

AUGUST 2016

**CONTACT
SPORTS**

ADAM RAWCLIFFE



**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“WE SHOULD ACCEPT
THE RISK INHERENT
IN CONTACT SPORTS”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Key terms

The Contact Sports debate in context

Essential reading

Backgrounders

Organisations

Audio/Visual

In the news

KEY TERMS

[Chronic traumatic encephalopathy \(CTE\)](#)

[Contact sport](#)

[Punch drunk](#)

INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

NOTES

1
1
2
4
5
5
6
6

In September 2015, the American National Football League (NFL) reached a \$1 billion settlement on a lawsuit filed by a group of over 20,000 retired players, which accused the league of not warning about, and hiding, brain injuries associated with the sport [Ref: [NFL Concussion Settlement](#)]. The settlement brought closure to a five-year court case that engulfed the American media, spawned its own movie and brought to light the considerable risks associated with playing contact sports, particularly head injuries and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) [Ref: [IMDB](#)]. The severe psychological damages caused by CTE came to public attention following the 2012 suicide of NFL player Junior Seau, who was posthumously found to be a sufferer of the disease [Ref: [NPR](#)]. Since then many former players have revealed the dark episodes and suicidal thoughts that have plagued them since their retirement [Ref: [MMQB](#)], and a plethora of other sports have also experienced concussion controversies: Welsh Rugby Union were criticised for allowing George North to play on during the 2015 Rugby World Cup after suffering two severe head blows [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]; the football Premier League were lambasted for not doing enough to protect player safety when Tottenham Hotspur goalkeeper Hugo Lloris carried on playing after being knocked unconscious [Ref: [Independent](#)]; and boxing fans and commentators reacted with disgust when Chris Eubank Jr put opponent Nick Blackwell in a coma following Blackwell's refusal to give up a fight he had clearly lost [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. These instances and others have brought the issue of sports safety to the fore with many now questioning the legitimacy, and even humanity, of contact sports at the professional, amateur and youth levels [Ref: [ESPN](#)]. Critics argue that the rules and culture of contact sports must change to protect athletes from their desire to win at all costs; ultimately, the game must change to put safety first [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Yet others, including many sportspeople, disagree. Should we trust athletes to understand the consequences of contact sports and make a rational choice to take a risk for their love of the game? Or is it necessary that we protect athletes from themselves?



THE CONTACT SPORTS DEBATE IN CONTEXT

2 of 6

NOTES

Taking a risk

CTE, colloquially known as “punch drunk” due to the disease’s association with boxing, is a progressive degenerative illness found in people who have had a severe or repeated blows to the head leading to, in its minor forms, dizziness and headaches, and in more severe forms erratic behaviour, memory loss and dementia [Ref: [Wikipedia](#)]. Scientific research continues to bring to light the association between CTE and contact sports such as American football, rugby, boxing and mixed martial arts [Ref: [Economist](#)]. In March, an open letter signed by over 70 doctors and health experts called for a ban on tackling in school rugby games due to the risk of “fractures, ligamentous tears, dislocated shoulders, spinal injuries and head injuries” when playing high-impact collision sport, and “the short-term, life-long and life-ending consequences” such injuries can inflict on children [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Many commentators have since called for significant changes to the rules of contact sports to protect participants, including to concussion protocols, safer tackling techniques, and even the removal of unsafe elements of sport for children under the UN convention on the Rights of the Child [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Nevertheless, when weighing up the risks associated with contact sports, some critics are adamant that despite rule changes, improved technology and ‘smarter’ coaching, “no matter how you play football, head injuries are inevitable...[and] at some point, we might have to acknowledge the only way to play smarter football is to not play it at all.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] But those defending contact sports, such as NFL Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman, argue that today professional athletes are fully educated on the risks, and make an informed choice to continue playing the game they love [Ref: [MMQB](#)]. Concerns over player safety must not destroy the spirit of the game they have dedicated their lives to. Similarly, others observe

that a cultural aversion to risk-taking is being enforced on sports we have known are dangerous since their inception, and athletes and children should be both free to, and at times encouraged, to take risks [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

