You just can't do that shit. And it wasn't me. Even this last summer we was at a family wedding and they still talking about that shit. When you listen to stuff like that, I feel good about my family, you know. But you can't do it. As cold as it is, you cannot fall prey to what other people want you to do or want you to be.

Somewhere along the way the mother-son dynamic became unbalanced between Bobo and his mother. He eagerly expresses gratitude for the sacrifices his mother made for him and his siblings. He is quick to acknowledge how difficult it was for her as a single mother of four children with little money or family support. Bobo is also grateful for his mother's unwavering faith in God. Yet, as a teenager Bobo discovered that his mother was helpless to protect him from his father's manipulative, self-indulging behavior. Furthermore, Bobo came to understand that his was mother was incapable of providing the guidance, support or encouragement he needed to pursue his own dreams. These early impressions were influential in Bobo concluding that his mother lived life as a victim, rather than seeing her as a source of strength. Even when Bobo's mother tried to intervene, her advice mainly centered on "trusting God and remaining prayerful." As much as Bobo loved his mother, and desperately wanted a relationship with his father, he resented them for abandoning him emotionally. They were not there for him when he became a father; when he was being recruited to play college football; when he decided to leave college early; when he was selecting a football agent; when he negotiated his first NFL contract; or when he was rehabbing his injured knee. Disappointment led Bobo to respond differently to each parent. Whereas he built up a wall to protect against his father BS, Bobo assumed more of parental role for his mother. The struggle to come to grips with his past is both painful and long, but Bobo has begun the process of self-discovery and is learning to let go of the past and take charge of his future.

> I ain't never proclaimed to be a football player. I always proclaimed to be an entertainer. I always wanted that shit. I never wanted football but I was doin it because I had to do it, because I was good at it. I was doing it because mother fucka's was smiling. But at the same time, man that not what I wanted to do. If I was smart enough or mature enough I would have used football as a means to an end, but instead I had to basically reinvent myself to get to the other side. And now I can talk about what happened without being embarrassed about the bonehead decisions that I made.

In agreeing to share the impact that football has had on his life, Bobo felt that it was also important to disclose the darkest event to take place along his journey. After the Raiders released him in the summer of '96 Bobo moved to Las Vegas to live with his mother. His plan was to get a job and earn enough money to make his way to Hollywood. After all these years of playing football, Bobo finally felt it was time to pursue his dream of working in the entertainment industry. While completing his degree at Washington State in '94 Bobo became obsessed with the idea of writing screenplays after a friend gave him a copy of a film script. Instead of getting a job at a casino or some other local establishment, Bobo claims he fell into the trap of making fast money.

> '97 came, I went to Vegas, and became a pimp. Now keep in mind, I was trying to find my way to make movies, I ain't have no money in my pocket and never held a job my life. My man comes up to me right, dude I grew up with in Pasadena. He had a girl, who had a friend, (and this is the first time I'm telling anybody) she had a friend who came up to me and said "I want you to be my man." She put $700 in my pocket; I was done (Laughing). But at that time I was staying with my momma (laughter grows even louder), so I had a hard time with just coming back home to moms after pimpin these girls, you know what I'm saying? I never really felt comfortable coming back to my momma's house cause we was pimpin from 11:00 at night until 6:00 am. The daytime was when I should have been writing movies but I was too damn tired. That was the worst shit ever, man. I did it as long as I could. I had to stop pimpin cause the girl, you know, left for a weekend and didn't call nobody. You don't leave a pimp like that so I put her head against the window of the car. I saw something that I was becoming and I didn't want to go there. That's not me. I mean I made enough money to help mom around the house with the groceries and to live and stuff. But it wasn't no money though. I started feeling guilty and it came back to everything that I'm not, God and stuff like that. And I saw my man, he was full blown, beatin bitches up, you know. I saw my mom go through that. I really lost it that day he did that, so I'm like okay I'm done.

The rawness of Bobo's confession offers a rare glimpse into the moral, ethical, and financial dilemmas that confront an athlete frustrated by the inability to crack the NFL code. Bobo presents a picture that contradicts the image of a highly recruited high school athlete who goes onto a successful college career before earning fame and fortune in the NFL. In spite of collecting scores of accolades and piling up impressive statistics as a wide receiver in the

powerful Pacific 10 football conference, Bobo failed to ever play a single game in the NFL. After vowing to quit forever following the '96 training camp, he took three more stabs at professional football. Football finally ended for Bobo in 2001 with "a halfhearted attempt at playing in the XFL. Ironically, when Bobo sat in his college dorm room and proclaimed that he would never make a stupid mistake and leave school early like Lawrence Phillip, it turned out to be a foreshadow of things to come. Rather than return for his senior season as the featured offensive threat, Bobo's decision to leave set in motion a series of devastating events he could not recover from. Starting with the selection of Ron Brown as his personal advisor all the way down to alienating coaches and scouts, Bobo killed every opportunity bask in the NFL spotlight. Stubbornness, immaturity, an over inflated ego, and a sense of entitlement led Bobo down a path of self-destruction that took years to recover from. Though many highly recruited athletes go on to lead productive lives after playing in the NFL, Bobo reminds us of the struggles of individuals who are not prepared for life outside of football. Poverty, teenage pregnancy; parental abandonment; mental and physical health issues; pressure to adhere to social expectation; falling through the educational cracks; unscrupulous managers and agents; lack of marketable job skills, and the underground economy are but a few of obstacles that befall the *can't miss* prospect attempting to live the storied life of an NFL athlete.

Chapter 2
*The Process of Becoming an Athlete*

All I need is for somebody to give me a chance
Matt Hewitt, 2008 NFL draft hopeful

Today's NFL athletes are bigger, stronger, and faster than they were just a decade earlier (Straub, 2006; Ley, 2001).[34] But who are they, what are their football careers like prior to the NFL, and why would anybody want to make a profession out of such a violent sport? I raised these questions in a discussion with Skip Fuller, Sports Performance Director at Test Sports Clubs where instructional football classes are offered for kids as early as kindergarten. Skip explained that Tests' Football Academy is capitalizing on a national trend where families plunk down $240 or more for one training session per week over the course of eight weeks. In fact, I counted over one hundred and fifty 6-18 year olds enthusiastically hanging on every word of instruction barked out by former NFL athletes at the Test field house in Martinsville New Jersey. When I glanced over the audience with a look of wonderment, Skip chuckled, "Rob it's a different world from back when we played. By the time these kids get into high school they're pushed to workout year round. They don't play basketball, indoor track or nothing." As a former high school star and a member of the University of West Virginia football team that contended for the 1988 college football national championship, I asked what he thought of these changes. "I don't totally agree with what's happening but most kids feel that if they don't concentrate on one sport they'll lose out on a spot on the team. It's happening like this in all the sports."

Considering the frenzy surrounding the NFL it should come as no surprise that teenagers will risk life and limb for a chance at winning the football lottery. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2007), approximately 1,071,775 high school athletes

[34] The New York Times, ESPN's television program "Outside the Lines," and MSNBC have reported on the increasing pressure faced by athletes to get bigger, faster, and stronger in order to secure a position on an NFL team.

participate in football yearly. However, only 5.7% go on to play football in the collegiate ranks with just .08% graduating to the NFL. Despite these long odds, many communities across the country commit considerable resources to field football teams. Little League and Pop Warner football serves as a feeder system for local high school teams, which in turn prepares athletes for the college ranks. Of course the biggest beneficiary of this system is the NFL, which drafts from a talent pool created from a mix of public funding and alumni donations. [35]

Paramount to this system is the NFL's ability to leverage college football as a quasi farm system. The NFL bylaws include a rule prohibiting any player who has not completed three college seasons, or is not three years removed from high school graduation, from joining the NFL (Scheinkman, 2005)[36]. By preventing potential athletes from marketing their services directly to the NFL, high school seniors turn their attention towards college football, vigorously competing for the 85 scholarships granted by 120 NCCA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (The University of Texas at San Antonio, 2006)[37] programs each season.

With the proliferation of media coverage, video games and Fantasy Football, the game is growing in popularity thereby fueling the hopes and dreams of millions of athletes across the country. Conspicuously absent from this media coverage are the everyday experiences of athletes who aspire to play in the NFL. To gain a deeper understanding of how football shapes

[35] Frey and Eitzens' (1991) argue that major college athletic and professional sports have become institutionalized for the purpose of entertaining society and generating revenues. I expand upon these scholars analysis to include some Pee Wee or Little League, and High School football teams as young athletes increasingly rely upon these organization as a means of securing athletic scholarships.

[36] According to a 2004 lawsuit filled by Maurice Clarett, the NFL Management Committee and the NFLPA negotiated a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), which comprises of 292 pages, 61 articles, appendices from A through N, and 357 sections but does not contain "the Rule." The lawsuit claimed that "the Rule" is not the product of a bona fide arms length negotiation between the NFL and the NFLPA. Federal Judge, Shira Scheindlin, initially ruled that the NFL could not bar Clarett from participating in the 2004 draft. This decision was overturned by the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, then denied by the Supreme Court on appeal.

[37] FBS programs are allowed to provide full scholarship aid consisting of course fees, housing, board, and textbooks. The three service academies that play in Division I FBS (Air Force, Army, Navy) are exempt from this rule because all students at these schools receive full scholarships from the federal government.

the lives of young men who dream of playing in the NFL, I draw upon the experiences of high school and college athletes who trained at Test Sports Clubs in the winter of 2008.

These athletes demonstrate the underlying uncertainties experienced at different stages in a prospect's career. In documenting the daily activities at Test Sport Clubs and detailing the life histories of athletes, I came to recognize that many of these athletes had developed methods to reinforce within themselves an absolute belief in their athletic ability. Their daily lives are driven by the belief that they must capitalize on the opportunity to play at the next level. As a strategy to maintain control over their destiny, many of the athletes rely upon catch phrases such as: *all I need is somebody to give me a chance*, or, *when I get into the league*. These statements contradict the depiction of a spoiled high school athlete who is awarded a scholarship to play big time college football, and then signs a multi-million dollar NFL contract.

## The High School Years

As Skip Fuller pointed out, many young people feel a sense of urgency to gain a competitive edge in order to get on the field. According to the Chicago Sun Times (Bell, 2006), today's high school athletes benefit from better coaching, better conditioning, better facilities, and better equipment, than previous generations, which is largely credited for developing bigger, stronger, faster and more skilled athletes. But what price must a young man pay for a chance at football's lottery? To better understand the pressures confronting athletes early in their careers, I will describe the lives of two high school football players, Cody Bohler, and Nyshier Oliver who represent two of the paths traveled by the athletes in this study. Nyshier (Naz) is a highly sought after Running Back/Defensive Back from football powerhouse Saint Peters Prep in Jersey City, New Jersey. Scholarship offers came pouring in from Rutgers, Boston College, Pittsburgh, West Virginia, and Cincinnati, during his junior season. On the other side of the spectrum is Cody Bohler, an unheralded Offensive Lineman from Somerville New Jersey.

# The Late Bloomer

Bohler, a 17-year-old Catholic of German decent, played the offensive line as a pudgy overweight 265-pound freshman. He was knocked around and struggled to make his presence felt, he says, "I just saw how big they were and I knew I had to get in shape to compete with those guys." This realization started him on a workout odyssey to reconstruct his body. After his freshman season in high school, Bohler, who spent the past two years rigorously dieting and weight training, now stands at a bulky 6'7" weighing 275 pounds. He inhales two 5,000-calorie shakes per day, which is over three times the daily-recommended intake of 2,800-3,200 calories for an active 14-18 year old male[38]. To unlock the mystery of why a teenager would willingly push himself to such physical feats, one only needs to exam Cody's response to Mike Farrell's (2007)[39] assessment of his talent, "I'm competitive right now at this level, but if I want to move up to the major college level I have to gain another 30-35 pounds and increase my footwork." This statement is indicative of the unwavering sacrifices that young men perceive are necessary to keep their dreams of playing football alive.

Cody knows that each Division I football program only offers 18-25 scholarships per season, and understands that hundreds of thousands of football players across the country are willing to do whatever it takes to catch the attention of a single college recruiter (Wojciechowski,2008)[40]. Each season young men all across the country enter their senior season

[38] According to the USDA, active means a lifestyle that includes physical activity equivalent to walking more than 3 miles per day at 3 to 4 miles per hour, in addition to the light physical activity associated with typical day-to-day life.

[39] Farrell is a recruiting analyst for rivals.com, which claims to be the number one authority on college football and basketball recruiting.

[40] In February 2008 espn.com reported that a high school athlete called a press conference and falsely announced his decision to accept a football scholarship to the University of California at Berkeley. Cal head coach Jeff Tedford stated that he had never even heard of the young man. Tedford further commented to the Associated Press, "I've talked to other coaches who have had people saying they've committed to their programs who they're not even recruiting, and it just seems like this thing is getting so big and egos are getting so involved ... people want to have an identity or whatever. To get to that magnitude that I read about is really kind of unfortunate."

with visions of gaining a college scholarship and becoming the next Tom Brady or Tiki Barber[41]. This is why Bohler basically eats, sleeps, and breaths football.

What exactly is going on when a high school athlete feels compelled (and allowed) to re-sculpt his body for a shot at making it to the next level? Is Cody just an over zealous teenager obsessed with the desire to impress college scouts, or is he typical of today's high school offensive linemen? Perhaps it is because major college programs are always on the hunt for that all elusive giant who is quick as a cat and can bench press an elephant. In fact 15 of the top 39 linemen in the high school class of 2006 ranked by rival.com tipped the scale at 300 plus pounds. According to the Tulsa World newspaper (Barker, 2007), the average Oklahoma high school offensive lineman has gone from 183 pounds in 1930 to almost 273 pounds in 2006. Even more shocking, offensive linemen have gained almost 50 pounds since 1982 and if the trend continues, the newspaper predicts that they will average 300 pounds by 2021. Although American children as a whole have gotten larger, offensive lineman have grown at a significantly faster rate than the general population. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention the average 17-year old boy increased in weight by 11 percent, growing from 150 pounds in 1966 to 166 pounds in 2002.

Skip Fuller, who serves as Cody's personal trainer and strength coach, first introduced me to him in January of 2008. Cody had just completed his junior season as a first year starter for Immaculata High School. During our first conversation Cody enthusiastically expressed his dreams of playing for Notre Dame. After a quick ribbing about the Fighting Irish's horrible 2007 season, I asked, "Why Notre Dame? They haven't been winning much lately." His face

[41] Tom Brady, starting quarterback for the New England Patriots, has won 3 Super Bowl championships and was selected as the Super Bowl MVP on 2 separate occasions. Tiki Barber retired in 2006 after playing 10 seasons as a running back for the NY Giants and went on to become a television commentator for NBC.

beamed as he replied, “I don’t know. I’ve just kind of liked them ever since I was a kid. I think it would be kind of neat to run out of the locker room wearing those colors being on TV.”

For every athlete with multiple scholarship offers, thousands less fortunate agonize over what tomorrow may (or may not) bring. To present himself in the best light possible, Cody is determined to control his vital football statistics (weight, strength, speed, and quickness). Motivated by the pressure to gain an edge over the competition, each off season Cody heads back into the gym and undertakes a rigorous workout and conditioning program. According to Skip, Cody needs to combine an intensive weight-lifting regime with a speed and agility workout 4 days a week in order to reach his goals. “Basically we got to get him stronger, but first we need to get all that soreness out from the season and get his body adjusted to lifting again.” Once in full swing, Skip leads Cody through a program targeted to strengthen specific muscle groups (legs, buttocks, back, chest, shoulders, arms, and abdominal muscles). His routine closely resembles the program used by many major college football programs. During the winter and spring months Cody will spend Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday working out 45-60 minutes learning to master advanced power lifting exercises:

**Table 2.**

| | |
|---|---|
| Reg. Squats 4 - 5 X (1 - 10) @ (60% - 105%)[42] | Front Squats 3 X (2 - 5) @ (60% - 90%) |
| Roman Dead Lift's 3 X 5 @ (50% - 65%) | Bench Press 4 X (2 - 8) @ (65% - 90%) |
| Alternating Dumbbell Inclines 3x (8-10), | Shoulder/Triceps Circuit |
| Manual Neck workout | Clean Pull 3 X 4 @ (50% - 105%) |
| Clean Pull / Power Clean<br>4 - 5 X (1 - 4) @ (60% - 105%) | Single-Leg Squat<br>3 X 5 @ (55% - 65%) |
| Back / Bicep Circuit | Hang Snatch 3 X (3 - 4) @ (30% - 50%) |
| Push Jerk3 X (3 - 4) @ (55% - 70% | Hang Clean 4 X (2 - 3) @ (50% - 80%) |
| Box Step-up 3 X 5 @ (50% - 65%) | Back/Bicep Circuit |
| Glutes & Ham/Hamstring Curl | Neck Machine |

By the time March rolls around Skip begins adding heavier weights to most of Cody's base exercises. In January, for example, his bench press routine started at 3 sets of 5reps at 225 pounds and every two weeks Skip added 10-20 pounds until Cody was able to power through 4 sets of 5-8 reps at 275 to 300 pounds without any visible signs of fatigue. Another little game Skip plays with Cody is called Fourth Quarter. He begins the workout session by handing Cody his list of exercises for that particular day then proceeds to push him until sweat has practically soaked his workout gear. Just when Cody thinks he has reach the end of the workout, Skip yells out "fourth quarter," which immediately signals another 5 to 15 minutes of fast paced lifting. "I push him this way to build mental toughness and help him with his endurance. Anybody can play hard when he's fresh; it's what you do when you're tired that counts."

Over the course of our first month together I learned that Cody had become accustomed to the rigorous workout regiment, but what really caused him restless nights was that he felt

[42] The numbers within the parenthesis refer to the progression. For instance, Tuesday's squat routine, 4-5 x (1-10) @ (60%-105%) means that the athlete begins with 4 sets of 10 repetitions at 60% and gradually works towards 5 sets of 1 repetition at 105% over an eight-week period. The program is designed for the athlete to take Wednesday as a rest day.

disrespected by his high school coach. One week after our initial introduction I noticed Cody kind of going through the motions during a set on the bench press. Skip, who was mildly agitated by this lack of effort, started in on Cody:

SKIP: Cody, I don't see why you let all that stuff bother you.
CODY: He's such a suck up. I mean the guy ain't even that good and he throws out his card to everyone he meets.
SKIP: I know he's not that good but what's that got to do with anything? Next year is your year. You'll show em what you're made of.
CODY: I know but… after all that hard work I put in last year I still can't get any recognition. I know my coach tells all the recruiters I need to work on my footwork. He thinks my feet are slow. I move better than any other lineman on the team. Then he turns around and just praises Mark.
SKIP: I don't see it. I watched him (Mark) a couple of times last year and he's just a big blob. He's not that strong and he doesn't move his feet. I'm not trying to be bias or anything. You know me; I'd be honest and tell you if I felt otherwise, but you're way better than him.
CODY: I know but damn, it just bothers me cause it feels like I'm not even getting looked at. It's like the coach is directing all the attention to Mark and I don't even matter.

After several minutes the conversation lost steam as the lackluster weight session came to a close. Even through the fragmented dialog, the message came through loud and clear: the recruiting process was beginning to take an emotional toll on Cody.

About an hour later I met Cody's father, Tom Bohler, to gain permission to observe his family throughout the up coming recruiting season. After our initial greeting I asked Tom if I could have a word alone with Cody prior to our group meeting. A few minutes into our conversation I began to sense that my own years of football experience might be used to help Cody deal with his anxiety. As Cody slumped down in a plastic blue chair that strained to contain his large frame, he slowly explained his frustration with his teammate's shameless self-promotion. I asked, "What does Mark's deal have to do with you? Why does he even matter? What if you just went out and did your thing regardless of how much he sucks up? Help me understand where you're coming from." I explained how my high school coach nearly sabotaged my career by blacklisting me when recruiters started calling.

For a high school athlete, the power wielded by his head coach can be a blessing or a curse.[43] College recruiters are generally responsible for scouting certain geographic regions, which means building relationships with high school head coaches is vital for identifying top talent. It is imperative for college recruiters to trust the word of head coaches, and for head coaches to know which recruiters to trust. According to *USA Today* (O'Toole, 2006), Ray McCartney, recruiting coordinator for the Wake Forest University football program, believes that high school coaches often feel obligated to help a young man who gave his heart and soul to his program get to the next level, but it is up the university recruiter to see if they agree or disagree whether the kid is a good fit for a certain program. For all but the blue chip athlete, the recruiting process often leaves a kid with feelings of hopelessness and despair, desperately hoping that his coach will open a door so he can prove himself. This becomes all the more stressful since a Bowl Championship Series (BCS) school like Wake Forest typically begins the recruiting process with well in excess of 1,000 names and over a 24 month period, whittles that group down to 100, then actively recruits 40-50 knowing they will probably only sign 15-18 athletes to scholarships (ibid).

The scouting and recruiting process in football has an uncanny ability to play mind games with athletes. One day a young man is flying high because he lifted a new max weight on his bench press, then the next day his world can come crashing down over rumors that his high school rival was offered a college scholarship. For instance, a mini crisis occurred when Cody heard that the Fighting Irish had signed a few offensive linemen in their 2008 freshman recruiting class. During one workout Cody whispered to Skip in a dejected tone, "Notre Dame

[43] The biggest complaint logged by dozens of the athletes who participated in this research was directed towards their high school coaches. Many athletes expressed frustration with their coach's lack of experience or their inability to guide them through the college recruiting process.

signed like 4 or 5 offensive linemen this year." Skip responded with the slightest tinge of sternness, "SO?" "I know… it's just that… man!" replied Cody. This brief yet poignant interaction speaks to a young athlete's emotional vulnerability. Skip was trying to get Cody to focus on his game and to let go of everything else. Ironically, less than a month later Cody received a letter from Charlie Weis, the Notre Dame Head Coach, who requested a copy of his highlights and a game DVD.

As of the winter of 2008 it is too early to know how things will work out for Cody, but he does several distinct advantages going for him, including a supportive family. Tom, Cody's dad, explained the family's involvement in Cody's career. "I mean I think that, and again it's up to him, he only really started playing football in 8th grade because he was always too big, and he really has aspirations of going to the highest levels and if that's what he wants to do I'll obviously support him in any way I can." Tom then explained that the most important goal for the family is a top-notch education. A year earlier his oldest son fielded a few offers to play baseball before deciding to pursue a degree in engineering.

> Ryan decided he's not going to play in college… being an engineer was very important to him. You know, I'm…I'm disappointed, but again, you have to be a big person. I was down there (New Jersey Institute of Technology) while he was taking a few tests so I decided to watch them practice and the coach came right up to me and said *hey you're Ryan's dad, can you try and get him to at least be a walk on* and I said no, he doesn't want to play because he had a bad experience (in high school), but regardless we're hoping he has a good experience in college cause that helps push him a little bit more (with his grades).

Besides emphasizing the importance of school, Tom also expressed his belief in securing the highest level of training, nutritional guidance and personal instruction to enhance Cody's chances of reaching the next level. "Cody's surrounded by good people. He's got Skip, Bill Ard (Former New York Giants offensive Lineman and Super Bowl Champ), Brian from Test here (Owner of Test Sports Club), yourself… you know there's a lot of people that are for him. He's

got guys here for him and he's got good parents and we'll do anything we can to keep him going."

Not surprisingly, athletes and their families across the country look for competitive advantages in the recruiting game. Even though our initial telephone conversation was only seven days earlier, Tom viewed me as an asset to his son's future. The Bohler's, like many football parents, have committed valuable resources to support Cody. At Test Sports Club, whose football academy is similar to those sprouting up all over the country, a $240 eight-week training session is only the tip of the iceberg. Dozens of parents of young athletes also opted to pay $720 for a four sessions per week plan, consisting of power and strength workouts, speed and agility training, and positional work. Parents can also enroll their high school students in the *complete all-inclusive high school package* for $1,060, which includes a recruiting consultation, the Huddle Group, and NCAA Clearing House Assistance.

The demands placed on a family to support their child's dream of football stardom can be daunting. Following his freshman season, Cody came home and announced he needed to lose 40 pounds and get stronger. Right then Tom, who owns a small HVAC company, decided to enroll his son at Test Sports Clubs. Over the past 2 ½ years, the Bohler's have spent thousands in cash and barter for a club membership, personal training, summer camps and nutritional guidance, for their son. $1,500 for a club membership, $6,300 for the personal training sessions, $480 for protein shakes, plus an additional $100 for each consultation with the nutritionist added up to nearly $10,000 in out of pocket expenses that first year. The Bohler's caught a break after Cody's sophomore season because Tom was able to barter with Test for his services.

The resources committed by the Bohler family do not begin to account for all the training and preparation Cody needs. Two or three times a week Cody, and his football-addict buddy

Mike, spend countless hours repeating speed and ability drills. Although some families are willing to pay $75 per hour for a trainer to run their kids through fast feet ladder drills, 40 yard sprint mechanics, 3 cone drills, and 20 yard shuttle technique drills, Skip encouraged the Bohler family to have Cody go unsupervised during this phase of his training. "He's been with me long enough to know what I expect from him. If he doesn't put the work in it will eventually come out. I'll run him every once in awhile just to see where he's at." While other kids head off to jobs after school or hangout with their friends, Cody religiously spends 2-3 hours 5 times a week following his workout regiment. On school days Cody generally arrives at Test around 3:30 pm wearing his blue Catholic school sweater vest, gray pants, and white shirt with his tie undone. In his school uniform I first mistook Cody for just another big kid wasting time in the gym, but in his workout gear, a real transformation took place. Once Cody and Mike started diving into their workout I began to get a sense of their dedication to the sport. It really seems as if Skip were to tell Cody to jump, this kid would not bother asking, how high or for how long, he would just start jumping. "Skip is like a second father to Cody. People recognize how much this kid gives of himself so they're willing to spend time on him. Cody wants it bad and he's not afraid of working for it," according to Tom.

> For all of the physical instruction, hours of personal training, and insider tips parents pay for, nothing prepares most athletes for the emotional roller coaster ride of college recruiting. As mentioned earlier, nearly 95% of athletes will not have the chance to play football beyond high school. The vast majority of kids know that final day is coming and are able to begin preparing for it. For thousands of others, the dream comes crashing down when the national scholarship-signing day quietly passes by. The clearest illustration of one of football's hardest lessons was captured in the following phone conversation:

CODY: The whole recruiting process is very stressful. It makes you feel kind of like a dog going after a piece of meat. I feel really bad because it makes you selfish, but you know that if you don't go for it then somebody else will.
AUTHOR: What's the matter with being selfish?
CODY: Well, it's not really in my nature. The whole thing makes you kind of become somebody your really not. But that's the only way to get what you really want.

AUTHOR: Ok so help me understand what you're saying. It's not in your nature because of your family upbringing and being raised Catholic? You've been taught to put others first and to serve your brother?
CODY: Exactly, that's what I mean about it being stressful. You start to understand that you got to put yourself first no matter what. You get this burning passion deep inside you that won't go away. You just have to fight like a dog or else somebody else is going to take it away. I know that sounds bad but…
AUTHOR: Is there anytime that you don't think about this fight and the stress it produces?
CODY: Well I don't think about it all the time but it's pretty much always there. I mean, I try not to think about it when I'm with my girlfriend or when I'm at the movies and stuff, but otherwise it's always there. It's really stressful.

## The Blue Chip Athlete

Besides the obvious physical differences between Cody Bohler and Nyshier Oliver, their experiences in football are similar in some areas and different in others. While Cody is a tall lineman with a long frame and flowing blond hair, Nyshier is a 5'11" 175 pound running back/defensive back with a chestnut completion. The former is a suburban white kid from a working class town in central Jersey and Nyshier is African-American and was primarily raised in the densely populated city of Newark New Jersey. One has had to fight for the attention of scouts and college recruiters while the other is considered an elite Blue Chip athlete. But the common thread that binds both high school juniors together is a passion to move onto college and then make it on the biggest stage in football.

Nyshier, or Naz as most call him, initially burst on the high school athletic scene as a track star. His time of 10.38 in the 100-meter dash set a New Jersey state record for freshmen. Based on the strength of this performance he was named 1st team All Hudson County for the 100-meter and Honorable Mention for the 200-meter in his freshman season. His list of accomplishments in the first three years of high school is impressive. 1st team New Jersey All-State Group 4 non-public high school football team, 2007 Hudson Reporter all area football, 2007 Hudson Reporter Offensive Player of the Year, and The Associated Press 2007 2nd team All

State football. As the oldest of seven children, "Naz" takes pride in his 3.10 grade point average and the example he sets for his siblings. "Yeah, I try to be an example. I'm the only child between my mother and father: the oldest of five. My mom has a younger son and daughter, and my dad has the same. Even though my parents aren't together they still have a good relationship."

Newspaper articles and high school scouting reports often refer to Naz as a rare athlete with unlimited potential.[44] With this type of public attention it might be tempting to think of Naz as a young version of the brash, self-centered African-American athlete so often portrayed in the media[45]. One look at Nyshier interacting with peers and any such concerns about cockiness are easily dispelled. Naz was first brought to my attention by accident during a training session at Test. I had been hearing a lot about a young man by the name of Will "Thrill" Hill, who had recently accepted an athletic scholarship to play football for the University of Florida. As the number one rated high school prospect in the state of New Jersey, Hill had dozens of schools calling for his services. A buzz began circulating around the Test Sports field house as word spread that Hill planned to attend the 2008-winter Football Academy. As a former defensive back (DB) I was eager to checkout the drills conducted by JB Brown, a 12 year NFL veteran. While many of the fathers in the crowd were in awe of Hill, my attention was drawn to Naz. Speed and agility were without question two of his greatest assets, but what was most compelling was his desire to compete.

[44] For a detailed scouting report on Oliver's athletic potential refer to maxpreps.com, rivals.com, or Rutgers.scout.com.

[45] An example of this type of media portrayal is offered by Fox Sports Journalist Jason Whitlock in an article entitled, *NFL buffoons leaving terrible legacy* in which he states that African-American football players caught up in the rebellion and buffoonery of hip hop culture have given NFL owners and coaches a justifiable reason to whiten their rosters.

It wasn't until part way through the 90-minute session when I learned that DB was not his natural position. Theodore, Nyshier's father walked up, introduced himself and offered, "I see you're telling him some of the same stuff I've been pointing out." I responded, "He's pretty good, his stance is a little tight but once he begins to trust himself, he'll really be special." Theodore then offered, "Believe it or not he only played like three games at DB, he really plays running back, over 1,200 yards and twenty something touchdowns this season." I immediately went home that evening and conducted an Internet search to find out as much as I could about this young man. I soon discovered that he had accomplished more in one season than most kids could dream of in an entire high school career. I began to wonder why he was working out with the DB's instead of focusing on the nuances of running the football. Catching up with Theodore the following week I blurted out "Why isn't your son training with the running backs?" Theodore coyly responds, "That's not even Naz. He's not big headed or nothing. Running back ain't a challenge no more so he's focusing on being a defensive back. Schools that want him say he can play either position so he's focusing on DB." This statement made me take a step back and think. Of all the years I've been involved with the sport, I can not recall ever meeting anyone who rejected the spotlight that accompanies being an offensive start simply because defense was more challenging. This led me to push for a deeper understanding of his personal history and family background that shaped Nyshier's views.

In 1990 Theodore Oliver graduated from Weequahic high school in Newark and shortly thereafter became a single father. Committed to avoiding the mistakes of his father and stepfather, Theodore began working a series of odd jobs at the airport, in retail, or anything else he could get his hands on to take care of his responsibilities. "Even though things didn't workout between me and his mother, she's never had to worry about me. I've been always been there.

He's lived with me for three years when his mom had a rough time in her life. I know what it's like to grow up without a father and I made sure that wasn't happening to my son. " Beyond adhering to his financial responsibilities, Theodore also takes an active role in the educational aspects of his son's life. "I was what you might call a social student. I just didn't take school too seriously. My older sister got a basketball scholarship to Howard and everybody was giving her all the attention so I just kind of went the other way. I've seen what an education did for her and I want that for my son."

Like many Blue Chip athletes, Naz excelled in sports at a young age. As a kid he was said to be bigger than most others his age, which allowed him to shine on the Pop Warner level. By the time he was 12 years old, coaches from top prep schools began attending his games to persuade him to play for their programs. Once he settled into high school his career began to take off. Though he was not able to start on his freshman team due to a problem with some school registration documents, Naz still managed to become the featured running back and score the bulk of the squad's touchdowns. The other fathers who attend the workout sessions at Test repeatedly indicate that Naz is such a great competitor that he never gives up. According to Theodore, "He'll play a video game with you all night until he wins. The kid just loves to compete." Though Theodore credits his son with an innate ability to persevere through adversity, the father clearly has had a hand in cultivating this attribute. Three times a week, since Naz was 12 or 13, Theodore has taken his son to run 2.2 miles around the Weequahic Park track and 20 sprints up and down "Dead man's hill" while wearing a 20 pound weight vest.

After spending time with Naz and Theodore I began to get a sense of the bond between father and son. Theodore began the running regiment in Weequahic Park as a way of instilling structure and discipline in his son, but he later confessed that it was also a way of ensuring that

the two spend time together. In fact, Theodore's voice began to crack ever so slightly at the recognition that Naz was beginning to exercise his independence.

