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Arenas of Toleration in Canadian Football

While conducting his everyday work, a young man in Calgary was struck violently from behind, without notice or chance for recourse. His leg was broken, and various muscles and tendons were torn as a result. The injuries sustained from this violent act were so severe that he will never be able to return to his place of work again (CanWest News, 2007). In a separate incident in Montréal, a young university student was forced by a group of men to undress, receive anal prodding from a broomstick, and expose his naked body in public (Drolet, 2006). In lockers rooms across Canada, numerous groups of young men have filled and continue to fill syringes, injecting their bodies with illegal anabolic drugs (Gillis, 2005). These incidents, while seemingly distinct, share four main commonalities: they (1) were illegal, according to Canadian Criminal Code definitions; (2) all took place in Canadian workplaces;
(3) occurred in and around the sport of football; and (4) were all deemed tolerable enough that no criminal charges were laid.

**CONCEPTUALIZING TOLERABLE DEVIANCE**

Robert Stebbins (1996, p. xi) defines tolerable deviance as behaviours that “occupy a middle ground, both attitudinally and emotionally, between acceptable, normative practices and disdainful, criminal practices.” For him, deviance is defined in relation to the moral norms of the community, a conception similar to the one proposed by Émile Durkheim (1968 [1893]), and later by Kai Erikson (1966). In the Durkheimian sense, when the “collective conscience” is morally offended a community unites, a crime is socially defined, and the society seeks retribution through the punishment of the offender (1968 [1893], p. 80). Through this process, moral boundaries are defined, clarified, and redefined within the community (Erikson, 1966). Building on this, Stebbins explained that tolerable deviance occurs when individuals cause a slight (but not major) offence against the collective morality of a community. The offence is neither normative nor criminal, but instead rests on a continuum between the two.

The continuum of tolerable deviance is classified using three main subtypes of severity or threat to the collective good (Stebbins, 1996, pp. 4–5). The first and often most severe slight against collective morality is termed “criminal tolerable deviance.” This form is illegal, but tends to be overlooked by law enforcement officials, as
it is not considered a top priority. It is a crime but is not considered a “disdainful crime” (Stebbins, 1996, p. xi). The second type, “non-criminal tolerable deviance,” is outside the jurisdiction of the law but is still treated as deviant by the community. The final form, “legitimate tolerable deviance,” is guaranteed or protected by the law, despite its divergence from the norms of society.

Along with the three subtypes of tolerable deviance, Stebbins (1996, pp. 7–15) also provides three main justifications for why people engage in various forms of tolerable deviance: for purposes of recreation, as a form of work, and as a means of psychological adjustment. Individuals pursue tolerable deviance as leisure during their non-working hours for enjoyment or relaxation; an example is recreational drug use. Tolerable deviance as work occurs in the workplace and/or is part of how the individual earns their livelihood: the sex trade is one example. The third justification, tolerable deviance as adjustment is related to the unbalanced or unhealthy mental state of the individual caused by issues such as drug addiction or mental disorder, which fuels the deviant activity.

Many scholars have used the concept of tolerable deviance as a descriptive device to help classify certain forms of deviance. Hathaway (1995) examined middle-class marijuana use as a form of tolerable deviance. Likewise, Osborne and Fogel (2007, 2008) conducted a study on the normalization and tolerance of marijuana use among graduate students and working professionals in Canada. Brannigan and McDougall (1983) explored the non-criminal act of hang-gliding as a form of tolerable deviance.
As Stebbins wrote (1996), tolerable deviance is not an explanatory concept, but rather serves as a sensitizing concept. Hathaway and Atkinson’s (2001) application of tolerable deviance in their research on marijuana use and ticket scalping provides an example of Stebbins’ intended use of the concept. These researchers do not simply apply tolerable deviance as a label — instead they use it as a starting point for theoretical description. They describe the various processes that go into making marijuana use and ticket scalping tolerable by certain sectors of society, and the continuous struggles that allow for this tolerance.

