



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Contact Sports

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
April 7, 2012

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. I am taking a break from writing about the financial meltdown and the never-ending presidential campaign to send you happier thoughts: Hit contracts taken out by athletes to take out their opposition.

“Take out.” Not in the sense of blocking them to the ground, or tackling them to the turf. Take out in the sense of damaging their bodies or minds to the extent their bodies or minds are...well, taken out.

Who agreed to these contracts? LA gangs? The Las Vegas Mafia? Little Italy’s thugs? According to the NFL office, it was the *Saints* of New Orleans.

Saints. There’s an incongruity in that name. Saints are known to offer solace and refuge. But listen to this doggerel.

Strum, strum, beat, beat...

Oh, when the Saints go pounding in.
Oh, when the Saints go pounding in.

Oh Lord, I want to be in their number,
‘cause the passer they’re going to plunder!



Okay, it works better with rap music. But all doggerel does. Let’s pass, so to speak, on this one as we focus on maimed quarterbacks who no longer pass. Rap music fades, as quarterback is carried off the field, suffering from brain damage.

Glass House, No Stones, Please

American football is a contact game. It’s a violent sport. People who play the game are aware of this fact. If not, they are already brain damaged and have lost any understanding of its dangers.

In my youth, I played a lot of football. As a game, it was secondary only to my love of swimming. I played it until a shoulder injury---coupled with inability---put me out of the game.

I liked to hit. I liked to bring a person down. I never considered taking on an opponent in the sense of injuring him. The idea just did not occur to me. But I wanted my adversary to be aware of my block or tackle. Else why play football? That meant, whenever possible, to knock the living daylights out of him. That’s the game of football. It’s taken from the game of life: subduing an opponent.

Every football player in the NFL (and other football leagues) must be violent if they are to keep their job. I exclude quarterbacks from the previous claim, but they often are the targets of intended violence. As for defensive players, if they let up, if they do not sack, block, and tackle their opposition with great force, they are back to sacking bags at the local grocery store.

A few words about our long-gone relatives’ violence: Things have changed since the days our ancestors clubbed each other to death. Or when the Aztecs played a ball game, and the

¹ Image on cover is courtesy of Google.

losers were killed. In sports, we are no longer supposed to maim our competition, at least not while vocally expressing our intent to do so. And that returns us to the situation with the New Orleans Saints.

Keep It a Secret

As mentioned, violently intentioned hits are an accepted and respected part of football. Football players know the rules. They usually strive to play within the rules. Within self-imposed boundaries, each play on the field is intended to put numbers on the scoreboard in favor of one of the teams.

Fans love the aggression displayed on a football field. Peeping-Toms, we all are. Venting our displaced aggression onto those men on the gridiron; it is a healthy way for humans to sublimate our brain stem instincts to dominate other humans. It subdues those subconscious urges that still reside in our makeup to eliminate an adversary.

However, in our modern society where we have ample food and shelter, there is a danger of letting our natural primordial and *private* dispositions become part of a systemic *public* process. In so doing, we allow a sport to evolve from a healthy way to *vent* our aggression to one in which it *abets* our aggression.

It is a fine line to draw. What is acceptable aggression on the football field? What is an acceptable hit? How does a defensive player know how or when---and to what extent---to curtail a possible inclination to injure an opponent?

To prevent mayhem, the answers to these questions must remain private to each person. They must not become systemic to the organization to which the person belongs.

Why? Because when encouraged by others, human aggression feeds upon itself. For lack of a better phrase, it's another example of the bandwagon effect: *Everyone else is doing it, so I can, too.*

For the New Orleans Saints tale, it's Darwin in barefoot transformed into Darwin in football shoes: Don't just subdue the opposition, remove the opposition.

But doing it to win a sports contest? A game for god's sake! Sure, the game translates into more money for the winners than the losers. But losing does not translate into starving or freezing to death.

