

# NFL Fandom

The National Football League has come under fire in recent months, leading some to suggest that it is morally wrong to watch and be a fan of professional football. These critics argue that enthusiasm for the league is founded on a way of seeing players as, on some level, sub-human, and note that the league has a financial interest in encouraging this way of understanding the game. As these detractors see it, the hugely popular “fantasy” football games only make things morally worse: What we would normally consider a proper level of concern for the well-being of others is incompatible, they argue, with the kind of dedication and investment encouraged for fans of such a brutal game.<sup>1</sup>

Critics have focused especially on the league’s handling of the mounting scientific evidence of a relationship between degenerative brain conditions and football-related head trauma, as well as its ongoing promotion of youth football despite these scientific findings. In a recent article, ESPN.com’s Dan Le Batard suggested that head trauma may even be contributing to the recent rash of domestic abuse incidents involving NFL players.<sup>2</sup> Making matters worse, some critics have suggested that the league’s response to these off-field episodes (which they see as inconsistent, excessively lenient, and slow) confirms the perception that the NFL is interested in its players only as faceless commodities.

Supporters of the league, on the other hand, stress the importance of the players’ consent: Players voluntarily sign multi-year contracts; no one is forcing them to play. In his defense of watching football in the *New York Times Magazine*, Chuck Klosterman argues:

If you think it’s fundamentally barbaric to watch such an endeavor, I’m not going to try and convince you otherwise. But you’re not ethically required to hold that view. Yes, you are financially subsidizing a profession that involves elective physical risk. But on a smaller scale, the same could be said for taking your child to the circus; while there might be “big picture” problems with the enterprise, the risks associated with the work are taken on by free people.<sup>3</sup>

## STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) Is being a fan of NFL football morally defensible? Why or why not?
- (2) If being a fan of the NFL is morally wrong, does that mean we shouldn’t be football fans? Could we ever be all-things-considered justified in knowingly doing something immoral?
- (3) Does the fact that a participant consents to a potentially dangerous and degrading activity always make that activity morally permissible?

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, C. (2013, October 26). Living in a world of fantasy can be dehumanizing. *The New York Times*.

<sup>2</sup> Le Batard, D. (2014, September 20). Is NFL an accomplice to all this off-field violence? *The Miami Herald*.

<sup>3</sup> Klosterman, C. (2014, September 5). Is It Wrong to Watch Football? *The New York Times Magazine*.