> From the time Naz started playing ball at St. Peters I never missed a minute of practice or any of his games during the first two years. Then one day last season his coach came over and said that he's never had a parent spend this much time watching his kid, I guess he wasn't used to a black parent being around that much, but later Naz told me that I didn't need to show up as much. He said that he trusted what the coaches were telling him and that everything was fine. I have to admit, that kind of hurt me but I understand what he was trying to say. Honestly, Naz is my best friend.

When I asked Naz about his relationship with his father, in typical teenage fashion he kind of stared in silence for a few seconds and answered, "My pops is cool. He's always there for me and all my brothers and sisters. My younger brother is an even better athlete than me and my father will do everything for him too. That's just the way he is."

No matter how much of a natural athlete Naz is, he is being tested by the game in a similar fashion as less gifted, less publicly-recognized athletes. Naz is learning first hand that even the great ones are under pressure to work even harder if they want to make it on the next level. No matter how many accolades or awards are listed after Will Hill's name, Nyshier's high school teammate diligently continues to show up for work at the Football Academy. Why? Because as former New York Giant wide receiver James Tyler said while observing Hill during a workout, "He better step up his game cause them boys down in Florida got something his ass. They DO NOT PLAY down there at the University of Florida."[46] Tyler laid it out as a simple question of who is hungrier. By making an example of Will Hill, he was letting the kids know that somebody is always ready to fight you for that piece of steak. Tyler was trying to impress upon Naz that it does not matter if he is a high school star, the competition just keeps on getting stiffer so he better be ready.

[46] James Tyler (pseudonym) is one of the professional athletes hired to teach position skills at the Test Sports Football Academy. He is often in charge of running the one on one wide receiver versus defensive back drills designed to test an individual's skill level.

Fortunately, the demands of fame, education, and athletics do not seem to present a problem for Naz. He comes across as a well-adjusted young man who takes things in stride. But stirring up behinds the scenes is an impeding recruiting battle. Like many other Blue Chip athletes who have come before him, Naz and his family will experience a mounting barrage of attention during the up coming months. Their mobile phones will come under constant attack with text messages from recruiters, coaches, news reporters, and friends seeking the inside tip on where he plans to attend school in the fall of 2009. College representatives will visit his school and pull him out of class to remind him how terrific their program is. And college head coaches will visit Nyshier's mom seeking to gain her approval in hopes of persuading him to sign their scholarship offer. Which university to attend may be the single most important decision a Blue Chip prospect will face. Unlike the Overachiever, the Blue Chipper arrives on campus with a reputation to uphold. If his promise is fulfilled he will help bring home a national championship and become a high draft choice in the NFL. If he fails to deliver, then he will be labeled as one of many over hyped guys who wasted away on the bench.

Upon hearing about my football background and research, Naz's father, Theodore, solicited a little advice:

THEODORE: Right now Naz is thinking about Clemson cause he attended a camp down there and kind of like the way it felt. What do you think about Clemson?
AUTHOR: Well, if I had a kid who was a top prospect and could write his own ticket I would consider a few things. I've learned through one of the guys I'm following in my study, that alumni networks go a long way in helping you once football is over. This particular guy went to Notre Dame, played 5 years in the NFL and now he calls on alumni to help with his business ventures.
THEODORE: Well Boston College is comin at him hard too
AUTHOR: It's interesting that you should mention BC. There's a guy working out with the elite athletes who just graduated from BC and played defensive back. He says it's a great school with a lot to offer but not a lot of guys from there go on to make it big in the NFL. According to this guy, they didn't really have a secondary coach last season and BC plays a lot of zone scheme, which could hurt his chances of getting drafted. Let me make a call, cause I'm sure he would be cool to talk with you.

THEODORE: Yeah, do that. We are going for a visit to BC this weekend and it would be good to get the inside scope. So… what other schools do you like?
AUTHOR: Well, please don't take this as I'm saying that these are the only schools to consider cause everyone has to find a perfect fit for themselves. Of the guys I've interviewed the ones who played at Stanford, Cal Berkeley, and Notre Dame have done real well after football. You can get a solid education at these schools plus you're playing football at the highest level. These are real solid brothers who look after one another, played in the NFL, and are doing big things now.

Upon hearing my assessment, Theodore excitedly pulled over a buddy and enthusiastically repeated our conversation. Both fathers then explained how stressful the whole recruiting process has become. It seems that a family must either draw from the experiences of family and friends, or they must find some other way to evaluate each scholarship offer. The issues and concerns raised by Theodore are indicative of how high the stakes have become in the recruiting game. The mental part of the game dictates that an athlete must believe so strongly in his abilities that nothing will stop him from achieving his dreams. Therefore selecting a school in which his talents will be developed and he can be academically supported becomes just as important as his ability to play football. When Theodore first told Naz that I was a sociologist writing a dissertation on football he suggested that we sit down and talk. Naz informed me that he wasn't down with sociology but he did plan to study psychology in college. We both cracked a few jokes about the two disciplines before I asked what he was looking for in a college. He responded, "I just want to go to a good school, play ball, and get a good education." I nodded in approval then asked, "What do you consider to be a good school, I mean what should a school offer in order for you to consider it to be a good school?" Naz paused for a minute then stated in a barely audible voice, "I never really thought about that before." With that I decided to let the subject drop by turning to his father and telling him that his son was going to do quite well for himself. Theodore commented that he really enjoyed talking to me, and then suggested that we stay in touch over the upcoming year.

My interactions with Cody, Naz, Theodore, and Tom served as the catalyst to search identify common experiences shared by NFL athletes. As is the case with almost any group, the NFL fraternity is a heterogeneous group of individuals, yet the Over Achiever and the Blue Chip athlete represent two of the most common types who find their way into the league. In observing these two young prospects I began to sense that neither type has an easier path to the NFL. The game requires all athletes to submit a strict code of conduct. Today there are so many young athletes playing football that nothing can be taken for granted. Just as Cody is learning how to balance selfishness with his family values while pursuing his dream, retired NFL athletes like JB Brown and James Tyler forbid Naz to rest on his laurels. At Test football Academy the older generation is mentoring the young kids on how to stay focused, keep hungry, and be prepared when the chance arises. Both young men have obstacles to overcome. For Cody, the struggle consists of fighting for a coach's respect while hoping to catch the attention of a big time recruiter. Whereas Naz will need to stay focused, keep his head out of the clouds while living up to the expectations of being a big time recruit.

## The College Years

College football represents another of the many minefields that an athlete must to learn to conquer in the pursuit of his NFL dream. Along the way many will crumble when faced with adversity, while others are stymied by their own physical limitations. Yet a select few find a way to push through and gain a shot at the next level. In this section Matt Hewitt and Moe represents two of the many paths traveled by the 25 professional prospects that participated in the 2008 Football Academy NFL Combine Training. These young men have endured a number of tests of their mental, physical, and emotional resolve during careers that placed them in two of college football's biggest programs. Despite all of their various trials and tribulations both athletes continue to display an unwavering belief in their abilities once the NFL comes calling. They

spend countless hours in the weight room, soaking in hot and cold tubs, receiving physical therapy treatments, catching passes, running sprints, and sleeping in lonely motel rooms, all in preparation for the moment when someone hopefully offers a life changing opportunity.

## From JC to the SEC

Matt Hewitt played football for the Arkansas Razorbacks in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). For perhaps the better part of the past ten years, the SEC has arguably been considered the best conference in college football; in fact four of the last ten BCS national champions[47] are members of SEC. During the 2007 season the Razorbacks were only one of two teams that beat the eventual national champions Louisiana State University (LSU). When I approached Matt about taking part in my research he responded with a reassuring yes, and proceeded to tell me that his undergraduate degree was in sociology. Matt is a tall, well built, light-skin African American young man often seen sporting red and black Razorback gear while working out at Test Sports Club. One often gets a sense that Matt is almost unapproachable as he sits or naps with his headphones on in between workout sessions. I finally mustered up the nerve to ask, "Are you sure you don't mind talking to me about your story? Sometimes you seem like you don't want to be bothered." Matt answered, "Nawh Rob, it's cool. Hell somebody needs to write a book about my experiences in football. Ain't nuthin come easy for me. All I know about football is struggle. I'm quiet cause I'm just thinking about what I got to do to make it."

Even with all my years around the sport, it was hard to comprehend what Matt was trying to explain. I understood that some athletes in every program fall through the cracks. Playing for an SEC powerhouse does not guarantee that the NFL will come calling. Yet eight of his teammates were invited to the 2008 NFL pre-draft scouting combine while Matt was left out in

[47] The Bowl Championship Series (BCS) is a selection system designed to force a "national championship game" between the top-ranking teams (in the BCS rankings).

the cold. To better understand Matt's situation we need to retrace his steps from high school through Junior College on to the University of Arkansas. While sitting on a couple of exercise balls in between workout sessions in the Test field house, Matt explained how running with the wrong crowd in his first two years of high school cost him dearly. "Had I kept on, I could of ended up in jail or on the streets. Too much bad stuff was happening so I started concentrating on football. But going into my senior year my GPA was only 1.8." By the end of his senior year Matt's poor transcripts left junior college as the only option. "After my junior year I went to University of Maryland's football camp for QB's[48] and receivers. When the coach asked about my grades and I told him a C average, he just walked away. Didn't even bother sayin nuthin. My senior year I pulled my grades up to a 2.3 and started learning how to study, too late though."

As a result of a NCAA rule, Matt was required to graduate from junior college prior to accepting any scholarship offers. He was forced to turn down numerous offers from schools that wanted him to enroll after his third semester. "There were a whole bunch of schools willing to sign me but they wanted me to transfer in December. Cause my high school grades were so low I had to pass up scholarships to some big time schools. Syracuse was real close to signing me, then backed out at the last minute." In a strange set of circumstances, Matt landed on the Razorback's radar, which lead to a last minute scholarship offer. "My defensive coordinator at Alfred State (ASC) heard Coach Nutt on rival radio talking about needing a Free Safety. I sent in my tapes, bout a week later QB coach Alex Wood came to ASC. When I went to Arkansas for my visit, Coach Nutt offered right on the spot."

Matt's football odyssey suggests that his time at ASC, where he was selected as a Junior College All-American, was probably the most gratifying of his years as an athlete. He never felt

[48] QB often serves as an acronym for Quarterbacks.

as though he hit his stride in Arkansas, "I never really fit in down there. I don't know, maybe because I'm not from the South or something like that. I always felt like an outsider."

Matt arrived at the University of Arkansas in time to enroll in summer school and by the fall he played well enough to become a starter on all special teams while serving as a back up Free Safety. He switched positions after the third game when the starting Strong Side linebacker fell to a season-ending shoulder injury. Though a bit undersized at 6'3" 205 pounds, Matt filled in quite well as the 2006 season ended with the Razorbacks going 10-4 and playing against the University of Wisconsin in the Capital One Bowl. After bulking up to a solid 220 pounds, his coach called him in the spring before his senior season and said to lose weight because he was moving to Strong Safety. In his final season for the Razorbacks Matt turned in a strong campaign. He recorded 118 tackles, 4 forced fumbles, 3 fumble recoveries, 2 pass interceptions, 1 sack, 9 quarterback hurries, and was selected as a 2nd team Associated Press All SEC selection.

With solid credentials like these, it was all the more perplexed why Matt had not been invited to the NFL scouting combine. When questioned, he replied, "Man, you tell me. The scouts must figure I was moved to Linebacker cause I was too slow to play in the secondary, but that's ridiculous, I never been timed in my life.[49] Nothin in football ever came easy for me. But I'll show 'em. Just like before. All I need is a chance."

Although NFL scouts have not been rushing to acquire Matt's services, he has gained the support of agent, Guy Packwood, who arranged for him to participate in the Elite Football Academy at Test Sports to prepare for the Razorback Pro Day.[50] A strong performance on Pro Day could mean a call on draft weekend and a contract worthy of a nice signing bonus. However, a poor showing generally means a team might be convinced to offer a free agent

[49] NFL scouts often use an athlete's 40 yard dash time to determine his football speed.
[50] Pro Day workouts are events generally held on campus which give scouts and NFL personnel managers an opportunity to work out prospective draft prospects in a setting other than the NFL Combine.

contract for the league minimum salary. Matt Hewitt's story is compelling if for no other reason than that he has continued to fight, claw, kick, bleed, and do whatever else is necessary to keep his dream alive. After a shaky academic start in high school, Matt matured as a student and was on the University of Arkansas' Lon Farrell Academic Honor Roll for the fall of 2006 (Razorbacks Media Relations, 2006). When asked why he did not receive that honor again, Matt simply stated, "It got too hard. Football started taking up more and more time. They demand a lot from you in football and its pretty hard trying to juggle everything."

About three weeks into my research, Moe, one of the athletes participating in the Combine Training at Test, invited me back to hang out at his hotel for an interview. As luck would have it, two other pro prospects (Roland and Tierre) happened to drop by to play video games. What transpired over the course of the next six hours was a highly spirited, often hilarious, and sometimes sobering conversation detailing these three players' views on life. By default, Moe's place became the hang out, since his agent provided a one-bedroom suite, whereas everyone else either shared a regular room or stayed in a cramped studio suite. As I took a few seconds to collect my thoughts before asking questions, I scanned the room for clues about his living arrangements. It was pretty obvious that an eight week stay at the Sierra Suites Hotel was pretty pricey. I later discovered that agents generally work out an agreement to take on the financial responsibility of providing food, lodging, transportation, and a little pocket change during the players' pre draft training. As a general rule, prospects all across the country spend six to ten weeks preparing for the NFL Combine or Pro Day, after the final game of their college career. According to Roland and the others, Moe's agent was willing to provide him with a little better "hook up" since at least two teams had requested an interview at the Combine.

Our session began with Moe offering everyone a water or Gatorade while explaining that he needed to be mindful of his diet in order to be lean for his upcoming date with destiny. I was curious to know how the whole combine thing worked, but decided not to ask until an opening was presented. Instead, I decided to offer a brief explanation of my work then followed up with asking their opinions about playing big time college football. Roland, a defensive back from Virginia Tech, kicked things off by explaining, "People have no idea how difficult it really is." After challenging him that some people would respond by saying, "Hey these athletes receive well over $100,000 in free education, what in the world are they complaining about? If all you're doing is trying to get by then you are throwing away a valuable opportunity." At this point the conversation began to take on a life of its own. Moe, Matt, and Tierre were jockeying to get a word in, but Roland beat them to punch, "It ain't that we only trying to get by, it's just that we don't have enough energy, we can't put our all into class, because when we put our all into class, we slackin' on the football field, which is our main focus for being there, without football a lot of people wouldn't have been in school." Each man nodded in agreement suggesting that Roland was offering a realistic view of big time football at Virginia Tech, University of Nebraska, and the University of Arkansas.

Many factors may have an impact on a college student's academic progress, yet these athletes believe the university makes it difficult for them to succeed. Over ninety minutes of the conversation focused on the pressure to perform in the classroom and on the playing field. When pressed for specific examples, Tierre made the point of emphasizing that in the spring of his freshman year a new coaching staff took over and, "put pressure on us to spend 50-60 hours a week doing football related stuff, if they could get away with it." But it was Moe who really challenged me to reexamine how some athletes define their situations. As the conversation

shifted to a question about the rules regarding maintaining academic eligibility, Moe blurted out, "C's get degrees." Within seconds the room was filled with chuckles as he continued, "When I left for college my mom said 'C's get degrees.' And I heard some statistics that a 4.0 student ain't always just the smartest people out there. I heard that the B-C range are the smartest people cause they don't really study as much." Roland nodded in agreement, "Yeah, cause they don't have to study as much to get good grades." Before I could probe further, Tierre revisited his earlier comment by suggesting that the off-season demands on his time were even greater than the season. Moe then chimed in, "I can really honestly tell you that I have never read a book in college." Incredulously I asked, "What do you mean?" He then shot back, "Nothing else said. You see I brought this Joe Montana book (lifting the book off the desk), feeling bad cause I never read a book in college." Unsure of what to say next, I finally asked, "How could you go to college and never read a book, they buy books for you don't they?" "YOU DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME" replied Tierre.

Another important factor that shapes how these young men perceive the college athlete role is their interactions with college football coaches and professors. Roland offered a detailed account of a professor who continuously singled out football players for being late to her 8:00 am class even after they explained that their mandatory 6:30 am team workouts prohibited them from arriving on time. In contrast to this belittling experience, Roland explained that professor Nikki Giovanni, American poet and activist, asked five students to describe their typical day on campus, then she requested that a football player to stand up and describe his normal day. Afterwards Roland detailed how Professor Giovanni's gesture helped the group develop a sense of pride and served as motivation to work even harder in her class.

Examples of how far removed the coaches are from the athlete's academic progress were also offered as evidence that eligibility, not grades, served as the true measure of what mattered to the College. Part way through the conversation I tried to summarize what they wanted me to understand by stating, "Basically what you're trying to tell me is that once you sign that scholar…" Roland immediately finished my sentence …"you went to jail." Moe added, "I wouldn't say that you went to jail, I'd say it's more like, you… you're a slave." Tierre jumped in and said, "It's more like boot camp, they own you for the next four or five years. You gotta do whatever they say if you want to play or you'll lose your scholarship. It's that simple."

Matt brought the discussion back into focus when he delivered this statement in a cerebral tone, "I just wanted to play football, that's all. I mean yeah it was demanding and all that but all I cared about is (sic) getting a chance to play. I love football and that's what I want to do." Returning to my notes later that evening, I was compelled to search for clues that might offer insight into why, in spite of the nearly insurmountable odds, young athletes so committed to the idea that all they need is a chance. For some, that chance may never come, and for others the chance will evaporate right before their eyes. Yet nothing seems to be able to separate them from keeping the hope alive. Perhaps Matt developed an undying faith from watching his older brother's NFL career get cut short by a devastating knee injury. Or maybe Tierre is driven by some unspoken pressure to continue his family legacy of great athletes. After all he has been anointed as the next in a line of cousins and uncles to play in the NFL. In fact, all the athletes who participate in the Test Football Academy continuously encourage one another with messages such as: *Luck is when hard work meets preparation*, or, *you got to be hungry to play this game*.[51]

[51](Italics were added by the author) These types of message are often printed on t-shirts and distributed by college coaching staff or hung throughout football training facilities.

## Discussion

The media may regularly refer to professional athletes as *playing*[52] football for a living, yet Frey and Eitzen (1991) point out that it is more appropriate to conceive of sport at the highest level of institutionalization as work. My inquiries into the lives of aspiring football athletes suggest their experiences are heavily influenced by the institutional demands of the sport. At varying points in their careers, these athletes are confronted with the challenge of pursuing football as a profession as opposed to playing the game of football primarily for pleasure. Amateur athletes will either acquiesce by approaching the sport as a leisurely activity; however those desiring to play at the highest level will actively embrace the football role by undertaking the norms and values of the institution.

In his ethnographic inquiry into the social structuring of bodily capital and bodily labor through boxing, Wacquant (Pg 315-319, 2004) applies Bourdieu's dispositional theory of action to establish the concept of a *pugilistic habitus* as a means of understanding the initiation into a practice of which the body is at once the seat, the instrument, and the target (Wacquant, Pg 16). To acquire the practical ability embodied in the skilful behavior of a pugilist, Wacquant spent 3 years training at a west side area boxing gym: he served as a corner man, fought in a regional Golden Gloves tournament, and lived amongst poor African Americans in a south Chicago neighborhood. Sociologist Matthew Desmond (2007) followed a similar path of investigation to reconstruct the practical logic of firefighting. In his work "On the Fireline," Desmond focused on the distinction between a general and specific habitus; the former is recognized as a system of dispositions and a way of thinking about and acting in the world that is constituted early in life, while the latter is acquired later in life through education, training, and discipline within

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[52] Warren Sapp, former NFL defensive player of the year in 1999, was often quoted as saying that he "gets paid a king's ransom to play a kid's game."

particular organizations (Desmond, 2007). He suggests that for most crewmembers, class - inflected masculine dispositions were formed during their upbringing in rural America. Desmond then argues that this general country masculine habitus guides how these firefighters understand the world around them while influencing how they codify sameness and differences and how the forest service crafts and amplifies this into a specific firefighting *habitus* that makes workers deployable. In a similar fashion, the ballplayers interviews demonstrate that an *NFL habitus* is formed in aspiring young football athletes as a result of dispositions and skills developed during an upbringing in competitive sports combined with the institutional logic of football.

In Cody Bohler we see a young man who willingly consumes over 10,000 calories each day while lifting thousands of pounds of weights during each workout. When Skip speaks of working the soreness from the previous football season out of Cody's body, the merits of this strategy are never questioned by Cody or his parents. Cody's response suggests that regardless of pain or soreness, he willing submits to Skip's demands. As Tom Bohler indicated during a brief chat, former athletes enthusiastically offer to train Cody because of his work ethic. I rarely saw Cody flinch any time Skip shouted "overtime" or called out that champions win games in the 4$^{th}$ quarter. The interactions between Skip and Cody provide a living example of how the *NFL habitus* becomes ingrained in aspiring athletes. On the subconscious level, Cody is absorbing lessons Skip learned 20 years earlier from his mentors. Test Sports Club is the organizational pulpit from which Skip preaches the sermon of hard work and dedication. The staff, athletes, coaches, scouts, recruiters, family and friends, are just a few of the many organizational components that combine to reproduce within young athletes like Cody patterned responses to the demands and constraints of the sport.

Scenes of Cody working out with his buddy Mike in the Test weight room evoke visions of the Woodlawn Boxing Gym where Wacquant describes the excitement of being caught up in the "collective effervescence" of 35 men busily practicing their craft (Wacquant, Pg 116, 2004). I have repeatedly observed high school athletes at Test feeding off a similar energy while attempting to outshine peers lifting weights or running speed-training drills. Regardless of whether an athlete is a late bloomer or a blue chip prospect, an unwritten code of conduct drives these young men back to the Test facility for rigorous training sessions.

Though football is considered a team sport, the institutionalization of the game has resulted in athletes taking an individual or rationalized approach to pursuing their goals. Cody may express concern over the pressure to selfishly chase his personal goal of earning a scholarship, yet he quickly pushes those doubts aside and gets back to the business of turning his body into a football machine. Likewise, even as Theodore sought to imbue his son with discipline, he was tacitly depositing within Naz the trained capacities necessary to overcome the boredom of working out alone. It is this propensity to train the body that allows Naz to strap on a 20 pound weight vest and run three times a week for the better part of 3 years to the point that it has become second nature.

Focusing on bodily disposition and skill development caused me to search for practical clues on the enactment and construction of *habitus*. One particular statement by Skip Fuller caused me to view the activities taking place at Test in a slightly different light. Skip indicated that it takes 10,000[53] repetitions to correct a bad habit. This helped me begin to understand that Skip was not only attempting to rid these athletes of bad habits by breaking down their every bodily movement, he was also instilling within them the disposition required to become elite

[53] Skip indicated that this training technique was developed based on findings provided by Velocity Sports Performance, who promotes itself as the leader in Nike SPARQ Training.

athletes. Reflecting back on the numerous times I have observed athletes at Test repeatedly running 40 yard sprints, three cone shuffle drills, and training in the weight room it became that clear Skip was preparing their bodies to respond as well oiled machines. In essence he was serving as the organization's agent assigned to develop a bodily schema within the football athlete.

Equally important to the development of an *NFL habitus,* is the mental schema that Skip and other organizational agents help develop within athletes. Nearly every athlete training at Test withdrew from college after their final football game, in order to prepare for the NFL draft. Of the twenty-five athletes I interviewed, six graduated from college, while most others were at least fifteen credits short of graduating. Two of the NFL prospects who did graduate joked about how crazy it was for someone not to graduate if the college was providing a free education, yet the reality is that most of these college athletes were too pre-occupied with making the NFL to focus on graduating. Compared to non-athletes who often consider a college degree as a means to greater job opportunities, many of the athletes in this group approached college as a gateway to professional football.

The desire for national exposure and the economic realities of the game has led many alumni of big time high school and college programs into pressuring school administrators to field winning teams. The responses offered by Moe, Roland, and Tierre that big time college football is synonymous with jail*, slavery, or boot camp* indicates that today's athletes are acutely aware of the emotional and true cost of a football scholarship. Likewise, injury and academic ineligibility represent two of the many obstacles that can potentially curtail one's career. Moe may have summed it up best when he said, "Why do we put up with all this? Because you love the game; it's what you do to make the NFL."

In his study of high school basketball, race, and the pursuit of the American dream, May (Pg 3, 2007) asserts society espouses the belief that irrespective of an individual's beginnings, an equal opportunity exists for social mobility in most American institutions. An underlying principle of May's allegation is the belief that an individual's ability to move up the social ladder is simply a matter of personal work ethic. Upon putting forth his argument, May claims, "That in order for our socio-cultural institutions to be maintained and perpetuated, such deceptions occur systematically." To support his declaration, May invokes Harry Edwards's (1973) observation that the primary function of sport as an institution is in disseminating and reinforcing the values regulating behavior and goal attainment in the United States.

Compared to the unheralded high school athletes in May's work, meritocracy takes on a subtle yet meaningful difference for the elite athletes in my research. May's work is important because it addresses how a group of average high school athletes pursue their dreams of playing in the NBA based on the belief that irrespective of the starting point in life, rising up the ranks of basketball is simply a matter of hard work and determination. Whereas May focuses on high school basketball players who hope to catch the attention of college recruiters, the athletes at Test have been labeled *top collegiate prospect*. Even Cody Bohler, who developed later than the blue chip athletes, received a scholarship offer during of his senior season of high school football. Rather than subscribing in the notion that anyone can succeed on the football field through hard work, elite athlete believe they are pre-destined for a successful athletic career.

Though the concept of meritocracy does play a role in the how of elite athletes view their physical accomplishments, the football players in this study place more emphases on natural endowment, mental toughness, and – to a lesser extent – genetic to explain their path to the NFL. A quote by former NY Giants linebacker Jessie Armstead typifies the mindset of the elite

athletes highlighted in this study. While reflecting on his NFL career, Armstead explains that the difference between him and 95 percent of athletes is that he was born to be a football player. Armstead said that as a late round draft choice in 1993 he scanned the NY Giants draft class then determined that he was the best player in the bunch and was destined for greatness (Schwartz, 2010). For Armstead, NFL success is more about natural selection and respecting his God given talent than it is about societal rewards for working hard. For the athletes who participated in my research, meritocracy is akin to a birthright.

Sport sociologist Jay Coakley (1990) observes, "Sport is created by people interacting, using their skills and interests to make sport into something that meets their interests and needs." Roland, the safety from Virginia Tech, offered an illustration of Coakley's analysis while explaining his future in the sport. "In the unlikely event that the NFL don't work out, I got my degree in real estate management, so I'm prepared. But really, I plan on making it. The degree is there only in the unlikely event that something happens." Clearly, Roland understands that there are no guarantees in football, yet like so many of the athletes at Test, he claims immunity to the possibility of failure. For Roland, football provided a way of getting out of the streets of Washington DC while fulfilling the promise he made to his mother that he would do something with his life after high school. In watching Roland work out it is obvious that he loves playing football, yet the sport also serves an instrumental purpose for him and for many others at Test. Roland indicated that making the NFL would allow him to provide a better life for his daughter, mother, and other family members. Ironically, he is so intent on pursuing his dream of making the NFL that leaving the game and using his degree to secure a job is unthinkable at this point in his career. For Roland and so many others like him at Test, football transcends the traditional meaning of sport, and has become a purpose in life.

For the athletes in this study, meritocracy serves as a framework, which allows them to make sense out of events that occur in the world of football. Goffman (1974) sees frames as principles of organization that define experiences. In his view, frames are assumptions made about what people are seeing in the social world. Scholars argue that frames aid in rendering events or occurrences meaningful for the individual or the collective (Snow et al., 1986). Gonos (1977) suggests frames are laws that fix interaction, while largely operating in the unconscious. When Matt Hewitt vocalizes his need for a chance, it is not a rejection of the basic tenets of meritocracy; rather it signifies a belief in a doctrine that has guided him throughout his career. For athletes like Matt, meritocracy is an ascribed attribute. It is not something that Matt or his brethren consciously spend time focused on earning but rather, it takes on a sort of birth right quality that these athletes are socialized into.

Like many of the athletes at Test, Matt subconsciously understands that hard work and dedication are the baseline requirements to be included in the fraternity of elite athletes. They understand that these qualities alone do not guarantee a spot in the NFL, but so much of who they are has been invested in obtaining this dream, that meritocracy takes on an ascribed attribute. By dissecting Matt's career, we learned that poor high school grades and a stint in junior college could not stop him from securing a spot at a top football program. Playing as an undersized linebacker could not keep him off the field, nor was he deterred when the coach requested that he drop 20 pounds and move back to strong safety before his senior season. Society says that hard work will be rewarded, but in Matt's world, this matters little. The brass ring is his birthright and he will succeed even where others have failed.

By spending time with the athletes at Test Sports Club, I have come to realize that blue chip recruits and late bloomers alike have a profoundly different relationship with meritocracy

then individuals who possess few exceptional athletic skills. Unlike the athletes in Mays' study who only dreamed of being recruited by top colleges, the athletes in this discussion have developed an emotional immune system that guards against anything keeping them from achieving their goals. At this phase of their careers, these athletes do not outright reject the traditional notion of meritocracy; rather, the *NFL habitus* has helped to create a frame that allows them to understand success in relation to their prior achievements. For these athletes, meritocracy is not a reward distributed by society; it is something that rests within the individual. When a challenge confronts Matt he sees it as an opportunity to get better, all he needs is a *chance* to get his foot in the door, and he will do the rest.

Chapter 3
*The Political-Economic Playbook*

The Super Bowl is one of the most spectacular entertainment events I have seen. On Wednesday evening January 28, 2004 I arrived in Houston Texas to experience firsthand the festivities that surround the big game. Over the course of ten days corporate sponsors hosted elaborate parties with big name sports legends and mega stars from the music and entertainment world. Not to be out done by the likes of Maxim Magazine, Budweiser, and other internationally recognized brands, Playboy Magazine hosted a late night gala honoring the class of the 2004 NFL Hall of Fame inductees. Motorola, the global communications giant, saw Super Bowl XXXVIII as the perfect opportunity to connect with fans by showcasing their latest products. The company sponsored *The NFL Experience*, a ten day family friendly event, in which fans used communication devices to advance through a series of NFL inspired athletic events. As the game grew nearer, tens of thousands of people descended on the city to consume Texas barbeque, drink the finest alcohol, and indulge in the local adult entertainment provided by such establishments as *Rick's Sports Cabaret.* By the time Sunday rolled around, I was struck by the high number of corporate types that descended upon Reliant Stadium, the new ultra-modern home of the Houston Texans. With scalpers commanding $2,500-$5,000 per ticket by game time, it was no wonder why the average New England Patriots and Carolina Panthers fans stayed home to catch the big game on television. For good measure, singers Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson preformed their infamous "wardrobe malfunction" incident to ensure that fans at the stadium got their money's worth.

Every few years a debate ensues at various locations across the country as the NFL selection committee gathers to solicit bids to host the Super Bowl. On one side of the debate, NFL owners align with local politicians to convince citizens of the economic fortunes that await

winners of the Super Bowl lottery. In opposition are sports economists and skeptics who argue that very little financial benefit is derived from hosting the nation's most popular sporting event. Invariably, the owners and civic leaders succeed in convincing local taxpayers that the benefits far outweigh the capital expenditures required to secure the winning bid. The tactics used by owners to lure the Super Bowls while lining their pockets with windfall revenues, is a vivid example of why the NFL is the most profitable sports entity in America.

To millions of fans across the globe, the NFL offers an unparalleled rush of adrenaline. Each fall, sports bars across the country overflow with diehard NFL fans clad in $259 customized official team jersey. Other diehards quench their thirst by forming fantasy football leagues. In 2007, more than 14 million people in the U.S. and Canada registered to play fantasy football (Sweet, 2007). Similar to ancient Rome when frantic crowds determined the life or death of gladiators, NFL fantasy football owners value athletes based on touchdowns scored, passes caught, and number of tackles made. In the eyes of the viewing public, NFL athletes are larger than life specimen willing risk life and limb to entertain the masses with brute force and ballerina-like grace.

Contrary to the fans view, the perspective from the owner's box is completely different. The NFL is much more than a professional sport league filled with world class athletes; it is a powerful enterprise that generates nearly $8.5 billion in annual revenues for a small elite group of business moguls. This chapter offers political and economic examination of the most successful sports league in America (Saporito, 2004). To retain this title, the NFL functions as a tightly controlled institution that micromanages every facet of business. Though the business community now looks upon the NFL with envy, it has not always held such a lofty distinction. From 1920 through the mid 1950's the league was on shaky financial ground. A series of

legislative victories combined with several fortuitous events gave rise to a consolidation of power, which in turn, allowed the NFL to manipulate relationship in the field of professional football. As the sole operator of a major professional football league, the NFL is free to negotiate vendor contract and stadium construction deals without consideration of traditional market competition. The league used the same approach to deal with labor negotiations. In fact, the league has historically approached labor as a commodity that is necessary for the production of their entertainment product. In order to uncover the cognitive frames that an NFL athlete uses to understand the world, we must first examine the social structure in which he functions. After conducting a brief analysis of the intuitional, the next chapter takes a closer look at the impact that labor negations has one lives of NFL athletes.

