

The Assignment with Audie Cornish

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Kicking the Football Habit



Speakers

Audie Cornish, Archive, Michael Socolow, Daniel Sailofsky, Nate Jackson

00:00:00

Audie Cornish

Did you know people used to watch train wrecks for fun? I'm serious. From the late 1800s to the 1930s, there were railroad equipment salesmen who had stage collisions all over the country, setting up steam locomotives at two ends of track. Fire them up and then let them ram into each other. Now, the trains were empty, except for the engineers who would jump from the front cabs at the last minute. And of course, sometimes people still got hurt, but thousands of people paid money to see this. So it kind of made sense to me when I learned that American football was born during the same era. Newspaper writers at the time criticized the brutality of this new sport, and even its earliest boosters wondered if it would survive public opinion.

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Audie Cornish

Even now, every few years, there's this cycle of outrage and news columns about the effects of violence on the players on and off the field. And when Buffalo Bills player Damar Hamlin went into cardiac arrest during a game last month. The shock was palpable. Like there was this small moment that got me. Here's Hamlin's teammate, Tre'Davious White. In the days after it happened.

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Archive

Just something uh I can't get... I can't unsee. Every time I close my eyes and replays and I try watching TV and every time TV go on commercial, that's the only thing that comes to my mind the vision of that.

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Audie Cornish

Now, the players were obviously shaken and the NFL had to beat back widespread reports that it would have continued the game. One league executive called that claim ridiculous and said that it, quote, never crossed our mind to resume play. But it was the latest in a series of stories fueling an argument against the value of watching the sport.

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Archive

McMahon, famous for his toughness and durability, says in the lawsuit he played with a broken neck and ankle during his career without being told by team doctors and trainers.

00:02:03

Archive

More than a thousand former players have filed suit against the NFL over the way concussion related injuries have been handled. The NFL denies the claims.

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Audie Cornish

And all this has led some people to say publicly that they're done watching football. So, who are they? What about this moment is affecting how they see their favorite game? And is football too deeply ingrained in U.S. culture for their numbers to grow? I'm Audie Cornish and this is The Assignment.

00:02:37

Audie Cornish

Okay, so let's be honest, football feels untouchable like nothing could unroot it from the core of American life.

00:02:44

Michael Socolow

Football is totally intertwined with popular culture in America today.

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Audie Cornish

That's media historian Michael Socolow. He says that as popular as football is right now, nearly 100 years ago, boxing occupied a similar space.

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Michael Socolow

Boxing was one of those programs in the 1930s on radio that attracted a huge mass audience that crossed all kinds of demographics.

00:03:06

Audie Cornish

Tens of millions of people tuned in to listen to boxers like Joe Louis take on their opponents.

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Michael Socolow

So it started out very controversial and then it became big. And then it went from just big, like being a big and important sporting event to the biggest events in America. And if you look at the ratings for the Joe Louis fights, beginning in 1936, 37, 38. The only thing that gets a higher rating in radio broadcasting in the United States are the fireside chats by the president.

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Audie Cornish

And for decades, boxing's place in the culture was untouchable until a series of fights started to change public opinion.

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Michael Socolow

And in particular, two fights happened in 1982, one where a South Korean boxer named Duk-koo Kim was killed from the injuries he sustained in the ring, a fighting Ray Mancini for a championship fight. And the other was a fight between the heavyweight champion of the world, Larry Holmes, and a gentleman named Tex Cobb. And the fight was so incredibly one sided. And Cobb, got... just looked like a mess, a big, bloody mess. And the referee didn't stop the fight. And it was so controversial, it made all the newspapers around America and Howard Cosell quit. He would no longer be the number one boxing commentator in America on ABC Sports called it a, you know, a barbaric sport that he wouldn't have any part in anymore. And these two events happened just a couple of months apart. And boxing never really recovered in terms of broadcast popularity in the United States.

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Audie Cornish

Fights moved off network television and on to pay per view, where they continued to draw an audience and dollars, but not the tens of millions of fans the sport had once had.

