

## How Real Were the Cougars? Crime and Deviance in the National Football League

### QUELLES-ONT ÉTAIENT LES RÉALITÉS DES COUGARS? DU CRIME ET DE LA DÉVIANCE DANS LA LIGUE NATIONALE DE FOOTBALL

Curtis A. Fogel<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, Lakehead University, Orillia  
500 University Ave, Orillia, ON, L3V 0B9, Canada.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 1 January 2012; accepted 14 April 2012.

#### Abstract

In 2003 ESPN premiered a new series titled *Playmakers* which provided a fictional account of life on and off the field of professional football. Despite the high viewership ratings and television awards it received, the show was cancelled during the first season. *Playmakers* told the story of a fictional professional football team, the Cougars, from an unidentified American city. The show depicted various acts of crime and deviance in American football such as: injurious violence on the field, steroid use, painkiller use, illicit drug use, night club violence, domestic violence, homosexuality, and eating disorders. The NFL league office claimed that the show was a gross misrepresentation of life in the NFL. This paper examines the real life events and issues in the NFL and reveals that *Playmakers* did not misrepresent professional football but rather, it cast an important critical light on many issues in professional sport and NFL football in particular.

**Key words:** American football; Television; Violence; Crime; Deviance

#### Résumé

En 2003, L'ESPN la première d'une nouvelle série intitulée *Playmakers* qui ont fourni un compte rendu fictif de la vie sur et hors du terrain de football professionnel. Malgré les évaluations d'écoute élevés et des récompenses qu'il a reçues de la télévision, le spectacle a été annulé au cours de la première saison. *Playmakers* a raconté l'histoire d'une équipe professionnelle de football fictive, les Cougars, à partir d'une ville non identifiée américaine. Le spectacle représenté divers actes de criminalité et de déviance dans le football canadien, tels que: la violence

préjudiciable sur le terrain, l'utilisation de stéroïdes, de l'utilisation antalgique, la consommation de drogues illicites, la violence boîte de nuit, la violence domestique, l'homosexualité, et les troubles alimentaires. Le bureau de la ligue NFL a affirmé que le spectacle était une déformation grossière de la vie dans la NFL. Ce document examine les événements réels et les enjeux de la NFL et révèle que *Playmakers* n'a pas dénaturé le football professionnel, mais plutôt, il jette une lumière critique importante sur de nombreuses questions dans le sport professionnel et de la NFL du football en particulier.

**Mots clés:** Football Américain; Télévision; La violence; La criminalité; La déviance

.....  
Curtis A. Fogel (2012). How Real Were the Cougars? Crime and Deviance in the National Football League. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(2), 1-6. Available from URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020120802.1330>  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120802.1330>  
.....

#### INTRODUCTION

.....  
In 2003, ESPN aired a fictional television show titled *Playmakers*, which depicted various acts of crime and deviance in professional American football. The television drama revolved around a team identified as the Cougars, a fictional team name, who were located in an unidentified American city. Much of the drama in the series occurred off the field, depicting fictional accounts of life off the field for professional football players. Despite the high viewership ratings of approximately two million American viewers and winning various awards, the show was cancelled in its first season after airing just eleven episodes. According to ESPN, a primary reason the show was cancelled was due to pressure from the National Football League (NFL) front office. ESPN, a partner of the NFL, were criticized for developing storylines that

cast professional football in a negative and inaccurate light (Rovell, 2004).

According to ESPN, various NFL players were also outspoken about the need to cancel the show. According to Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis, a man once convicted of obstruction of justice following a fight leading to the death of another man, publicly stated “That show don’t mean nothing -- that show is nothing about us” (Rovell, 2004, p.1). Cincinnati Bengals offensive tackle Willie Anderson said “It one of those false interpretations people get about the NFL and the players. If the NFL’s serious about our image and the image that we portray, canceling [Playmakers] is a good thing” (Rovell, 2004, p.2). Both players and administrators of the NFL publicly proclaimed that the show was bad for the image of football and grossly inaccurate. Despite the success of the show, ESPN caved to the pressure and cancelled their highly-viewed, highly-rated show. The aim of this paper is to explore how real the Cougars really were. That is, to examine the extent to which the show *Playmakers* depicted actual storylines of events occurring in and around the NFL. The data used in this study include 59 interviews with football players, autobiographies of professional football players, and various legal and media files.

