

# Sports Concussions Not Dangerous—They Believe!

## Yet another Demonstration of a Basic Principle of Historical Materialism

[This is my commentary in an email to friends on Feb. 5, 2010, on an op-ed column in the *New York Times* about the purposeful blind eye that many people turn toward concussions in sports. – S.H.]

Hi everybody,

The article attached below, by a professor of science journalism at the University of Wisconsin, convincingly shows that those involved in sports such as boxing and football which often result in concussions, including not only the players themselves but also the coaches, owners, broadcasters, fans, and just about everybody else connected to these sports, have been refusing to admit that these sports (and concussions in particular) are very dangerous.

The article points out that *some* calloused boxing fans have recognized this fact all along and just don't seem to give a damn. Some of them even enjoy making fun of punch-drunk boxers! (We still live in a pre-civilized age...)

However, probably the great majority of players, coaches, owners, fans, etc., in these sports have not openly admitted that concussions specifically are very dangerous and that much better methods must be used to prevent such injuries if these sports are to continue.

What I first want to briefly discuss in this intro is *just why* all these people have refused to admit this, and for such a long time, even though medical science had long ago shown it to be true. Clearly *some* people have refused to admit this *even though they knew better all along* just because it was in their own economic interests to lie about it. But I think that *most* people involved in these sports have simply *convinced themselves* that concussions were not dangerous *because that is what was in their own perceived interests to believe*. Hence the unconcerned jokes about people merely “getting their bell rung”.

The general principle here, which is a basic principle of Marxist historical materialism, is that people tend to believe that which is in their perceived interests to believe. Sometimes this is put: “People believe what they want to believe.” But why do they *want* to believe it? Mostly because it is in their own *interests* to do so.

There is another principle of historical materialism that appears to (but really doesn't) conflict with this: In any society the ideas of the ruling class are dominant (at least most of the ideas and

most of the time). This is sort of a “corrective” principle to the first principle. First, people tend to believe what is in their own perceived interests to believe. But if what is in the perceived interests of most people (“the masses”) is different from what is in the class interests of the rulers, then the rulers are very concerned to *change* those perceptions of the masses. And since they own or control the media, the educational system, and most social institutions, they usually have the means to do so.

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There are of course many other illustrations of the basic correctness of the principle that people tend to believe what is in their own perceived interests to believe. The dangers of smoking, for example! For many, many decades the tobacco companies outright lied about this (which should be considered attempted and actual murder), but the smokers also tended to fool themselves. True, cigarettes were sometimes called “coffin nails”, but overall people fooled themselves about how serious the dangers of smoking really are—because they were addicts and really wanted to believe the contrary.

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A final note: I'm not saying that sports which are dangerous should be banned! After all, almost all sports have some dangers. Even ordinary exercise has some dangers (as well as great benefits, generally).

In general, and as opposed to liberals, I think adults should be free to do whatever they want *even if that is dangerous!* Go climb El Capitan in Yosemite if you want—it is no skin off my nose if you fall and kill yourself!

But on the other hand: First, children (including even high school students) should be strongly steered away from dangers, and not into them.

Second, those organizing sports events should be required to make sure that every participant has been fully apprised of the true dangers involved (according to current scientific medical knowledge).

Third, society should at least strongly encourage people to use more sense and more precautions when participating in possibly dangerous sports or other activities.

And fourth, monetary (or other economic) inducements to get people to participate in dangerous sports should be prohibited, in the same way that any other form of *force* should be prohibited in getting people to do dangerous things.

Of course these things probably won't happen under capitalism! Especially not the last point!

Scott

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Op-Ed Contributor

## Will Science Take the Field?

By DEBORAH BLUM

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THE warning in The Journal of the American Medical Association is not ambiguous: “There is a very definite brain injury due to single or repeated blows on the head or jaw which cause multiple concussion hemorrhages. ... The condition can no longer be ignored by the medical profession or the public.”

The report in question concerns professional athletes, hardly surprising given the worries expressed during this week’s Super Bowl runup and Congressional hearings into long-term damage caused by football-related concussions. It methodically details the well-publicized problems — loss of coordination, cognitive deficits, uncontrollable rages — that forced the N.F.L. to issue new rules this season limiting players with head injuries from returning to the field.

