

NFL violence and high school prayers OK with most fans

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—For all the headlines about football violence, concussions and player injuries, watching football is not a “guilty pleasure” for many Americans. It’s just a pleasure, a new survey finds.

The Public Religion Research Institute/Religion News Service survey also found overwhelming support for “allowing football coaches at public high schools to lead their players in specifically Christian prayer during games.”

A Seattle-area high school football coach made headlines recently when he was suspended from his job after refusing to halt praying in public during games. He’s now filed a federal discrimination suit, according to The Seattle Times.

The 73 percent who approve of such prayers included 93 percent of white evangelicals and 55 percent of people who say they have no religious identity.

Dangerous, but Americans love those hard hits

The bone-crunching NFL game is by far Americans’ favorite sport to watch, even though the PRRI/RNS survey finds the audience for it drifting slowly off. And more people say they would not allow a young son to play the game.

“An overwhelming number of Americans believe that football is more dangerous than other sports. However, they also think the hard-hitting nature of the game is either integral to the sport or at the very least it’s acceptable,” said Dan Cox, research director for PRRI.

What bothers Americans about the NFL

When asked what bothered them most about professional football, violence was mentioned by only 17 percent of those surveyed, behind athletes' off-the-field behavior:

- 32 percent agreed, "Players care more about money than the game."
- 21 percent cited players as "poor role models."
- 7 percent said, "It encourages negative treatment of women."
- 2 percent mentioned concussions or brain injuries

Football was tops on the favorite sport list for 38 percent of U.S. adults. Basketball was a distant second at 11 percent.

Overall, 71 percent said, "Football is generally more dangerous than other sports."

Generation gap

And concern with violence is divided by generations, he said.

"Older people are more in touch with news and more familiar with coverage of injuries and the concern about concussions," Cox said. "Young adults don't bring a lot of history to the questions."

'Would you let your son play?'

Overall, 31 percent said they wouldn't let their child play competitive football, up from 22 percent in the PRRI survey in January 2015.

"Would you let your son play?" became a popular question with pollsters after President Obama, father of two daughters, told *The New Yorker* in 2014 that if he had a son, he wouldn't allow it. *New York Magazine* found

nine NFL stars who would hesitate or forbid it as well.

Young adults also are the least concerned about the dangers posed to players by the violence of football, Cox said.

Only 11 percent of young adults said football has become more dangerous than other sports, compared with 40 percent of seniors (65 and older).

But young Americans (age 18 to 29) are shifting away. It's not the sight of helmet-on-helmet collisions, but rather "sports pluralism," Cox said, citing increased interest in watching other sports such as soccer or hockey or auto racing.

The survey found 72 percent of young adults would be fine with allowing a son to play, compared with only 50 percent of seniors.

A finding that was probably no surprise: Most Americans (68 percent) say they're likely to watch the Super Bowl this year.

The survey of 1,009 U.S. adults, conducted by phone Jan. 20 and Jan. 24, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.6 percentage points.