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Michael Socolow

For a sport to really be very important in American popular culture. It needs to be pervasive. You need to be able to hear about it on the radio, sports talk radio. You need to be able to watch it live on regular broadcast channels, and you need to be able to read about it in the newspaper regularly. And once you start moving to to really subscription and pay per view models, that kind of popular culture pervasiveness is going to shrink by a lot.

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Audie Cornish

Meanwhile, another sport had been growing its broadcast audience: football.

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Michael Socolow

A lot of people point to football being particularly made for television. So, they say the greatest game ever played is this 1958 game between the New York Giants and the Colts for the championship that went into overtime. And they say it's really made for television because of what the camera can capture. The field lines tell you where they are on the field. You can see each of the players. It's pretty intuitive and easy to understand. And it's the drama and suspense is there. It's a fast moving and violent game.

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Audie Cornish

Michael Socolow says football has been presented with some of the same issues that hurt boxing. Injuries, violence, long term health problems for players.

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Michael Socolow

What do you do when the population might have issues with the violence you're providing to them through their television sets? And what the NFL did is they created new rules about the violence. They created penalties for hitting the quarterback in certain ways. And now we see if you're concussed, you have to leave the field. You have to take a test. They brought the doctors in. They've they've done all kinds of things and they've been helped by television. Television doesn't show the most horrible injuries.

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Audie Cornish

It's worth noting, he says this was not the approach you saw from the world of boxing.

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Michael Socolow

Boxing went the other way. Boxing moved to subscription and pay per view where the people who really wanted to see the violence would pay \$100. You know, millions of people paying \$100 is more money than Muhammad Ali could ever dreamed of having made, but it just lost out in popular culture in that way.

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Audie Cornish

And so in that context, the shock of seeing a player down, seeing CPR administered on the field, seeing the players distraught faces, the expression of that national shock makes a lot more sense.

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Audie Cornish

But boxing's history shows us that no sport, no matter how beloved, is invincible.

00:07:13

Daniel Sailofsky

I thought that all the good that I got out of football, which I got as a fan with no harm to myself, I thought that I couldn't continue to do that knowing what I know about the harm that is done to so many players.

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Audie Cornish

In a minute, what it's like for the ex-fan who's chosen to stop watching a game that used to bring them joy. That's next.

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Audie Cornish

Okay, this will seem like we found the world's most random fan for this episode, but stick with me. This is Daniel Sailofsky.

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Daniel Sailofsky

I'm from Montreal, Canada, actually is where I come from originally. I live in the UK now, so a Canadian from the UK talking about American football.

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Audie Cornish

Wait, there's more. He's also a sociologist at Middlesex University London, where he researches sports, masculinity, deviance and violence against women.

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Daniel Sailofsky

I was a huge New York Giants fan growing up from about the age of like seven. I was a stats kid kind of growing up like I was the kid who was reading the sports section of the newspaper. You know, cover to cover from the time I was like eight years old.

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Audie Cornish

But at the start of the 2022-2023 football season, he stopped watching football. We found this essay he wrote for The Guardian, where he wrote that he couldn't unsee the harm it causes.

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Audie Cornish

And this is Nate Jackson.

00:08:40

Nate Jackson

So I did play football. I played in the NFL for six years. I am now a radio host here in Denver. And I've also written a couple of books about my experience playing in the NFL, as well as a bunch of articles and pieces like the one that we're talking about today.

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Audie Cornish

His show is called The Players Club, and Jackson, who had been a former tight end for the Denver Broncos, says he didn't contemplate his relationship to pain and violence until an injury ended his career in 2009. But Nate still loves the game. He's drawn to it in the same way he was when he was just a kid whose parents didn't want him playing in the first place.

00:09:19

Nate Jackson

They were both public school teachers were concerned about the violence of the game. They wouldn't let me actually put on a helmet and put on shoulder pads until I got to high school. That's what they said. And I think silently they were hoping that I would forget about it. I would move on from that dream. I didn't. So as soon as I got to high school, I signed up and started playing football.

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Audie Cornish

That means someone planted the seed in your head a long time before you got involved with the sport that, hey, it seems a little violent and maybe it's a bad idea.

00:09:45

Nate Jackson

Right, however—

Audie Cornish 00:09:46
You had to override that to start playing.