Winning at all costs

In order to deal with the potential for injuries, some commentators argue that we not only need to change the rules, we must also change the culture of contact sports [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Athletes inherently carry a “win-at-all-costs” mentality and are encouraged to “shake-it-off” or “tough-it-out” in the face of injury; a mindset 7 out of 10 youth American football players attest to [Ref: [MMQB](#)]. To protect sportsman from the considerable risk of head injuries we must, it is suggested, change the endgame of sports from winning to enjoyment at both the amateur and professional levels [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Contact sportspeople, it is argued, need adequate information about concussions, models of safe play must be enforced and, most importantly, athletes need to be encouraged not to play on in the face of injury and put their safety first [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But critics of this approach counter that the very desire to ‘fight on’ is why contact sports are so valuable. Professional boxers Chris Eubank senior and junior argue that the “warrior” mentality to stay in the ring regardless of the punishment from an opponent is at the heart of boxing’s code; the “honour and integrity” behind this mindset elevate contact sports to a higher plane and is an inherent part of its value - “You do not play boxing”, as Eubank puts it [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Furthermore, advocates of contact sports maintain that they teach children important ideas, such as courage, discipline, togetherness and toughness, whilst offering increased confidence, self-respect and the potential for individual



THE CONTACT SPORTS DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 6

NOTES

betterment [Ref: [Telegraph](#)]. In short, contact sports teach things more valuable than player safety. But those opposed to this outlook continue to argue that athletes cannot be trusted to make decisions on their own safety, as they will continually sacrifice themselves in pursuit of victory [Ref: [New York Times](#)], although perhaps a recent spate of NFL players resigning due to concerns over their long-term health might suggest otherwise [Ref: [SB Nation](#)].

watching”? [Ref: [MMQB](#)] Should we put safety first, or is there something more valuable to be learnt at the heart of contact sports?

The humanity of getting hurt

One recent retired American football player, Chris Borland, began to view the NFL, and contact sports more broadly, as a dehumanising spectacle akin to blood sport [Ref: [ESPN](#)]. For Borland, American football is, “like a spectacle of violence, for entertainment, and you’re the actors in it... it’s a trivial thing at its core. It’s make-believe” [Ref: [ESPN](#)]. In contrast to Chris Eubank and his son calling boxing a “merging of souls”, akin to only a woman giving birth in the field of human experience [Ref: [Guardian](#)], Borland believes, in essence, that contact sports are so violent they strip away the humanity of those taking part, as well as the spectators. However, for others, like former NFL player Richard Sherman, there is a fundamental and profound humanity in making informed choices that may result in getting hurt. He cites other dangerous sports such as NASCAR and boxing, highlighting that they all involve an element of known risk to participants, and suggests that in the case of the NFL, “playing with injuries is a risk that guys are willing to take.” [Ref: [MMQB](#)] So what is the solution? Do we tear out the “soul of the game” in the name of safety? [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Do these sports pose such a considerable danger that the only option is not to play at all? Or, do we allow those athletes who choose to embark on these careers to take risks, and if we “don’t like it, stop



ESSENTIAL READING

4 of 6

NOTES

FOR

[I was paralysed playing youth rugby – but a tackle ban is not the answer](#)

Nathan Cubitt *Guardian* 9 March 2016

[Is rugby too dangerous? Children need to be free to take risks](#)

Gaby Hinsliff *Guardian* 4 March 2016

[‘School rugby brings more benefits than risks’](#)

Telegraph 26 August 2014

[We chose this profession](#)

Richard Sherman *MMBQ* 23 September 2013

AGAINST

[History shows ‘smarter’ football is no match for concussion](#)

Jack Moore *Guardian* 30 June 2016

[Sports culture must change to reduce head injuries](#)

Debra Houry *Huffington Post* 24 December 2015

[World Rugby isn’t doing enough to protect young players from head injuries](#)

Allyson Pollock *Guardian* 21 September 2015

[Why former 49er Chris Borland is the most dangerous man in football](#)

Steve Fainaru & Mark Fainaru-Wada *ESPN* 20 August 2015

IN DEPTH

[The knockout blow – the risk of brain injury in mixed martial arts](#)

