

## Dying for the Game

by Richard E. Lapchick

I recently read about a group of surfers in New Smyrna Beach, Florida who continued riding the waves in spite of sightings of dozens of sharks right where they were surfing. This was within six weeks of a shark biting off a boy's arm and another attacking a 36 year old man forcing doctors to amputate his leg.

The story was especially disturbing coming in the wake of the heatstroke deaths of Minnesota Viking offensive lineman Corey Stringer and University of Florida running back Eraste Autin, the loss of Northwestern's Rashidi Wheeler, apparently related to bronchial asthma and Utah Lionzz fullback Curtis Jones from cardiac arrest.

The surfing story appeared in the same newspaper as the report of the preliminary results of NASCAR's probe into the death of Dale Earnhardt. The probe revealed safety problems in the very design of the race cars. We now know that these cars lack sufficient crush resistance in the front end to ensure the safety of drivers in severe crashes.

Stringer's death was the first recorded death from heat stroke in NFL history. NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue has been going from team-to-team to beg for caution so health hazards to NFL players will be reduced. But will coaches and players who rely on toughness ease off a teammate they see slowing down or leaving the field?

Earnhardt's death was not NASCAR's first but, perhaps, the most notable because of his fan following. Since his death 75 percent of the drivers in the elite Winston Cup series have been using head-restraint devices. Among those ignoring the danger is Dale Earnhardt, Jr. Now comes the news that the cars' structures are seriously flawed. Will NASCAR leaders act in some dramatic way to alter the chances of future fatalities?

A sad answer may come from the surfers. Chad Erickson told the Orlando Sentinel, "The sharks aren't really attacking here." New Smyrna Deputy Police Chief Joe Wooden dismissed the number of shark sightings with "It's like asking if there's a traffic jam on Interstate 4 (a road famous for heavy traffic)." He failed to mention that nine of the 32 shark bites world-wide this year have been in Volusia County (where New Smyrna is) and half have been in Florida!

So what is at play here? Why do we ignore danger when people's lives are at stake. Before going farther, let's not think that ignoring risk and danger is just a sports story. Think of the totally preventable deaths caused by Firestone tires after the manufacturer knew the risks involved.

The sports industry has to keep their game in front of the fans and viewers. The Vikings were quickly back at practice, NASCAR race cars zoomed the weekend after the report was leaked, and surfers were on their boards as more sightings were identified. Coaches have to win, players have to keep their roster spots, drivers and race car teams have to stay in the race.

For the athlete, sport is at least partially about toughness and keeping a mental edge over competitors. Several newspapers reported that Corey Stringer was mocked by teammates on the day of his death after the Minnesota Star Tribune published a photo of him bent over and looking out of breath during practice the day before he died. Did Stringer respond to peer pressure and continue in spite of the warning signs present in the intense heat? Had the owners and team leaders mandated that their medical staff be on top of such situations and have the authority to call off practice or, at least, reduce the rigors of the workout?

In a football culture, would Korey have felt less of a man by walking off the field? Could he have thought of his family and stopped before that moment when the heat consumed him?

Is it ethical for NASCAR officials to let their drivers race without head restraints? What makes the 25 percent, including the son of the latest victim, chose to ignore safety? Now that NASCAR knows the grave defect in the design of team cars, can we expect immediate action? Is it ethical to stage a race knowing it could result in a fatality? I recognize that possibility seems far fetched and will not happen, but then I ask was it ethical for Firestone to sell tires after the death toll began to mount? The American public now clearly believes that Firestone breached its faith. What becomes the critical number of deaths?

In football, was it Korey Stringer joining the 17 college and high school football players who died from heatstroke since 1995? In racing, will the Earnhardt investigation make NASCAR count up the numbers already lost on their watch and examine how many young drivers aspiring to join the circuit have been killed trying to get there?

I know some fans see the risk and danger as part of the sport but don't they have some responsibility to demand protection for those they cheer for and follow? If they let the decision-makers know they will turn away, then changes will come faster.

What about corporate sponsors? Do they have a responsibility to the games they profit from? What would happen to the Winston series if some of the sponsor logos began to disappear? I would bet we would see change even more quickly.

Finally, I return to the surfers. Obviously, they are not going to leave the water on their own. It seems that the authorities are downplaying the risk in spite of Volusia County's unwanted title of "Shark Capital of the World." What will it take for the chief of police or mayor to call all swimmers and surfers out of the water when sharks are sighted? Their fan equivalent, the tourist, would have to leave and let the authorities know that they felt their children, the equivalent of athletes in this case, were at risk.

None of these are simple cases with simple answers. There is only one certainty: unless we act on what we know to be life-threatening situations, more lives will be lost. We know ... we need to act.

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