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Does College Football Really Deserve to Be Banned? Breaking Down a Speech by Author Malcolm Gladwell



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On February 14, Malcolm Gladwell presented a lecture at the University of Pennsylvania in which he discussed head injuries in college football. As a member of the audience, sports journalist Daniel Lewis delves deeply into the issues raised during Gladwell's speech.

British-Canadian journalist Malcolm Gladwell, author of four *New York Times* bestsellers including *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, and *Outliers*, raised a storm of controversy during a guest lecture he delivered at the University of Pennsylvania Museum on Thursday, February 14.

Presenting the hour-long lecture as part of Penn's "Year of Proof" program, Gladwell began by asking, "What level of proof do we need about the harmfulness of some activities before we act?"

Naturally, he explained, we search for evidence, and rightfully so-it would be imprudent to act in the absence of evidence.

However, his second question was far more intriguing: Are there instances in which we ask for too much proof before acting?

This question encapsulated Gladwell's main theme for the lecture, which focused on humankind's peculiar tendency to cite the need for absolute proof as an excuse not to take action. This behavior, he asserts, often leaves people suffering unnecessarily.

The New Yorker journalist detailed an early 20th-century study conducted by statistician Frederick Hoffman, who investigated the high numbers of American miners dying of black lung disease due to inhaling high levels of coal dust. In 1917, he discovered a clear correlation between the fatal disease and the poor working conditions in American coal mines.

Gladwell lamented how neither mine owners nor legislators took action to remedy the problem at the time. Indeed, Hoffman's findings were largely ignored due to private interest groups who denounced the evidence since it originated from a small-scale study. It was not until 1975-several decades after Hoffman's work-that working conditions finally improved.

According to Gladwell, we are no more empathetic or enlightened than we were a century ago. In a somewhat unanticipated turn, he illustrated that this desire for "too much proof" is also manifest in American football, especially at the collegiate ranks.

Gladwell outlined the risks of playing football, many of which have become very clear in recent years. For example, he noted that, the average football player sustains 1,000 blows to the head each season. This repetitive trauma is conducive to the development of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative neurological disease that can lead to dementia and death.

The disease is not a new topic among scientists, nor is it among players. In fact, the list of former footballers with the disease who later committed suicide is growing ever longer; Penn's own

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ex-football captain Owen Thomas too is on that list. Thomas committed suicide as a junior in 2010 with no history of depression. The autopsy revealed that he too was a victim of CTE.

In a more controversial argument, Gladwell admonished universities for standing relatively still in light of the dangers of brain injuries to their football players, singling out Penn as an offender because the school, according to him, failed to address the core issues behind Thomas' death.

The apparent dangers of football, Gladwell suggested, calls for action. He urged the Penn audience in front of him to boycott the university's football games. He believes that if universities truly care about their students, then football and higher education have no option but to file for divorce.

He maintained that the costs and risks of the sport outweigh its benefits, insisting that universities ought to suspend their football programs until the complex, entangled web of brain trauma, CTE, and concussions in football is researched thoroughly and resolved.

Though his books primarily cover topics in sociology or psychology, Gladwell is actually an avid football fan, as evidenced by many of his previous works, including articles about the NFL in *The New Yorker* and a number of intelligent pieces co-written with ESPN columnist Bill Simmons. So it would be downright unfair to dismiss Gladwell as a sort of anti-sports nerd.

Still, even considering Gladwell's football acumen, should [college football](#) really be banned?

This question has been posed much earlier than most would guess. Questions about the safety of football first made waves in 1905, when President Theodore Roosevelt grew alarmed by a series of student-athlete deaths and subsequently convened a collection of professors at the White House to debate the future of college football. One University of Chicago representative decried the sport, calling it a "[boy-killing, man-mutilating, money-making, education-prostituting, gladiatorial](#)" disgrace.

Today, the game faces its most serious scrutiny since Roosevelt's presidency. Is college football too violent for students? Does it deserve a place at institutions of higher learning?

At a basic level, it is hard to believe that fans still defend football as it is. Science is merely a luxury in proving that bashing heads can pose harm to a football player's brain. Any sane person would not repeatedly bump his or her head against a wall-it goes against common logic. Doing something similar in the bright [lights](#) of a stadium makes it no better.

Gladwell echoed this sentiment, pronouncing the continuation of college football "a moral abomination." He also compared colleges' disregard of warning signs and recent player deaths to the callous indifference of the coal mining industry toward black lung disease.

He did make it clear, though, that his words represented more of an indictment of colleges as opposed to football in general. He feels that football detracts from the mission of universities, which he believes should dedicate themselves entirely to higher learning.

Gladwell certainly has a point. Universities that spend millions on football at the expense of professors and classroom resources are, in effect, failing in their main mission to educate their students. This bungled value system poses a grave danger to young American men and women, whose education is only growing more important in an increasingly global economy.

These negatives aside, football does confer a number of benefits: building character, promoting diversity, and fostering a sense of community among students and fans.

Most importantly, whereas Gladwell casts college football players as victims, [these same individuals graduate at a higher rate](#) than the general student body. In addition, each year, football allows 23,000 students-many of whom are low-income young men who otherwise could not afford college-to obtain a quality education as they play football on athletic scholarships.

Moreover, the dangers of football, though serious, are overblown. Less-popular sports such as baseball, equestrian riding, female downhill skiing, lacrosse, and water polo all result in more direct

fatalities each year than football. To boot, the non-stop discussion about the dangers of football in the media is in many ways a product of its immense popularity.

That said, Gladwell's speech does have its merits. Aside from his misguided attempt to mobilize a boycott of college football, Gladwell is accurate in recognizing that we have reached the point at which we are asking for too much proof before coming to the protection of our country's football players.

But instead of banning the sport at the collegiate level, the appropriate step would be to continue walking the sport backwards as scientists unearth more definitive truths about head injuries in football. Universities could, for example, arrange for students to play fewer games and participate in fewer full-contact practices.

Considering his extreme stance, Gladwell's argument comes off largely as a Utopian vision. It is fair for him to say that America might be a safer place sans college football, but then if we heeded his advice, should we not also ban other popular yet hazardous items such as alcohol or cigarettes?

Of course, then we would not be America. Freedom and capitalism define our nation, often for the better but sometimes for the worse. Football is deeply woven into the fabric of American freedom. As a result, young men should be allowed to suit up in a uniform and helmet if they wish and fans should be allowed to cheer them on from the stands for entertainment if they desire.

Therein lies the answer to the century-old question, "Should we ban college football?" Indeed, the uncovering of everything dangerous, scandalous, and unscrupulous about the sport in recent years has yet to undermine interest among players, universities, and fans in the slightest.

Minus Gladwell, no one really wants to see college football go away. So why should it?

1. Clint Carter. "[Should College Football Be Banned?](#)", Men's Health News.
2. Katy Waldman. "[Should College Football Be Banned?](#)", *Slate Magazine*.
3. Malcolm Gladwell. "[Malcolm Gladwell at University of Pennsylvania 2/14/2013](#)", YouTube.

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