



CASE STUDY 31 Aug 17

A7FL: TACKLING THE DANGERS OF AMERICAN FOOTBALL

Football may be America's favourite sport, but NFL viewership declined by 8% in 2016/17. And while violent sports may appeal to some, long-term health concerns have created an image problem. The American 7s Football League tackles these issues head-on, bringing the game to a wider audience.

Location **United States**

Highlights & Data

- The American 7s Football League promotes a full-contact version of football that aims to be safer for players by getting rid of pads and helmets
- Research suggests that wearing protective equipment while playing encourages repeated collisions, which can cause greater harm in the long-term
- This health concern is contributing to reduced participation in the sport and falling NFL viewership
- Contact sports enable people to watch violence in an acceptable context, offering a vicarious thrill
- Sports leagues may appeal to younger fans through their second screens to enhance the experience at home or in a stadium
- **12%** of NFL fans watched fewer games in 2016/17 compared to the previous season (*J.D. Power, 2017*)
- **Four in ten** Americans say football is their favourite sport to watch (*PRRI/RNS, 2017*)
- Between 2008 and 2013, the number of people playing full-contact football dropped by **23%** (*Sports Industry and Fitness Association, 2013*)
- **29%** of Americans have an unfavourable view of football, with **19%** concerned about issues of violence and concussions (*PRRI/RNS, 2017*)
- **Three-quarters** of Gen Yers want to receive real-time updates on athletes' performances, and **63%** want to watch replays on their phones (*Avaya, 2016*)

Scope

"If the sport of football ever dies, it will die from the outside in," wrote American author Jonah Lehrer in 2012. [1] Five years on, there are worrying signs that this prediction may not be so far-fetched; NFL viewership declined by 8% between 2015 and 2016, and 12% of fans said they watched fewer games in 2016/17 compared to the previous season. [2] Amid concerns around the dangerous nature of the sport and high-profile controversies off-field, American football has an

image problem – but can it be saved?

“Football is not a contact sport; it is a collision sport,” said legendary coach Vince Lombardi. [3] It’s certainly a dangerous game, and to keep players safe they’ve traditionally been required to wear protective apparel. But studies suggest that helmets may be doing more harm than good. “When a player has a body part that’s protected, and the contact with somebody else is imminent, you’re going to put your protected body part first, just reflexively,” explains Dr. Erik Swartz, a kinesiology professor at the University of New Hampshire. [4] All those blows to the head can do serious damage; researchers who studied 202 deceased football players found that 88% of their brains had some degree of chronic traumatic encephalopathy – a degenerative disease. [5]

In response, some football leagues are experimenting with new ways of playing. Founded in 2014, the American 7s Football League (A7FL) sees semi-professionals play without helmets and pads in a bid to make the game safer. “American 7s Football format of removing helmets and removing bulky pads encourages athletes to use proper form tackling and wrap up technique,” says Sener Korkusuz, the CEO of A7FL. “The concept of risk homeostasis supports our findings that athletes instinctively take their head out of the tackle when you remove the helmets and hard pads.” [6]

“*The A7FL maintains the physicality of full contact... while packaging the game in the American 7s format, which is safer in many ways compared to NFL and college football*

Sener Korkusuz, the CEO of A7FL

“The A7FL maintains the physicality of full contact... while packaging the game in the American 7s format, which is safer in many ways compared to NFL and college football,” says Korkusuz. [7] Though it may not have the usual helmets, in April 2017 the league signed a deal with 2ND SKULL, which makes skull caps that are almost weightless but harden to guard against impact, offering protection without added bulk. [6]

The league is using Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram to stream its games and engage new fans through social platforms, and in 2017, TV network ELEVEN Sports gained the rights to broadcast the A7FL to its global audience. [8] “The A7FL is focused on increasing viewership across the board, from fans at games locally to fans across the United States and [people around the] world who are being exposed to the A7FL for the first time through our social media, live-streaming, and TV programming,” says Korkusuz. [7]