Nate Jackson 00:09:48
And that was a natural override because as a boy I enjoyed physical play, I enjoyed the rough stuff. I was an aggressive child. I was more muscular than the other kids. I was faster. I wanted to tussle. I had scabs on my knees all the time, holes in my jeans, stitches in my head. That was the kind of kid I was. And so I think those kind of kids are drawn to the game of football and end up becoming the best players. You have to be your best at all times in football. There is not one moment to let down. I think that is intoxicating in a lot of ways. It makes you feel like you're at your best at all times.

Audie Cornish 00:10:26
How does that morph into this kind of culture of devotion? And by devotion I mean playing through injuries, gritting teeth through the pain, not acknowledging what it...maybe, the medication you need to get through those injuries. Like at what point do you feel like there's a tipping point where what you described in high school becomes this thing that is all encompassing and at all costs to your health and body?

Nate Jackson 00:10:52
It certainly is an issue because when I stopped playing football—

Audie Cornish 00:10:54
Was it college? Was it like, at what point is it start to be like, this is my life?

Nate Jackson 00:10:59
No, it's not. It's just not till you're done. It's not. It's not tell you. You walk away from the sport that you realize it can be a detriment in the real world because ignoring pain is a virtue. In football. The guys who can ignore the pain the best make it the furthest. Certainly, every time you get hit with somebody running full speed wearing a hard plastic helmet with metal on it, that's going to hurt the very first day, it hurts. But you have to decide, is that going to stop me or am I going to overcome that? And and because there is the glory exists on the other side of overcoming these painful obstacles, ignoring pain is the way you make it to the top in football.

Audie Cornish 00:11:37
Daniel, what's appealing about that as a fan?

Daniel Sailofsky 00:11:40
So, you have fans who are so invested in their team, right? They know everything about them. They buy tickets, they buy jerseys, they spend their Sundays watching and their Mondays watching. But they also spend time during the week paying attention to it. They really escape out of their everyday lives into sport in that way. And I think it's a lot easier to do that to justify doing that, then you feel that the athletes who you're watching are equally or are actually much more invested in the game and they're willing to fight through pain and they're willing to play through it because the stakes to them are so almost life and death that they're willing to risk injury. And without that, if it wasn't the case that athletes took it as seriously and were willing to pay through the pain, I think that would kind of destroy some of the facade that sort of exists for fans that this is life or death stakes, that the football that they're watching, they can be justified in being so crazy about and so interested in it because it is this important.

Audie Cornish 00:12:28
And Nate, I wonder if you down on the field ever looked up at that crowd screaming and had a question for them, you know, about what they were enjoying in a moment when you and others on the field are experiencing pain.

Nate Jackson 00:12:42
No, because I understood it. Because I was once that member of the audience cheering on, you know, my favorite team and wanting them to put it all on the line when I was a kid, a fan of the 49ers. 49ers safety, Ronnie Lott, when faced with a decision of whether or not to have surgery on his pinkie and end his season or cut the pinky off and keep playing, he chose to cut the pinky off so he could keep playing the season. That's how important it was to him. And as a fan who had devoted my free hours and my fantasies to this team, that resonated with me and made me think, gosh, what I wouldn't give to care about something that much, to put something on the line like he does. But there is a definitely a separation. Once you become that, once you become a professional, you're no longer a fan. And so there's definitely a disconnect between the pain that the players experience and the fans who watch them play.

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Audie Cornish

Daniel, we don't mean to beat up on you because you're our proxy fan. But yeah, jump in here.

00:13:43

Daniel Sailofsky

You're making my...You're making the points that I would love to make, Right? So, when you said I'm a fan, I was a fan. The reasons that you're describing is exactly why I couldn't watch the game anymore because of the way that the players are treated and treated as commodities, treated as oftentimes only valuable insofar as they can create value for the team. And really what I mean by this is ownership. Sometimes coaches and management as well. But really for ownership to keep the business of football going. People like Nate, players who maybe get injured out in their second year and never play it down again, they feel discarded and not just feel discarded, but they are discarded from the sport and they aren't discarded with no scars to show from it, like they're discarded from the sport and unable to make money via the sport and also potentially nursing injuries that will follow them the rest of their lives.

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Audie Cornish

Nate, I see you moving. Did you want to jump in?

