

SUICIDE ON THE SIDELINES: MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF NFL PLAYERS' SUICIDES  
FROM JUNE 2000 TO SEPTEMBER 2012

By

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For Rob

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From 2000 until 2012 there have been more than a dozen suicides by current or retired NFL athletes. Stories about these suicides have made their way into mainstream news and sport-related media coverage. Current research does not fully account for all of the important aspects related to suicide among athletes—especially NFL athletes—nor does it explore the ways in which the suicides have been covered by mass media. Furthermore, there has not been a comprehensive analysis to identify the way in which the media covered the stories or what themes exist in the coverage. This study examines media coverage of NFL athlete suicides from June 2000 to September 2012 in six sources: *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* (print); ESPN, Sports Illustrated and Bleacher Report (online). The study discusses the results of qualitative content analysis performed on the 176 articles, using framing analysis to address the specific research questions. Ultimately, this research presents current media portrayals and discussion of commonly appearing frames, discusses thematic elements and framing tools, gives recommendations for journalists covering suicide, and provides suggestions for future scholarship on the topic.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Every 18 minutes, someone dies by suicide (Joiner, 2005, p. 29). Worldwide, there are more than half a million suicides per year, and more than 30,000 people in the United States die by suicide annually (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.; Joiner, 2005, p. 29). In 2001, this mode of dying was the “eleventh leading cause of death overall in the United States” (Joiner, 2005, p. 29). In 2007, it rose to become the tenth leading cause of death (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Despite its position as a leading public health issue, what sets suicide apart from some other leading causes of death is that it is preventable with effective therapeutic and treatment interventions.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), suicide accounts for “almost half of all violent deaths and resulting in almost one million fatalities every year, as well as economic costs in the billions of dollars” (World Health Organization, 2004). Despite its status as a pressing public health issue, suicide is preventable. In light of such statistics, this research examines the ways in which the media discusses the high-profile deaths of NFL athletes.

Qualitative framing analysis was chosen as the methodology for this study because it is necessary to understand the relationship between the media’s treatment of NFL athletes and coverage of their suicide, an area that has not been heavily researched. For that reason, both elite print and popular sport-related online outlets were surveyed for content.

Established theories on suicide demonstrate that media coverage of high-profile suicide cases can have a significant impact on public audiences. Journalists’ use of certain framing tools and techniques can influence audiences’ perception of

professional sports, suicide and mental health. When covered incorrectly, articles discussing high-profile suicides can even inspire contagions whereby other individuals commit suicide around the same time and perhaps in a similar manner (National Institute of Mental Health et al., n.d.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention et al., n.d).

Suicide among athletes is not a new phenomenon, though it has not been heavily researched. A prevalent issue in the National Football League (NFL), suicide among players has been gaining national media attention in recent years. According to an NFL Mortality Study conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), NFL players are “more likely to die from acts of violence and accidents than the general public. The theory was that these men are likely to be risk-takers and engage in dangerous hobbies and activities” (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1994, p.1). Suicide theories have shown that having a risk-taking personality, as many professional football players do, can make an individual more predisposed to suicide, among other prevalent risk factors (Lester, 1989).

Due to the inherent popularity of professional sports, particularly NFL football, it is worthwhile to understand how the media covers this controversial topic. Depending on the way the issue of suicides in the NFL is framed, there can be potentially adverse effects on viewers, especially adolescents who may idolize these figures.

The purpose of this research is to identify the ways in which the mainstream and sports-related media inform the public’s perceptions about NFL athlete suicide: for example, whether they possibly aid in sensationalizing the death, speculating on motives for suicide, or perpetuating the stereotype that men must adhere to

unattainable standards of masculinity—standards that are often heavily surrounded by the “All-American” nature of football and the mythos of a “hero” that is sought in a famous sports figure. This research will investigate print and online media from six well-known media outlets from June 2000 until September 2012 using *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* as print sources; and *SportsIllustrated.com*, *ESPN.com*, and *BleacherReport.com* as online sources. These print sources were chosen because they are among the most elite American newspapers (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 46), consistently rank among the highest circulating daily newspapers, and they represent a wide geographical range within the United States. The aforementioned online websites were chosen because Sports Illustrated and ESPN are consistently ranked in the top 10 among the most popular websites for sports consumers (Fisher; comScore Media Metrix, 2012). Both ESPN and Sports Illustrated are the only websites that also publish in print—*ESPN The Magazine* publishes biweekly and *Sports Illustrated* publishes weekly. Some articles from Sports Illustrated and ESPN included in the sample for this research were published in both print and online. The other online source, Bleacher Report, combines a blog format with sport-related content and is “the web's largest and fastest growing community-powered sports network,” according to commercial web traffic website Alexa (Alexa Internet Inc., 2013).

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 44 million households (42%) had “at least one member who used the Internet at home in 2000” (Newburger, 2001). Accessibility and availability of computers and the Internet are important factors to receiving information. The media landscape has shifted greatly from 2000 until 2012, which is why print and online sources were used for data collection.

Choosing a time frame where there was widespread access and availability of computers and the Internet was an imperative aspect of this time frame, in addition to diversifying media sources to include print and online.

Framing theory was utilized to conduct a qualitative content analysis of the collected articles. This theory sets the foundation for understanding how print and online media depicted the NFL players and how their suicides were discussed. This study contributes to the literature because little research has been conducted regarding media coverage of suicide among NFL athletes.

NFL players have been dying by suicide since the 1920s when the league was officially instated, but perhaps even earlier. It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many NFL athletes died by suicide over a certain time period because publicity and media coverage of their death is largely contingent upon their fame and media coverage tends to be episodic. In June 2000, 1936 Heisman trophy winner Lawrence “Larry” Kelley died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound at the age of 85 (Goldstein, 2000). From June 2000 until September 2012, there have been 11 NFL player suicides. Following Kelley’s June 2000 suicide, two deaths occurred in 2006, then one per year from 2009 to 2011, and five occurring in 2012 alone. As a result of these suicides, the NFL has gained national media attention. This research looks at the commonly appearing media frames of NFL suicides, how the frames changed over time; trends in the increase of media coverage; specific language and framing tools used to discuss the suicides, external factors the media suggest contributed to the suicide, and discussion of motive or the presence of a suicide note or last wishes.

The rest of this thesis is arranged as follows: Chapter 2 further presents relevant statistics; focuses on the various factors that may influence athlete suicides, and surveys the associated issues using other past relevant research, literature and theories. It also lays out the applicable research questions studied in this analysis. Chapter 3 discusses the criteria used for selecting the print and online articles used in the qualitative framing analysis in addition to explanation of the methodology used in this study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the framing analysis and includes a discussion of the salient frames and framing techniques used in the articles using an informational coding sheet that was developed and completed for each article. Along with the framing analysis, there is also a description of how coverage changed over time. Findings for each of the research questions also are addressed. Chapter 5 discusses the significance of these findings in relation to already established psychological theories and practical applications. This chapter also reiterates the importance of this topic, discusses theoretical and practical implications, describes the limitations of this study and lays out possibilities for future areas of research.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The Stigma of Suicide and Mental Illness**

A very complex topic, suicide (and mental illness) is often stigmatized. Stigmas are present in various forms, whether societal, environmental or religious. Historically, suicide has been stigmatized by religion since ancient times. Although the act of suicide was tolerated by Greeks and Romans, (Alvarez, 1990, p. 59) it was not until Greek philosopher Aristotle claimed that suicide “weakens the economy and upsets the gods,” that the act was stigmatized (Tadros & Jolley, 2001). Other religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism did not view suicide as an inherently negative act, as did Judeo-Christianity until the 4th century.

Suicide is not condemned in the Bible, (Barraclough, 1992, p. 64; Gearing & Lizardi, 2008, p. 334) although Saint Augustine “considered suicide as unacceptable within Christian values” (Pritchard, 1996, p. 11). *The City of God*, written by Saint Augustine around 413 A.D., described the act as murderous: “whoever kills a man, either himself or another, is implicated in the guilt of murder.” He considered those who attempt or commit suicide as “proof of a feeble mind” (Saint Augustine, 426 A.D., p. 24). Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas echoed Saint Augustine’s sentiment by referring to suicide as a “sin against self, neighbor and God” (Aquinas, 1225-1274; Gearing & Lizardi, 2008, p. 334). According to Aquinas, confession of sin must be made before leaving Earth—thus, suicide is an especially serious sin because those who commit the act are unable to confess and/or repent (Kennedy, 2000; Phipps, 1985, p. 971).

The stigma against suicide increased in Europe until it eventually became more than a sin—it became a crime (Tadros & Jolley, 2001). Writers such as William Shakespeare attempted to lessen the stigma against suicide by making it a frequent feature in his tragedies:

the attitude toward suicide in Shakespeare's plays, pagan and Christian, is generally one of acceptance. Although some resulted from a misunderstanding of the situation (Romeo, Cassius), many of the suicides are depicted as, at the least, necessary and honorable (Othello, Antony), while others are noble, even glorious (Titinius, Eros, Cleopatra) (Kirkland, 1999, p. 662).

In many parts of the world, suicide and attempted suicide was illegal for many years. In 1961, it became decriminalized in New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Levine & Pyke, 1999), among the last European countries to do so. Suicide is no longer considered a crime under modern law in the United States; however, “some states classify attempted suicide as a criminal act, but prosecutions are rare” (Legal Dictionary, n.d.).

The stigma of suicide reaches beyond legal issues, and may also affect emotional and psychological aspects such as grief and bereavement. One study indicates that about 44% of those bereaved by suicide “had lied to some extent about the cause of death” (Joiner, 2005, p. 6). Other research has indicated that a possible reason for lying about the cause of death is because bereavement from the loss of a loved one to suicide is different from other types of grief. A study was conducted with relatives of those who have died by suicide, using in-depth qualitative interviews to uncover themes, explore their “lived experience,” and understand how they cope with feelings of bereavement (Begley & Quayle, 2007, p. 28). Four master themes were uncovered: controlling the impact of the suicide, making sense of the suicide, social

uneasiness, and purposefulness (p. 29). Although the relatives of the deceased would go through many different phases of grief, they shared similar lived experiences when dealing with the suicide of a loved one. The final subtheme, purposefulness, suggested a “magical attachment’ to the deceased. . . . The attachment meant that participants had adapted to a life without the physical presence of the deceased and it was achieved by maintaining a ‘mental’ bond with the deceased” (p. 31).

### **Suicide Risk Factors**

“Some risk factors [for suicide] vary with age, gender, or ethnic group and may occur in combination or change over time” (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Risk factors include the presence of a mental disorder (such as depression or a substance abuse disorder), family history of mental disorders/substance abuse/suicide, presence of firearms in the home, family violence such as physical or sexual abuse, prior suicide attempt, incarceration, and the “exposure to the suicidal behavior of others, such as family members, peers, or media figures” (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Along with these risk factors, suicide is also associated with neurotransmitter (brain chemical) fluctuations, such as serotonin (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). “Decreased levels of serotonin have been found in people with depression, impulsive disorders, and a history of suicide attempts, and in the brains of suicide victims” (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.).

Every year it is estimated that 26.2% of Americans aged 18 and older—or one in four adults—has a diagnosable mental disorder. Because suicide is heavily associated with mental illness, it is often stigmatized as a result. This stigma is particularly present in ethnic minorities—African Americans in particular (Joe, Canetto, & Romer, 2008). This is important because many of the NFL athletes who died by suicide from June

2000 to September 2012 were African American. In addition to its presence in minority populations, the stigma may be more pervasive in sports where masculinity and toughness are cornerstones. “In an industry (regardless of sport) where bravado and machismo drive each play, an athlete’s admission of any mental health problem could be just as damaging to a career as a torn ACL” (Ulanday & Crowder, 2011). This may explain why so many players stay silent about the emotional, physical and mental issues they face as high profile, professional athletes.

Cases of athletes suffering from a mental illness are under-reported (if reported at all). And the instances where depression and mental illness do become a topic of conversation among major news outlets usually follow a tragic event like [NFL player Dave] Duerson’s death (Ulanday & Crowder, 2011).

### **Suicide Contagion**

A cluster of suicides that occur close in time is referred to as a contagion, which is a “significant clustering of suicides, defined by temporal-spatial factors” (Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003, p. 1270). It has been proven numerous times that the number of suicides increases following extensive media coverage of a particular suicide case or multiple cases. Suicide contagion is the most prevalent among adolescents (Davidson, 1989; Phillips & Carstensen, 1986).

Media-related factors that escalate the number of suicides as a result of contagion include: increase in the number of stories about an individual suicide; a particular death reported at length or for a prolonged period of time; the story is prominently featured on the front page of a newspaper, at the beginning of a televised broadcast or on the main page of a website; and the headline is dramatic (Phillips, Lesyna, & Paight, 1992; Hassan, 1995). “Any analysis that encourages suicidal behavior in any way, particularly in ways that romanticize or glorify it, or make it seem

easy and normative—has potential negative consequences for public health” (Joiner, 2005, p. 43).

Related to cases of the media romanticizing and glorifying death by suicide is the case of the celebrity. “Celebrity deaths are more likely than non-celebrity deaths to produce imitation” (Wasserman, 1984). However, following media guidelines put forth by federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and organizations such as the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and American Association of Suicidology has been shown to decrease suicide rates (Sonneck, Etzterdorfer, & Nagel-Kuess, 1994; Etzterdorfer & Sonneck, 1998).

### **Suicide Prevention**

Despite the recent Institute of Medicine report that identified the paucity of research on the stigma of suicide as an important barrier to suicide prevention, no prevention study has focused on reducing the stigma of suicide or examined systematically whether it should be a part of suicide prevention strategies, particularly for ethnic minority populations (Joe et al., 2008, p. 6).

Suicide prevention is not always easy. Due to the lack of research on stigma reduction and an atmosphere that inspires players to simply undermine or ignore their suicidal thoughts, it may be difficult to identify situations in which treatments or interventions might be necessary.

However, “suicide does not occur suddenly, impulsively, unpredictably, or inevitably. It is the final step of a progressive failure at adaptation” (Grollman, 1988, p. 63). For this reason, prevention is especially essential, as 70 to 75% of “would-be suicides indicate their intentions in one way or another” (Grollman, 1988, p. 63).

Predictors of completed suicide include previous attempts, threats, situational hints, family hints, emotional hints, behavioral hints, and mental illness (Grollman, 1988, p. 63-

75). Previous attempts indicate intention to die or may serve as a cry for help or intervention. People who want to commit suicide may reveal their desire by communicating about it. Indications can be spoken or nonverbal (Grollman, 1988, p. 64). Situational risks include difficult financial times and/or other experiences that may drive someone to kill him or herself. Suicide risk is high in people who are diagnosed with a progressive illness; or experiencing economic distress, death of a loved one, and/or divorce/domestic difficulties (Grollman, 1988, p. 66). The family hint consists of crisis situations or situations in which the suicidal person is exposed to depressing familial circumstances. For example, being around or living with other family members who are depressed.

In a study of adolescents who had taken their lives, it was discovered that almost all of the victims' parents were themselves depressed or preoccupied with suicide. If the person finally decides to take his or her life, it is really an acting out of the antisocial impulses that are covertly present in other family members (Grollman, 1988, p. 67).

Internalizing thoughts and emotions may make an individual more susceptible to carrying out their suicide. The emotional hint consists of symptoms in an individual's personality that changes suddenly—the majority of potential suicides suffer from depression. Behavioral hints are closely related to emotional hints, whereby a person's behavior shifts in a markedly different way. This can manifest itself in substance or alcohol abuse. Mental illness affects suicidal individuals and may come in the form of chemical imbalances and a family history of depression or mental illness (Grollman, 1988, p. 72). Of all the aforementioned predictors, previous suicide attempts, “direct or veiled” suicide threats, family history, alcoholism and chronic drug use are the strongest risk factors for suicide (Grollman, 1988, p. 73).

## Anthropology of Sport

Anyone who reads the newspaper, watches television, or listens to casual conversation on the street is undoubtedly aware of the ubiquitous nature of sport. It is everywhere; it flavors our national culture, and permeates every corner of our daily lives. It has almost become its own medium of communication (Blanchard, 1995, p. xvii).

