

'Concussion' Doesn't Hold Back On NFL's Head-Injury Crisis

BY STEVEN ZEITCHIK
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LOS ANGELES — Long before its Christmas Day release, the fact-based film "Concussion" was generating speculation and even potential controversy. Would the movie — about the NFL's handling of football's head-injury crisis — pull punches in how it addressed the topic?

And if it didn't, could it alter perceptions of the country's dominant sports pastime?

On Tuesday night at AFI Fest, "Concussion" made an early statement on those issues when it screened for the public for the first time. While the jury is out on how the film, which stars Will Smith and is backed by Sony Pictures, will echo in a nation obsessed with all things pigskin, the answer to the first question was resolute: The film does not hold back.

That position was encapsulated by its director, the journalist-turned-filmmaker Peter Landesman, who in an interview with *The Times* after the screening said of the NFL, "Not to sound dramatic, but they have death on their hands."

"Concussion" explores the 21st-century discovery of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a disease now believed to afflict scores of former NFL players, including the late San Diego Charger star Junior Seau. The condition results from repeated blows to the head and can include a range of debilitating cognitive and emotional symptoms. One of its most insidious features is that it cannot be detected by traditional scans and in fact is only fully diagnosed after death.

Shedding a light on all this is Bennet Omalu (Smith), a Nigerian-born forensic pathologist in Pittsburgh who, in 2002, notices a strange set of medical circumstances while performing an autopsy on former Steelers offensive lineman Mike Webster, who had committed suicide. That soon sets Omalu off on a research path that unearths more such cases, discovered after their sufferer also takes his own life.

Needless to say, the doctor quickly runs afoul of the NFL, which seeks, as Omalu's boss and research partner Cyril Wecht (Albert Brooks) says, to "bury" them. Discrediting Omalu's research is the least of the league's measures, ac-

ording to the movie, which implies that the league played a role in the FBI investigating Wecht and even tormented Omalu's family.

If you're waiting for the film to give the NFL a pass or a small moment of redemption, it never comes. Instead, NFL figures are shown as shadowy figures who stop at nothing to protect their interests. There are repeated comparisons between the league and Big Tobacco, the film equating the industries in their allegedly suppressing evidence that their product is deadly.

The NFL has made no comment on the movie. But its position has long been that it has taken the necessary steps to address these health concerns via such action as a so-called "concussion protocol" that requires players to pass a long series of tests before retaking the field after a sharp blow to the head.

The issue of the NFL's relationship to "Concussion" came to the fore several months ago with reports that the movie had been changed to placate the league. If such changes were considered, they did not appear to make their way into the finished film. "I'm thinking if this is 'caved,' jeez, I'd like to think of what the other film" would be, Brooks said at the screening.

Landesman said he did not meet with the NFL — he canceled a scheduled meeting with a top executive at the last moment because he felt it would help the NFL more than it would him — and Sony has maintained that it has been unbowed by the possibility of any league reprisal. The studio, which greenlit the movie after many of its competitors passed, is one of the few corporate-owned Hollywood entities not to have a business relationship with the NFL.

The head-trauma publicity is just one front on which the league has fought. The NFL has endured a series of public relations night-

mares, the latest of which are revelations of photos of graphic bruises on Nicole Holder allegedly caused by her ex-boyfriend, Dallas Cowboys star Greg Hardy.

The bad press does not seem to be dissuading fans. NFL ratings continue their robust performance; "Sunday Night Football," the game's crown-jewel telecast, is averaging a whopping 23.6 million viewers halfway through the season, a 10 percent jump over last year. The popularity is high even in non-NFL markets; it was not lost on some viewers that "Concussion" was debuting even as news broke of Robert Iger becoming involved in Los Angeles' bid to lure one or more NFL teams to the Southern California market.

Indeed, the game seems not only immune to off-field drama but may even be helped by it: Sunday's game which featured Hardy's Cowboys, was up about 25 percent over last year's matchup on the same weekend between the Ravens and Steelers despite those teams sporting a far better collective record at the time the contest took place.

How many of those fans — they of course also include the millions who play fantasy football — will see a movie or be amenable to its message as a morally complicit sport remains to be seen; after all, much of the information in it

has been known for years and documented in journalistic outlets.

Key to Sony's marketing efforts is Smith, a movie star with the mainstream popularity to deliver its message in a wider way. The actor has been candid, if not quite as direct as Landesman, in expressing criticism of the NFL.

"For me it was really conflicting," he told the audience after the AFI screening, noting his son's status as a former high-school football player in Los Angeles. Smith said he thought about not getting involved due to his love of the game but ultimately felt compelled to make the movie as an educational tool of sorts.

"I watched my son play football for four years and I didn't know. I didn't know," he repeated. "That became our quest: to deliver the truth. People have to know."

Landesman said he's not actively trying to change perceptions, and is skeptical he could anyway, at least in the immediate term.

"Most fans will see this movie and understand there's a real problem, an insoluble problem, but also like the bloodlust and will go back to watching," he said.

He said he does believe that in the years to come the issue of head injuries will chip away at interest fans have in watching — and parents have in children playing — the game of football.

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Finally, let the kids help by creating personalized holiday cards using colored paper, glitter and craft essentials for a unique, one-of-a-kind greeting. Use creativity and have fun with it!



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