

The 14th Round

Along the way, I certainly figured that if I was going to cover the subject of boxing reform, it was necessary to address the concept of boxing safety, and the inherent dangers involved when two fighters get into the ring with each other. But more than anything, I want to do it with an educated perspective, relating boxing to other sports. If you do that objectively, as all sports fans should, you'll realize that boxing has a pretty good record in this area, when all functionaries are performing their tasks properly.

I managed to dig up this story I wrote more than three years ago for a now-defunct website, NFLTalk.com, in which I focused on this very angle. And rather than "freshen it up" a bit, I figured I would just reproduce it "as is", since the fundamentals really haven't changed.

So here it is:

NFL SHOULD KNOW WHEN TO CALL IT A TKO

By CHARLES JAY, Editor/Publisher, TotalAction.com

Special to NFLTalk.com

November 11, 1999

Back in 1982, within a couple of days of each other, Deu-Koo Kim had died at the hands of Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini, and Alexis Arguello had taken a horrific 14th-round beating from Aaron Pryor. In the ensuing days, there was a great deal of deliberation as to how far to go in letting a fighter take punishing blows to the head, and the boxing world scrambled for answers.

About ten days after this, I was attending a fight card at a place called the Knight Center in Miami. In one of the bouts, the referee waved off the action after one fighter had the other rocking and reeling on the ropes. Then the show broke for intermission, and as I waited in line in the men's room, a guy was heard to complain, "I can't believe the ref stopped it. That guy wasn't even CLOSE to death yet!"

Sometimes I think this is the way many fans feel about their NFL heroes. If you can walk, you should play. If you can breathe, you should play. As long as you are alive, you should be able to slip the pads on.

Looking at the NFL injury report for this week, there are six players listed as suffering from a concussion. Three of them are scheduled to play this weekend, including quarterback Dave

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Written by Charles Jay
Friday, 03 January 2003 18:00

Brown of the Arizona Cardinals. Another is on injured reserve.

The other two - Steve Young and Troy Aikman - are at a career crossroads. Young may or may not play again this season, or ever again. The Niners have not put him on the I.R. yet, but may very well do so at some point. Aikman, who suffered another concussion against Minnesota in the Monday night game, is not playing against the Packers on Sunday, but might be back in the lineup the next week against Arizona. Aikman has now suffered EIGHT concussions in his NFL career. At least.

Both men, at the end of this season, are going to be faced with a major decision - whether to continue their careers and risk serious head injuries, or pack it in.

Some fans, for their own selfish reasons, may want both to continue, and in fact, may wish for Young to get back in the lineup sooner rather than later, to lift the Niners out of their current doldrums.

Fans can have interesting tunnel vision that way.

In fact, I distinctly remember the response I got from one misguided soul, when I wrote, back in the pre-season, that the Dolphins had better be very careful with Zack Thomas, because he was suffering not only from some very strange and mysterious dizzy spells, but from what he described as "flashes" as well, which made it doubly hard for him to concentrate in meetings and which, in his words, "made the game seem slower".

This guy, who obviously must have been one of Jerry Quarry's cornermen at one time, wrote: "Zack Thomas has about a month to recover from the lingering effects of his concussion. Had he suffered a torn ACL or something I think you might be on to something but right now, I think you're just looking for something to write about."

Sure. And if your son or daughter were suffering from "lingering effects of a concussion", there wouldn't be anything for you to be freaking out about - right, asshole?

The fact that Thomas has come through the season so far without incident is not the point at all. The point is, he was suffering from something that not only could HE not explain, but the DOCTORS didn't know anything about either. When you're still suffering "lingering effects of a concussion" after a month, that's cause for concern. It's scary. Though not as scary as some tough-as-nails couch potato who thinks head trauma is "not that big a deal".

But I'm wondering how many people with NFL teams feel the same way about it. There is such a single-mindedness about winning in the league that it's apparently easy to overlook a lot of things that should be blatantly obvious. Or to ignore good common sense.

As it stands now, there is nothing to tell Steve Young or Troy Aikman what to do with their careers, aside from their own conscience. Sure, their doctor can suggest retirement, but one thing is for certain - if you go and visit enough doctors, one of them is going to clear you to play. And that's the guy you tend to listen to.

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Though fans, teammates, coaches, and physicians may have their own opinions, when it comes to the "retire or not" issue, it's going to be Steve Young's decision. Troy Aikman's decision. And absent any rule or regulation to govern this decision, I have to trust their judgment. After all, it's their life, right?