Past

During my Freshman year in high school, I was dedicated to subduing Leo Bridgeforth. He was a football teammate, but he was my archrival. He played middle linebacker on the defense. I was the center on the offence. During scrimmages, and for many of the plays, my assignment was to block Leo. He often eluded my attempts to keep him out of the action. Leo was adept at tackling and even better at mocking the results of my failed blocks.

I could put up with some missed blocks, but I could not ignore his derision. I resolved to even the competition and his derision of my less than average performance.

One day, while the offence was running a wide out, end run play, I had a golden opportunity. Leo was pursuing the runner, oblivious to my bearing down on him. I wiped him out of the play.² For that play, what I lacked in ability, I make up in aggression.

² Sweet irony. This block also wiped-out my right shoulder. After this season, the injury kept me out of football and almost out of the US Navy.

Apart from the one solitary good hit I had in my entire “career,” that’s football. I can’t imagine anyone who has played the game would say otherwise. If a team and its players strive to be successful, it can’t be played any other way.

Individual Violence versus Institutional Violence

During the few years I played organized football, not once was I instructed to do harm to an opposing player. I did not hear this encouragement from any coach, nor do I recall any of my teammates boast that they were going to maim someone. Sure, we were committed and expressed that we were going to “kick the shit” out of our opponent. But not once, was it mentioned to taking out a knee, or trying to injure a player’s head. Some of us may have thought it, but none of us made these thoughts public.

I never witnessed institutionalized violence in the game of football. In fact, during a game, if an opposing team player put a dirty hit on a teammate, without any coaches’ direction, we players ganged up on this player in subsequent plays. Any injury-intended violence was contained because it was self-policed.

The danger and associated violence of football is sufficient unto itself. If it is encouraged by the football organization, specifically the coaching staff, it becomes institutional violence. It becomes a criminal activity. It should become a crime.

The media had this to say about the New Orleans Saints’ situation:³

The NFL suspended [head coach Sean] Payton for the 2012 season for failing to stop, and working to cover up, the three-year [three-year!] existence of a bounty system that included targeting four quarterbacks, two of whom the Saints beat during the championship run, Kurt Warner and Brett Favre.

Here are other quotes from the media:⁴

Gregg Williams, the Saints’ former defensive coordinator, exhorted his team to inflict physical damage on specific players in a playoff game against the San Francisco 49ers in January.

Williams pointed to his chin while telling his players to hit 49ers quarterback Alex Smith “right there,” saying: “Remember me. I got the first one. I got the first one. Go get it,” while rubbing his fingers together to indicate there would be cash paid for the hit.

He also said: “Every single one of you, before you get off the pile, affect the head. Early, affect the head...”

About 49ers running back Frank Gore, Williams said: “We’ve got to do everything in the world to make sure we kill Frank Gore’s head. We want him running sideways. We want his head sideways.”

³ Judy Battista, “After Payton’s Suspension, Saints Scramble to Fill Void,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2012, sports section, p. 1.

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/06/sports/football/tape-reveals-saints-williams-singling-out-49ers-for-injury.html?_r=.

Later, Williams talked about hits he wanted put on Kyle Williams, mentioning his history of concussions, and receiver Michael Crabtree, urging them to “take out” his knee ligament.

Circling the Wagons

According to the NFL, it has been substantiated that some of the Saints’ executives lied to the NFL during the investigation. It has been substantiated that Coach Payton knew about the bounty program.

Yet many of the press reports have focused on how much Payton can participate during his ban by coaching from afar, about the famous coach Bill Parcells wanting to help-out Payton. And about this subject: Payton and others who are banned are filing an appeal to contest their ban.

An appeal to continue participating in the NFL? These men should be hiring lawyers to keep themselves out of jail. If the charges hold up, and they seem to be solid, these men do not belong on the gridiron. They belong behind iron bars.

Read those statements from the Saints’ coaches again. “Make sure we kill Frank Gore’s head.” And “...receiver Michael Crabtree, urging them to ‘take out’ his knee ligament.”

But I will give you odds that these men, after serving their time away from the sport, will be back in the sport. All will be forgotten and forgiven. The NFL and its stalwarts will move on to the next concussion.