Hero or sissy? Study explores perception of injured athletes

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Melinda Weathers (left) discusses athlete injuries and communication strategies with undergraduate student Samantha Warren at Clemson's Social Media Listening Center. Credit: Craig Mahaffey, Clemson University

NFL teams shoulder most of the blame for players' injuries and sports journalists can shift football cultural norms toward valuing players who put their health first.

These are the key findings of a new study authored by Clemson

University researchers Jimmy Sanderson and Melinda Weathers that examined health and safety issues in sports. It was published in the journal *Communication & Sport*.

"Media coverage of players who decide to sit out or play through an injury may impact players' future decision-making as well as fans' attitudes towards these players," said Sanderson.

"Sitting out during an injury is often viewed as weak and lacking the requisite toughness demanded by football, whereas playing through an injury is often viewed as the action of a warrior who embodies the ethos of sport," Weathers stated.

Where violence and sacrificing one's body to inflict pain are part of the football experience, the research explores print media framing of two injuries experienced by NFL quarterbacks: Jay Cutler sitting out the remainder of a championship game due to an injury he suffered and Robert Griffin III electing to play through his injury.

"Surprisingly, given that Cutler has been viewed as possessing a terse personality, the most common frame was supportive, consisting of positive statements defending Cutler's decision to remove himself from the championship game," said Sanderson.

Other supportive media framing included positive sentiment regarding the backlash that Cutler originally received after leaving the game, expressing that negativity toward him was unwarranted and that his peers should have supported him.

"Upon entering the league, Griffin was perceived as a good guy, so it is perhaps not surprising that the majority of articles framing his injury directed blame elsewhere," said Weathers.

Regardless of the specific blame for the injury that Griffin endured, media shifted the blame away from the quarterback and onto the coaches, trainers, doctors, team owner and management, field conditions and the overall NFL culture.

Given that the mass media can influence public knowledge, attitudes and behaviors regarding health problems, this research is vital for understanding the ways in which news media frame these issues as they relate to sports.

"Critics of safety changes to football often argue that football can never be made entirely safe, yet this does not mean that efforts should not be undertaken, particularly at younger levels," said Weathers.

"As sports journalists take more of an advocacy role and support athletes who make their health a priority, attitudes towards injuries and the players who sustain them may gradually begin to change," Sanderson said.

More information: com.sagepub.com/content/early/ … /27/2167479514536982

Provided by Clemson University

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