

# An open letter to football

*Bay Area Reporter, November 21, 2013*

Dear Football,

I have been a fan of yours since my youth, when I was a tiny fourth-grader playing pickup tackle games in the back yard against kids in high school and college. I was a fan as a freshman in high school when I watched Joe Namath lead the New York Jets to Super Bowl victory, legitimizing the growing AFL-NFL rivalry that eventually forced a league merger.

In high school and college I loved watching my friends play for my schools as we cheered wildly in the stands. I loved taking my father to Bengals games as we prayed for Greg Cook to stay healthy, Virgil Carter stay consistent, and Kenny Anderson to blossom.

I loved charging up the middle or rolling out for a pass in pickup games with my co-workers after college.

It's been a swell ride overall. I admire the combination of sheer physical toughness combined with coordinated team efforts and the spectacular athleticism of the best QB-to-receiver completions. But somewhere along the way the past few decades, you've lost your way and I'm afraid you're losing me. You are being consumed by your own success and a consequent loss of perspective and balance. I fear you are headed for such a reckless crash that, shudder, Big Brother government will eventually find itself forced to intercede and deliver you to the clutches of the nanny state. Please rein yourselves in before you drag every football program at every level into such legislative tomfoolery.

Think football hasn't lost perspective? Consider that within the past two years, a coach at Penn State saw a former coach raping a boy in a team shower and it did not get reported to proper authorities in essence because nobody want to rock the personality cult that had evolved over the decades; a Dallas Cowboy, after killing a teammate in a drunk driving accident, was allowed by the team owner on the sideline of the next game against Pittsburgh; and a New England tight end has been charged with first-degree murder for allegedly killing his friend and is now being investigated for gun trafficking. The documentary *League of Denial* showed us this year how the NFL has worked for years to be institutionally and willfully ignorant of the horrific long-term brain damage players are exposed to just by playing the game within the rules.

Nationwide, six high school kids died from head and neck injuries while playing this season. Players at the pro level are now massively bigger than they were in the 1980s, when studies showed that anywhere from seven to 21 football players each year would sustain severe spinal injuries that would leave them catastrophically paralyzed for life – and in many case, with no means of paying for their own care.

To sustain this multibillion dollar industry so attractive to gamblers both casual and compulsive, NCAA Division I schools are each allowed to provide 63 full scholarships, in some cases split up and given to 85 players. It is a number so massively skewed - by comparison, men's basketball can have just 13 scholarships and women's basketball 15 - that it makes it

difficult for institutions to afford a full and balanced slate of other men's and women's programs.

We hear constantly about college recruiting trips that lure prospective players with hookers. We read about football student-athletes discouraged from taking tough academic courses because they would interfere with the "real" reason they are in school: to play football. Just this week, Rutgers defensive back Jevon Tyree left the program after alleging assistant coach Dave Cohen had verbally abused him in the spring, trying to make him feel "soft" and threatening to head-butt him.

And now we have the Miami Dolphins bullying scandal. The Dolphins promise they will hold their own investigation after the NFL holds its own, but excuse me if I am skeptical.

Former Dolphins quarterback and current television commentator Dan Marino said on Sunday the team investigation will explore what happens in Miami and then compare it to the norm of other NFL locker rooms. Hey, let's not set the bar too high. After Richie's Incognito's abusive messages to teammate Jonathan Martin were released, players from around the league, not just Miami, said Incognito's use of the n-word was commonplace in their locker rooms and were just part of the "team bonding" culture of NFL team's.

Ahh, bullshit.

There is nothing team bonding about racial, sexist, or homophobic slurs. Nothing that makes them acceptable or justifiable. Period.

*Note to Miami:* If your language would make chef Gordon Ramsey blush, you need to examine your speech. If your behavior approaches that of a racist European soccer hooligan, you need therapy.

*Note to the NFL:* Your excesses are dependent on your enormous cash flow, but your cash flow is not dependent on the excesses. Modify your rules to take it back to a simpler, less dangerous place. Insist on professional workplaces with professional conduits so that your players can act like professionals rather than juvenile thugs.

*Note to the NCAA:* You'd solve a mass of your problems if you cut your scholarships down to the level of your other team sports and had your athletes use their time with you to study. They might actually learn something.

The trickle down effect on youth football is already beginning to tell. Pop Warner football reports a decline of nearly 10 percent in 2010-12 – the biggest decline the organization has ever recorded. Cited as the number one reason for dropping out? Head trauma.

I was chatting over the weekend with a friend of mine who coaches high school football. He has a lifelong passion for the sport and like me admires the coordinated teamwork, the camaraderie, the group effort. He says the thing he tries to work on most with his team are "life lessons." He says the non-football things he talks with his players about are the most valuable part of his program.

It's a nice perspective. It's one the entire sport should embrace. Better to learn life lessons early in talks than late in life with guns and cellphones and millions of dollars and time to kill.