The popularity of organized sport has been a hallmark of various cultures and societies since ancient times (Crowther, 2007, p. xxii). Organized sport has been around as long as humans have—there are records of many ancient cultures partaking in sport.

In contemporary American culture, sports are consistently among the most popular and highest grossing events ever. The Super Bowl brand was rated number one among other sporting events by gross revenue generated per day of competition in 2010, as reported by *Forbes Magazine* (Schwartz, 2010a). The Super Bowl brand value was rated at \$420 million in 2010, attracting a record U.S. audience of 106.5 million and increasing every year (Schwartz, 2010b). The NFL has the “highest average per game attendance” with 67,357 fans per game in 2011 (Statista, 2012). The 32 teams of the NFL generated revenue of \$6.03 billion in 2005 and in 2004; the average NFL franchise was worth \$733 million (Statista, 2012). For the American public, “Sport is a tantalizing subject. . . . No subject, except sex, is a more constant preoccupation in the physical lives of Americans. We also like to read about it, in formats ranging from tabloid sports coverage to high literature” (Messenger, 1995, p. 726). Given the popularity of sports, it is unsurprising that it has become intricately tied to the social, relational, psychological and financial identity of the United States.

## **History of the National Football League (NFL)**

On November 6, 1869, Rutgers University and Princeton played the first-ever college football game (NFL.com, 2012). It was out of the tradition of these intercollegiate games that a precursor to professional football was born (Maltby, 1997, p. 6). During that era, professional football was “hardly distinguishable from college football of the time” (History of the NFL, n.d.).

During the nineteenth century, many athletic clubs began developing in urban areas because “the city provided the people, communication, transportation, and general financial support necessary for the clubs to function. Beyond that, the athletic associations also fulfilled various social as well as recreational needs” (Maltby, 1997, p. 9). These clubs were probably considered “the first social clubs in America” (Maltby, 1997, p. 9). Within these athletic associations, various forms of organized sport became prominent, including football. After the Crescent Athletic Club of Brooklyn adopted football into their repertoire of sport, “others in the East followed suit, playing college teams as well as other athletic associations. The athletic clubs loomed large in the popularization of football as a spectator sport in America” (Maltby, 1997, p. 11).

Established in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the early 1890s, the Pittsburgh Athletic Club (PAC) and the Allegheny Athletic Association (AAA) were two athletic clubs with an intense rivalry. Out of this rivalry came “the first professional football player,” former Yale All-America guard William Heffelfinger. He was paid \$500 by the AAA to play against the PAC on November 12, 1892, “becoming the first person to be paid to play football” (NFL.com, 2012).

In 1902, Colonel John Rogers formed a professional football team, the Phillies (Maltby, 1997, p. 71). Soon after, plans were made for a National Football League of

1902—the “brainchild” of a newspaperman named David Berry—who led the Pittsburgh franchise and became league president. The NFL of 1902 included two clubs from Philadelphia and teams from Pittsburgh, New York, and Chicago (Maltby, 1997, p. 72). The three NFL teams played each other as well as squads from outside associations. Although it was not successful, the league raised awareness for professional football and was necessary to its development (Maltby, 1997, p. 73). Thus, professional football transformed slowly, “with as many setbacks as advances” (Maltby, 1997, p. 119).

The first league of professional football teams, the American Professional Football Association, was created in 1920. The National Football League (NFL) officially began out of this tradition in 1922. In 1936, the first player draft occurred and the game witnessed increased popularity among public fans. “The Chicago Bears, the Chicago Cardinals, the Detroit Lions, the Green Bay Packers, and the New York Giants were some of the league’s dominant teams during the period” (History of the NFL, n.d.).

Today, the NFL is the “largest professional American football league,” with 32 teams representing major cities from around the country (Zhu & Bolding, n.d.). From 2011 to 2012, the League’s revenue reached an estimated \$9.5 billion, a \$500 million increase from the year before (Gaines, 2012). “A Harris Poll of the American public, conducted September 25-27 [2012], found that 59 percent of Americans follow pro football, the highest level of interest in the NFL that Harris has ever found in its regular studies of the U.S. population” (Smith, M., 2012). American football is an integral part of our national psyche and our identity as a nation: “It’s not just America’s most popular sport, it may be America’s most popular cultural institution of any kind” (Smith, M., 2012).

## **Presence of Masculinity and Heroism Mythos in Sports**

“Hegemonic masculinity” is a dominant masculinity that has been idealized in U.S. culture (Hardin, Kuehn, Jones, Genovese, & Balaji, 2009, p. 184; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It is identified by its “emphasis on overt displays of force and power, on patriarchy, and on occupational achievement” (Hardin et al., 2009, p. 184). Considering the unparalleled popularity of organized sports in the United States, particularly professional football, it is no surprise that “commercial sports are a focus of media representations of masculinity” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2007, p. 833). This idea is asserted many times throughout the literature. “Men’s competitive, organized team sports—particularly contact sports—have long maintained utility in shaping and defining acceptable forms of heterosexual masculinity in Western cultures” (Anderson & Kian, 2012, p. 154; Hargreaves, 1994; Messner, 1992). Going beyond hegemonic masculinity in American football, it is important to note that the discussion of masculinity and the inherent gender difference also has important implications to suicide. Per year, approximately four times as many men as women die by suicide (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Furthermore, suicide rates are the highest among white men over the age of 85 (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.).

Also within these social constructs is the concept of heroism in sports:

In ancient times, the hero, usually a warrior, was a legendary figure who performed brave and noble deeds of great significance, who possessed attributes of great stature such as bravery, strength, and steadfastness, and who was thought to be favored by the gods (Wenner, 1998, p. 134).

In the modern age, the traditional construction of hero has been replaced by the celebrity—“the hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media” (Wenner, 2002, p. 137; Boorstin, 1978, p. 61). In contemporary American sports culture, athletes

are considered heroes because of their consistently outstanding long-term performance, paired with intellect; in addition to qualities of moral and social responsibility (Wenner, 2002, p. 137; Reid & Austin, 2012). Thus, images of celebrity, the concept of traditional heroism and constructions of hegemonic masculinity inform the modern creation of the “football star.” Sport allows for these athletes to practice their skills and establish prominence over other players.

Sport is not just a symbolic signifier of male competence but assists in the embodiment of hardness, particularly of external muscular hardness. In male sport there is a competitive pitting of the brute force of one's body against the brute force of others, creating both a carapace for the self and a knowledge of one's own force and bodily competence. To win is to momentarily become the hero whose sureness of body can be taken for granted. To be is to be powerful, and anyone who is not, is flawed (Davies, 1993, p. 95).

In addition to being revered as heroes, football players are also viewed as role models by young adults. This meaning is achieved by fragmenting together “selected constructions of reality” (Lines, 2010, p. 287) to illustrate a person who is worth emulating. Along with athletic ability, the sports star as role model embodies many characteristics such as bravery, courage and toughness. In many cases, the sports star is glamourized as a hero, celebrity or role model due to his ubiquitous nature—being featured on television, in print media and online. “Across sporting texts, entertainment value, drama and focus are enhanced by the amplification of sport stars” (Lines, 2010, p. 287).

### **Hegemonic Masculinity and Football**

In simple terms, hegemony is broadly defined as a form of cultural control. According to Marxist and Italian critical theorist Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is defined as “the winning and holding of power and the formation (and destruction) of social

groups in that process” (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645). Societally, those who hold the power may use it to influence, control or manipulate people and situations. “Hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media, and the organization of social institutions in ways that appear ‘natural,’ ‘ordinary,’ ‘normal’” (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645).

Hegemony permeates many facets of society, particularly in sports. Within the sports arena, hegemony comes into play in situations in which athletes establish themselves as dominant, powerful and exert their power through various methods. These can consist of physical manifestations because in many ways, “a football star is a model of hegemonic masculinity” (Donaldson, 1993, p. 647). Due to the ritualistic nature inherent in sports and sporting events, masculinity, hegemony and “the dimension of male solidarity” is constantly strengthened “not just for the teams, but for men in general” (Bryson, 1987, p. 357).

Two important issues related to hegemonic masculinity include heterosexuality and homophobia (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645). A societally accepted criterion for being the archetypal football players tends to be heterosexuality, explicit displays of masculinity and emphasis on athletic prowess. Functioning similarly to a brotherhood or fraternity, football as a sport tends to be heterosexually centric and focused on ousting those who do not fit into the norm (Keddie, 2002).

Reconstructing the myth that used to surround gladiators and athletes of antiquity to fit the football players of today is also a common facet of modern sports—a myth that has not faded with the passage of time. Thus, it is no wonder that violence is an inherent aspect of hegemonic masculinity in sports. As a practice, sports violence helps

create hegemonic masculinity (Messner, 1992). From a young age, boys are indoctrinated to behave a certain way in order to be accepted in their peer groups, especially in sport locker rooms. Boys utilize football culture as a way to establish, implement and perform masculinity (Keddie, 2002). Previous studies involving young boys have shown that sports can have positive effects, such as in promoting physical and social skills, friendship and teamwork (Swain, 2000, p. 2). However, it is possible that these favorable experiences could be overshadowed by domination and even violence. “Physical domination in the form of violence and the marginalisation of femininities or effeminacies are not only acceptable but par for the course” (Keddie, 2002).

### **Suicide among Athletes**

Worldwide, there are more than half a million suicides per year and approximately 30,000 people in the United States die by suicide annually (Joiner, 2005, p. 29). With a suicide occurring once every 18 minutes, this mode of dying constitutes the “eleventh leading cause of death overall in the United States” in 2001 (Joiner, 2005, p. 29). Some groups or individuals have an increased risk for dying by suicide—white males over the age of 65 die at the highest rate (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.).

Past self-injury is the most powerful and dangerous way to acquire lethality. According to the present theory, however, it is not the only means. There should be high rates of suicidality in people who have repeatedly experienced and thus habituated to injury and pain, even if not through self-harm per se (Joiner, 2005, p. 68).

The aforementioned idea of repeated exposure to injury is thought to be an important determinant for possibility of suicide. Coupled with the statistic that approximately 65% of NFL athletes retire with permanent injuries, prolonged

experiences with pain are commonplace (Ruettgers, n.d.). It is also important to note that the rate of suicide among former NFL players is “nearly six times the national average” (Ruettgers, n.d.).

A prominent current theory of suicide maintains that a key factor that makes suicide possible, despite our robust survival instinct, is repeated exposure to injury. This desensitizing process is thought to take some of the fear out of self-harm, to the extent that depression and despair are able to evolve into self-destructive action (Ellis, 2012).

In an article by Smith and Milliner, they investigated the varying emotional and psychological responses that athletes may have to their injuries. Their findings revealed “significant depression that may be profound and may last a month or more, paralleling the athletes’ perceived recovery” (Smith & Milliner, 1994, p. 337). For more seriously injured athletes, he/she would experience increased feelings of depression, anger and other mood disturbances lasting a month or more following injury (p. 337). Furthermore, they looked at athletic injury as a “psychosocial risk factor” and analyzed a case study of five injured athletes, looking for the common factors:

The five injured athletes who attempted suicide shared several common factors. All had experienced 1) considerable success before sustaining injury; 2) a serious injury requiring surgery; 3) a long, arduous rehabilitation with restriction from their preferred sport; 4) a lack of preinjury competence on return to sport; and 5) being replaced in their positions by teammates (Smith & Milliner, 1994, p. 337).

### **NFL Athletes’ Suicides from 2000 to 2012**

In recent years, issues of suicide and depression in NFL athletes have become the focus of media attention. During the time frame of this study, June 2000 to September 2012, 11 NFL players died by suicide: Larry Kelley, Andre Waters, Terry Long, Shane Dronett, Kenny McKinley, Dave Duerson, Mike Current, Ray Easterling, Kurt Crain, Junior Seau, and O.J. Murdock.

Larry Kelley died by self-inflicted gunshot wound in his New Jersey home in June 2000 (Goldstein, 2000). Andre Waters died in November 2006 by self-inflicted gunshot wound in his Tampa home (ESPN.com news services, 2006). Terry Long, a lineman for the Pittsburgh Steelers, ingested antifreeze to commit suicide in June 2006 (Associated Press, 2006). At the time of his death, the coroner's report indicated that Terry Long died of meningitis due to CTE, but the death certificate has since been revised to indicate he died as a result of drinking antifreeze, and "did not die as a direct result of football-related head injuries" (Associated Press, 2006). Shane Dronett shot himself in his home in January 2009, after suffering from symptoms such as paranoid outbursts and fits of rage and violence related to a degenerative disease called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Following his death, Boston University researchers confirmed the diagnosis in Dronett's brain, which showed "definite" evidence of CTE (Smith, S., 2011). Kenny McKinley, who was on injury reserve for the Denver Broncos at the time of his death, shot himself using a .45-caliber semi-automatic handgun in September 2010 (Rosenberg, 2012). Ex-Chicago Bears safety Dave Duerson shot himself in the chest in February 2011 to preserve his brain for post-mortem study (Smith, S., 2011). Once an offensive tackle for the Denver Broncos, Mike Current shot himself in the head in an Oregon wildlife refuge area in January 2012 (Steffen, 2012). Former NFL player Kurt Crain was serving as associate head football coach for South Alabama University when he committed suicide in April 2012, at age 47. Before the most recent suicide of Tennessee Titans wide receiver O.J. Murdock in July 2012, retired New England Patriots linebacker Junior Seau killed himself in May 2012, and Atlanta Falcons safety

Ray Easterling died two weeks before in April 2012 of a self-inflicted gunshot wound (Bishop & Davis, 2012, B13).

There was a wide distribution of athletes' age at time of death. All of the aforementioned athletes died by self-inflicted gunshot wounds except for Terry Long.

Table 2-1. Athlete death information

Athlete name	Month/year of death	Age at death
Larry Kelley	June 2000	85
Andre Waters	November 2006	44
Terry Long	June 2006	45
Shane Dronett	January 2009	38
Kenny McKinley	September 2010	23
Dave Duerson	February 2011	50
Mike Current	January 2012	66
Ray Easterling	April 2012	62
Kurt Crain	April 2012	47
Junior Seau	May 2012	43
O.J. Murdock	July 2012	25

### **Motivations for Sport Participation**

There are many different aspects of athletic participation that motivate athletes to partake in organized sports. Among these, the most prevalent conscious reasons include “having fun,” “thrills and excitement,” “to succeed or win,” “to become physically fit,” and to relieve stress or fulfill “private and often unconscious motivating factors . . . related to either sexual, aggressive, or narcissistic drives” (Smith & Milliner, 1994, p. 340). Although participating in sports may have positive aspects, it is also important to recognize and understand the negative implications, such as sustaining injury:

Psychosocial stressors such as a serious athletic injury prompt depression and, on occasion, even suicidal ideation. It seems likely that serious athletic

injury is a psychosocial stressor that is most ominous when it is in the presence of other risk factors (Smith & Milliner, 1994, p. 340).

Identifying risk factors for suicide may aid in understanding the motivations an individual may have for taking his/her own life. Risk factors include “stressful psychosocial life events, chronic mental illness, personality traits consistent with maladjustment, a family history of suicidal tendency/genetic predisposition, and a psychiatric disorder” (Smith & Milliner, 1994, p. 339).

### **Sport-related Injuries; Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE)**

Due to the nature of their profession and the sport in which they participate, NFL football players are constantly being exposed to bodily harm that compounds over time. It is speculated by medical experts that sports-related injuries, especially concussions, may be an important risk factor for the onset of depression and in some cases, suicide. Currently, there is no well-established consensus among medical professionals and physicians regarding the connection between concussions and suicides, although this topic has been a hot-button issue in the news, especially in recent years.