Prior to tackling the labor issues, the following pages describe the role that politics plays in maintaining the NFL's position as the dominant player in major professional football. In effect, this chapter offers a peek at the NFL's political and economic "playbook." Just as coaches develop elaborate offensive and defensive strategies to dominate the competition, the NFL commission and management council has meticulously crafted a playbook to conquer the field of American football. To decode these tactics, I rely on the Political-Cultural theory developed by sociologist Neil Fligstein.

## The Political-Cultural Theory

The Political-Cultural approach to market institutions is an economic sociological model of action in which market participants try to create stable worlds and find social solutions to competition. The analysis also contains a discussion that describes how markets and state governments are intimately linked (Fligstein, 1996). This conceptual view of the social institution includes propositions about how politics work during the three stages of market development: 1) formation, 2) stability, and 3) transformation. At the formation stage, actors in

firms are trying to create a status hierarchy that enforces noncompetitive forms of competition, while political action resembles social movements. In the stable market stage, incumbent firms defend their position against challengers and invaders. And finally, during periods of market transformation, invaders can reintroduce more fluid social movement-like conditions (ibid).

The key insight of the political-cultural theory is that social action takes place in arenas, fields, domains, sectors, or organized social spaces. These fields contain collective actors who try to produce a system of domination in that space. The accomplishment of this task requires the production of a local culture that defines local social relations between actors . Accordingly, major professional football is as a field in which NFL owners work diligently to exercise total control over. The analysis performed throughout this chapter discusses how the NFL culture is crafted to dictate all manner of social relationships, while simultaneously uncovering how independent actors come to understand their positions within those relationships. As a cultural institution, the NFL produces an interpretive framework that allows internal and external agents, along with vendors, and lawmakers to render one another's actions as meaningful. Under the structural arrangement that defines the NFL, the owners are incumbents or collective actors who benefit the most, while athletes and competitive leagues are the challengers that benefit the least.

The theory also argues that once the order between incumbents and challengers has been established, the interactions that take place in the field become "games" where various groups who have more power use the acceptable cultural rules to reproduce their power. Accordingly, this process makes action in fields continuously conflictual and inherently political (Fligstein, 2002). With regards to the NFL, politics plays a critical role in how the owners manage both internal conflicts and external market threats. As a result of legislative maneuvering, the NFL

secured an antitrust exemption to the Sherman Act[54], which has had a significant impact cultural landscape of America football. Since gaining antitrust exemption status, the modern era of football has been defined by the political and cultural influence of the NFL owners. In the next section I offer an abbreviated historical account of the political strategy used by the NFL to secure this precious asset. The following section contains an overview detailing how NFL owners create and reinforce the cultural "rules" of the game to maintain power.

Based on my interpretation of the Political-Cultural Approach, cultural is comprised of three primary elements: a set of principles that organize thought and are used by actors to make sense of their situation (cognitive frames or world views); the routines of practices that actors perform in their day-to-day social relations; and the social relations that constitute fields that may or may not be consciously understood by actors (Fligstein, 1996). Throughout my examination of the NFL, I apply the term culture to encompass the process that management uses to eliminate and co-opting their principal competitors. Culture is also used to describe the system of production that allows the NFL to maintain its position as "incumbent" in the local domain of professional football.

## The Sports Broadcasting Act

The legislative foundation for the concentration of power in the hands of NFL owners can be traced back to 1953, when Judge Allan K. Grim ruled that the league's restriction on telecasts in the home territories of teams playing a home game was pro-competitive (Grim, 1953). In the case, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) filed an antitrust lawsuit seeking an injunction

[54] The Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 was the first measure passed by the U.S. Congress to prohibit trusts. It was named for Senator John Sherman of Ohio, who was a chairman of the Senate finance committee and the Secretary of the Treasury under President Hayes. Several states had passed similar laws, but they were limited to intrastate businesses. The Sherman Antitrust Act was based on the constitutional power of Congress to regulate interstate commerce.

against the continued enforcement of Article X[55] of the NFL's Bylaws. The DOJ argued that Article X was an unreasonable restraint of trade and thus a violation of Section 1 of the Sherman Act (Pelnar, 2007)[56]. Judge Grim ruled against the DOJ determining that relative equality of playing ability was needed to sustain a fan base else wise weaker teams would be driven out of the marketplace and consequentially even the strong teams would fail financially (Grim, 1953). Though the ruling was initially viewed as a victory for the NFL, several years later a new competitor arrived in the marketplace and negotiated the first ever collective broadcast contract.

In 1960, after failing to secure a NFL franchise, Texas millionaires Lamar Hunt and K.S. "Bud" Adams formed a rival league with eight teams. The newly formed American Football league (AFL) presented intense competition to the more established NFL for player personnel, coaches, and spectators. Previous to the AFL arriving on the scene, standard practice dictated that NFL teams negotiate broadcast contracts independently. The AFL operated from a whole different paradigm, in that the owners came together as a single unit to sell media rights. By agreeing to pool television rights, selling them in a single package, then dividing revenues equally among all teams, the upstart league sought to ensure economic stability. The ABC network responded favorably by entering into a multi-year national contract to broadcast the new leagues' games. For the AFL, the exposure to a nationwide television audience was far more valuable than the modest $8.5 million five year contract. Prior to the arrival of the AFL, a

[55] Article X of the NFL's Bylaws prohibited the telecasting of any NFL games into the 'home territory' (generally defined as a 75-mile zone) of a team playing a home game the same day. The league was concerned about the impact of televising games on live attendance. At the time, television rights fees were insignificant relative to ticket and other stadium revenue. Article X, however, also prohibited teams from broadcasting their games in another team's home territory, even if that team was playing an away game (unless permission was received from both teams playing that game).

[56] Section 1. Trusts, etc., in restraint of trade illegal; penalty, of The Sherman Antitrust Act (1890) states: Every contract, combination in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy, in restraint of trade or commerce among the several States, or with foreign nations, is declared to be illegal. Every person who shall make any contract or engage in any combination or conspiracy hereby declared to be illegal shall be deemed guilty of a felony, and, on conviction thereof, shall be punished by fine not exceeding $10,000,000 if a corporation, or, if any other person, $350,000, or by imprisonment not exceeding three years, or by both said punishments, in the discretion of the court.

number of leagues unsuccessfully tried to compete with the NFL. With the rapid growth of TV in the 60's, the AFL gained the validation needed to stand toe to toe with the older more established league (Waldimir, 2006). Upon assessing the potential threat, the NFL quickly moved to alter their antiquated broadcast model of clubs negotiating and retaining revenues for individually.

The AFL-ABC broadcast alliance proved to be a significant financial and legislative challenge for the National Football League. Throughout the 1940's and 1950's, the NFL's patchwork broadcast strategy resulted in low profits and often left teams competing against one another for viewers. For example, in 1959 the mega-market New York Giants received $200,000 in broadcast revenues, while the small-market Green Bay Packers only generated $30,000. Within seven years of Judge Grim's 1953 ruling that allowed the NFL to blackout telecasts, the AFL masterfully leveraged television to challenge for economic supremacy in professional football. In an attempt to outmaneuver the competition, NFL owners entered into an agreement with CBS television upon devising their own revenue sharing plan. As a precautionary measure, the NFL petitioned a federal district court to determine if their version of a collective contract violated the 1953 judgment. Soon after a district court judge declared the contract violated the terms of the 1953 ruling, the NFL petitioned Congress to enact the Sports Broadcasting Act (SBA), which exempted the joint sale of television rights from antitrust laws (Kessler, 2009). Shrewdly, the NFL laid the groundwork for future legislation by seeking an exemption for the various professional sports leagues, not just football.

Unlike Major League Baseball (MLB), which gained a blanket exemption from the antitrust laws through a 1922 Supreme Court ruling, the NFL needed Congressional support to operate as a monopoly in negotiating a collective broadcast agreement. Newly appointed NFL

commissioner, Alvin "Pete" Rozelle, immediately enlisted the help of Baltimore Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom and his many Washington D.C. contacts to win over Congress. According to retired New York Giants General Manager Ernie Accorsi, who began his career working for Rozelle in the league office, Rosenbloom was a big donor in the [Presidential] primaries-a friend of Joe Kennedy" (Yost, 2006). On September 30, 1961, after an unusually short vetting period, President John F. Kennedy virtually rubberstamped the Sports Broadcasting bill into law. Almost overnight, the NFL secured the precious antitrust exemption needed to negotiate collective media contracts (Waldimir, 2006). In passing the legislation, Congress reasoned that the action would bring financial stability to the NFL, while the growing national television audience would benefit by having more cities being able to support football franchises (Kessler, 2009).

Pete Rozelle is often credited for transforming the league from a loosely knit group of small independent owners into a thriving capitalist cartel. By de-emphasizing the individual team owners and replacing them with a single hand of control, Rozelle allowed capital to grow at an alarming rate. Beyond being responsible for creating a huge economic windfall, Rozelle's plan also fostered tremendous political and cultural capital, while simultaneously expanding the fan base. Within the span of four decades the NFL grew from an upstart league consisting of 14 disparate teams to a multi-million dollar stalwart with powerful political ties. Competitive market conditions and a fertile political climate ultimately caused owners to close ranks and protect their investment. Had the owners chosen to retain a loose operating structure in the late 50' and early 60's, it surely would have limited their access to capital and stifled their ability to manage the enterprise.

In addition to convincing owners to negotiate collectively with vendors, Rozelle is also

responsible for helping extend the reach of the NFL's monopoly status. After wide receiver Willard Dewveall played out his contract option with the NFL's Chicago Bears and signed with the AFL's Houston Oilers in 1961, the new league brought about an antitrust lawsuit alleging monopoly and conspiracy involving expansion, television, and player signing. In 1962, the district court ruled against the AFL, which an appeals court later upheld (Pelnar, 2007). Though Rozelle, and the NFL owners, defeated the AFL in a lawsuit that dragged on for nearly four years, they agreed to enter into secret talks that eventually lead to a merger between the two leagues. The AFL's aggressive strategy to offer players lucrative contracts made it increasingly more expensive for NFL owners to retain and attract top talent. In a proactive move to head off any legal challenges, the two leagues sought congressional approval for their proposed merger. Commissioner Rozelle and the AFL leaders understood that eliminating competition for players through merger could have been interpreted as a violation of antitrust laws. They also realized that when one professional league controlled the supply of teams it could have been perceived as creating fewer opportunities for cities that wanted to host football teams. During the Congressional hearings to discuss broadening their antitrust exemption, league representatives offered two commitments to alleviate concerns and gain support for the merger. First, Rozelle pledged to add several new NFL teams over the next few years. Secondly, team owners committed to keep franchises in their existing communities (Slack, 2004).

In October 1966, Congress passed the second provision of the Sports Broadcast Act. Though narrower in scope than the original proviso, this bit of legislation allowed the two leagues to merge without fear of antitrust challenge. This second amendment, which only applied to professional football, extended the SBA to allow members of two or more professional leagues to combine their operation in an expanded single league. In a bit of political wrangling,

Congress also passed legislation that amended the tax laws and allowed professional football leagues to be exempt from federal income tax as 501(c)(6) non-profit organizations. These congressional actions allowed the two leagues to move forward without fear of antitrust challenge. Based on a joint agreement to combine and conduct their affairs, the NFL and AFL were free to merge as members of a single league (U.S.C.CA.N., 1996). In addition to paving the way for an NFL-AFL merger, the amendment offered sufficient protection against future antitrust lawsuits.

## Television revenues

In 2006 the NFL secured the largest television contract in sports history. The league sold packages for Sunday afternoon games to CBS and Fox for nearly $8 billion, with $4.3 billon coming from Fox for NFC games and nearly $3.7million coming from CBS for AFC games. For the right to broadcast every game through the 2010 season, the NFL also entered into a five-year contract worth $3.5 billion with DirecTV. Throw in another eight-year ESPN contract for $8.8 billion dollars and the NFL will rake in $3.75 billion each of the next six seasons. Combined, the four new contracts more than doubles the annual revenues paid out under the previous agreement.

Undoubtedly, these figures would have been mind boggling to former NFL commissioner Burt Bell who, in 1949, worried that television would kill football just as it crippled minor league baseball and boxing, as spectator sports (Rooney, 2008). Instead, television proved to be the catalyst responsible for catapulting the NFL into the position of the most successful sport in America. In 1961, during the early stages of the secret merger talks with the AFL, Commissioner Pete Rozelle methodically went about spreading NFL broadcast rights over the three major networks. His shrewd negotiating tactics left no room for the rival league to gain television exposure, while simultaneously cutting off a viable source of funding (Waldimir,

2006). CBS immediately agreed to purchase national TV broadcasting rights to the 1962 and 1963 seasons for $350,000 per team. This represented an increase of over 50 percent more than the NY Giants made during the 1959 season and almost 12 times what the Packers previously received. For the 1965 season CBS agreed to pay $27.2 million or nearly $2 million per team (Waldimir, 2006). With the new legislation in place, the NFL methodically set out to dominate the professional football market by negotiating a series of new television contracts.

With the Sports Broadcast Act firmly in tow, and the nation's appetite for professional football rapidly increasing, Rozelle masterfully conducted a bidding war for NFL broadcasting rights. Upon entering into the first multi-million NFL broadcasting agreement, the television networks were keenly aware of the necessity to protect their investment by committing the resources needed to promote the game. In a matter of a few short years, the television networks had become both a generous source of revenue for the NFL and a powerful marketing partner. Viewed by his peers as a master tactician, Rozelle increased the NFL's national television contract by 25 percent each of his first few years as commissioner. If any doubts remained about his ability to generate wealth, all doubts quickly subsided as the 1966-67-season TV contract came up for renewal. Prior to the NFL-AFL merger, NBC had committed $36 million for the right to broadcast AFL games for five years. With ABC firmly focused on delivering college football, CBS was the lone broadcaster bidding for the NFL contract, yet Rozelle refused to back off his demands for a two year $37.6 million deal. Rozelle shrewdly announced that if CBS did not accept his terms, the NFL would lease dedicated telephone lines from AT&T and the league would start its own network. Unwilling to risk losing the all-important 18-49 male demographic[57], CBS agreed to remain a valuable NFL broadcast partner (Yost, 2006).

[57] A May 10, 1999 Brandweek magazine article states that the most reliable way to reach the 18-49-year-old make demographic is through televised sports.

The fact that Rozelle oversaw the NFL's meteoric cultural and financial ascendancy is no coincidence. Prior to taking over as commissioner in 1960, Rozelle developed an extensive reputation as a sports marketing professional. His first meaningful business contacts were developed in college where he met Bill Dando who later became the head football coach at the University of Buffalo, and Pierre Salinger, White House Press Secretary for the Kennedy administration. En route to becoming NFL commissioner, Rozelle honed his skills by working in public relations for the Los Angeles Rams of the NFL. Before taking over the Rams operation as General Manager, the young Rozelle gained valuable corporate marketing sponsorship experience working for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. Under the skillful guidance of Commissioner Pete Rozelle, the NFL evolved from fledgling sports league to a burgeoning revenue sharing enterprise. In fact, Art Modell, the former owner of the Cleveland/Baltimore franchise, once paid Rozelle the ultimate compliment in referring to NFL owners as 32 fat-cat Republicans who vote socialist on football (Economist, 2006).

## Protecting and exploiting the Monopoly

After Rozelle successfully guided the NFL through the formation stage of market development, the league enjoyed a period of relative stability. The antitrust exemption legislation granted by the 1961 and 1966 Sports Broadcast Act provided the NFL with nearly unlimited control over major professional football. At various times since 1986, plaintiffs have sued the NFL under Section 2 of the Sherman Act, alleging monopolistic intent or the acquisition of monopoly power by unlawful means. While the courts have permitted plaintiffs to offer evidence about the legislation, and have expressly held that abuse of monopoly power acquired as a result of the legislation is not exempt, they generally have held that evidence about the reasons or motives that led the NFL to seek the legislation is not admissible, and the NFL's

lobby efforts related to the passage of that legislation are immune from antitrust challenges under *Noerr*[58] (Jacobson, 2007).

A landmark case, in which the United States Football League (USFL) brought a lawsuit against the NFL, illustrates how the league utilizes political resources and cultural influence to severely restrict competition in the marketplace. In 1988, the 14-team USFL filed an appeal of judgment after the jury found that defendants (27 NFL teams)[59] had unlawfully monopolized major league professional football in the United States. The appeal followed the highly publicized trial and jury verdict award of $1.00 in damages. On appeal, the USFL claimed that a "litany of erroneous opinions, rulings and instructions" by Judge Peter K. Leisure resulted in a "verdict of confusion" that "sent one of the most egregious violators in the history of the federal antitrust laws on its way with a pat on the back" (Corner, 1988).

At the heart of the case, the USFL alleged that the NFL violated Sections I and II of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, 15 U.S.C._GC_1 and 2 (DOJ, 2009), and the common law (Corner, 1988). In seeking damages of $1.701 billion, the USFL based its claims on predatory tactics such as:

a. The NFL pressured the major networks to abstain from televising USFL games in the spring or fall by threatening not to renew NFL contracts or by assigning unattractive games under existing contracts;
b. Establishing contracts with networks for artificially high fees that preclude the networks from broadcasting USFL games;
c. Seeking to prevent the three major networks from signing a contract for the USFL's inaugural 1983 spring season;
d. Implementation of the so-called "Porter Presentation," designed to conquer and bankrupt the USFL, by co-opting powerful owners, such as Donald Trump and Alfred Taubman, by offering them Franchises; encouraging ABC not to continue USFL broadcasts; targeting important USFL players for signing with the NFL through the such means as the Supplemental Draft and expanding the roster; and attempting to bankrupt the weakest

[58] See, e.g., United States Football League v. NFL, 634 F. Supp. 1155, 1170-71 (S.D.N.Y. 1986), Mid-South Grizzlies, 720 F. 2d at 784-85 & n.7. Part C of Chapter 14 discusses the Noerr immunity.
[59] The USFL brought a lawsuit against 27 of the 28 existing NFL teams. The lawsuit did not included the then Los Angeles Raiders, as owner Al Davis was a major witness for the USFL.

USFL teams by driving up USFL player salaries in order to diminish the leagues size and credibility.

After three seasons of play and nearly $200 million in losses, the USFL determined that the NFL was to blame for its difficulties. Despite ruling that the NFL's unlawful monopolization of professional football had indeed injured the USFL, the jury found that the NFL had neither monopolized a relevant television submarket nor attempted to do so. In a decisive blow against the young league, the jury reasoned that the NFL did not commit any overt act in furtherance of a conspiracy to monopolize, nor did it engage in a conspiracy in restraint of trade. The jury further concluded that the NFL's television contracts were not unreasonable restraints of trade; that the NFL did not control access to the three major television networks; and that the NFL did not interfere with the USFL's ability to obtain a fall television contract or with its spring television contracts. The USFL's common law claims were also rejected.

The USFL's legal battle against the well financed, and politically entrenched NFL, represents a classic Pyrrhic victory, in which the battle was won at a devastating expense. Even in the face of an "unlawful monopoly" conviction, the NFL methodically delivered a crushing defeat to its most formidable challenger since the old American Football League. Undoubtedly, the jury concluded that while the USFL was harmed by the NFL's de facto professional football monopoly, its problems were mainly due to mismanagement. The verdict represents more than a symbolic victory for the NFL, it illustrates how the dominant player in a field uses acceptable cultural rules to centralize and reproduce power. In determining that the USFL was primarily responsible for its own failure, the jury, serving as an agent of the state, granted the NFL nearly unfettered control over the market. Within a twenty-five year period, the NFL succeeded in gaining antitrust exemption status, leveraging the power of television to build a substantial fan base, and warding off major competitive threats via merger and judicial victory.

## Merchandising and Product Licensing

The NFL's quest to dominate the landscape of professional football extends far beyond new leagues competing for consumer attention. The NFL is equally concerned with warding off advances from internal and external threats to authenticate merchandise. In a rare misstep, the NFL was late in recognizing the tremendous revenue opportunity available in the license merchandise market. The situation came to a head in January of 1983 as the Washington Redskins took on the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl XVII. Prior to the game, the Redskins offensive linemen, affectionately known as the Hogs, seized upon the opportunity and created Hogs Incorporated. On the march towards the big game, the opportunistic linemen capitalized on their momentary celebrity standing by selling hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of Hogs merchandise. In attempting to protect their brand, the NFL sought a last minute restraining order directed at preventing street vendors in Los Angeles and Pasadena, where the game was played, Washington D.C. and Miami from selling unlicensed merchandise (Yost, 2006). In rendering his verdict, Judge Charles R. Richey said a restraining order "would appear to invite catastrophe" through "a nightmare of jurisdictional flaws, deprivations of due process and windfall litigation that could endure for years to come." At the time, Judge Richey's decision was a crushing blow given that NFL Properties charged vendors 6.5 percent of the wholesale price to market official merchandise (Associated Press, 1983).

In an ironic twist of fate, the battle with Hogs Inc awakened the NFL to glaring holes in their business operations. Besides not having a process in place to safeguard against the sale of unlicensed merchandise, the league also lost millions from having a woefully inadequate licensing system. After Super Bowl XVII the NFL quickly regrouped and methodically went about cleaning up the marketplace. In what has become a standard business practice, the league regularly seeks and obtains court orders to seize counterfeit merchandise. The 2006 Super Bowl

was no exception, as the league secured the right to open a civil lawsuit against vendors selling phony hats, shirts, and jerseys (Shepardson, 2006). In the twenty-three years between Super Bowl XVII and Super Bowl XL merchandise sales grew from a paltry $13 million for the entire season, to $100-$125 million in Super Bowl products alone (ibid). Burgeoning revenues and court injunctions are examples of the painstaking measures the league implements to exert total control over the market. Since 1983, the NFL has effectively partnered with law enforcement to minimize pilferage. In a coordinated effort that included the Detroit police department and officials from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the NFL claimed that $6 million worth of phony goods were confiscated several days prior to the 2006 Super Bowl (ibid). Accordingly, efforts to rebuild the merchandize business, and aggressively prosecute illegal vendors have paid huge dividends. After taxes and operating expenses, the $3.5 billion merchandise business distributes approximately $4 million to each NFL team annually (Yost, 2006).

In addition to implementing sophisticated security measures, the NFL established NFL Properties (NFLPA), a central properties division designed to coordinate all merchandise licensing efforts. Of all the major sports entities in North America, The NFLP has taken the most aggressive approach to merchandising official licensed products. Over the past decade it has developed more than 30 merchandise programs, including: "NFL Throwback," which features clothing from original or classic teams, and jerseys of Hall of Fame greats. Along with establishing a diverse line of apparel, the NFLP opened and operates a number of retail locations. This move allowed the league to retain royalty fees-well beyond the standard industry rate (Masteralexis, 2004).

In responding to the apparel merchandising snafu of the 1980s, the NFL has also done a masterful job exploiting emerging technology for revenue generation and brand building opportunities. Fantasy Football, the Internet, Personal Digital Assistants (PDA), Smart Phones, and Podcasts are just a few of the many tools used to enhance the customer experience. It should come as no surprise that video games are the established revenue leader in this category. And Madden Football is by far the undisputed king of sports video game universe. Between 1988 and 2005 more than 45 million copies of Madden Football were sold. In fact, the release of "Madden NFL 06" was so successful that it topped 1.7 million units sold during the first week of sale. The twenty-six percent rise over the previous year was the biggest week-one launch in the games history at the time (Morris, 2005). In December 2004, Electronic Arts (EA), creator of Madden NFL; announced a 5 year exclusive licensing agreement with the NFL; and the NFL players union. That agreement effectively eliminated all competition in the NFL licensed football video game business. Though the financial terms of the agreement were never announced, it is believed to be worth somewhere north of $300 million and less than $500 million (ibid). In February 2008, EA announced that it reached an agreement to extend its exclusive licensing relationship. The extension provides EA with continued rights to NFL teams, stadiums and players through the end of the 2012 season, which culminates in February 2013. Again, the financial terms of the new agreements were not disclosed, but given the leagues negotiation history; EA paid a premium to maintain this exclusive relationship (Business Wire, 2008).

## Stadium Subsidies

Prior to concluding this chapter, one final example is offered to highlight how the NFL uses formal laws and informal rules to reproduce their power in the field of football. Over the past two decades, the NFL has experienced a financial windfall resulting from the proliferation of stadium renovation and new construction. Most of the funding for these projects has come

from public sources. Subsidies for these palatial temples were initiated by the federal government, which allowed state and local municipalities to issue tax-exempt bonds, thereby lowing interest on debt and reducing costs for cities and team owners. To gain support for public financing, stadium proponents tout job creation; revenue generation; increased tourism; and the "multiplier effect," an increase in local income that causes still more spending and job creation. Zimbalist and Noll (1997) report that state and local politicians commit more public resources to subsidize sports facilities than tax breaks issued by the federal government. The authors claim that by 1996 state and local governments typically spent $10 million annually on subsidies. In response to the enormous sum of public subsidies collected by wealthy team owners, economists point out that sports stadiums are poor investments for local communities (Siegfried, 2000).

While economists, politicians, community groups, and civic leaders debate over the merits of stadium subsidies, no one questions how attractive the arrangement is for the NFL. In fact, the monopolistic structure of the league allows owners to supply fewer franchise than the number of cities that desire teams. Prior to 1966 amendment of the Sports Broadcasting Act, Congress recognized that a potential bidding war for franchises could break out if the NFL secured the all important antitrust exemption. Though the league conceded that adding four new teams was in the best interest of the game, the demand for additional teams has far outstripped supply. Even with the league expanding to thirty two teams, the mere threat of relocation is enough to hold many cities hostage for more favorable stadium deals. The real "trump card" in this subsidy poker game is the NFL's extensive revenue sharing plan. Given the structure of the league, there is a huge incentive for teams to seek homes that feature expansive revenue opportunities such as: luxury suites, club boxes, elaborate concessions, catering, signage, advertising, theme activities, upscale bars and restaurants, and apartments with a view of the

field (Zimbalist, 1997). According to Zimbalist and Noll (ibid), a new facility can add an additional $30 million annually to an owner's coffers.

The bidding frenzy that swept through St. Louis and Cleveland is indicative of lengths that cities go to in order to attract an NFL franchise. After refusing to commit public funds for stadium financing, both cities agreed to pay substantially more to attract new teams than what they initially offered old ones to stay put. In 1987, the Cardinals flew the coop for Phoenix, Arizona after St. Louis refused to pay $120 million towards a new stadium. Losing professional football caused such uproar that within three year, voters agreed to spend $280 million for a new facility-even before they secured NFL team. A similar situation befell former Cleveland Browns owner, Art Modell, who decided that Baltimore was a great place to relocate. Baltimore offered Modell a deal he truly could not refuse: a 30 year rent free lease in a brand new stadium plus a $50 million cash relocation bonus. City leaders also agreed to grant the team a 10 percent management fee for concerts and other non-football events hosted at the stadium. Shortly after losing their beloved Browns to Baltimore, Cleveland decided to tear down the old Municipal Stadium and build a state-of-the-art facility for $290 million. After securing a new expansion franchise, the city offered a generous 30-year lease, which includes revenues from all stadium rentals. The new tenant agreed to pays for all maintenance and operations, but receives an exemption from paying property taxes. In response to learning about the terms of the deal, Modell glibly stated, "If they gave me half of what they're doing now, I'd still be in Cleveland" (Yost, 2006). Given the completive advantages secured with their antitrust exemptions, NFL teams have exploited their position as the dominate player in the marketplace. As a result, teams have been free to systematically carve out stadium deals similar to the Cardinals and the Browns.

## Discussion

David Meggysey, former St. Louis Cardinal and former director of the NFL Players Association, offers the following explanations of the courts position regarding the NFL's antitrust exemptions:

> The courts have understood the special nature of sports leagues: that there exists a need for joint and cooperative activities among league members in order to put on the games. Recognizing this special need, indigenous to sports leagues, the federal courts have liberally applied the Sherman antitrust principles by holding that professional sports leagues activities will be subject to and analyzed within the antitrust statue's Rule of Reason as opposed to the per se rules of the Sherman Act. Activities that would be blatantly anti-competitive in any other industry, a group boycott for example, represents a violation of the Sherman antitrust laws on the face of it-what is called a per se violation. In the case of professional sports leagues, such practices would be subject to Sherman's Rule of Reason (Meggysey, 1986).

Meggysey further points out that historically the major objective of the NFL has been twofold: a) rationalize operations through eliminating competition among franchise owners for players' services; and b) protect markets by freezing out competing professional sports leagues from entering second-tier metropolitan markets (ibid). Meggysey's synthesis underscores the benefit of using the Political-Cultural Approach to examine the NFL. In a departure from neoclassical economics, which rarely considers the affects of politics or culture on the market, Fligstein's theory emphasizes that economic behavior is structured by rules, regulations, and governance structures that are politically determined (Avner, 2003).

As the dominant player in the field, the NFL has succeeded in producing a culture that specifically defines the social relations between the owners and athletes. The foundation for that culture took root in 1935, when Bert Bell, the initial owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, proposed that the league share revenues among all teams. Speaking at the league meeting, Bell reasoned that professional football would never survive unless owners agreed to share ticket revenues and create a system whereby each team would have an even chance to bid for talent against one

another (Fligstein, 1996). Bell's theory of spreading talent around to make games more competitive led to what was eventually known as a "draft" of the best available college seniors. The innovative revenue plan combined with the draft system set in motion an ideology that still permeates throughout the NFL today.

The NFL truly came of age after the passage of the 1966 SBA, which paved the way for a consolidation of power in the market space. During the post 1966 modern era of professional football, the NFL has methodically transformed into an all encompassing cultural institution. In the wake of the new legislation, vendors who wanted access to the lucrative professional football market were forced to negotiate with Pete Rozelle. As a result of the consolidation plan ABC, NBC, and CBS willingly forked over millions for a piece of the NFL action. The negotiation with EA Sports is a further example of how, as the sole market entity, the NFL continues to dictate social relations. Today, consumers, vendors and athletes must pay homage to the NFL in order to gain entrance into the kingdom of professional football. Once Reebok International decided to break into the professional football market, they immediately sought the NFL's stamp of approval. The league has successfully minimized an athlete's ability to monetarily capitalize on his professional status. Even the most popular athlete will someday fade into obscurity. For corporate America, the real value is derived from being a merchandiser of authentic NFL license products. Kids all across America may want to run like Hall of Fame running back Emmitt Smith, or throw touchdown passes like Super bowl MVP Tom Brady, but the NFL holds the key to realizing those dreams.

# Chapter 4
## *The NFL Labor Market*

In May of 2008 NFL owners unanimously voted to terminate the current labor agreement with the players union in 2011. During the announcement, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell stated, "The agreement isn't working, and we're looking to get a more fair and equitable deal" (Associated Press, 2008). The 2006 Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), which was scheduled to expire in 2013, contains an option that allows either side to terminate after the 2010 season. For nearly a year prior to the decision to terminate, league officials and team owners have expressed misgivings regarding the existing agreement. In fact, several owners who helped push through the 2006 CBA note that while the previous contract may have been too beneficial to the owners, the current agreement is too much in favor of the players (nfl.com, 2008). For the owners, the main point of contention centers on the $5.5 billion committed to player compensation, which represents 59.5% of the league's $8.5 billion annual revenues. Along with seeking a more favorable revenue sharing plan, the owners are also pushing for the adoption of a system that distributes a higher percentage of player salaries to veterans and less to unproven rookies, which owners claim is a problem in the current agreement (Associated Press, 2008). In response to the owners' actions, former Executive Director of the NFLPA Gene Upshaw concluded, "All this means is that we will have football now until 2010. If we can't reach agreement by 2010, then we go to no man's land." Upshaw added, "March 2010, that's what we see as the realistic deadline. I'm not going to sell the players on a cap again. Once we go through the cap, why should we agree to it again" (nfl.com, 2008)?

Beyond the obvious economic considerations, the impending labor clash between the player union and the NFL Management Council (NFLMC) presents a number of important questions. After nearly ninety seasons of professional football, why are the owners and the

players still at odds over labor relations? What does either side stand to gain or lose during the upcoming labor negotiations? In this chapter I focus on uncovering how retired NFL athletes are affected by collective bargaining agreement. What resources or benefits are available to athletes during retirement? What responsibility does the NFL and the NFLPA have to the players during retirement? Equally important to this discussion is uncovering management's philosophical approach to protecting their economic interest when negotiating with labor. Granovetter (2001) reminds us that while the assumption of rational action or instrumental behavior is a good place to start; sociability, approval, status, and power are equally important factors that determine economic motivation. Conducting an historical analysis of the relationship between management and labor is important since the outcome of the 2011 collective bargaining negotiations will determine how billions of dollars in annual revenue and benefits are distributed among former, present and future NFL athletes.

