

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

**Joe Burrow's Calf, "A Matter of National Security": Examining the Presence of the
Lombardian Ethic Within Media Coverage of Joe Burrow's Injury**

Nicholas S. Papakirk

The Ohio State University

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Advisor: Dr. Brian Turner

Introduction

The Contemporary Pain Principle

As Khris Middleton dribbled the ball on the right wing, he found himself matched up against National Basketball Association (NBA) player Kevin Durant. Middleton took a screen from Milwaukee Bucks forward Bobby Portis to get the switch in defensive coverage from Kevin Durant. Middleton took a few dribbles and pulled up for a contested three point shot. Occurring six minutes into the first quarter and game at large, what would normally be considered a routine shot turned into devastating news for Middleton and the Bucks organization: Middleton rolled his left ankle on Durant's left foot, as Durant left him no room to land from his jump shot. Due to this violation of space, the referees assessed Durant with a Flagrant 1 foul, as Middleton opted to take the two free throws from the foul call instead of the alternative of subbing out of the game for good. Only a couple minutes later, Middleton would sub out of the game and was later diagnosed with an ankle sprain (Maloney, 2024). What was not made clear is how Middleton's decision to continue playing on his sprained ankle impacted the length of his injury absence, in the context of a midseason coaching hire and increased expectations by the team.

Middleton's decision to play through the pain of his injured ankle is not a unique case; as a matter of fact, it has become expected of all athletes to prioritize their contributions to the team as opposed to their physical health. However, this mindset does not represent the norm, but is rather the result of the interconnected nature of the sporting culture and the expectations placed on athletes from external sources, such as coaches, family, and the media. In an interview with *The Athletic's* Eric Nehm, Khris Middleton cites how the injury he was dealing with is "part of the game...part of sports" (Nehm, 2024). Middleton also stated that, during the process of

recovery, he was “not going to rush it and put [himself] in jeopardy of making anything worse or not helping [the Bucks] out being a cone out there and a liability...” (Nehm, 2024). That Middleton was this open with a member of the media about his rehabilitation process adds an additional layer of complexity in viewing how athletes may choose to play through pain. These two quotes provide a stark contrast between the sport-promoted pain principle and the player taking agency of their injury. Middleton acknowledges the commonality of injuries within any given game and sport, but fails to let this ethic influence his path towards full physical and mental recovery.

The recency of Khris Middleton's injury provides a fresh reminder of the danger that the pain principle occupies within the sporting environment, for all figures involved. Middleton should not be solely to blame for opting to continue playing on his injured ankle: the Bucks coaching staff and athletic training personnel should also be held accountable for their lack of urgency in substituting him out of the game to examine his ankle. However, there should also be concern as to why Middleton did not communicate to the coaching staff that he needed to be subbed out of the game or stayed down on the floor while play continued to ensure he did not risk further aggravation. The action of continuing to play on his injured ankle in an effort to not put his team at a disadvantage stands at a stark contrast to his second quote in Nehm's article, that essentially highlighted how he did not want to put an injured version of himself out on the floor to compromise the Bucks' chances in the game.

Ultimately, the case of Khris Middleton represents one that shows the extremes to which the pain principle can exist in contemporary sports, if not challenged. The normalization of playing through injury represents a danger to both professional athletes and sports in general.

Examining Joe Burrow's Injury History

It was another routine football play: Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow snapped the ball from his center out of the shotgun formation and aired out a deep pass that fell incomplete to Bengals receiver Tyler Boyd. While Washington Football Team defenders celebrated the forced third down incompleteness, a more gruesome scene was unfolding near the Cincinnati Bengals 3-yard line: Burrow writhing in pain, as multiple Bengals athletic training staff came out to attend to him. What the TV camera did not show was two Washington defensive ends hitting Burrow just as he released the ball, with one grabbing Burrow's lower legs in an attempt to tackle him and the other wrapping his arms around Burrow's upper body. Burrow, during his first professional season in the National Football League (NFL), would be out for the remainder of his rookie season with a season-ending torn ACL and MCL injury in his left knee (Patra, 2020). Up to that point, Burrow had taken many dropbacks as a quarterback in his young football career; unfortunately, this particular one may stick with him as one of the most disastrous of his career.

Joe Burrow is no stranger to his share of injuries. While the ACL/MCL tear during his rookie season in 2020-2021 was his first season-ending injury, Burrow has tended to several different injuries up to this point of his four year career. In 2021-2022, Burrow dealt with throat issues during an overtime game against the Green Bay Packers, causing him to go on vocal rest until he wasn't straining to speak. During the same season, Burrow also dealt with a right pinky during a game against the Los Angeles Chargers, which he continued to play with; he was limited in practice the following week, still played in the next game, and then missed practice following that game. Burrow's final run-in with injury in the 2021-2022 season came during one of America's most-watched events of the year: Super Bowl LVI between the Cincinnati Bengals

and Los Angeles Rams. Burrow suffered a sprained MCL in his right leg during the game, different from the MCL he tore during his rookie season, and continued to play; his recovery would come during the offseason (Morrison, 2023). Just through one season, Burrow's position as a quarterback in the NFL appears to come with his acceptance of the inherent risk of injury that comes with playing. After accounting for his appendix injury that caused him to miss the duration of the 2022-2023 Bengals training camp and an injury to his right elbow during the regular season that did not cause him to miss any time, Burrow's body has undergone a tremendous amount of wear and tear that most professional athletes may not have to deal with for the entirety of their career. What makes Burrow's case unique, though, is his relative youth in experience at the NFL level in addition to his ability to continue to play the game at the highest level.

A Calf Under Scrutiny

As the heat settled at the practice fields next to Paycor Stadium, the second day of training camp practices were coming to a close, with the offense and defense squaring off in a competition. Joe Burrow, heading into his fourth professional season as the quarterback of the Cincinnati Bengals, took a snap from the shotgun formation. As Burrow dropped back and pump-faked a pass to one of his receivers, he scrambled out of the pocket hoping to make a big play; no sooner did the fans' excitement for what was to come turned into dread and concern. Burrow's scramble eventually left him favoring his left leg, as he hobbled over to the side of the field and reached out towards his right calf. As would come to be known by both Bengals fans and followers of the NFL, "Burrow went down on the second day of training camp [last season] and missed and [sic] five weeks before returning well below 100 percent. It wasn't until Week 5 that he looked as though he had put the calf injury completely behind him" (Morrison, 2023).

The Bengals, coming off of a Super Bowl run two years prior and a close AFC Championship loss the season before, had high expectations set for the 2023-2024 season. These expectations were entirely dependent on the health of their franchise quarterback, Joe Burrow; any setback, such as an injury to his right calf, would put into question how attainable these expectations were.

For the next several weeks following the calf injury, local Bengals reporters and national football pundits tried to make sense of what was to follow. How long does a calf injury take to recover? How can Joe Burrow prepare for Week 1 of the NFL regular season, only a few weeks away? Will a Joe Burrow operating with physical limitations be a better option than a backup who is fully healthy? Through all of these questions lies the central idea of what this paper will examine going forward: the existence of the Lombardian ethic, and the 'pain principle' as an integral foundational ideal, in contemporary sports. The case of Khris Middleton illustrated how, on any given night, injuries are likely to affect any athlete and it is completely normalized for these athletes to attempt to play through these injuries until their bodies are not physically capable of doing so. In examining the injury history of Joe Burrow during his first three seasons of the NFL, a similar theme emerged: athletes are not only willing to play through injury, but may see it as a requirement of their role, especially dependent on their status and skill level.

The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the presence of the modern-day Lombardian ethics in sports, specifically football, through the analysis of Joe Burrow's recovery from his right calf injury. Through the use of content analysis, articles relevant to the injury will be collected and analyzed to examine the pain principle's influence on how the Cincinnati Bengals organization responded to Burrow's injury, in addition to how the media contributes to the upholding of this ethic.

Literature Review

The Lombardian Ethic in Sports

Professional sports have historically been viewed as a vehicle through which societal values and norms pass through. Whether through the action of playing a game or the feeling of winning or losing a game, sport is seen by people as an integral part of affiliation and participation in society at large. In this regard, sport membership could draw comparisons to affiliations with other social and cultural practices, such as politics, religion, arts, and business (Seippel, 2008). While sports may be valued by society due to the effects of participation or feelings associated with affiliation to organizations or athletes, it is important to critically examine the foundations by which this institutional practice is built on. Not only can sport be embraced by the general public, but it can also influence the values that it holds into general societal norms and values.

The foundations for the Lombardian ethic stem from one of American football's most prominent figures: Vince Lombardi. Lombardi, a Super Bowl-winning head coach of the Green Packers in the 1960s, was a proponent of the idea that "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing" (Scott, 1973, p. 71), though he was not the first or last football coach to abide by this expression. This central idea of winning at all costs came to be attributed back to Vince Lombardi, eventually being identified as the "Lombardian ethic," which was first identified by Jack Scott, a prominent activist in sports sociology during the 20th century (Scott, 1973). The Lombardian ethic outlines a prioritization of winning as the only outcome that athletes should be working towards when they engage in sporting competitions. Contrary to other sport-based models, such as the counterculture ethic that arose as an antithesis to the Lombardian ethic, the process by which the athletes trained for and competed in sports was not valued nearly as much

as the final outcome of the competition itself (Kew, 1978). These competitions were viewed as such, with the identification of athletes as heroes who were required to take down their enemies, or opponents who stood in the way of the goal of winning. Within the Lombardian ethic, sports were seen as authoritarian, with little room for athletes to operate if they were not focused on the end goal of winning. Even more, one of the Lombardian ethic's most extreme principles was in the exclusion of women from sport, essentially laying the foundation for how sport would come to be seen as male-centered and male-dominated.

Though the Lombardian ethic was identified as one of the primary components of how American sport culture at large operated, there were two other models through which sports have been viewed: the counterculture ethic and the radical sport ethic. The counterculture ethic primarily began as a response to the rigidity of the Lombardian ethic, promoting a freer space through which athletes could compete in sport (Kew, 1978; Scott, 1973). In a counterculture-based sport world, there would be a more significant amount of attention paid to the process by which athletes train and compete in sports; this emphasis on the process stands in stark contrast to the Lombardian ethic's prioritization of winning and pure domination of the opponent. In a similar regard, the counterculture ethic does not seem to regard competition as being a necessary part of sports, but rather subscribes to the belief that cooperation in team sports provides the most intrinsic value. With an emphasis on cooperation also brings the inclusion of women back into sporting activities, highlighting the progressive nature of the counterculture ethic. Laying in the middle of the Lombardian ethic and counterculture ethic is the radical sport ethic, a view that takes the positive and negative aspects of both models and proposes a feasible medium to operate from (Kew, 1978; Scott, 1973). For example, the radical sport ethic fails to see sport as just competitive or just cooperative, but rather places an equal value on the process

by which competition can lead to a winning outcome. Further, the radical sport ethic builds off of the counterculture's inclusion of women through the promotion of equitable access to sports regardless of gender. There is an inherently humanistic nature in the radical sport ethic's values, which can be reflected in the way that opponents are treated as pseudo-companions and the athletes themselves are given authority to operate in whichever manner they choose. Taken together, these three models represent the basis through which sports have historically and contemporarily operated from, with the indication that the Lombardian ethic remains supreme.