But what really makes the research and its conclusions so interesting is its timing: it appeared in The Journal of the American Medical Association on Oct. 13, 1928. This raises the question — at least for me — as to why we are announcing the athlete concussion-dementia link as a new, and still somewhat debatable, issue some 80 years later.

It was only in December that the N.F.L. finally [conceded publicly](#) that concussions “can lead to long-term problems.” And even that admission was contradicted a few weeks later by one of the league’s longtime brain injury experts, Dr. Ira Casson, [who told a Congressional panel](#) that there is not enough “valid, reliable or objective scientific evidence” showing that repeated blows to the head could cause permanent brain damage.

I’d argue that Dr. Casson — and his former friends at the N.F.L. — could have saved themselves and the players a lot of trouble if they’d spent just a little time in the medical archives. That 1928 medical journal paper started a drumbeat of research into head injuries in athletes, continuing throughout the 20th century and intensifying in the last decade. [The 82-year-old study](#), by Dr. Harrison Martland, remains frequently cited by researchers today, partly for its meticulous examination of damaged brains.

The paper is also a terrific reminder of early 20th-century medicine’s down-to-earth approach to research. Martland, the chief medical examiner in Essex County, N.J., began his research by hanging out at boxing matches. He titled the paper “Punch Drunk,” drawing on boxing cant. As

he pointed out, boxing fans didn't hesitate to malign injured boxers, derisively shouting "cuckoo" when obviously brain-damaged fighters shambled into a ring, and referring to those with dementia problems as "slug nutty."

Martland did autopsies on more than 300 people who had died of head injuries, looking for patterns of brain damage. For his study of boxers, he talked a fight promoter into giving him a list of 23 former fighters he thought could be labeled as definitely punch drunk. Martland was able to track down only 10 of the former athletes, but in those cases, he found the promoter's diagnosis was on target. Four were in asylums, suffering from dementia. Two had difficulty forming sentences or responding to questions. One was almost blind, two had trouble walking and one had developed symptoms similar to those of Parkinson's disease.

His colleagues had also begun to realize that a concussive blow to the head could result in injuries that were remarkably slow to heal. An earlier study of repeated concussive blows in more than 100 people warned of possible mental degeneration: "It is no longer possible to say that concussion is essentially a transient state which does not comprise any evidence of structural cerebral injury."

Martland argued that blows to the head — and the inevitable shaking of the brain that resulted — caused small but cumulative hemorrhages that could lead to scarring called gliosis. Such fibrous scarring is now known to be associated with dementias like Alzheimer's and diseases like Parkinson's that affect motor control.

[Surveys done in the last few years](#) have found that N.F.L. players are at higher risk of dementias and other mental disorders than the general population. Autopsies of athletes — notably the brains of former N.F.L. players who suffered from profound dementias — consistently found dark clusters of nerve cell proteins, formations more common to elderly Alzheimer's patients. Similar patterns of damage were recently reported in wrestlers and soccer players. Most of these athletes were dead by age 50.

Doctors investigating these injuries have become effective advocates for player protection in the last few years, and their research has played a critical role in forcing a re-evaluation of game safety standards. At a Congressional hearing on football brain injuries, held in Houston on Monday, [legislators accused college athletic officials](#) of ignoring risks and failing to adopt policies that sufficiently protected young players. "It's money, money, money," said Representative Steve Cohen, a Tennessee Democrat, "and health care ought to be considered."

The best response to such statements is: about time. As Harrison Martland's work reminds us, we can't pretend that we've just discovered that head blows pose a dementia risk. We can take credit for confronting the problem, albeit belatedly. And we can legitimately lay some blame here — if our response has been slow, that's mostly because the N.F.L., the National Collegiate Athletic Association and their allies have done an outstanding job, up until now, of ignoring and dismissing the medical record. Not everyone is happy about this, of course. Representative Ted Poe, a Texas Republican, complained that "football as we know it" could be destroyed if we move toward greater protectiveness.

I feel safe in diagnosing that comment as slug nutty.

*Deborah Blum, a professor of science journalism at the University of Wisconsin, is the author of the forthcoming "Poisoner's Handbook: Murder and the Birth of Forensic Medicine in Jazz Age New York."*