

# UMass Lowell Center for Public Opinion

## 2017 Sports Poll – The National Football League (NFL)

### August 14, 2017 – August 21, 2017

N=1,000 American adults  
Margin of error +/- 3.7% for all respondents

See <http://uml.edu/polls> for full questionnaire/topline results and detailed methodology disclosure.

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## HIGHLIGHTS

In partnership with the Washington Post, the UMass Lowell Center for Public Opinion surveyed 1,000 American adults on their attitudes about sports. This, the second release in a series, focuses on general attitudes about sports and sports viewership, with a particular emphasis on professional football/The National Football league (NFL).

### FINDINGS:

***Football is still America's undisputed favorite sport; among all demographic subgroups examined, it is the most popular sport***

- A plurality of respondents (37%) ranked football as their favorite sport; basketball (11%), baseball (10%) and soccer (8%) follow as the second, third and fourth most popular sports.
- In addition, 6 in 10 Americans say that they are fans of professional football, with 31% identifying themselves as “a big fan.” Fandom cuts across different races/ethnicities, income levels and levels of education. The NFL's biggest fans are those ages 30-39, among whom 39% identify as “big fans,” compared to those 18-29 (28% identify as big fans) and those over 65 (24% identify as big fans). The trend for the NFL has been flat over the last five years; just as many Americans are fans today as identified as fans in 2012.
- Professional football is also the only sport asked about in our survey of which a majority of Americans consider themselves a fan (60%). The fan bases for other sports are as such: professional baseball (45%), college football (45%), professional basketball (39%), college basketball (35%) professional boxing (28%), mixed martial arts (25%), professional soccer (24%), professional auto racing (24%), professional ice hockey (24%), and WWE wrestling (14%).
- Asked if their interest had increased or decreased in the past few years, 23% of football fans say that their interest in the NFL has increased compared to 19% who said their interest had decreased. Twenty-five percent of women indicated that their interest had increased, compared to only 12% who said it had decreased. While there was a net gain in interest among women, among men, 21% say their interest had increased compared to 25% who say their interest

decreased. Similarly, among those 18-39, we see a net increase (34% increased compared to 16% decreased), while among those 40-64 and 65 and up, we see a small net decrease in interest. Finally, among white respondents, 17% said their interest increased compared to 22% who said it decreased; however, among non-white fans, 29% said their interest increased compared to 11% who said their interest decreased.

- Among those who said their interest in football decreased, the most identified reason was political issues (24%) with 17% identifying national anthem player protests or Colin Kaepernick directly. Ten percent said their interest decreased because of too many penalties/game delays, 10% because they are not as interested in sports, 8% who are busy/don't have time, and 7% say that the game is too violent/there are too many injuries.

### ***Football's popularity stems from the fact that it is a social activity and it is fun to watch***

- Asked about why they watch football, most football fans identify rooting for a favorite team as a major reason to watch football (71%), which indicates the geographic, social, and familial ties that create bonds between football fans. In addition, 53% say that a major reason they watch football is enjoying time with friends and family; this is especially true among fans over 40, among whom 64% say it is a major reason they watch football.
- The action of the game also scores very high among football fans, with 68% saying it is a major reason they watch football. Interestingly, however, it seems that the hard-hitting nature of football is not as important to many fans; only 26% say it is a major reason they watch football, compared to 29% who say it is a minor reason, and 43% say it is not a reason. Among women, 55% say that hard hits are not a reason they watch football.
- When asked to rank the reasons they watch football, rooting for a favorite team ranks first at 30%, enjoying time with friends ranks second at 23%, the action of the game ranks third at 20% and the tradition ranks fourth at 10%. Again, we see that 18-39 year-olds rank enjoying time with friends first (at 28%), showing that especially for younger Americans, football is a social activity.

### **Large majorities of American sports fans view head injuries as the biggest problem in football and believe in emerging science on concussions; Americans are split on whether the NFL has adequately responded to issues stemming from head injuries/concussions**

- When asked if head injuries caused by hits and tackling were a problem, 76% of sports fans said head injuries are a major problem, 14% said they are a minor problem, and only 6% said that they are not a problem. When we restrict the sample to pro football fans, 77% said that head injuries are a major problem, 15% said minor problem, and 6% say not a problem. Sports fans also see violence committed by players as a major problem (60%) and domestic violence committed by players as a major problem (61%)
- Americans overwhelmingly believe that there is a *settled science* that playing football causes brain injuries with 82% saying that the statement is either certainly (45%) or probably (37%) true. Only

one in 10 say that this statement is probably false (7%) or certainly false (3%). Additionally, a majority says that it is certainly true (52%) that Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) is a serious public health issue, with another 28% saying that it is probably true; only 1 in 10 say that the statement is probably (7%) or certainly (3%) false.

- On the question of whether the NFL has done enough to address the concussion issue, Americans are split with 45% saying they have done too little, 40% saying they have adequately addressed the issue, 5% saying they have done too much, and 11% saying they are uncertain.
- The love of football and simultaneous recognition of the seriousness of head injuries points to an interesting level of ambivalence about the safety of America's favorite sport. A large majority of football fans indicated that head injuries are a major problem, that they believe in the science connecting football and brain injuries, that they view CTE as a serious public health issue and 44% of those who identify as pro football fans say that the league has not done enough to address this issue. It does not appear that the NFL has lost a significant part of its fan base over these issues, but it should also be aware that NFL fans are certainly aware and very concerned about head injuries, concussions, and CTE, and nearly half of the fan base thinks that the league could be doing more.