With 32 NFL teams total, each with a roster made up of 53 men, the total number of active and inactive players is 1,696 (Weir, 2009). As of 2009, the total number of former NFL players in the United States was 6,983 (Weir, 2009). The sheer numbers of current and former players makes them a particularly at-risk population for sustaining injuries and head trauma. A study from 2000 that surveyed 1,090 former NFL players found that “more than 60 percent had suffered at least one concussion in their careers and 26 percent had three or more” (“Head Injuries in Football,” 2010). Athletes who reported suffering from concussions also reported “more problems with memory, concentration, speech impediments, headaches, and other neurological problems than

those who had not” (“Head Injuries in Football,” 2010). The NFL commissioned a study in 2009 which reported that “former NFL players have been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease or other memory problems 19 times more than the normal rate for men between 30 and 49” (National Public Radio, 2011).

A neurodegenerative disease closely connected with sport-related concussions or traumatic brain injuries is Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). It is classified as a “progressive degenerative disease of the brain found in athletes with a history of repetitive brain trauma, including symptomatic concussions as well as asymptomatic subconcussive hits to the head” (Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy, n.d.). CTE “manifests as a progressive worsening of cerebral neurologic symptoms, initiated and maintained from repetitive concussions” (Chin, Toshkezi, & Cantu, 2011, p. 33).

What is now known by medical professionals as CTE was first identified in the 1920s, when it was most notably associated with boxing (McKee et al., 2009, p. 709). The concept of CTE was first officially introduced in 1928 by Dr. Harrison Martland, who referred to it as ‘punch-drunk’ syndrome (McKee, et al., 2009, p. 710). The symptoms associated with CTE were thought to be the result of “repeated sublethal blows to the head,” and mostly associated with the sport of boxing. Also called “dementia pugilistica” by J.A. Millspaugh in 1937, the disorder was also referred to as ‘psychopathic deterioration of pugilists’ by Armand Corville (Chin et al., 2011, p. 33). The term pugilistica has roots in Latin, from “pugilist,” the term for a professional boxer (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, n.d.). However, CTE is also prevalent in and associated with

football, where “players may experience thousands of subconcussive hits over the course of a single season” (McKee, et al., 2009, p. 710).

There is no cure for CTE and it can only be detected in an individual’s brain after they have died. Originally, CTE was most commonly identified in boxers, but has since been observed in the postmortem brains of athletes from other contact sports such as football, hockey, soccer and wrestling (Saulle & Greenwald, 2012, p. 1). For individuals suffering from CTE, “suicide is a common fate” (Saulle & Greenwald, 2012, p. 8).

### **Suicides and CTE**

Some neurologists have been making the link between suicides and CTE since they have been given the opportunity to study the players’ brains postmortem. Dr. Bennet Omalu, forensic pathologist, neuropathologist and founding member of the Brain Injury Research Institute believes that there is strong evidence to suggest a connection between multiple concussions (post-concussion syndrome), CTE, and subsequent suicides. “In 2002, Dr. Omalu became the first doctor to identify physical evidence of CTE—a neurological disorder associated with repeated head trauma that is classified by significant cognitive deterioration” (Brain Injury Research Institute, 2009).

Since Omalu’s initial research, other colleagues in the field as well as his team at the Brain Injury Research Institute in Boston have been studying the brains of deceased athletes. There is also a center that studies CTE located at Boston University’s School of Medicine, called the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy. Bennet Omalu, Ann McKee, Kevin Guskiewicz, Julian Bailes, and Robert Cantu are just a few among many names that have appeared in the media frequently as quoted expert sources for articles relating to concussions, CTE and other head/brain injuries, especially as these medical issues relate to the NFL. According to research conducted

by Guskiewicz et al., concussions are a potential risk factor for neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease (Guskiewicz et al., 2007, p. 904). Research by Saulle & Greenwald (2012) indicated that many athletes who play professional football, especially those who are retired, "have struggled in their later years with depression, substance abuse, anger, memory/motor disturbances, and suicide" (p. 1).

When discussing the link between CTE and suicide, some media outlets make the suggestion that the disease and the outcome are related; whereas others make sure to explicitly mention that the two may be related but there exists no definitive, incontestable correlation and/or causation link. In a *New York Times* article from September 2010, the suicide of a University of Pennsylvania football player sparked discussion about the disease's possible role in suicide:

Dr. Stern and other experts in the field emphasized that C.T.E. could not be blamed solely for a person's suicide. But some of the clues left from [Owen] Thomas's case, they said, suggested that the damage in his brain might have exacerbated his sudden depression and compromised his ability to think clearly about his actions (Schwarz, 2010a, p. A1).

Despite the possible connections between head trauma, CTE and suicides, the NFL has denied and downplayed the connection for years. Following the research performed by scientists on the brains of deceased professional football players, the league's concussion committee denied the link between concussions and cognitive decline, stating the need for further research to confirm any findings. Until fall 2009, the NFL was still denying any possible links until receiving criticism by the House Judiciary Committee (Hanna, 2012, p. 12). Since then, the league changed their view and revamped the committee by replacing some members with neurologists. The NFL also

donated \$1 million to the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at Boston University (Hanna, 2012, p. 13).

### **External Factors for Suicide**

Suicide as a method of death is not easy to understand and clearly assigning a definitive motive for death is not possible, as it is an amalgamation of various experiences, factors and issues. However, many suicide experts believe that the prolonged experience of certain feelings may be contributing factors. Among these are feelings of isolation, burdensomeness, and the past ability for self-harm (Joiner, 2005).

According to a study done by Joiner and his colleagues, a representative list of other variables for predicting likelihood of suicide include

the demographic variables of age, marital status, and ethnicity; family history of suicide, depression, bipolar disorder, and alcohol abuse; personal history of legal trouble as an adult and as a juvenile; current and past diagnoses of depression and bipolar disorder; depression, hopelessness, problem-solving difficulties, borderline personality symptoms, drug dependence symptoms, alcohol dependence symptoms, and negative life events (Joiner, 2005, p. 63).

There can also be many situationally related external factors that motivate someone to commit suicide. For that reason, the act of taking one's life can be viewed as a culmination of these many internal and external factors. Some examples of external factors that may play a role in the act of suicide include financial problems (debt, gambling, bankruptcy), legal troubles (lawsuits, fines, transgressions of the law), drug use and addiction problems, relationship and familial issues (divorce, child custody battles, breakups). Many of the athletes who committed suicide had one or more of these issues prevalent in their lives at the time of their death.

"The average annual NFL player's salary is 25 times greater than that of the average U.S. household income" (Ruettgers, n.d.). With such wealth, however, also

comes the potential for financial troubles. Experiencing financial woes is not a new occurrence among athletes:

Although salaries have risen steadily during the last three decades, reports from a host of sources (athletes, players' associations, agents and financial advisers) indicate that by the time they have been retired for two years, 78% of former NFL players have gone bankrupt or are under financial stress because of joblessness or divorce (Torre, 2009, p. 2).

It is these subsequent financial losses that may have played a significant role in the development of suicidal thoughts in the 11 deceased players who were investigated in this research. For example, former Pittsburgh Steelers offensive lineman Terry Long experienced myriad financial and legal issues during his lifetime. He had a history of failed businesses, including a chicken processing plant (Culverhouse, 2011). In 2003, the plant burned down, leaving authorities to speculate that Long may have been behind the arson. He also committed mail fraud, insurance fraud and defrauded the state of Philadelphia for about \$1.2 million dollars. Ultimately, a grand jury indicted Long on eight counts of mail fraud and arson. In court, Long cited financial troubles, claiming to make payments of \$10,000 a month on a \$1.6 million loan (Mandak, 2005). Retired former New England Patriot player Junior Seau's eponymous restaurant was reportedly in financial trouble shortly before his suicide (Perry, 2012a).

Another external factor, relationship troubles, may also affect the lives of athletes and cause them distress. Former defensive back for the Philadelphia Eagles and Arizona Cardinals Andre Waters was in the midst of a custody battle for his daughter (Habib, 2010). According to a neighbor, Terry Long was depressed over the separation from his second wife at the time of his death (ESPN news services, 2006).

## **Sports and the Media**

Sports have been a feature of media coverage since ancient times, beginning with “sports-associated written texts including literature” by Greek poets like Homer and Pindar, in addition to inscriptions such as “victor inscriptions and rules relating to gymnasia” (Bryant & Raney, 2006, p. 3). Such traditions were also observed in various ancient cultures such as the Egyptians, Sumerians, Minoan and Mycenaean Greeks and in time periods such as the Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman eras (Bryant & Raney, 2006, p. 5-8). In the United States, media coverage of sport has been shifting throughout the ages—the Agricultural, Industrial, and finally, the Information Age.

During the Agriculture Age, one-way print media such as newspapers and magazines were the primary mode of communication for sports stories. In the Industrial Age, it was one-way electronic media such as radio, television, and film. And in the Information Age, “interactive media that allow one-to-one as well as many-to-many communication” such as the Internet have become commonplace (Bryant & Raney, 2006, p. 38). The Information Age is marked by the development of the Internet and digital communications during the 1960s, and defined by the fact that more than half of the U.S. workforce is comprised of “information workers” (Bryant & Raney, 2006, p. 38). Indeed, easy accessibility to computers and the Internet are essential factors for the Information Age. During this time, multiple technologies exist for media coverage, including print, radio, television, Internet-based websites and social media.

The ubiquitous nature of Internet-based websites devoted to sports news and information is a cornerstone of the current Information Age. For example, many “giants of sports communication” have created some of the most popular websites. During the early 1990s, sports websites were “static” and content was not regularly updated or

maintained, and there were almost no multimedia elements (Chapman, 2009). The primary function of these websites was to inform and disseminate information without heavy use of text, graphics, photos or hyperlinks, in addition to maintaining a “linear layout” (Edison, 2010). ESPN SportsZone was ESPN’s first-ever website which began in 1995. Since then, the website has changed its name to ESPN.com in 1998, as it currently is known today (Bryant & Holt, 2006, p. 41).

Today’s sports websites, by contrast to their earlier counterparts, contain many social media and multimedia integrations. These sites also

help sports organizations achieve strategic business goals, including helping enable fans to continuously monitor news about their favorite teams, (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007) to buy tickets and merchandise (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006), to facilitate e-commerce (Schwarz & Hunter, 2008), and to create dialog between fans and teams (Johnson-Morgan & Sassenberg, 2010).

Sports websites of today are more “dynamic,” and contain features such as YouTube and streaming videos, game highlights, and integration with various social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, RSS feeds and hyperlinks.

The popularity of sport-related websites cannot be understated, as the United States constitutes the number one online sports market based on the percentage of users visiting the sports category. In July 2011, approximately 70.7% of U.S. online users aged 15 and older visited a sports site from a home or work computer (comScore Data Mine, 2011).

### **Framing Theory**

Used as a theoretical foundation for this thesis, framing is a method of analyzing ways in which information is presented by media to the public. This is important because media frames can influence and contribute to the ways the public understand

an issue (Hertog & McLeod, 2001). With roots in both psychology and sociology, framing theory is “based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Framing is the process whereby the news media presents an issue to the public, thus influencing and shaping their opinions and responses to such issues—almost akin to the way in which applying a frame around a photo changes “how viewers interpret and react to the painting itself” (Tewksbury & Scheufele 2008, p. 17). In particular, “journalists—often subconsciously—engage in essentially the same process” (Tewksbury & Scheufele 2008, p. 17).

Framing theory argues that news frames function to suggest how audiences can interpret an issue or event. In fact, news frames can exert a relatively substantial influence on citizens’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Tewksbury & Scheufele 2008, p. 19). This level of control and power can have particularly important implications for the presentation of issues relating to health and public safety. News organizations have a great deal of power to influence public perception about major issues. For that reason, this is an appropriate theoretical underpinning and method by which to analyze the news article that discussed the suicides of NFL athletes from 2000 to 2012.

An important aspect of framing theory is the inclusion of certain framing devices. According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989), these ‘framing devices’ appear in the form of “metaphors, exemplars, catch-phrases, depictions, and visual images as framing devices” (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54). These framing devices add meaning to the article and provide insight into how the journalist, blogger or news organization as a whole packaged this information to the public. According to Entman, news frames can be

identified and subsequently analyzed using “the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative framing analysis was conducted to survey the print and online media coverage of NFL athlete suicides from the time period of June 2000 until September 2012. Print articles were retrieved from elite, high circulating news media agencies based in the United States and online articles came from widely read, well-known sports media outlets.

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis “is a method for describing the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way” (Schreier, 2012, p. 1). The advantage of qualitative research is the ability to perform systematic analysis in a “flexible” manner (Schreier, 2012, p. 5). Additionally, it focuses on “latent meaning, meaning that is not immediately obvious, whereas quantitative content analysis focuses on manifest, literal meaning” (Schreier, 2012, p. 15).

The goal of the researcher was to go beyond the manifest content and systematically uncover the latent content of the articles. Manifest content is defined as “elements that are physically present and countable” and latent content is “deep structural meaning.” For latent content, “analysis is extended to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physical data” (Berg, 2001, p. 242). Combining a mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative elements allowed for a multi-dimensional understanding of the information at hand.

“The specific type of content analysis approach chosen by a researcher varies with the theoretical and substantive interests of the researcher and the problem being studied” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). Qualitative content analysis was chosen as

the method because it allows for a more detailed understanding of the deeper meaning of the news articles when contrasted with a purely quantitative approach (Creswell, 2007). “Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

### **Framing Analysis**

Framing analysis was chosen because it provides a glimpse into the way in which journalists from various platforms portrayed and discussed the NFL athletes’ suicides. Media frames are important because they can influence and contribute to the ways the public understand an issue (Hertog & McLeod, 2001).

Framing analysis is a process by which researchers evaluate media forms—such as news articles, clips, magazine articles, et cetera—for themes; evaluation of the themes present or absent in a set of media materials helps us understand what type of picture of that issue the media are presenting to their audiences. Thus, “frames are manifest in the patterns of symbols that people choose to argue for their positions” (Miller & Reichert, 2001, p. 114).

In the framing analysis process, “frames emerge from the material during the course of analysis” (de Vreese, 2005, p. 53). Step one of conducting a framing analysis consists of identifying the most integral concepts in a set of frames (Hertog & McLeod, 2001, p. 147). After that, researchers investigate master narratives, vocabulary, and possibly assign qualitative codes to the texts. Framing theory and analysis can serve as important underpinnings when analyzing texts, such as news articles. By using framing as a theoretical foundation and framing analysis as a method, researchers can better

understand how specific issues presented by the media can in turn influence the behavior of the public.

### **Qualitative Coding Process**

The constant comparative method was used to conduct this qualitative research. The constant comparative method is an aspect of grounded theory as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Concerned with the systematization of the analysis process, the constant comparative approach identifies “boundaries of categories” and is concerned with “assigning segments or finding relations between categories. The data in hand are then analysed again and compared with the new data” (Boeije, 2002, p. 393).

According to Maxwell, the first step in qualitative analysis is reading the documents to be analyzed, followed by various “analytic options” undertaken by the researcher, which may consist of memos, categorizing strategies (such as coding, thematic analysis), and/or connecting strategies such as narrative analysis (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). Most qualitative researchers perform many, if not all of the aforementioned analytic options at various points during the research process. Additionally, these options all “support the principle of comparison” as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (Boeije, 2002, p. 391).

Coding articles was an important facet of this research, and inductive frames were developed during the qualitative content analysis process. Coding in qualitative research goes beyond the largely quantitative approach of observing “frequency counts of the items in each category,” and instead focuses on rearranging the data “into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid

in the development of theoretical concepts . . . organizing the data into broader themes and issues” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107).

“The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data” (Thomas, 2003, p. 2). Inductive frames are developed by the researcher, not generated beforehand like *a priori* codes (Creswell, 2007, p. 152). Thus, frames in this research were inductive and “data-driven,” where coding categories are based on the material at hand (Schreier, 2012, p. 94). In data-driven qualitative content analyses, it is especially important to and “useful to bring in a second person to alert you to additional aspects in the material that may have escaped your notice” (Schreir, 2012, p. 94).

Following the collection of print and online articles, a co-coder was recruited to perform open coding with the researcher. The goal of open coding is to “develop categories and to label them with the most appropriate codes” (Boeije, 2002, p. 395). The co-coder was a journalism master’s student trained in the methodology. The researcher and co-coder read 10% of the articles comprising the total sample size and coded for initial themes. Changes were made to the coding sheet following the open coding session. After coming up with appropriate inductive codes, the researcher revised the coding sheet and the remaining articles were coded.