## Internal Strife

After nearly 13 years of relative peace, the NFL and NFLPA are once again on the verge of a contentious labor dispute. When the six-year CBA extension and revenue sharing plan was signed in 2006 it was considered a stunning win for the NFLPA (Forbes, 2007). The eleventh hour compromise came about when 30 of 32 team owners agreed to dedicate a higher proportion of total revenues to player costs. Union negotiators reasoned, any financial schism between big market and small market teams could eventually threaten the competitive balance therefore greater revenue sharing among teams was necessary for teams to be able to afford higher player cost (Yost, 2006). Since the signing to the 2006 agreement the owners now contend that 60% of the gross revenue is too high to commit towards player salaries. The NFLPA responded by asserting it will reject any CBA proposal containing a salary cap provision. Now that the NFLPA has succeeded in participating in every revenue source from broadcasting rights to

luxury suite sales, the owners appear ready to fight and reclaim a portion of the revenues they once enjoyed.

If an ensuing battle does take place, what will it mean to the future of NFL labor relations? Of course it is too early to know what will happen, but the question does provide an opportunity to examine the claims presented by Edward Garvey, former Executive Director of the NFLPA. In 1971 Garvey wrote, "The history of professional team sports in the U.S. is a story of exploitation of gifted athletes by a few wealthy people who call themselves *owners*. For over a century they have considered the employee-athletes chattel to be owned, sold, traded, suspended or fired at their whim." Garvey (1971) concludes his thoughts by issuing a challenge to professional athletes, "If all athletes work together, they have a chance to eliminate the draft, the option-reserve-compensation system, and gain real dignity and a fair share of the revenues. If they remain separate, divided, and aloof to the problems faced by fellow athletes, the reserve system of the 1940s will be re-imposed by the conglomerates."

Nearly forty years after Garvey issued his challenge it appears NFL athletes still have a long way to go in solidifying a unified front in their labor struggles. A contemporary example of the struggles that continue to plague the union is the retired players' lengthy battle for increased disability benefits. In 2007 former Chicago Bears Coach Mike Ditka and fellow Hall of Fame inductee Gale Sayers testified before the U.S Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation regarding difficulties confronting retired athletes seeking disability benefits. In response to Ditka's testimony, Upshaw was quoted as saying, "The bottom line is I don't work for them [retired players], they don't hire me and they can't fire me. They can complain about me all day long. They can have their opinion. But the active players have the vote. That's who pays my salary" (Schaal, 2007). Lanny Davis, crisis communication specialist for the players

union, also questions why Ditka selectively attacked Mr. Upshaw and the NFLPA while giving the NFL a free pass (ibid). In Garvey's view, the public feud between Ditka and Upshaw illustrates how competing interests among athletes undermines the effectiveness of the NFL Players Union. This example also offers clues into how management prospers when athletes remain divided in their struggle to eradicate labor exploitation. As the NFLPA fights with retired athletes over disability benefits, it must also gear up for a lengthy battle with owners over a new collective bargaining agreement. On the other side of the bargaining table, the NFL is singularly focused on increasing its monopolistic and monopsony power. Stated in more simplistic terms, NFL owners are driven by the desire to maintain tight control over labor in order to maximize revenues.

## Management vs. Labor

Latham and Stewart (1981) are credited with conducting one of the few empirical examinations focused on the managerial objectives of the National Football League. The authors point to the lack of research in this area partly as function of teams being suspicious of academic researchers combined with a fear of unfavorable publicity as possible factors that contribute to an unwillingness to cooperate in these types of studies. In an attempt to broaden the scope of the organizational investigation identified by Latham and Stewart, this chapter focuses on the labor relationship between the NFL athlete and his employer. To provide context for this investigation, a brief overview of rulings in the Circuit Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court is required.

Rather than viewing the league as 32 autonomous entities, I adopt Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist's dissenting opinion from the denial of certiorari in the 1982 trial; National Football League v. North American Soccer League. In his brief Justice Rehnquist indicates that sports leagues are single entities, "'individual [sports] [teams] are [the league's] raw material,'"

necessary, interdependent elements that could not survive on their own. Justice Rehnquist contends "NFL teams rarely compete in the marketplace" and acknowledges the league structure is "a matter of necessity" (Grow: 2006).[60] The Justice further notes the NFL is a joint venture, which produces a product (professional football) that each of its teams could not produce independently; it competes with other sports and other forms of entertainment in the entertainment market (Renquist, 1982).[61] By viewing the league as a collective institution it becomes possible to shed light on those forces and activities that shape the experiences of the NFL athlete (Devault: 2006).

Prior to dissecting the underlying assumptions implicit in Justice Rehnquist's dissenting position, I must first acknowledge that counter arguments have found favor in the courts on several occasions. In two separate antitrust actions filed against the NFL (Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum Commission v. NFL[62], and North American Soccer League v. NFL)[63], courts ruled that teams were separate entities capable of conspiring to violate section I of the Sherman Act[64] (Grauer, 1983). According to Grauer (ibid), both courts erred in rendering such a decision. In siding with Rehnquist, Grauer reasons that if teams act as separate entities in instances such as player-restraint cases,[65] they must be considered separate entities in all their actions. The key issue before the courts in such cases is competition, which in Section I of the Sherman Act rests on the premise that the unrestrained interaction of competitive forces will

[60] Grow, Nathaniel. 2006. "There's no "I" in "league": professional sports leagues and the single entity defense." *Michigan Law Review*.
[61] U.S. Supreme Court. National Football League v. North American Soccer League, 459 U.S. 1074 (1982) 74 L.Ed.2d 639 459 U.S. 1074
[62] 519 F. Supp. 581 (C.D. Cal 1981), appeal docketed, No. 82-5572 (9th Cir. June 14, 1982).
[63] 670 F. 2d 1249 (2d Cir.), cert denied, 103 S. Ct. 499 (1982).
[64] Section I of the Sherman Act provides a pertinent part: "Every contract, combination in the form of trust or otherwise, or conspiracy, in restraint of trade or commerce among the several States, or with foreign nations, is declared to be illegal." 15 U.S.C. § I (1982).
[65] Player restraints include, for example, the NFL draft.

yield the best allocation of economic resources.[66] Yet the definition of competition in sports leagues remains contentious. The professional sports industry in America is atypical because teams within a league are not seen as competitors in a traditional sense since they want each other to succeed financially. For the NFL, the controversy generally centers on the question of free agency restrictions with regards to labor. Bartok (1991) claims that because any restraint on free agency necessarily inhibits some player movement the restrictions always will be characterized as anticompetitive. Rather than belaboring the merits of either side of the debate, I contend that either legal interpretation frequently places management at odds with labor over issues involving competition. As with most businesses that adhere to the principles of capitalism, the NFL relies upon its political, financial, and cultural capital to maximize profits and maintain its competitive position.

## A history of Conflict

Initially the NFL utilized a system known as the reserve rule, which indefinitely bound an athlete to a specific team (Bartok, 1991). Under this system every player contract contained a provision stating clubs had the right to renew a players' contract for another year under the same terms as the previous one. The clause became part of the new contract, in effect giving the club the right to renew a players' contract for an additional year in perpetuity. This rule also prevented a player from moving to another team of his own volition. The NFL then progressed to what was referred to as *the One Year Option and the Rozelle Rule.* In 1947 the NFL granted free agency by replacing the reserve clause with the "one year option" rule. This rule provided teams with the same right to renew a contract except that the renewal clause was restricted to a one-time use. In 1962 R.C. Owens became the first player to take advantage of the rule by switching to another team (Beamish, 2003). In an attempt to avoid unrestricted free agency the

[66] Northern Pac. Ry. Co. v. United States, 356 U.S 1, 4-5 (1958).

owners proposed and the NFLPA agreed to make the "Rozelle Rule" part of the new collective bargaining agreement (NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement, 1977). The new rule, adopted in 1963, allowed commissioner Rozelle to award compensation from the team signing the free agent to the team losing the player at his discretion, unless the two teams reached a prior agreement regarding compensation (NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement, 1963).

1976 brought about the NFLPA's first antitrust lawsuit concerning free agent restrictions. In Mackey v. NFL, the Eighth Circuit Court held that the *Rozelle Rule* violated Section I of the Sherman Act as an unreasonable restraint on trade.[67] According to legal scholar Richard E. Bartok (1991) the court recognized the owners had a legitimate need to maintain competitive balance in the NFL, but concluded that even if restriction enhanced competitive balance, the *Rozelle Rule* was too restrictive to serve any legitimate purpose. As part of a settlement in the Mackey case, the owners and the NFLPA agreed to new forms of free agency restrictions that became part of the 1977 CBA. The 1977 agreement stipulated that the free agent's team possessed a right of first refusal, which allowed it to match an interested clubs offer and retain its own player.[68] The agreement also included a compensation scheme that allowed for the team signing a free agent to compensate the team losing a player with draft choices; the number and level of which depended on the free agent's years in the league and his new salary.

Though both sides had reached the agreement, fifteen players listed as parties in the Mackey case objected to the compensation scheme and right of first refusal included in the new CBA.[69] The athletes argued that the proposal failed to address the defects of the *Rozelle Rule*. Upon court review, the new agreement was approved based on the reasoning that it met the

[67] 543 F.2d. 606, 609 (8th Cir. 1976).
[68] 1977 agreement could not be located, but the provision was similarly included in the 1982 contract.
[69] Alexander v. NFL, 1977-2 Trade Cas. (CCH) ¶ 61,730, at 72,998 (D. Minn. 1977), aff'd sub nom. Reynolds v. NFL, 584 F.2d 280 (8th Cir. 1978).

criteria of a valid class action settlement. In his examination of the NFL free agency restrictions, Bartok (1991) concludes "In approving the settlement, the court was not required to consider weather every provision of the plan would be reasonable under the Sherman Act or immune by reason of the labor exemption. Therefore, the court's approval is not determinative of whether these restrictions violate the Sherman Act." As a result of the rulings, the provisions were included in the CBA of 1977 and 1982 with a change in the compensation system contained in the later primarily to adjust for inflation.[70]

In an article designed to examine the scope of the labor exemptions in professional sports, Professor Lock (1989) explains that in each of these early cases the NFL argued that the unique nature of professional sports precluded the application of the *per se*[71] standard of the Sherman Act, and that the restraints were reasonable under the rule of reason.[72] In the eyes of the owners and the NFL management council, economic viability depends upon controlling the movement of players. Unlike other forms of business, profitability in professional sports rests upon the unpredictable outcome of individual games and championship races. Thus, the absence of restricted player movement would presumably steer the best players towards the largest markets and the most successful teams. Movement, the owners reasoned, would ultimately strengthen certain teams while undermining fan interest and revenues. Lock (ibid) points out that ownerships persistently argues to the courts that the restrictions on movement were not intended to injure players, but rather to sustain a viable league. Ownership views the

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[70] A player had to complete at least three years of NFL service to be eligible for free agency. His team was required to respond within seven days of receiving the offer sheet; otherwise the player was free to sign with the offering team.

71 In the years following the enactment of the Sherman Act, the Supreme Court interpreted the general language of section 1 to ban only unreasonable restraints of trade. The Court, therefore, has adopted two standards under which to analyze the reasonableness of a particular restraint of trade: the rule of reason and the per se rule.

[72] See, e.g., Mackey v. NFL, 407 F. Supp. 1000, 1002 (D. Minn. 1976) (NFL defends Rozelle Rule as reasonable restraint on trade) modified, 543 F.2d 606 (8th Cir. 1976), cert. denied, 434 U.S. 801 (1977); see also J. WEISTART & C. LOWELL, THE LAW OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS 594-95 (1979) (reviewing arguments for and against per se antitrust liability in sports industry).

competitive model that exists in other industries as neither desirable nor feasible in the professional sports industry since teams are not economic competitors. Ergo, the free market would destroy a professional sports league.

On September 21, 1982 the NFLPA went on strike for 57 days, during which time no games were played. Among the concessions sought by the players was a demand for 55 percent of the gross revenues (Boyle, 1982). According to Ed Garvey (1989), the former NFLPA Executive Director, management had a much more difficult time dividing the union in 1982 because the NFLPA's strategy was to demand money for all players. Instead of relying on the untested theory of free agency and trickle down economics, the players association convinced athletes that severance pay, insurance pension, and a wage scale were needed. According to Garvey (ibid), management dominated the 1974 labor negotiations through the use of "raw power, some illegal actions, and superior resources." Garvey then claims management broke the union in 1974 by taking the position that the league was fighting to protect the reserve system (ibid).

In 1987 labor and management found themselves at loggerheads once again over the compensation restrictions contained in the 1982 CBA. Labor's objective at the bargaining table was to provide veteran players with the realistic opportunity for free agency by eliminating the compensation restriction contained in the 1982 agreement. The NFLMC (NFL Management Council) refused to budge from the belief that it retained the right of first refusal/compensation provisions contained in the previous agreement. This impasse in negotiations caused the NFLPA to declare a strike during the season in October of the 1987. Unlike the 1982 strike, the owners received advance payments to broadcast games and therefore decided to field teams comprised largely of replacement players. The NFLPA suffered a second blow when 89 players crossed the

picket line and went back to work fearing that the owners would cut off their annuity benefits. The union's failure to set up a strike fund, dwindling fan support, the networks decision to televise games featuring "scabs," and cracks in union support, convinced the NFLPA to end the strike on October 15. Eventually, leadership within the NFLPA concluded that collective bargaining was impossible with a monopoly intent on placing an inferior product on the field (NFLPA.com, 2010). Within hours of ending the strike, the NFLPA filed an antitrust lawsuit in federal court; challenging the NFL owners' intent to continue applying the first right of refusal/compensation system and other restrictions on players even though the previous agreement had expired (Powell v. NFL, 1987).

> In late January of 1988, presiding Judge David Doty sided with the NFLPA in ruling that the 1987 labor impasse had ended any exemption the owners would have for the continuation of their restrictive practices under the antitrust laws (Murphy, 2008). Twenty three months later the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned Judge Doty's view and found that the restraints in Powell "were exempted from antitrust scrutiny as the exemption survived impasse (Powell v. NFL, 888 F.2d 559 8th Cir, 1989).

As a result of the Powell case, the NFLPA persuaded its members to decertify the union by revoking its or anyone else's authority to engage in collective bargaining on their behalf. Upon collecting the necessary votes, the NFLPA informed the Department of Labor of its intent to terminate its status. The stage was then set for a series of cases filed against the NFL[73], each of which was paid for by the purportedly defunct NFLPA. Rather than wait on the judicial system to untangle the numerous lawsuits, both parties attempted to enter into a new bargaining agreement. Though a good faith showing was made by both parties, under the labor laws the decertified NFLPA could not represent the players unless it was re-certified. Because the non-statutory exemption would have been activated, an agreement first had to be reached that would properly re-certified the union. The NFL agreed to recognize the existence of the non-statutory

73 McNeil v National Football League,1992-2 Trade Cas.(CCH) ¶69,982 (D. Minn. 1992), Jackson v. National Football League, 802 F. Supp. 226 (D. Minn. 1992), White v. National Football League, 822 F. Supp. 1389 (D. Minn. 1993).

exemption for the term of the agreement while stating that no antitrust claim could be filed after expiration until the parties reached impasse or six months has passed, whichever came later. Once both parties settled on all the necessary conditions, the league then had to agree not to assert any antitrust exemption defense based on any claim that the decertification was a sham.

While the legal battle over decertification and antitrust labor litigation ensued, the NFLPA rejected a modified system of free agency proposed by the NFLMC in late 1988. As a result, the owners unilaterally decided to impose their version of a modified system for the 1989-1990 season referred to as Plan B free agency (George, 1992). Under the new plan owners were required to protect thirty-seven players from the forty-seven-man roster.[74] Each protected player was subject to the same rules of compensation under the 1982 agreement including the first right of refusal clause. No compensation of any kind was required for remaining unprotected players, nor did the first right of refusal rule apply, thereby allowing this group to become unrestricted free agents from February 1 until April 1 (ibid). The rights of the unprotected players who did not sign with a new team by April 1 reverted back to the team that failed to protect the player. During the prescribed period an unprecedented number of unrestricted free agents changed teams.[75] The NFLPA charged that stars and average players faced the same restrictions that existed before the new plan since no player movement was recorded among protected players. Court documents from the Powell case indicated that none of the top thirty-seven players on each team had the opportunity to establish his worth on the open market. Of the remaining 619 players left unprotected, other teams signed 229 with only 149 under contract at the start of the season (Powell v. NFL, 1989).

[74] Injuries could increase the over all number of players a team had under contract beyond 47, but only 47 could be on the active roster at any given time.
[75] Between the prescribed time period 229 of the 619 unconditional free agents changed teams in 1986.

The first right of refusal/compensation system and the Plan B system have been categorized as modified versions of the old *Rozelle Rule* (Locke, 1989). Implemented after the courts ruled the *Rozelle Rule* violated the Sherman Act, the 1982 compensation system was supposed to provide free agency for athletes by eliminating the commissioners' discretion clause. The provision eventually proved to be more restrictive than the older system since less player movement occurred during its five year existence. Whereas one player changed teams as a free agent under the 1977 CBA, not a single athlete changed teams between 1982 and 1987 under the first right of refusal/compensation scheme (Locke, 1989).

Both Mackey and Powell marked significant milestones in the NFLPA's battle for free agency. In the early years the NFLPA was too weak to resist the demands of league owners who fought to incorporate restraints such as a player draft and the *Rozelle Rule* into the initial CBA. Also working against the union was the fact the *Rozelle Rule* went into effect five years prior to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) recognition of the NFLPA as the exclusive bargaining representative for NFL players (Mackey, 1976). Prior to Mackey, the powerful and well-financed owners had successfully managed to keep the union on their heels for nearly two decades.[76] After analyzing similar restraints under the rule of reasoning in Smith v. Pro Football Inc (D.C Circuit Court, 1978), the courts acknowledged the NFL justification for a player restraint, such as the draft, but concluded those justifications did not require complete insulation from antitrust laws (Lock, 1989). The courts further concluded the NFL applied excessive restraints even though less restrictive alternatives were available and would likely accomplish the same objective.

[76] According to the NFLPA website, the union was first established in 1956. However, the NLRB did not grant the union official status until 1968.

The battle between players and owners took another significant turn with McNeil v. NFL. In the spring of 1990 the decertified NFLPA financed a second lawsuit on behalf of Freeman McNeil and seven other NFL players whose contracts had expired. McNeil and the other plaintiffs charged the Plan B free rules restricting free agency violated antitrust laws, which in turn provided legal grounds to sue since the union no longer represented them (NFLPA, 2008). In response, the NFL charged that decertification was nothing more then a ploy to circumvent the Powell appellate ruling since the NFLPA essentially functioned as a union. According the NFLplayers.com (2008), the NFL then attempted to severely limit the organizations' ability to finance any court battles by undermining the NFLPA's Group Licensing Authorization (GLA). Realizing the NFLPA's ability to finance further litigation hinged on the players continued support of the union backed GLA, the league spent in excess of $30 million in direct payments to players for group licensing rights from 1990 to 1992 (ibid). As a large number of stars began defecting for the new NFL Properties deal, the courts handed down several important decisions. First, the NFLPA earned a significant victory in Powell v. NFL IV (Wise and Meyer, 1997). Secondly, the 1991 ruling that decertification had nullified the restraints of the CBA meant the NFL was no longer exempt from antitrust laws. Lastly, a NLRB judge ruled that the owners violated labor laws by refusing to allow striking players to return for the third "scab" game during the 1987 strike. Even though the owners elected to appeal the verdict to the full National Labor Relations Board rather than pay $19 million to 1,400 players affected by the lockout, these verdicts set the tone for the completion of the McNeil trial.

On September 2, 1992 a jury of 8 women determined that the Plan B system was more restrictive than necessary and therefore violated antitrust laws. The jury awarded damages of $543,000 to four of the eight plaintiffs, which tripled under antitrust law for a total of $1,629,000

(George, 1992). After five years without a CBA the NFLPA had strung together a number of antitrust court victories.[77]Two of these victories, a $30 million verdict in the 1989 developmental squad case Brown v. NFL, and the 1992 class action antitrust suit filed on behalf of Philadelphia Eagles defensive end Reggie White threatened the leagues entire salary cap system. As a result, lawyers for the NFLPA felt it had finally forced the owners to discuss all the major issues: free agency, the salary cap, and even the abolition of the draft. Lawyers on the owner side took the position that loses in the McNeil and Jackson cases only meant Plan B could not continue in its present form and that another right-of-refusal system was still possible. The NFLPA countered this claim by seeking financial retribution for all players damaged under the Plan B system. Rather than duke it out in court, settlement talks began in November of 1992, which culminated in the form of a new Collective Bargaining agreement in January of 1993. The new CBA finally recognized free agency with two significant caveats: a salary cap would take effect in 1994, and a new refusal-compensation designation would be enacted. A team could now take top rated unrestricted free agents completely off the free agent market by designating one player on their roster with the franchise tag and offering him a one-year contract with a modest raise (Tanier, 2007). This compromise did not offer the complete free agency sought by the players association, but one right-of-refusal player per team was much better than 37 under the Plan B system. The salary cap appeased owners who were concerned with preventing top players salaries from escalating sharply as they had in baseball and basketball.

With the antitrust issues resolved by litigation settlement, the NFPA went about the business of gaining re-certification as a union. In early 1993 the NFLPA executive committee and the Board of Representatives voted to obtain authorization from the players and gain certification. Upon a majority of players offering their support, the National Labor Relations

[77] The NFLPA also earned verdicts in Jackson v. NFL and Brown v. NFL.

Board certified the NFLPA's status in March of 1993 (NFLPA, 2010). After disbanding nearly four years earlier, the union finally regained the right to represent the players. The 1974 strike for free agency and the 1982 work stoppage seeking a percentage of league earnings brought about a major breakthrough for the NFLPA in the form of the 1993 CBA. As a result of the 1993 settlement, athletes who participated in the 1987 strike received back pay checks plus 60% interest in November 1994. Though only a handful of players from the 1987 strike remained in the league five years after the strike, the players association claims 1993 agreement resulted in all active and non-active player pensions retroactively increased by 40% (nflplayers.com, 2010). The 1993 CBA also retroactively provided pensions for athletes who played before 1959. Lastly, the White vs. NFL court case brought about a settlement that distributed $110 million in damages to athlete who played from 1989 onward. After decades of court battles, the NFLPA boasts the CBA was extended without major revisions several times between 1993 and 2003. In 2006 the NFLPA and the NFLMC finally ratified the CBA to include the current player annuity plan, salary guarantees for players with five-year or more of service, and significantly increased minimum salaries (ibid).

## The Collective Bargaining Agreement:

No doubt the hard fought victory by the NFLPA is a significant achievement. But questions still persist regarding inadequate health and disability benefits, and player pensions. Just as pieces in a chess game are imbued with different levels of power, the NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement distributes player benefits unequally. The CBA contains a salary cap and other compensation restrictions,[78] and minimum salary benefits,[79] which suppresses an athlete's

[78] The NFL's cap is a so-called "hard cap" (which no team can exceed for any reason under penalty from the league), and a hard salary floor (a minimum team payroll that no team can drop beneath for any reason). Both the cap and the floor are adjusted annually based on the change in the league's revenues. The cap is based on income that the teams earn during a League Year. Originally that "pot" was limited to what was known as Defined Gross Revenues (DGR), which consisted of the money earned from the national television contract, ticket sales, and NFL

market value during contract negotiations. An example of this phenomenon is found in the case of former Boston College quarterback Matt Ryan. As a highly sought after commodity, Ryan's agent successfully negotiated a record braking $72 million contract that contained $34.5 million in guaranteed bonuses. Despite making headlines for the size of his contract as the first player selected in the 2008 draft, Ryan possessed the leverage few NFL athletes ever obtain. In 2009 the Atlanta Falcon payroll equaled $95,492,000 million, but Ryan's salary accounted for 10.5 percent of the team's total payroll. As the Ryan case clearly points out, the CBA pits athletes against one another with regards to securing the largest contract possible. To emphasize this point in a slightly different manner, I turn to the Washington Redskins for another example. In 2007 twenty three members of the Redskins received eighty five of the team's $123 million payroll leaving thirty six athletes to divide up the remaining fifteen percent.

Other obstacles created by the CBA that significantly affect how athletes fare during retirement is the mandatory league draft, the Entering Player Pool and Rookie Allocation system, and non-guaranteed salaries. Article XVI of the 2006 Collective Bargaining Agreement declares there shall be an Annual Selection Meeting (College Draft) each league year of the agreement, and that no player shall be employed in the NFL until he has been eligible for selection in a draft (Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2006). The Entering Player Pool was created to limit the total amount of salary NFL clubs may commit to sign drafted rookies. A second condition of the Entering Player Pool is the Rookie Allocation clause, which is calculated based on the number, round, and position of the Club's selection choices in the draft. Additionally, the CBA contains a

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merchandise sales. Under the current agreement the "pot" has been expanded to include total revenue. Thus, other sources of revenue, including such other items as naming rights and local advertising, have been added. As was the case with the original DGR, the expanded revenue is divided equally amongst all 32 teams for purposes of calculating the salary cap.

[79] During the 2007 season, the NFL CBA set the minimum salary for a rookie is $285,000. The minimum salary increases according to the number of years the player has been in the league. The highest minimum salary is $820,000 for players who have been in the league 11 years or more.

restrictive provision that determines the length of rookie contracts. Players selected in the first half of the first round (1 thru 16) may not sign contracts exceeding six years; players selected in the second half of round one (17 thru 32) are prevented from signing longer than five years, and rookie free agents and college players drafted outside of the first round may not enter into contracts that exceed four years. Considering the average NFL career only last 3.3 seasons, this combination of restrictions prohibits athletes from entering the open market at the peak of their income earning potential.

Of the various stipulations outlined in the 2006 CBA, Article XIV (Collective Bargaining Agreement, 2006), the section defining NFL player contracts, is most responsible for distributing financial resources and benefits unequally among athletes. Section 5(*d*) states that during any period the salary cap is in effect NFL teams have the right to terminate any contract if, in the teams opinion, the player being terminated is anticipated to make less of a contribution to the team's ability to compete on the playing field than another player or players whom the team intends to sign, and for whom the team needs to make room. Though the clause prohibits any team from withholding guaranteed consideration, rarely are NFL contracts secured by guaranteed payment. Because NFL teams have the right to release players anytime they see fit, little incentive exists to offer guaranteed contracts. Once an athlete is cut he is no longer entitled to receive the remainder of his salary. If an athlete is released four games into a sixteen game season he is only entitle to receive one quarter of his contract or $250,000. As a result, high draft picks and big name veteran free agents began demanding multi-million dollar bonuses. A signing bonus is the only currency that provides any measure of financial security if an athlete's contract is terminated prematurely. Since a signing bonus is counted against the salary cap, an unintended consequence of this practice is that higher priced veterans risk being replaced by lower-salaried

players. This practice has become known as salary cap manipulation, which allows teams to restock their personnel with rookie free agents or serviceable veterans willing to play for lesser contracts (Mondello and Maxcy, 2009).

The salary cap in combination with the minimum salary restrictions has become a conundrum for many veterans. In 2009 the minimum salary for a rookie with zero years of experience was set at $310,000. The 2006 CBA contains a seven tiered system that escalates based on years of service until it reaches a ceiling of $845,000 for veterans of ten or more seasons. Though the clause was intended to provide veterans with protection against deflating salaries, it serves as another mechanism to squeeze certain veterans out of the league. The minimum salary for a veteran entering his fourth year of service is $620,000, double the rookie minimum. A team can simply gain two players for the same price they must pay a four year veteran. Essentially, the salary cap and minimum salary restriction squeezes a number of veterans out of the league each year to make room for the new crop of first round draft choices. The NFLPA attempted to offset this economic loophole by devising an arrangement so that a veteran player who does not receive any contract bonuses can be paid the veteran minimum of up to $845,000, which in return would only account for about half the amount normally charged against the salary cap. This may seem like a reasonable solution for a veteran seeking to extend his career, but by agreeing not to accept any bonus money the athlete risks losing any or all of his salary if he is cut or injured anytime before the season ends.

The ramifications of the salary cap, minimum salary restrictions and lack of guaranteed contracts extend far beyond the amount of money an athlete earns over the course of his career. Retirement and health benefits are tied to the number of years of service an athlete accrues playing in the NFL. According to the 2006 CBA, the league allocates $65,000 to an annuity for

an athlete who has a total of four or more credited seasons. A player can participate in the NFL Health Reimbursement Account if he earned a credited season for 2006 and has a total of three or more credited seasons in the NFL. An exception exists for those athletes who last played in either 2004 or 2005 and has a total of eight or more credited season. In either case, the nominal account of a player who earned a credited season will be $25,000 with total credits not to exceed $300,000. Under the health insurance benefits program players released after the first game of 2002 continue to receive benefits for forty eight months and players released after the first game of 2005 receive benefits for sixty months. The harsh economic reality is such that the majority of NFL athletes are excluded from receiving extended health and retirement benefits simply because they never earn that all important fourth credited season. Because the NFL labor market is stratified by draft status, higher round draft selections gain greater financial stability retirement benefits. When added together, the 2006 CBA is heavily weighted in the direction of early first round selections like Matt Ryan, who are financially secure prior to playing a single down in the NFL. Even mid-round selections generally sign contracts that include bonuses worth a quarter of a million dollars or more. Comparatively, later round selections and undrafted free agency are paid much less and they are more susceptible to having shorter careers. Though the NFLPA is quick to mention that today's NFL athlete receives a much better compensation package than those of previous generations, labor and management have yet to resolve many of the issues confronting players who experience financial hardship or have careers shortened due to injury.

## Discussion: Moving Forward

In his book 40 Million Dollar Slaves veteran *New York Times* Journalist William Rhoden (2006) picks up on a theme advanced by former Major League Baseball (MLB) star Curt Flood, who famously told sports broadcaster Howard Cosell, "A well paid slave is nonetheless a slave" (Leonard, 2006). In recent years, several noted athletes such as NBA star forward Rasheed

Wallace and NFL All-Pro defensive lineman Warren Sapp joined a chorus of professional ball players espousing similar views.[80] Unlike the litany of praises bestowed upon Floyd decades after his legal battles with MLB (Belth, 2005), Wallace is often labeled as a spoiled self-centered brat (Adelson, 2008). In the four decades since Floyd collected a $100,000 annual salary, claims of unfair labor practices and exploitation by multi-million dollar athletes garner little public support.

A New York Times column entitled, *Freakonomics* (Dubner, 2007) asks a handful of sports insiders to comment on the widely held perception that MLB and NFL athletes have different levels of power since baseball has a stronger union while in football owners wield more power, often at the expense of individual players. Sports consultant and author Vince Gennaro, CNBC sportswriter and commentator Darren Rovell, and Stan Kasten, president of MLB's Washington Nationals imply that under the current set of conditions both athletes and owners are making out reasonably well financially. The article took on a decidedly different tone when sports economist Andrew Zimbalist stated plainly: "Why would anyone ask this question? The owners organize Major League Baseball and the NFL. The owners in each league elect a commissioner who acts in the best interest of the owners, or, at least endeavors to do so. Each league is a monopoly and exercises significant market power by, *inter alia*, extracting significant public subsidies for the construction of facilities" (ibid). Zimbalist's views galvanize the issue raised by Floyd and Rhoden; a labor market exists in which the athlete must bargain with a monopoly cartel for a share of the profits.

[80] Rhoden work points to the absence of black ownership, and the institutionalization of rules to regulate black athletic style as evidence of black athletes' subservience to white interest. For Rhoden, this absence of power leaves black athletes in a continuously precarious position of being kept out, persecuted, and eased out when white owners and management decide they are no longer needed or wanted (Leonard, 2006). Without attempting to minimize the influence that race has on the observations made by Rhoden, I am compelled to question how much power any athlete yields in the NFL.

While examining the athletes' position in the labor process, a key question emerges: *once athletes sell their labor power what do they have left to bargain with*? Curt Flood and Bill Rhoden suggest the modern athlete may be well paid labor, but as high priced slaves they still remain far from the seat of power. NFL owners have successfully developed a mode of production that determines and defines social relations. An NFL athlete's social status and relationship with management, coaches, sports agents, and the players union is largely dictated by his position in the labor process. As Marx (1974) points out, once the instruments of labor begin to employ workers, a fact that arises out social relations, the work process becomes fixed in the hands of management.

According to Hill and Taylor (2008), the most important labor battle for the professional athlete was to eliminate the monopolistic reserve clause and facilitate the higher pay that goes with a competitive environment for a highly skilled worker's services. In the authors view, the advent of free agency has ushered in an era where professional athletes' salaries and share of franchise rents have increased considerably. Now that players have largely won the battle for market-based wage determination, Hill and Taylor contend that owners are now focused on ways to re-circumvent the market. The owner's decision to opt out of the remaining two years of the 2006 CBA appears to support the conclusions offered by Hill and Taylor. Though the salary cap was initially designed to suppress wages, the owners have since decided to reopen an ugly labor dispute in an attempt to reclaim a larger portion of the $8 billion annual revenues. Nearly forty years after former NFLPA executive director Ed Garvey issued a call for solidarity among professional athletes, the challenge confronting NFL athletes has never been bigger. In addition to preparing for a fight over the salary cap, free agency, and the player draft; NFL athletes must

also decide if solidarity includes fighting for increased benefits for future, present, and former athletes.