Taking a new approach with the term, Young and Atkinson (2008) invoke tolerable deviance as an explanatory concept to reveal why deviance in sport is often overlooked by legal officials. Young and Atkinson (2008) identify seven reasons for the tolerance of deviance in sport. First, they suggest that a hierarchy of social problems is created by law enforcement officials because they do not have the resources to tackle all problems. As a result, some criminal activity is overlooked. Second, they reveal a culture of internal policing, whereby sports leagues are granted the ability to govern themselves through the creation and formation of laws. In so doing, league officials are able to turn a blind eye to criminal activities that would cast a negative light on the league. Third, sport can be seen as a mimesis enabling warlike behaviours but with less devastating consequences. Fourth, athletes are often treated as a special or revered population that the public does not rally to see punished for criminal behaviours. Fifth, there is a general acceptance of the belief that criminal behaviour in sport is an individual problem, rather than a problem
arising from structural issues. When crime occurs it is due to a rare offender — a single “rotten apple” in a batch — and little further investigation is done into larger issues. Sixth, legal intervention is difficult in the context of sport as current laws and legal precedents make successful convictions unlikely. A significant reason missing from this list is that the tolerance of deviance in sport serves the interests of individuals in positions of power, which is discussed in this study.

In this chapter, I use the concept of tolerable deviance to expand the discussion of on-field violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use in Canadian football. Each of these acts can be considered forms of tolerable deviance. Like Hathaway and Atkinson (2001), I explore the processes and power struggles that permit some potentially criminal acts to be tolerated in sport. I develop the concept of “arenas of toleration” to supplement this notion, revealing the various groups who have vested interests in tolerating these acts of potentially criminal deviance in Canadian football. I attempt to take this concept beyond Hathaway and Atkinson’s discussion, to examine how toleration of deviant acts serves the interests of football administrators in Canada, creates precarious labour conditions for football players, and marginalizes them.

In doing so, I offer a critical perspective on the concept of tolerable deviance in football and the process through which certain acts come to be tolerated. Criminologists have paid a great deal of attention to how some acts are labelled as deviant, but have given less attention to how and why some acts of deviance come to be accepted and legitimated in certain social contexts.
TOLERABLE DEVIANCE IN CANADIAN FOOTBALL

Violence on the Canadian football field is tolerated, despite the fact that many of the acts would be deemed illegal outside of sport. This violence rarely invokes moral outcry from the community and has, to date, never resulted in serious legal sanction. Whereas criminal charges have been laid in cases of violence in other sports (see, for example, \textit{R. v. Ciccarelli} [1989], \textit{R. v. McSorley} [2000], and \textit{R. v. Bertuzzi} [2004] in hockey), there does not appear to be a single Canadian case where a football player has been criminally charged and convicted for violence on the field. In Stebbins’ sense of the term, in-game football violence is tolerable deviance.

Tolerance of violence is not restricted to football leagues, but extends beyond them as well. Legal precedent set in the case \textit{Dunn v. University of Ottawa} (1995) suggests that the Canadian legal system tolerates violence on the field. The judge presiding over this trial remarked, “those involved accept certain risks, and of course one of those risks is that an injury will occur.” Describing the tolerance of violence on the field of play in football, Atyeo writes:

The thing about sport is that it legitimizes violence, thereby laundering it acceptably clean. Incidents routinely occur in the name of sport which, if they were perpetrated under any other banner of open warfare, would be roundly condemned as crimes against humanity. The mugger in the parking lot is a villain; the mugger on the playing field is a hero. (1981 [1979], p. 11)
In Canadian football, on-field violence is not only tolerated but also promoted, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Each of the fifty-nine players I interviewed indicated that they had experienced some form of initiation ritual when joining their current team. Despite this, none had ever taken part in or heard of a case where legal authorities became involved. Similarly, apart from the McGill University hazing incident, no players were aware of league or team penalties for any acts involving hazing. The players interviewed in this study described numerous examples of hazing they had experienced that received no sanction or punishment. For example, as one professional player recounted in an earlier chapter, he had a raw egg cracked in his anus, with another player instructed to retrieve the egg using his mouth. Another described an incident where a player who was allergic to peanuts had his car coated in peanut butter. Both of these acts can be seen as deviant, and potentially criminal, yet no penalties were considered.