Playing Through Pain

Injuries have become a commonly accepted part of sport, something that athletes, coaches, and sport organizations recognize they will have to deal with at some point or another. Across different sports, among different levels of ability, and regardless of age, race, or gender, an athlete seems to engage in sporting competitions with the idea that their body and mind are likely going to undergo wear-and-tear due to their physical level of play. As part of this "sport ethic" that Hughes and Coakley (1991) defined within the framework of the Lombardian ethic, a majority of collegiate athletes were willing to compete while dealing with pain due to factors such as the sporting culture, external pressure, a focus on outcome, and more. This sporting culture was further explained by Nixon (1992), who described how the social network within athletics, such as coaches or trainers, can inform and influence how athletes choose to manage their injuries. These networks can thus distort how severe an injury truly is, potentially leading to the athlete choosing to play through their injury due to the trust given to who is in their sports culture network and not wanting to let these important figures down by choosing not to compete (Curry, 1993; Nixon, 1992). When athletes subscribe to the principles of the Lombardian ethic and feel included within the culture of sports, they are more likely to be willing to play through

injuries because of their standing within the community and the pressure that comes with upholding the values promoted as part of it (Jessiman-Perreault & Godley, 2016; Madrigal et al., 2015). For example, Malcolm (2006) conducted an ethnographic analysis of adolescent girls playing softball, highlighting how the culture within sports comes to be through a socialization process. Athletes begin to internalize the sport ethic from a young age due to the words and actions of their coaches, enabling them to be complicit within this socialization process that is based in the Lombardian ideals. Ultimately, there is a relationship between the sporting culture and the values of the Lombardian ethic, with the idea of playing through pain contributing directly to a winning outcome for the team. This relationship is prevalent from the start of sports participation at a youth level and continues to be imbued in athletes as they engage in the socialization process that often goes unchallenged.

As the notion of athletes playing through pain becomes normalized, the presence of the 'pain principle' becomes a further integrated part of sports that will be difficult to extract. The 'pain principle' has roots in religion, yet is situated within a context of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. Similar to the Lombardian ethic, the 'pain principle' describes the acceptance of pain as being an inevitable part of sports and rewarding athletes, especially those who are male and play in contact sports like American football, for making the sacrifice to play through their pain to achieve the end goal of winning (Sabo, 2009). However, with the presence of sports networks that socialize athletes to endure their pain and play through injury, there are difficulties in managing the responsibilities of who should decide what the athlete does with their injury. Is it the athlete, who is actually experiencing the pain brought by the injury; the coaches, who have to deal with working towards the success of the team as a whole; the athletic training staff, who have a responsibility of managing player health and rehabilitation?

From the athlete's perspective, though they are aware of how playing through an injury can cause emotional distress or further physical aggravation, they are ultimately motivated by the long-term prospects of where athletics can take them. Coaches and athletic training staff must consider the motivation of athletes, as their relationship with the athlete is built on a delicate foundation of trust; if the coach and athletic training staff act in the best interest of the athlete, then there has been a general positive trend in recovery of the athlete's injury (Barrette & Harman, 2020). Despite the influence that team personnel should have over ensuring that their athletes are properly taken care of, there is a realization that the extent to which the Lombardian ethic is embedded in sports will prevent these figures from acting out their roles to the fullest capacity.

While coaches and athletic training staff may have a difficult time balancing recommending what the right thing for the athlete's body is versus allowing the athlete to dictate a decision, it is ultimately the athlete that will have the final decision on whether or not they want to play through the pain of their injury or not. If a star NFL quarterback is leading his team for a chance at a Super Bowl title and injures a muscle in his leg, there is little doubt in his mind that he would want to sit out and risk losing any time to put his team in a disadvantageous position. It is this warrior-like mindset that compels athletes across all sports to push through the pain of their injury and compete at all costs (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Sabo, 2009). Despite experiencing a significant injury for a quarterback, Joe Burrow's decision to play through his injury represents a confluence of his own decision, input from the team and athletic training staff to allow him to continue to compete, and pressure from sports consumers to continue to compete at the highest level.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Professional Football

The Lombardian ethic's prioritization of winning at all costs (Scott, 1973) and promotion of the 'pain principle' that Sabo would later outline (2009) centers around the construction of a certain kind of image that athletes must live up to; for example, embracing a 'warrior'-like mentality while fighting through the pain of their injury. This image, in addition to others such as 'gladiator' or 'assassin', comes with the implicit understanding that athletes engage in minimized violence while engaging in sports, especially those where full-body contact is a required way of stopping an opponent. Messner (1992) tackles the idea of how athletes transform their bodies into 'weapons' that can be used to overcome their opponent, the primary obstacle in the way of winning a game (Scott, 1973). In considering how athletes use their bodies in sport, Messner (1992) makes a pointed observation that relates to what a "traditional masculine identity" may look like as part of a weaponized game, stating that "the way athletes are taught to regard their own bodies as machines and weapons with which to annihilate an objectified opponent ultimately results in violence against one's own body" (p. 30). In addition to this "traditional masculine identity" adopted by athletes who engage in full-contact sports like football identified by Messner (1992) is the relation of professional football to values commonly associated with the war or general conflict. For example, Jansen & Sabo (1994) indicate that, with its general similarities to values such as aggression and violence, football fits right in with war imagery; this association can even be seen with Messner's word choice, in "machines," "weapons," and "annihilate" (p. 30). Taken together, athletes understand that in the context of sports like football, where war-like actions such as full-body tackling are permissible and rewarded, there are certain benefits that come as a result of their violent play, primarily being the respect that these athletes earn from their peers, fans watching the game, and the media responsible for creating the

narratives surrounding these athletes. However, consideration should be given to whether the benefit of gaining the respect of the athlete being tackled or the young fan in the stands outweighs the costs of inflicting potentially serious harm to the other or to the self.

Central to the “traditional masculine identity” that Messner (1992) refers to is the idea of hegemonic masculinity as a guiding ideal within contemporary sports. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the “pattern of practice...that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). The notion that sports are created by men and for men is one that can be supported by the existence of hegemonic masculinity, as it not only serves to exclude women from both competition and management within the sport industry, but also any athlete who is not willing to subscribe to its tenets (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005): playing through pain, sacrificing for the betterment of the team, winning at all costs, and more. Hegemonic masculinity is not something that necessarily involves or advocates for violence; however, it can and often will be supported with force, if needed (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This aligns with the general framework of football, in being a game that does not revolve around violence, but can include violent acts and often features force from both offensive and defensive players to make a play. It should not be a surprise then that hegemonic masculinity shares many of the same principles as the Lombardian ethic, further reinforcing the idea that the Lombardian ethic is not only the foundation of most sports, but also the ideal that keeps driving these sports. Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) outline how hegemonic masculinity is used in the context of other domains, such as with war imagery or general media representations; in conjunction with Jansen & Sabo’s (1994) findings of the relationship between war imagery and professional football, the ideals of hegemonic masculinity are thus an integrated part of a sport like football. Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt (2012) further highlighted this connection, as they examined

several different factors that were independently related to conformity to masculine norms amongst collegiate football athletes. These factors included level of athletic identity by the athlete, level of competition by the athlete, whether the athlete played offense or defense, and the age of the athlete (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Though the findings that came from this study were significant in highlighting the tendency of athletes to conform, there was also the underlying conclusion that not all athletes felt compelled to abide by the principles of hegemonic masculinity. It is fair to wonder, then, if athletes, and the sporting landscape more generally, have shifted away from an acceptance of hegemonic masculinity; if so, then what to?

As different social norms and values have evolved to become more progressive in nature, there is an increasing pressure on sports to move beyond the outdated framework of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily a concrete idea, but rather something that will continue to develop in relation to society as a whole (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005); however, questions may arise as to the necessity of abiding by an ideal that both lacks a progressive foundation and serves to exclude a large majority of people from it. Thus, it is necessary to understand where hegemonic masculinity stands within contemporary sports. An effective way of measuring this standing is by examining how the media has covered significant events within the NFL, from concussion reporting to retirements. Anderson and Kian (2012) first examined the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and concussion narratives within the NFL, specifically examining then-Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers' decision to take himself out of a game, with previous advice of a teammate, after receiving a hit to the head. Through textual analysis, it was found that the media's general coverage of this decision was different than what it may have historically been; rather than criticizing Rodgers for not returning to the game and willing his team to a win, many outlets praised Rodgers and Donald Driver, the

teammate that had told Rodgers not to play through a head injury earlier in the season, for the decision not to put Rodgers' health at risk (Anderson & Kian, 2012). Though this decision ran counter to the ideals of the Lombardian ethic and hegemonic masculinity, the media changed the narrative to praise the decision to not play through injury, rather than condemning it as a choice to not try and win at all costs. With his keen advice to Rodgers, Donald Driver prevented his teammate from becoming an "informed soldier" (Furness, 2016, p. 51) who would come to normalize and rationalize his playing experience while injured in the NFL. These "informed soldiers" are agents of upholding hegemonic masculinity within the NFL, as they minimize the impact of playing through pain due to their acceptance of the physical risks of playing football. In another way, hegemonic masculinity finds itself present in the coverage of retirements by NFL players, such as Chris Borland and Andrew Luck. Cassilo and Sanderson (2018) found similar results to what Anderson and Kian (2012) and Furness (2016) noticed, in that there are cracks beginning to form in the foundation of hegemonic masculinity in sports. More specifically, they found that the media coverage and framing of Chris Borland's retirement from the NFL challenged this fundamental part of contemporary sports, "specifically, that playing with pain and sacrificing one's body in order to portray toughness and compliance with social masculine norms is expected of those who play football" (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2018, p. 102). Media coverage of Andrew Luck's retirement, which occurred in 2019, followed a similar pattern: rather than portraying Luck's decision to retire as his failure to embrace the 'warrior-like' mentality required by professional athletes, the media saw an athlete who was breaking away from the "ingrained sport ethic" and showing "resistance to masculine ideals" that involve playing through pain and winning at all costs (McGannon et al., 2022, p. 948). Though hegemonic masculinity may be believed to still be an integral part of sports, the framing of

media outlets covering stories within the NFL highlights a potential shift away from these ideals and displaces hegemonic masculinity from the core that constitutes football.

