

Opinion Piece  
Ryan Schneiderman  
Journalism

### A Commentary on the NFL's Opioid Crisis: Why is Cannabis Being Ignored?

The year is 2002, and All-American offensive lineman Jeff Hatch is living the dream: he has just been drafted by the New York Giants. Hatch makes it through training camp unscathed, and impresses enough to become the starter in his rookie year. Four games into the season, he suffers a severe back injury and is out for the year. By the time next season comes around, Hatch is fully addicted to prescription pain-killers. Three years, another back injury, and multiple overdoses later, Hatch's once promising career is over.

The average NFL player is given six to seven pain pills or injections per week, many of which are highly addictive. The extensive medication provided by NFL teams has contributed to a staggeringly high rate of opioid abuse among its players — four times that of the general population. Opioid abuse in the NFL isn't just a problem, its an epidemic.

The span of an average NFL player's career is just 2.66 years. That's more than 2 years shorter than the other Big 4 American sports leagues (NBA, MLB, NHL). NFL players also receive the least amount of guaranteed money in their contracts, and in order to get paid they must stay on the field. Unfortunately the nature of NFL contracts is not going to change until 2021 when the Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) between the owners and the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) is agreed. Even when the next CBA is bargained for in 2021, it will be difficult to change a policy that distinctly favors the owners unless the NFLPA is able to accumulate

significant leverage. The players union will likely resort to a lockout — essentially a strike — to establish a new paradigm for the distribution of wealth between the players and owners, an event which many players are already being advised to prepare for financially.

Until a new CBA is agreed upon, however, players will continually be incentivized to play as many games as possible. But, when the bodies of NFL players must endure the equivalent of a violent car crash every weekend, playing in every game is nearly impossible. In fact, according to a study conducted by the Football Players Health Study at Harvard University, the mean number of significant injuries per game in the NFL is almost five times greater than the other Big 4 sports *combined*. When the team doctors present players with legal medication to minimize the pain so they can play, who can blame them for taking it. The fact that the medications are highly addictive opioids that have problematic long term health effects is likely an afterthought when their next pay check is on the line.

What if there was medication the players could take which provided many of the same intense pain relieving effects without the addictive qualities? Numerous studies have shown the pain relieving and anti-inflammatory properties of cannabis and unlike opioid painkillers, cannabis is not physically addictive. There is also evidence to suggest that cannabis can reduce the impact of head trauma. Many NFL players already use marijuana for its medical benefits. One former player estimated around 40 to 50 percent of players in the league use marijuana, in many instances as a substitute for opioids.

In April of this year, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell vehemently denied the medical benefits of marijuana.

“Listen, you're ingesting smoke, so that's not usually a very positive thing that people would say. It does have addictive nature. There are a lot of compounds in marijuana that may not be healthy for the players long term. All of those things have to be considered,” he said.

The irony is palpable. The NFL cares about the health of its players when it comes to using a substance that is (1) less addictive and less dangerous than the current pain medication and (2) not even necessarily ingested via smoke, but when it comes to the long term effects of traumatic brain injuries the NFL is ambivalent at best, and downright malevolent at worst.

The question begs, why is the NFL really against the use of marijuana? One might argue that it comes down to its legality in the US. Marijuana is legal for medical use in 30 states, in which 24 of the NFL teams reside; 8 teams reside in states where it is illegal. To make marijuana permissible in the NFL would mean that only some players would be able to use it. However, if it were a legality issue, the NFL would treat marijuana use as they treat other infractions of the law. right? But they don't.

When a player is charged with a crime or involved in activity deemed in violation of the NFL's personal conduct policy, it is reviewed on a case by case basis by commissioner Rodger Goodell, who determines the punishment. Marijuana use, on the other hand, falls under the league's

substance abuse policy, which also handles the use of performance enhancing drugs. Players are tested at least once a year for marijuana and are given just 3 hours notice. A first offense results in no punishment but further offenses result in suspensions and fines.

Browns wide receiver Josh Gordon has been suspended for multiple full seasons after testing positive for marijuana on multiple occasions. Rules are rules and in the end Gordon should not have used a banned substance, but does the punishment really fit the crime? Should there even be a punishment at all? The NFL has proved time and again that it doesn't really care about the health of its players. With its policy on cannabis, it appears to be no different.