The use of illegal or banned performance-enhancing drugs is further evidence of tolerable deviance in junior, university, and professional football in Canada. While some players have been charged, few have been convicted for the possession, distribution, and/or use of them. In 2002, a CFL player named Mike Mihelic was arrested after police seized 120,000 pills and hundreds of bottles of injectable steroids from his home and those of a few others. All charges were, however, dropped (Gillis, 2005). Similarly, police discovered that Calgary Stampeders’ kicker Sandro DeAngelis was part of a steroid distribution ring, but he has never been criminally charged or sanctioned by the league for this involvement (Jenkins
& Rosenthal, 2005). In the Waterloo steroid case Eric Legare, who had played for the team, was charged with possessing and trafficking the drugs. He was ultimately convicted on other charges, none of them drug-related. Jordan Matechuk, formerly of the Hamilton Tiger-Cats, was arrested for the possession of steroids and charged with marijuana possession when attempting to cross the US–Canada border. He was sentenced to ninety days in prison (Wazny, 2012).

It was not until 2011 that CFL players began to be tested for steroid use. New policies mean that there are penalties for users who get caught, but the league still remains modest in their punishments: first-time offenders do not even receive a suspension. Furthermore, it is still very possible for a football player to go through their entire career — across junior, university, and professional playing levels — without ever being tested for steroid use. Steroid use is a tolerated aspect of Canadian football, for the most part.

ARENAS OF TOLERATION IN CANADIAN FOOTBALL

Stebbins (1996) delineates different forms of tolerable deviance and describes various behaviours that can be assembled under the concept, from deviant sexual practices to mental disorders. Questions about where tolerance comes from, who shows it, how, and for what purposes are less clear. In the following section I develop this concept further by identifying actors who tolerate violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use, and the possible reasons for their tolerance.
I consider five main arenas of toleration in Canadian football: individuals or groups that take to the field, manage those who take to the field, watch those on the field, provide media coverage of those on the field, and legislate and litigate the actions of those on the field. These groups form “arenas of toleration” that collectively determine what is defined as tolerable deviance in Canadian football. Building on Stebbins’ (1996) work and the insights of Hathaway and Atkinson (2003), I introduce a critical perspective that examines the competing interests of different groups who may benefit from tolerable deviance in Canadian football.

The first arena of tolerance, those who take to the field, is made up of the players, coaches, trainers, and referees actively involved in the on-field aspects of a football game. This is where the so-called deviants exist: the players are the ones violently tackling opponents on the field, hazing one another, and unlawfully using and distributing steroids. They are labelled deviants even though their acts are often tolerated. At first glance, they appear to be the “game-day gangsters.”

The players whom I interviewed refuted the notion that a culture of tolerance for on-field violence exists. Players who deliberately injure others in a game are negatively labelled “dirty” or “cheap.” The majority of players I interviewed reported having similar perceptions of athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs; they noted concerns over the minimal drug testing in Canadian football.

While revealing some intolerance for injurious on-field violence and performance-enhancing drug use, the majority of players reported tolerating hazing, providing it did not involve sexual acts, was consensual, and was not
done with the intent to injure. In fact, well over half of the players at the junior and university levels indicated that their team and league policies were excessively restrictive with regard to hazing.

The coaches, trainers, and referees interviewed had similar perspectives in relation to violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use. Revealing intolerance for immoderate and ultra-violence on the field, one junior coach asserted that he would pull any player on his own team if he saw him engage in a deliberate attempt to injure. With regards to intolerance of steroid use, all of the coaches indicated that they would never promote steroids or allow a player on their team to use them. Revealing a tolerance for hazing, all of the coaches indicated that they, or another member of their coaching staff, supervised or were informed of all team initiation practices to ensure that the players did not take things too far.