Chapter 5
*Eye in the sky: Discipline, Control and the Black Body*

What does it mean to play football in the NFL? I presented this question to a group of current and retired NFL athletes. Of the numerous responses I received, one theme continued to surface. Matthias, a three year NFL veteran bluntly stated "What is the NFL? It's a job; the NFL is so structured you can't do anything." Jarvis, a linebacker who drifted between the NFL and NFL Europe, expressed similar displeasure, "It wasn't what it was all cracked up to be." Abdullah, a former linebacker with three and a half years of service, challenges the public perception of life as a professional athlete, "the NFL is an illusion, it's a form of modern day slavery. Go to the NFL combine and you'll never ask that question again; you're not in control of your own life." As a former second round draft choice, Abdullah received over two million dollars in bonus money during his career. But the large cash advance did little to prevent him from developing critical opinions of the league. "If it's all about the money then you aren't a slave, but when you talk about life then you begin to see that every aspect of your life is controlled." In Abdullah's view, the conflict between labor and management is rooted in racism. "I feel the reason NFL players have so little control of their careers is because the league is 80% black and the NFL Players Association is weak[81]. Black people still suffer from a slave mentality in certain ways. You ever read T*he Making of a Slave* by Willie Lynch?[82] That's exactly how NFL owners treat black athletes.[83]"

[81] Author David Zirin (2009) claims the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) is generally considered the weakest union in professional sports.
[82] In 1712 Slave owner William Lynch purportedly delivered a speech on the banks of the James River in Virginia regarding control of slaves within the colony. It is reported that he offered an account of a short speech given by a slave owner, in which he tells other slave masters that he has discovered the secret to controlling Black slaves by setting them against one another.
[83] Retired six year NFL veteran Anthony Prior expresses a similar sentiment in his book The Slave Side of Sunday.

By almost any standard, it is difficult for most Americans to envision black NFL athletes as a marginalized group in society. Eye popping headlines of multi-million dollar contracts serve to validate the public perception that NFL athletes live in the rarified air of the rich and famous. In reality, blacks in the NFL deal with a complex set of racial dynamics that parallels the world of the black corporate executives in the post-civil rights era (Anderson, 1999). As African American athletes they hold the dual distinction of being identified first and foremost as members of a historically stigmatized group, while simultaneously cast as members of the elite social class. Contrary to the notion that professional sports are a gateway to the upper echelons of American society, Abdullah's commentary raises questions about the black NFL athletes' ability to enjoy the same privileges as his contemporaries.

Scholars contend that league officials disproportionately fine and criticize black athletes for trash talking, taunting, celebrating, and dancing (Cunningham, 2009). Andrews (1997) believes that, counter to White male interpretations, for the African American Athlete celebrating is expressing excitement and showing emotions which will be contagious and motivate his teammates and get a positive response from the spectators. Simons (2003) argues that the major underlying reason why black male behavior is often targeted in the NFL is because it poses a threat to White male control of sports and their right to define and interpret meaning. In response to this threat, Simons (2003: 9) suggests, White men have made normal African American behavioral expressions abnormal and deviant by interpreting the meaning of these behaviors according to the White cultural norm.

Recent ethnographic studies (May, 2007; Wacquant, 2004) demonstrate that some young black men view sports as a means to achieve the American dream (but see Eitzen 2009)[84]. These

[84] Eitzen challenges this theoretical construct by arguing against the myth of sports as a way out of poverty for racial minorities.

works generally examine Bourdieu's concepts of the body as a form of physical capital (Shilling, 2004) and upward mobility through sports. Another body of ethnographic work investigates how Black men understand their social position in relationship to the American dream (Young, 2006), and the discrimination in the workplace suffered by African American men (Royster, 2003). Scholars have also produced key works on the African American working class (Horton, Allen, Herring, & Thomas, 2000) and blacks in corporate America (Toliver, 1998; Collins, 1989; 1983; 1997). Though ethnographers have largely ignored the occupational challenges and institutional obstacles faced by the contemporary black professional athlete, these budding literatures suggest the usefulness of scholarship focused on practices that bear witness to the marginalization of a group largely seen as members of the socially elite class in America.[85].

This article offers a sociological investigation of how well paid black athletes experience race in the NFL. This study further examines how African Americans interpret and respond to problems associated with being publically praised for their athletic talent while also being marginalized by the league. There are four areas of concern that confront the black athlete throughout his NFL career: 1.) The institutional socialization process, 2) The white gaze, 3.) The zero tolerance policy, and 4) The compensation system. Though the NFL claims to indiscriminately hold all athletes to the same standards, the racial composition of the league and the black athlete's social experiences with tend to cause them to view the league in racialized terms. Key insights about race are gained by examining how black NFL athletes respond to fines for aggressive play, penalties for violating league rules, and a faulty grievance process. After reviewing the relevant literature on control and domination, socialization, and marginalization, I document through interviews and observations different strategies used by black NFL athletes to

[85] Though limited in its scope and methods, Dufur and Fienberg (2007) study workers who attempt to gain employment in the National Football League by exploring how artificially restricted labor markets limit workers' market power.

resolve this conflict. I begin by highlighting methods used to socialize Black athletes into conforming to the league's standards of acceptable behavior. I then consider how the black male body is viewed as an object for institutional control.

This study builds on the work of Goffman (1960) and other theorists of institutional control (Foucault, 1995; Berger and Luckmann, 1966), and scholars who explore the marginalization of Black athletes (Edwards 1961, 1973, 1983, 2000; Harrison, 2000; Hawkins, 2010). With regards to my participants' claims that the NFL is a business cartel motivated by profit maximization (cf. Pantuosco and Stone, 2007), I focus on examining how Black athletes perceive their relationship to the league's power structure. The key contribution of this paper is in demonstrating how elite athletes who are compelled to participate in the intensification of their own exploitation can play a role in our understanding of marginalized black men by a significant cultural and social institution.

## Socialization and the Total Institution

In the past, social scientists such as Berger and Luckmann (1966), Goffman (1961), Foucault (1995), and Bay (1970) theorized that institutions have coercive power over the individual both by the force of their facticity and through control mechanisms. As athletes enter the NFL they undergo a socialization process similar to the one used by the military to initiate new recruits. According to Van Maanen (1976), indoctrination to the values, norms, and required behavior permit individuals to participate as a members of the organization. Institutions such as the military have formal training and clearly spell out rules and regulations for their personnel. Just as soldiers must learn the formal and informal expectations of everyone within the organization, corporate employees must adjust to the work environment, develop work skills and discipline, and adhere to the culture and values of the organizational setting. Wicks (2002), who

extends the concept of institutional habutalization by drawing upon Castell's (2003) definition of 'legitimizing identity,' concludes that institutions regularize behavior and reproduce identities in a way that rationalizes institutional domination and control. Thus, despite identity being a source of meaning for individuals, Berger and Luckmann (1966) provide the conceptual framework to understand how the athletic identity is not completely under the control of the athlete. For many athletes, identity and sense of self worth are so closely linked to playing a sport that they readily accept and defend a strict set of disciplinary rules (Lamont-Mills and Christensen, 2006).

With his investigation of asylums, Goffman (1961) claims total institutions are distinguished from other organizations in that "their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside world…." A chief concern of Goffman involves the structure of the self and the complex tangle of ways in which inmates of total institutions succumb to and actively resist definitions of self imposed by their organizations. M.A. McEwen (1980) suggests that a severe limit that continues to plague the total institution concept is the "close system" view inherent in the notion of a sealed-off organizational world. In a general sense, the conception of isolated total institutions has contributed to an overly narrow view in which the political ties and structural continuities between life inside and outside have been neglected. Much can be gained by revisiting the central features of Goffman's total institution and using them to examine how a capitalist enterprise, which benefits from limited marketplace competition as a result of legal monopoly cartel status, disciplines and attempts to control a well paid labor pool.

According to Foucault (1995), discipline is a series of techniques by which the body's operations can be controlled. This principle works by coercing and arranging the individual's

movements along with his or her experience of space and time. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power or Panopticism is closely related to the concept of the total institution (A. Goffman, 2009). In Foucault's schema, disciplinary power leads to a process of self-surveillance to such an extent that each person becomes his or her own overseer, which ensures social control and order. The conceptualization of surveillance, power, control and discipline, offered by Foucault takes on particular significance with regards issues of the body and race within an institutional setting. Yancy (2008) posits that the black body vis-à-vis the white gaze undergoes processes of dehumanization. In this view, white gaze is an important tool used by the NFL to administer control over the black Athlete. Unlike the white corporate executive who leaves the office in a suit and tie to live his personal life in relative obscurity, the sheer size and build of the black NFL athlete makes him a target for public scrutiny. Athletes are also increasingly becoming aware that any public mishaps will draw a swift response from NFL. In this regard, the recognition of the ever present White gaze is a key tool used to induce the black athlete to self-police his behavior.

Messener's view of Hegemony in sports also makes a valuable contribution with regards to drawing a link between the NFL and the total institution. According to hegemonic theory, the economically and politically dominant groups in society control institutions such as education and mass media to promote and shape the ideology about current social relations that serve their interest. Messener (1992) points out that as a social institution, sports are also guided by the ideology outlined in hegemonic social theory. Messener argues that the structure and values of sports are largely shaped by, and in the interest of, those who hold power. To better understand how dominant groups in charge of social institutions such as the NFL control and discipline black bodies, I briefly draw comparisons to the educational system. A paper authored by Monroe

(2005) points out that teachers confine reprimands and punitive consequences to black children even when youths of other races engage in the same unsanctioned behaviors (McCadden, 1998). Monroe contends that teachers' actions are based on, "Popular views of African American life that are connected to threatening images with predictable regularity. Both media and scholarly portrayals of contemporary black life often highlight cultures of violence, drugs, anti-authoritarianism, and other social deficiencies" (2005: pp. 46). One result of the criminalization of black males is that schools have increasingly begun implementing zero tolerance policies. Reportedly, 94 percent of public schools across the nation have adopted initiatives designed to curb behavior deemed inappropriate or criminal (Johnson, Boyden, and Pittz 2001). The demographic composition of the NFL[86] combined with the black athlete's lack of access to power offers a rare opportunity to move beyond the notion of the total institution as a closed system to examine how members of an organization are marginalized without being confined to a bounded space.

## Subjugation and Marginalization

Rarely are black NFL athletes regarded as marginalized individuals by the general public. In fact, a simple Google search uncovers dozens of articles and websites that label professional athletes as overpaid spoiled brats (Christian Science Monitor, 1999; badjocks.com, 2010). Yet, Edwards (1979) contends that race is one of many factors that contribute to the marginalization of black professional athletes. In his account of the black athletes' role in the civil rights movement, Edwards recalls how U.S. sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos used the 1968 Olympics to spotlight racial inequality in sports and in American society. Decades after the

[86] The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports (2009) reports that African Americans, Latinos, and Pacific Islanders comprise nearly seventy percent of the league's athletes, while Whites hold eighty two percent of all senior administrator positions on NFL teams. Additionally, one hundred percent of the owners are White, and seventy five percent of the league's corporate office professionals are White.

image of Carlos and Smith's raised arms and Black gloved fists left an indelible impression on society, some scholars assert that little in the world of sports has changed. Hartmann (2003) builds on Edwards work by concluding that although athletes of color are now handsomely compensated at the elite level, they continue to serve as athletic commodities, either helping teams win or being forgotten about altogether. Though Smith (2000) rejects Edwards and Hartmann's conclusion by arguing that sports has changed considerably in the past fifty years, Cozzillio and Hayman (2005) remind us that biases and barriers of discrimination have infused the politics of exclusion into the world of sports.

Scholarly debates persist regarding the merits of sports as a vehicle of upward social mobility for minority athletes. While Melnick and Sabo (1994) argue the purported mobility benefits gleaned from sports participation is illusionary, Delancey and Madigan (2005) suggest there are direct benefits (e.g. lucrative professional contracts) and indirect benefits (e.g. gainful employment as a result of a college degree). Regardless of the position one favors in this debate, it is important to recognize that a lack of economic opportunity plays a role in some young men's pursuit of NFL riches. Young (2006), who demonstrates how marginalized African American young men interpret their social world, suggests that Black men who regularly leave economically oppressed neighborhoods tend to have a wider range of opportunities but are also met with more racism, hostility, and institutional obstacles. Although sports are often viewed as an arena where meritocracy prevails, much can be gained from an investigation of how the marginalized black NFL athletes interpret and respond to their institutional context.

Given the racial composition and class inequality that exists within the NFL, it is important to examine how black athletes interpret and respond to the league's disciplinary policies. After offering a brief methodological outline and overview of recent changes in the

NFL personal conduct rules, I present the empirical data collected during my time in the field. A theoretical discussion of the narratives is then followed by several concluding statements. I also touch upon how, after years of intense socialization, black athletes are persistently aware of and respond to the White gaze. This study is ultimately concerned with discovering why black athletes support restrictive policies that contribute to their marginalization.

## Observing Athletes

Katz (1997) acknowledges that one warrant for ethnographic research is a rare opportunity for a close look at elite groups. Just as gaining access to doctors, lawyers, judges, or politicians presents a unique set of challenges, professional athletes have the financial means to live beyond the reach of mainstream society. Since NFL athletes are generally considered a charismatically inspired group worthy of great deference, getting "behind the scenes" is a compelling basis for inquiry (1997: pp. 367).

In discussing this project with colleagues or presenting at conferences, the most common questions I receive are about access. People are curious to know how I gained access to NFL athletes. Initially, I relied heavily on my status as a former professional football player to gain access to NFL athletes. My strategy to contact former teammates, coaches, and sports agents was immensely helpful in that it allowed me to spend hours formulating the questions that guided my research agenda. The data presented in this paper is part of a larger project, which includes interviews and observations from 120 NFL athletes and individuals directly involved in their daily lives. Over the span of four years, I spent hundreds of hours with the athletes recording their life histories and social interactions. Because of privacy concerns, I agreed to use pseudonyms to protect the identity of each athlete who participated in this project. My purpose for observing these interactions was an attempt to understand how NFL athletes make sense of their world.

In the first vignette presented bellow, I introduce *Red* – an eight year NFL veteran. Red and I initially met when he was working as a private coach preparing college athletes for the 2007 NFL draft. From early January until the end of February, I observed Red train twenty five young men a total of ten hours per week. Every Monday evening during the winter Red also earned extra cash by helping junior and senior high school boys develop basic football skills. Towards the end of February I began striking up small conversations with Red until he finally agreed to sit down and learn more about my research. Another three or four months passed before Red decided to "introduce [me] to a few brothers that might be interested in helping out." As a result of my relationship with Red I have gained access with over 50 football players. Like many NFL athletes I encountered in the field, Red is immensely private and cautious when it comes to outsiders who seek his attention. After conducting two summer football camps together and hosting a football clinic to raise money for a local food pantry, Red has asked me to join him in establishing a non-profit organization to mentor inner-city kids at risk of joining gangs and selling drugs. Our relationship has grown to the point that Red recently invited me to take an active role in his son's preparation for the 2010 NFL draft.

I gained access to the other participants in this study through my football network. Because I have been out of professional football for a number of years, snowball sampling proved to be the most effective means of recruiting enough subjects to gather the data contained in this paper. In some instances a former teammate would introduce me to one of his NFL buddies, at other times an athlete would agree to participate after hearing about me from one of his friends. In addition to observing athletes during training sessions, on the practice field, and in the locker room, I also spent six weeks living in an apartment complex with six athletes and their families. Moreover, this paper includes narratives taken from six-semi structured interviews and

approximately three-dozen informal interactions. One of the most fruitful interviews took place three years after my initial interaction with an athlete. I first sat down with this athlete in 2006, which turned out to be his last full year season in professional football. After losing contact for three years, this individual agreed to sit down a second time for a three-hour semi-structured interview. His perspective is both nuanced and insightful since his transition from the NFL took place while the league adopted the new personal conduct policy.

## Personal Conduct Policy, Fines, and Penalties

On April 10th, 2007, the New York Giants issued a press release stating that the National Football League announced changes to its long-standing personal conduct policy and program for players, coaches, and other team and league employees. Among other things, the correspondence indicated that the modification focused on increased levels of discipline for violations of the policy. Highlighted in the press release was a statement by the newly elected NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, "It is important that the NFL be represented consistently by outstanding people as well as great football players, coaches, and staff." Goodell went on to say, "We hold ourselves to higher standards of responsible conduct because of what it means to be part of the National Football League. We have long had policies and programs designed to encourage responsible behavior, and this policy is a further step in ensuring that everyone who is part of the NFL meets that standard. We will continue to review the policy and modify it as warranted." In what appears to be a show of solidarity, the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) Executive Director Eugene Upshaw[87] added, "The NFL Players Association and the Players Advisory Council have been discussing this issue for several months. We believe that these are steps that the commissioner needs to take and we support the policy. It is important that players

[87] Upshaw died on August 20th, 2008 and was replaced by Attorney DeMaurice Smith on March 16th, 2009.

in violation of the policy will have the opportunity and the support to change their conduct and earn their way back."

Given that commissioner Goodell implemented what attorney David Cornwell and other sports agents label as "draconian changes" (Sporting News, 2009) within his first eight months in office, an important question comes to mind. Why would the union representing athletes who play in the most popular professional sports league in America willingly accept a policy that limits its members' personal freedom? In fact, the NFL Players Advisory Council, a six member committee of veteran players, publically endorsed the league's stronger guidelines for bad behavior. The advisory council's response provides a frame to critically examine the political, social, and cultural conditions that causes NFL athletes to accept policies that render them powerless to file a grievance with an impartial third party. As a result of the Advisory Council's passive stance, the NFL freely disciplines and punishes athletes without adversely affecting labor relations. In other words, the NFL has convinced athletes it is in their best interest for the league to determine and punish what it deems to be bad behavior.

Goodell is also credited for increasing the number of fines imposed for on-field infractions, while simultaneously leveling stiffer penalties for off-field violations. After watching dozens of athletes' names appear on police blotters across the country, the commissioner essentially borrowed a page from the educational system's playbook and established a zero tolerance policy for bad behavior. As the league's highest ranking administrator, Goodell fills a role familiar to Black men across the country – the czar of discipline.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of the commissioner's crackdown on unwelcomed behavior – and least recognized – is the absence of guaranteed contracts. The league's labor agreement mandates that teams must adhere to a strict salary cap, which limits the total amount

players are compensated each season. Because of the inherent risk of injury and other factors, player contracts almost always include the right to cut (fire) a player. If a player is cut by the team, his salary for the remainder of his contract is neither paid nor counted against the team's salary cap. Under the current labor agreement NFL athletes are provided with relatively little job security. Only highly sought-after players are offered long term contracts that include signing bonuses, which generally provides a measure of financial security if they are cut prior to their contracts ending. One result of the salary cap is that many higher-salaried veteran players have their contracts terminated early in favor of younger, lower-salaried athletes.

### Why you think Goodell went after athletes?

In the following two sections of data I focus on how black athletes respond to the issue of control and discipline in the NFL. Who deems player behavior as acceptable or inappropriate and how disciplinary policies are administered becomes particularly important in light of the league's racial composition. For those athletes who view the NFL through a racialized lens, the new personal conduct policy is yet another attempt by White men to keep blacks in their place. On the other end of the spectrum are the black athletes who emphasize the need for assimilation. The latter group believes everyone benefits from adhering to the strict code of conduct. The underlying philosophy that drives the second group is rooted in the understanding that black athletes have little to worry about as long as they abide by the rules and stay out of trouble. Regardless of how an individual responds to the NFL power structure, one can reasonably conclude that black athletes are intimately aware of the significance of race both in and out of sports. High incarceration rates, rampent unemployment, and soaring school dropout rates are just a few problems that persist in many of the neighborhoods Black NFL athletes came from. Social science has long recognized the significance of race with regards to social interactions;

this study offers a rare opportunity to examine how NFL athletes view this dynamic at work in one of the most important American institutions.

*Racial Attitudes*

About two hours into our drive to West Virginia, Red decided he could no longer hold back his opinion. His oldest son T-Bone started the conversation by declaring "It's better to get drafted in the middle or late rounds that way you get a few years to learn from vets on a good team instead of expecting to be the savior for a bad team." The light banter about the merits of going higher or lower in the draft continued for several minute before Red quipped, "I'll tell you what, with the way Goodell is coming down on brothers, a mother fucka got to play it right these days. This shit ain't like when I was playing, that damn Goodell is a motherfucker, that's for sure." At the tail end of his nearly two minute diatribe, Red presented a compelling question, "Hold on a minute, before you say something, let me ask you a question: why you think the first thing Goodell did when he got into office was go after Michael Vick? What is it you do when you want to show that you can't be fucked with? WHAT? You go after the weakest mother fucker around, THAT'S what you do. In the NFL, athletes is the weakest ones cause they ain't go no say." After trying to determine who was the first athlete targeted by Roger Goodell, everyone agreed Adam "Pacman" Jones deserved to be suspended for inciting a riot at a Las Vegas strip club.[88]

With one simple remark Red cut to the heart of the structural issue confounding NFL athletes. On one level, Red questions the NFL Players Association's ability to provide adequate protection from management's draconian disciplinary rules. On another level, Red is

[88]According to a report by ESPN, on Feb. 19, 2007, Jones, a former first round draft choice for the Tennessee Titans, showered scantily clad dancers with money at a Los Vegas strip club. Just minutes after "making it rain," Jones was involved in a fight inside the club. A short time later, three people were shot outside the club.

commenting on the social relations between NFL athletes and management. By punishing players for violating the personal conduct policy, Goodell is fulfilling his role as power broker for a capitalist enterprise. In Red's view, when the commissioner made player suspensions his first order of business, Goodell was sending a message that management controls the league, not the players. As commissioner, Goodell represents a monopoly cartel that generates $8 billion in annual revenues. Historically, team owners have benefited from billions in tax incentives and other forms of assistance granted by local and state governments across the country for stadium construction projects. The financial, political, and legislative success of the league has firmly established NFL owners as powerful members of the social elite class (Domhoff, 2005; Mills, 1956). In light of the NFL Players Association's (NFLPA) struggles against management, Red's comments take on additional significance. A fact recognized by law professor Marc Edelman, "It is highly significant that the NFL players have never really succeeded in collective bargaining. Their successes have come in antitrust actions." "Even with their successes in antitrust, they still have no guaranteed contracts; and they have yet to obtain other basic benefits like a neutral arbitrator for player grievances" (ESPN, 2009).

Race plays a significant role in the way Red, a forty five year old African American, relates to the world around him. As a child Red and his three siblings were raised in the Deep South by strict parents who "taught us right from wrong." During the past few years I have accompanied Red on dozens of speaking engagements. These events ranged from a celebrity fundraising golf tournament at a swanky Connecticut private country club, to serving as a guest coach for an inner-city high school football team in Southern New England. He is a charismatic speaker who demands respect from everyone he meets by challenging them to confront life's challenges head on. Red generally lives by the code, *respect is something you got to earn*, which

is why it made sense when he announced "any Black man who trusts another man is a fool. I don't trust nobody completely." After watching Red smooze with Wall Street executives and verbally disengage gang members, I knew better than to challenge his opinion. Experience has taught me that Red is a man with a strong conviction about how the world works. As we rolled down the interstate, Red explained "as a black man in the NFL you gotta know what time it is." To illustrate his point, Red shared a poignant story about how he and several other ball players were swindled out of large sums of money.

> We were introduced to this financial guy by Bruce Allen, the former General Manager of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The finance guy got us to invest in this shopping mall project, and at first everything seemed real cool. We flew out during the off season to check everything out. Every month or two this guy would send us statements showing how much money we was making. I thought, you know, this looks pretty good. So I put some more cash in, then after a few months I realize I hadn't seen no statements in awhile. I call up my teammate and ask if he heard anything. Poof, just like that, our moneys gone! That's why I ain't letting that shit happen to my son. When he gets into the league, he ain't gonna go through the same shit I went through with them White boys. They try to get you anyway they can. Man, you have no idea how many people come at you because you play ball. And you know what, that shit don't change, not even when you get out the league.

Since Red's retirement, the NFL has implemented the Financial Advisors Registration Program, which includes procedures governing arbitration, oversight and compliance of registered player financial advisors. Even with the added layer of protection, players still make headlines for being victimized by unscrupulous investment counselors (Forbes 2005; Wall Street Journal 2008).

In addition to getting ripped off by a White financial advisor, experience has taught Red that money will cause black people treat each other equally as bad. "My own brother stole a check and forged my name, even after I gave him money to handle some problems he and his wife were having." In Red's view, all NFL athletes in general and blacks in particular need to keep a watchful eye on everyone they come in contact with: family; females; agents; team physicians and other representatives; financial advisors, and the general public. The problem,

according to Red, confronting black athletes stems from the legacy of slavery. He shares the ideological belief that the effects of slavery continues to exert its brutal influence in the untold suffering of millions of Black people every day. Red is adamant that slavery is the reason black people are incapable of trusting one another and whites. His ideas are consistent with the belief that slavery is responsible for the high level of black residential separation from whites today (Dyson, 2004; 2003). A common retort to these and similarly held believes is that African Americans are quick to blame every problem identified by the black community on slavery (Williams, 2005).

Red's long battle over health disability benefits has also left him cynical about the NFL's treatment of athletes. After years of using his body as a battering ram and running head long into walls of blockers, Red must deal with the after effects of several concussions and constant pain from a severely arthritic knee. Under the current benefits plan, players are eligible for up to $110,000 in annual compensation. The catch is that benefits are only for physical or mental conditions developed within fifteen years of retirement. But the structure of the plan and the league environment makes receiving higher benefit levels very difficult. A player who retires at age thirty and develops health problems at fifty can receive no benefits from the plan board, which consists of three appointees each from the league and union. Likewise, players who develop debilitating conditions within fifteen years face an uphill battle to receive maximum health benefits (The Virginia-Pilot, 2009). After initially being rejected, Red continued to battle the league until his claim for permanent disability was finally granted in the fall of 2009. "The fucked up thing is how much you got to go through just to get what's yours. They know they're responsible for you getting all beat up and shit; yet you damn near got to beg just to get what's rightfully yours. It's a horrible experience." Even though he receives eight thousand dollars per

month, and legally accesses handicap parking, Red feels jaded towards the NFL for mistreating athletes. “They treat you like crap. Just use your ass up and forget about you. Yeah, they’ll call you if they can use you for something. But even that shit, the retired White boys get called for all the good paying jobs. They mainly just throw the brothers the scraps, stuff they can’t find nobody else to do.”

Not every black athlete shares the view that the NFL is unduly hostile towards of African Americans players. Will-Rock, a defensive back and former teammate of Red who played for twelve seasons, believes there are decent people and racist people throughout the NFL. After observing him speak as an invited guess at a graduate class on leadership, Will-Rock and I discussed a number of topics over a three hour lunch. During the meal, Will-Rock shared several stories about his experiences with race in the NFL. “I’ve always been pretty much the type to stick to myself. So I guess the head coach was wondering why I didn’t act like the other guys on the team. One day in training camp during my second year he told the offensive coordinator to go after me. They ran 20 plays at me without a break. Play after play, he just kept coming at me. I was dead tired, but I wasn’t gonna let him know it. I just kept battlin until practice was over.” When I questioned why the coach singled him out, Will-Rock responded “Doc, you know what the coach said to me one day? He said, ‘Will-Rock, how come you never have nothing to say when I walk by? You don’t think I like black people do you? – I ain’t got a problem with black folks –growing up we had a black nanny and a black housekeeper. I’ve been around black people my whole life.” In contrast to this narrative, Will-Rock described his relationship with the team owner. “He always treated me with respect. He told me I as long as I wanted to play for him there was a spot for me. When he died, his wife told me how much he loved me. She said I was always one of his favorites. I know I could always count on him for anything.”

In addition to spending three hours over lunch, Will-Rock and I have developed a relationship by attending numerous charity functions together. Besides lending his name to support various causes, Will-Rock makes sure that his former teammates receive opportunities to appear at paid speaking engagements, "These are the guys that I've gone to battle with. I won two Super Bowls with these guys. If it wasn't for them, I couldn't lead the life I live today. When one of these guys come calling I'll do whatever I can." As a young kid growing up in rural North Carolina town Will-Rock received a quick lesson about how race works in sports.

> I didn't grow up with a father and sports weren't really part of my family life. One day a friend invited me to play on a baseball team, which was pretty unheard of cause Blacks and Whites pretty much stuck to themselves. We played every sport together as kids and his father took me in like his own son. Even when I continued to get a lot of attention as an athlete and my friend stop playing, his father was right there for me. We are still close to this day today. I had my share of run-ins with jealous White folks grown up too. My next door neighbor hated the fact that I was a better athlete than son. He did everything he could to hurt me. Claiming I was too old to play, trying to get me kick off of teams, and other stuff like that. But he was right there, standing in line waiting for an autograph with his grandson when they named a road after me in my hometown. That's how it is in sports. As a Black athlete some folk want to use you for what they can get, and other folks are good decent human beings.

Former teammates Red and Will-Rock approach the issue of race in sports from different perspectives. Red believes that a black man needs to be on guard at all times. Sports are run by White people looking to exploit the unsuspecting black athlete. He also sees racism as a factor that keeps the black athlete from being able to unite and fight against the injustice that persists in the NFL. On the other hand, Will-Rock chooses to focus on the individual rather than the institution. In his view, the White head coach was racist to the core, but the team owner treated him with respect and dignity. Will-Rock's account of his childhood friend and White racist neighbor had a lasting impression on his opinion of race and sports. That early experience taught Will-Rock to keep his eyes open for people with racist attitudes who want to limit his opportunities in sports. Though Red and Will-Rock differ in their views on how race operates in

sports, both men's responses acknowledge the prevalence of the white gaze. As athletes, both men recognize that their views and opinions of sports are shaped by the recognition that white people wield power in sports.

## No time to waste

A significant aspect of the total institution is accounting for the inmate's time. The following narrative provides insight to all encompassing nature of the NFL.

Juleonny's transition from college to the NFL was anything but straight forward. Because Juleonny played for a liberal arts school with a stronger reputation for academics than football, pro scouts tended to overlook the players on his college team. After his senior season Juleonny was given little chance to make an NFL squad. In fact, his college head coach refused to invite NFL scouts on campus to run Juleonny through a workout. The coach even warned Juleonny against trying out for fear of embarrassing the program and hurting the chances of several underclassmen that had a legitimate chance to play in the league. Juleonny's big break came when a former college teammate, who was drafted a year earlier, told the head talent scout Juleonny had blazing speed. When Juleonny caught wind the scout was scheduled to visit a nearby campus, he talked his way on the field for a workout. When the scout clocked Juleonny running the forty yard sprint at 4.3 seconds, he was instructed to run a second time. After crossing the line with another impressive clocking, the scout told Juleonny he would be in contact and to stay in shape. As an undersize 210 pound linebacker who played in the Football Champion Series division (formerly know as Division I-AA), Juleonny needed to make the most of every opportunity that came his way. After anxiously awaiting a phone call and watching 256

players get selected in the NFL draft, Juleonny felt fortunate to be one of about 150 free agents invited to a rookie mini-camp[89].

As an undrafted free agent, Juleonny was offered a league minimum rookie contract of $200,000. The small $7,000 signing bonus was barely enough to live on after graduation, so he moved in with his mother in between sponsored team training events. In accordance with the NFL labor agreement, teams are permitted to hold a rookie mini-camp on one of the first two weekends after the draft in April. Although there are no restrictions on the number of mini-camps teams may hold for rookies, they are permitted to conduct one mandatory mini-camp for veteran players. Teams with new head coaches are also permitted to conduct two additional voluntary mini-camps for the veterans. Throughout the remainder of the spring teams invite rookies and veterans to participate in 14 optional training activities (OTA's) workouts. Because NFL teams only invite athletes to use their facilities during organized activities, athletes generally need to pay for private trainers during the remainder of the off-season. While high draft picks can afford to hire the best trainers and workout at state of the art facilities, rookie free agents such at Juleonny rely on whatever resources are available. "I decided to work with the female track coach at my college. I would spend rainy days out on the track running by myself or sometimes with the woman's track team. I'd go workout every day cause I knew I had to train. I didn't have an agent saying 'I'm going to pay for you to go to Chris Carter's Fast Program in Boca. I was like, these are all the resources I have so I got to make the best of it."