---

## REALISM IN PLAYMAKERS

---

Various acts of crime and deviance were depicted throughout *Playmakers*’ short run. While these depictions might have been out of line from the image that the NFL would like to portray of the life of American football players, there is evidence to suggest that the plot lines were based on real-life events occurring in and around NFL football. Though a fictional show, the themes of the show are real. The data used to confirm this include media accounts, published autobiographies, and existing research on crime in football. The plotlines tied to crime and deviance that will be examined in this paper include: a) injurious violence, b) steroid use, c) painkiller use, d) illicit drug use, e) violence off the field, f) homosexuality, and g) eating disorders.

---

## INJURIOUS VIOLENCE

---

Season one, episode one of *Playmakers* begins with a violent tackle that leaves a player paralyzed for life, and the ensuing psychological struggle of the player, Eric Olczyk, who caused the paralysis. This theme reflects a pressing issue in the NFL. Severe injury and the possibility of paralysis are risks of participation in the sport. According to the National Football League Players Association, the average length of an NFL career is just 3.5 years due in large to injuries from routine violence on the field (NFLPA, 2011). The effects of on-field violence can

be devastating, as is depicted in *Playmakers*. According to data compiled at the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research over 1,006 direct and 683 indirect fatalities resulting from participation in organized football in the United States were recorded between 1931 to 2006 (Mueller & Cantu, 2007).

Less existing research appears to have been conducted on the prevalence of player paralysis in American football, but there are certainly examples that *Playmakers* could have drawn from. For example, Darryl Stingley of the New England Patriots suffered a fractured 4th and 5th vertebrae from a hit by Jack Tatum of the Oakland Raiders leaving him a quadriplegic for the remainder of his life (Kreidler, 2007). Likewise, Mike Utley of the Detroit Lions suffered a fractured 6th and 7th vertebrae during a game against the St. Louis Rams leaving him paralyzed from the waist down (Freeman, 1991).

While death and paralysis are present in the sport of football, injurious violence in general can be seen as an everyday occurrence. One former professional player, Time Green, writes: “Pain and football are inseparable” (Green, 1996, p.93). A former player interviewed for this study reminiscing on his playing days stated: “Everything just hurt so bad that it kind of blended into one big hurt.” His list of injuries are as follows:

I don’t regret anything and I would do it all over in a heartbeat, but I have a steel plate, 4 pins and 2 screws in my left ankle, torn my MCL in my right knee, a stress fracture in my right femur, I’ve broke both ankles, all of my fingers, ribs, slipped a disk, separated my left shoulder, bruised my tailbone ridiculously bad and it still bothers me to this day and that was six years go, and I have badly dislocated my elbow... your body hates you after.

Most players not only expect that they could receive minor injuries like sprained ankles and jammed fingers that could keep them out of the next game or two, but they also appear to acknowledge that they could experience catastrophic injuries that would end their playing careers and cause injuries that have larger health repercussion later in life. Reggie White (1996) writes:

With every snap, you’ve got 300, 600, maybe even 900 pounds of raw beef aiming to land on you. Could come from you blind side. Could come from a cut block from the side, or a chop block from the rear. Could just happen when you get ‘caught in the wash’ beneath a tangled pile of bodies, pads, and helmets. Any play can be a career-buster. (p.85)

Expressing a similar concern, Bill Romanowski (2005) writes: “You realize it is just a matter of time before you are the next casualty” (p.113).