A set of master frames and sub dimensions were created based on the information that emerged from the news articles. In the constant comparison model, “the cycle of comparison and reflection on ‘old’ and ‘new’ material can be repeated several times” (Boeije, 2002, p. 393). Following open coding, axial coding was performed. Axial coding is the process “whereby data are put back together in new ways after open

coding, by making connections between categories. This is done by utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies and consequences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96).

The “cycle of comparison” (Boeije, 2002, p. 393) was repeated several times in this research until the frames reached a point of saturation in which the information found in the articles “can be easily assigned to one of the already existent categories” developed by the researcher. Frames and sub dimensions were then edited and collapsed until only the most salient and frequently appearing were included. At that time, the frames and associated sub dimensions were finalized.

Along with assigning appropriate codes and sub dimensions, the data collected about each article was: source, print or online article, headline, date, journalist’s name and title (if available), word count, main topic of story, mention of concussion/CTE/both, names of athletes mentioned in article, use of Twitter integration (yes or no), enumeration of various words used as framing tools, frames found in article. Further explanation of these can be found in the coding sheet/guidelines (Appendix A).

### **Source Selection**

The year 2000 was chosen to analyze because in August of that year, 54 million households (51%) had one or more computers (Newburger, 2001). Access to computers and the Internet is essential for obtaining information, especially news and sports updates. According to The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism “State of the News Media 2012” report, more people than ever are obtaining their news from online sources—in fact, half of all adults in the United States have a mobile connection to the Internet, whether it is through a smartphone or tablet. Additionally, about 46 percent of Americans own a smartphone—many of whom are

using it to follow news. Reading news articles on is an important activity among smartphone owners, 64% of tablet owners and 62% of smartphone owners say they use the devices for perusing news at least weekly (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012). Spanning the time frame of 2000 to 2012 ensured that sports consumers would have multiple options for obtaining news and sports updates—from print and online sources.

Newspapers have been an important part of sports culture since they began in the late 1800s (Schultz, 2010, p. 25). Elite national media outlets were chosen because they are among the most widely circulated daily print newspapers in the country (Weprin, 2012). Since this research spans over a 12-year period, finding sources that were highly ranked throughout the time frame was important, in addition to diversifying the sources by choosing to analyze articles from both print and online sources. Elite newspapers including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* were chosen for inclusion in this study because they are considered elite print sources, they represent a wide geographical range and consistently rank among the widest circulating newspapers in the United States (Romensko, 2011).

Print sources such as newspapers provide greater “depth, even if fans had to wait several hours to get the information” (Schultz, 2010, p. 26). In addition, “Hard copy newspapers now provide even more analysis and opinion and rely less on acting as a record of events, although many still provide this function” (Nicholson, 2006, p. 28). Many of the articles originally published in print were also available online. “Partly as a result of the challenge of the Internet to traditional media forms, almost all major daily

newspapers now have an online version, which includes analysis and opinion” (Nicholson, 2006, p. 28).

Among the three online media sources selected for the purposes of this research, ESPN and Sports Illustrated were chosen because both are well-known and recognizable brand names for sports readers. Unlike rivals such as Yahoo! Sports, ESPN and SI mostly provide original content, instead of aggregating articles and linking to external websites as Yahoo! frequently does. Bleacher Report (BR) is an “independent digital sports media outlet” (Fisher, 2012) that was acquired by Time Warner Inc.’s Turner Broadcasting System for an estimated \$175 million in August 2012 (Lee, 2012). This amount was double the “record for the acquisition of any pure-play American online sports media outlet, the 2007 purchase of Rivals.com by Yahoo for \$98 million” (Fisher, 2012). Bleacher Report was chosen for its niche sports content and blog-like format, as contributors chosen and approved by the organization are permitted to upload articles (Bleacher Report, 2013). According to commercial web traffic website Alexa, Bleacher Report is “the web’s largest and fastest growing community-powered sports network” (Alexa Internet Inc., 2013).

Founded in 2007, Bleacher Report also uses social media integration to draw a large audience by “providing a social experience around sports... BR can compete because it’s effectively leveraging a fanatic fan base. More, it’s built some major and subtle social elements built into the BR site that are attractive to authors and readers” (Fidelman, 2011). Sport websites with a blog layout and full availability of social media features have become the future of online sport content. Bleacher Report was created to fill a void in sports content—providing

an amplified outlet for writers whose unique voices were routinely drowned out by cookie-cutter analysts and celebrity “experts;” a localized network for readers whose favorite teams were routinely under-covered by national wire services and mainstream news corporations; a civilized community for commenters whose intelligent debates were routinely overrun by message-board blowhards and mean-spirited trolls (Bleacher Report, 2013).

### **Article Selection**

Print and online articles used in this framing analysis were chosen on the basis that they discussed these 11 athlete suicides at a substantive level—for example, articles simply mentioning the player’s name briefly in the passing of a larger story unrelated to his death were excluded. Only articles about NFL athletes whose deaths were ruled as a suicide by law enforcement or medical experts were included. Suicide attempts, drug overdose, accidents, and murder suicides were not included. The overall sample size was further screened to include only American-based print and online sources (written in English only); the article had a minimum word count of 100 to ensure it contained adequate textual content for coding.

The databases used to find the print articles were ProQuest Historical Newspapers, ProQuest National Newspapers and LexisNexis Academic. Keywords used to retrieve print articles were “Suicide” and “NFL” or “National Football League.” In the LexisNexis database, an advanced search for full text articles was performed with the keywords “Suicide” and “NFL” or “National Football League” in the body of the article, among All News (English) in the custom date range of June 1, 2000 to September 1, 2012. In the ProQuest database, an advanced search was performed for full text newspaper articles using the keywords “Suicide” and “NFL” or “National Football League” in all fields and text for a custom date range of June 1, 2000 to September 1, 2000. These settings were applied to search simultaneously across three newspaper

databases: *The Washington Post* (1987-current), *The New York Times* (1980-current), and *The Los Angeles Times* (1985-current).

To retrieve the online articles, the keyword “NFL Suicide” was used to search on the websites of ESPN, Sports Illustrated and Bleacher Report. Articles without bylines or by wire services (such as the Associated Press or ESPN news services, for example) were included. Duplicates were excluded. All available articles were read and screened to match the criteria. Video coverage, letters to the editor, and simple line obituaries were excluded. News articles and opinion pieces were included. Articles that were directly linked to on the ESPN, Sports Illustrated and Bleacher Report sites were included.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

### Results of Article Collection

Of the collected print and online articles, the final sample size was 176 articles. The unit of analysis for this investigation was the individual print and online article. The databases used to find the print articles were ProQuest Historical Newspapers, ProQuest National Newspapers and LexisNexis Academic. The online articles were retrieved directly from the websites of ESPN, Sports Illustrated and Bleacher Report.

In the LexisNexis database, an advanced search using the aforementioned keywords and applied settings produced 999 results, 596 of which were from newspapers. Among the three print sources, the total sample size was 53 results—*The New York Times* had 42 results, *The Washington Post* had 10 results, and *The Los Angeles Times* had 1 result. These articles were read and further screened to meet the aforementioned criteria. Of the 53 results, the final sample size of usable articles from LexisNexis was four.

In the ProQuest database, the results of the advanced search with the associated keywords and settings produced 501 results. Of these, 18 were included in the final sample size. For all print articles, the total unfiltered sample size across all databases was 1,500. After applying the aforementioned criteria, the final sample size used was 22 print articles (four from LexisNexis and 18 from ProQuest).

The online articles were retrieved from the websites of ESPN, Sports Illustrated and Bleacher Report. ESPN.com (also known as <http://espn.go.com>) produced 156 results (66 of which were stories); SI.com (<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com>) produced 443 results (438 of which were labeled as “News”); and Bleacher Report

(<http://bleacherreport.com/>) produced 641 results. Ultimately, the original sample size of online articles shrunk due to unusable links, resulting in exclusion of some articles.

ESPN contained 49 usable articles, Sports Illustrated contained 21, and the Bleacher Report contained 84 for a total of 154 articles. Combined with the 22 print articles, the grand total for all articles was 176 (n=176).

Table 4-1. Description of final sample by source

Source	# of articles	%
Bleacher Report	84	48
ESPN	49	28
Sports Illustrated	21	12
New York Times	11	6
Los Angeles Times	8	5
Washington Post	2	1
Total	176	100.0

The total sample size of 176 articles obtained from print and online media sources was then analyzed for salient frames, associated sub dimensions and informational categories outlined in the coding sheet and guidelines (Appendix A), such as headline, source where the article appeared, date of publication, journalist's name, et cetera. The average word count for all articles was 763. The shortest article contained 105 words and the longest contained 3,015 words. Two articles were written and published in 2000, none in 2001, none in 2002, none in 2003, none in 2004, none in 2005, one in 2006, two in 2007, none in 2008, one in 2009, 10 in 2010, 18 in 2011, and 142 in 2012. Given the heavy distribution of articles in 2012, it appears the news coverage was correlated with the year of the highest number of suicides.

Table 4-2. Articles by yearly publish date

Year	# of articles published	Percentage
2000	2	1
2001	0	0
2002	0	0
2003	0	0
2004	0	0
2005	0	0
2006	1	0.5
2007	2	1
2008	0	0
2009	1	0.5
2010	10	6
2011	18	10
2012	142	81
Total	176	100.0

The five frames found in the articles included: causes, character, medical, legal, and religious. Two of these frames included sub dimensions. For example, the character frame included the two sub dimensions of masculinity and reputation. The medical frame included prevention, research, and last wishes as sub dimensions.

In addition to frames and sub-frames, buzzwords found in the articles were coded and enumerated. These buzzwords were considered framing techniques (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 2).

### **Results of Qualitative Framing Analysis**

#### **RQ1: What are the Commonly Appearing Frames Found in the Articles?**

Results of the framing analysis showed the most common frames found in the articles (in order of frequency) were: causes (n=160; 91%), character: masculinity (n=134; 76%), character: reputation (n=131; 74%), medical: prevention (n=73; 42%), medical: research (n=71; 40%), medical: last wishes (n=59; 34%), legal (n=40; 23%), and religious (n=36; 21%).

Table 4-3. Information about commonly appearing frames

Frame	# of articles	Percentage
Causes	160	91
Character: Masculinity	134	76
Character: Reputation	131	74
Medical: Prevention	73	42
Medical: Research	71	40
Medical: Last wishes	59	34
Legal	40	23
Religious	36	21

### Causes

When the suicide of these 11 NFL players was framed as the amalgamation of many different external factors, it was framed as a cause, or a contributing factor to death. A cause as defined for the purposes of this frame consisted of elements that may have contributed to the suicide or feelings right before the suicide such as psychological issues, mental illnesses (such as depression), sport-related injuries, drug and/or alcohol use, relationship problems, financial issues, criminal activity, legal troubles, et cetera. Journalists framed these contributing factors as direct or indirect causes for the suicides, and sometimes included their own speculations relating to the possible motives or circumstances surrounding the suicide.

A commonly mentioned contributing factor discussed in relation to Junior Seau's death includes his insomnia and use of sleeping pills. His insomnia might have played a role in another incident, which was also mentioned frequently in the context of his death. In October 2010, Junior Seau was arrested on charges that he had assaulted his girlfriend. Later that day, he drove his Cadillac Escalade off a beachside cliff in Carlsbad, California. Police estimated that he was going about 60 mph when the vehicle fell and landed some 100 feet below the road (Farmer & Rojas, 2012). Junior Seau told

police that he had fallen asleep at the wheel, but “there was speculation that it was a suicide attempt,” a theory that was revived following his May 2012 suicide (Farmer & Rojas, 2012).

In a *New York Times* article about his suicide, the journalist writes about the financial and domestic problems Dave Duerson encountered later in life. He was

successful in private food-related business after he retired, but... in 2005, he resigned from the Notre Dame board of trustees after he was charged with pushing his wife, Alicia. The next year, he sold most of his company’s assets at auction. In 2007, the Duersons filed for divorce, and their home in Highland Park, Ill., went into foreclosure, according to the Chicago Sun-Times (Schwarz, 2011f, p. D1).

The vast majority of articles included some mention or discussion of depression in relation to the suicides of these 11 NFL athletes, establishing it either directly or indirectly as a precursor to or symptom of suicide. In a Sports Illustrated article by Scott Tinley, he explores the connection between athletes and depression:

In the past three years, nearly a dozen retired professional athletes have committed suicide. Thousands more are now suing the NFL for doing too little to prevent head injuries, which can lead to emotional trauma and suicidal tendencies. When a former professional athlete takes his own life so young we are conditioned to think that head trauma after years of violent hits is the main culprit. And while the physiology of a damaged brain surely plays a role in many cases, it doesn't tell the whole story. The social and psychological factors in the arc of an athlete's life should not be overlooked (Tinley, 2012).

Criminal charges were also commonly discussed in the context of the players’ suicides. O.J. Murdock’s suicide was frequently discussed alongside his past criminal charges. He was caught shoplifting \$425.50 worth of items from a department store in October 2006 and served one year of probation (Dillon, 2012). All of the articles mentioning ex-lineman Mike Current mentioned the criminal charges he was facing at the time of his suicide. Current was facing charges of up to 30 years in prison for

sexually abusing three children under the age of 14, according to court records (Wells, 2012c).

In September 2010, former Broncos player Kenny McKinley was found dead in his home, a pillow covering his head and a .45-caliber semiautomatic pistol atop the pillow. According to the Arapahoe County Sheriff's investigative report, the television was turned to the NFL Network and there was a strong smell of freshly burned marijuana in the room. The article mentioned that McKinley was taking 500mg naproxen, (an anti-inflammatory NSAID) but no other medications (ESPN.com news services, 2010).

Some articles made references to or inferred about past suicide attempts by the athletes. These suicide attempts have been confirmed and some remain unconfirmed, such as in the case of Junior Seau's October 2010 incident where he drove his vehicle off a cliff, which was never confirmed as a suicide attempt (ESPN.com news services, 2012h).

Former Steelers player Terry Long died in 2006 by drinking antifreeze at age 45. Some articles mention his previous suicide attempt, where he ingested rat poison following suspension for his steroid use. Long also struggled financially and was "indicted by a federal grand jury on charges he fraudulently obtained loans for a chicken-processing plant which prosecutors allege he burned to the ground for the insurance money" (Associated Press, 2006b).

### **Character: Masculinity**

The character frame as a whole discussed the various personal qualities of the athlete, (for example, the ones that made him memorable, unique or valuable in his community) and qualities associated with the sport of professional football. Masculinity

was a sub dimension of the character frame. The masculinity sub dimension discussed aspects inherently associated with the culture of professional football such as dominance, celebrity, brotherhood and camaraderie; qualities associated with the type of character who is widely accepted in professional football—for example, toughness, bravery, courage, athletic prowess and imperviousness to pain. This frame also included concepts of heroism, whereby the athlete is depicted by the journalist as invincible, heroic, superhuman, a legend or otherwise mythological in nature.

A *Los Angeles Times* article described the very nature of the NFL franchise as a whole, and cited its sheer power and popularity, and framed it in a distinctly masculine way: “the NFL is the 500-pound gorilla in sports. It has Super Bowls and Black Eyed Peas at halftime and companies falling all over themselves to spend millions of dollars for a 30-second commercial” (Dwyre, 2011c).

A *Sports Illustrated* journalist also commented on the popularity and the very nature of the game, and posed a valuable question that is nearly impossible to answer: “The very brutal nature of football is what makes it so uniquely popular to Americans, but how can you distill the violence from the game and sustain its enchantment?” (Deford, 2012). In this excerpt, violence is simultaneously framed as a dominant and desirable aspect of professional football.

A *New York Times* article from 2011 referred to Dave Duerson as a “hard-hitting but nimble defensive back,” emphasizing his athletic prowess and exemplifying his tough, intimidating nature on the football field (Schwarz, 2011a, p. A1).