That managers, team owners, and league officials tolerate various forms of deviance in sport is clear. As Jeffery Benedict (2004, p. 70) remarks, professional sport is the “one place where a registered sex offender can get a $33-million increase in salary the day he gets out of jail, and then be introduced to the public as a ‘great guy’ without any questions being asked.” Although this statement was made in reference to a player in the National Basketball Association, it depicts how tolerance of crime and deviance exists within sport, especially at the professional level.

Administrators at the junior, university, and professional playing levels indicated that disciplinary reviews for acts of violence on the field are rare, leading to few suspensions. In fact, the only suspensions noted in recent
years by interview participants were at the junior level, for two players who got into a fight. One university coach filed a complaint to report excessive violence on the field by an opposing player, but the university’s athletic director ignored it, and no formal review took place.

At the professional level, team management and league officials are tolerant of hazing practices. None of the players reported that they were aware of any specific rules pertaining to hazing, initiations, or pranking. The 2008 CFL Rule Book makes no mention of hazing. Likewise, the team and league administrators with whom I spoke were not aware of any players having been penalized for hazing.

An alleged zero tolerance policy against hazing exists at the junior and university levels of Canadian football. In practice, however, this is typically not enforced. The 2005 McGill hazing incident disrupted this tradition, where university officials, marking a clear intolerance for hazing in university sport, suspended the entire team for the remainder of the season. However, after this incident, initiation rituals continued. Every player interviewed from McGill indicated that despite the existing policy and sanctions, they all underwent some form of initiation when they joined the team.

Likewise, junior and university football in Canada have a zero tolerance policy for illicit steroid use, yet as the previous chapter outlined, so few players are subject to random testing each year that they are not effectively enforced. At the professional level, no policies or testing procedures were in place until 2010. This lack of policy had the effect of allowing players to use steroids with impunity. Furthermore, the CFL has permitted numerous
players to join the league after they were suspended for failing drug tests in the National Football League (Barnes, 2006).

The spectators of Canadian football also play an integral role in deciding what forms of deviance are tolerated. For instance, while fans may condemn the use of steroids as cheating, they still expect to see the power and speed on the field, possibly enhanced by their use. Several players I interviewed noted the expectations of fans to see violence on the field. On professional centre stated, “That is what the fans pay to see; they want to see gladiators, not gentlemen.” Or as the CFL player quoted earlier remarked, “All of these fans are used to seeing a certain product on the field; guys are so fast and so strong.” Even at the junior and university playing levels, where the revenue generated by ticket sales is far less than that made by the CFL, players frequently remarked that spectators like to see violence on the field. A university coach claimed that he recently heard a parent yell out, “Rip their heads off!” while cheering at a game. Not only do fans tolerate violence on the field, they also appear to expect, promote, and celebrate it.

The media adage, “if it bleeds, it leads” is not only true of crime and accident reporting, but is a common characteristic of sports news and media coverage. For example, in Super Bowl XLIII (2009), James Harrison intercepted the ball on his own goal line and made a record-setting 100-yard run for a touchdown. The majority of the video replays that followed the live television coverage were not of the exceptional athletic feat, but rather of the tackle Harrison received as he crossed the goal line. He lay motionless for a short period of time from the hit, and it was unclear if he was injured or exhausted. The
tackle caused Harrison to land on his head and shoulder as he entered the end zone for a touchdown. It was replayed on national television multiple times, in slow motion and shown from different camera angles, far more often than his 100-yard run. According to Young and Smith (1988), slow motion and instant replay have been used to increase the media coverage of violence on the field. When violent hits happen live, they occur so fast that a viewer can miss them. With slow motion replay, viewers can see each violent tackle and examine the intricacies of the hit, as well as the injuries that often occur. As Harrison’s example illustrates, violent tackles can be replayed repeatedly, slowed down to examine each aspect of the impact, and dissected from different angles by commentators and television viewers. This is done, according to Young and Smith (1988), to “heighten the dramatic appeal” (p. 299). They describe the typical media coverage at a football game: “A devastating hit is replayed in slow motion, the cameras zoom in on an injured player grimacing in pain on the bench, colour commentators argue over who is the hardest hitter in the game” (p. 299). In this above example, Harrison was not injured from the tackle. He lay motionless for a moment in sheer exhaustion. However, the replay prolonged the time Harrison spent on the field before getting up, heightening the drama of the on-field violence. As with spectators, various media sources tolerate deviance in sport, while also aiming to heighten its dramatic appeal.

