

SNG-football at zenith-9-18-17

Football, at zenith, is dying

By Jim Nowlan

American football is at its zenith in terms of money and hype. The game dominates the airwaves on weekends, and now throughout the week as well. Big college programs are building Taj mahal-like locker rooms for their pampered, but unpaid, players. Katy TX (pop. 14,000) just opened a \$72 million high school stadium!

But under the glitzy surface, the game is apparently dying. Moms are killing it.

My local rural high school, long an area football powerhouse, mustered only seven freshmen for the team this fall. No more freshman football games. The local JFL program for peewees is way down as well.

Numbers turning out for football are down overall across the country in recent years, except in the South.

I come not to bury football, but to assess what is going on. Indeed, I couldn't wait for the recent NFL Bears-Falcons opener. Watching a wide receiver leap improbably high to snag a 40-yard pass is indeed poetry in motion.

My fascination with the play of these great athletes is hard to resist, even though I remind myself some/many players are literally beating their brains out.

As I say, moms are killing football. They can't avoid the media drumbeat, especially insistent this fall, about the medical findings that show brain damage to footballers. This is apparently the

case even among some high school players, according to studies reported recently in the New York Times.

There have long been at least niggling concerns about safety. My Dad wore a thin leather helmet to play high school football. By my unspectacular days on the field a generation later, we were wearing what seemed like huge plastic globes. I recall cloth strap netting inside that seemed to float the helmet around the head, as of to protect it.

The brain can be thought of as a large grapefruit, certainly in consistency. The three-pound, soft-tissue organ basically floats within a very thin shield of spinal fluid.

Nothing else about the human compares with it. The body is just a platform for the brain, where billions of delicate neurons dance intricately to give us Shakespeare, Mozart, Stephen Hawking, and you and me.

Studies show that brain damage—chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)—occurs not so much from concussions as from repeated blows to the head and body.

High school players are smaller and slower than the NFL brutes, so damage is undoubtedly less, though still to be found, say researchers.

Yet if more studies, and there will be such, show additional evidence of brain damage at the high school level, more moms, and dads, will steer their sons away from the playing field.

In rural America, that will necessitate even more cooperative shared teams among several small schools to come up with a respectable roster. That will blur the singular hometown connection to the sport, reducing excitement for the game, I am guessing.

I predict, hard to believe, that in 20 or 30 years, American tackle football will be a minor sport.

Yet the compelling need for tribal competition will not relent.

Football enthusiasts say few sports equal their game for teamwork and camaraderie. Baseball, for example, they say, has less of the multiple moving-part orchestration required in football, all requiring teamwork.

So, what might replace football as the centerpiece sport? Maybe soccer, which has been growing rapidly in popularity among both male and female athletes.

Or flag football? The Dixon IL park district has for 35 years hosted a popular 7-player flag football league for as many as 21 teams of fellows age out-of-school to 35 or so.

“I see flag football as an option,” Dixon recreation director Terry Shroyer tells me, who played the game in Dixon years ago.

Shroyer adds, however, that 7on7 touch football is becoming popular in Wisconsin. The game is played on a smaller field, without linemen or pads, and is mostly passing. He thinks that is where football may be headed.

Life goes on. But maybe not so much for tackle football, regardless of how it appears on the surface at present.