

We're Killing Ours Sons - But We 're Making Mem A Tolerance for "Football" Injuries In Britain and America, 1873-1914

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In March 1875, the *British Medical Journal* announced that "a promising 21-year old student from St. George's" Hospital had been fatally injured while playing rugby against the Royal Naval School. Death was attributed to peritonitis caused by a blow to the abdomen. As were their contemporaries, late 19th and early 20th century physicians were divided on the issue of whether football was a "killing sport" or of such significance in developing courage and character that injury and even death was worth the price. The mayor of Southampton attempted to forbid the use of public grounds until the rules had been altered; but "heavy and slippery" playing surfaces, such as occurred during the 1884 International match between England and Wales, did not deter the presence of several thousand spectators. Over the next quarter century, newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic reported an escalating number of crippling injuries and deaths. Upwards of fifty deaths annually among the three football "codes" - rugby, soccer, "gridiron" - was not unusual.

While it is not surprising that medical journals discussed cervical injuries and ruptured spleens, the amount of space they devoted to lauding the games does seem intriguing. Reacting to condemnations of 1886 brutalities, Howard Lowe (Medical Officer at Glenalmond) asserted that it was: "impossible to over-estimate the importance of football in fostering the physical and moral development of young men." In 1894, the *J.A.M.A.* noted that the season had begun with the usual quota of "contusions and broken bones" while the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* contended that football produced "the majority of qualities of which we as Americans are most proud." In an attempt to quell escalating criticisms, Walter Camp produced *Football Facts and Figures* - a book that seems rather short on "facts."

During the early 1900s, changes in the rules (notably in American football), better preparation for contests, and improved surgical practices reduced - but certainly did not eliminate - serious injuries and deaths. Additionally, physicians like William Anderson at Yale began to collect data in an attempt to assess the consequences of

competitive athletics. Far more extensive was Luis Dublin's 1928 study of the longevity of college athletes. Drawing from the popular press, medical publications, actuarial accounts produced by insurance companies, and other sources, this paper examines both biomedical issues and cultural values associated with athletics - especially football - before World War I.