The lack of legal cases involving violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use in Canadian football suggests that the criminal justice system is a sphere that tolerates these acts. No relevant criminal
law precedents exist where a Canadian football player has been criminally charged and convicted for on-field violence or hazing, and very few cases have involved performance-enhancing drugs. These matters, while all potentially criminal, have been ignored.

Some cases of violence on the field have ended up in Canadian civil courts. In Bell v. Edmonton Eskimos Football Club (1988), a player named James Anthony Bell unsuccessfully sought damages against his football team for serious injuries that he believed resulted from an improperly manufactured helmet, and the club’s failure to investigate the potential dangers of the product they supplied. Similarly, in Thomas v. Hamilton City Board of Education (1994), a parent unsuccessfully sought damages for the injury his son sustained allegedly as a result of poor coaching. In both incidents, the courts asserted that violence on the field was not a legal matter, effectively revealing legal tolerance for it.

EXPLAINING TOLERABLE DEVIANCE IN CANADIAN FOOTBALL

Tolerance of on-field violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use is not in the interest of players, but rather is in the interests of spectators, team managers and owners, the media, and league administrators. A CFL linebacker expressed this sentiment: “Our staff are all a bunch of snakes. They don’t care about us as people, just [as] investments to keep their jobs.” Tolerance of these acts in Canadian football serves the interests of capital accumulation. The real game-day gangsters are
those who profit from the deliberate tolerance of crime
and deviance in sport.

Acts of on-field violence are turned into commodities. For example, there is a well-known picture of Lawrence Taylor tackling an opposing quarterback so hard that he broke the player’s leg. This photograph is a popular item, bought and sold in many markets; the depicted act of violence has become a commodity. In the context of Australian rugby, Hutchins and Phillips (1997, p. 161) term this “selling permissible violence.” The same term could apply to Canadian football. If violence on the field were illegal, it would not serve the interest of capital accumulation. Consistent with this sentiment, a CFL offensive lineman claimed, “the league tries to sweep excessive violence on the field under the rug.” For major money to be made, the violence must be authorized and defined as legal.

Misguided theories about hazing can similarly serve the interests of team and league administrators. A common belief is that hazing is an effective method for creating team cohesion, resulting in a better-functioning, more dominant unit. Such ideas contribute to the prevalence of reported hazing in the military. The tolerance of hazing could be because it is seen as a method to cultivate a team mentality, with athletes willing to do things that they might not ordinarily do for the benefit of their team, such as using steroids or committing injurious violence against an opposing player.

The use of performance-enhancing drugs also produces a better product on the field for the viewing audience to consume. A professional offensive lineman remarked that the human body has limits that can be surpassed with steroids. They can help transform the body
into a spectacle of power and aggression, which contributes to the desired performance on the field. From the perspective of this player, the CFL league office deliberately turns a blind eye to drug use because it helps to put a “better” product on the field and more money in the pockets of team owners and league officials.