---

## STEROID USE

---

The second episode of *Playmakers* is aptly titled “The Piss Man”. The piss man is a connotation for the drug tester who randomly selects NFL players at intervals during the off-season, regular season, and playoffs to undergo urine tests to identify the use of banned substances, particularly

steroids. In this episode, many of the players express worry and concern among themselves out of fear that they will test positive for their steroid use.

The exact use of steroids in professional football is not known, as most players are not tested and various strategies can be used to beat the test. According to interviewed players, one basic strategy is to cycle steroid use, typically after a test has just been conducted. This allows enough time for traces of the steroids to be minimized and undetectable by the next test. Another technique is to use a variety of masking agents that allow players to continue using steroids throughout the season and not test positive if they happen to be tested at random. An extreme form of beating the test involves using a catheter to place the urine of a non-steroid user into one's bladder. In *Playmakers*, the catheter method is depicted. While this technique might be farfetched and seem like a fictional dramatization specifically made for television, player reports indicate that this measure is taken in the NFL. Former NFL player Tim Green (1996) describes this catheter method in his autobiography. Likewise, former NFL player Lawrence Taylor describes a less intrusive approach that he used to beat the drug tests: "I'd put that bottle [of clean urine] into my jock, get my test bottle, go off to a stall, pour the urine into their bottle, and give them clean urine" (p.129).

Reports by players in this study on illegal steroid use in football varied from one percent to eighty-five percent. While revealing little by way of specific numbers, the reports of players do indicate that steroids are certainly being used. This prevalence does not, however, appear to be as high as it once was in American professional football where, according to Dave Meggyesy (1971):

The violent and brutal player that television viewers marvel over on Saturdays and Sundays is often a synthetic product... I saw players taking not only steroids, but also amphetamines and barbiturates at an astonishing rate... trainers do more dealing in these drugs than the average junky. (p.73)

Meggyesy (1971) adds further: "Some pro teams dispense amphetamines and barbiturates like they were penny candy" (p.91). Similarly, Steve Courson (1991) writes: "Many coaches have encouraged their players to use performance-enhancing drugs. When a coach suggests a player gain 20lbs. in the off-season, he is basically writing out a prescription for steroids" (p.181). While these accounts are now somewhat dated, they provide clear evidence that the steroids plotlines that persist during the short series are grounded in real life examples in the NFL.

---

## **PAINKILLER USE**

---

Along with depicting illicit steroid use in the NFL, *Playmakers* also depicts the severe injuries that players would sustain and the painkilling measures they would

go to in order to remain on the field. The players on the Cougars are warned about the long-term dangers of playing through their injuries, yet the team trainer continues to supply them with painkillers and cortisol shots to numb their pain so they can continue to play. This extreme use of painkillers appears to reflect the realities of the NFL.

Former professional player Jerome Bettis (2007) writes: "Pain is part of the game... if you can't endure pain you can't play [football]" (p.117). He goes further to note the painful procedure he endured before every game for an entire season:

The needle was as long and as thick as a No.2 pencil... the doctor would stick that needle into the puffy part of my knee and extract all sorts of pus, blood, and little pieces of cartilage. Yeah, it hurt. Damn right it did. But if I wanted to play, that's what I had to do. (p.117)

Steve Courson (1991) makes similar remarks about playing through injury and enduring pain in his football career. He writes:

In nine years as a professional football player, I had played with a laundry list of injuries: dislocated foot, dislocated shoulder, hip pointers, pulled hamstrings, sprained ankles, sprained knees, torn knee cartilage. Like many offensive linemen, I also had undergone a couple of knee operations. For most injuries, I took the needle from the team physician, sucked it up, and went out to play.

In both of these examples the players indicate receiving some sort of painkiller to be able to endure the pain and continue to play. Players in this study were asked about their perceptions of painkillers. Several noted that taking painkillers was a sign of toughness. No player indicated that the use of painkillers was cheating or looked down upon. In fact, the opposite was true where players who refused painkillers were perceived negatively by their teammates as being "soft" and as "liabilities on the team."

