

# **Is It Not Time To End All Sport?**

**Jon Burras**

**Sports have been ingrained into our culture like apple pie and hot dogs for a very long time now. For most of us the idea of competitive sports is as American as Chevy cars and cheeseburgers. We celebrate sport as much as backyard barbecues and outings to the movie theater.**

**The concept of sport has been credited with shaping the lives of young men and women. Through sport we are able to develop discipline, teamwork, leadership and courage. We are able to achieve the outer limits of success by pushing our bodies to the extreme. By participating in sport we are able to get in shape, maximize our physique and keep our weight under control. Sport has also become a "right of passage" for many, lifting them from the world of play and innocence into the realm of competition and aggression.**

**The great sport experiment has come of age and there is now a very dark side being expressed. This dark side has been known about for quite some time but most of us have been in denial of it. We have walked around it, tried to cover it up and pushed it back into the closet where we would not have to look at it. That dark side is that athletes do not age very well and that sport may be causing more harm than good. We have made an erroneous conclusion where we believe that the pathway to health and longevity is through combat.**

**Sport is combat. While mostly symbolic in nature, it is still combat. Two opponents face off against each other either across the net in a tennis match, on the gridiron (also known as the football field) or on the basketball court. Those opponents might be two individuals or two teams of combatants representing a school, city or club. Through combat and competition we are able to dominate and drive to submission our opponent.**

**The toll that sport has taken on our bodies is enormous. We are now becoming aware of the vast number of athletes who have long-term brain disorders that have been associated with concussions in which they acquired while competing in a sport. This is most common in the sport of football but also is seen in boxers, wrestlers, rugby players, hockey players and even soccer players. Thousands of soccer players, (from youth soccer to high school, college and professional), receive concussions every year due to the act of "heading the ball." A size 5 soccer ball weighing 16 ounces and traveling at high speed will knock you silly if it hits you on the head and can cause long standing brain and neck trauma. Yet heading a ball is a standard practice in the weaponry of the soccer combat. The act of heading the ball in soccer or banging heads together in football is no different than running as fast as you can and throwing yourself at the garage door head first.**

**One would think this latter act to be foolish yet we accept it routinely on the field of play.**

**Other athletes do not fair so well. The life expectancy of a retired professional football player is fifty-five years old. If he were a lineman the death rate drops to fifty-two years old. Not to mention the fact that most retired professional football players live on daily pain medication and have aching body parts. Many former players have had multiple surgeries to repair torn ligaments and tendons causing a build up of scar tissue. A vast number of former players have had knee and hip replacements, not to mention all of the back surgeries undertaken. A retired professional football player also has a thirty-three percent greater chance of acquiring Alzheimer's disease as he ages.**

**Most former basketball players, golfers, soccer stars, baseball players and other former athletes, from the high school athlete, the weekend warrior and the professional, have been significantly impacted by the sport that they played in the past. It is scarce to find a hockey player still with a full set of teeth in his mouth. It is common for baseball players to have to undergo hip surgery from all of the sliding on their sides that they have undertaken or Tommy John surgery for torn tendons in their throwing arm. Injuries do not just go away. Those very same injuries might be alive and well in you for decades after the first trauma. These injuries linger and often morph into something much worse. A slight limp at age twelve becomes a full blown incapacitation at age forty.**

**For instance, a twelve year old soccer player twists his ankle on the field. He might be out of action for a week or two. Unbeknown to most, that twisted ankle has set in motion an imbalanced leg that is now creating torque into the knee, through the hip and into his back. As he ages he will continue to have problems up and down his leg, ultimately ending up with severe sciatica when he reaches his adult years. Yes, a simple athletic ankle sprain can lead to years of excruciating back pain down the road.**

**Mental health issues often result either directly or indirectly from traumas to the body. Many former athletes suffer from loss of cognitive brain function, Alzheimer's and dementia due to direct brain trauma. Others suffer indirectly as their bodies begin to fail they often develop depression because they have lost their identity as a warrior. Depression and suicide can be a side effect of an athlete who has suffered the blows and the impact that have degenerated his body.**

**We have come full circle in our history of athletics and sport. Sport was first seen nearly two-thousand years ago when the city-states of Greece would stop their wars and convene for mock battles. This was the first Olympics, These mock combats included wrestling, running and jumping events. Here is where we began to equate athletes as warriors. Men were using their bodies to simulate war and now sport**

was born. This idea progressed down through the centuries. The Romans built a Coliseum where thousands of gladiators and animals were killed in battles in front of a live audience. The crowd would cheer ferociously to see if the gladiator would live or die. The last twenty years or so have seen women join in to become warriors and to physically assault and batter their bodies as well. Welcome to the world of equality.

We see a very similar story being told in the recent addition of our sport. This addition is called Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). Here two gladiators enter into a cage or ring and beat each other into submission while a large and ferocious crowd cheers them on. The only thing missing is the sword and the shield. Those men and women who have chosen to abuse themselves for short term glory and money will have a reduced life expectancy and many forthcoming injuries. Their names and reputation will be remembered in the archives of newspapers and video clips as they struggle with their decaying bodies and their impaired brains. We will throw them away like an old rag doll and say that he or she should have known the risks involved in such brutal combat.

We have seen the proliferation of many sports throughout our lifetimes. A youth entering high school will have many choices in which to choose from. This includes the following: football, soccer, water polo, swimming, basketball, volleyball, tennis, track, baseball, wrestling and more. There are currently over 7.8 million boys and girls participating in high school sport. How many of them will go on to limp their way through life due to the injuries suffered in those high school years? How many of them will suffer from concussion symptoms later on in life? How many of them will be forced to have joint replacements or live on pain medication for the rest of their lives?

