

Nixon vs. Seamy Side of Football

President Nixon's interest in football extends considerably beyond the telephone calls to bowl champions, visits to the Washington Redskins, and the fascination of Sunday's Super Bowl game.

He is deeply concerned, as an erstwhile underweight player for Whittier, with a side of the sport that gets little or no publicity and certainly no glory — gridiron casualties.

En route to meet Emperor Hirohito in Alaska last fall, the President stopped over in Portland, Ore. He was scheduled to fly on to Walla Walla, Wash., where his remarks would contain some light-hearted reference to football. But at Portland he learned that a Walla Walla high school boy named Chuck Anderson, an offensive tackle playing in the first game of the season, had received a severe blow to the jaw on a blocking assignment, died and was to be buried that day.

The President called the boy's family without fanfare, offered his sympathy, told the family that two of his older brothers had died of tuberculosis because at the time there was not sufficient knowledge of how to combat it, and agreed that "something should be done."

A month later, in Charlotte, N.C., to take part in a tribute to his friend Billy Graham, the President heard that a high school tackle named Phil Hughston had suffered a broken neck and was dying in a local hospital. Nixon called the boy's family and the boy himself, and did what he could to comfort them.

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AT A WHITE HOUSE DINNER on October 22, the President asked his good friend Don Kendall, head of PepsiCo, one of whose related companies is Wilson Sporting Goods, to look into the matter and come up with some answers to the seamier side of football. A month later, Kendall replied, in part:

"There has been a total of 13 known deaths and severe injuries in 1971, either directly or indirectly attributed to football. Only seven of these deaths have been officially reported thus far to the High School Federation or to the National Collegiate Athletic Association."

Kendall's research included the following:

"Haskell, Texas: On August 9, 1971, a high school youngster was playing in an interscholastic game. Afterwards, he collapsed in the locker room. Despite the fact that a doctor was in attendance, within five minutes the young man died. An autopsy reflected the cause of death as subdural hematoma (brain hemorrhage).

"Chicago: A student at Senn High School, carrying the ball, had a head-on collision with a tackler. He suffered a subdural hematoma and died.

"Chicago: A fullback at Rock Falls High suffered subdural hematoma and has remained in a coma since the injury. The helmet was thoroughly examined following the accident. There is no indication that the injury was due to failure of the equipment.

"Cincinnati: Ken Dyer of the Bengals was injured while attempting a head-on tackle of John Brockington, Green Bay. Since, Dyer has been paralyzed from the neck down.

"Miami: A young man at Addison High received a broken neck on kick-off, while attempting a tackle. Paralysis has been virtually complete."

"Facts have not been obtained in the remaining six cases due to reluctance on the part of parents, hospital coaches, or the schools to divulge complete details."

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KENDALL said his own sports equipment company and competitors were constantly testing for better football protective gear, but that was not necessarily the full answer.

"... Actually, the most significant comment made by doctors in analyzing the causes of severe injuries, particularly broken necks, is that subdural hematoma may primarily occur according to the position of the player's head at the moment of impact. The major cause, twisting of the neck, can best be minimized by improving playing and/or coaching techniques."

A thought for Super Bowl day.