If you asked me which defensive player in the last 20 years inflicted the most punishment on offensive players in the NFL, I’d say it’d be a tie between Junior Seau and Ray Lewis (King, 2012b).

In the above quote, the journalist depicted Junior Seau as someone who inflicted punishment on other players; he established his dominant persona and hegemonic control over others when on the playing field.

Seau played a huge part in developing the team's chemistry. He was in his early 20s and already a superstar—Miller used to call him a freak of nature—and Seau would wow guys by casually throwing around 180-pound dumbbells. But he was also the one spotting his teammates in the weight room (Merrill, 2012).

This excerpt depicted Junior Seau as an integral part of the team's fraternal dynamic and illustrated the working relationship that players have with one another.

While football is a violent collision sport and hits to the head will happen, necessary precautions can still be taken to ensure the safety of the thoroughbred athletes fans around the world love to watch take the field as modern-day gladiators (Hanford, 2011).

The above excerpt explained inherent aspects of football: injury, violence, head injuries, and the importance of precautionary safety measures in this spectator-centric sport. When asked what Seau's suicide means to him, Washington linebacker London Fletcher said:

Men in general, we're wired to hold things inside. It's not manly to be vulnerable and ask for help. For me, now, I can tell you I'm going to seek help if I feel I need it. That's what Junior's death has taught me (King, 2012b).

The journalist further discussed the personality type that seems to be ubiquitous in the NFL:

Fletcher didn't know Seau well, but he knows the type of person he was—driven, brave, not one to ask for help. He's like the rest of us: He doesn't know why Seau killed himself. But he fears it has something to do with the football player's way of minimizing injuries, mentally and physically, and seeking his own way out of problems instead of asking for help (King, 2012b).

## **Character: Reputation**

Included in the character frame, the reputation sub dimension discussed the personal qualities that the athlete was known for during his life, what he will be remembered for (i.e., legacy), and the athletic contributions that will live on after his death. Essentially, any personality traits that will transcend the player's death were part of the reputation frame.

A Bleacher Report article by NFL national lead writer Ty Schalter referred to Junior Seau as "the greatest linebacker of his generation" (Schalter, 2012a), a view that was shared by many journalists, as Junior Seau was the most frequently mentioned of all 11 NFL athletes who died by suicide from June 2000 to September 2012.

A *New York Times* article stated Seau's athletic achievements as a professional player: "Over his 20-year N.F.L. career, Seau played for three teams, most prominently the Chargers, and made 12 Pro Bowls. He played in two Super Bowls and was named to the 1990s All-Decade Team by the Pro Football Hall of Fame" (Pilon, 2012).

Another example of the reputation frame is from an ESPN article from May 2, 2011 and described Dave Duerson: "Duerson played safety in the NFL for 11 seasons, seven with the Chicago Bears, and was chosen for four Pro Bowls before retiring in 1993" (ESPN news services, 2011a). A *New York Times* article from February 2011 remembered him for more than just his football achievements:

Duerson earned an economics degree from Notre Dame, and in 2001, he graduated from a Harvard Business School program. After many years in private business, he had spent the last several years as one of the union's three representatives on the board that rules on retired players' disability claims (Schwarz, 2011c).

To ensure his memory lived on, his former team honored Junior Seau as the Chargers held a tribute event on May 11, 2012. In attendance were guest speakers who

shared their memories and stories about him (Goss, 2012a). After Junior Seau's suicide, NASCAR driver Michael Waltrip donned a No. 55 decal on his car, which was Seau's jersey number (Goss, 2012c). One of Seau's hobbies was surfing, so it was fitting that fans remembered him with a memorial "paddle out" ceremony in front of his Oceanside, California home (Bartletti & Perry, 2012).

Journalists' inclusion of anecdotes, contributions, and personal qualities were framed as part of the athlete's reputation. Examples of this included quotes from individuals who knew the athlete in addition to the journalist's own opinion of the athlete. Part of an athlete's reputation is his involvement in charitable works or supporting various philanthropic organizations with time or monetary donations. Following Dave Duerson's suicide, an ESPN article dated February 26, 2011 said his family would be starting an eponymous charity on his behalf to help athletes cope with mental illness (Associated Press, 2011c).

Junior Seau was well known for his charitable involvement. The Junior Seau Foundation was created in 1992; its mission is to educate and empower youth through "the support of child abuse prevention, drug and alcohol awareness, recreational opportunities, anti-juvenile delinquency efforts and complimentary educational programs" (Brown, J., 2012). The foundation also holds a yearly celebrity golf tournament with all proceeds benefitting the youth of San Diego.

Junior Seau had a reputation for his willingness to be interviewed and for his friendliness toward journalists and fans. Working as an intern for his local television station at the age of 18, journalist Ryan Phillips had the opportunity to meet Seau and recounted the experience in his Bleacher Report article. "he [Seau] held off another

member of the media with his left hand while I asked my question again. He made sure to give a lengthy answer I could use, and as I walked off the field a little later he was heading in the same direction and gave me a head nod, thumbs up and said, ‘Good job, buddy!’” (Phillips, 2012b).

In addition to his friendliness, Junior Seau was known for his grit and tough nature, which simultaneously showcases his reputation and his masculinity: “I believe Seau played his entire career never wanting to give into pain and playing with far more than his share of it—he missed only nine games due to injury in his first 14 pro seasons” (King, 2012b).

In a Bleacher Report article, analyst Danny Webster comments on Junior Seau’s solid work ethic:

When I think back about Junior Seau, I think about how hard of a worker he was on the field. He was never a guy to give up on a play, and he played hard on every snap of every play (Webster, 2012).

Later in the article, Webster went on to compliment Seau’s defensive playing style: “Even when he would be blocked by someone bigger than him, he continued to fight hard after the play was over, just to show the offense that it wasn’t going to be easy to contain him” (Webster, 2012). Throughout the article, he described and wrote about Seau as if they were intimate friends, but there is no mention anywhere in the article that Webster neither met nor knew the NFL athlete personally.

A personal quality that made O.J. Murdock memorable was his affable nature: “When you met O.J., you fell in love with him. He was a humble young man who just had this great gleam in his eye,” said his agent Hadley Engelhard (Dillon, 2012b).

Known by his fellow teammates for always appearing happy and showing a jovial disposition, Kenny McKinley’s smile seemed to light up a room: “It was as if Kenny

McKinley was right there with them, cracking jokes and a smile so wide, as one teammate said, ‘You could see every tooth in his mouth’” (Hochman, 2010).

### **Medical: Prevention**

The medical frame as a whole included any discussion of medically related information in the articles. As a sub dimension of the medical frame, the prevention frame included mention of preventative resources such as hotlines or organizations available to help treat mental illness and assist those struggling with suicidal thoughts or tendencies, and/or discussion of intervening forces to stop suicides.

If a journalist or quoted source cited the need for greater prevention, called for specific prevention efforts or lamented the fact that none were adequately taken, it was included in the prevention frame. In a Bleacher Report article about Seau’s suicide, Big Ten Football lead writer Adam Jacobi recounted his experiences playing organized football in high school and college and discussed the possible sport-related injuries he sustained during play. He also offered advice to those who may be struggling with mental illness or thoughts of suicide: “I’m not suicidal in any way and never have been. This isn’t a cry for help. I know where to find help and so should you” (Jacobi, 2012a). In that sentence, he provided an embedded hyperlink to the website of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

Thoughts of suicide don't just pop into your head like the answers to your Calculus homework. They slowly infect your being. One day you wake up mad, and you don't know why. You aren't mad at the world or mad at your roommate or your wife or your kids or your boss. You aren't even mad at yourself. You are just mad. You are mad that you woke up, that you have to figure out a way to get through another day. You are mad that you exist. That life exists. Eventually, those thoughts can go two ways. You can tell someone about it while you can still control your impulses. You can get help. You can surround yourself with friends and family who care about you and know what's going on (Levy, 2012).

This above excerpt conveyed the opinion of the journalist, but also urged readers to see help for their problems.

In a *New York Times* article, journalist Mike Tierney discussed the NFL's mental health hotline, Life Line, which provides free consultations to current and former players and their families. "Life Line represents the N.F.L.'s latest response to a heightened attention to the health and welfare of players" (Tierney, 2012b, p. B.16).

"For many people with depression or depression-like symptoms, there is help. If you realize it soon enough, there are ways to fight those thoughts and work through your issues" (Levy, 2012). This excerpt proved that depression is treatable and that appropriate resources should be sought. However, unlike the other Bleacher Report article, this journalist did not provide any hyperlinks to external suicide prevention websites or other helpful resources.

### **Medical: Research**

The research frame included any mention or discussion of medical advancements. For example, citing examples of medical research, new scientific developments associated with athlete suicides, sports injuries, depression and/or related issues.

Due to the fact that many journalists were making connections between suicides, head injuries and CTE symptoms, discussion of these issues were particularly prevalent in the articles, despite the fact that the medical community and other organizations remain divided on this topic—especially when it comes to the long term effects of these injuries. According to his family, Dave Duerson sustained at least 10 concussions in his career, losing consciousness during some of them. "researchers at the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at Boston University's School of Medicine

concluded he had ‘moderately advanced’ brain damage and CTE related to blows to the head” (Associated Press, 2012d).

A Sports Illustrated article from May 2012 discussed medical research and CTE:

In 2011, 50-year-old former NFL safety Dave Duerson shot himself in the chest and died. He had shot himself in the chest to leave his brain intact. Duerson’s brain wound up in the possession of the Sports Legacy Institute, a foundation started by neurologist Robert Cantu and former Harvard football player Chris Nowinski to study the long-term effects of concussions. In May 2011, Boston University researchers working with the SLI announced that an examination of Duerson’s brain showed Duerson had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (Staples, 2012).

“Researchers’ findings could pave an avenue for the league to make wholesale changes to the game we’re used to. What if Seau’s brain resembles that of a 70-year old man?” The question posed by Bleacher Report correspondent Clint Evans further illustrated the notion that medical research remains an integral part of the debate surrounding concussions, suicide and CTE. Despite the fact that many articles connected head injuries, CTE and suicide in some way, whether directly or indirectly, journalist Chris Burke made sure to make explicit in his article that all of the medical facts about Junior Seau’s suicide are not confirmed. “[Seau’s suicide is] strikingly similar to that of former Chicago Bears player Dave Duerson, who took his own life by shooting himself in the chest so his brain could be studied. . . . There’s no evidence that Seau’s death is linked in any way to brain damage suffered during his playing career” (Burke, 2012).

Following his their son’s suicide, O.J. Murdock’s parents “had no qualms” about donating his brain for the benefit of scientific research:

I’m an organ donor myself, so anything I can do in a case like this to help other people. That was my main reason for doing it. Unfortunately, it just had to be my son (Dillon, 2012).

## **Medical: Last wishes**

Included under the medical frame, the last wishes sub dimension discussed any form of communication left behind by the player before his suicide, such as a note, email, text message and the like. In these communications, a player's last wishes were usually included. The most common last wish for these 11 NFL players was the desire for their brains to be studied postmortem for evidence of CTE.

Many of the articles mentioned the fact that Dave Duerson left a note with a specific request. The actual note said: "Please, see that my brain is given to the NFL's brain bank," which is an example of his last wishes. According to some articles, Dave Duerson also sent a text message to his wife and son Tregg the night before his death. In the text, Duerson said he loved them and wanted his brain to be donated to the "brain bank" (Gupta, 2011; ESPN news services, 2011b). Since they had no idea what he meant at the time, Dave Duerson's son and wife did not know what to make of the text message— until they heard the news of his suicide (ESPN news services, 2011b). Many of the articles made explicit the fact that Dave Duerson shot himself in the chest and not the head to preserve his brain for such study, a last wish for medical research to be conducted after his death.

Similar to Dave Duerson, the day before his suicide on May 2, 2012, Junior Seau sent a text message to his ex-wife Gina and each of their three children, concluding the text by saying that he loved them (Johnston, 2012). Other information regarding the content of the text message has not been publicly released or reported on. According to the articles, Junior Seau did not leave a suicide note. According to Gina Seau, sending a text to her and their children that said "I love you" was not out of the ordinary for him,

but a once-commonplace text took on a whole new meaning in the wake of the devastating news that he was gone forever (Davis et al., 2012).

Some articles included all or part of the contents of the suicide notes left by some of the athletes. According to an article by the Associated Press, former Atlanta Falcons safety Ray Easterling left a suicide note before his death on April 12, 2012. In the note, he mentioned his struggles with headaches and memory loss. Easterling also asked that his brain be donated to the Boston University Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy (Associated Press, 2012g).

Former Chicago Bears safety Dave Duerson left a suicide note when he committed suicide on February 17, 2011. In the note, he requested for his family to donate his brain to the Boston University School of Medicine (Farmer, 2013; Schwarz, 2011d, p. B11). Though the actual contents of the note have not been publicly revealed, Duerson, like Easterling, wanted his brain to go to same particular location—the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy.

Like Junior Seau, former Tampa Bay Titans receiver O.J. Murdock also sent a text message before committing suicide on July 30, 2012. The text message was sent at about 3:30 a.m. to his former high school and college coach Al McCray.

I got a text at 3:30 in the morning, where he said: 'Coach, I want to thank you for everything you've done for me and my family. It's greatly appreciated,'" McCray said. "At the end, he goes: 'I apologize.' And I don't know what he's talking about. I woke up, and I'm thinking he's apologizing because he texted me so early . . . I wish he had called instead. (Schilken, 2012).

Hours after the text message was sent, Murdock would be discovered by police—dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in his car, parked at his former high

school (Schilken, 2012). Murdock did leave a suicide note but contents of the note have not been publicly revealed since his death (Schilken, 2012).

## **Legal**

The legal frame included mention of legal issues, lawsuits or litigation associated with wrongful or neglectful nature of a player's death, league disputes, collective bargaining, et cetera. This frame did not include criminal charges against the athlete, which were included under the "causes" frame.

Players such as Ray Easterling and Dave Duerson have been involved in concussion-related litigation, their families claiming that the head injuries contributed to death by suicide. Widows of former players, such as Mary Ann Easterling, have filed separate wrongful death lawsuits against the NFL. In fact, Ray Easterling was lead plaintiff in the first federal suit against the NFL for head injuries. Plaintiffs in these suits claim that the league failed to properly treat concussed players and were unforthcoming regarding the dangers and risks associated with concussions sustained during a professional football career (Segura, 2012). Following his suicide, Dave Duerson's family also filed a wrongful death suit against the NFL in February 2012 for failing to accurately represent the risks associated with concussions and to take proper safety precautions to protect players. According to the lawsuit, Dave Duerson suffered from CTE. The NFL has denied the charges and claimed to take player safety seriously (Lighty, 2012). Some lawsuits also name NFL-licensed helmet manufacturer Riddell as a co-defendant, claiming that the company designed and manufactured defective helmets.

"If they knowingly failed to inform and implement proper safety concussion procedures, then their indifference was the epitome of injustice. The inactions of the

past inevitably led to the demise and death of my father” (Associated Press, 2012c). This quote from Dave Duerson’s son Tregg illustrated the anger and sentiments that some families of deceased NFL athletes felt, which prompted them to take legal action against the league, believing that with proper intervention, the suicide of their loved one could have been prevented. “The lawsuit accuses the NFL of negligently causing the brain damage that led Duerson to take his own life at the age of 50 by not warning him of the negative effects of concussions” (Associated Press, 2012c).

According to an ESPN article dated May 3, 2012, more than 1,500 players have sued the NFL on claims that the league ignored and actively suppressed any link between repeated sport-related concussions and brain damage (Fairnaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2012).

## **Religious**

Appearing the least among all of the frames, the religious frame included Biblical allusions, mention of God and/or God’s will, and discussion/inclusion of prayer in the article either from the journalist or expressed through quoted sources. The presence of positive religious phrases presented in the articles can be juxtaposed with the condemnation of suicide in many religions and the once-illegal nature of the act.

When referring to O.J. Murdock, his former high school head coach Harry Hubbard said:

He was an exceptional athlete with God-given talent... He was just a special person. He touched so many people’s lives. He was put on earth to do that, and then God said, ‘OK, you did what I asked you to do. Come on home to your reward (Dillon, 2012b).

When describing O.J. Murdock in his article, Dennis Dillon of Sports Illustrated includes multiple religious details and references. He stated that Murdock was

a devout Christian, judging by a tattoo on the upper left side of his chest. It had a large football with several banners inscribed: 'I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.' On his right arm, Murdock had several other tattoos: an angel with the word 'Jama'... and a large, elaborate cross with a dove above it and the scripted words 'RIP Kelly Boy (Dillon, 2012b).

Right before his suicide, O.J. Murdock sat in his parked car in front of his Tampa high school. He called his former middle school track and field coach Aesha Bailey, and began frantically screaming and apologizing. After asking him where he was, Bailey drove to the high school and found Murdock in the car. He had shot himself, and Bailey tried giving him CPR: "He wasn't breathing. I prayed for him and he started breathing" (Dillon, 2012b).

In an alternate view of suicide and the role of faith, Bleacher Report contributor Matt Rogers gave his opinion on Junior Seau's death:

What is struggling [sic] for me to cope with is how his death is being discussed and written about. People are mourning the sudden death. What I am about to write is very difficult to say and most probably in bad taste given how sudden this happened, but his passing was not a sudden death nor was it an unexpected tragedy. Junior Seau's death was a suicide pure and simple. He willingly put a gun to his chest and pulled the trigger. He willingly took his own life and orphaned his children. I am a man of faith, but I do not want to bring my religious beliefs into this. I do not even want to appear as if I am passing judgment on Junior or condemning him in any way. I will pray for his soul and pray for his family to find strength and peace (Rogers, 2012).

Later in the article, Rogers goes on to refer to Seau as a "hero," wonders aloud about how "we have sacrificed another football god" and "how many more gridiron warriors we must lose" until the game changes (Rogers, 2012).

In a *New York Times* article about the death of Ray Easterling, there were multiple religious references and an overall religious undertone. Ray and Mary Ann met for the first time many years ago at a Bible study session that he co-hosted. After they got married, Mary Ann continued to hold Bible study sessions with Ray's teammates

and wives. As he aged, Ray's health began declining, and Mary Ann didn't know why. "In three months, there came a diagnosis: dementia. Hallelujah, thought Mary Ann, even if the news was tantamount to a death sentence" (Tierney, 2012a, p. B.9). On April 19, Easterling committed suicide. He left behind a note addressed to his wife—"sprinkled with 'I love yous' and containing evidence that his faith had not wavered. Quoting from the letter, she said, 'I'm ready to meet my Lord and savior'" (Tierney, 2012a, p. B.9).

## **RQ2: How Does the Coverage of Suicides Change over Time (2000-2012)?**

Coverage of NFL athlete suicides changed significantly over the time period of 2000 to 2012. Most noticeably, coverage changed by the number of articles published per year. The amount of articles published each year seemed to fluctuate based on how many athletes died by suicide in that year. In 2000, there were two articles published; from 2001 to 2005 there were no articles published; in 2006 there was one, in 2007 there were two, none in 2008 and one in 2009. There were 10 articles published in 2010 and 18 in 2011. In 2012 there were 142 articles published (Table 4-2).

The vast majority of the coverage clustered not only around a specific year, 2012, but also around a specific athlete, Junior Seau. In order to find out which of the 11 NFL athletes who died by suicide from 2000 to 2012 was mentioned the most, the researcher calculated the number of times each of the names of the 11 athletes appeared in the sample size (n=176). This was accomplished by recording the names of the athletes appearing in each article, and then tallying the amounts. This calculation revealed that Junior Seau's name was mentioned the most—120 times overall. Dave Duerson's name was appeared 65 times; Ray Easterling's appeared 23 times; Kenny McKinley's name appeared 15 times; Andre Waters' name appeared 14 times; O.J. Murdock's name appeared nine times; Terry Long's name appeared seven times; Mike

Current's name appeared six times; Larry Kelley's name appeared two times; Shane Dronett's name appeared once; and Kurt Crain's name appeared once.

Table 4-4. Appearance of athletes' names in articles

Athlete's name	# of times mentioned in articles (n=176)
Junior Seau	120
Dave Duerson	65
Ray Easterling	23
Kenny McKinley	15
Andre Waters	14
O.J. Murdock	9
Terry Long	7
Mike Current	6
Larry Kelley	2
Shane Dronett	1
Kurt Crain	1

From the outset of the time frame analyzed for the purposes of this research (beginning in 2000), there was not nearly as much discussion of medical issues that could be a possible link to the suicides. However, by 2012, the discussion had shifted to include more mention of sport-related injuries such as concussion, CTE, surgeries and more discussion of medical symptoms like depression that were framed as possible “causes” or contributing factors for suicide. It was clear that over time, journalists developed a better understanding of the multitude of elements that may possibly influence or even motivate an athlete to commit suicide, including situational factors such as financial troubles, relationship issues, legal problems and more. The news articles of later years, especially those published in 2011 and 2012, took a more holistic view of the situation by introducing and explaining these external factors as direct or indirect factors for suicide.

Quoted sources in articles from the earlier years included spouses, friends, family members, neighbors, teammates and some expert sources such as coroners, law

enforcement, physicians, et cetera. Conversely, by 2012 articles were including screenshots of tweets from celebrities, family members/relatives, friends, colleagues or other athletes who were close to the deceased player. Social media integration was a departure from the traditional practice of only including quoted material and/or paraphrases in the articles.

**RQ3: What Specific Language and Framing Tools Do the Media Use to Discuss These Suicides (i.e., Specific Buzzwords And Phrases), and How Often Do They Occur?**

The media sources surveyed in this research used specific language and framing tools to discuss the NFL athletes' suicides. Most commonly, journalists used buzzwords such as "tragedy," "hero," "legend," and "idol" to refer to the dead NFL athlete. These words were subsequently repeated throughout the article.

The word "tragedy" or close variations such as "tragic" appeared 108 times. The word "best" or referring to the athlete as one of the "greats" of his profession appeared 74 times. The word "star" or "superstar" appeared 43 times. "Hero" or mythical references suggesting strength such as "Superman," "titan," "ironman" and/or "invincible" appeared 38 times, while the word "legend" appeared 21 times. "Warrior," "gladiator" or words that suggest fighting qualities appeared 18 times, while "icon" appeared 13 times. The word "celebrity" appeared 10 times, while "idol" appeared 6 times. The word "martyr" appeared twice.

When the journalist used terms like "legend," "idol" or "icon," it suggested that he/she was depicting the deceased NFL athlete as an individual whose life and career will transcend his memory. When a journalist referred to the athlete as an "idol" or said that they idolized the athlete, it established the deceased athlete as a superhuman figure. The word "hero" has meaning in the context of hegemonic masculinity as well.

“To be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes” (Donaldson, 1993, p. 647). But there is also a dark side to being a hero: “Many of the fallen athlete heroes have surrendered wholly to the pursuit of earthly greatness, exposing them to the terrifying process of public ruination when failed investments or morality or the ravages of physical decline come to collect” (Tinley, 2012).

Table 4-5. Description of framing tools

Buzzword	Frequency of appearance
Tragedy	108
Best/great	74
Star/superstar	43
Hero/strength	38
Legend	21
Warrior/fighting	18
Icon	13
Celebrity	10
Idol	6
Martyr	2

Former San Diego Chargers safety and Junior Seau’s teammate Miles

McPherson said:

Junior is a warrior. He played 20 years in the NFL as a linebacker. You have to be a warrior. Warriors conquer problems they face and they run at them (ESPN news services, 2012f).

The above quote showcased the personality type that is commonly associated with being a professional football player—comprised of strength, grit and toughness. This quote from a Bleacher Report article also depicted Junior Seau in a similar manner: “It will be some time before we know exactly what happened at Seau’s house, and how the man that we came to know as a gridiron warrior passed away on Wednesday” (Zaldivar, 2012).

Words closely related to “warrior” include “gladiator.” Some journalists referred to the deceased athletes by using these terms, which allude to violence and are evocative of historical foundations to sport: “Seau’s death and the events leading up to it inspire increased concern for the health and safety of the gladiators we all love to watch on Sundays” (Dodge, 2012).

When interviewed regarding Junior Seau’s death, longtime Chargers chaplain said, “I’m sorry to say, Superman is dead” (ESPN news services, 2012f). Bleacher Report contributor Ryan Phillips recounted a childhood sport figure that meant a great deal to him as a child:

I grew up in San Diego, and so did Seau. He was a native, he was one of us and he always will be. I idolized him from the first time he stepped on the field for my beloved Chargers in 1990 to the day he retired from the NFL in 2009 (Phillips, 2012).

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

### **Analysis of Commonly Appearing Frames**

The results of this framing analysis revealed the presence of some frames that appeared more frequently than others. Of the frames identified, “causes” was the most commonly appearing frame, found in 160 articles (91%). By discussing various contributing factors and framing them as possible causes for death, journalists showed a diverse landscape of issues that may have been affecting the athlete directly or indirectly at the time of his suicide. Causes ranged from problems such as sport-related injuries or mental illnesses to situational issues like relationship, financial, criminal and legal troubles. Sometimes these issues were merely mentioned in the context of the athlete’s suicide, but sometimes the journalists even framed these contributing factors as causes for the decision to die by suicide. Examples of this include Junior Seau’s October 2010 incident in which the athlete drove his SUV off a cliff in Carlsbad, California—some journalists framed this as a cry for help or even a previous suicide attempt although there was no evidence to prove it.

Journalists frequently mentioned criminal activity in the context of an athlete’s suicide, framing these two issues as possibly related. In the case of Tampa Titans player O.J. Murdock, the fact that he had been arrested for shoplifting was mentioned in relation to the greater topic of his recent death. Former Broncos player Mike Current was facing sex abuse charges at the time of his suicide and every article about his death that was examined for the purposes of this study mentioned this fact. By including information about the multitude of issues affecting these 11 NFL athletes at the time of their suicides, journalists directly or indirectly framed death by suicide as a complex

issue. It is not just one particular thing that causes someone to die by suicide—instead, a combination of factors—many of which, such as genetics, family history and chemical imbalances, are beyond the scope of the journalists’ knowledge.

By portraying multiple elements that were affecting the athletes at the time of their suicide, perhaps journalists wanted to show readers that suicide is complicated, and that there can be many causes for such a serious and permanent outcome. Going back to the literature cited in Chapter 2, there are a multitude of suicide risk factors such as mental illness, genetics, chemical imbalance, history of abuse, incarceration and exposure to suicidal behaviors from loved ones or people in the media (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.).

Contained within the character frame, masculinity was the second most frequent frame overall, appearing in 76% (n=134) of the 176 articles. Aspects inherent to NFL culture include the dominant and performance-based, victorious nature of the sport: “A ferocious tackler, he’d [Junior Seau] leap up, pump a fist and kick out a leg after dropping a ball carrier or quarterback” (ESPN.com news services, 2012a).

The world of professional football functions with some of the same elements as society as a whole, but amplified. Elements such as friendship, success, training, teamwork, and camaraderie are cornerstones of this sport. Journalists may have framed football as a salient issue because it has permeated our very psyche as a ritualistic American pastime: “Football is conceptualized as a major community ritual that socializes future generations of youth” (Foley, 1990, p. 111).

Concepts of masculinity encompass traits like toughness, power and imperviousness to pain, to name a few. The masculinity frame found in this study

contained many of the same elements that were intricately related to the discussion of hegemonic masculinity cited in Chapter 2. In many ways, the football star is the archetypal representation of hegemonic masculinity (Donaldson, 1993, p. 647). Furthermore, the culture surrounding the NFL is full of hegemonic displays, from the locker room to the training room, to on and off the field. It is with these displays of power that men establish their athletic prowess and compete with each other for dominance (Bryson, 1987, p. 357).

Directly juxtaposed to the toughness by which the journalists framed these 11 NFL athletes, another common thread running throughout many of these articles was that so many of these players were quite adept at hiding their pain and faking a smile despite the fact that inside, they were suffering. Perhaps they have been indoctrinated to get used to disappointment as a part of their career, such as suffering an injury during play and being put on injury reserve. Injury can strike at any moment. They can get cut from the team. Their finances could disappear, along with their marriages, relationships, and custody of their children. This breeds an atmosphere of constant fear and anxiety.

The career of a successful NFL player is both effusive and temporary. They have money, fame, friends and opportunities they might have never have had otherwise. Coping with the pressures of a high stakes professional career based solely on the ability to perform and meet athletic feats, overcome injury and still entertain a fan base has to be extremely taxing on an individual. The complex nature of a professional sports career and its inherent demands coupled with an environment of hegemonic masculinity may be the perfect breeding ground for feelings of isolation, perceived inferiority and insecurity. Not one of the articles mentioned an attempt on the part of the athlete to

reach out for help—according to their family and friends, most of them seemed “normal” even right before their suicide (ESPN.com news services, 2010).

In general, the possibility of appearing weak or vulnerable may dissuade males from discussing their issues with others (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, n.d.). But the culture of masculinity associated with a career in professional football might further prevent players from speaking out about their problems, and perhaps it’s possible that many players let their negative feelings build up and become internalized for years. Athletes may internalize their pain because of the culture in which they operate is full of hegemony, dominance and the daily reminders that you are expected to be strong and impervious to pain. As a result, their bodies become vessels for their trauma. It is possible that many of players push themselves to the limit to mask the mental and emotional anguish they may be experiencing. This is a particularly prevalent issue among males, who are at greater risk for completed suicide. The suicide rate among males in 2007 was 18.3 per 100,000 (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, n.d.). For men, suicide was the seventh leading cause of death.

A sub dimension of the character frame, the reputation frame was another commonly appearing frame, found in 131 articles (74%). In many ways, the reputation frame functioned much like an obituary—providing context for the death in relation to the accomplishments the athlete made during his lifetime and recounting who he was as a person. “Media framing devices within obituaries help scholars understand how these news stories taught the public about the social value of life and about the way to deal with death” (Hume, 2000, p. 153).

In an article from the *Washington Post*, journalist Mark Maske referred to Junior Seau as “a linebacker who played in the NFL for 20 seasons and was among the most widely respected players of his generation” (Maske, 2012b, p. D1). A *New York Times* article recounted Seau’s athletic achievements as a professional player: “[Junior] Seau, a 10-time All-Pro selection who was the backbone of San Diego’s defense for 13 seasons before he moved on to play with the Dolphins and, later, the Patriots” (Dillon, 2012). These achievements serve as memories of the athletes’ professional careers. As a society, we care about this because we place a high level of importance on sports—particularly, the NFL, as it remains the one of the largest, most popular and highest grossing brands in existence. According to *Forbes*, the Super Bowl brand was rated number one among other sporting events by gross revenue generated per day of competition in 2010 (Schwartz, 2010). To reiterate, the NFL has the “highest average per game attendance” with 67,357 fans per game in 2011 (Statista, 2012). The 32 teams of the NFL generated revenue of \$6.03 billion in 2005 and in 2004; the average NFL franchise was worth \$733 million (Statista, 2012).

“Obituaries can reveal greater social ideals while focusing on the lives of individual citizens and thus provide a truly intimate portrait of the ‘ideal American’ in any era” (Hume, 2000, p. 154). One must also pay attention to the concept of “inclusion” (p. 50), which dictates whose life and subsequent death is worth mentioning in popular media. Such widespread presence of the reputation frame in these articles suggested a high level of inclusion, due to the sheer fame and celebrity of the deceased athletes.

The athletes’ personal qualities discussed in the articles were ones that American society places high value upon: who the athlete was as a person while he

was living, his personality, accomplishments and philanthropic nature. Athletes were framed in this way because as onlookers, we may view them as celebrities. We are interested in the way they live their lives, and we pretend to know them. Many journalists from outlets such as ESPN, Sports Illustrated and Bleacher Report exhibited this tendency—to write about the deceased athlete as if they were close friends, when in reality the journalist had never met the athlete at all. This pseudo-familiarity gives meaning to the athlete’s death. For sports journalists and fans, these players function almost like intimate friends. Sports journalists spend their life covering these athletes. Fans devote their time, money and energy to following these players and attending their games, picking favorites and cheering them on regardless of if they win or lose. It is only fitting, then, that reputation would be an integral part of the way in which journalists framed these NFL athletes.