Media Coverage of Professional Athletes

Whether it be the principles of the Lombardian ethic, such as advocating for a 'winning at all costs' mentality, or in the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity as a dominating and exclusive force within sports, the media has a central role in creating narratives that influence the perceptions of an athlete by the general sports consumer. Columnists can write stories about anything related to an athlete, whether it be their performance on the field, their actions off the field, or their recovery from an injury, and have the ability to select certain values and ideals they believe are important through the use of media frames. Media frames can best be thought of as an overarching schema that organizes meaning implicitly within a selected text, with the aim of communicating "a clear, selective meaning to the words and visuals a communicator uses to contextualize a topic" (D'Angelo, 2017, p. 5). Building off of D'Angelo's (2017) definition, de Vreese (2005) offers a more concise perspective on media frames, citing their "emphasis in salience of different aspects of a topic" (p. 53). Thus, media frames act as a device that news editors and columnists can ensure to use to put a certain story within the larger context of a topic as a whole without explicitly mentioning it in their writing. Taken together, both D'Angelo (2017) and de Vreese (2005) underscore the relationship between source communicator and receiver audience in addition to the intentional selection of topics within this relationship. This relationship can be bidirectional: as the news columnist comes up with a story to share information to their audience, their audience can also influence what kind of content they expect and enjoy to engage in. Sports audiences enjoy reading about the sudden rise of phenoms or character-focused narratives more than a performance-based article (Lewis & Weaver, 2015); it

is important to consider how editors and columnists within sports media have to appeal to these interests and opportunities for engagement versus stories that they want to tell. In this regard, sports are an essential topic to examine the use of media frames and the impact these may have on sports consumers' perceptions.

Sports media coverage acts as an extension of the existing hegemonic masculinity seen within professional sports, thus utilizing frames that continue to reinforce outdated ideals. Lapchick's (2021) report card grading the racial and gender makeup of sports media coverage reflects the Lombardian notion that sport was inherently made for men, by men. For sports columnists, 77.1% were white and 82.2% were men; for sports editors, 79.2% were white and 83.3% were men (Lapchick, 2021, p. 5). These numbers reflect the continued disparity between men who cover men's sports, excluding the voices of women who are more likely to cover both men's and women's sports. Seeing how Lapchick's (2021) research highlights the lack of significant improvement in the representation of women within sports media, it can be seen that the process of media framing by sports media is "constructed within raced, classed, and gender hierarchical relations of power and are read within those very same systems of domination" (Cooky et al., 2010). As an example of this, Kian and Harding (2009) found that men were more likely to write stories about the men's college basketball tournament than women were, reinforcing the idea that there was a higher proportion of men in sports media who were focused primarily on the men's tournament as opposed to the women's tournament going on at the same time. It appears that, even when covering the same sporting event, men and women within sports media differ not only in the frequency of stories written about the event, but also the frames that they choose to use within their stories. Despite being in the minority of sports media, women were found to have been the most likely to challenge hegemonic masculinity through the use of

frames that were typically reserved for describing female athletes, such as the athletes physical appearance or family role (Kian & Harding, 2009). What may be more surprising though, is the finding that men were also found to slowly be shifting away from traditional media frames within sports: for example, men's coverage of male athletes did not trivialize the position of female athletes to make them seem superior and they were more likely to focus on the physical appearance of the male athlete (Kian & Harding, 2009). As representation across race and gender within sports media continues to be critically examined, that figures in this industry are beginning to shift away from what previous media coverage has traditionally highlighted, such as Lombardian ideals or hegemonic masculinity, into a new frontier that gives athletes more freedom and relieves external pressure from them.

The exploration of several different instances in which an athlete has either played through pain and/or injuries or retired due to injuries helps establish a guiding framework with which to analyze the media coverage surrounding Joe Burrow's calf injury. Anderson and Kian (2012) provide a starting point with which to view a shift away from the traditional ideals of hegemonic masculinity in regards to media coverage surrounding NFL athletes' head injuries. No longer is 'sacrificing one's body' or 'playing through the pain' viewed as an acceptable reason for putting oneself at further risk of injury, because of the "growing cultural awareness" (Anderson & Kian, 2012, p. 167) surrounding severe injuries, such as concussions, and the decline in power that hegemonic masculinity holds within sports. In a similar manner, Karimpour and Hull (2017) also critically examine the notion that concussions suffered by NFL players are framed as being part of sport, instead holding that the inclusion of doctors and other trained medical personnel as sources of injury-related information can better explain the risk of playing through an injury and mitigate those instances. By relying on players, coaches, or the league

itself as a source of news, then sport consumers are only reinforcing the Lombardian ethic that is prevalent within the sporting culture (Furness, 2016; Karimpour & Hull, 2017; Nixon, 1992).

Beyond examining how the media is beginning to shift away from traditional media frames rooted in the principles of the Lombardian ethic and hegemonic masculinity, athletes themselves are looking to gain control of how these narratives portray them. Sanderson et al. (2016) examined the differences in media response to injury by two quarterbacks, Robert Griffin III and Jay Cutler. While the circumstances surrounding each quarterback's injury were different, there were three frames they both shared that differed in results: placing the blame on the athlete, supporting the athlete, or shifting the blame away to the organization. From the findings of the research, despite support and blame coming from different places and being attributed to different parties, Griffin III and Cutler did not have any control over how the media covered their injuries (Sanderson et al., 2016). This lack of agency over their own names could be viewed as the boundaries that the Lombardian ethic within sports media has placed on athletes: while they are constantly the source of news attention and media coverage, they rarely have the chance to control what is being said about them or how they are portrayed in a public and lasting way. However, the recent media coverage of the retirement of two NFL players due to injury concerns aligns with the previously mentioned research on framing of athletes with injury. In the case of both Chris Borland (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2018) and Andrew Luck (McGannon et al., 2021), it appears that the choice to retire gave the athletes the ability to control how they were going to be perceived as they retired from the sport of football. While the media was still equally likely to critique both of their stories, there was also a continued shift and fracturing in media frames that were related to the Lombardian ethic, the 'pain principle,' and hegemonic masculinity. As a result of these findings, it remains to be seen whether the media coverage of the NFL has fully

shifted away from the Lombardian ethic. Examining the case of a high-profile quarterback like Joe Burrow will continue to contribute to the development of an exact answer.

Methodology

Selection of Methods

In conducting research on the presence of the Lombardian ethic in contemporary sports, specifically in the National Football League, it would be best to view it from the lens of those who cover these professional athletes for a living: the media. With the influence that the media has in framing stories and creating narratives about professional athletes, they can be seen as a primary source by which an ideal like the Lombardian ethic would be both cultivated and upheld within professional sport. From national media pundits to local beat writers of a professional team, there is a dearth of available reading and viewing that sport consumers can engage with in order to inform their opinions and knowledge of whatever aspect of sport they are looking to gain insight into. In addition, sport consumers also have greater access to how they can obtain this knowledge, as the rise of digital media streaming platforms have given way to traditional writers utilizing podcasts or video essays to create their narrative. In total, the focus of this research - a case study of Joe Burrow's calf injury, the recovery from it, and the media coverage of it - lays the foundation for qualitative content analysis in a narrative lens to occur and allow for new insights to be gained from the conclusions.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Selecting content analysis as the primary methodology for this research paper allows for themes relevant to the purpose of this study to emerge naturally from the data, or artifacts, itself and be told through a narrative story. The goal of content analysis is to find deeper meaning of some object through the analysis of cultural artifacts, which are created by sports media and

journalism. More specifically, qualitative content analysis is the process by which a researcher is “systematically describing and conceptualizing textual meaning that is at least partly latent and requires some degree of interpretation” (Schreier, 2019, p. 5). Within the process of qualitative content analysis, the researcher is responsible for developing a research question to base the analysis off of, select relevant artifacts, create a coding frame, and present the results found from this process.

Artifact Selection

The artifacts that will be selected are based entirely on the focus of this research paper, meaning that content related to Joe Burrow's calf injury and how the Cincinnati Bengals were impacted by it is of relevant focus. With this in mind, a timeframe needed to be established to determine which artifacts should be included and which artifacts should be excluded. Given that Joe Burrow's calf injury occurred on July 27th, 2023, this established the starting date; including anything before the calf injury (i.e., Burrow's first day of training camp) would not have added any value to addressing the main issue at hand. There is a heavy skew in the amount of articles selected towards the first couple of days after Burrow injured his calf, as these represented the initial thoughts of the situation in addition to how Burrow and the organization reacted after it occurred. Establishing a start date for the content selection was not difficult; however, figuring out an end date required slightly more research. The last artifact included was published November 17th, 2023. This date was selected because, on November 16th, 2023, Joe Burrow suffered a torn ligament in his right wrist, effectively ending his season; this injury occurred after his calf had presumably healed to near full strength for a few weeks. In the context of the other artifacts selected, this November date was an outlier due to the fact that Burrow was believed to have been nearing full recovery from his calf injury during the beginning of October 2023.

However, it felt appropriate to include at least one artifact that covered both major injuries Burrow suffered in the span of four months, because of the ability for initial comparison between the two.

Following the establishment of a time frame was the decision on which artifacts to include in the analysis. With qualitative content analysis, the focus on artifact collection is not the amount of artifacts selected as it is if done quantitatively, but rather the ability to draw relevant themes from the artifacts themselves (Huxley, 2020; Schreier, 2019). This guiding framework influenced the type of artifacts that were chosen within this analysis in addition to the quantity of artifacts studied. Given the focus on how media coverage may contribute to the upholding of the Lombardian ethic in contemporary sports, online news articles were selected as the primary artifact to analyze. Despite the fact that social media has found a wider and more diverse audience or how podcasts and videos have created long-form outlets through which insiders and analysts can cover a topic, news articles seemed to be a form of artifact through which concrete themes could be drawn from. In this analysis, there are 15 different news sites that had articles included, from local Cincinnati news (*WLWT*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, etc.) to more national outlets (*ESPN*, *The Athletic*, etc.). This mix represented an effort to get insight from those who had jobs that solely covered the Cincinnati Bengals to those who were merely commenting on the state of the Bengals in the context of other NFL teams in any given week. Moreover, the amount of articles (n=89) reflects the emphasis on being able to get claims that aren't too specific yet are not too general, rather than finding every available news article published from July 27th, 2023 to November 17th, 2023 about Joe Burrow's calf injury. To obtain these articles and news sources, a Google search was done with key phrases such as "Joe Burrow calf injury" or "Joe Burrow playing through pain," with changes made where necessary.