00:14:34

Nate Jackson

It's what I was saying is it's rare that a fan has a moral conflict with it so much that he walks away or she walks away from the game because it draws everyone in. The NFL broadcast do a really good job of not lingering on the consequences of the violence. You see somebody laid out on the field. They're going to cut to commercial as quickly as they can. Now, sometimes they can't escape it like what happened with Damar Hamlin, but it's very rare that somebody almost dies on an NFL football field. You know, we've seen broken necks, we've seen all sorts of other injuries. The game always continues. The game always goes on.

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Daniel Sailofsky

You mentioned that the game goes on it. Even with the Damar Hamlin case, the game did get stopped, but it got stopped because the players and the coaches decided they didn't want to play anymore. We we hold up this Damar Hamlin case like a freak case and it was where we really we couldn't avoid seeing the scary kind of event, the harmful event happen on our TV screens. They couldn't cut away the commercial for that, but at the same time, they still, even with that, wanted the moneymaking machine to kind of keep turning.

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Audie Cornish

So then, is this a turning point moment? And from your perspective, are you hearing anyone else in your lives talk about football differently?

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Nate Jackson

I don't think it's a turning point moment. I do think the conversation has been different in the last couple weeks. Absolutely. But this injury is so completely unusual and such a freak sort of timing injury that you're not going to see it again or not very often.

00:16:05

Audie Cornish

Right.

00:16:05

Nate Jackson

But really, the more common...

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Audie Cornish

So people can kind of compartmentalize. Yes, they can say this isn't part of the brain injury question or they they can take it out of that column and move forward.

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Nate Jackson

And like Daniel said, I mean, you know, they stopped the game due to the players and the coaches and but they didn't stop the season. They played the next week. And we're still going to play the Super Bowl and it's still going to be watched by just as many people. And, you know, these playoffs have been consumed by so many viewers. The game is not going anywhere. You mentioned brain injuries. If the CTE brain injury saga didn't derail this league at all, I don't think one scary injury like that is going to do it. I think that the league is very savvy when it comes to manipulating the way we think about these injuries and what they're doing to stop them. They're creating healthier football, safe football. That's a misnomer. It will never be safe.

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Audie Cornish

You're using air quotes there.

00:17:02

Nate Jackson

Yeah. Yeah. Healthy football, it doesn't exist. That's an oxymoron. You know, you're swinging a bat at people. There's no safe way to to hit somebody as hard as you can.

Audie Cornish 00:17:16
So, here's where I get to talk to you, Daniel Sailofsky, a little bit about what you've learned as you've started to pull away from the sport, Right? Like you're no longer a fan was there, for him, he's saying once you're on the field, it's different. And once you leave the game, it's different. What are the tipping points for a person who leaves fandom?

Daniel Sailofsky 00:17:38
I actually do have like a very clear tipping point in my mind, which is...I'm currently writing a book about violence and harm in sports. And part of this research was about head injury, concussion, long term injury more generally in football, but also in ice hockey, also in rugby, also in boxing. I came across a few different pieces about early research by Dr. Bennet Omalu. The one that was played by Will Smith in that like kind of not so great movie, but important movie, but not such a great movie. But that guy.

Audie Cornish 00:18:07
Yeah. But also from a long time ago.

Daniel Sailofsky 00:18:09
Yes.

Audie Cornish 00:18:09
So this would have been stuff you would have heard.

Daniel Sailofsky 00:18:11
Exactly. I'd heard a lot about the concussion epidemic and the numbers. There's a study from 2017 where 99% of the NFL players brains that were donated to science had CTE. And then I read about Terry Long and Mike Webster, who are two of the original kind of CTE cases. They had a neurologist look at, I believe it was Terry Long's brain, and he was 45 when he passed. And he was described as having the brain of a patient with Alzheimer's, a 90 year old patient with Alzheimer's. With the other player, Mike Webster, they were talking about how he was eating basically like Pringles for his meals and was catatonic in the fetal position for days at a time. And this is in his 40s, right? And hearing the individual stories about players who've suffered and I'm sorry for the gruesome details, especially speaking to someone who did play the game, and it's hearing the gruesome details and hearing the stories from families talking about their their son, their father, their brother, their husband, who in their late 30s or in their early 40s already is showing erratic behavior, is acting. It has having intense mood swings, early signs of dementia, memory loss being described that they're not the person that they were. And for me, I thought that all the good that I got out of football, which first of all, I got as a fan with no harm to myself, I thought that I couldn't continue to do that. Knowing what I know about the harm that is done to so many players and that's what ultimately made me stop watching.

