

Not for Long: The Life and Times of the NFL Athlete, By Robert W. Turner II (2018) New York: Oxford University Press, 258 pages. ISBN: 978-0-1998-9290-7

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prejudice. Teters concludes by analyzing General William T. Sherman, a reluctant emancipator if ever there was one. Still, even if Sherman was not interested in liberating all slaves and thought little of black soldiers, “the army was still a powerful force of liberation” (p. 138). The slaves who found shelter, employment, and freedom behind Union lines, in other words, likely did not care if Sherman and his men were motivated by pragmatism or morality. Teters might have included more African American voices in the book to see what they thought about the “practical liberators.”

Teters has written a thought-provoking book, but one wonders if it might have been organized differently. His fifth chapter, “A Practical Army of Liberation,” details the actual work of emancipation. Since Teters is correct that the Western Theater contained far more slaves than the Eastern Theater, an in-depth study of the way emancipation unfolded, and how officers, soldiers, slaves, and politicians played multiple roles in this process might have been more significant than discussing pragmatism. In addition, as mentioned above, Teters sometimes creates straw man arguments. For instance, he comments, “while it [the Civil War] had pushed Northerners to emancipate the slaves, it did not make them into racial egalitarians” (p. 157). One would be hard pressed to find a historian who argues that soldiers who supported emancipation, whether their support came early or late in the war, were all racial egalitarians. Some obviously were, some were not, and some were no doubt ambivalent. These criticisms suggest the inherently fascinating nature of the topic. Practical *Liberators* would be a useful book to utilize in upper-division undergraduate courses or graduate seminars to spark lively discussions.

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Not for Long: The Life and Times of the NFL Athlete

By Robert W. Turner II (2018) New York: Oxford University Press, 258 pages. ISBN: 978-0-1998-9290-7.

Of the various team sports played across the globe American football poses the greatest physical and (possibly) psychological risks to its participants. A game based on speed, strength and physical domination over others is an occupation with a very high injury rate and short careers. National Football League (NFL) players have an average career of 3.1 years (p.x). Injuries to their bodies and their brain resulting from numerous concussions provide them with a post football life of pain, reliance on medical prescriptions and ‘illegal’ drugs, weight problems, family break-ups, difficulties in finding second career employment, mental disorders, depression and suicide. Despite the high income players may earn, Robert Turner quotes a 2009 report in *Sports Illustrated* that within two years of retirement, 78 per cent of players are bankrupt or in financial hardship due to joblessness or divorce (p. 2).

Robert Turner is a former player with stints in the now defunct United States Football League, the Canadian Football League and the NFL. When he was cut from the NFL, he faced the dilemma of not knowing what he would do next. He sees this problem as being common to all players. Their identities are all linked to being footballers. Once this comes to an end— invariably as the result of an injury or a fitter or less injured younger player who can be employed for less—, players find themselves in a state of limbo and, if they are not careful or smart enough, long term decline into misery. Turner turned to education, obtained a PhD in sociology, which focused on sport and is a sport’s scholar. Much of this book draws on his PhD.

Not for Long examines the career path of American football players from Pop Warner youth leagues, through high school,

college, professional leagues such as the NFL and the transition to retirement. Turner sees this career path as an integrated whole and an example of what he describes as the sports-industrial complex. Turner's object is: «[...] to explore how the sports-industrial complex in its operation as a totalizing institution contributed to athletes' socialization and to Black male marginalization [...] an elite group of mostly White wealthy men [...] exert almost total control over the bodies and social fortunes of professional football players—approximately 70% of whom are Black [...] the immense profit and control accrued by a few powerful individuals, combined with the willingness of players to suppress their desires and identities in order to share in the bounty, create such a momentum that, as the wheel spins, it regularly jettisons players, sending them spinning off into the ether.” (p. xiv).

A totalizing institution is where “all aspects of life are conducted in the same location and under a single authority and members daily activities are carried out in the immediate company of others” (p. 71). Prisons and the military are examples of totalizing institutions. College and possibly school football (Turner provides limited information on the latter) constitutes a sports' example of a totalizing institution. At college, all aspects of a so called student's life are controlled to maximise their ability to perform on the football field. Their hours of work are such that they have little time to attend class or study, they do Mickey Mouse courses, have academic (sic) advisors who ensure that they do not waste time performing academic functions, have limited interaction with other students, and even though their playing generates billions of dollars for their respective colleges, are forbidden by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) from being paid, because they receive scholarships which provide them with a pretended education, with many players leaving college without a degree. At college, players are indoctri-

nated to sacrifice themselves, their health and education, for the welfare of the team by coaches, many of whom are on multi-million dollar contracts.¹

Turner sees similar processes playing themselves out in the NFL. Drawing on the work of the pioneering African American athlete and sociologist Harry Edwards², he sees labour relations in the NFL in terms of old White men dominating a predominantly Black young workforce (p. 123-124). He situates these issues in terms of a discourse of Black Nationalism.

Besides examining different steps along players' career paths, Turner also has chapters on the historical evolution of the NFL and its engagement with and/or neutralizing the impact of the 1890 *Sherman Antitrust Act* and the trajectory of collective bargaining in the NFL with a brief examination of the 2011 deal negotiated between the NFL and the National Football League Players' Association (NFLPA). Turner sees the NFLPA having limited power and is generally critical of its achievements on behalf of players. Schiavone provides an alternative analysis of the NFLPA and collective bargaining in football.³ These two chapters appear in the latter stages of the book. They could have appeared earlier in that they essentially provide contextual material for the main body of Turner's narrative.