PRECAIOUS LABOUR IN CANADIAN FOOTBALL

Beyond the commodification of the athlete and their acts of permissible violence, tolerance of violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use creates precarious labour conditions for professional Canadian football players. In professional football, players become commodities to be bought and sold by teams. It can be argued that management is not concerned with the health, safety, and financial security of the players, but rather with generating profits. Unlike most other professional sports leagues, few CFL players have guaranteed contracts, their income is short-term, and they are not provided with long-term health care benefits despite the violent nature of their work. It is one of the few workplaces where a man can show up for work one day, have his legs broken while performing his everyday job tasks, get fired shortly after for no longer being able to perform his job effectively, and lose all health benefits upon dismissal. While players are protected from disciplinary and criminal sanctions for acts like on-field violence, this tolerance keeps the victims from being able to qualify for compensation when they are injured, nor can they seek redress for violent acts committed against them.
Leah Vosko (2001, 2003) describes several defining characteristics of precarious labour: it is unstable, with no guarantee of permanency or full-time hours; it provides little to no health care, maternity leave, or other benefits; it generates an undefined and unregulated relationship between employers and employees; it creates a uniquely individualistic and competitive work environment; and it often places the worker in physically demanding positions. Each of these characteristics describe Canadian football, particularly at the professional level. They also apply to university football, where scholarships are at stake, or to junior football, where the chance to continue playing in university or as a professional is won or lost. Even so, in this chapter I only consider the precarious labour conditions in the Canadian Football League.

Professional Canadian football players I interviewed described their work as precarious, unstable, insecure, and uncertain. While players do sign contracts, these provide little in terms of a guaranteed salary. Even those who sign a four-year contract with a team can be cut at training camp as early as the second season. According to a CFL player agent, it is in the best interest of players to sign shorter contracts, since longer ones provide guarantees to team management, rather than players. As this agent indicated:

Any player can be cut at training camp each year, regardless of their contract. If you sign a one-year deal and have a good season, you can look for more money in the off-season. If you sign a longer deal, then you are stuck in that contract and do not get any real security from it.
All contracts in the CFL have an option to extend by one year, so if a player signs a one-year contract, the team can bring him back for an additional year. If the player signs a four-year contract, the team can bring him back for a fifth year. As one professional player claimed, “the CFL contract protects the club, not the player.” Another remarked,

the professional game is a high-pressure, performance-based business where if you are not on your game constantly, you are on your way home. I often ask my friends to imagine going into their jobs and knowing that if they don’t perform every day, they are going to get fired.

Similarly, a professional offensive lineman remarked, “there’s no guaranteed money in Canadian football.” Likewise, a CFL running back stated that there is, “absolutely zero job security without any guaranteed contracts. There is no confidence whether you will be receiving a paycheque week in and week out.”

The career of a professional football player is not a very long one. It is only between the ages of twenty and thirty-five that most can successfully perform their jobs. Following their time in the league, football players are left to look for employment without the experience required for well-paying jobs. Unlike NFL players, most Canadian football players do not achieve celebrity status, which will help them transition to alternate career paths after leaving the sport. Most CFL players make a little over $40,000 a year and some must work second jobs during the off-season to make ends meet. The salary is not high enough to enable players to save for retirement, nor does it provide
the necessary financial resources to cover medical costs after being injured and/or released from their teams.

A quarterback described the problems with the lack of security in Canadian professional football: “even if you are one of the lucky ones and injuries don’t end your career, age will always get you.” Explaining his career prospects after playing CFL football, a centre remarked, “while my other friends are twelve years in the workforce working up the corporate ladder, I am way behind in the business world. There will be a huge transition for me when I retire from football.” Likewise, a fullback stated, “professional football doesn’t really set you up for much.”

An additional characteristic of the precarious labour conditions in the Canadian Football League is the lack of health care and benefits provided to players who have been injured on the job. Standard contracts only cover health care costs for players injured during the season, and only to the start of training camp the following season, when they can be cut from the team and their contract terminated. If a player is injured during training camp or in the pre-season, the team can cut him, provide no compensation, and require him to pay for his own medical fees and support services. A player who had to retire from football due to an injury described what athletes in his situation actually need:

Players should have some sort of restitution; at least some sort of severance. Fortunately I had a strong support system around me after my injury, because I had no way to work and was not getting any money from the CFL. I think it is only fair that they should provide some sort of compensation. I was injured
on the job. In any other industry you will get that kind of coverage or compensation, but not in Canadian football.