As a twenty-two year old recent college graduate, securing a spot on an NFL roster meant fighting to stay one step ahead of the competition. Like every first year player, he arrived at rookie minicamp needing to make a big impression. The big difference between him and the

[89] Players who are not drafted in the NFL's annual draft of amateur players are also considered to be unrestricted free agents and are free to sign contracts with any team.

team's draft picks is that no one on the coaching staff really knew much about him. As an undrafted player from a no name school, Juleonny claims "I was just a name and a number. There was really nothing to know [about me]. Actually my recruiting scout, the guy who found me, was the only one who knew anything about me. When I started to do good in pre-season games he was always there congratulating me." For Juleonny, the biggest adjustment was the mental aspect of the game. The challenge to find a spot on the roster was made even more difficult given the success of the team before his arrival. "The year before I got there they were winners so the team was all veterans, so the playbook is all review for everyone else. For me, it's the first time I'm trying to decipher what the codes mean – sun, sky, rainbow, I mean, he's going from nickel to dime, to penny to third down, to goal line and I'm like this is like a war strategy, like a pre-conceived war strategy – but what war are we fighting? What the hell is going on?" The experience described by Juleonny is common for all rookies, but teams generally make undrafted free agents fend for themselves in terms of grasping the intricacies of the playbook. "Like the first round draft choice from my year, he was a hell of an athlete but he didn't get pressured like us. But guys in my group, we didn't get a lot of attention." Since early round draft choices sign multi-million dollar contracts and are expected to play right away, the entire organization is committed to ensure their success.

The size of a player's contract and signing bonus often plays a major role in his chances of gaining a roster spot on the team. The Houston Texans made a huge financial commitment when they signed Mario Williams, the first overall pick of the 2006 draft, to $60 million contract that included a $26 million signing bonus. On the other hand, when a team signs a minimum salary guy, they can afford to write off the small signing bonus if the player does not pan out. Given this economic reality, a low round draft choice or an undrafted free agent can ill afford to

miss a single practice or give the coaches any reason to dislike him. One injury, a minor infraction with the law, or a mental lapse at a critical juncture in a preseason game often means the end of a career. To illustrate this point, Juleonny recounted the following story

> **Juleonny:** A friend of mine got food poisoning because they cooked him a bad omelet at [pre-season training] camp. He told me the food they had was like lobster and steak, it was all catered eggs; the food we had [at training camp] was like at McDonalds. Bacon, eggs, in the big tins and stuff. He was in Jacksonville, and he got food poisoning. He got cut and the train kept going. He could have made it too.
> **Author:** Did he get a shot the next season?
> **Juleonny:** Nope, that was it. And he could have made it. Those of us who aren't drafted you get one shot in camp. Maybe he shouldn't have ate that lobster, or maybe he shouldn't have ate that steak, or them eggs. Maybe something didn't smell right. It's your own fault you got food poisoning.

In spite of the long odds faced by low priced athletes, the salary cap can work in favor of the little guy when a team has too many high priced veterans on the roster. In fact, every year a handful of late round draft picks and free agents appear on teams rosters because they are willing to play for minimum wage. In Juleonny's view, money was a big reason he made the NFL in the first place. "I scraped in because a linebacker was gonna demand a million dollars a year for salary, and it wasn't in the budget. And they said ok, you [Juleonny] can play special teams and you'll play defense eventually, and that's how I made it."

During the spring before his rookie season Juleonny relied on a method he calls "the cheat," which allowed him to study his playbook late into the night until he fell asleep. "I would get back to my hotel room after practicing all day then do schoolwork, because I still needed to graduate, and then study my playbook until I fell asleep. My cheat was to dream about the plays I just studied. That way they were still fresh in my mind for practice the next day." While big money veterans and high draft choices had the luxury of knowing their jobs were secure for the season, Juleonny relied on "the cheat" to remain competitive.

After surviving two spring mini-camps and getting through a grueling four week summer training camp, the demands of playing in the NFL quickly set. From the first week of September until the following January-February, football consumed nearly every waking moment of Juleonny's time. Typically, Juleonny's workday began between 5:00 or 5:30 am to get in an individual weight training/stretching session before grabbing a quick breakfast at the team complex (see table 1). Over the course of a fifteen hour day Juleonny and his defensive teammates would sit through three team meetings and three film sessions before attending special team and defensive team practices. To maintain his playing weight, Juleonny was required to end his day with a rigorous weight training workout conducted by the strength coach. If studying the playbook during preseason training camps seemed like war, memorizing a new defensive scheme each week was a baptism under fire. During the first half of the season Juleonny averaged four hours of sleep each night. When the veterans hit the town for drinks or dinner, Juleonny headed home to study the weekly defensive game plan and special team adjustments. His evening usually ended reviewing a couple hours of game and practice film. This routine altered slightly after the eighth or ninth week of the season as divisional rivals faced one another for the second time. By this point in the season the defensive game plan required fewer adjustments, which meant a young player like Juleonny needed less preparation time. Instead of heading home immediately after practice, Juleonny would take a little extra time to bond with teammates. The second half of the season also meant a few hours of extra sleep each night. "By this point in the season my body required more time to recover so I was glad to sleep six hours at night instead of the four hours I was getting when the season started."

**Table 3.**

***Practice schedule during the season***

5:00am wake up
5:15-6:00 individual weight training session
6:00-6:15 breakfast
6:30-8:00 special teams meeting (non-special team guys eat breakfast)
8:05-8:30 team meeting & announcements
8:30-10:00 positional meeting, review films and install the strategy for the upcoming game
10:30-12:00 walk through/ watch more game film then hit the field for a walk through session
12:00-1:00 lunch
1:30-2:30 special team practice
2:45-4:30 regular practice
4:45-5:30 or 6:00 watch the practice film
6:30-7:30 Organized team weightlifting session
7:30-8:30 treatment for any injuries before leaving for the night

Similar to many other institutions that place demands and interests on employee's time, the NFL also exhibits encompassing tendencies. The distinguishing characteristics that align the NFL with Goffman's description of the total institution are the barriers that constrain athletes from social intercourse with the outside world. While the league employs security professionals to conduct extensive background checks and monitor for offensive behavior, the watchful eye of the media serves as an additional layer of surveillance that further distances athletes from the public. The pressure to play at a high level also acts as a barrier. Coaches and other team officials pour over every second of game and practice film to evaluate each athlete's performance. Teams are constantly in search of the greatest athletic productivity available at the lowest labor cost possible. Given this reality, NFL athletes rarely spend more than six to eight weeks away from the game each year. In addition to a lengthy playing season, fifteen hour work days, and countless hours training with private instructors; NFL athletes must endure the emotional stress of playing in front of millions of fans each week. Unlike most employees in a capitalist society, NFL athletes are required to tolerate public scrutiny without responding negatively to

unfavorable criticism. Collectively, these constraints serve as an invisible barrier that wall off NFL athletes from society at large.

Over the course of two extensive interviews and hours working together at youth football camps, Juleonny shared many stories regarding the subtle ways the NFL socializes athletes. When an individual first enters the league he must learn what it means to be a professional athlete. To address this need, the league requires all draft picks to attend a rookie symposium. Curiously, undrafted rookie free agents such as Juleonny are not invited to attend this symposium. Over the period of four days, drafted NFL prospects participate in discussions that include financial management, the personal conduct code, the banned substance policy, and how to deal with the media. This carefully crafted process is designed to socialize individuals into the role of the NFL athlete while simultaneously reinforcing the rules and values of the league. For guys like Juleonny who are excluded from such resources, adjusting to the rigors of the NFL becomes that much more difficult.

At the conclusion of his first season in the league, Juleonny agreed to participate in the team's optional training activity program (OTA). Like many young veterans, Juleonny quickly learned the acronym OTA meant mandatory, rather than optional. "You could skip them if you want to, but your butt would be gone come time for the season. Everything for me was a rough situation. Nothing in my pro career came easy. I couldn't take nothing for granted. The OTA's are very intense; this is another area that you had to prove yourself." Even established veterans have a shared understanding of what OTA really represents. After skipping a voluntary mini-camp and receiving a stern rebuke from teammate Peyton Manning and head coach Jim Mora, former NFL star running back Edgerrin James commented "Hell, I only went to college for 2½ years, but I think I know the meaning of the word *voluntary*" (Yahoo Sports, Silver, 2008).

For the NFL athlete, football is a year round occupation. Over the past several decades the competition for roster spots has stiffened to the point that athletes can ill afford to lose their physical edge or mental focus. Each year thousands of Black kids from disadvantaged background spend countless hours pushing weights, running stadium stairs, and hanging on every word of the coach, just for the chance to make it to the next level. By the time an athlete makes it to the NFL after eight years of high school and college football, he has so much invested in the game that no sacrifice is too big. Though the work necessary to make and NFL team is the same for Blacks and Whites, the cost of losing a seat on that gravy train is much higher for athletes from impoverished backgrounds. Once an athlete forges his way into the league, the pressure to maintain a spot on the roster never subsides. Because college football acts as a minor league feeder system for the NFL, a reserve army of labor (Marx, 1992) is readily available to replace athletes who do not adhere to league rules. The social prestige and the financial rewards of playing in the NFL are two of the carrots used to seduce athletes into accepting extensive demands on their time and conforming to stringent disciplinary policies. Once the season ends NFL veterans generally take a few weeks to let their bodies heal before beginning training privately and participating in team sponsored OTA's [Table 2].

**Table 4.**

***Optional Training Activities (OTA) workout program lasts between 8-10 weeks, before three mandatory mini-camps.***

5:30 am wake up
6:00-7:00 personal weight training
7:15-7:30 team meeting
7:30-9:00 position meeting
9:00-10:00 taping, dress for practice
10:00-12:00 practice
12:00-1:30 lunch with team, taping, treatment for injuries
1:30-2:15 special team practice
2:30-4:30 regular practice
4:15-5:30 recap, film session for defense
5:30 organized lift, stretching & cramp session with strength coach (got to impress the weight and strength coaches)
6:30 Dinner @ team hotel

*Eye in the Sky:*

Constant surveillance is an intrusion that athletes must learn to grow accustomed to dealing with in the NFL. In addition to former law enforcement agents observing how athletes behave in public, team and league personnel constantly monitor their on-field movements. According to the labor agreement, the league maintains the right to discipline players for numerous types of violations. Among the on-field infractions that can result in player fines are flagrant or personal fouls, fighting, verbal abuse, unsportsmanlike conduct, physical contact with an official, throwing a football into the stands, wearing unauthorized logos and the use of cell phones. These fines range from $2,000 for unnecessarily entering into a fight area to $100,000 for logo violations. The league reports there are about 20 fines assessed each week based on a review of approximately 2,300 plays conducted over a weekend (Washington Post, 2008). Though the NFL declines to release the amount of fines levied, one published report suggests $3.3 million in player salaries was collected in 2005 (Wall Street Journal, 2005). Off-field violations such as use of alcohol, drugs, and steroids are governed by the NFL substance-abuse policy. Violation of the NFL substance-abuse policy can range from fines to suspensions and

expulsion from the NFL for life. The severity of the fine or suspension depends on whether this is the player's first, second or third violation.

In addition to receiving fines for excessive play and being monitored in public, life in the NFL also means team personnel is constantly observing an athlete's every move in the practice facility. While recounting his time year in the league, Juleonny remembers how it felt knowing his every move was being scrutinized:

> It's like they take a piece of your soul man. Cause you're trying to impress, but you're trying not to over exert, you know, you got to stand out from the pack. You know, they're looking to see who's crossing the line last every time, their looking to see who's cutting corners. Who's cheating on their sets, who's keeping the proper etiquette and techniques in lifting? These are all evaluating tools that the draftees don't have to worry about, but like me, they're looking for a reason for putting my ass out.

As Juleonny described this experience, I decided to probe deeper to uncover how he dealt with the pressure of knowing that every move was scrutinized by the team. As a researcher, my intention was to ascertain if he felt pressure to impress the coaches and general manager throughout his NFL career. In public, NFL athletes are praised as role models and considered social elites, while in the work place every move is accounted for like an inmate at a total institution. Though a select number of athletes are paid handsomely as high round draft choices, everyone on the team falls prey to the watchful eye of management. The camera focuses on each athlete at practice and during the game. Perhaps the multi-million dollar free agent or the high draft pick with a large signing bonus can afford to pay a fine easier than a free agent rookie, but neither can escape the ubiquitous gaze of Commissioner Roger Goodell. The following dialog with Juleonny illustrates how grown men come to accept the fact that the NFL scrutinizes every move they make.

> **Author:** people are paranoid?
> **Juleonny:** …It's true. There are cameras everywhere, people are watching. You know the general manager is hovering somewhere. People are always watching.

**Author:** This is an indoor practice facility?
**Juleonny:** Yeah, the ---- Center. So cameras are everywhere and they control every aspect of that place. Cause they looking for the cues that they find important to them that they think will make their team stronger.
**Author:** It seems like what you're describing is like a prison
**Juleonny:** No, cause at anytime I could say fuck ya'll I'm going home. I don't want to do this anymore. And I think somebody did.
**Author:** No, I mean like a prison compound. You know, like you see on television when patrol guards are walking around on the tower with guns and watching everyone.
**Juleonny:** Ok, yes. In that aspect yes, you don't always see them, they are not always up there. You can't always hear them, you know clanck, clanck, clanck, cause it's padded up there, but you know they are there.
**Author:** So you know they are always there? There is always an eye in the sky?
**Juleonny:** There are always cameras, so its – are you working hard even if no one is up there manning the cameras? Cause there's always someone on the sidelines taking notes. Cause they're gonna see the film at the end of the day anyway – its just – do you run a little faster when there's cameras and someone watching you?
**Author:** So everything that you do is under the watchful eye?
**Juleonny:** Yes, under the watchful eye, you're being evaluated. It's like Big Brother. That's what it feels like. Like everywhere. Is there a camera in the bathroom or what? You start wondering if the coach is thinking –what the hell is he doing in there so long – shit, man its tough.

## Discussion:

The above narratives highlight several issues that confront black NFL athletes. Abdullah astutely recognizes he can earn enough money to "set my family up for the rest of my life, and give me the freedom I need for the rest of my life." But the story is not quite so clear cut. Abdullah also acknowledges that the chance for financial freedom comes at a price, "What people don't see is that fact that every day when I step out on the field I'm risking my life or injury." Abdullah's views are supported by a published report, which finds that retired NFL athletes suffer from abnormally high rate of diabetes, high blood pressure, and sleep apnea which increases the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and daytime drowsiness (Health Day News, 2007). The significant risk of injury coupled with long term health problems, questionable labor representation, and the racial composition of the league suggests that black athletes have plenty of reason to challenge the NFL power structure. Still, the question remains, "Why do black NFL athletes remain relatively silent?" For athletes who come from a disadvantaged or a working

poor background, the NFL represents an opportunity to gain financial stability. Instead of making waves or fighting against the system, an athlete may simply decide to make the most out of the opportunity at hand. Denise, Abdullah's wife of three years offers the following hypotheses "I just think that when you're making enough money you just deal with it." Abdullah echoes his wife's sentiments "The black athlete reconciles their behavior because they are going to the bank every Monday or Tuesday [the CBA mandates that players must be paid the following Monday or Tuesday after a game]. They just taking care of their families."

Abdullah believes that as long as Black NFL athletes remain focused on making money, they will continue to be exploited by management. "They don't want no blacks with intelligence; they don't want no one who has any kind of self awareness." When questioned about how black athletes were exploited by the NFL, Abdullah responded:

> The NFL prefers guys that don't think that there is life after football. There is a double standard for the Black and Whites on this issue. You could have a White athlete teaching other White athletes about life after football, but they don't want Black athletes to feel that they can do anything other than play football; and that's what the NFL wants, to keep you dumb, deaf and blind.

Although he remains adamant in the belief the leagues' racial composition adversely affects black athletes, Abdullah also admits that an individual who chooses to speak out against unfair treatment risks being labeled a malcontent or a radical. Rather than remain quite like many of his teammates, Abdullah was compelled to speak up whenever he felt disrespected by management. His wife suggests Abdullah's outspokenness forced him out the league and hinders his ability to land another NFL job. "The system may not understand a guy like Abdullah because he's loud and can be offensive, and controversial… honestly I think that his anti-institution attitude is the thing that has kept him out of the NFL."

Even when an athlete feels he has been treated unjustly and the appropriate recourse is available to challenge the system, he may choose to remain silent. When Juleonny tested positive for an illegal substance in his rookie season, he decided to accept a four game suspension instead of questioning the validity of the test or appealing the decision. After weighing the options Juleonny felt the coaches would look at him more favorably if he put the situation behind him and started preparing for the next season. In the end, this decision wound up costing twenty five percent of his $200,000 salary in fines. A comparison of Abdullah and Juleonny's career trajectories reveals how two distinctly different strategies ultimately produced similar results. As a highly regarded second round draft choice, Abdullah choose to voice his displeasure with the racial dynamics in the league. After being unceremoniously cut from the league, Abdullah determined the NFL was a racist institution designed to exploit the black athlete in the name maximizing profits. In contrast, Juleonny entered the league as an undrafted free agent who attempted to play by the rules. From his perspective, Juleonny sees race playing a minor role in how management interacts with athletes. He feels that it is up to the individual athlete, Black or White, to make the best of every opportunity that comes his way. At the end, neither strategy helped Abdullah or Juleonny play beyond the league average of 3.3 seasons. During their brief professional career, neither athlete earned enough money to retire nor did the NFL turn out to be the pathway to upward mobility so many Black men believe will be.

## Conclusion

In some respects, the new personal conduct policy implemented by Commissioner Goodell amounts to a zero tolerance policy for the black NFL athlete. With regards to the NFL, the conduct policy appears to fit into Goffman's schema, as an example of "the various enforced activities that are brought together in a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution" (1961: pp. 6). The attempt to guard against egregious behavior

has led NFL teams to begin employing former police officers and FBI agents to act as security chiefs; conducting extensive background checks; installing video surveillance systems in locker rooms; investigating rumors, and sometime limiting player accessibility to the press. Upon learning of questionable conduct, the league carries out an investigation and deems when it is appropriate for the employee to address the transgression at issue. At the conclusion of the investigation, Commissioner Goodell has full authority to impose the discipline he warrants suitable. Following the imposition of punishment, the athlete has the right to appeal the decision and shall be entitled to a prompt hearing pursuant to Article XI of the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and the NFL Constitution and Bylaw, to be conducted by the Commissioner or his designee (NFL Personal Conduct Policy, 2008). Aside from filing a grievance with the NFL, players' only other recourse is to go court.

Burawoy's (1972) investigation of a machine work shop provides useful theoretical perspective to consider why NFL athletes support policies that restrict personal freedoms and possibly contribute to their marginalization. While conducting research and working in Machine shop, Burawoy was compelled to understand why workers actively participated in the intensification of their own exploitation. To frame the examination another way, Burawoy sought to understand why workers push themselves to advance the interest of the company. Upon surmising that coercion alone could not explain what workers did upon arriving on the shop floor, Burawoy offers a two part explanation. Firstly, management successfully inserted workers into the labor process as individuals rather than as members of a class distinguished by a particular relationship to the means of productions. Secondly, labor agreed to a system of rewards based on the individual rather than collective effort, which had the consequence of redistributing conflict from a hierarchical direction into a lateral direction (1979: pp. 81).

The NFL labor agreement constrains athletes from voicing their grievances to management. Because NFL contracts are not guaranteed, the salary cap creates an incentive structure that rewards the individual rather than the collective body of labor talent. When a team signs a high draft choice or a big name free agent to a large contract, it limits the amount that can be offered to other ball players. The irony of the NFL collective bargaining agreement is that it prevents an open labor market while simultaneously pitting teammates against one another in a struggle to secure the largest contract possible. Juleonny describes the situation this way, "you got to be careful who you trust. I've seen guys try and sabotage their teammates in the middle of a game just to try and get that person cut. One guy might have a bigger contract than the next guy. If you can get the guy cut that's making more money than you and the team give you his salary, then so be it. In the NFL it's about surviving."

# Chapter 6
## *Forced Out: Involuntary Role Exit and the NFL Athlete*

American popular culture is filled with images of celebrity athletes basking in the spotlight of material success. For example a recent General Motors commercial, entitled *Some opportunities come just once*, featured retired New York Giants All-pro running back Tiki Barber cruising around New York City at night in a shiny black Escalade SUV discussing his approach to life. An accompanying website, which showcases Barber along with his wife and two children, offers two lengthy video clips entitled *Everyday is an opportunity* and *Life after football.* Barber shares insights on preparing for the challenges of life. The TV commercial and website reinforce stereotypes that the career of a professional athlete is both exciting and glamorous and offers financial security.

Absent from public consciousness are the athletes who exit the game without great fanfare or multi-million dollar endorsement contracts, or those suffering from debilitating injuries. The 14 NFL athletes in this study contradict images of retired sports heroes who become media personalities, corporate spokespersons, or move on to notable coaching careers. In contrast to the high-flying days of fast cars and celebrity parties, several of these athletes' careers were shortened by injury or non-guaranteed contracts, whereas for others, retirement was accompanied by financial hardship, frustration, depression, and denial. This study offers firsthand accounts of daily interactions that reveal strategies used by athletes who sought to prolong their careers or soften the emotional and psychological sting of retirement. It depicts retired NFL athletes struggling to establish new identities while fighting to hold onto their celebrity status. Intrinsic to the role of the professional football athlete is an anxiety produced by the NFL's policy of replacing veteran athletes with younger, less expensive talent. Confronted with this antagonistic work arrangement, athletes develop sophisticated coping mechanisms that

allow them to perform at a high physical level without having to acknowledge the stress and tension involved with playing the role of a superhero athlete.

In professional football circles, the phrase "it's harder to stay in the NFL than it is to get into the NFL" is a harsh reminder that life in the NFL is fleeting. For many athletes, exiting the NFL is traumatic because of the dedication and commitment required to get there. By the time a twenty one year old college athlete is drafted by the NFL, he has played organized football for eight to twelve years. In high school, classmates and coaches view him as an athlete destined for NFL stardom. The newspapers turn him into a local hero by celebrating his athletic prowess, and people in his hometown live vicariously through his accomplishments. Once an athlete enters the NFL, he is anointed as an iconic figure who is charged with fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of those around him. Thus, the disappointment and sense of loss is accompanied by frustration and embarrassment when an athlete feels that he was unjustly forced to exit the NFL, which can result in a general state of anomie.

This paper expands our understanding of the role-exit process (Ebaugh, 1988) by analyzing how individuals experience a forced role exit, drawing upon the forced-retirement literature and from identity theory, sport-psychology theory, and social support network theory. Focusing on NFL athletes after they are forced to abruptly abandon a role central to their identities offers a unique opportunity to deconstruct the behavior of social elites grappling with their status. Star treatment, public adulation, and a degree of journalistic mistrust have created barriers that obscure the indigenous meanings and everyday lived realities of this socially admired group. As a result of a proliferation of sports news and 24-hour sports broadcast networks the public side of professional athletes' lives has been well documented in recent years. Yet little is known about how these individuals experience the role of professional athlete. This investigation, consisting

of interviews and *in situ* observations of players' daily activities, gives us a rare glimpse of the everyday problems that confront this select group. Specifically, this article focuses on analyzing the NFL players' subjective understandings as they struggle with, seek to delay, and partially disengage from their athlete role. I also highlight one "negative case" (Katz, 2001), a football player who seemed to have an easier time transitioning out of the NFL because he rejected the *unidimensional* athletic self-identity.

## Role Exit, the Sports Identity, and Anomie

According to Ebaugh (1988), the role exit is sociologically and psychologically intriguing since it implies that interaction is based not only on current definitions but, more importantly, on past identities that somehow linger on and define how people see and present themselves in their present identities. Role exit is "the process of disengagement from a role that is central to ones' self-identity, and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one's ex role" (p.1). The process of exiting a role is comprised of three primary characteristics: disengagement, dis-identification, and re-socialization. Disengagement encompasses withdrawing from the type of behavior associated with a former role. Dis-identification refers to the time when self-identification is no longer associated with the exited role. The re-socialization process is completed once an individual learns to incorporate his/her former self into a new role.

Ebaugh's theory was derived from data collected during 185 semi-structured interviews conducted with a variety of 'exes' (nuns, police officers, teachers, semi-professionals, etc.); it was designed to reconstruct life histories (Denzin, 1999). Ebaugh (1988) hypothesizes four stages in role exit: 1) *First Doubt*, when the individual begins to doubt his or her commitment to his or her current role, 2) *Seeking Alternatives*, after experiencing doubts the individual may look for and weigh alternatives, 3) *Turning Point*, after weighing the alternatives, identifying new

reference groups, calculating the cost and benefits of leaving a role, and rehearsing new roles, the individual is faced with a decision of whether to exit or stay in the existing role, 4) *Creating the ex-role*, adapting to an ex-role takes place when one has actually left the former social position; this involves the tension between one's past, present, and future. These four stages are combined to illustrate that role exiting is a phenomenon independent from the socialization process (Ebaugh, p. 3).

Drahota & Eitzen (1988) broadens the scope of the role exit theory by incorporating characteristics unique to athletes, especially the involuntary nature of most exits. Interviews conducted with 27 former professional athletes from various sports led the researchers to add four unique characteristics: (1) a stage of original doubts that precedes becoming a professional athlete; (2) the difference by the era in which the athlete played; (3) the "withdrawal" behavior associated with leaving the sport; and (4) the significance of the type of involuntary exit. The last point stems from Ebaugh's admission that, "Clues were presented which indicated that exits which were less voluntary differed from voluntary exits in the stages of process preceding the actual exit" (Ebaugh, p. 204). Drahota and Eitzen's (1988) study underscores a limitation in Ebaugh's work by pointing out the inconsistency in the claim that Role Exit Theory is generalizable to all types of exits (Ebaugh, 1988). Wacquant (1990) criticizes Ebaugh (1988) for having little to say about the structural constraints that bear on the role exit, and for virtually ignoring forced exits. Even with such limitations, Drahota and Eitzen (1988) maintain that, with modification, Ebaugh's model is the best conceptual framework for understanding the stages in professional athletes' role exit experience. A noteworthy exception to the limited theoretical focus of role exit theory is a study by Allison and Meyer (1988), who introduce gender and

participation in an individual sport as key variables affecting how tennis athletes experience the retirement process.

The implications for Ebaugh's work are far reaching, as it is common in today's mobile society for people to make at least one major shift to their identity. With global shifts in jobs, entire segments of the labor pool are forced to redefine their professional roles and the concomitant aspects of their identities. In addition to those affected by global realignments, professional dancers, entertainers, and career politicians are particularly susceptible to involuntary role exits.

The NFL athlete stands in stark contrast with the general population in that he is singled out as socially elite at an early age. Typically, these athletes are identified as physically gifted during high school or even grade school. However, most individuals who attain this highly coveted position are forced to relinquish this elite status and role well before their thirtieth birthday. Killeya-Jones (2005) notes that the athlete role may occupy such a central role in one's self-conception that it dominates the ego-identity.[90] It is reasonable to conclude that during a forced retirement, the status enjoyed by an NFL athlete will compete with an individual's self-identity for temporal and psychological resources, resulting in a role conflict (Killeya-Jones, 2005).

Taylor and Ogilvie (2001) claim that the most fundamental psychological issue that influences adaptation to a career transition is the degree to which athletes define their self worth in terms of their participation and achievement in the sport (Blinde and Greendorfer, 1985; Ogilvie and Howe, 1982). The authors suggest that *unidimensional* athletes are

[90] Also see: Taylor , J. and B.C. Ogilvie (2001). Career transitions among elite athletes: I there life after sports? *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance.* J. Williams. Mountain View, CA., Mayfield.: 480-496.

disproportionately invested in their sport participation and often have few fulfilling or no meaningful activities outside of their sport (Svoboda and Vanek, 1982). In many instances, this produces an overly developed athletic identity, leaving athletes less prepared for post-sport careers (McPherson, 1980). Typically, this athlete experiences retirement from sport as a loss of something very important that can never be recovered (Coakley, 1983).

Such observations suggest that an un-willful exit from the NFL causes some athletes to suffer from acute anomie (Ogilvie and Howe, 1982) upon realizing that the former identity is both nontransferable and embedded within the institution of football. Though some athletes are seduced by the grandeur and allure of the NFL, others have an easier time making the transition from a forced role exit. Identity theory reminds us that identities are internalized role expectations. According to Stryker and Burke (ibid), people possess as many selves as groups of persons with whom they interact. In other words, people have as many identities as distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

To examine how certain athletes guard against developing a singularly focused self-identity (Stryker and Burke, 2000), it is useful to incorporate Bourdieu's concept of *capital* (Moore, 2008). While most of the athletes I encountered described playing in the NFL as their primary goal in life, while a small minority view their NFL careers as an asset that carries tremendous social and cultural capital. For this group, professional football represents a means to an end, rather than the end game. These athletes use these forms of capital to their advantage while guarding against losing their identity in athletics (Wright, 2008), which they attribute to strong family ties and support from social networks.

## Methods & Data

This study employs participant observation and face-to-face in-depth interviews with 14 professional football athletes, one professional football coach, a professional team executive officer, three journalists, and a team equipment manager. Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

I combined "purposive sampling" and "snowball sampling" (Babbie, 1973). Personal relationships were used to obtain initial interviews, and referrals were then used to secure the remaining contacts and enable observations. Interviews with nine of the participants were conducted over three weeks in the summer of 2005. Athletes were initially contacted by the team's marketing director and voluntarily chose to participate in an interview of approximately two hours and thirty minutes. Each participant also agreed to meet at least one additional time for a more loosely structured session, which began with the question, "describe what it means to be an NFL athlete." This was done to earn trust by breaking from the uniformity of journalistic interviews of which athletes have grown wary. The interviews were conducted in various settings, generally selected by the athletes based on convenience or privacy concerns. In at least two cases, the spouses of athletes decided where the follow-up interview would take place. From the outset, I was invited to attend a team family barbeque hosted at a local amusement park. This event served as a catalyst for establishing the rapport needed to gain entree into the world of these athletes. Over time, these athletes felt comfortable enough to invite me into their homes, play video games, chat over dinners, cruise around town in their cars, or hang out with them in night clubs.

Interactions with five of the athletes were recorded over the course of three years and were based on relationships established during my own four-year professional football career.

One athlete in particular served as the model for this study as a result of his involvement in the NFL labor dispute during the early 1980s. Throughout our twenty-year relationship, he told me dozens of stories about his and other players' difficulties adjusting to retirement. These conversations led to more than one hundred and fifty hours of observations, interviews, and conversations with four other athletes whose careers varied in length from six months to thirteen years. All but one left the NFL between 1996 and 2005. The respondent with the longest retirement tenure hung up his cleats in 1985.

Of the fourteen individuals who agreed to participate in this project, twelve are African American, one was of Nigerian descent, and the final athlete was a white Canadian. They range in age from 21 to 54; eight are married, and nine are parents. Seven of the athletes are no longer playing professional football; the remaining seven have sought to extend their careers in the Canadian Football League (CFL) or in the Arena football League (AFL). Thirteen of the fourteen men indicated that they attended major college football programs on athletic scholarships. However, only three said that they graduated prior to entering the NFL, and none of the remaining eleven is actively seeking to complete his education.

Throughout this study I drew upon my sociological training and four years of professional football to situate the subjects' words and actions within their cultural context. Observations of the ex-players' everyday lives allowed me to make more reliable inferences than if I depended solely on questionnaires. The fieldwork allowed me to look beyond the narratives and perceptions presented by each athlete and search for clues that influenced their behavior during retirement. I was also able to research details of their background in the NFL, compile information about their life-histories, and question the subjects regarding any apparent inconsistencies. This study adds to our understanding of the role exit process by presenting data

collected from ongoing, situated, micro-level interactions rather than relying solely on one shot interviews that are bracketed from participants' lived experience.

## The Unidimensional Athlete

During my field research, the athletes I spoke with made several curious references about life in the NFL. Every so often one would proclaim, "Man, it's easier to get into the NFL than it is to stay in the league," or, "Brother, the NFL ain't no joke; somebody's always out there trying to take your job." To play at the highest level of professional football, an athlete must have a supreme belief in his ability. Regardless of the obstacles confronting him, experience tells an NFL caliber athlete that the odds against succeeding do not apply to him. The fact that athletes at the sport's highest level have avoided getting cut, and have persevered through injuries while out battling the competition, serves to reinforce their identity as elite football players. In spite of this supremely confident NFL persona, a tension persists beneath the surface that threatens an athlete's self-identity at any given moment.

Securing a roster spot is extremely difficult. Published reports by the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) indicate that of the 100,000 high school seniors who play football each year, only 0.2%, or 215, will ever make an NFL roster. Given the success they experience rising through the ranks, it comes as little surprise that certain athletes succumb to the temptation of linking their self-worth with the role of professional football player. This over-inflation of self-identity, reinforced through close personal ties with teammates, leads to a variety of developmental, psychological, and social factors that may cause difficulties during the career transition.

In this paper I draw on the experiences of six individuals to illustrate strategies used by athletes confronted with a forced retirement from the NFL. These narratives were selected as

representations of athletes wrestling with their celebrity-identity status in a broad sense. The elite status once afforded these young men was continuously reinforced by the special treatment they received throughout high school, college, and professional athletics. After years of special treatment and public adulation, these young men were suddenly forced to contend with the frustration, disappointment and embarrassment that accompany the loss of an NFL career.