In some instances, articles were manually selected by looking at the list of articles that an author published within the timeframe of this study. For example, *The Athletic* allows the user to see all of the articles that a specific author contributed to; many other sites did not have this option. Overall, though this sample of articles is selective in nature, there is still a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, list to look at. The news sources for Burrow's calf injury included *All Bengals* (n=8), *AP News* (n=2), *Bengals.com* (n=4), *Bleacher Report* (n=4), *CBS Sports* (n=4), *Cincinnati Enquirer* (n=1), *ESPN* (n=8), *Gridiron Heroics* (n=1), *NFL.com* (n=2), *ProFootballTalk* (n=1), *Sports Injury Central* (n=1), *The Athletic* (n=45), *The Ringer* (n=6), *WLWT* (n=1), *Yahoo! Sports* (n=1). As previously mentioned, the significant increase in the amount of articles from *The Athletic* is a result of an ability to look at each article that the beat writer for the Cincinnati Bengals wrote during the established time frame. Without the use of a software tool to gain access to more articles relevant to Burrow's injury across a wider range of sites, it was appropriate to selectively obtain the sample.

Narrative Analysis Applied to Qualitative Content Analysis

In conducting a qualitative content analysis, the basis of the research findings were to come as a result of the engagement with the selected artifacts through a thematic narrative analysis framework, similar to the research conducted by McGannon et al. (2022) in covering the media's coverage of Andrew Luck's retirement. As a result of this, the qualitative content analysis done within the scope of this research is different than what would traditionally be expected. For instance, rather than entering the familiarization process with rigid categories to assign each artifact to, the categories presented themselves as themes throughout each article examined. What was important to this research specifically was observing how the themes that were identified within each artifact were able to relate to each other to highlight whether or not

tenets of the Lombardian ethic were present in the coverage of Joe Burrow's recovery from injury. As McGannon et al. (2022) covered in their research on Andrew Luck's retirement coverage within the media, the analysis itself focused on multiple readings of the articles, making connections between articles and sources, and the continual asking of questions related to the aim of this research. In this regard, then, it is first important to outline the research question guiding the framework of this analysis:

Research Question: How can the media reinforce the notion that athletes should put their bodies on the line for individual and team success in sports?

This question is left intentionally vague due to the consideration of not only Joe Burrow dealing with a calf injury, but also the general idea of athletes being socialized to play through pain by a variety of external factors, whether through the creation of stable sports networks or the influence of coaches or team staff (Malcom, 2006; Nixon, 1992). Stemming from the Lombardian ethic's promotion of a 'winning at all costs' mentality, the core part of this question stems from whether or not the media plays a role in maintaining this exclusionary ideal that has slowly been being chipped away at. Because of this, the following is expected to be found at the conclusion of the analysis:

Hypothesis #1: As Burrow attempts to play on an injured calf, the media will continue to push the 'warrior' narrative that is central to the Lombardian ethic and the 'pain principle.'

Given how Scott (1973) and Kew's (1978) description of the Lombardian ethic is nearly war-like in nature, similar to Jansen & Sabo's (1994) association between professional football and war imagery, it seems that the media will continue to use this choice connotation to valorize Burrow's attempts during his recovery from this injury. In addition to the promotion of this

Lombardian-based narrative as applied to Joe Burrow from the media, it would also be beneficial to expand the scope of the calf injury situation to the actual results put on the field. With this in mind, the following findings are predicted to be found at the conclusion of the analysis:

Hypothesis #2: As the Cincinnati Bengals play through the regular season, the media will primarily attribute Joe Burrow's calf injury to the offense's level of play and the team's success.

Hypothesis #3: Through the timeline of Joe Burrow's injury, the media will attribute blame to the team's management of his situation, while implicitly deflecting blame from the expectations that the media itself set.

Taken together, these two hypotheses serve the function of determining how the media places the blame on the Cincinnati Bengals' success during the time that Joe Burrow is dealing with the calf injury. The second hypothesis places the blame on the health of Joe Burrow's calf as central to the success of the offense. In effect, when Joe Burrow is playing on a strained calf, the team's offense and overall success will likely be more limited than when Joe Burrow is fully healthy. Comparison can be the thief of joy, as there will likely be many references made to the previous two seasons the Bengals competed in, when they advanced to the Super Bowl and AFC Championship games, respectively. Additionally, the third and final hypothesis within this artifact analysis will likely see two additional sources of blame: the Cincinnati Bengals organization and the media. Team personnel, whether coaches or athletic trainers, have significant influence in determining whether or not a player is likely to play through an injury or rest to fully recover. These sport networks, embedded within the framework of the Lombardian ethic, are likely to encourage the athlete to continue to play through the injury even though it may negatively impact their recovery and goals that they set for themselves (Nixon, 1992;

Barrette & Harman, 2020). While the media may be quick to place blame on Burrow's calf as the reason for the Bengals' offensive futility or the coaching staff for allowing Burrow to play rather than turning to his backup as he makes a full and complete recovery, they will not be likely to place blame on themselves for establishing expectations for Joe Burrow's return. It is difficult to determine whether Joe Burrow himself, or members of the Bengals organization broadly, see what sports pundits write about Joe Burrow and if this has any influence in their decision-making. However, the influence that the media has can not be denied, as seen by the effects that media framing has on the types of content that sports consumers are interested in reading (Lewis & Weaver, 2015). Ultimately, analyzing these media articles will prove to be a litmus test of how much of an influence the Lombardian ethic still has in professional sports today.

Findings

As was previously mentioned, the goal of this section was to tell a story about the themes that emerged from the selected sample of media articles. This story aims to relate each article to one another, compare and contrast its content with the theoretical underpinnings of the research question (i.e., the Lombardian ethic), and bring about a clearer understanding of a way to work forward with the results. With this goal in mind, this narrative telling of the results will be categorized by different time periods throughout the calf injury: Training Camp/Preseason, Regular Season (Weeks 1-5), and Conclusion (Weeks 6-10). In an attempt to tell a cohesive story, breaking the timeline up into these three periods better allows for a more in-depth look into each article within the context of the time period it was written and in relation to the other articles written during that time. Bringing in additional perspectives in comparison with each will only

contribute to working towards answering the primary research and better validating whether the hypotheses were true or not.

Training Camp/Preseason (07/27/2023 - 08/29/2023)

Burrow's injury occurred on the second day of the Cincinnati Bengals' training camp, on July 27th, 2023, marking the start of the media coverage on this situation. As the team practice was coming to a close and the offensive and defensive units were running through situational drills, Joe Burrow gingerly limped to the sideline and sat on the ground, holding his right calf. As medical personnel came over to attend to him and teammates crowded his view from the rest of the media and fans in attendance, there was a looming sense of dread and anxiety hanging over the crowd. Minutes later, as Burrow went on a medical cart and was taken back into the team's athletic training facilities, the floodgates for media speculation opened.

One of the primary themes that emerged from this initial fallout from his injury and throughout the Bengals' preseason was the general normalization of Burrow's injury within the context of other injuries in the NFL. The Lombardian ethic embraces the ideas behind the 'pain principle' that call for the normalization of injuries through the rationale that they are an accepted part of sports (Sabo, 2009). After the practice in which Burrow was injured, the initial reaction within the media seemed to align with this ideal: players would get sore during these practices, especially considering that they were coming off of their first practice a day before. Before even receiving any official confirmation from the Bengals' PR team or athletic training staff, speculation already began with respect to the status of the calf injury and the level of concern that Bengals fans should have:

This isn't a season ending injury. He could be fully healthy for the start of the regular season with the opener just six weeks away.

Burrow has dealt with much worse than this. (Rapien, 2023a, "Resilient")

Within this quote, expectations are already beginning to be set for Joe Burrow's return, despite the injury having occurred so recently. Not only does the author minimize the severity of the injury, but there is already an effort to establish a timeline for Burrow's recovery to play in time for the regular season opener. Given the underlying sport ethic that Hughes and Coakley (1991) used to describe why collegiate athletes were more likely to continue to compete while playing through pain, one of the primary factors associated with this was external pressure. Within this analytical context, it can be seen that reference Burrow's previous history with injury, in addition to assumptions about his character, further put pressure on Burrow to meet these expectations to return:

It won't be easy, but there's no reason why he won't attack this calf issue with the same resilience and determination. (Rapien, 2023a, "Resilient")

Reinforcing the general normalization of Burrow's calf injury were statements made by his teammates during media availability sessions after the practices. Nixon (1992) and Curry's (1993) research on the presence of stable sports networks implicates teammates within these networks that often have influence in determining the perception of how an athlete's recovery from injury goes. Given Burrow's status as the Cincinnati Bengals' franchise quarterback and the importance of the quarterback position within the NFL, it should come as no surprise that many of his teammates were asked to give their reactions to his calf injury. While some teammates, such as Pro Bowl wide receiver Ja'Marr Chase, continued the trend of downplaying the severity of the injury and attributing their beliefs in his full recovery to his character, there was one teammate who proved to be more on the cautious side due to previously dealing with a calf

injury: defensive end Sam Hubbard. Hubbard, who dealt with a calf injury the season before, offered his assessment of his own injury in relation to Burrow's:

“[Calf injuries] are really painful,” he said. “They are not the end of the world. They do linger a bit. Took me a while...take a couple weeks, rest them and good to go. That's all I know.”

He was sure not to speculate on if Burrow was going through the exact same situation... (Dehner Jr., 2023a, para 17-19)

Amidst the relative subdued level of concern within the locker room, Hubbard's previous experience with a calf injury pushes back on the need for speculation on the part of the media, fans, and team personnel. No two calf injuries are the same, but Hubbard's experience is still valuable to consider in how his management of the injury could be applied to Burrow's, especially considering the difference when each occurred. Despite the fact that the media has heard little from Burrow on what his expectations for recovery are, their use of instant reactions and teammate responses begins to set the stage for the utilization of media frames that embody Lombardian principles.