Commenting on the compensation (or lack thereof) players receive in the CFL, a running back remarked,

the most pressing issue in the CFL right now is lack of financial assistance for players who could be physically disabled from playing this sport. The league should ensure that the players currently playing are given some peace of mind when dealing with serious injury.

Given the prevalence of serious injuries that do occur in football, this lack of health benefits is particularly problematic. The sport is a high-risk occupation where career-ending injuries are common, and many result in long-term health issues for players. Football, because it is a sport, sits on an unclear line between work and leisure. Some might consider players’ efforts on the field to be work, which it clearly is because they earn a salary, pay taxes, fulfill job obligations, and have a contract, among other typical aspects of paid work. Others, however, perceive football as a game. Players might be paid, but they are being paid to play. This perspective can obfuscate the employer–employee relationship that exists in football, which allows team owners to avoid providing injury compensation, long-term benefits, and a guaranteed contract from season to season.

The precarious labour conditions in the CFL create a unique work environment where athletes are forced to continuously compete to keep their jobs. If a player
refuses to make a violent tackle at the coach’s request, or gain the appropriate weight in the off-season, he can be replaced by any other athlete waiting to step out on the field in his place. Kevin Young (1991, 1993) suggests that athletes who step onto the playing field face a choice: they can either relinquish the health and safety standards that are guaranteed to any other worker, or they can forget about playing in the league.

Football is a sport of constant collisions that places incredible strain on all parts of the human body. Beyond dealing with injuries on the field, football players, like most professional athletes, must train in ways that are unimaginable to most people. In training camp, players must endure as many as three 2-hour physical training sessions in a single day. The results of this over-training can be devastating. For example, a high school athlete in the United States recently died in a football practice from over-training that caused “septic shock, multiple organ failure and complications from heat stroke” (Schreiner, 2009, p. 1). Referring to the physical strain caused by football, a CFL player said, “The human body is only capable of so much.”

Football players are forced to push their bodies to the limits in order to keep their jobs under precarious labour conditions. To exceed these limits, some may turn to performance-enhancing drugs that provide immediate results, but also have long-term health consequences for the athletes. According to a former CFL player, “my body is going to give out long before yours does just because of the crap that I put it through, no matter how well I have taken care of it from then on. Your body hates you after.”

My findings in this research parallel the theoretical work of Bero Rigauer (1981) and the ethnographic study
of Michael Robidoux (2001). Using the same approach I took, both considered sport an occupation. Rigauer (1981) argued that sport, as work rooted in a capitalist labour system, is reflective of the oppressive aspects of capitalism. Human performance is reduced to a commodity to be sold in the marketplace. Similarly, Robidoux (2001) examined the oppressive conditions faced by American Hockey League (AHL) players which included job insecurity, unpleasant and dangerous working conditions, and a lack of autonomy. Robidoux (2001) argued that because athletes are celebrated, given heroic status, and treated as fortunate, they often overlook unfavourable labour circumstances and uncritically accept an employer–employee relationship that puts them at a disadvantage. When players challenge labour standards, they face public criticism and are labelled “greedy” and “unappreciative.”

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter I critically examined the vested interests spectators, team managers and owners, and league officials have for tolerating on-field violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use in Canadian football. In so doing, I expanded Stebbins’ (1996) concept of tolerable deviance to describe a process where toleration serves the interests of capital accumulation. The arenas of toleration that allow and often promote on-field violence, hazing, and performance-enhancing drug use in Canadian football have their own vested interests in tolerating these acts.
Tolerance serves the interests of fans who want to consume permissible violence, team managers who are selling players and the violence they commit as commodities, and league officials whose jobs rest on the economic success of the league. By tolerating acts of injurious violence on the field, players are able to avoid league disciplinary action and criminal penalty; however, they are also given no chance for recourse and denied compensation if they are the victims of such violence. This tolerance marginalizes and oppresses players within the institution of Canadian football, leading to precarious labour conditions and constraints on their freedom to consent.