

Witness Moment Football Players and Dementia



This is the time when we take a moment to look at structural racism, the system of laws, regulations, algorithms and rules which govern our society, which are invisible to white Americans, but harm African Americans every day.

[cue slide #1] As we all know, football players suffer head injuries that can lead to early dementia, so in 2013 the NFL agreed to a billion dollar payout to former players who suffer from brain injuries. Former NFL players were tested on two dozen skills. A player who showed a marked decline in at least two areas received compensation. But almost no Black players qualified for compensation. Why not? Well it turns out that black players were scored differently than white players who performed at exactly the same level.

In an example shared with The Associated Press, a raw score of 19 for “letter-number sequencing” became a score of 42 for whites and 46 for Blacks. The raw score of 15 for naming animals became a 35 for whites but a 41 for Blacks. These scores would have qualified a white man for a moderate dementia finding — but shown no impairment for Black men, who then received nothing.

Why the difference? The NFL insisted on using this “race norming” because they believe that Black men start with lower cognitive skills than white men. Really? [cue slide #2] Does this include President Barack Obama and Neil DeGrasse Tyson? This so called “race norming” makes it harder for Black players to show a deficit and qualify for an award. Former Pittsburgh Steelers Kevin Henry and Najeh Davenport, for instance, were denied awards but would have qualified had they been white.

Dr. Art Caplan, a New York University medical ethicist, said, “Norming by race is not the stance that the NFL ought to take. It continues to look as if it’s trying to exclude people rather than trying to do what’s right, which is to help people that, clinically, have obvious and severe disability. There’s always been this race-norming in medicine, that has been problematic because it’s tied in too closely to racism.”

Former Washington running back Ken Jenkins believes it all comes down to money. “Race-norming may have had a benign origin, but it quickly morphed into a tool that can be used to help the folks in power save money,” he said.

So rich white men save money while Black football players get nothing.

That's structural racism at work.

Sources:

1) Retired Black players say NFL brain-injury payouts show bias MaryClaire Dale Michelle R. Smith

AP: May 14, 2021 <https://apnews.com/article/health-nfl-race-and-ethnicity-sports-066d9fd6bd85f5b5023207467701fde4>

2) NFL to halt 'race-norming,' which assumed Black players had lower cognitive function The Associated

Press **NBC NEWS** June 2, 2021 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/nfl-halt-race-norming-which-assumed-black-players-had-lower-n1269435>