One final trend that was prominent during this time period was the general reaction by the media, specifically that which was independent of any player/coach input and was more centered on their own analysis of the situation. Considering how powerful the use of media frames in reinforcing certain power relationships are, such as with gender and hegemonic masculinity (Cooky et al., 2010), then it did not come as a surprise that most of these articles overreacted to news surrounding the calf and practices following the injury (*italics in each quote added for emphasis*):

“Sources: *Bengals Avoid Disaster*, Joe Burrow Expected to Miss Time With Calf Injury” (Rapien, 2023b, article title)

[Burrow] sat on the ground as trainers and a smattering of players came near, staring down *judging the health of his right calf — and the Bengals’ championship aspirations*. (Dehner Jr., 2023a, para. 4)

There seemed to be *no Burrow hangover*. (Hobson, 2023, para. 17)

With the way the media wrote about Burrow’s calf strain, both hours and days after the injury occurred, it would seem that this injury ended their Super Bowl aspirations despite the season not even beginning. By overreacting this early into the media coverage of Burrow’s calf injury, it only seems reasonable to follow that the right calf of their franchise quarterback will be attributed as the main source of any Bengals offensive struggles.

Return to Practice/Lead-Up to Regular Season (08/30/2023 - 09/09/2023)

Despite being one of the less media-driven portions of the analysis, there were still notable moments to consider in the process of Joe Burrow’s recovery from his calf injury. Now over one month into the recovery process, Burrow officially returned back to practice with the regular season approaching. In covering his first practice, there was still an undertone of expectations to return to the heights of his fully healthy playing abilities:

All appeared well with the franchise quarterback. There was no calf sleeve, there was no hesitation or anything out of the ordinary from the work Burrow went through during the 30 minutes open to the media. (Dehner Jr., 2023b, “How did Burrow look?”)

[After their spring and summer additions], expectations for this Cincinnati squad are high. They will need a healthy Burrow to live up those hopes. (Stumbaugh, 08/31, para. 12)

Burrow's return to practice was one of the first hurdles that he needed to clear before considering what his status would be for the team's first game. Instead of focusing on his availability to both practice and play, given the expectation that he will be competing through the pain, there will now be a greater emphasis on his abilities to execute at a high level. Burrow expressed his expectations to not only be ready to play for Week 1 of the regular season but also resume his role as starting quarterback; however, the coaching staff, led by head coach Zac Taylor, did not want to fully commit to whether or not he would be available. This split between explicit player goals and undisclosed coaching staff plan could go on to represent an additional hurdle that team management must work with Burrow to clear. While the Bengals may have outlined a rehabilitation plan for Burrow to be able to play at or near full health, Burrow's motivations may be different, especially if he is considering his own individual statistics or team performance. When both player and staff goals are aligned, the general trend in player recovery from injury is positive (Barrette & Harman, 2020); when these two goals are not aligned, then progress, like Joe Burrow's right calf, may be limited.

Regular Season Week 1 vs. Cleveland Browns (09/10/2023-09/16/2023)

After signing the NFL's largest total contract of all time, Joe Burrow entered the regular season as the entrenched Week 1 starter for the Cincinnati Bengals. Upon the game's conclusion, though, more lingering questions about the direction of the Bengals under a limited Burrow arose than answers to a weeks-long calf debate. One of the first themes that emerged from the selection

of articles written after the Week 1 game against Cleveland was where the blame should be assigned for the Bengals' performance. There were a few areas that the media immediately pointed to for blame: the rainy weather that caused Joe Burrow to wear a glove on his throwing hand, the first week matchup against a historically difficult divisional opponent, or the record new contract that officially placed the title of 'franchise quarterback' to Burrow. However, one area of blame was most frequently mentioned within the articles, whether directly or not: Joe Burrow's calf. Burrow's performance in the game, statistically one of the worst of his career, were almost always qualified with his lower body ailment:

The question next is how much of this was an accumulation of *calves* and contracts and how much of it is a real issue of long-term concern. (Dehner Jr., 2023c, "A rusty start to the Bengals season")

But I think we're all ignoring the most obvious answer here: *the calf injury that kept Burrow out of most of the preseason*. (Ruiz, 2023a, "Joe Burrow and the Cincinnati Bengals passing game can't handle a little rain?")

[Burrow's] every move is news, his haircut a headline, and *his calf a matter of national security*. (Dehner Jr., 2023d, para. 3)

All three of these selected quotes illustrate that the level of concern for the Bengals' offensive performance against Cleveland was centered around Joe Burrow's right calf. With regards to the intended purpose behind media framing (D'Angelo, 2017; de Vrees, 2005), the media is beginning to establish the association from 'Joe Burrow's calf' to 'Cincinnati Bengals offensive struggles.' As previously mentioned, while there were other areas of blame that authors

in the media mentioned, the calf injury is beginning to become the primary issue that the media wants the audience to be able to point to.

By beginning to frame the calf injury as one of the primary reasons for the Bengals' poor offensive performance, the media is subtly beginning to encompass the ideas behind the Lombardian ethic and the 'pain principle.' While there was no explicit mention of Burrow "playing through the pain" or having a "winning at all costs" mentality in deciding to play, there was still underlying messaging that resembled what the media wrote about in training camp. Burrow was expected to play on an injured calf because of the frequency that other NFL athletes play through their injuries. Even though the full extent of the injury was not entirely known, there was the continued placement of expectations that Burrow would be able to overcome any pain or injury, due to his character:

Yeah, [the calf is] a thing still, but [Burrow's] a competitor and have played through far tougher ailments than this. (Dehner Jr., 2023e, "Burrow's calf")

Players play hurt all the time — welcome to the NFL...I wonder whether the Bengals should have sat Burrow, taken the L, and given him another week to actually reach 100 percent — but that's with the benefit of hindsight (Solak, 2023a, "The Zag: Joe Burrow Wasn't Ready to Play")

While not overtly stating it, the media is placing Burrow in light of the 'warrior' narratives that dominate the discourse surrounding the Lombardian ethic and 'pain principle.' His ability to play hurt all the time is not only normal within the context of the NFL, but is made to be unique due to his previous history of playing through injuries and how his limited abilities were part of the reason that the Bengals were not able to win their first game. Solak's (2023a)

quote is compelling, given the fact that he not only acknowledges the fact that the 'pain principle' is an understood reality of playing in the NFL, but he also contradicts this by advocating for the Bengals to have rested Joe Burrow. However, considering the aforementioned expectations that the media placed on Joe Burrow during the preseason to return from injury by the beginning of the regular season, it is interesting to consider why Solak didn't attribute any blame to how the media contributed to rushing Joe Burrow back to a limited version of himself.

Throughout the remainder of the regular season, then, it will be important to not only track how the media is placing blame around the Bengals' performance, but to also monitor whether any of this blame goes back on them.

Regular Season Week 2 vs. Baltimore Ravens (09/17/2023-09/24/2024)

The biggest storyline coming out of the Bengals' next game was not that they were more competitive in the face of defeat; rather, it continued to narrow in on how Joe Burrow not only played on a strained calf, but also reaggravated the strain to potentially set himself back on his road to full recovery. Continuing from the themes that emerged from the Week 1 game against Cleveland, the media's coverage of the Bengals' performance once again revolved around Burrow's calf. No longer was the weather a factor, or the expectations established by a new contract. Instead, more worry came from the reaggravated calf that clearly raised more questions about the short-term future of the Bengals and of Burrow:

While the play on the field represented progress, the question of how long he'll spend postgame answering questions about this injury could go on for a while. He admitted these things are "always ongoing," but when asked if he's worried about having to manage it throughout the season, the answer didn't involve the word no. (Dehner Jr., 2023f, para. 13).

But while the numbers are better, the vibes couldn't be worse after the 26-year-old limped off the field following a 27-24 loss to the Ravens on Sunday. (Ruiz, 2023b, "Cincinnati Bengals")

Coupled with the media wondering whether the team would have been better off giving Joe Burrow more time to recover from his calf injury, it is becoming more apparent that the media is attributing blame for the Cincinnati Bengals' performance to two entities: Joe Burrow's right calf and the Cincinnati Bengals' management of the situation. As Coach Zac Taylor's midweek press conferences became more laden with questions surrounding Burrow's calf (Dehner Jr., 2023g), there became a clearer understanding that, despite the media's reliance on Joe Burrow's characteristics, he was being affected by playing through pain. Not only was Burrow risking the potential for reinjury when he first stepped onto the field for the game, but indirect criticism was being raised towards the mutually agreed upon decision by Burrow and the coaching staff to let Burrow return to the game after the reaggravation, which could have potentially lead to a further extreme injury to his Achilles tendon (Sigler, 2023). Even still, Burrow himself recognizes the nature of likelihood of injuries as a quarterback:

"You got to be able to adapt," Burrow said Thursday. "It's part of the game. You know, nobody's 100 percent healthy out there. Everybody's dealing with something."

Taking a chance with all of [contingency] scenarios far outweighs taking a chance on rushing Burrow back so early — as hard as it would be for the Bengals or Burrow to swallow. (Dehner Jr., 2023g, para. 16, 38)

At this point in the season, the Bengals have failed to reach up to their Super Bowl-caliber level of play, an idea that is rooted in the expectations of the media leading into the season. The core issue seems to surround Joe Burrow's calf injury, whether being the calf itself or the management of Burrow's recovery. Because of this, the buzz surrounding the Cincinnati Bengals grew to a high point, given the amount of different parties that commented on the matter. This included one of Burrow's teammates, Ja'Marr Chase, who previously said at training camp that he was not worried about Burrow not being able to recover fully; now, though, Chase stated that he always believed Burrow should have been sitting out well into the season (Dehner Jr., 2023h). Moreover, the media coverage this week included medical input, a source that was never relied heavily upon since the initial injury:

A trip to injured reserve would help Burrow's calf fully heal, Jaraillo said, while also aid in long-term prevention of future injuries, such as an Achilles tear. Short of this, Burrow "runs the risk of playing with this all season," and not only that, but experiencing worsened effects (Benjamin, 2023, para. 7)

Karimpour and Hull (2017) advocate for the use of qualified medical experts and related personnel to be able to better explain injuries to athletes than journalists would. By incorporating these perspectives into their articles, a new alternative to Burrow's recovery has been introduced: placing Burrow on injured reserve, which will prevent a player from playing any game for four weeks upon placement (Benjamin, 2023; Nettuno, 2023). Whether this option will fully heal Burrow's calf is unknown, but it is a step in the right direction of including medical expertise, as opposed to merely speculating and offering unsubstantiated opinions.

Finally, with medical experts advocating for placing Joe Burrow on injured reserve and Burrow's teammates expressing concern about Burrow's ability, a shift in attention turns to the

Bengals organization. Through all the articles in the Week 2 time frame, there remains a lack of transparency from the Bengals' decision-making process in determining whether Burrow is able to continue playing in the short-term. Besides looking at team-released practice reports, indicating whether Burrow was a limited participant or not, Joe Burrow's status was continually undetermined leading up to their Monday Night Football game for Week 3. As the saga of Joe Burrow's calf injury continues, the narratives created by the media will continue to be embedded within the Lombardian ethic, placing blame on the calf's role in limiting the athlete and the team's management of this limiting factor.