Audie Cornish 00:19:35
Let me ask this, as a sociologist, tell me, is that what it takes for the average person?

Daniel Sailofsky 00:19:41
I think once some of the work is done to get rid of that facade that the NFL puts up, to speak frankly, that they even really care about the health of their players. That is what I think it would take. It would take huge change in American society because of the importance of football to so many communities.

Audie Cornish 00:19:58
Yeah.

Daniel Sailofsky 00:19:58
It's a lot that's going to have to be done. I think that in 40 or 50 years we are going to look back at football the same way we look back at other what we now term as like barbaric practices that... In the same way we look back at gladiator fighting or that we look at bare knuckle boxing or things of that nature. I think that unfortunately, very unfortunately, once the results and the consequences from this generation of players is seen in 10, 20, 30 years, and again, I hope to God I'm wrong, I hope I'm wrong, and I hope that I hope for whatever reason that doesn't happen. But I just, based on the evidence that we see, there's no reason to think that that's not going to be the case.

Audie Cornish 00:20:35
Do we think it's going to go away right now? I don't think so either.

Daniel Sailofsky 00:20:39
No, definitely not.

00:20:40

Audie Cornish

I know for sure there was someone out there that thought boxing would not go away. Right? That thought all kinds of, as Daniel pointed out...

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Nate Jackson

It hasn't.

00:20:48

Audie Cornish

Well, it seems...

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Daniel Sailofsky

Yeah, I was referring to like bare knuckle kind of boxing...

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Audie Cornish

It does. No, no, no, no. Let's talk about that. Boxing does not play the role in our lives that it did in the early 20th century period. That's it. The way the where, where football is...

00:21:03

Nate Jackson

MMA is very popular.

00:21:03

Audie Cornish

It is. And that is boxing only down...

00:21:06

Nate Jackson

And now there's slapping. We're doing slap fighting.

00:21:09

Audie Cornish

So that's my point. That's taking boxing down to only the violence, Right? That's not the beautiful science, etc.. Could football go the way of a sport where at a certain point it is distilled down to just its violence for the people who enjoy that aspect of it? Because that is the path I saw with boxing, right? It is not maintained its status in the culture and the elements of it that people really enjoy have migrated to another, more violent sport that takes even less care of the people who participate in it.

00:21:43

Nate Jackson

I would say this it's baked into our society and there is...It's not just beating each other up. There is a ton of strategy that Daniel fell in love with that make people very, very interested. It is a ballet of sorts. People do appreciate the poetry of football and the stuff that isn't violent, but actually the very athletic moves to avoid the violence because you're not just walking into every punch, you're trying to avoid being hit. And sometimes the most exciting moments in football are avoiding that moment of violence. And I think—

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Audie Cornish

You think Muhammad Ali would have agreed? Right like—

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Nate Jackson

Right.

00:22:17

Audie Cornish

I'm just saying there was a world where there were entertainments that seemed so baked into our culture. Nothing could ever replace them. And then things kind of did.

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Nate Jackson

But those things still exist.

00:22:30

Daniel Sailofsky

And I would say that that's I but I would say that's true also of a lot of cultural practices in general, like just because something has existed. And again, what Audie and I have both said, I think, is that we do not think that football is going to end any time soon because it is so baked into the culture and using it as a main justification. The fact that it's so baked into the culture, that's one thing. But whether it should exist is kind of a different question, right? There's all sorts of behavior that people might enjoy that we do not allow them to do because of the risks and the harms associated with it.

00:23:02

Audie Cornish

Daniel, It sounds like you're about to have a lonely existence as an ex-football fan. I mean, I assume you had a whole social life built around this. Right?