While Turner provides more than useful insights in unpacking the career of American footballers, his account suffers two related problems. The first is that much of his information is dated and seems to draw too much on his earlier PhD. Second, he has not engaged with how to break down and counter the totalizing institution that is football. Turner interviewed many current and past players in conducting his ethnographic based research. In discussing different stages of the career path, Turner draws on interviews he conducted more than a dozen years ago. This is not necessarily a problem. When he produces data, in the

form of numbers concerning the income of the NFL, average income of players and so on, this information is many years out of date. It is difficult to understand why such information was not updated.

In reading between the lines of Turner's account, football is an activity conducted by dictatorial coaches, at all levels. Turner provides an account of a training camp for schoolboys conducted by himself and a fellow past player. While Turner was addressing the group, one of them said something to a fellow student. Turner's colleague gave the boy a solid tongue lashing spiced with expletives. The boy having been humiliated by an older, bigger man never turned up to the camp again (p.56-57). Maybe the schoolboy attended the camp for social rather than sporting reasons. The way in which schoolboy football is conducted, the behaviour of coaches is an area that required further examination in developing an understanding of the beginnings of the totalizing institution that is football. Policies may need to be developed and enforced to ensure that the rights of schoolboy athletes are respected and they are not subject to being yelled at and abused by coaches looking to climb the greasy pole that is football coaching.

Turner points to how the lives of college players are controlled by coaches to the extent that they have no time for themselves. The NCAA has a rule that athletes cannot indulge in football related activities for more than 20 hours during the football season and eight hours in the off season. Coaches get around this by holding so-called voluntary training which, in fact, translates into mandatory practice. Turner reports that college players, on average, spend 44.8 hours a week practicing, playing or training (p. 83). A possible way to overcome this problem is for the NCAA to institute a rule that there cannot be any training or football related functions before 1 PM. This would enable athletes to sleep a few extra hours, attend class and engage

in study and participate in other aspects of campus life. Such a rule should be strictly enforced with coaches and/or their assistants who break this rule being substantially fined, with repeat offences involving suspension and dismissal.

Turner is also unaware of the enhanced role of the NFLPA in devoting resources to the welfare of both past and present players. A quick dip into its website reveals that it has rules, which govern the activities of player agents and financial advisors, that in 2013 it established a Trust that provides a wide range of benefits for members, and in 2016 established another program to provide all former players with medical and other benefits.⁴ A provision in the *2011 Collective Bargaining Agreement* funds Trust payments and there are other provisions in the collective agreement, which fund a wide variety of welfare programs for retired players.⁵

Turner focuses on the problems of Black players in a White-dominated league and society more broadly. What is surprising is that he has made no mention of the furore that was created when Colin Kaepernick took the knee (refused to stand) during the playing of the national anthem in a pre-season game in 2016.⁶ He was protesting over the discriminatory treatment of Blacks in America. He subsequently filed a collusion case against the NFL as no club was prepared to employ him. The issue was settled in February 2019 with Kaepernick receiving an undisclosed payment (which the rumour mill suggests was US \$60 million).⁷

Turner saw himself as following the pioneering work of Harry Edwards. Edwards saw the plight of the Black athlete and racism in America in systemic, structural terms; it was endemic to America. In the final chapter, Turner asks the question of whether he would let his son play football. He provides a Neoliberal answer. He says yes, as he would be able to guide him through the pitfalls, which he has examined in the book.

It is doubtful if this would include medical and issues associated with concussion and mental health. The more general point is how many young Americans, whether they are Black, White or from overseas such as the Pacific Islands, have a father who has played professionally, obtained a PhD, and who conducts research into football and its laments? The ultimate weakness of *Not for Long* is that Turner has not invested any thought into breaking down the totalizing institution that is American football and the dramatic and devastating impact it has on players which his research revealed and he himself experienced.

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Notes

- 1 See H. P. Chudacoff (2015) *Changing the Playbook: How Power, Profit, and Politics Transformed College Sport*, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press; R. King-White, ed (2018) *Sport and the Neoliberal University: Profit, Politics and Pedagogy*, New Brunswick, Newark and London: Rutgers University Press; J. Nocera and B. Strauss (2018) *Indentured: The Battle to End the Exploitation of College Athletes*, New York: Portfolio/Penguin; E. O'Bannon, with M. McCann (2018) *Court Justice: The Inside Story of my Battle with the NCAA*, New York: Diversion Books.
- 2 His most famous work is H. Edwards (2017) *The Revolt of the Black Athlete (50th Anniversary Edition)*, Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.
- 3 M. Schiavone (2015) *Sports and Labor in the United States*, Albany: SUNY Press, p. 51-88.
- 4 National Football League Players' Association website, <https://www.nflpa.com>, accessed 17 February 2019.
- 5 *NFL-NFL Players Association Collective Bargaining Agreement*, August 4, 2011, Articles 12 (5), Articles 53 to 65.
- 6 National Football League Players' Association website, <https://www.nflpa.com>, accessed 17 February 2019.
- 7 BBC Sport, "Colin Kaepernick, Former NFL Quarter-back Settles 'Collusion' Case", <https://www.bbc.com/sport/american-football/47261004>, accessed 17 February 2019; You Tube, Oshay Dude Jackson, "The Real Reason why Colin Kaepernick Settled for \$60 Million with NFL", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjwmlVaerPQ>, accessed 17 February 2019.