Regular Season Week 3 v. Los Angeles Rams (09/25/2023 - 09/31/2023)

The Bengals find themselves in the win column for the first time this season and Joe Burrow's efforts are fully elevated by the media. Despite neither team scoring more than twenty points in the game, a sign that defensive stops were equally as valued as offensive possessions, the media covering the Bengals appeared to be focused on the fact that their franchise quarterback played a full game of football without experiencing any setbacks and being on the winning side. Of the postgame coverage from this game, the prevalence of Lombardian-based principles and terminology were higher than any other week:

“Postgame Observations: *Joe Burrow Plays Through Pain* Leads Bengals Past

Rams 19-16” (Rapien, 2023c, article title)

[Burrow] wasn't his normal self, but he played through the pain and put the Bengals in position to win. (Rapien, 2023c, “Burrow Plays Through Pain”)

Credit Burrow for grinding through the calf injury and proving his connection with wide receiver Ja'Marr Chase (12 for 141) can be enough, but the Bengals have real existential issues they need to figure out if any expectations of this season become realistic. (Rodrigue & Dehner Jr., 2023, "Bengals' slow starts continue")

"Joe Burrow plays through calf injury, leads Bengals to first win" (Baby, 2023, article title)

Burrow himself echoes the Lombardian sentiment that places winning above anything else:

"There is risk to go out there and potentially reinjure it," Burrow said. "But there's also the risk to not go out there and be 0-3. So I wanted to be out there for my guys, and I was confident that I would be able to do what I needed to get the win." (Baby, 2023, para. 3)

As opposed to the first two weeks, when Burrow was limited in his ability and the Bengals lost their games, the media ensured that Burrow's performance would not be forgotten during this win against the Los Angeles Rams. This week represents the first time that the Lombardian ethic and 'pain principle' were explicitly visible to sport consumers; Burrow was focused on the end goal of winning, which he accomplished, despite his injury (Sabo, 2009; Scott, 1973). In what has been nearly two months of a calf-centered issue, it appears that the media coverage in this week was generally favorable towards both Burrow's ability and availability.

However, the general analysis of the game did not follow this similar positive light, but rather took on a more extensive look at why the Bengals offense, figured to be near the top of the league, was struggling with their output. As in the past two weeks, Joe Burrow's calf was the central culprit of the offensive woes:

Burrow's right calf laces through the explanation of every issue. It's limiting the offense, constricting the space and sapping the explosiveness. There's zero off-script creativity. Those are limitations out of the Bengals' control. They also aren't going anywhere. (Dehner Jr., 2023h, para. 10-11)

For the Bengals, [similar levels of concern are] because of another week of dealing with Joe Burrow's *de-calf-inated* offense. It looks, sounds and smells like the normal Bengals attack, just without all the good stuff. (Dehner Jr., 2023i, para. 7)

These two quotes from Dehner Jr. (2023h; 2023i) place Joe Burrow as being in possession of the offense, while also attributing the limitations to his strained right calf. Through choice diction and creative wordplay, Dehner Jr. (2023h; 2023i) answers the pressing question at large of what has been the issue with the Bengals offense by centering on Joe Burrow's calf; team management or the media themselves are not sources of blame in this scenario. In considering this, there appears to be a difference in blame attribution to when a team loses as opposed to when a team wins. Through the use of framing devices, the media has this ability to associate words and ideas with different meanings, thus becoming readily available in the minds of sports consumers. For Bengals fans who were concerned about the team's offensive performance despite winning the game, their reading of the media's articles will make them

believe that Joe Burrow's calf is the primary reason the Bengals have not been as successful as expected. What they will not consider and critically assess are how the expectations established by the media influenced during the offseason and preseason led them to their action of blame attribution.

Regular Season Week 4 v. Tennessee Titans (10/01/2023 - 10/07/2023)

With their first win in mind, the Cincinnati Bengals appeared to step back in another poor offensive performance. Similar to Weeks 1 and 2, the media began to question the Bengals' ability under a limited Joe Burrow, rather than including any positive developments like in Week 3. Now, more skepticism seemed to surround the trajectory of Burrow's full recovery from his calf injury before the Bengals' playoff chances would begin to slip away, further associating his calf as being central to their offensive and team success. This dim outlook highlights the 'worst-case' outcome of choosing for the Bengals' quarterback to play through the pain of his injury, rather than letting him fully heal before competing:

With Burrow still limited and the team searching for any way to grab a few wins and get into the Week 7 bye, what provides belief the offense will look dramatically different Sunday in Arizona? (Dehner Jr., 2023j, para. 16)

Ultimately, it's hard to see things getting brighter for the Bengals if Burrow's calf continues to bother him. (Kasabian, 2023, para. 9)

Not only is there the belief that Burrow is vital to the team's offensive success, but there is also the shared viewpoint that the Cincinnati Bengals as an entire team are reliant on Joe Burrow's health to help them find a way to win. However, what was made abundantly clear by

the media is that the Bengals, over two months into the calf recovery process, are comfortable with Joe Burrow playing in a limited fashion, as opposed to his fully healthy backup:

Burrow isn't healthy and clearly needs to rest. Cincinnati's bye doesn't come until Week 7...

In a perfect world, they might be able to sit Burrow for both of those games, count on getting a split with a win over Arizona, and get him back after three weeks of rest (Barnwell, 2023, "5. Cincinnati Bengals (1-3)")

"Bengals are sticking with a limited Joe Burrow. Here's why" (Dehner Jr., 2023k, article title)

With Joe Burrow's calf injury still limiting his mobility and teams teeing off on him, should the Bengals shut down the franchise quarterback for a few weeks, go forward with backup Jake Browning and a full complement of the playbook? (Dehner Jr., 2023k, para. 2)

The media is not only beginning to recognize the limitations that Joe Burrow is having while playing through his calf injury, but also understanding that the Lombardian principle of 'winning at all costs' coupled with abiding by the 'pain principle' may not be the best outcome for any athlete. According to the media, the costs of Joe Burrow continuing to play through his calf injury include losing three games and jeopardizing the Bengals' playoff hopes, despite only being four games into the regular season. Interestingly, in this week, less was made about Joe Burrow's 'warrior' mentality that attributes his toughness and leadership characteristics to

playing through pain; instead, there was a heightened sense that this Lombardian-based mentality was an outdated one to adopt:

I'm writing my third iteration of "Should we be concerned about the Bengals? in four weeks.

It has become clear the Bengals don't trust Burrow (or Burrow doesn't trust his balky right calf) in [empty personnel] situations, and that's taking a chunk out of this offense. (Barnwell, 2023, "5. Cincinnati Bengals (1-3)")

As was an integral part of the previous three weeks of the regular season, the media's reactions to Joe Burrow's limited capabilities within the team's offense were at an all-time high. In pointing out the calf injury as the primary culprit for the team's problems, as well as facets of the offense that should and should not be attributed to the health of Burrow's calf, the media continue to build and utilize the frame the team's success to Burrow's strained right calf. Ultimately, the media coverage of this week makes the win against the Rams in Week 3 an outlier than the norm for the remainder of the season.

Regular Season Week 5 vs. Arizona Cardinals (10/08/2023 - 10/14/2023)

The main storyline that came out of this week's game against the Cardinals, a decisive victory, was that Joe Burrow looked as close to healthy as possible:

...but Burrow taking an enormous step in becoming his full, healthy self again was the story of the day. That's a significant sign for the hopes of the season.

(Dehner Jr., 2023, "Burrow finally looks 100 percent")

“Three plays that showed Bengals’ Joe Burrow was back: ‘The whole huddle was hyped’” (Dehner Jr., 2023m, article title)

In this moment that all but put the Arizona Cardinals away, Burrow screamed, flexed, and unleashed a cathartic celebration five weeks in the making. The message in his emotion was clear: I’m back.
(Dehner Jr., 2023m, para. 3-4)

“Bengals’ Joe Burrow says he feels close to 100% recovered from his calf injury”
(Dubin, 2023, article title)

At this point in the analysis, it appears that the worry from the previous week’s game is beginning to fade away with the optimism of a healthy Joe Burrow, and a winning Cincinnati Bengals team, replacing it. While not directly the center of the media’s focus anymore, the ‘pain principle’ is still being acknowledged as something that Burrow has to continue to deal with as long as he is in the recovery process. However, it seems that the attention on Burrow’s pain itself is being minimized once again in favor of discussing the winning results of the team. Though the season is five weeks old, this acceptance that Joe Burrow’s calf is a significant part of how he will be playing has been a staple belief since the beginning of training camp.

The Rest of the Regular Season/Season-Ending Injury (10/15/2023 - 11/17/2023)

After wins against the Arizona Cardinals in Week 5 and Seattle Seahawks in Week 6, the Cincinnati Bengals were hitting their stride under a nearly-healthy Joe Burrow; as a result, the media’s attention was beginning to focus more on the entire offense and team performance, as opposed to the quarterback’s calf holding them back. By the week leading into the Bengals’

matchup against the San Francisco 49ers, three months since the initial injury, the calf was no longer the center of attention and the Bengals of old were warmly welcomed back by the media:

The calf injury has essentially become a non-story. The last two games against the Cardinals and Seahawks made that apparent. Though, it's not totally out of Burrow's mind. The injury still requires attention and management during the course of the week. Still, Burrow pointed out he's close to 100 percent and that means all offensive levers can be pulled if necessary against the 49ers. (Dehner Jr., 2023n, "This Week in Burrow")

This quote is symbolic of the general turning point in media coverage surrounding Joe Burrow's calf injury. Just like any other injury that an NFL player has to deal with, it has gotten to the point that it can no longer be used as the scapegoat for why the Bengals offense was struggling during the season. No longer are there any calls for the Bengals coaching staff to change the offense to suit Burrow's limited mobility and playing style. Instead, the media frame associating Burrow's calf with the team's offensive success has been replaced by the media frame associating Joe Burrow's fully health with the reigniting of their Super Bowl aspirations:

[Burrow] was absent for much of the season up to this point. That's not revisionist history or schematic criticism—Burrow could not do this a few weeks ago. Still recovering from his preseason calf injury, Burrow was confined to the pocket, unable to extend plays...He clearly wasn't able to play. Burrow's calf injury did more than affect his play; it limited what the offense could call. (Solak, 2023b, "The Big Thing: That's How the Cincinnati Bengals Are Supposed to Look")

Solak's (2023b) reference to presenteeism, or the detracted value from an employee when they are not performing at their full capacity and can be classified as 'absent', is one that has

been studied before in elite German handball and track and field athletes (Mayer & Thiel, 2018), but has never been fully applied to the professional football context. This idea of presenteeism, then, could be related back to the overall media coverage of Joe Burrow as he was playing through the pain with his calf injury; it was generally understood that he was not performing to his peak productivity, yet he was still willing to go out with his teammates and practice and compete each week.