---

## **ILLICIT DRUG USE**

---

Not all of the action of *Playmakers* is on the field. One of the off-field plotlines that runs throughout the series is the use of illicit drugs, specifically cocaine, by the players. One player in particular, D.H., struggles with an addiction to cocaine throughout before eventually being required by the team to enter a rehabilitation facility. At one point he is pulled over by the police while he is in possession of cocaine and the police ignore it. At another point he is unable to perform in a game due to sickness from withdrawal, leading him to convince another player to buy some cocaine for him at half-time so that he is able to play.

Like steroid use, there is a large dark measure surrounding the use of illicit drugs in the NFL. It is not possible to know the exact statistics on use or even to calculate a rough estimate. During random drug tests,

the league does test for illicit substances. However, as with steroids, players are able to avoid detection through various means. There is, however, ample evidence to reveal that illicit substances are used regularly by some NFL players. In a study of criminal infractions by NFL players in the 1996-1997 season, Jeff Benedict and Don Yaeger (1998) reported that 15 arrests were made on active players for drug crimes, including intent to distribute cocaine, possession of cocaine, and possession of marijuana. Benedict and Yaeger (1998) warn that these numbers should be treated conservatively as their sample size was only about one-third of the active players.

The plotline of cocaine addiction issues faced by the fictional character D.H. in *Playmakers* seems to mirror the real life struggles of former NFL player Lawrence Taylor, commonly referred to as L.T. In his autobiography, Taylor (2003) goes into great detail about his continued cocaine use throughout his hall of fame career. Describing his use, Taylor writes

I went from using half a gram every two to four weeks to an eighth or more in one night. I used to buy a gram, then all of a sudden I was buying an eight ball... it got to the point where there would be times when I'd be standing in the huddle and instead of thinking about what defense we were playing I would be thinking about smoking cocaine. (p.126)

At other points in his autobiography, Taylor reveals that he would often show up to practices and games with little to no sleep, still high on cocaine. A parallel seems quite clear between the fictional D.H. in *Playmakers* and the real life L.T..

---

## VIOLENCE OFF THE FIELD

---

Several episodes of *Playmakers* center on two separate incidents of violence off the field including: a) night club violence, and b) domestic violence. In the first incident, violence breaks out at a night club which leaves one man dead. The team's star running back, D.H., is implicated in the murder as he was with the people believed to be involved. D.H. lies to police investigators stating that he was with his friend at the time of the murder and away from the scene of the crime. In the final episode, D.H. finally reveals to the police that he had lied.

It could be suggested that this plotline also provides a parallel between the lives of the fictional D.H. and real life L.T., as Taylor was known for his involvement in many acts of night club violence. In fact, he suggests that fighting at night clubs is a part of playing professional football. He writes, "We'd come home from celebrating after a big win and someone would say, "Hey! We didn't get in a fight tonight." So we'd hop in a car, go to the bar, get into a fight, and come back home. Saturday-night fighting was a big thing" (Taylor, 2003, p.32).

The depiction of night club violence in *Playmakers* might have been a more exact parallel to the night club murder involving Baltimore Ravens star player Ray

Lewis. In this case, following the stabbing death of a man at a night club, Lewis provided incomplete statements to the police about what had occurred, encouraged the people he was with to stay quiet, and his blood stained clothing was destroyed before investigators were able to obtain it. In exchange for a charge of murder, Lewis pled guilty to obstruction of justice and agreed to testify against the men he was with when the murder took place (Associated Press, 2000). The plotline of *Playmakers* might have been built off of this case, or one of the many other incidents of night club violence that occur each year that NFL players are involved in.

Another continuing plotline on *Playmakers* involves an incident of domestic violence perpetrated by an aging runningback named Leon. Struggling to come to terms with his career coming to an end, Leon grows increasingly violent with his wife. At one point during an argument Leon hits his wife and she falls down a set of stairs. Gradually the truth of the incident comes out and Leon faces criminal charges related to the assault. This plotline similarly parallels the NFL. Benedict and Yaeger's (1998) study reveals 45 arrests for domestic assault among their sample of 509 active players in the 1996-1997 season. Considering low rates of reporting domestic violence, the actual occurrences of domestic violence could be even more alarming. The writers and producers of *Playmakers* could have drawn inspiration from a wide range of real life cases of domestic violence.