Hasan Chowdhury *New Statesman* 16 July 2016



BACKGROUNDEERS

[Football's silent shame: Dementia 'conspiracy' is a stain on the game](#)

Jeremy Wilson *Telegraph* 30 May 2016

[Playing through pain is part of rugby's culture, but where's the line?](#)

John Daniell *Guardian* 9 May 2016

[Chris Eubank Sr and Jr: 'You have to stay and take the beating'](#)

Decca Aitkenhead *Guardian* 6 April 2016

[Schools and hard knocks](#)

Economist 5 March 2016

[Bang to rights](#)

Economist 5 March 2016

[We can tackle AND stay safe... change rules to protect children but don't ban contact](#)

Clive Woodward *Daily Mail* 2 March 2016

[Opinion: The harsh reality of knockouts, concussions and fighter health](#)

Michael Hutchinson *SB Nation* 10 January 2016

[Being smart about your child's brain](#)

Frank Bruni *New York Times* 19 December 2015

[Head games: The push to protect football players from brain injury](#)

Tom Rooney *CNN* 2 December 2015

[Chris Borland retirement: Is football worth it?](#)

Amy Nordrum *International Business Times* 22 March 2015

[Dr Elizabeth Pieroth: How many concussions is too many?](#)

NFL.Com 20 January 2015

5 of 6

NOTES

[Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll uses rugby to tackle safety concerns](#)

Martin Pengelly *Guardian* 2 August 2014

[Life after concussions](#)

Nate Jackson *MMBQ* 25 October 2013

[The first line of defense](#)

Jenny Vrentas *MMBQ* 22 October 2013

[Head trauma in football: A special report](#)

Peter King *MMBQ* 22 October 2013

[Phys Ed: Will Olympic athletes dope if they know it might kill them?](#)

Gretchen Reynolds *New York Times* 20 January 2010

ORGANISATIONS

[Concussion Aware](#)

[Heads Up Football](#)

[National Football League \(NFL\)](#)



IN THE NEWS

[America's growing headache: why are youth concussion rates surging 500 percent?](#)

Alternative Daily 28 July 2016

[NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman adamantly fights notion that CTE can be linked to concussions](#)

CBS Boston 27 July 2016

[Strict concussion tests to be introduced for jockeys](#)

The Times 19 July 2016

[School tackling ban unnecessary, says study](#)

The Times 23 June 2016

[Muhammad Ali and Parkinson's disease: Was boxing to blame?](#)

STAT 4 June 2016

[The BMX rider Dave Mirra, who died in a suicide, had C.T.E.](#)

New York Times 24 May 2016

[Boxer Nick Blackwell in coma after title fight defeat](#)

Guardian 27 March 2016

[UK health experts call for ban on tackling in school rugby](#)

Guardian 2 March 2016

[Why MMA fighting in the UFC may be safer than playing football in the NFL](#)

Metro 26 February 2016

[OT Anthony Davis retires at 25, 4th 49er to retire this offseason](#)

SB Nation 5 June 2015

[Wales under fire over George North 'concussion'](#)

Telegraph 7 February 2015

[Helmetless Football? It's the new practice at New Hampshire](#)

MMBQ 4 December 2014

[A Tie's a win for the NFL](#)

MMBQ 10 July 2014

[MMA Fighters suffer traumatic brain injury in almost a third of professional bouts](#)

National Post 26 March 2014

[Hugo Lloris concussion: Assessment of head injuries can no longer be left to team doctors](#)

Independent 3 November 2013

[Seau suffered from brain disease](#)

New York Times 10 January 2013

[NFL Concussion settlement](#)

AUDIO/VISUAL

[Seau's suicide helped to make concussions in football a national issue](#)

NPR 22 December 2015

[Seahawks Head Coach Pete Carroll teaches rugby tackling](#)

Rugby Today YouTube 29 July 2014

[Concussion Talk](#)

Concussion talk.com

[NPR podcasts on concussion](#)

NPR

[Concussion \(movie\)](#)

IMDB

6 of 6

NOTES



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS

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FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**