It is psychologically challenging and emotionally counter-productive for an NFL athlete to expend energy thinking about retirement while simultaneously preparing for the physical demands of the game. The athletes I observed in this section were actively seeking to extend their careers after exiting the NFL. Whenever the subject of retirement was raised, these young men would become visibly agitated or would seek to avoid the discussion by changing the subject. Rodney, a 28-year-old CFL wide receiver who kicked around the NFL for just over three seasons, personifies a career teetering on the margins. As Rodney and I cruised around in his eighty thousand dollar BMW sedan the conversation steered toward the topic of life after football. He made it clear that one reason he felt comfortable talking to me was that he could be himself as opposed to worrying about being misrepresented by the press. In public Rodney comes across as reserved and somewhat unapproachable, but in private he emanates a passionate and enthusiastic zest for life. Given that he was a 7th round draft pick, it is safe to guess that over the course of three plus NFL seasons, Rodney earned anywhere in the range of $250,000 to $750,000. Driven by this *guestimate* I decided to nudge the discussion toward his plans for the future.

> AUTHOR: So what's up when football is done?
> **RODNEY**: Hopefully by that time the real estate thing will have kicked in and I can let my money work for me.
> AUTHOR: What about investments? Who handles that for you?
> **RODNEY**: My peoples' got a lawyer and I runs things by her before I jump into anything.

AUTHOR: What type of law does she practice? Does she give financial advice or just legal advice then you decide once you know if it's legit?
**RODNEY**: I don't really know. All I know is that she's been with the family a long time and I trust her. She's been doin right by my family so I trust her.
AUTHOR: That sounds like a good bet. So you plan to keep on playing for a minute to make cash and invest in real estate?
**RODNEY**: I'm not really thinking about it that deep. Right now I'm playing ball and doing my thing, that's all. So far everything is straight.

Like other interviewees from humble beginnings, Rodney credits athletics as his ticket out of a tough neighborhood. He confessed during a locker room chat that his youth in Southern California was marked by confrontations with the law, a little drug "dealin here and there," and a gang initiation. In his view, the gang was more like a family than how it is portrayed in the media. "In my case we didn't have much money growing up so whenever I needed something I knew where to turn. Because I was a good athlete the old heads didn't want me to get caught up so they protected me from all that mess going on in the streets." According to Rodney, football enabled him to gain respect and earn a reputation as somebody who could "bring it" in a "real man's" game. Through hard work and determination, Rodney relied on his talents to earn an athletic scholarship to a prestigious mid-western university with a major football program. In the eyes of his people back home, Rodney has made something out of himself. From the time he began playing sports in grade school, Rodney has seen many talented athletes end up in jail or get led astray hanging out with the wrong crowd and making stupid choices. For Rodney, football is the stage that allows him to stand tall and be somebody special. As a professional athlete, Rodney actively embraces his elite status and proudly displays it as a badge of honor.

A vital component of the well-heeled image projected by Rodney is his physical appearance. His chiseled facial features, freshly woven braids, and tattoo-covered muscular physique convey the message that a modeling contract awaits should Rodney desire to pursue a second career. In contrast to some of his African American teammates who generally sport athletic gear in public,

Rodney prefers a bit more hip hop "flava." Saggy jeans with timberland boots or a fresh pair of Air Jordans are usually accompanied by a loose fitting T-shirt by a top name urban designer. To finish off his trendy ensembles, Rodney usually protects his corn row braids with a color coordinated doo rag, topped off with a baseball cap. During our time together, I was struck by how apprehensive people were about approaching Rodney based on his appearance. Though he comes across as slightly standoffish or a bit unapproachable, Rodney is a good-natured guy who appreciates attention from fans and loves signing autographs for children.

A crucial aspect of a unidimensional football player's self-identity is the need to justify his short-lived NFL career. Rather than acknowledging any shortcomings in his athletic ability, Rodney readily counts off a plethora of explanations for his current situation. Politics and favoritism are two of the more common scapegoats offered by athletes unceremoniously forced out of the NFL before their careers can take root. An example of this well-rehearsed discourse was on display one evening when several teammates got together before a night on the town. Flip and Abdul-Jamal were playing *Madden video football* while Rodney sprawled out across the couch with a beautiful young twenty something blond hair blue-eyed Canadian woman. Placed on the dining room table of his well-furnished luxury rental was nearly a pound of marijuana, the main purpose for this gathering after a tough football practice. Abdul-Jamal, a former NFL wide receiver, and current teammate of Rodney, took a long slow drag from a "fat joint" and shouted:

> Listen partner, you wanna know about the NFL? The NFL ain't bout shiiiiiit! You know why? Cause them MOTHER FUCKERS don't want nobody to do shit except their own boys! I can go down there right now and rip shit up but they still gonna hold you back. When I was out there in NFL Europe, they couldn't help but bring me to camp cause I was the baddest thing out there! When I got to Dallas them FUCKIN CATS couldn't do shit wit me, both me and Rodney fucked them up. Our game was tight, but if you ain't one of their boys, it don't matter. They got too much invested in them.
>
> See man, this is how it works. If a team spends a high draft pick on someone in your position, that bitch is making the team! It don't matter what you do cause the money is in

> him. So I said fuck it! I'll just go on back up to Canada and make my money. See, up here, I'm the man! I'm the highest paid receiver in the CFL. People in the NFL and the CFL know I'm bad as shit, and that's all that counts. Cats like Rodney and me; we get our respect from the true ballers. We go at it hard on the field, get the girls we want, and make that money. You don't need no damn NFL to show your shit, and that's how we do!

Abdul-Jamal serves as an elder statesman for the receiving corps both on and off the field. Though Abdul-Jamal is only a year older than Rodney, his five-years of CFL experience and Grey Cup [Championship] MVP ring qualifies him to be "the man." After a successful college career, Abdul-Jamal never quite fulfilled his promise of becoming a star in the NFL. In the southern region of the United States, Abdul-Jamal is considered somewhat of a college football legend for helping his alma mater win a national championship. For many athletes, the CFL is a way of rejuvenating their careers while keeping alive the dream of making it back to the NFL. A move to the CFL also serves as a protective buffer from the people back home who constantly ask, "what happened, why aren't you still playing in the NFL?" The statements offered by Abdul-Jamal represent similar sentiments expressed by Rodney and other former NFL holdovers. Since talent alone cannot conquer the NFL politics, these athletes rely on press clippings and the Total Sports Network (TSN) to broadcast their CFL exploits. For Rodney and Abdul-Jamal, the media attention, MVP accolades, and championships help reaffirm the belief that politics kept them from their just desserts of NFL glory.

## Disappointed and Disillusioned

This section highlights three individuals to examine the emotional turmoil they experienced when attempting to disengage from their former NFL role while simultaneously seeking to establish a new self-identity. These cases demonstrate various approaches to the frustration and disappointment that confront athletes at the end of their careers. Individuals grapple with issues of mortality and self-worth, as they begin to reflect on how the NFL has

influenced their self-identity. The common variable that undergirds each response is a dialectic tension that inextricably links the player and the NFL to one another.

For the average professional athlete, the concept of disengagement is a bit misleading. In the case of BK, a talented defensive back, the challenge entails finding an alternative career that offers a similar level of personal gratification and public recognition to that of the National Football League. Further complicating his adjustment is the need to financially support his family. In addition to distant cousins, aunts and uncles hitting him up for money, BK says that his child's mother believes that he has millions of dollars stashed away somewhere because he played in the NFL. In BK's view, his baby's mother manipulates the child welfare system to continually harass him for child support based on earnings from his short-lived NFL career, even though his income has dropped precipitously since retiring.

At first glance it is easy to dismiss BK as just another 26-year-old guy hoping to fulfill a lifelong dream of playing professional football. During our introduction at the start of the CFL training camp, BK's five foot nine inch muscular frame was disguised by a loose fitting Nike T-shirt and a pair of jogging pants. BK's unimposing physique matched his reserved demeanor, both of which stood in stark contrast to images of the celebrated athlete who set several records for a Big 12 conference college football program. After a few minutes into our initial conversation, it became clear that BK was once a highly coveted athlete headed for NFL stardom.

In college, BK was such an accomplished talent that he decided to leave early and pursue his dream of playing in the NFL. "I really didn't know what to expect. Because I was only 20 when I got drafted, my parents had to sign my first contract. I really wasn't prepared for everything that happened though." In spite of his age, BK possessed the speed, quickness, and

agility to earn a multi-million dollar contract as a second round draft selection[91]. Given his accomplishments in college football, I decided to probe for a reason why BK was overlooked in the first round of the draft. "The second round was mainly because of my size. If I were 3-4 inches taller I definitely would have been a high first round selection. I would probably still be in the league and made millions more." This statement pointed to a gaping hole in BK's biography listed in the team's official media guide. NFL protocol dictates that a second round draft choice is normally given four or five seasons to prove his value. Since BK barely lasted three seasons in the NFL, I pressed for an explanation:

> I was stupid and kind of took things for granted. I just figured as long as you could play then you're safe. The team invests a lot in the 1st round guy so he gets all the chances. With all that money tied up in him they're gonna do everything possible to make things work. The farther down the line you are the fewer chances you get. With me, I got paid really good money but they could afford to let me go cause I kept getting hurt on top of screwing up a couple of times.

BK only lasted a few games into his second season before the coaches grew weary of his late night partying and frequent tardiness. The final straw came after he overslept and arrived 45 minutes late for a Monday morning "warm down" practice.

> I just had my best game in the pros and we were out late celebrating at a strip club. I slept through my alarm clock when I get a call from the team equipment manager. When I arrive they tell me the General Manager wants to see me. I joked and ask him how much is my fine and he tells me they're fed up, that's it, I'm done.

Just like that, BK had his contract terminated and was labeled a wasted draft pick. Fortunately for him, another team immediately claimed him off the waiver wire and signed him to a contract[92]. His reputation as a NFL talent was still intact so another team picked him up, only for him to have his career sidetracked by injuries over the next season and a half.

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[91] There is a discrepancy between published reports of his draft ranking and BK's claim of being selected in the 2nd round selection. In the recorded conversation BK states that he was drafted in the second round, however, the NFL draft records list BK as a third round selection; the 84th player selected that year.

[92] According to the 2006 NFL record and fact book, the waiver system is a procedure by which player contracts or

In a matter of three seasons BK was out of the NFL and working as a sales representative for a marketing company. As he described his experience in sales, it was evident that the monotony of office work and the relative anonymity of being out of the spotlight began to wear on him. "Man I got bored sitting in that office doing the same thing over and over again every day. I'm used to people knowing my name, being the man. It's a nice feeling when everybody knows who you are." Over the two years that I have gotten to know BK, he has left the CFL only to try and resurrect his career once again in Arena Football (AFL). When asked why he would go play in some small mid-western town to earn between $50,000 and $100,000 per season after having earned a seat at the NFL table, BK's response was simple yet poignant, "I got that itch again. Just couldn't stay away. I'll probably keep playing until that desire's gone."

BK is not unique in the struggle to let go of football and move on to the next phase of his life. Chester, a physically imposing 34-year-old defensive end, was forced to retire after a long, successful NFL career. I first met Chester during the off-season prior to his final season. He sensed the end was near. The cruel reality of the NFL was taking its toll on him as he began to contemplate a life without football. Unlike many of his teammates who burned through money buying luxury cars, and flashy jewelry, Chester carefully planned for his financial future. According to a close personal friend, a prosperous thirteen-year career allowed Chester to park over thirty six million dollars in various investments. It appears, however, the impending death of his career caused Chester to re-examine life apart from football. For the first time in over twenty years, Chester was about to embark on a life without rigorous workouts, analyzing game films, and chartered team flights. His long time business partner Victor acknowledged that the

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NFL rights to players are made available by a club to other clubs in the League. During the procedure, the 31 other clubs either file claims to obtain the players or waive the opportunity to do so.

stress of retirement was taking a toll on Chester. According to Victor, Chester was notorious for living life on his own terms, but his behavior was becoming more erratic than usual.

> He must be going through some kind of phase or something; he's usually very good at handling business affairs. Usually when Chester wants to do something, you can count on him doing it. I don't know what's going on with him right now but it must be something to do with his career. That's the only thing I can think of.

The good fortune that allowed Chester to avoid serious injury and play well beyond the average career of 3.3 seasons had done little to fill the void that accompanies a forced retirement.

On more than one occasion Chester confessed that he was certain he could still perform at a high level, but that the minimum salary for veterans made him expendable. "I know I can still play, it's just when you start getting up there in age, then you become too expensive. After you've been around for so long they don't want to pay a brother, so I refuse to go to camp." Reacting to my obvious confusion, Chester continued:

> Why should I get out there in the hot sun each summer, let them break my body down, and get injured for no money? For the last couple of years I just waited until training camp was over then start making calls, someone always needs a quality defensive end, so they'd invite me in for a workout and I get the job.

It visibly pained Chester to admit the end was closing in on him. When questioned whether he could squeeze out one more year in the NFL, Chester's patience grew a little thin, "Damn man, you wear me out with all those questions. I want to get my entertainment management company off the ground at some point, and I want to get a cigar bar rolling soon but we'll just have to wait and see." Several months later Chester had gone underground for about a month and stopped returning telephone calls after discovering that he could not secure a contract for the upcoming season. In responding to questions regarding his absence, Victor his business partner said, "He was talking about going back to school and possibly finishing his degree but I'm not sure what he plans to do next."

The final case in this section describes the experiences of an individual who left the NFL in the mid 1980s. His story is similar to thousands of athletes who attack the NFL Players Association (the union) and the NFL for turning their backs on older retirees.[93] Big Al spent a total of eight seasons playing for two teams on the east coast, a third located in the mid-west, and a fourth on the west coast. Three years after his retirement, a mutual friend introduced me to this kindhearted giant. Big Al immediately agreed to serve as my personal coach for my impending NFL tryout. The well-built 6'4" 250 pound African American former tight end greeted me with the same generosity and respect that I soon learned he approached everyone with. During this phase of his retired life, Big Al was attempting to reconnect with some influential community leaders and corporate executives he had met during his playing career. In addition to adjusting to life without football, Big Al was also readjusting to living with his wife and six children after spending the final three seasons of his career living on the road. After he was traded the first time, Big Al and his wife decided that it was best not to uproot their young children every time he was sent to another team.

Apart from Big Al's kindness and warm personality, the thing that stands out about this imposing figure is his desire to help retired NFL athletes "get paid." Every chance he gets to meet up with members of the pro football family, Big Al seeks out his NFL brethren to remind them that maintaining a high profile and remaining active in the community is the most important way to "keep that cash flowin." When pressed to describe how successful he is at rounding up retired guys to come out for celebrity basketball games or other events that offer appearance fees, Big Al explained:

[93] In 2007 former Chicago Bears Coach Mike Ditka and fellow NFL Hall of Fame inductee Gale Sayers testified before the U.S Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation regarding difficulties facing athletes seeking disability benefits during retirement.

> Most of these guys are like children. The young guys won't show up for a gig because they don't need the money, and the older cats would rather complain about what the NFL ain't doing for them. I tell them to come on, all you got to do is say a few words and sign a few autographs. And you know what they say? Brother, why don't you talk to the NFL and get them to kick in some cash so you can pay us some real money. Hell, they owe us at least that much; after all we did for them.

Though many athletes feel slighted by the small appearance fees that Big Al offers, his philosophy of guys "cashing in whenever possible" is rooted in the recognition that African Americans make up nearly seventy percent of the NFL talent pool. Over the thirty plus years of his association with the NFL, Big Al has seen many Black alumni struggle financially, while the coaches, front office management, and owners continue to "rake in the big bucks." For Big Al, the key to gaining control of his financial future is leveraging the one bargaining chip at his disposal-- the fact that he played in the NFL. In his view, White people may have money and resources, but he has access to NFL ball players. Over the years we have been acquainted, a great deal of Big Al's energy and identity has involved figuring out how to execute a strategy that properly compensates Black NFL athletes after the game ends. Big Al is convinced that "White people are always having some type of problem with their kids and they don't mind turning to someone else to solve them." Big Al espouses that rich White folks "will pay good money and use their social connections to support programs run by ex-athletes, as long as it helps reach their children." On several occasions I have witnessed Big Al delivering variations of the following sermon:

> Them White folks is something else; boy let me tell you. You can call on them for anything as long as it involves children. Just tell them you want to put together a program for the kids and they'll find the money. But brother, don't ever forget that they always see you as a Black man. Don't matter who you are or what you've done, they'll always let you know that you're a Black man in America. It's like they want you to feel like they doin you some kind of damn favor. [94]

[94] Paraphrased from notes recorded during several personal conversations.

On the surface, Big Al's comments on race and his apprehensions about White people appear incongruous with his actions. Over the years, Big Al has introduced me to dozens of Caucasians whom he has called on to support numerous charitable interests and fundraising events. On several occasions, I have even heard Big Al refer to these men and women as "real good people." In fact, he took me to several lunch dates and casual meetings with prominent White and Jewish business contacts he met during his playing days in the NFL. Big Al felt that these men were candidates to purchase the five thousand dollar Super Bowl packages the company I worked for was promoting. Asked if he considered these men to be different than the average White person he encountered while playing in the NFL, Big Al quipped, "[Author], you know how that shit is, they your friends when they want something from you, or when feel like they can get something out of you. Otherwise we just one step above an average nigger. Can't never forget that shit brother." This point of view conjures up memories of discussions I have had with a handful of other African American players. Whether the athlete retired prior to the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) earning free agency in 1992, or if he was currently playing professional football, the African American men who professed similar sentiments associated the NFL with high priced slavery[95].

I began to grasp how serving as a NFLPA union representative in the early 1980s influenced Big Al's identity as an African American NFL athlete. In 2005, as we traveled on the I-95 highway from New York City to Annapolis Md., Big Al, now in his mid-50s, offered an account of the struggle for higher wages and racial equality during his eight year career:

> Man the first time we went on strike in 1982 we caught some serious hell. My career never really recovered because it was up to me to decide if our team should support the strike. I had general managers and coaches telling me that I would never work again if the strike went through. We were fighting for our fair share of the pie and the NFL really tried to stick it to

[95] In the book *Forty Million Dollar Slave,* William C. Rhoden (2006) puts forth the thesis that black athletes are little more than highly paid slaves.

> us. They don't give a damn about the players. Look how they treat us when we're finished playing, especially the Black guys. It's pretty much like they use you up and throw you away, unless they can use you to make them look good.

To Big Al, the NFL and the NFLPA conspire to keep the athletes fighting amongst themselves for access to limited resources, while the owners reap the fruits of their labor. In his view, the NFL is a highly racialized environment designed to keep the Black athlete in a subjected position. Big Al believes that "the White man is always trying to make brothers feel like they should be happy for anything they get; but the sad part is that brothers be acting like they happy to just to have that hand out." As we rolled down the freeway toward a mid-summer cookout in honor of a budding young NFL star who recently signed a $68 million dollar contract extension, Big Al continued:

> Yeah, the money has changed, but it's still the same old NFL. The young cats think things are different because the money is better, but look how many athletes is still struggling once they get out. I mean, you put your time in, make your money, and after you finish playing, then what you got? The league don't care about you. These young brothers don't understand that it ain't just about the money.
>
> What good is the money when your body's all beat up? The NFL keeps on rollin without you. The White man got us just where he wants us. As long as we keep our hand out there asking the White man for something, we gonna be in the same damn boat. That shit ain't changed. All we thinking about is the money, but we don't understand that it's about more than the money. Don't nobody in the NFL give a damn about you once you gone. It's time for us to come together cause it's hard out here on a brother. We got to start looking after each other, cause once your career is over, what you got? Who are you then?

After losing contact for nearly sixteen years, a chance encounter at a cocktail lounge for young Wall Street types in the East Village of New York brought Big Al back into my life. As cheerful as ever, he sauntered across the bar, called out my name and greeted me with a bear hug. I soon learned that Big Al was going through a rough period in his life. His wife was suffering from medical conditions that kept her out of work for several months. Nearly all his children depended on him financially, especially his teenage daughter, who had recently dropped out of college and was struggling to make it as a single mom. To help the family stay afloat

during these lean times, Big Al took a job as a bouncer working weekends at a lounge in Manhattan. His only income consisted of selling vitamins for a multi-level marketing company, and working for $200 per night on Friday and Saturday before rushing off to grab a 4:00 am train back to the suburbs. Always the proud athlete, Big Al never let on that life after the NFL had not gone according to plan. No matter how tough things were in his personal life, Big Al always masked his concerns with a big smile and a hearty laugh. Recognizing that he could use a little help to make it through these tough times, I arranged for Big Al to work as a business development representative at the sports marketing company I managed. The owner of the company agreed to pay Big Al a modest hourly wage along with a commission for any Super Bowl tickets he could secure through his NFL connections.

Throughout our two-decade friendship I have witnessed Big Al wrestle with a number of personal issues. After consistently missing two or three days of work each week over a span of four months, my boss pressured me into relieving Big Al of his position at the marketing company. Mindful of the awkwardness of the situation, Big Al graciously accepted the decision and stated that he understood my predicament as his friend and manager. Because of the turmoil and instability surrounding his life, Big Al was forced to sell his house, the last meaningful asset remaining from his NFL career. He and his wife decided to place their valuables in storage, and relocate to the southwest for a cheaper cost of living. When questioned about his plans for the future and possibly taking advantage of the NFL college tuition reimbursement program, Big Al smiled wryly, shook his head and stated as a matter of fact "that's the plan." He followed, "I've been telling my wife for years that we both need look into finishing our degrees, as soon as we get settled out west, get the house in order, and set the kids straight."

The change of venue follows a familiar pattern in Big Al's life. Over the years, I have seen Big Al get recruited to direct one community-based project after another, only to be disappointed at the eleventh hour. One incident summarizes the disappointment Big Al has encountered throughout his retirement. Shortly after he moved his family out west, an administrator from his former town in the northeast contacted Big Al with an offer to run a city- wide basketball program. The councilman explained that the city had limited funds for the pilot program, but they would appropriate a full budget to hire him the following year if things turned out well. Big Al decided that it was worth his time to relocate for the duration of the basketball program as long as the city agreed to pay a small stipend to cover his expenses. After praising him for running a successful program and giving the kids an alternative to joining a burgeoning street gang community, the city informed Big Al that they were in desperate need of his services again next season even though they could not offer him a salary as promised. "That's why I don't like dealin with Black folks. They're the first ones to cry about how bad things is in the minority community, but when it comes time to put money on the table, they start crying that Black athletes are making all this money and should be giving something back to the community, which is all well and good, but we have to eat too. I got a family to take care of. I can't be messin with these folks no more."

Like many of the individuals I encountered during this project, Big Al seems engaged in a prolonged struggle to reconcile his current identity with his former role as an NFL athlete. On one hand, Big Al believes that he can leverage the fact that he played in the NFL into a sustainable second career in community service by appealing to influential business, state and local leaders. On the other hand, Big Al has failed to earn the credentials necessary to head a community service organization. He has yet to return to university and finish his degree,

develop a complete business plan, file for 501c3 non-profit status, or gain management experience working for an existing community based agency. Rather than choosing to work his way through the ranks and build a solid reputation as a successful manager in the world of non-profit and community service, Big Al relies on his accomplishments as a NFL athlete to create career opportunities during retirement. Unfortunately, this strategy has yielded mixed results at best. In many ways, Big Al epitomizes the prolonged struggle that some NFL athletes experience when attempting to leave behind the celebrity status of his former role.

## Capital and the Social Support Network

In contrast to other athletes detailed in this paper, the final subject claims that exiting from the NFL was not difficult because he never thought of himself as "just a football player." Though injury and other issues forced him out of the NFL prematurely, this athlete states that as a teenager he developed a plan to earn a football scholarship at a nationally prominent university and spend at least five years in the NFL. He credits a former NFL athlete and his parents for helping him understand there is more to life than playing football. In describing this individual's experiences, I illustrate how he views playing in the NFL as a marketable asset he can leverage in the business world. This section also contains a narrative that explains how this athlete's family serves as a social support network that prevents him from conflating his NFL-identity with his self-identity. The quotes provided by this highly regarded athlete suggest that although a forced exit from the NFL is a difficult adjustment for many, a small select group has developed strategies to transition into new roles with relative ease.

I had never heard the name Jay Maesing before a business associate suggested a meeting with the former super bowl champion. The first thing that impressed me was the business-like manner in which he approached the conversation. Unlike most professional athletes that I have

encountered, Jay made a point of turning off his cell phone and offered his full attention. One statement during the conversation offered a profound insight into Jay's philosophy on life.

> When I was in college, our head coach used to tell us that everything we ever needed in life was right in front of us, we just needed to go out and get it. I have seen so many guys just waste their time making excuses when all they have to do is recognize that all the resources they'll ever need has already been given to them.

After breakfast we decided to walk eight blocks through the chilly New York City spring rain and continue the conversation in my office. As the exchange moved towards exploring business opportunities, I nearly forgot about the fact that Jay was a retired NFL athlete. Only after I began introducing him around the office did his reputation reclaim center stage. Glen, the exuberant 26 year old office manager, jumped out of his seat, shook Jay's hand and proclaimed, "Super bowl ###, I remember you! You had a nice career, not long enough, but good all the same. I always wondered what happened to you." Glen proved to be a wealth of information for my research as he offered an oral history of Jay's gridiron accomplishments. "You're one of only a handful of people to captain the XXX University football team. You hold the record for most career touchdowns catches at XXX University. You were drafted in the second round and played in two Super bowls over a five year NFL career." Glen then explained that he is a big fantasy football fan, to which Jay chuckled, "I probably lost you a lot of money during my career."

Later that afternoon I asked Jay why he only played five years. In contrast to many of the athletes I interviewed for this project, Jays' response was both mature and insightful for a thirty two year old young man less than five years removed from the NFL:

> I never considered myself to be a football player. I'm a guy who played football but I never allowed myself to be defined by the game. As a matter of fact, I've always known that football was going to be my springboard to bigger and brighter things. I chose to attend the university that I did because of the alumni network.

When I pressed Jay to explain how he could devise such a sophisticated plan as a high school student, he simply replied:

> Growing up my father owned a successful electronics business, and mom was well respected as a schoolteacher back in the Midwest. One of her students was Drayton Marks (famed NFL wide receiver who played in '80s and '90s). When I used to visit Drayton he showed me how the game really works. Those were some crazy times, the things I saw coming at him was something else. Even though I was only in high school I could still see that you better have a plan because that shit he was dealing with wasn't real. He used to tell me to make sure not to get caught up in all the hype when it was my turn.

Upon exiting the NFL and moving to Los Angeles, Jay used his bachelor's degree in communication to establish an entertainment production company. After calling on contacts from his Alma Mater, Jay developed a college football TV show while starting up a weekly TV-online football journal. "Honestly, I never intended to be in the NFL forever. I knew that football could open doors to take me where I want to go in life so I started out with a plan and stuck to it."

As a former professional and collegiate star, Jay actively seeks to exploit his elite status for personal gain. According to Jay, the NFL is a calling card that gives him access to people and business opportunities that he willfully takes advantage of. Over time, I began to sense that Jay grew frustrated with athletes who lacked the savvy to leverage their NFL status into a tangible job or other means of making money. "One of my college football buddies that has a much bigger name that me, rang a couple of weeks ago and asked who he could call on to purchase sponsorships for his NASCAR team. I mean shit, your fuckin Mr. NFL, Godammit, and you're calling me for help? People should be begging you to receive your phone call." Shortly after the conversation with his former teammate, Jay contacted me about a fund raising campaign he was involved with for a non-profit organization that provides scholarships for high school athletes. I offered to introduce Jay to a personal friend who heads the high net worth division of a major Wall Street investment firm. At the meeting I casually mentioned that Jay earned a Super Bowl

ring several years earlier. At the first opening in the conversation, Jay took control by mentioning that he and the firm's CEO are alumni of the same university. My friend immediately called the CEO to inform him that Jay was sitting in his office. The two college alumni shared a few pleasantries over the speaker phone before the CEO offered his mobile number and encouraged Jay to call anytime he needed anything. As we left the office building, Jay explained that this meeting was the reason why he chose the school that he did. "This is what it's all about; coming out of high school I could have gone to damn near any school in the country. I'm talking about contacts –shit, a degree from XXX plus playing in the NFL - you can't beat that." In both his words and his actions, Jay seems singularly focused on using NFL celebrity status to cultivate a successful career outside of football.

Ironically, even with a well-conceived retirement plan in hand Jay still experienced a turbulent exit from the NFL. A hint of frustration creeps into his voice when Jay explains how he was shuffled around the league over the course of five seasons. Besides being traded by one team and getting released by two others, Jay attempted to prolong his career by playing with a fourth team. That effort was thwarted by a failed physical examination that eventually led him to file a grievance with the NFL for disability benefits. Even with the guidance of his mentor, and the support of his family, Jay was still frustrated when a knee injury prematurely forced him to exit the NFL.

## Discussion

The narratives presented in this paper illustrate the reoccurring themes of self-identity, role conflict, and disengagement addressed by the participating athletes. The stories offer accounts of the strategies employed by individuals confronted with an involuntary separation from a master status. The theory presented by Ebaugh (1988) and modified by Drahota and

Eitzen (1988), is inadequately positioned to explore the NFL athlete's psychological struggle to function in the prescribed role of the ex-NFL athlete.

In this chapter, I set out to examine how forced role exits differed from voluntary exits. Rodney and Abdul-Jamal provide examples of individuals who have experienced the bitter disappointment of rejection from NFL. Their bravado and grandiose claims of athletic prowess are illustrative of individuals that conflate personal identity with celebrity status. For these men, an acknowledgment that they were not physically talented enough to play in the NFL would equate to an attack of their self-identity. Rather than preparing for the inevitable forced exit from professional football both men chose to prolong their careers by playing in the CFL. Granted, an apparent lack of transferable skills appears to be at least partially responsible for Rodney and Abdul-Jamal's decision to continue playing in the Canadian Football League. In BK and Chester we gain a glimpse of athletes who express an overriding desire to hold onto a celebrity role that offered exceptional social and personal gratification rather than concede that time has passed them by. In fact, BK and Chester each testified that the difficulty of adjusting to the mundane rituals of civilian life was compounded by their forced retirement from professional football. Big Al shows a prolonged struggle to disengage from a forced role exit can inform and shape one's approach to life even after twenty plus years of retirement. And Jay Maesing presents the case that social support networks can play a prominent role in framing how an athlete understands his celebrity-identity. The second contribution of Jay Maesing's narrative is his view that an NFL-identity equates to cultural and social capital that can improve an athlete's status in retirement.

Self-identity is an important but often-overlooked concept that affects the individual's experience during the loss of a significant role. As Taylor and Ogilvie (2001) point out, the

professional athletes' psychological approach to self-identity is a key factor in their ability to adequately transition into the next phase of life. The narratives offered by Rodney and Abdul-Jamal support Killeya-Jones' (2005) assertion that an athletic identity may occupy such a central role that it dominates the ego-identity. Both Rodney and Abdul-Jamal expend a great deal of energy crafting and maintaining a celebrity identity designed to reinforce the social status they have come to depend upon. A persistent theme woven through many of their conversations is the belief that the business aspect of the NFL is responsible for their broken dreams and unfulfilled promises. These two athletes are frustrated and distrustful of a system that failed to deliver on the promises of fame, fortune, and public adulation. Although elite athletes are susceptible to developing an overly inflated sense of self, it is important to note that social support networks can help prevent one role from dominating the various different roles an individual occupies at any given time. Each season hundreds of athletes enter the NFL driven by the belief that a meritocratic system will enable them to enjoy the spoils of celebrity identity long after retiring from football. For the athletes involved in this study, the forced retirement represents an acute anomic condition in that it threatens one's reputation, prestige, living standards, leisure activities, and general lifestyle choices. My insider status allowed me to interact with athletes over an extended period of time. This advantage helped me recognize when an athlete tried to hide his frustration over not being able to make it back to the NFL or when someone was satisfied with how he exited from the game.

## Chapter 6 conclusion

The role exit process is an important and distinct social phenomenon because the expectations, norms, and identity associated with the individual are defined by one's previous role and not by the role currently occupied. By examining the lives of a small group of NFL athletes, a subtle yet more nuanced version of a phenomenon identified by Ebaugh (1988) begins

to emerge. A small though influential segment of society is subject to problems resulting from the involuntary removal from a primary role. Apart from professional athletes, actors, musicians, dancers, career politicians, and military personnel may suffer from a forced role exit and an inability to adopt a new role without disengaging from a former role. Similar to the NFL athlete, certain military personnel are confronted with the additional burden of exiting from a role that is embedded within an institutional setting. Social science will benefit by exploring the strategies and methods used to combat the problems resulting from the involuntarily exit of a role central to one's self-identity.

# Chapter 7
## *Unequal Distribution of Resources*

The recent arrest of NFL legend Lawrence Taylor and the subsequent media fire storm surrounding his alleged rape of an underage girl serves as a reminder of why I first selected this dissertation topic. Over the years I have listened to countless people chastise fallen athletes for reckless living and criminal behavior. I continue to wince whenever people proclaim, "What's the matter with these guys?" "With that kind of money and fame I would never do something so stupid." After a number of attempts to reason with the cynics I came to realize that the public has a limited understanding about the actual day to day life of the NFL athlete. Though it is nearly impossible to uncover all the subtleties and nuances of this lifestyle, it is my hope that the preceding chapters help shed light on some of the complex issues confronting these individuals. It is also my wish that this study assist athletes in their understanding of why the public feels a deep sense of betrayal when a fallen sports figure such as Lawrence Taylor is accused of committing a loathsome act.

Four years of field observations and countless interviews have allowed me gain a deeper appreciation for the young men in their early twenties who are adored by millions of fans and are paid a small fortune for playing professional footbal. The four main findings revealed in this study suggest that 1) the NFL Collective Bargaining Agreement has created a stratified system that distributes resources unequally among athletes, which often leads to a difficult retirement for some. 2) Players that feel a deep sense of responsibility or connection to family, church, or some other institution generally have an easier time adjusting to retirement. 3) The forced role-exit is a stressful process that produces feelings of emptiness for those NFL athletes who have not developed skills to cope with the loss of identity. 4) Black athletes develop strategies such

Afrocentrist/Black Nationalist, and racial integrationist responses to deal with the marginalization they experience as members of the NFL.

## Stratified System of Inequality

The way an athlete enters the NFL has a huge impact on the quality of life he can expect during retirement. Athletes gain entrance into the NFL through various means. The most common source of player recruitment is the annual draft. The draft is the first chance for each of the thirty two teams to conduct negotiations with players who have at least three years of college football experience (or two and half years removed from high school). The draft order is generally based on each team's regular season record, with the exception of the two Super Bowl contestants, who are placed at the end of the draft order. The current format consists of seven rounds plus an additional thirty two compensatory picks combine for a total of 256 draft selections each year. Each team is allotted a certain amount of money from its salary cap to sign players whose rights were acquired through the draft. The amount is based on an undisclosed formula that assigns a certain value to each draft selection. Teams that acquire more picks or teams whose picks appear earlier in the draft receive an increased allotment of cap space to sign players in their rookie season. Because players receive salaries commensurate with the position in which they were drafted, a de facto pay scale for drafted rookies exists. At the completion of the draft, un-selected rookies are free to sign a contract with any team in the league. These free-agent rookies generally sign a pre-determined rookie minimum contract and receive a smaller signing bonus.

In addition to the wide disparity in financial compensation, healthcare and other benefits are dispersed unequally among NFL athletes. As of April 2008, the NFL dramatically increased Line of Duty Benefits eligible under the Bert Bell/Pete Rozelle NFL Player Retirement Plan and

the NFL Player Supplemental Disability Plan. The improvements that were made include a $20,000 increase to the inactive total and permanent disability benefits. Vested players also benefit from an enhanced Joint Replacement Assistance Program, Spine Treatment Program, and Neurological Care Program. The problem is that the vesting period, which establishes NFL player health care benefits, requires a minimum of four years of service. As pointed out in at the beginning of this study, the average NFL career only lasts 3.3 seasons. The cost of medical treatment for chronic injury during retirement presents an additional burden for NFL athletes who plays less than four seasons. Because football is a collision sport athletes are at significant risk of serious injury during every play throughout their careers. By the time most NFL athletes retire between the ages of 25 to 27 their bodies have exposed to between 10 and 15 years of violent high speed collisions. Essentially, the NFL Management Council and the NFL Players Association have colluded to create a labor agreement that prevents the average NFL player from qualifying for extended health care and retirement benefits.

The majority of NFL athletes who play 3.3 years earn between $310,000 and $500,000 per season. This means that when the average athlete retires, he has generally earned $1,046,000 to $1,678,500 million. After paying taxes and fees to his sports agent, the average athlete will pocket roughly one million dollars in exchange for playing 54 NFL games. If a young man has the will power to resist the temptation of buying fast cars and expensive jewelry, his labor can provide a nice financial foundation to build toward retirement. The primary question confronting this group of NFL athletes centers on diligence. Do these young men have the foresight or discipline to save enough money to cover the medical expenses they incur from chronic injuries that surface in midlife? Sadly, seventy eight percent of all NFL athletes suffer financial difficulties in retirement. The unfortunately reality is that the average NFL athlete is faced with

double jeopardy: a shorted playing career limits his access to health and retirement benefits while also placing him at the lowest end of the pay scale. Put more succinctly, the most financially vulnerable NFL athletes have the least amount of health and retirement protection. This group is clearly the most exploited of all NFL athletes.

The high draft picks are on the opposite end of the NFL labor market. Retired Buffalo Bills safety, Jeff Nixon (2010), indicates that NFL teams awarded $426 million in guaranteed bonuses for the 32 first round draft selections in 2009. Though the first player selected in the 2009 draft received $41.7 million in bonus money, and the final player of the first round was paid $6.1 million, both players signed for significantly more than the average NFL athlete. Additionally, when a team invests millions in a high draft pick, management is more inclined to retain that player for longer than 3.3 seasons. Ironically, when the Oakland Raiders cut former first round pick JaMarcus Russell after only three seasons, a wave of reporters rushed to label him the biggest bust in NFL history. The critics complained that the Raiders wasted money by guaranteeing $36 million of Russell's $61 million rookie contract. I suggest another perspective from which to examine this situation; though Russell did not play long enough to become eligible for full retirement and medical benefits, he pocketed $36 million for being the first player selected in the draft.

When the NFL labor situation is examined through a Marxist framework it becomes apparent that a stratified reward system exists in order to keep power centralized in the hands of the owners. Burawoy's study of the shop floor helps explain how workers get attached to the game and become consenting participants in their own exploitation. In his study Burawoy describes the process "Making out" in which the worker is inserted into the labor process as an individual rather than as a member of a class distinguished by a particular relationship to the

means of production. In the same sense that laborers in Burawoy's study feel an enhanced sense of autonomy because they control their own machines instead of being controlled by them, NFL athletes believe they are the masters of their athletic ability in the arena of professional football. The NFL collective bargaining agreement serves as a tool to help reinforce this notion by rewarding players based on individual rather than collective efforts. A second benefit of the individual reward system is that it generally assists to deflect conflict from a hierarchical direction to a lateral direction. Juleonny's narratives in chapter six about teammates being pitted against one another to secure higher salaries is a powerful illustration this point. The conflict for resources also obscures the fact that NFL athletes are common members of a class of agents who sell their labor power for wages, which places them in a distinct class apart from owners who, according to Marxist theorist, appropriate their unpaid labor (Burawoy, 1979).

## Sports Identity as a master status

My field research includes testimony from a number of personal assistants, sports agents, and others who interact closely with NFL athletes. Many of these professionals expressed a belief that the loss of identity is the primary reason professional football players experience difficulties adjusting to retirement. According to these informants, NFL athletes are so pampered and spoiled from a young age that they often develop an over-inflated sense of self. Interviews with a number of football players also revealed that felt the transition to retirement was more difficult than they had initially anticipated. In scholarly terms this phenomenon is said to occur when the athletic identity occupies such a central role in the identity structure that it dominates the ego-identity. It stands to reason that athletes who define their self worth in terms of sports will struggle finding something to fill the void upon leaving the game. After hearing this sentiment expressed from athletes and many people closely associated with the NFL, I began thinking about my circle of friends who played professional football. The theory of the

unidimensional athlete put forth by Taylor and Ogilvie was useful in helping me decipher why some former teammates seem to have a hard time finding a sense of purpose beyond football. It was a greater challenge for me to explain why other athletes were able to make the transition without feeling a sense of detachment or exhibiting self-destructive behavior during retirement.

A lengthy interview with a young married couple led me to uncover one of the elements that helps some athletes prepare for the eventual end of their NFL career. This couple explained that upon signing a rookie free agent contract they decided to marry and move to Northern California together. The young bride made it clear that she initially resented the thought of putting off graduate school to follow her husband's dream of playing in the NFL. Over time she came to discover that her husband was also required make personal sacrifices for the chance to play professional football. Rather than choosing to live apart during the season and pursuing their individual career goals, the couple decided that their definition of a stable marriage meant living together. The wife also acknowledged that some women might criticize her for becoming financially vulnerable to a man, but having a Christ centered relationship required them to keep their family together at all costs. As far as this couple is concerned, playing in the NFL is a short lived career. They approach life in the NFL as a shared experience and once his career is over they aim to move into the next phase of life together. About sixty minutes into the three hour interview this young bride explained that at some point after her husband retires she intends to go back to school and start her career as an accountant.

The interview with this young couple pushed me to think about how a commitment to family can serve as a buffer against developing a unidimensional athlete identity. With the assistance of Stryker and Burke's (2000) work on group affiliation I was able to conclude that some athletes use organized religion to guard against falling prey to an overly inflated sense of

self. In addition to attending church services and participating in family bible studies with teammates, this young couple relied on a network of Christian athletes to guard against the athletic role from dominating the ego-identity (Killeya-Jones, 2005).

During my field research I encountered a second family who helped me examine the role that culture and family upbringing plays in helping athletes safeguard against developing a singularly focused self-identity. A young Canadian couple explained that when they first met in college she used to help her boyfriend practice his long snapping skills. Her husband, a burly 275 pound defensive tackle stated that as a teenager his goal was to play in the NFL as a long snapper for field goals and punts. Although his wife did not know much about American football, she enjoyed spending time on the practice field getting to know her future husband. After attending a rookie tryout in 2005, a scout from the Dallas Cowboys offered him a free agent contract. The couple packed their belongings in an older model Honda Accord and headed to Texas. Upon arriving in Dallas the Canadians admitted experiencing culture shock. They had no idea how fanatical Texans were about football. The couple explained that in Canada, kids grow up dreaming of being professional hockey players. For most Canadians, football on the college level is equivalent to a club sport. Compared to the 100,119 screaming fans that arrive at DKR-Memorial stadium hours before a University of Texas game, Canadian athletes' teams are delighted when a few thousand people show up for college football game.

While analyzing the data collected from my interviews with this young Canadian couple, I also gained an awareness of how social interactions influence the way individuals interpret identity, roles, and status. When an American child decides to play football he is often introduced to the game by a local junior league. The same opportunities are not available for most Canadians. Athletes across Canada must to wait until high school or even college before

they can participate in organized tackle football. Whereas, top America football players are recognized by the national media and rewarded with college scholarships, Canadians generally perform in front of small crowds and pay tuition for the privilege to play college football. My Canadian subjects explained that coming from a small town in the province of Quebec meant spending countless hours practicing alone since practically no one else shared a vision of playing in the NFL. As the couple recounted their experiences, I began to see how their cultural upbringing in Quebec shaped relationships with American teammates. Both the husband and wife mentioned that it was difficult for them to understand why many American NFL athletes waste so much cash buying expensive toys. To save money during his rookie season, the Canadian couple rented a small apartment across the street from Texas stadium. The husband indicated that as the season progressed his teammates began to pressure him about buying a big house so he could "live like a Dallas Cowboy." His wife also recalled that some of the player's wives and girlfriends gave her a hard time for having such a small engagement ring. From her perspective, these women expected to be lavished with expensive gifts because NFL athletes are paid so much money just for playing football.

Much like the first couple I introduced in this section, the Canadian wife views her husband's football career as a partnership. In addition to spending countless hours together on the football field, the husband explained that his wife was always there to pick up the pieces when things went wrong. Every time he got cut from a team and his agent called with a tryout in different NFL city, his wife was always there to pack up the apartment, turn off the utilities, and drive their little Honda to the next destination. Both the wife and husband indicated that playing in the NFL would not have been worth it without having the other person there to share the

experience. This couple came to the conclusion that the money and material possessions are nice but none of those things defined their relationship.

My research suggests that strong ties between athletes, wives, parents, or other family members can help safeguard against developing an over inflated ego. I also encountered athletes who described how relationships with their children helped them remain grounded. In addition to family, I have seen retired NFL athletes dedicate time and money to charities or visit the U.S. Armed Forces as a means of committing to meaningful activities outside of sports. Many of the retired NFL athletes I encountered expressed a belief that volunteer work is a way of giving back to the community while helping those who are less fortunate. Community service also serves as a way for the retired NFL athlete to remain socially relevant while attracting positive media attention. At least one sports agent mentioned that he requires his clients to establish a charity as a way to acquire the social capital necessary to safeguard against any unforeseen negative publicity in the future. This agent believes that once he can sell his client on establishing roots in the community it becomes easier for that athlete to recognize the benefits of preparing for life after the NFL.

## Involuntary role-exit and forced retirement

In the 1994 Hollywood movie *Shawshank Redemption* the character Brooks Hatlen, played by James Whitmore, was afraid to face his parole date after serving 50 year in prison. When Brooks attempts to kill another inmate to avoid his release from prison, Morgan Freeman's character explains that Brooks was terrified of the outside world because he had become institutionalized by the prison system. Freeman's character reasons that inside of prison Brooks is an educated man, and an important person, but outside the walls of the Shawshank Brooks is just a used up old ex-con with arthritis in both hands. I refer to the Brooks character in

order to illustrate how professional football players undergo a similar institutionalization process. I am not suggesting that NFL functions exactly like a penitentiary, but a closer examination of the dialectic relationship between the institution and the athlete is warranted.

The retired NFL athlete shares much in common with the character Brooks. As a career inmate Brooks recognized that he occupied an important role in prison. Life outside of the penitentiary presented a challenge that Brooks was unprepared to handle. Similarly, an NFL football player spends so much time functioning in the athletic role that the thought of transitioning into a new identity is often overwhelming. Years of social conditioning teaches the NFL athlete how to relate to the world as a football player. Football consumes nearly every aspect of an athlete's life from the time he learns to play the game until retirement. Major college football is the pathway that nearly every athlete must travel before earning a spot on a NFL roster. For fifty weeks each year college athletes are housed in an institutional setting where coaches and administrators structure every aspect of their lives. By the time an athlete enters the NFL he has undergone an intense boot camp designed to indoctrinate him into the cultural, social, and physical expectations of professional football. For the physically gifted athlete who is willing to comply with the rules of the institution, his reward is a spot on an NFL roster. If an athlete refuses or is unable to conform to the rules and policies of the institution he will be forced to relinquish his role as an elite football player. During my field research I observed that a number of retired athletes experience a sense of loss or anomie upon recognizing they no longer possess the same social prestige as current NFL athletes. In fact, one of the biggest challenges faced by retired NFL athletes is the realization that society does not have a well defined role for the former elite athlete.

As a result of spending years in the field, I discovered two primary reasons why the transition from the NFL is difficult for many athletes. As an athlete advances from high school through college and onto the NFL, society begin to identify with him more as a football player than the other roles he occupies. Retirement presents challenges for the professional athlete because he does not want to relinquish the social prestige that comes with playing in the NFL. Many athletes also believe that playing in the NFL is a social marker to be leveraged for business opportunities. In sociological terms this conflict can be described as an involuntary role exit. Contrary to the individuals in Ebaugh's study (1988), several athletes in my research experienced anxiety after being forced out of the NFL due to injury, old age, or because of a glut of talent in the labor market. The retired NFL athlete struggles to establish a post-career identity when society continues to view him in his former athletic role. It is nearly impossible for an athlete to abandon his athletic identity when people introduce him as someone who used to play for the Oakland Raiders or a Miami Dolphin. Though my field research with NFL athletes I have come to recognize how difficult it is for an individual to voluntarily disengage from a highly coveted role that signifies an elite social status.

## The Hyper-visible Black NFL Athlete

The black NFL athlete occupies a peculiar position in American society. Each season about two thousand men play in the NFL and nearly fourteen hundred are black. These numbers stand in stark contrast to the 12.5 percent figure that blacks represent in the overall United States population. The black NFL athlete is paid among the top income earners in the country and enjoys a heightened celebrity status that accompanies playing in the most popular professional sports league in America. In contrast to his elite social position, black NFL athletes are also members of a larger group of young African American men that are increasingly becoming disenfranchised in America. With regards to educational achievement, unemployment,

incarceration rates, and health disparities, young black men lag far behind their white counterparts. Some might even argue that young black men in America are a marginalized social group that has largely been left behind while become socially invisible.

The black athlete has historically been called upon by the African American community to represent the struggle for human rights, dignity, and to defy white supremacy. Jack Johnson, Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Wilma Rudolph, Althea Gibson, and Muhammad Ali are just a few of the historic African American athletic figures that stood up against white America's preoccupation with racial discrimination. While the historic contributions of the black athlete have been acknowledged by many, today's black male athlete is often criticized for the merger of the gangster rapper, the criminal identity, and black masculinity into a single persona that is mass-marketed around the world. Ironically, the NFL is complicit in perpetuating the stereotype of the black athlete as a menacing figure. The NFL often promotes the sport by featuring muscular black athletes glistening with sweat and delivering bone crushing hits in television commercials. As the largest employer of African American athletes in major league professional sports, the racial dynamics between labor and management plays important role in determining how the black athlete transitions to life after the NFL.

My research suggests that many black athletes view the NFL as a racialized institution. Some black athletes believe that race negatively impacts their experience in the NFL, while others conclude that most of the disputes with management involve labor conflicts rather than racial issues. Black athletes generally employ two strategies to deal with the impact of race in the NFL. The Black Nationalist or Afrocentric approach appeals to certain members of the NFL, while the racial integrationist strategy resonates with another group of black athletes. Some African American NFL athletes are drawn to Black Nationalism for the meaning it offers to their

everyday lives rather than viewing it as a political ideology. This group of athletes believes that Black Nationalism or Afrocentrism is an effective strategy to fight against racist owners who are intent on exploiting and marginalizing the African Americas. While conducting field research I discovered that the Black Nationalist/Afrocentric athletes are sub-divided into two camps. Some Afrocentric athletes believe that blacks must to unite and fight against the white establishment. The other faction of pro-Black Nationalists feels that the historic legacy of slavery has left African Americans fractured and incapable of unifying. Both groups are equally proud of their black heritage; the difference being that the second group believes that personal responsibility is the only way that the black community will rise up and conquer their problems.

Most African American NFL athletes who reject the Black Nationalist ideology prefer to employ a strategy of Racial Integration. The integrationist athlete often seeks to downplay the effects of race by emphasizing the benefits of hard work and clean living. Individuals in this camp tend to reject the notion that the new NFL personal conduct policy (PCP) is racially motivated. They often believe that NFL owners were forced to enact this policy because too many athletes were behaving irresponsibly. African American athletes who support racial integration generally believe that playing in the NFL is an honor and therefore athletes have a personal and social responsibility to adhere to the guidelines of the PCP. Integrationists also tend to reason that athletes who display poor judgment draw negative attention to the NFL, which jeopardizes the financial well being of the entire league. While conducting interviews with black athletes I recorded many comments that reflect the integrationist's interpretation of the racial climate in the NFL. The following statements from my field notes serve to illustrate this point, "I'm sure racism exists in the NFL just like it does everywhere else in society. You can't worry

about that though or else you'll be kick out of the league in a hurry. Your job is to play football and everything else will take care of itself."

Throughout my years of research I also discovered that racial integrationists in the NFL believe that personal responsibility is the key to fixing problems within the African American community. I spoke with dozens of black athletes who testified that even though they came from poor backgrounds, those circumstances did not prevent them from getting ahead in life. The black integrationist athlete expressed strong feelings that African Americans must stop making excuses and take responsibility for their own actions. When pressed as to how structural inequality affects the poor in America, most black athletes agreed that racism is a difficult obstacle to overcome. Many of the racial integrationist I spoke with expressed a belief that people in the black community use race as a crutch too often. Athletes guided by the integrationist philosophy claim that racism is not responsible for people in the ghetto who throw their lives away selling drugs and buying expensive Cadillac Escalades. Most black integrationist athletes I encountered believe that Bill Cosby was right to condemn some African Americans for behaving irresponsibly. When I explained that Cosby was criticized for promoting a conservative view that blames the victim, one black athlete reasoned that even as registered democrat who voted for Obama he must admit that too many black people would rather complain than work hard to change their personal circumstances. Four years of fieldwork has led me to conclude that black athletes who adhere to the integrationist ideology believe the best way to avoid racial conflicts in the NFL is to stay out of trouble, collect his pay check, and head home after work to take care of his family.

The discovery that black football players use competing strategies to deal with the racial dynamics of the NFL forced me to consider how issues of race affect athletes during retirement.

My data suggests that a group of athletes view Afrocentrism as a guiding principle that frames their everyday interactions. Afrocentric athletes are skeptical and distrustful of the NFL as a white owned institution. black athletes who subscribes to Afrocentrism strongly believes that white owners treat black football players as commodities to be exploited then discarded after their bodies are broken and battered. According to the Afrocentric athlete, the only way for a black man to survive in the NFL is to sell out to the white man. The Afrocentric athlete feels that the enlightened black man who speaks his mind is a threat to the white man. The Black Nationalist athlete often concludes that racism was the reason his career ended in disappointment. I also found that many retired Afrocentric athletes feel that their white counterparts have greater job opportunities and social resources to draw from after leaving the NFL.

The athlete who adheres to the racial integrationist model tends to downplay race as an issue that negatively affects his adjustment to retirement. The racial integrationist is deeply committed to notion that failure is not an option. Most black athletes who subscribes to the racial integrationist strategy believes that the same dedication and perseverance that allowed them to make it in the NFL is exactly what it takes to succeed in every aspect of life. Even when the retired athletes are faced with a difficult set of financial or emotional circumstances their positive outlook on life causes them to face the situation as a temporary setback. Years of field observations has lead me to conclude that the NFL athlete's emotional state is deeply dependent on the notion that he possesses the mental strength to endure any adversity that crosses his path. Contrary to the belief that professional football players are cocky, most black athletes believe they are natural endowed with the physical, emotional, and mental skills succeed in the NFL. As opposed to the afrocentrist, the black integrationist concludes that racial discrimination is only

one of several obstacles he must overcome to prosper in life. According to the racial integrationist, the true test of a man's character is determined by how he overcomes these challenges. Ultimately, the racial integrationist feels he is responsible for whatever happens in life. As a member of the NFL, the racial integrationist refuses to be a victim of racial discrimination during his playing career and in retirement.

*  *  *

A colleague from graduate school recently asked, "Do you miss football? Is it as enjoyable to watch as it used to be? How do you feel about the sport now, after spending all these years studying the game? " I must confess, these are excellent questions. Before bringing my dissertation to a close, I would like to take a few minutes to address these issues. As mentioned during the introduction, football has been an important part of my life as far back as I can remember. From elementary school until my late twenties football was a significant part of my daily life. Football paid for my college education and helped open the doors to graduate school. Because of football I also suffer from a chronic neck injury. Needless to say, football continues to affect my life in innumerable ways.

The process of writing this dissertation has helped me reconcile my relationship with football. Listening to dozens of professional athletes' stories has helped me come to terms with my own disappointments with the game. I have benefited from spending hours with several members of the NFL Hall of Fame, and other athletes who were cut one month after making an opening day roster. These individuals have helped me understand that every athlete has a personal relationship with the game. Playing professional football is like being married to the game. No matter how you feel about football, the game is forever a part of your life. Professional football causes an athlete to experience a range of emotions. During certain times in life an

athlete feels like he cannot live without the game. At other times he wishes that football could be cast into the fiery pit of HELL. The point I am trying to convey here is that once football gets in the blood, a professional athlete can never get it out. I am talking about the game getting so deep down in your soul that the smell of fresh cut grass on a Saturday morning in early autumn instantly causes a shot of adrenaline to rush through your veins.

I would like to close by addressing one last question. As I presented my work to a graduate course on the sociology of sports, Professor Bill Kornblum asked, "How do NFL athletes feel about their children playing football? With all the problems athletes NFL athletes experience during retirement, why would anyone want his child to play football?" It has taken me years to understand the answer to this question, and now I will do my best to offer a meaningful answer. The retired athlete wants his son to play in the NFL simply because he wants his child to develop a personal relationship with the game. Fours plus years of field research gave me the opportunity to look into the eyes of dozens of professional football players and share an unspoken bond that nobody can take away from us. This is the feeling an NFL athlete hopes to one day share with his son. I would like to conclude by thanking every athlete who participated in this research project and for sharing that special bond with me.

## Future Research

My future research agenda includes extensioning of my dissertation research and the investigation of new research questions. In addition to spending the next 12-18 months converting the dissertation into a book for publication, one extension of my research will be a comparative analysis of race and mental health outcomes between NFL athletes. A factor that I am unable to account for in my current research is the degree to which depression and other mental health issues affect athletes throughout their careers. Studies show that there is a

significant difference between the beliefs that blacks and whites hold about the effectiveness and necessity of mental health treatment. While African American are more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to believe that mental health professionals could help individuals with major depression, they are also more likely to believe these problems will improve on their own and less likely to access mental health services. To gain a deeper understanding of these issues, I will develop a set of questions with a sports psychiatrist and other health care researchers and then re-interview the participants from my dissertation. Afterwards, I plan to use the data to construct a health survey and distribute it to fifteen hundred current and former NFL athletes. A second extension of my dissertation research will examine whether or not gender makes a difference in the health-seeking behavior of elite athletes. To examine these differences, I will compare mental health outcomes of NFL athletes and professional ballet dancers —a profession that follows a similar career trajectory of extensive preparation followed an abrupt ending. Sports are often credited for a number of physical and emotional benefits including helping to reduce stress and improving mental health. Yet, little research has been done to uncover the negative mental health outcomes associated with sports participation. I will examine the conditions under which amateur and professional sports can be implicated in negative health outcomes, not only because of injuries but by fostering a "warrior culture." Are women and men subjected to the same pressures, and do they internalize these messages in similar ways?

Another project I plan to pursue will trace the personal histories of black athletes from high school through professional sports using a variety of methods. The project will examine the theory presented by sociologist Harry Edwards, who claims that the dynamics of black sports involvement, and the blind faith of black youths and their families in sport as a prime vehicle of self realization and social-economic advancement, have combined to generate a complex of

critical problems for black society. A representative sample of scholarship athletes that played major college football between 1990 and 2000 will be created by compiling data from public records, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the NFL Players Association, and survey research. This study offer an empirical test of Edwards's thesis by tracking the social outcomes of black athletes, collecting their retrospective narratives about the role of sports in their lives, and comparing these findings to data collected from white athletes. It will also frame my long-term goal of establishing a Center for Sports and Social Research. This inter-disciplinary institute would hopefully serve as forum to empirically and critically study the social impact of sports on society. The institute would also encourage students and athletes to actively engage in community-centered projects, connecting the theories of social science to the everyday problems faced by athletes as they map out their futures.

## Appendix: Literature Review, Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to my research, little has been known about the methods used by NFL athletes to manage the immense attention that frequently accompanies fleeting celebrity status, the ways their lives typically unfold, the processes used to construct self-identity, and the daily experiences of ex-NFL athletes. C. Wight Mills (1959) argued that sociology should be concerned with the intersection of lives, social structure, and history. My study examines the NFL athlete's behavior in order to uncover how athletes' personal troubles can be understood as social issues and processes. My research attempts to explore several critical questions that uncover the challenges faced by NFL athletes as they deal with retirement: (1) what impact does an athlete's racial and socio-economic background has on his preparation for retirement? (2) How are individuals socialized into the role of NFL athlete? (3) How does this socialization process influence their experiences during retirement?

### Literature Review

As a subfield, the sociology of sport has generally been under theorized (Frey and Eitzen, 1991). The discipline emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, with structural functionalism (Edwards, 1973), conflict theory (Haerle, 1974), and cultural studies (Birrell, 1989) becoming the prominent theoretical perspectives. In an attempt to delineate and justify the new field, theorist began by focusing on the functions of sport as social organizations. Subsequent works focused on the socialization of youth through sport as a vehicle for assimilation. Cultural theorists have challenged both the functional and conflict perspectives by viewing sport as a socially constructed arena of cultural significance.

Although the sociological investigation of sport has advanced beyond the macro level of analysis, a gap remains on the cognitive and interaction levels. Bourdieu's concept of habitus

(1984), "the mental or cognitive structures" through which people deal with the social world, offers a means of uncovering the athlete's perception of his social reality. In applying a sport-psychology (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001), and interactionist perspective (Goffman, 1973), my work analyzes the subjective experience and tacit knowledge of athletes in order to examine how they perceive of and navigate the athlete role. These social processes take place within a larger organizational field, the NFL. Thus, I examine the socialization process of athletes through the 'presenting culture' of the NFL, which is guided by a strict set of rules that monitors behavior both on and off the field (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), (Douglas, 1986), (Goffman, 1961). In focusing on the intersection of individual athletes and the social system of the NFL, I highlight how issues of race (Edwards, 2000), class and power (Mills, 1999), and labor (Braverman, 1974) affect the athletes' self-identity and life chances both during and after his playing career.

**Institutions and Identity**

Sociological investigations of sports would not seem to lend themselves to the theoretical concept of the "Total Institution" (Goffman, 1961). This may be because Goffman's notion of the "Total Institution" unlike the NFL is characterized by symbols of physical barriers such as locked doors, high walls, or barbed wires. Nor is the NFL considered a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society, lead an enclosed, formally administered life (ibid. #28). However, if approached from a slightly different entry point, that of the athlete, this concept offers an intriguing theoretical perspective.

In her seminal work *How Institutions Think,* Mary Douglas (1986) offers a basis for the study of an institution through collective action by moving away from the rationalist model that privileges the decision-making of sovereign individuals and toward organizational decisions as the outcome of negotiations between powerful individuals within the organization. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) also recognize that sociological institutionalism rejects the reductionist

impulse of much of social science theory, and identify institutions as having cognitive, normative, and regulatory mechanisms that affect the organization of social practices. Thus, based on these theories of organizations, the NFL can be investigated by its ability to order experience and memory; the control it is capable of exerting over its members in regard to the acceptance or rejection of new ideas, and its ability to create patterned social action by supplying actors with basic cognitive frames (Goffman, 1973).

Sports Psychologists Taylor and Ogilvie (1998) claim that the most fundamental psychological issue that influences adaptation to 'career transition' is the degree to which athletes define their self worth in terms of their participation and achievement in sport. Likewise, Killeya-Jones (2005) suggests that an athletic identity may occupy such a central role in the identity structure that it dominates the ego-identity. Therefore it is not unreasonable to conclude that the role of the NFL athlete may come into conflict with the individual's self-identity for temporal and psychological resources, resulting in a role conflict (Killeya-Jones 2005).

In the book *Becoming an EX: The Process of Role Exit*, Ebaugh (1988) explores what it means to leave behind a major role or incorporate it into a new identity. Her work identifies four common stages in the role exit process. The final stage, creating the ex-role, is said to constitute a unique sociological phenomenon where expectations, norms, and the identity associated with an individual are not consistent in what one is currently doing but rather stem from ones' previous role. Ebaughs' investigation focuses on individuals who voluntarily exit from significant roles; however, little attention has been directed towards forced role exits. Because the vast majority of NFL athletes are forced to retire, Ebaugh's theory (1998) offers a conceptual

model but does not go far enough to analyze the processes undertaken by elite athletes who unwillingly adopting a new role.

Three main theoretical perspectives provide an underpinning for this research: (1) Building on Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1984) I examine the way that the socialization of athletes involves the development of cognitive and bodily dispositions that serve to make the athlete a "natural" football player but that leave the ballplayer ill equipped to operate in other cultural fields after retirement; (2) Goffman's interactionist approach offers insight into how players experience their careers within the structural inequalities identified by Edwards. These two perspectives combined with (3) Douglass's institutional critique offers a method to deconstruct the socialization process designed to control behavior during his playing career yet fosters challenges towards self-identity in retirement.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I began preliminary research by observing, and conducting lengthy interviews with, former NFL athletes who sought to extend their careers by playing in the Canadian Football League (CFL). During this phase ten athletes participated in a series of two hour face-to-face loosely structured interviews, answering the question of what it means to be an NFL athlete. In three separate instances I invited the athlete's wives to provide insight into gender roles and family dynamics. Supplemental data were gathered through a series of discussions with former teammates and acquaintances that I have known since my professional career.

One particular athlete has helped shape my questions by sharing his experiences as a team representative for the NFL labor disputes of the early 1980's. Throughout our twenty-year friendship he has communicated dozens of stories regarding the lives of NFL athletes and their difficulties adjusting to retirement. This relationship has provided an opportunity to collect more

than one hundred and fifty hours of observations, interviews, and conversations with four other NFL athletes whose careers varied in length from six months to thirteen years.

Another athlete agreed to allow me to live with his family periodically over the course of a year, and approximately 100 others offered to meet in their homes, at work, and various other social settings. Along with *in situ* observations, three current NFL athletes agreed to participate in focused interviews. In order to gain a nuanced perspective regarding the challenges faced by different cohorts, I solicited at least three individuals from each of the following categories: retired between 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, and 16-20 years. My total sample was comprised of about 120 participants.

The research design I employ has several strengths. Observations of the ex-players' everyday lives allowed me to make more reliable inferences than if I depended solely on questionnaires. Thus, fieldwork helped me to look beyond the fancy lifestyle and other images often associated with NFL athletes to search for intimate clues as to how after spending 15-16 years in preparation, ballplayers cope with the loss of a career and social role that in most cases ends before age 30. Just as Carol Stacks (1997) successfully showed in her ethnography "All Our Kin," qualitative research can be a powerful tool for debunking stereotypes through capturing everyday life. In applying these methods I follow a long line of ethnographic research that is interested in generic social processes. The goal is to understand the actions of this group of athletes as "a case of" more general social phenomena usually not studied in sports, namely involuntary role exit and racial marginalization.

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