---

## HOMOSEXUALITY

---

While homosexuality is no longer labeled deviant within popular, Western discourse, it remains deviant in the context of masculine sports and football in particular. Describing locker room talk among professional players, Tuala (2006) writes: "Homophobia peppered the banter. They called each other fags, fucking queers, fudge packers- they took it to the crude and graphic limits" (p. 94). Stebbins (1987) indicates that similar homophobic sentiments were commonplace in his study of professional football in the 1980s. Despite larger societal changes, homosexuality remains deviant in football.

Amid depictions of violence, murder, and illicit drugs use, the depiction of the struggles of a gay player on the Cougars, Guerwitz, remains one of the most controversial. Guerwitz is an emerging star on the team and well-liked among the other players. He leads a similar life as other players, including dating women and making homophobic remarks to fit in with his team. Simultaneously, however, he is shown hiding his sexuality from the team. After rumours begin to spread, Guerwitz openly reveals his sexuality to his team. The players on the team react violently to this news and attempt to physically injure him on the practice field. The team's front office force him to declare injury, go on the injury list, and stop attending practices and games, even though

he is not injured. They do not want him on the team. Amid this homophobic discrimination, Guerwitz is named a league all-star, but the players and team personnel no longer want him playing for their team because of his sexuality.

The prevalence of homosexuality in professional football is unknown. The writers and producers of *Playmakers* did not, however, simply invent this plotline without real life examples to base it on. The most recent example of an NFL player revealing that he is gay is Esera Tuaolo. After nine years of playing in the NFL, Tuaolo (2006) writes, "The dream to succeed in the NFL and achieve all that football had to offer was a nightmare at times. I struggled to survive the combative, macho world dominated by a culture that despised who I really am" (p.3). Tuaolo describes fears that if his sexuality became publicly known that he would be physically beaten and injured by his teammates. Tuaolo hid his sexuality from his teammates, apart from those he had sexual relations with, by having girlfriends, much like the fictional character Guerwitz in *Playmakers*. Tuaolo was not the first NFL player to publicly reveal that he is gay. A similar story is detailed by Dave Kopay in his 1977 autobiography, which could also provide the base to which the *Playmakers* plotline was developed.

---

## EATING DISORDERS

---

Thomas Herrion, a 23-year-old, 6-foot-3, 310-pound offensive guard for the San Francisco 49ers collapsed in the locker room following a game with the Denver Broncos and dies with no immediate cause. His death was later attributed to heart failure (Masin, 2006). This heart failure could be attributed to the diet and weight of this young football player. Despite the associated physiological dangers of obesity, NFL football players having been increasing their weight, on average, at a steady rate. In 1970, only one NFL player weighed as much as 300 pounds (Longman, 2011). By 1994 this number rose to 179, then to 339 in 2004 (Masin, 2006). In 2010, an astonishing 532 players weighed over 300 pounds. This weight gain can also be associated with increased health problems related to heart failure, stroke, overuse injuries, arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnea, and high mortality rates (Sibastinelli, 2006). While some of this weight gain might be attributed to performance-enhancing drugs, much of it appears tied to the eating pressures of playing in the NFL. A reporter from Men's Health magazine attended a training camp of the New York Giants in 2006 and found that players consume up to 10,000 calories a day, about five times the caloric intake of an average, healthy person (Bellavance, 2006).

