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Credit Jim Rogash/Getty Images

‘The American Dilemma’: Why Do We Still Watch Football?

By **JOE DRAPE**

I am a Catholic. He is a priest. It seemed natural to ask the Rev. James Martin if it was morally wrong to enjoy watching professional football, namely the Super Bowl, on Sunday.

Martin is a Jesuit, which is the order that produced Pope Francis and provided the foundation (for better or worse) of my education. He is a writer, a thinker and an acknowledged public intellectual. But Martin, a Philadelphian, is also an unabashed Eagles fan.

“I was watching several renditions of [‘Fly, Eagles Fly’](#) on YouTube this morning,” he confessed when we spoke.

He, too, is uncomfortable enjoying a brutal sport that has imperiled the health of its work force. Still, Martin will meet his 86-year-old mother at his sister's home in New Jersey on Sunday and pull hard for the Philadelphia Eagles to win their first Super Bowl title.

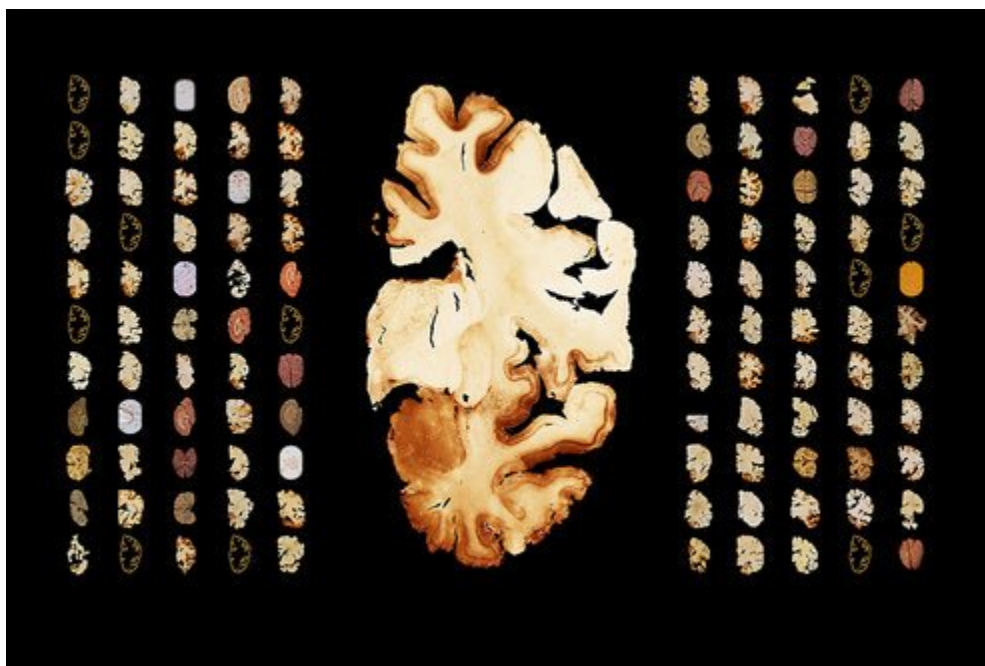
“I don't think it's a stretch to ask that question, but I'm not sure what the answer is,” Martin said. “I have watched with interest the progression of medical research. Are we using their bodies for profit? Are we using their bodies for our enjoyment?”

C.T.E. has been found in the brain of [one dead N.F.L. player after another](#). Published studies have found a correlation between the total number of years one plays tackle football and the likelihood of one's developing brain disease later in life.

Still, we shrug. Last year, 111.3 million people tuned in to CBS's Super Bowl broadcast, according to Nielsen. Even with N.F.L. regular-season ratings down 12 percent this season, Eagles-Patriots on Sunday will almost certainly be the most-watched television event of the year — as the previous year's Super Bowl was.

111 N.F.L. Brains. All But One Had C.T.E.

A neuropathologist has examined the brains of 111 N.F.L. players — and 110 were found to have C.T.E., the degenerative disease linked to repeated blows to the head.



“I'm embarrassed how much I love football,” a friend texted me recently during an afternoon of football watching. “The American Dilemma.”

Stories of concussions do not affect viewership of the game for 77 percent of fans, as two-thirds of them told pollsters they believed player safety had been prioritized, according to the annual [Burson-Marsteller Super Bowl survey](#). Alan Schwarz, the former New York Times reporter who exposed football's concussion crisis, said that the issue does not discourage him from watching the N.F.L.

"I have no problem watching the N.F.L. — these are grown men making grown men's decisions," said Schwarz, whose [investigative articles](#) from 2007 to 2011 compelled new safety rules for players of all ages. "After being kept in the dark for so many years by their employers, they now know they could wind up brain-damaged. Fine. They're professional daredevils. It wasn't immoral to watch Evel Knievel. We watch stuntmen in movies."

But even a football lifer like Eagles defensive end Chris Long is troubled by the danger of his chosen profession.

His father is the N.F.L. Hall of Famer Howie Long, who now is a football analyst for Fox Sports. His brother Kyle is an offensive lineman for the Chicago Bears. Chris Long, however, sounds like parents everywhere when he says that he doesn't want his 2-year-old son, Waylon, to play tackle football before high school. He hopes that Waylon doesn't play the game at all.

Jelani Cobb, the New Yorker writer and educator, said he would not be watching on Sunday, but his reason had nothing to do with the game's violence and potential for life-threatening injury. He is not watching because he believes Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback, was blackballed by the N.F.L. for protesting for social justice when he chose to take a knee for the national anthem before games.

Many Americans say they have been turned off by on-field protests during games (61 percent, according to the Burson-Marsteller survey), but most say they plan to watch the game even if there are protests. Huh?



The N.F.L. announced a series of changes in the way possible concussions are handled during games after a December incident in which Texans quarterback Tom Savage was allowed to return to the field after a hit left him on the ground, arms shaking. Credit Eric Christian Smith/Associated Press

“The cultural power of football is part of our fabric,” Cobb said, “and when something is part of tradition, people adhere to them for reasons that are not entirely rational.”

Debbie Staab understands this better than most.

We grew up together in the Midwest and I watched as her three sons excelled in the sport, each of them on a high school program that plays all comers nationally and perennially reaches national prominence. She has watched hundreds, probably thousands, of games over the years and appreciates the athleticism of the sport.

Now, she watches with an increasing amount of dread.

“When someone gets hit and they replay it in slow motion, I can see why these guys at 55 are rattled,” she said. “Nobody should get hit like that. Knowing what I do now, I would have steered my boys away from football.”

Bryan Partee is the executive director of the Boys & Girls Club of Marshall, Tex., the town that brought us the great Y. A. Tittle as well as Dennis Partee, Bryan’s father, who was a kicker for the San Diego Chargers in the 1960s and 1970s. Two years ago, Partee and his board [shut down](#) their club’s tackle football program. They decided the potential for head trauma, the legal exposure and the high cost of running the program were no longer worth it.

Dennis Partee, 70, has Parkinson’s disease and is part of the N.F.L.’s concussion settlement. His love for the game has been passed down through the family. Bryan Partee played football in high school; his 10-year-old son, Noah, will not. Yet they will all watch Sunday’s game together.

“Football is still a great sport, but on the tackling side, my wife and I are not going to engage,” Bryan Partee said. “I don’t want to see anyone lose their memory, or be so depressed they contemplate killing themselves.”

Soon my wife and I, like millions of other parents, will have to make a similar decision about our own football-crazy 13-year-old. We know the long-term risks now, and that makes what used to be a simple decision far more harrowing.

No priest will be able to help us. The N.F.L. should be as worried about that as I am.