Besides the injuries and long-term consequences of sport there are other factors that might help end this world of combat.

1. Fan injuries and deaths especially in Europe are on the rise. Soccer in many parts of the world is extremely competitive. Europe seems to have some of the most passionate fans. Fans can either live or die by the success or failure of their team. Often fans erupt into violence causing extreme harm to other fans, players and even to referees. Sometimes the fans are more violent than the players on the field.

2. High school and college campuses have become the pimping ground for student athletes to be recruited by offering money, sexual favors and other perks. One is no longer the student/athlete but just an athlete (warrior) who is being primed for battle. Only a small few will make it to the next level so the fallback on a free education scholarship is often wasted. The scholar part has been diminished in most universities as highly prized athletes are being whisked into battle with little emphasis on their education.

**3. The world of gambling and fantasy have hijacked sport to become nothing more than a giant casino. With fantasy sports leagues being played on record levels players are no longer human beings but just some commodity to be leveled against each other. Sport has become more about the gambling and the statistics than about the actual performance.**

**4. There is a enormous toll on our society due to sport. From decrepit and wounded bodies to the mental health problems associated with concussions, we are in a world of denial around it all. Sports leagues attempt feint efforts to make their combat safer but these measures are mostly cosmetic. The irony of trying to make a violent sport safer is like trying to make a hot sauce milder. The purpose of sport is to engage in combat and in today's age the more violent the better. How many fans would watch football if it were only flag football and not tackle football? Would we have to wrap boxers in bubble wrap or not allow hockey players to "check" one another to calm the violence and would people still watch?**

**With athletes emerging bigger, faster and stronger, the injuries that we now see are becoming even worse. We are somehow willing to ignore these wounded warriors for our Sunday afternoon game of football viewing. After all, once an athlete is crippled and finished competing we just throw him away and find someone else to replace him. We are no different than the exuberant fans in the Roman Coliseum. We want our blood and violence and no one is going to take it away from us.**

**There is a better way. While sport has some very redeeming values (teamwork, discipline, leadership etc.), there are others ways to achieve these values. Join a backpacking club and find yourself in the middle of the wilderness. This will teach you about courage. Try a yoga class. This will treat your body well in the right kind of manner. Go hiking in the mountains, kayaking in the ocean or playing Frisbee at the beach. While sport is a way to have a right of passage for many, it is not the only way.**

**The history of sport and exercise have not been very kind to us. Athletes do not age well for the most part. Years after an athlete's playing days are over he might still be suffering. If not taken care of in the proper manner those injuries only snowball into something even worse. Plantar fasciitis might end up becoming a torn knee ligament if left untreated. A frozen shoulder might result in a lifetime of headaches and sleeplessness if ignored. Athletes, regarded as modern day warriors, are not necessarily the pinnacle of health. What would our society be like if we dismantled this iconic metaphor of sport?**

**From brain injuries to knocked out teeth, knee tears to Achilles tendon ruptures, athletes are carrying their injuries into their adult years. Imagine a society without sport, where we were not terrified when our child went into combat on a Friday night on the gridiron. Imagine a life where we did not have to spend the rest of our lives**

**paying for a few short years of glory and where we did not have to spend billions of dollars on pain medications as well as knee, back and hip surgeries.**

**Imagine a world without sport where families went to the park on a Sunday afternoon and played games and sat around and talked with each other. Imagine having a body that was not continually in pain each and every day. Imagine not having to watch the Super Bowl with its endless commercials and wardrobe malfunctions during the halftime show.**

**We never thought we would see the end of the internal combustion engine. The electric car and the hybrid automobile are quickly transforming the auto industry where the gasoline-driven internal combustion engine may soon become a thing of the past. We have an ugly story sitting in our closets that very few wish to open up to clean out. That ugly story is the damage that sport is causing and the denial behind it all.**

**During my high school football playing career I had the wisdom to observe a very real phenomenon. After taking many severe blows to my head and my body I got up gingerly from the ground. I whispered to myself, "Wow! That really hurt! I know that I am going to be feeling that when I am forty." My revelation was nearly on track. Those body blows, concussions and other physical assaults to my body did show up again later in life to bring me to me knees on many occasions. My only surprise was that they showed up a whole lot earlier than age forty.**

**I am the lucky one though. I have been aware of the damage that sport has done to me and have spent a lifetime trying to repair it. Unfortunately millions of former athletes will continue to suffer (often in silence) unaware of the damage residing in their heads and in their bodies. They will gather collectively with their medical professionals and say that they are just suffering from the effects of aging. The world of denial continues and it rests gingerly on the fifty-yard line, the basketball court and other arenas of play. When will we have the courage to remove this white elephant out from on top of us? Until that day comes upon us we will be gathered together as fans and as athletes to observe more trauma to our bodies and our culture. The rallying cry has not yet changed as we exuberantly proclaim "Go Chargers!"**

# **Resources**

## **Moving From the Left Brain**

**<http://www.jonburras.com/pdfs/movement-from-the-left-brain.pdf>**

## **Health or Fitness**

**<http://www.jonburras.com/pdfs/HEALTH-OR-FITNESS.pdf>**

## **The Heart Has Become a Weapon For War**

**<http://www.jonburras.com/pdfs/heart-and-war.pdf>**