In the concluding episode of *Playmakers*, a team lineman, named Buffalo, struggles with consuming

enough food to keep his weight well above 300 pounds. His weight declines and it is revealed that he is in the early stages of developing a serious form of diabetes from his diet and weight. He decides to put his health first and to discontinue his eating strategies to remain above 300 pounds. In response to Buffalo dropping weight, the coach gives his playing time to another player who was able to make the weight. Buffalo then decides to put his health aside and bring his weight back up over 300 pounds. In so doing, the writers and producers of *Playmakers* critically examine a pressing issue effecting over 500 current NFL players.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

While these depictions might have been out of line from the image that the NFL would like to portray of the life of American football players, there is evidence to suggest that each of the plotlines was based on real-life events occurring in and around NFL football. One might argue that though the depictions of crime and deviance in *Playmakers* are real, they are too concentrated for a single team. That is, the data confirming a few of the plotlines are spread out across different teams and different years of NFL football. Any inaccuracies, then, are only in the potency in which the drama is produced rather than false depictions. This criticism of a high concentration of drama could be said of any television drama and does not explain why *Playmakers* was cancelled.

*Playmakers* was an important television production that cast critical light on the institution of American football. It revealed real issues that are present and pervasive in the NFL that the league office does not want people to know about. The real inaccuracy of *Playmakers* might have been, in fact, that it did not cover enough of the crime and deviance that is systemic in American sport, and football in particular. What about gambling? What about the disproportionate perpetration of sexual violence against women by male athletes? What about coaches molesting towel boys? What about illegal weapon possession and use? What about the high rates of depression, drug dependence, and suicide among retired players? And, ultimately, what about the constant exercise of power by the league's front office to censor any information or depictions that reveals the darker sides of NFL football. One is left to wonder what plotlines the second season would have included.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Associated Press. (June 5, 2000). Lewis Murder Charges Dropped. *Sports Illustrated*. Available online at: [http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/football/nfl/news/19/06/04/lewis\\_agreement](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/football/nfl/news/19/06/04/lewis_agreement)
- Bellavance, J. (August 1, 2006). The NFL's Secret Muscle

- Foods. *Men's Health*. Available online at: <http://www.menshealth.com/nutrition/healthy-foods#axzz1lLyf9Nz9>
- Benedict, J. & Yaeger, D. (1998). *Pros and Cons: The Criminals Who Play in the NFL*. New York: Warner Books.
- Bettis, J. (2007). *The Bus: My Life in and Out of the Helmet*. New York: Doubleday.
- Courson, S. (1991). *False Glory*. Stamford, CT: Longmeadow Press.
- Freeman, M. (1991, November 28). NFL Team and Mike Utley, Offensive Lineman Who was Paralyzed During Game Against Rams Nov. 17, Face a Tough Thanksgiving. *Los Angeles Times*. Available online at: [http://articles.latimes.com/1991-11-28/sports/sp-23\\_1\\_mike-utley](http://articles.latimes.com/1991-11-28/sports/sp-23_1_mike-utley)
- Green, T. (1996). *The Dark Side of the Game*. New York: Warner Books.
- Kopay, D. (1977). *The David Kopay Story*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Longman, J. (January 28, 2011). NFL Linemen Tip the Scales. *The New York Times*. Available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/29/sports/football/29weight.html?pagewanted=all>
- Masin, H. (2006). Enter the NFL.... *Coach and Athletic Director*, 75(6), 6-7.
- Meggyesy, D. (1971). *Out of Their League*. New York: Paperback Library.
- Mueller, F. & Cantu, R. (2007). *Annual Survey of Football Injury Research Data*. National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research, University of North Carolina.
- National Football League Players Association. (2011). NFL Hopefuls Frequently Asked Questions. *NFLPA Report*. Available online at: <https://www.nflplayers.com>
- Rovell, D. (February 4, 2004). NFL Reaction to Series a Factor in Cancellation. *ESPN*. Available online at: <http://espn.go.com/gen/news/2004/0204/1727165.html>
- Sibastinelli, W. (2006). Obesity in Football: Is Bigger Really Better?. *Sports Medicine Update*, 7, 4-7.
- Stebbins, R. (1987). *Canadian Football: The View from the Helmet*. London: University of Western Ontario Press.
- Tuaola, E. (2006). *Alone in the Trenches*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks.