The NFL meat grinder: US pro football player dies in training camp

By Kate Randall
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The death July 30 of National Football League player Korey Stringer, who collapsed of heat exhaustion following practice in Mankato, Minnesota, demonstrates how the billion-dollar enterprise that is American professional sports devours and discards human beings in the interest of the bottom line.

Stringer, a 27-year-old offensive tackle with the Minnesota Vikings, collapsed of heat stroke on the second day of pre-season practice. Temperatures that day reached the mid-90s F (35 degrees C), and high humidity created a heat index of 109 degrees F (43 C). Stringer’s body temperature rose to 108 degrees (42.2 C) and he died at the hospital 15 hours later, never regaining consciousness.

He was the first professional football player to die from heat stroke in the NFL’s 82-year history. However, since 1995, 18 high school and college football players have died from overexertion in the heat during training. Only five days before Stringer’s death, 18-year-old University of Florida freshman Eraste Austin collapsed and died at training camp. And then on August 5, Rashidi Wheeler, a starting safety for Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, collapsed during preseason conditioning drills and died shortly afterward. A preliminary coroner’s report gave the cause of Wheeler’s death as bronchial asthma, but his family has called for a further investigation.

The death of this talented athlete was a tragic waste of human life which was unquestionably preventable. Stringer had been unable to complete practice the day before, exhausted from the heat. His teammates reportedly needled him about a photograph that appeared in the following morning’s Minneapolis Star-Tribune, which showed him bent over and gasping for air. He continued practice the next day, despite vomiting three times and showing clear signs that he was suffering the effects of heat exhaustion. No one intervened to insist he stop training, get out of the heat and rest.

By continuing to participate in the practice the young player was following the ethos promoted by professional football: push the body to the limit and beyond. Any other behavior is considered soft and not worthy of the game. This beyond-macho ethic is cultivated by team owners, enforced by coaches and trainers, and perpetuated by an understanding among the players. In this case it was a philosophy that directly resulted in a man’s death.

A number of NFL superstars earn huge salaries. But billions of dollars more are generated by their performances, in the form of ticket revenues, television rights and advertising. The media plays a particularly pernicious role in cultivating an appetite among fans for violence on the football field, sensationalizing the brutality. But in order to continue to deliver on this, the game needs more players like Korey Stringer.

Stringer was six-feet four inches tall and weighed 335 pounds (152 kilos). His bulk is not unusual among offensive linemen in professional football today, whose job it is to ram into opposing defensive linemen—typically of similar size—to clear the way for running backs or protect the quarterback, the lighter, faster “skill players.” Line play is frequently referred to as being “in the trenches,” in keeping with the militaristic terminology of American football, but the description has a certain accuracy, suggesting a resemblance to the brutal, pointless battles of World War I, in which thousands died to gain a few yards.

Players in this position have become bigger and bigger over the last two decades. While players of Stringer’s size were once merely overweight, today the majority of them have a high muscle mass and body fat of 15 percent or lower. Their bodies are the result of intense conditioning; and it is well known that this is helped along in many cases by the use of anabolic steroids, which pose grave health risks.

These players are not only bigger, but faster as well. Much of the action on the football field involves collisions between these dense, heavy bodies, including direct helmet-to-helmet contact at high speeds. These collisions have resulted in numerous concussions and spinal cord injuries, leaving players permanently disabled. Even those who manage to escape catastrophic injuries spend only a
relatively short time in professional football, averaging just
over four years in the NFL. While some players sign
multimillion-dollar contracts, more than half of them earn
less than $500,000 a year during their brief careers. The
long-term toll on the athletes’ bodies has been little studied,
but there are plenty of anecdotal accounts of gifted athletes
barely able to walk by age 50, because of loss of cartilage in
the knees, and of premature deaths from a variety of causes.

While football involves brute force, speed, athletic skill
and strategy are also required. Some talented athletes have
seen their lives tragically transformed, as a result of injuries
suffered on the field. One of these men is Mike Utley, an
All-American from Washington State University who was
drafted by the Detroit Lions in 1989.

Utley became the starting right guard for the Lions his
rookie year. In the fifth game of that year, he suffered an
injury that put him on the injured reserved list for the rest of
the year. In his second year he fractured two ribs in the third
preseason game, sideling him for a number of games. Later
that same season he dislocated his shoulder. This type
of wear and tear is not unusual for an offensive lineman.

On November 17, 1991, however, in a game against the
Los Angeles Rams, Mike Utley suffered a far more serious
injury. His 6th and 7th vertebrae were fractured, leaving him
partially paralyzed and wheelchair-bound, ending his
football career. With intense rehabilitation and personal
determination he has been able to regain some movement in
his legs.

Then there is the story of Lyle Alzado, an All-Pro
defensive lineman who played with the Denver Broncos,
Cleveland Browns and the LA Raiders. Alzado was
extremely versatile, playing both end and tackle in the front
four, beginning his career with the Broncos in 1971. Like
many other professional football players, to enhance his
performance and increase his body mass he took steroids.
The chemicals caused him to develop brain cancer, and he

Shortly before his death, Alzado commented, “I started
taking anabolic steroids in 1969 and never stopped. It was
addicting, mentally addicting. Now I’m sick, and I’m
scared. Ninety percent of the athletes I know are on the
stuff. We’re not born to be 300 pounds or jump 30 feet. But
all the time I was taking steroids, I knew they were making
me play better.

“I became very violent on the field and off it. I did things
only crazy people do. Once a guy sideswiped my car and I
beat the hell out of him. Now look at me. My hair’s gone, I
wobble when I walk and have to hold on to someone for
support, and I have trouble remembering things. My last
wish? That no one else ever dies this way.”

But the steroid use unquestionably continues, as does the
brutal training which took the life of Korey Stringer last
month. And few regulations have been put in place by the
National Football League to prevent such abuse and
 tragedies from happening again.

NFL coaches and trainers are supposed to follow the
guidelines established by the National Athletic Trainers’
Association (NATA) to prevent injuries and avoid health
emergencies such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke. In the
aftermath of Stringer’s death, one of their recommendations
is that teams “avoid workouts during hot temperatures.” But
there are still no league-wide rules covering such heat issues
or the treatment of heat-related injuries.

In fact, coaches welcome the extreme heat as a weapon to
push players to the brink of their endurance and beyond. At
a practice session only days following Stringer’s collapse,
New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick complained that
the weather in Massachusetts hadn’t been hot enough,
commenting: “You need the heat to get into condition.”
Extreme conditions produce athletes pushed to their topmost
limits, which means more weight, speed and power on the
field. This translates into increased profits for team owners,
advertisers and the media.

Coaches and trainers are well aware that players are being
pushed to the edge of their physical endurance. At practices
conducted in intense heat, nurses are on hand to hook
players up to IVs when they show signs of dehydration.
After treatment, they are often sent back into practice that
same day. Teams have medical specialists traveling with
them at all times to tend to the inevitable injuries, including
doctors specializing in spinal cord damage. This high level
of medical supervision is testament to the inherent dangers
of the sport, as practiced in the NFL today.

Many boys in America, particularly from working class
areas, dream of a career in professional football as their
ticket to athletic stardom and financial success. From a very
young age, they are taught that if they are to have any
chance of making it to the NFL they need to adopt the kind
of super-human attitude which dominates college and
professional football training regimes. Korey Stringer grew
up in Warren, Ohio, in the northeastern part of the state, an
industrial area which has produced football players as
regularly as it did steel and automobiles. Stringer was buried
there last Monday, one more victim of the NFL meat
grinder.

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