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Scenes from the Conundrum in Motion

Quite clearly, the spirit of Billy Clyde Puckett lives on and on, far beyond the pages of the novel that gave a name to the darker forces coursing through the game since its earliest days. Spokespersons influential and numerous have long essayed vigorously to exorcise it from the soul of commercial football. They would cast it out and give the ethos of Frank Merriwell full reign over the game if they could.

But they can’t.

Reviewing the history of the metanarratives advanced via the Billy Clyde and Merriwell models makes that clear. Commercial football faces what must be seen as a structural conundrum. It would very much like to market Frank Merriwell as the face of its product. But fundamental to the very nature of the game is the violence, the ribaldry, the disregard for the standards of civilized society that beats eternally in the heart of Billy Clyde Puckett.

So we can call this the Billy Clyde Conundrum. Commercial football cannot live without that which has from its beginnings created so much outrage, scandal, and societal reproach for the game—because it is also central to its primal appeal. Thus it grapples on in quest of ways to live with him, to at least smooth his roughest edges—and of course also to keep the Merriwell model as viable as possible and center stage any time the opportunity presents.

Clearly, none of that is going to be easy. As we look over the landscape of the game’s most recent developments, we see concern of such intensity it may rival the societal backlash that in its early days came close to abolishing football. The commercial game is now too deeply established economically, with a visceral magnetism far too mighty and marketable, for its actual existence to be brought to an end. But the problems football faces do approach the existential, at least in the sense that they threaten to change the game dramatically. And by some measures, it may already have begun to mutate.

The commercial viability of beating brains in

Before considering those propositions, let’s be even clearer on the basics of the Billy Clyde Conundrum. First, despite all the efforts to cloak it in more noble raiments, as a society we have one of the most deeply entrenched and highly profitable of all social institutions constructed upon marketing what in almost any other context would be unacceptably