Well, yes, but perhaps it shouldn't be that cut-and-dried.

Should it, in the end, always be THEIR decision? Should it be the decision of their team? If you feel strongly about such independence of thought, then perhaps you can learn something from the example set by professional boxing.

PROFESSIONAL BOXING? Don't laugh. In the world of bought-off ratings, controversial judges' decisions, and the exploitation of athletes, there are indeed practices that are very positive, and indeed progressive, that the NFL should consider integrating into its own safety policy.

The specifics vary according to the jurisdiction, but generally speaking, when a fighter is "stopped" (TKO'd), the result is an automatic suspension of no less than 30 days, and sometimes as much as 45 or 60. When a fighter is knocked OUT (KO'd), the suspension is 60-90 days. That means that he/she can not compete at all during that time. In some states, the fighter can not even engage in sparring activity during the mandatory suspension period.

And before we go any further, make no mistake about it - when a player suffers a concussion in a football game, he is KNOCKED OUT. Yet you're seeing a situation where Dave Brown is very possibly going to play this week, and Aikman, despite suffering two concussions in a couple of weeks' time, could very well be back under center next weekend. Deion Sanders suffered a concussion in a game and was taken out, then was later re-inserted and actually returned a punt for a touchdown. Now, some people are going to point to that and say, "You see, it was no big deal." But Sanders says he DOESN'T REMEMBER his punt return, and that scares the living hell out of me. And he's not the only player to have a concussion, then come back into a game. It happens all the time. And it shouldn't.

When a player gets put back into a game, or plays the next week, there can be even more of a danger than in boxing, because there are a lot of different Or to get injured. Like a direct helmet-to-helmet hit. Or a blind side hit, which is always a possibility. Like a player hitting his head on the ground, causing additional trauma. Or any other kind of physical contact in which the player's helmet is involved.

Ron Borges wrote a very instructive piece in the Boston Globe about this a couple of weeks ago. In it, veteran boxing trainer Teddy Atlas, who is also a commentator for ESPN2, said, "Boxing doesn't get nearly the serious injuries football does. It's incredible the numbers every Sunday when you're watching, but you just don't hear about it because football is much more corporate. It's a well-run machine. Football dresses up its violence better. Nobody says anything about what goes on in pro football until someone like Steve Young gets a concussion. He ain't going back and playing this weekend, but how many other guys are? If Steve Young is a lineman who got those concussions, would they be treating him the same way? No they

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wouldn't."

All I can tell you is that you'll rarely, if ever, hear of any fighter allowed in the ring, or NEAR a ring, while he's experiencing "lingering effects from a concussion" or suffering from "post-concussion syndrome". It wouldn't even be a consideration.

So why is it a consideration in the NFL, where the contact is more constant, more sustained, and in many cases, of a higher impact? I don't understand why the league can't see the light, and mandate that 1) any player who suffers a concussion must sit out a minimum of four games and possibly more, depending on the severity of the situation; 2) any player who does indeed have a concussion must, after the mandatory suspension is served, be cleared by TWO doctors, with an EEG, in order to play; 3) more extensive mandatory suspensions must be imposed on players who sustain more than one concussion during a season; and 4) any team which is found to have inserted a player in a game while suffering from the effects of a concussion will be fined heavily, with suspensions imposed on the coaches, trainers, or medical staff that allow it to happen.

No player or team is going to zealously take these precautions on their own. A player wants to play. That's in his nature. And he'll have a tendency to go to as many sources as he has to until someone tells him he's okay. A team wants to win. That's IT'S nature. Every week players are sent out onto the field with injuries, of varying degrees of severity, and it is expected that players perform with pain. Okay, that's understood. But let's draw the line somewhere. Head injuries are as good a place as any.

And let's have someone who IS NOT an interested party make judicious decisions on this policy, based on common sense, as well as what is in the best interests of the athletes and the image of professional football.

For the life of me, I don't understand why the NFL Players Association hasn't spearheaded a move in this direction. Aren't these people concerned about the long-term health of their constituency?

I'm sure they are. And I'm sure someday they will.

But for those of you who would just as soon leave well enough alone, you are entitled to your opinion. Just don't chortle about the "punchdrunk stiffs", "bums", and "palookas" in a boxing ring. Those guys are well-protected, by comparison. The REAL palookas are out there on CBS and Fox on Sunday afternoons. They're just better-paid palookas, for the most part.

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