Pads and helmets can be worse for players' health

Abigail Keenan (2014) ©

Context

Four in ten Americans say gridiron football is their favourite sport to watch, with an estimated 70% of households with TVs tuning into the 2017 Super Bowl, amounting to over 111 million viewers. [9] [10] But while the annual event is a big draw, participation is dwindling; between 2008 and 2013, the number of people playing full-contact football fell by 1.9 million, representing a decline of 23%. [11] This is likely due to perceived problems with the game – 29% of Americans have an unfavourable view of the sport, with 21% saying that players are poor role models, and 19% concerned about issues of violence and concussions. By contrast, just 8% say that nothing bothers them about professional football. [9]

A7FL is not the first league to challenge the might of the NFL. Founded in 2017, the American Flag Football League (AFFL) promotes a professional non-contact version of the sport wherein a 'tackle' is made by removing a flag from a belt. Founder Jeffrey Lewis believes that the league offers a faster and safer take on football, while maintaining the athleticism. "I've been playing flag football since I was a kid," says ex-NFL pro Chad Johnson. "Defensively and offensively, it's no different than being in the NFL." [12]

Flag football is one of the fastest growing sports in the country, with more than 1.6 million players aged 6-14 in 2015, up 8.7% from the year before. [13] Highlighting its popularity as a safer alternative to regular game, the Spokane Youth Football Association in Washington state announced that it would drop contact football in favour of tag football in August 2017. "Over the last several years, we've seen our numbers decrease at a fairly steady rate," says Glen Reser, sports coordinator for the organisation. "This year, we just made the decision to eliminate the program. The numbers just haven't been there." [14]



Just 49% of NFL fans prefer to watch games in a stadium

Joshua Allwood (2017) ©

Insight and opportunities

“Football is perfectly made for television,” writes John McDuling for Quartz. “Its spectacular athleticism, gladiatorial brutality and chess-like strategy appeal to Americans in the same way that Hollywood blockbusters do. And they work well across the full gamut of television formats, from epic drama (the average NFL game lasts over three hours) to six-second clips that go viral on social media.” [11]

Because people really are drawn to violent sports. Studies suggest that aggressive play can enhance the entertainment value of a sporting event through unscripted drama. The asserting dominance theory, meanwhile, posits that spectators live vicariously through the athletes they watch – so when a player sacks a quarterback or makes a one-handed catch, it’s as if the spectator made the play. [15] Research has also shown that aggression can give us a rewarding buzz as the emotion is mediated by the same brain neurochemistry that regulates the pleasures of sex. Contact sports enable people to watch violence in a context that is acceptable, providing the same kind of thrill as if they were getting stuck in themselves. [16]

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John McDuling, journalist

But it’s not for everyone – many people are more interested in the game itself. After some investors hesitated about the AFFL, Jeffrey Lewis analysed conversations on social media to see what people talked about during NFL games. He found that terms such as ‘touchdown’, ‘run’ and ‘interception’ came up often, while ‘tackle’, ‘hit’ and ‘contact’ weren’t so common. This suggests that there may be market for football fans who would rather see extraordinary athleticism

than violence. [17]

For new leagues to succeed, there's also a need for a smart digital strategy to complement the action. According to the ESPN Sports Poll in 2013, just 49% of NFL fans said they preferred to watch games in person rather than on TV, so in order to keep people coming back to stadiums, they need to feel immersed in the event. [18] One way to achieve this is by providing extra content and updates – three-quarters of Gen Yers want to receive real-time updates on athletes' performances, and 63% would like to watch replays on their mobile phones. [19] This reflects a shift at home, with four out of five NFL fans in the US second-screening during games. [20] With the established force in American football facing a drop in ratings as well as on- and off-field controversies, the A7FL's blend of social media streaming and high-octane games could help it find plenty of new fans.

a7fl.com

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