It was clear that the journalists frequently framed themselves as part of the discourse surrounding the NFL athlete’s death, when it is possible that the journalist never had any interaction with the athlete during his lifetime. This pseudo-familiarity on the part of the journalist highlighted the sometimes para-social nature of sports media coverage: “this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer [is called] a para-social relationship” (Horton & Wohl, 2006).

According to the results of this study, articles from the six media outlets surveyed contained frames relating to last wishes of the athlete 34% (n=59) of the time. This can be viewed in both a positive and a negative manner. The figure indicates less than half of the articles contained mention or discussion of a suicide note and/or an athlete’s last wishes before death. However, 34% can still be considered a significant percentage of

articles that discuss this issue, even though this practice is not recommended by federal agencies, organizations and suicide prevention advocates who put forth guidelines for media.

Disclosing the content of the athletes' suicide notes, which some articles did, is potentially problematic. Even revealing the last wishes of a player to have his brain studied can glamourize the suicide and portray it as a valiant, martyr-like gesture—to take one's life and leave his brain to be studied for the greater good of others. Including the contents of a suicide note in a news article is not considered journalistic best practice according to the guidelines put forth by various federal agencies and suicide prevention organizations (American Association of Suicidology et al., n.d., p. 1).

Journalists should always strive to “do no harm” in their articles, especially when it relates to a sensitive topic like suicide. Publishing the contents of a suicide note can inspire “copycat” situations where more individuals or groups take their own lives. In fact, some journalists seem keenly aware of such an issue yet ironically participate in the very activity they are criticizing:

Typically, we try not to dwell on the method of someone's suicide because we fear that might encourage copycats. In 2011, 50-year-old former NFL safety Dave Duerson shot himself in the chest and died. He had shot himself in the chest to leave his brain intact. Duerson's brain wound up in the possession of the Sports Legacy Institute, a foundation started by neurologist Robert Cantu and former Harvard football player Chris Nowinski to study the long-term effects of concussions. In May 2011, Boston University researchers working with the SLI announced that an examination of Duerson's brain showed Duerson has chronic traumatic encephalopathy (Staples, 2012).

When covering suicides, sensationalism should be avoided. Instead, a journalist should ensure his or her article focuses on the known, established facts. “Reporters should avoid speculating about reasons for the suicide and avoid fantasizing about what

may have been in the mind of the person at the time. Journalists should investigate whether there are economic, social, or other factors that prompted the suicide” (Ward, 2009). As evidenced by the frequent appearance of the “causes” frame, journalists did mention these factors in the context of the athletes’ suicides.

The suicide note is “a very important piece of information . . . because completed suicides leave very little information behind to explain their motives” (Lester, 1989, p. 9). Research conducted in Los Angeles County indicated that approximately 35% of men and 39% of women who died by suicide left behind notes (Shneidman & Farberow, 1961, p. 19-47). Suicide notes usually discuss “extremely distressing problems” that have been plaguing the writer for a long while; such problems that “permit no solution other than death” (Lester, 1989, p. 11). For older individuals, their notes contain fewer interpersonal reasons (such as rejection and isolation) that justify the suicide. Instead, their notes reveal more about their desire to escape pain and loneliness; contain more instructions and less justification and emotion (Lester, 1989, p. 11). For the NFL players who left notes, a vital component was the desire for their brains to be donated and studied for scientific purposes after their death. Some even explicitly mentioned this desire and provided instruction for this in the note.

The two frames that appeared the least were the legal and religious frames. Despite the fact that it did not appear with as much frequency as the other frames, the religious frame appeared in 36 articles (21%). The presence of a religious frame is ironic because suicide had a long history of being condemned and stigmatized in many religions, considered to be a “sinful” act (Gearing & Lizardi, 2008, p. 334). Until the 1960s, suicide was illegal in many places around the world. Despite this, however,

Biblical allusions, references to prayer and religiously themed elements appear throughout the articles surveyed in this sample size.

### **Changes over Time**

The second research question focused on changes over time. The greatest number of articles (n=142; 81%) was published in 2012, the same year in which five athlete suicides occurred. There were more deaths in 2012 alone than in the 12 years prior. Because of that, significant amounts of media coverage seemed to cluster around the year with the greatest number of deaths. Thus, media coverage was episodic rather than thematic. This framing effect is one that emerged after analyzing the results of the qualitative framing analysis.

Thematic and episodic framing are two varying framing effects, as outlined by Iyengar (1994). “Episodic framing depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence” (Iyengar, 1994, p. 14). He described episodic framing as “frames [that] focus attention on the individuals... the news is about this person, this person must have had something to do with the issue in the news” (Iyengar, 2009). The news articles surveyed in this research are centrally focused on the particular athlete’s death, rather than on the topic of suicide in professional football as a whole. The recent suicide of an NFL athlete brings the issue back into the forefront of media coverage, where it was previously not a salient topic of discussion. In addition to episodic coverage clustered around particular areas in time, media coverage clearly focused the most on one NFL player—Junior Seau. His name was mentioned most often of the 176 articles in the sample size, 120 times overall. Furthermore, Junior Seau was featured twice on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, whereas the other ten athletes were not featured on covers at all. However, it is important to note

that “in practice, of course, few news reports are purely episodic or thematic . . . although [content analyses] suggest in most cases one frame or the other predominates” (Iyengar, 1996, p. 62).

Over time, it also appeared that journalists’ knowledge about medically-related contributing factors that may possibly affect suicide (such as sport injuries) increased. In articles from the first year surveyed in this study, 2000, there was very little mention of the possible role concussions and development of CTE might have on the suicidal athlete’s physical and mental wellbeing. This may be due, in part, to the overall increase in the amount of medical research about issues like concussions, traumatic brain injury and CTE since 2000.

### **Buzzwords Used as Framing Tools**

Buzzwords such as “tragedy,” “star,” “hero,” “legend,” and “warrior” were used as framing tools that appeared the most often in the articles. Overall, these various buzzwords appeared 333 times total across all 176 of the articles analyzed in this research. Repeating certain buzzwords throughout the article helps readers establish “latent” meaning. According to qualitative researchers, “latent” meaning refers to “meaning that is not immediately obvious,” (Schreier, 2012, p. 15) as something markedly different from the manifest and literal meaning of a word. In addition to establishing latent meaning, these buzzwords can be likened to the five framing devices identified by Gamson and Modigliani (1989). Considered a framing tool, these buzzwords functioned as “metaphors” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 2) within the articles. Metaphors as framing tools are implied comparisons to other situations and figures from history (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 2). The journalists from these six media outlets repeatedly compared the 11 NFL players to these archaic embodiments.

Journalists frequently framed the NFL athlete suicides in relation to greater historical, anthropological and sociological contexts—such as within implied constructions of tragic heroism from Greek antiquity, gladiators from Roman history and the role model “idol,” “celebrity,” and “icon” we revere today.

Concepts and the mythos surrounding heroism have historically been fixtures of obituaries and articles about the deceased. Being “venerated as a hero” (Hume, 2000, p. 50) is a common feature of stories recounting someone’s life and subsequent death, which was confirmed in the articles analyzed in this study. Furthermore, “sports heroes are clearly promoted by the media as a source of national pride and function to represent national qualities, traditions and distinctions” (Lines, 2010, p. 289).

Journalists impart this latent meaning by framing the athlete as a larger than life figure, in some cases even bestowing super-human qualities upon them. By emphasizing the player’s athletic prowess, the journalists alluded—whether consciously or subconsciously—to the archetypal, traditional athlete/hero of classic antiquity. Using the word “tragedy” to refer to the athlete’s death is evocative of the epic tragedies of classical Greek antiquity in which the tragic hero meets a fatal demise. By definition, a tragic hero is “a literary character who makes an error of judgment or has a fatal flaw that, combined with fate and external forces, brings on a tragedy” (Dictionary.com, 2013).

When Junior Seau’s former teammate Miles McPherson called him a “warrior” (ESPN news services, 2012), he exemplified qualities of masculinity by asserting that football players are tough and need to be strong to survive. The journalist consciously chose to include the quote by McPherson in his article, and by framing Junior Seau as a

someone who tackled his problems head on, thus solidified the existing notion that football players must possess certain qualities that are distinctively masculine, which seem to be at odds with weakness and perceived femininity. “If football matches are narrated as contests of combat, then inevitably footballers acquire the status of warriors and leaders of men” (Lines, 2010, p. 290). Being characterized as tough and brave showed the cultural mores of this hegemonic group of professional football players. In other words, viable, well-respected players must be stalwart and resilient.

I’m sorry to say, Superman is dead. All of us can appear to be super, but all of us need to reach out and find support when we’re hurting. This super person, this wonderful human being, this extraordinary athlete and man, if someone so invincible like Junior could end his life this way, it should be a message to all of us all going through hurt and travails, that we all need each other. If somebody’s hurting, please talk to somebody. Get help (ESPN news services, 2012f).

The heartfelt message from longtime Charges chaplain Shawn Mitchell included references to “Superman” and a person who appeared to be “invincible.” However, by framing Junior Seau this way, he underscored the player’s true human nature.

Perceived invincibility is not protection enough against suicide, as these athletes are human like everyone else. Thoughts of suicide and mental illness do not discriminate and have little to do with the mental fortitude and strength that is mentioned in these articles. Research indicates that suicidal tendencies can be the result of a culmination of various factors (Grollman, 1988, p. 63-75; Joiner, 2005, p. 68; Lester, 1989; National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Recognizing the risk factors, both those that are clear and present and those that the individual hides, are important clues to understanding these suicides. Along with the capability for suicide through repeated painful and traumatic events, suicidal people can be seen as risk-takers who “may engage in behavior detrimental to their health and welfare” (Lester, 1989, p. 103). An established

theory is that individuals whose bodies become susceptible to repeated pain, such as war veterans and elite athletes, can develop a certain fearlessness and risk-taking mentality that may prompt suicide (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1994, p.1).

NFL athletes are inherent risk takers. Their intrepid personalities make them well suited for a career in professional football, but also might increase their predisposition for aggressive behavior or gambling with their own life. Conditioning themselves to enduring pain and injury may desensitize them to such emotions both physically and emotionally. After all, repeated exposure can breed this imperviousness to pain and establish the

capability for suicide . . . self-preservation is a powerful enough instinct that few can overcome it by force of will. The few who can have developed a fearlessness of pain, injury, and death, which, according to the theory, they acquire through a process of repeatedly experiencing painful and otherwise provocative events. These experiences often include previous self-injury, but can also include other experiences, such as repeated accidental injuries; numerous physical fights; and occupations like physician and front-line soldier in which exposure to pain and injury, either directly or vicariously, is common (Joiner, 2009).

Regardless of these athletes' risk taking personalities and familiarity with repeated pain, these journalists contributed largely to their portrayals as not only heroes, but role models as well.

Hopes are still invested in the ability of sport to produce heroic role models, and the frustration of these hopes feeds into a critique of sport as having become corrupted. In these constructions, what sport produces is not heroes, but stars (Whannel, 2001, p. 40).

It is these seemingly innocuous constructions of sports hero as a star that revealed much about the way in which journalists framed and subsequently discussed these athletes in their articles. In fact, the word "star" and associated terms such as

“superstar” appeared 43 times in the sample size. Portrayal of the players as role models who ultimately met demise as a result of their own hand can be potentially problematic for the youth populations who revere them. In the fast-paced, high stakes world of professional football, athlete as a celebrity is also an essential part of the conversation. Journalists seem to think so, too, as the word “celebrity” appeared 10 times in the articles overall. When journalists frame the deceased athletes as celebrities, their deaths have more of an impact for the general public because of their perceived importance in society. Information and events associated with celebrities may have the potential to be more sensationalized, which occurred in some of the articles about these 11 players’ suicides.

Yet in popular discourse the concepts of hero and star, celebrity and personality are often confused and by any notional boundaries between them blurred. The very concept of the hero is troubling and ambiguous . . . inscribing . . . the frame through which we should perceive society (Whannel, 2001, p. 40).

### **Importance of the Issue**

“As for suicide . . . it is one of the leading causes of death in the world” (WHO, 2004). As a leading public health issue, suicide impacts the world on a global scale. “While not a disease with a well-defined disease mechanism, suicide is nonetheless an extraordinarily adverse outcome” (Knox, Conwell, & Caine, 2004, p. 37). Despite the fact that external causes and psychological motivations for suicide are hard to define and discuss with a measure of absolute certainty, the risk factors defined in the literature review of this research contribute heavily to the act of completed suicide.

As a society, we should care that NFL athletes are committing suicide because it can have profound effects on our national psyche and how we view (and treat) mental illnesses. Furthermore, we should care how the media cover these deaths because

subsequent news coverage following their suicides can have psychological impacts on the public, especially at-risk populations like individuals with suicidal tendencies or for adolescents. Research finds an increase in suicide by readers/viewers when the number of stories about individual suicide is ubiquitous across many different media forms, for example when “a particular death is reported at length or in many stories; the story of an individual death by suicide is placed on the front page or at the beginning of a broadcast; the headlines about specific suicide deaths are dramatic” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d., p. 2).

Reduction of these imitative suicides following extensive media coverage can be accomplished through preventative efforts, but the media must take part by reporting on suicide in a correct, safe, ethical and responsible manner. More than 50 research studies worldwide have found that certain types of news coverage can increase the likelihood of suicide in vulnerable individuals. “The magnitude of the increase is related to the amount, duration and prominence of coverage” (American Association of Suicidology et al., n.d., p. 1). According to a set of guidelines that were the result of a collaborative effort on the part of groups such as American Association of Suicidology, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Annenberg Public Policy Center, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Mental Health (among many others), the main elements to avoid in a news story about a death by suicide are as follows: avoid prominently placed, large, sensationalistic headlines; don’t include photographs/videos of the location/method of suicide, grieving friends/family, memorials; avoid describing a suicide or recent cluster of suicides as an “epidemic;” avoid describing a suicide as inexplicable or unexpected/without warning; do not

disclose content or information contained in the suicide note; suicide shouldn't be reported on in the same way stories about crime would be covered; instead of quoting or interviewing police or first responders, seek quotes from suicide prevention experts, psychologists, mental health experts; and avoid referring to a suicide as "successful" or "unsuccessful" (American Association of Suicidology et al., n.d., p. 1).

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Concrete, well-established theoretical implications will be easier to identify once more extensive research has been conducted on this topic, since this was the first qualitative framing analysis conducted on this topic. The results of this research indicated that journalists from these six media outlets framed the topic of NFL suicides in different ways, though some elements were the same across all outlets, such as the presence of the aforementioned commonly occurring frames.

Heavy use of "buzzwords" as framing tools established the notion that journalists frequently framed the athlete suicides in relation to greater historical, anthropological and sociological contexts—such as within constructions of tragic heroism from Greek antiquity, gladiators from Roman history and the role model "idol," "celebrity," and "icon" we revere today. Further studies are needed to identify alternative ways in which the media has framed the issue of these 11 NFL athletes' suicides.

As for practical implications, perhaps there should be more rigorous training for some journalists who cover suicide topics because how they cover (and frame) the issue can have a broad impact on society. A seminal study by Dr. David Phillips and Lindie Carstensen in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that the suicide rate fluctuated after media coverage, and the amount of media coverage allotted to the suicide constituted a greater risk (Grollman, 1988, p. 56). This statistically significant

relationship between media coverage of suicide and an increase in suicide among teenagers is called the Werther effect, named after a 1774 romantic novel by German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in which a young man commits suicide (Grollman, 1988, p. 56).