00:23:12

Daniel Sailofsky

I did. I still have a social life built around a lot of sports and a lot of sports fandom so that I'm okay with. It does help that I don't live in the same city as I used to watch football with lots of people. But look, I watch a lot of other things I watch mens and womens basketball...

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Audie Cornish

But do you know what I mean? Like, this is a lonely argument you're making.

00:23:28
Daniel Sailofsky Yeah. No, I don't think it's a lonely argument. I think it's a lonely existence in terms of sports fandom, because most people are not here yet.

00:23:35
Audie Cornish Nate, is he going to be a lonely person or do you are you hearing more people saying, You know what, let me back away? Maybe there's some things I can't unsee and maybe I'm done here.

00:23:46
Nate Jackson I think there are a couple. Not a lot. Football as a game isn't going anywhere. It's so lucrative. It's, you know, in a world where television is dying. Professional football is keeping it afloat.

00:23:57
Audie Cornish And it also means there are interests vested in protecting that investment and profit, right Nate?

00:24:03
Nate Jackson Absolutely. And there and—

00:24:05
Daniel Sailofsky I would argue this is the main reason.

00:24:07
Nate Jackson Yeah.

00:24:07
Daniel Sailofsky This is the main reason that's going to continue to exist.

00:24:09
Nate Jackson Yeah, and the NFL has—

00:24:10
Daniel Sailofsky I would agree with you.

00:24:11
Nate Jackson The NFL is a machine and a very profitable one. And a lot of people are tied to that machine. A lot of television networks are tied to that machine. So, that's another reason why I think it ain't going anywhere anytime soon.

00:24:23
Daniel Sailofsky I would agree with you. The only distinction I think it's important to make is that's a reason that it will continue to exist, but not a reason that it should continue to exist.

00:24:30
Audie Cornish Nate Jackson, what's your message to fans who might be listening to this conversation and who might be in various kind of states of debate with themselves?

00:24:39
Nate Jackson My message to fans would be that your favorite football players are human beings and when they get hurt, they might disappear from the field. You might not see them again, but they have a long road to recovery That's that's painful, that's fraught with a lot of mental illness, depression, lack of self-worth, confusion about where they land in society. And so my message to fans would be, if you're going to love the player, you have to love the person behind the helmet. If you're going to love the team, you have to love the men who make up that team and lay themselves on the line for your team to win. And I think more fans are kind of discovering that as we get more access to these players in their lives. I do believe they're more humanized. I think we have a long way to go, but that would be my message to fans.

00:25:25
Audie Cornish Daniel, we're heading into Super Bowl season. What is your message for fans and or ex-fans?

00:25:32

Daniel Sailofsky

I would echo, first of all, Nate's point, which is we need to humanize the players. We need to stop thinking of them as as tokens to move around in our fantasy football team or as robots inside helmets, but as human beings with real needs and real harm that they're suffering. We also need to understand that they are workers. They are workers for the NFL, and they are workers for their team, their colleagues with one another. We should fight for, and when given the option, we should support their rights in terms of labor disputes and things of that nature, because they're the ones who are putting themselves at risk. They should be the ones who are reaping the financial benefits. And the other one is that if you are feeling uncomfortable with the violence that you are seeing and you don't feel like you want to continue to condone that, it can be tough when you're first kind of quitting the game or breaking up with the game in that way. But there are a lot of other sports and ways to find meaning and community outside the game. If it's something that you just do not feel comfortable watching anymore. So hopefully message to the fans and the non-fans.

00:26:32

Nate Jackson

Daniel, are you going to watch the Super Bowl?

00:26:35

Daniel Sailofsky

I will not.

00:26:37

Nate Jackson

Wow. A man of principle.

00:26:38

Daniel Sailofsky

At least for this first year. Yes.

00:26:48

Audie Cornish

That was sports sociologist Daniel Selassie. He's a lecturer at Middlesex University London, and Jackson is the author of "Slow Getting Up: a Story of NFL's Survival From the Bottom of the Pile." You can hear him on the fan sports radio in Denver.

00:27:07

Audie Cornish

That's it for this episode of The Assignment. New episodes drop every Thursday. So, please listen and follow wherever you get your podcasts. And if you like the show, please take some time and leave us a rating and a review.

00:27:22

Audie Cornish

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