As the Bengals' season progressed, Burrow's return to full health fulfilled the initial expectations set by the media and helped them move away from the calf strain. Unfortunately, one final injury proved to be the closing chapter of Joe Burrow's 2023-2024 injury-riddled season. In Week 10, against the division rival Baltimore Ravens, Joe Burrow snapped the ligaments in his throwing wrist; with camera angles showing Burrow writhing in pain after attempting to throw, it became clear that this was one injury he could not play through. Adding this season-ending wrist injury to his extensive list of injuries is not only concerning to Bengals fans for their hopes of the season, but also to those who understand the tolls of the Lombardian ethic and 'pain principle' on an athlete's mental and physical health. There is no relation to Burrow's calf injury and his wrist injury; instead, it was a matter of accepting the inherent risk of injury while being a quarterback in the National Football League:

People have accused Burrow of being a robot, a genius, an assassin, and an alien, among other monikers, but ultimately, he's still human. This grind must take a toll. It must wear on him physically and mentally. That compilation [of injuries] must be concerning. (Dehner Jr., 2023o, para. 11)

The term “injury-prone” has been thrown around... You’ll hear the name Andrew Luck. The ghost of his career hovers over Burrow’s due to the remarkable parallels. A franchise-altering No. 1 overall pick battling from injury to injury. Luck then walked away from a massive contract and essentially disappeared. (Dehner Jr., 2023o, para. 14)

“There is not really any other option than to be [mentally strong], Burrow said. “Otherwise, you’re not going to get through it and come back out on the other side. So no option. A lot of guys in that room are injured, have been injured. A lot of guys across the league, that’s part of the job we do. It’s expected. It’s not gonna be the last time something like this happens in my career, too. That’s just part of it.” (Dehner Jr., 2023o, para. 30)

Discussion

Throughout the narrative qualitative content analysis, the overarching question that guided the analysis itself was how the media is responsible for reinforcing the notion that athletes should put their bodies on the line for individual and team success in sports. This question was rooted in the Lombardian ethic of embracing a ‘winning at costs’ mentality, while also examining the related accepted ‘pain principle’ within sports influencing athlete decision-making and recovery progress. Over nearly a four month period, the case of Joe Burrow shed more light onto how the Lombardian ethic is still present within sports and sports media coverage through the adoption of familiar narratives to describe Burrow playing through pain. Hypothesis #1 posited that, as Burrow played on his injured right calf, the media would be more likely to adopt the ‘warrior’ narrative that could be associated with the Lombardian ethic and

hegemonic masculinity as a whole. While not to the same extent as previous literature that examined this 'warrior'-like mentality that athletes embrace when they play through play (i.e., Anderson & Kian, 2012), Hypothesis #1 could be supported based on the attributions that the media made towards Joe Burrow's willingness to compete while playing injured. During this timeframe, Burrow was often commended based on his character throughout his previous seasons in the NFL, with media journalists often citing his leadership or toughness as a positive attribute that emerged from his dealing with his calf injury. The media also utilized quotes from different members of the team, whether that be his teammates or coaches, that lauded his performance especially when the team would win. As Bengals wide receiver Trenton Irwin shared after their pivotal Week 5 win against the Arizona Cardinals, "[Burrow] was in kill mode from the get-go" (Dehner Jr., 2023m). With the use of war-like imagery that football is clearly rooted in (Jansen & Sabo, 1994), it is evident that, while not outright calling him a 'warrior,' the media framed Burrow's performance during this time in a similar manner.

Also notable during this time frame of Burrow's right calf injury was how the media assessed blame for the Bengals' performances during the regular season. Hypothesis #2 hypothesized that the media would identify Joe Burrow's calf injury and the limitations that were to come from it as the reason for the offense's level of play and the team's success. Looking back on the selected regular season games, the expectations for the offense's level of play fluctuated week-by-week, going from hopes of replicating the success of the 2022-2023 Bengals to desires for the offense to simply put points on the scoreboard. Despite the amount of articles that acknowledged that Burrow playing through the pain of this injury would be detrimental to his overall level of play, as opposed to resting it, the frequency of the calf being mentioned as the cause of the offense's problems was more than any other potential point of blame. Several

different articles explicitly pointed to Joe Burrow's calf within the headline or the content of the article, while many other articles found a way to link the offensive struggles with Burrow's limitations in mobility and comfortability due to the calf. Whether calling the offense "de-calf-inated" (Dehner Jr., 2023i) or citing a lack of trust from the Bengals and Burrow himself to his "balky right calf" (Barnwell, 2023), the calf was always central to how the media would frame the Bengals' struggles and Burrow's failure to perform at the same level as previous seasons. Because of this, Hypothesis #2 was supported in that the media primarily used Joe Burrow's calf injury to attribute to any changes in offensive level of play, considering how it was framed during wins versus during losses, and the Bengals' early season performance as a whole.

Finally, the media's ability to use media frames as a way of making certain topics more salient than others was subject to further examination, in terms of how the Cincinnati Bengals organization managed Burrow's calf injury and if the media itself took any blame for rooting their coverage in the Lombardian ethic. With Hypothesis #3, it was predicted that the media would be likely to place blame on the team's way of managing Joe Burrow's injury that led to the Bengals' subpar performances, though not to the same extent as the calf, which was predicted and found to be the primary source of blame by the media. There were a few instances in which the media pointed to the team's lack of transparency in providing updates of Joe Burrow's status, including but not limited to head coach Zac Taylor failing to provide a firm timeline in the offseason or explaining why the Bengals decided to keep Burrow in certain games when he could have risked further reinjury. However, as previously mentioned with Hypothesis #2, the majority of the blame for the team's performance was placed on Burrow's calf; thus, the first part of this finding was moderately supported. Not only did Hypothesis #3 predict that the media would find an additional source to blame, but it was also expected that the media would not look inward and

find that their use of media framing devices could have also played a significant role in influencing expectations for Joe Burrow's complete return. Considering Lewis & Weaver's (2015) findings that audiences preferred narratives that focused more on the athlete as a person than their performance, it was clear that, amongst all of the articles written surrounding Joe Burrow's calf injury and the Bengals' performance as a team, the journalists made it a priority to give a deeper background into Burrow during this time. Consequently, then, the media does not factor their own influence in setting expectations for how the Bengals will perform during the season, given that Joe Burrow makes a full recovery to health in such a short amount of time. When audiences read these stories that center around 'Super Bowl-or-bust' or 'the need for a vintage Burrow performance,' they are not likely to go and initially blame the media for setting these lofty aspirations or rushed timelines because the media, and media framing generally, is not overtly visible to them. Instead, they are more likely to blame something tangible that they can actually point to as the primary issue with the Cincinnati Bengals, whether it be a strained right calf or a coaching staff that keeps their decisions close to their chest for gamesmanship purposes. As a result, the second part of Hypothesis #3 is supported, because there were rarely any articles within the artifact sample that saw the media place any portion of the blame to themselves, as they acted as external pressure (Hughes & Coakley, 1991) to Burrow's return.

Athletes are trained to embody the Lombardian ethic because it is continually upheld and reinforced in sports by the media. The media acts as an external factor that is included in their sports networks (Nixon, 1992), whether the athlete's choose to include them or not. Because of this potential for inclusion, the media utilizes media frames that are familiar to athletes, such as the Lombardian ethic, 'pain principle,' or hegemonic masculinity. Since all three concepts are similar in the ideals that they promote and goals they work towards, athletes then grow and are

socialized within this sporting culture rooted in these ideals; thus, Joe Burrow may have adopted a 'winning at all costs' mentality because that is how his coaches taught him to play during his younger years. Joe Burrow may play through the pain of an injury not only because that is how he was able to put himself on a path to success, but because he may have been exposed to different types of media that promoted this messaging. Ultimately, despite recent findings that the media is beginning to shift away from traditional frames surrounding outdated ideals such as hegemonic masculinity, the Lombardian ethic remains an integral part of sports media coverage and continues to hold a position of influence towards athletes and audiences alike.

Proposed Solutions

For the influence of the Lombardian ethic in sports journalism to be minimized, there must be accountability on the part of the media to prevent the use of frames that center around related Lombardian-based ideals, such as the 'pain principle' and hegemonic masculinity. The purpose of using media frames when writing news stories and narratives is to both highlight what the author believes is important regarding a topic in addition to intentionally utilizing different words, meanings, and imagery to provide a clearer image of the selected topic (D'Angelo, 2017; de Vrees, 2005). Thus, media frames can serve an organizing function within the minds of the audience; when they read an article that emphasizes a familiar frame, they are more likely to both recall this frame from previous stories and reinforce their belief in what the frame encompasses. Thus, when the media chooses to use a Lombardian-based frame, such as highlighting Joe Burrow's decision to play on a strained calf to exemplify 'winning at all costs,' they are reinforcing these ideals not only within sports journalism, but within the audience of the NFL at large. English (2017) discusses how mitigating a 'winning at all costs' mentality, which is at the core of the Lombardian ethic, "can be accomplished by altering how [audiences]

conceptualize and to what degree [audiences] emphasize zero-sum competition” (p. 188).

English (2017) goes on to further explain how there may need to be a shift in the rigid dichotomy between winning and losing; under the principles of the Lombardian ethic, winning means assuming dominance over an opponent, while losing represents the worst-case outcome. Though the media's coverage about sports is ultimately shaded by the prospect of a team's record, such as how the Bengals' preseason Super Bowl expectations were hampered by their poor start to the season, there is still an opportunity for the media to place less focus on a team's pursuit of winning. Instead, the media could shift to the adoption of the radical sport ethic (Kew 1978; Scott, 1973) that not only places value on the end goal of winning, but also the value by which winning is achieved. The radical sport ethic further aligns with English's (2017) second recommendation in expanding the outcomes of sport beyond wins and losses, such as performances and skills learning during practices and the competitions themselves. For example, rather than focusing on what Joe Burrow did well during his return to practice, the media could have shifted to including what Burrow may need to work on going forward. While this addendum may seem to only further reinforce the limitations of the calf injury as the primary source of blame for Burrow's struggles while playing through the pain, it actually serves the purpose of centering the story around Joe Burrow's health. In each story about Joe Burrow during the early portions of this timeframe, from training camp to the preseason, reports on his recovery progress were always met with the qualifications of whether he could return to an MVP-caliber player and lead this team back to its winning ways. With English's (2017) framework of expanded outcomes, though, the media will now be more apt to highlight Burrow's recovery with a more intentional focus on his performance as it relates to the immediate health of his calf, not the long-term goal of winning a Super Bowl.