For adolescent populations especially, the Werther effect can have potentially serious effects. A sizable group of individuals who revere and look up to professional football players as personal role models are youth populations. “The sporting hero has traditionally been perceived of as epitomizing social ideals and masculine virtues, and as embodying values that learnt on the playing fields will readily transfer into everyday life” (Lines, 2001, p. 285). Because of the potential danger posed by incorrect media coverage of high profile suicide cases, the researcher recommends that more rigorous training should be an integral part of the journalistic vetting process, especially for online media outlets with blog-like formats, irrespective of the fact that some articles may be “opinion” pieces. The potential effect these articles may have on at-risk populations is not currently known—however, “media framing is important because it can have subtle but powerful effects on the audience” (Tankard, 2001, p. 97).

Further proving the salience of this issue, impacts on public policy cannot be ignored. Many groups such as the NFL and NFL Players Association are viewing these suicides as a disturbing trend, requiring more research dollars for further investigation. Considering the trend of recent NFL player suicides, more attention needs to be devoted to this issue before a significant paradigm shift in the way sports organizations view and treat mental illnesses, depression, and suicidal tendencies can occur. Whether it was immediately obvious or not, clearly something was amiss to cause these athletes

to commit suicide. A cultural shift in reducing the commonplace nature of hegemonic masculinity would also be a viable step to ensure that men, regardless of their age, feel comfortable seeking assistance for mental health issues suffered during or as a result of their sport or profession. In addition, the league should also increase financial support for mental health resources for players with the goal of preventing and/or reducing the amount of player suicides.

Currently, the NFL offers various resources for current and former players and their families. Resources for current players include NFL Player Engagement, NFL Total Wellness, NFL Player Assistance and Counseling Service, NFL Continuing Education Program. Resources for former players include health services, NFL Player Engagement, NFL Total Wellness, NFL Player Assistance and Counseling Service, Pensions and Disabilities, NFL Players Association, NFL Player Care Foundation, Gene Upshaw Player Assistance Fund, Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund (NFL Life Line, n.d.). Although this list seems extensive, there's no empirical research or evidence that establishes the efficacy of these resources, especially for the programs that have only recently been instated. Furthermore, existence of such resources does not guarantee participation by players. Research should be conducted to evaluate how effective the resources are and how they could be improved, in addition to finding ways to recruit more players whom need the mental health support to participate in the aforementioned programs.

As far as practical steps toward lessening player suicides in the league, there appears to be some steps being taken. According to an article published in April 2013 on the CBS Sports website, the NFL received a "Humanitarian Award" on May 8, 2013,

awarded by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. The award comes after the league launched NFL Life Line, which is “a website and crisis hotline number for former and current players, their family members, and all league and team employees. The website includes an anonymous and confidential self-check quiz and online chat that allows individuals to interact with trained professionals” (CBSSports.com wire reports, 2013). The site also includes information and warning signs about suicide and depression and videos from former players “encouraging those in distress to ‘make the call’ for help” (CBSSports.com wire reports, 2013).

This appears to be a vital first step in addressing the disturbing trend of NFL athlete suicides. However, it is important to note that such an intervention requires direct action on the part of the depressed and/or suicidal athlete—seeking out the resource, perusing the information and videos on the website and deciding to seek help because of it. Depending on the efficacy of the outreach and promotion surrounding these NFL Wellness Programs, they could help mitigate some of the pressing issues currently affecting NFL athletes. Some experts advocate making mental health checkups for professional football players as necessary and second nature as sports physicals or knee rehabilitations—this could very well be the markedly different change the league needs to address and subsequently treat player mental illness and/or suicides.

Effective advertisement and outreach of such mental health programs can also bolster participation rates among athletes, especially those who are retired, as they face more transitional roadblocks when adjusting to civilian life after a successful, high profile and high-energy football career. “When you’re no longer an NFL player, you no longer

have a purpose. You wake up and wonder why you should even get out of bed. What are you supposed to do with the rest of your life—play Nintendo?” (Pipkin, 2008, p. 97). When former Green Bay Packer Ken Ruetters shared his thoughts about leaving the game, he echoed the sentiments of many retired players who find themselves feeling lost and confused when attempting to adjust to a normal life. After leaving the NFL, he founded a nonprofit organization called GamesOver that is “dedicated to serving and meeting the transitional needs of players when they leave the game” (Ruetters, n.d.). Organizations such as these are useful to players because “78 percent of all NFL players are divorced, bankrupt or unemployed two years after leaving the game” (Bodipo-Memba, 2006). Players find themselves “thrust into the so-called real world with few marketable skills to increase their wealth and serious self-identity issues that often make the transition from the game a perilous one” (Bodipo-Memba, 2006). Factors like these may contribute to depression and in some cases, suicide.

As for some media organizations, they continue to make connections between factors such as head injuries and CTE and outcomes such as suicide when there is no widely accepted consensus among the medical community that all of these health issues are totally and unequivocally interrelated. Experts are divided in their opinion of such connections, which in turn can be confusing or misleading to public audiences that consume news articles about NFL athlete suicides in which the journalist frames a connection between these aforementioned medical issues and subsequent suicides.

The prevailing narrative [among] aging athletes who have killed themselves in recent years is that head injuries sustained long ago on playing fields laid the groundwork for a downward spiral of depression and suicide. While in some cases that may be true, researchers and medical experts, including leaders in the study of CTE, cautioned against rushing to judgment (Fish, 2012).

In an interview with ESPN’s award winning investigative series “Outside the Lines,” well-known researcher and neurosurgeon Julian Bailes said that “it is ‘absolutely not true’ that an automatic connection can be made between NFL players who commit suicide and CTE” (Fish, 2012). However, given that he has been involved as a researcher on many of the studies that become covered and cited by journalists, that position is not always accurately reflected in the articles—instead, some journalists portray strong causal links among these varied medical issues.

There is even a rift among researchers and the league itself. Researchers from Boston University’s Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy have tested many athlete brains for evidence of CTE and published about their findings in medical journals such as the New England Journal of Medicine. However, in the past, organizations such as the NFL have denied any connection between these conditions. Since then, their opinion has changed.

While the NFL initially denied that these traumas could have long-term effects, it has since publicly acknowledged the dangers and recently donated \$1 million to the CSTE at BU. In 2009, the NFL commissioned a study at the University of Michigan, which determined that ex-professional football players were more prone to developing memory-related diseases than the general population (Cole, n.d.).

For many years, the league denied the possible connection between head injuries and long-term health problems such as CTE, and outcomes such as suicide. The NFL has since changed its stance and has donated money to various groups to conduct research on this very issue. In 2011, the league donated \$30 million to the NIH—the largest philanthropic gift in its history—to support research on medical issues prevalent in athletes and relevant to the general population (Zigmond, 2013). In 2010,

the NFL gave Boston University researchers a gift of \$1 million. However, since April 2013, the NFL has reportedly “distanced itself from Boston University” (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2013). At present time, it is unclear how these conflicts of interest, research dollars, competing groups and legal issues will impact the sport in the long term.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Given the popularity of football, it is necessary for future research to assess both the long and short-term effects that media coverage has on the public and their perceptions. A clear limitation of this research was that it could not account for all of the news articles and stories published about the players’ suicides—instead, it evaluated the six most prevalent print and online sources and provided a holistic look at the issue. In this section, examples of research that should be conducted because they would significantly add to the scarce, preexisting body of knowledge are discussed.

There have been dozens of professional football players, both active and retired, who have died by suicide since the league was first instated in 1920. However, identifying all of the players who have died by suicide is difficult. Conducting a retrospective study that identifies and evaluates the total number of players who have died since the NFL was first created could show the ways in which the problem has changed over time on a quantitative and qualitative level. This is a viable first step in addressing this issue on the whole, as it is not currently known how many NFL athletes have died by suicide since the league was first established. A study of this kind will provide an epidemiological basis for determining how serious of a problem NFL suicides are. Epidemiological evaluation will give clues to communications professionals to

determine if this topic has been covered representatively in the media or if it is simply being overblown—arguments that have been made by media professionals and critics.

Future scholarship should encompass more news coverage across many different media outlets and diversify the type of articles to demonstrate a different and perhaps deeper knowledge of this hot-button issue. In addition, revisiting this topic after a significant amount of time has passed will reveal what changes the NFL has made to address the issue of player suicides, especially in light of the aforementioned initiatives and expansion of resources made available to current and retired players. Examining the efficacy of such resources might yield a connection with the suicide rate among NFL players. With the passage of time, observable trends may appear, to be assessed with further research.

Further studies should seek to compare and contrast local media coverage (in the hometowns or towns where the athletes played) with elite, national coverage in order to discern the differences in the way journalists or particular news agencies discuss or frame the deaths of these NFL athletes. Analyzing news articles from the hometown publication of each athlete will provide a different view of the death and likely emphasize the personal connection and impact the athlete had on their immediate community.

An interesting aspect of the articles evaluated in this research was observing the use of expert and non-expert sources. Thus, comparing the prevalence of expert versus non-expert sources could make for a worthwhile research endeavor. Anecdotes, recollections and memories from friends, family and loved ones about the suicide victim “are often distorted by the knowledge that the person has killed himself” (Lester, 1989,

p. 9). Many of the journalists included quotes in their articles from recently bereaved family members who were commenting on the suicide.

According to prevention guidelines, seeking quotes from trained professionals are the most advisable interview sources for journalists who report about suicide: "... instead of quoting or interviewing police or first responders, seek quotes from suicide prevention experts, psychologists, mental health experts" (American Association of Suicidology et al., n.d., p. 1). Thus, analyzing the presence of quotes from mental health experts such as psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors; individuals trained in suicide prevention and hotline operators would portray suicide as not just a death sentence, but as a prevalent public health issue that can be prevented and treated with proper professional intervention. Subsequent comparison and contrast of quotes from trained professionals with the amount of quotes from first responders and law enforcement officials would make for a worthwhile research endeavor.

Due to the episodic nature of these suicides, new developments will occur each time another NFL athlete ends his life. The ever-changing nature of this type of research requires that it will constantly need to be replicated and/or redone to account for recent deaths that may affect the results. Since this research has been conducted, the most recent player to die by suicide was Kansas City Chiefs player Jovan Belcher (Brown, S.R., 2012). In December 2012, the 25-year-old Kansas City Chiefs linebacker shot his 22-year-old girlfriend Cassandra Perkins to death. He then drove to the Chiefs' practice facility and committed suicide in front of team head coach Romeo Crennel, general manager Scott Pioli and other onlookers. His autopsy report indicated a high blood-alcohol level at the time of death (Chodos, 2013).

If one thing is clear, it is that this problem is not going to ameliorate itself. Former and current NFL athletes are still dying by suicide and will likely continue to do so until a profound shift occurs in the culture of the league and in American society as a whole to reduce stigmatization. However, this can be viewed as a positive aspect, as new developments (albeit harrowing ones) will constantly continue to impact the issue.

### **Conclusion**

This research has reiterated that suicide is not just a globally important public health issue, but especially important in the microcosm of professional sports. Suicide consistently ranks as a top 10 killer (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). It accounts for billions of dollars in economic costs and nearly one million fatalities per year (World Health Organization, 2004). Most importantly, unlike some causes of death, suicide is preventable.

The presence of commonly appearing media frames in the articles surveyed for the purposes of this study indicated that journalists framed the topic of NFL athlete suicide in a variety of ways. Examples of such frames and associated sub dimensions include causes, character (masculinity; reputation), medical (prevention; research; last wishes), legal and religious frames. Changes over time from June 2000 to September 2012 yielded marked differences in coverage and the presence of episodic framing effects. Finally, the articles included buzzwords with latent meaning, which directly and indirectly connected them to precursory historical, anthropological and sociological texts.

When established guidelines from federal agencies, organizations and other groups are revisited, the conclusion is that prevention should remain the main objective for media agencies to combat this prevalent public health issue. Considering the fact

that sports are such an integral part of American culture and national identity, the implications that media coverage can potentially have on society as a whole cannot be underscored. Many young men and women look up to athletes as role models and may be influenced to take action based on media coverage of the athlete suicides.

This research has reconfirmed the already established notion that media coverage matters. Taking into account the possibility for imitative or “copycat” suicides among adolescents makes this an especially important public health topic. As evidenced by many researchers such as Gould and Wasserman, the way in which the media covers suicides can have widespread impact upon the general public, especially at-risk groups such as adolescents. “It is found that stories on prominent suicides are likely to trigger a subsequent rise in national suicides . . . it is found that a significant rise in the national suicide rate occurs in the month after a celebrity commits suicide” (Wasserman, 1984, p. 427).

In addition to the fact that media coverage matters, the way in which journalists frame the suicides of these NFL athletes matters. Individuals derive meaning and invest a great deal in sports figures, despite the fact that they may have never met the athlete nor had any interactions with him during his lifetime. They often develop para-social relationships with sports figures, such as professional football players, who they have never met and likely never will. Thus suggesting that the sports mythos persists even today—athletes are our modern day gladiators, larger-than-life and revered for their athletic prowess, physical qualities and financial status. Due to the fact that very little is known at this time, there is a need for more scholarship on the topic of media coverage of NFL athlete suicides.

APPENDIX  
CODING GUIDELINES

Coding Sheet

ITEM ID # \_\_\_\_\_

1. Source:
2. Print/Online
3. Headline/Title:
4. Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ (MMDDYY)
5. Journalist's name:
6. Journalist's title (if available in article):
7. Word count:
8. Main topic of story:
9. Athletes mentioned:
10. Twitter? Y \_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_
11. Tragedy:

Hero or strength-related words:

Warrior or fighting-related words:

Legend:

Best/great:

Celebrity:

Idol:

Icon:

Martyr:

Star/superstar:

12. Frames found:

Explanation of coding sheet:

1. Source: Indicate the media outlet/website where the article originated. Can abbreviate with the following: New York Times (NYT), Washington Post (WP), Los Angeles Times (LAT), ESPN (ESPN), Sports Illustrated (SI), Bleacher Report (BR).
2. Print/Online: Circle whether the article appeared in print or online, or both.
3. Headline/Title: Write the headline or title of the article.
4. Date: Record in MM/DD/YY form.
5. Journalist name: Write the journalist's name as provided in the byline or online article.
6. Journalist's title (if available in article): Indicate the title if included in the article.
7. Word count: Approximate length of the article in words. To calculate, count the number of words in five lines; divide by five. Then multiply that number by the number of lines in the story to calculate an approximate length in words. Or you may copy and past article into a Word document to obtain a word count.
8. Main topic of story: Briefly write the synopsis of the article in 1 to 2 sentences.
9. Athletes mentioned: Write the names of the athletes mentioned in the article.
10. Twitter? Y/N: Circle yes if the article includes tweets, no if it does not. If it includes tweets, list who wrote the tweets.

11. Word enumeration: This section is for enumeration purposes to count the words used as framing tools in the articles. Write the number of times each of the aforementioned words appears in the article. Variations of the words are permitted, i.e. tragic for tragedy, heroic for hero, idolize for idol, legendary for legend.

12. Frames found: This refers to the inductive frames and sub dimensions found in the article. In order to find the frames, read the article carefully and highlight the sentences or words that fit into these frames/sub dimensions.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nicki Karimipour holds two Bachelor of Arts degrees in English literature and humanities from Florida State University. She graduated magna cum laude and with an honors medallion in spring 2011. While at FSU, she served as assistant arts and life editor of the *FSView & Florida Flambeau*. She also served as an editor for *Clutch Magazine*, FSU's only student-run fashion publication based out of the College of Human Sciences. Karimipour served as director of communications for Mortar Board National College Senior Honor Society, and was a member of Golden Key International, Phi Kappa Phi, Lambda Iota Tau, and Phi Eta Sigma.

A native of Tallahassee, Karimipour began her master's studies in journalism at the University of Florida in fall 2011. She began working for UF Health in 2012 as assistant to the assistant director of communications at the Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI). While working at the CTSI, she had the opportunity to conduct research on a variety of health and medical research topics. In spring 2013, she began teaching two sections of Multimedia Writing as a lab instructor. She worked as a research assistant in the summer of 2013. In the past, she has written for publications such as *the POST*, *UWIRE*, *INsite Magazine*, and interviewed a Nobel Laureate.

Her research interest is in health communication. After graduating with her Master of Arts in Mass Communication, she will continue her graduate studies at UF in fall 2013, pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy in mass communication.