The call for media journalists to prevent using Lombardian frames is sound in theory, but difficult to envision in practice. Extracting an ideal like the Lombardian ethic that is rooted within the sporting context is a nearly impossible task to do, given how pervasive the sport ethic is within all levels of sports, from youth to professional. Even further, there is no supervising force over the entire media structure that would be able to monitor the use of these specific frames; if there were, it would still be a logistical nightmare to enforce, given the extreme array of sports leagues, teams, and players that are covered on such a frequent basis. Because of this, the best step towards attempting to implement some regulatory measure of Lombardian frames is to create a report card similar to Lapchick's (2021) assessment of representation within sports media, based on race and gender. Following a similar model, a grading scale would be created to examine the prevalence of certain frames within sports media: the presence of the Lombardian ethic, the coverage of athletes based on demographic differences, and more. Seeing how TIDES, the organization that Lapchick's (2021) report card is issued under, includes several different professional sports leagues and entities, there is a framework with which this model could be built from. There would be difficulties in being able to go through each and every article while identifying these frames, considering the finite amount of resources to cover a seemingly infinite number of sources; however, with the use of sophisticated research softwares and independent graders, it is not out of the question that a new publication could be graded to attempt to hold the actors within sports media accountable.

As the media addresses its own issues in reporting and frame building, the NFL and its teams need to work on enacting changes that could minimize the impact that the Lombardian ethic has in this specific sporting context. One of the first areas that the NFL can look to focus on is in how they determine whether an athlete should be able to play through an injury or rest.

While no two injuries will ever be the same, there are certain expectations that an injury holds based on previous athletes holding these injuries: for example, injuries to a quarterback's wrist ligaments will likely require season-ending surgery. With respect to the current study, there are a wide range of outcomes that a team could expect for calf injuries; for example, while Joe Burrow played through his calf injury and was limited in what he could do relative to his previous performance, another quarterback may not be physically able to play on his calf due to previous leg injury history or simply to not want to risk reinjuring it. Keeping this in mind, the NFL has a transparency issue on injury reports that further complicates whether a team designates an injured athlete to be practicing and playing while injured or not. According to Pro Football Network (2023), the NFL's personnel report policy encompasses practices, games, and in-game injuries. The information that the team must be providing should be specific to the injured body part and credible, measured by the fact that teams submit an injury report three times during the week of a game. These rules generally seem vague, though. Despite the fact that the team is essentially updating the NFL league office and opposing teams the status of their injured players during practice, there are no specific measures that the NFL requires a team to follow for a player to be determined eligible to return to play. For example, during Burrow's return to practice and subsequent regular season games, one of the guiding principles for the team feeling comfortable in having him participate in practice or play in a game would be the simple fact that he did not experience any setbacks from his calf injury. This may seem like sound logic to determine whether or not any additional testing needs to be done if his calf did experience a setback, but it simplifies what was a complex injury issue into a binary 'yes' or 'no' benchmark. Seeing the shortcomings of the current personnel injury report by the NFL and relative simplicity in giving the coaching staff autonomy to make decisions about an athlete's ability to play, the

NFL and NFLPA should work to create a policy that centers around the idea of “return to performance” as opposed to the currently held principle of “return to play.” The difference between “return to play” and “return to performance” is the athlete’s ability to play. If they are not performing to their target level of performance, then they are ready to play, but not perform; however, if they are performing at a level that is unimpeded by an injury, then they are ready to perform altogether (“Return to Play in Sports,” n.d.). In essence, the idea of returning to play is one that is related to the ‘pain principle’ and ‘winning at all costs’ mentality central to the Lombardian ethic. Athletes who return to play, like Joe Burrow did after injuring his calf, are at further risk of reinjury while dealing with the frustration of not performing at the level they are used to.

By adopting a policy that advocates for an athlete’s return to performance, the NFL can work with athletic training staff from each team and independent medical consultants to establish a ‘guidebook’ of benchmarks that an athlete must meet depending on the injury. This guidebook could include injury expectations (i.e., severity, timeline, etc.) based on an analysis of every player who was reported to have dealt with that injury in the past and tests for coaching and training staff to put the player through to be able to clear them to return to perform. The implementation of a stricter and more regulated process, as opposed to one that is merely dependent on the lack of a setback within the athlete’s recovery, allows for the athletic training staff to take control of injury management situations and establish a dialogue with the coaching staff centered around the status of the player’s progress with their individualized ‘guidebook.’ Difficulties in employing this solution center around the dramatic overhaul that it would require from the NFL and all 32 teams to fully accommodate these changes. With this new ‘guidebook’ there would have to be a lot more individualized focus on athletes with injury, which may detract

from a coach's focus on completing their other duties, such as running practice or game planning for their upcoming opponent. Even more, athletic training staff may be put in a disadvantageous position due to the sheer amount of injuries that can occur during an NFL season, meaning that they could be working with individual athletes for longer hours, unable to provide an equitable amount of attention from athlete to athlete, or spending more time going through each benchmark to return to perform as opposed to taking care of day-to-day duties for all of the athletes on a team. To address these potential issues, the NFL will likely need to create a panel that judges whether an injury warrants the completion of benchmark testing from the 'guidebook,' such as a calf injury, or if it is something that may require attention outside of the expectation to meet certain benchmarks.

Ultimately, these solutions are being offered with the goal of prioritizing athlete physical and mental health more so than the value of winning and competing while injured. Within the artifact analysis, one of the more compelling sub-storylines was the Bengals' decision to play a limited Joe Burrow as their starting quarterback instead of a fully healthy backup in Jake Browning, who had been with the Cincinnati Bengals for the previous few seasons. Despite Browning's lack of experience as an NFL starter, he still won the training camp 'battle' to assume the backup position to Joe Burrow and start when needed during his rehabilitation process. However, he would never start during Burrow's recovery from his calf injury because Burrow did not want to risk the team being put in a disadvantageous position when he returned fully healthy rather than competing to win while he was injured. The team had the ability to override Burrow's intent to compete, considering that he was only ready to play, not ready to perform; unfortunately, though, they decided that a limited Joe Burrow put them in a better position to succeed than a fully healthy Jake Browning. Thus, Burrow's embrace of the

Lombardian ethic mentality not only dragged out his calf injury recovery longer than anticipated, especially considering the reaggravation in the Week 2 game against Baltimore, but it prevented the Bengals from meeting media-set expectations that they would never reach over the course of the regular season. After Burrow's season-ending surgery on his wrist, Jake Browning was able to valiantly lead the Bengals in a spirited effort during the second half of the season that fell just short of the playoffs. In a season filled with ups-and-downs, the Cincinnati Bengals realized that, even with their intent on winning and condoning Burrow to play while his right calf was injured, the costs of the Lombardian ethic weigh more heavily than the benefits of embracing it.

Limitations

Though this research is novel in how it brings in a narrative qualitative content analysis to describe how the Lombardian ethic is present in the media coverage of a current NFL player, there are limitations to consider when examining the results. One of the first limitations is in the narrative qualitative content analysis itself, which was adopted after the principles of narrative analysis by McGannon et al. (2022) in addition to the fundamentals of qualitative content analysis by Schreier (2019). If a qualitative content analysis on its own was conducted, there would have been a larger need for the extensive coding process and framework by which to identify relevant categories from the articles and code each article into these categories; this analysis simply focused on engaging with the articles to see which relevant themes would come up over the outlined timeframe. To mirror what a theme would potentially look like, the timeframe was broken up into different time periods in which each article published within those dates were examined within that broader context.

Other literature that utilized content analysis as a primary methodology had also used software and relevant data collecting to obtain an exhaustive sample of relevant articles within

the established timeframe. One of the difficulties in selecting the artifacts for this research was the inability to be able to go back through each source site and find all articles relating to Joe Burrow's calf injury, especially if they were behind a paywall, which is normally a more opinionated and analytical piece. For example, *The Athletic* is behind a paywall, but with a subscription to the website, it was easy to search through Paul Dehner Jr.'s previous coverage of the Cincinnati Bengals throughout the season to select any articles that were relevant to Joe Burrow's injury; however, to get *ESPN+*, most articles were behind paywalls, meaning it was more difficult to get an extensive sample from one of the nation's leading sports networks. With additional funding and a better knowledge of how to select artifacts to make a comprehensive sample using certain softwares, there will be a better aim for both reliability and validity for further content analyses.

One final limitation of this research is the fact that, with the findings answering the research question and the proposed solutions aiming to address issues raised with the Lombardian ethic's presence in sports, it is a very difficult task to completely eradicate an intangible concept from such an organized structure, as both sports and the media are. To say that the presence of the Lombardian ethic within sports and sports journalism would be completely minimized in a short period of time is a goal that will be difficult to achieve. Instead, these solutions need to be worked on by news agencies, the NFL, and sport consumers over a longer period of time before necessary change will be seen.

Suggestions for Future Research

With the scope of the study focusing on one professional athlete in the NFL, it may be interesting to do a larger content analysis that compares two or more professional athlete injuries as the primary case study. In considering the existing literature at large, there have already been

several content analyses that examine the 'pain principle' and hegemonic masculinity within the NFL because that is the sport that is most commonly associated with playing through the pain. However, cases across sports, such as the narrative surrounding Joel Embiid's most recent injury, can provide an insight into the differences in coverage by media members. This focus on other sporting leagues and injury cases can also extend into whether there is a difference between Lombardian framing with respect to race, gender, or level of competition (i.e., youth versus professional).

In addition, there could be a movement away from conducting content analyses to examine the presence of the Lombardian ethic within sports and sports media coverage to other methodologies. For example, it would have been really helpful to have interviewed both the subject of the research, Joe Burrow, as well as the examined media presence, since both would have been able to better explain the choices they made as it related to the Lombardian ethic. However, difficulties arise with obtaining access to these figures, considering their offseasons still require them to do work that fills up their already busy schedules, as well as the additional time needed to conduct the interviews, transcribe the interviews, and analyze the interviews. Even with these potential obstacles, there would still be an added benefit to be able to gain perspective from the people directly involved in the focus of the research.

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