

TACKLING REPRESENTATIONS OF FOOTBALL IN

*FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*

by

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## ABSTRACT

Football is an American sport celebrated by passionate fans nation-wide. Media outlets have boosted football to its prominent status of popularity in our culture today. One example is high school football portrayed through a television drama. *Friday Night Lights* is a critically acclaimed television series which first premiered on NBC in 2006. The show portrays high school football in the state of Texas. This study attempts a qualitative examination of the show's representation of high school football. Overall, *Friday Night Lights* depicts the passion and importance of high school football in a small-town community. The findings reveal representations of coach-player relationship, football injuries, and the negative impact of drug use. Findings also reveal football discourses for academics and budget vs. football, identity, community, and racial stereotypes. The representations and discourses in this television series may offer insight into the culture of high school football as it relates to communities, educators, and players involved in the sport.

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## INTRODUCTION

Football is America's sport. There are more than 11,500 students playing high school football nation-wide (Jeffrey, 2014). More boys play high school football in the United States than the combined number of young males participating in the second (outdoor track & field) and third (basketball) most popular sports (Frollo, 2011). Nearly 6,000 high school girls are competing in flag or tackle football annually. This interest extends beyond participation. Americans love to watch football, as 64 percent of Americans watch the National Football League on television with nearly three quarters of men (73 percent), and over half (55 percent) of women watching (Harris Interactive, 2011). In fact, football ranks as the most-viewed television program, with the Super Bowl consistently outdoing all other television programming in the ratings. In 2012, for the third year in a row, the Super Bowl was the most-watched television program of all-time (Kubicek, 2012).

However, watching live football games is not the only television outlet fans have been able to enjoy. Football has been a central theme in fictional television as well. From ABC's *Coach* (1989-1997), a sitcom about a college football coach, to the contemporary show *The League* (2009-present) on FX, about a fantasy football league, football has been widely covered in television comedy. Dramatic programs have also centered on football. For example, USA Network's *Necessary Roughness* (2011-2013) featured a psychotherapy practice counseling pro football players. ESPN also produced a drama, *Playmakers*, (2013) about a professional football team and how they deal with off-the-field pressures of fame and fortune. In 2006, *Friday Night Lights* debuted, capturing the importance of football in a small town. The show is rooted in the experience of writer H.G. Bissinger (1990) who documented a real high school football team in Odessa, Texas. *Friday Night Lights* is unique in that it used this rural community

backdrop to highlight many issues challenging contemporary high school football. *Friday Night Lights* pictures life inside small-town USA and showcases the passion for a marquee high school football team.

The first season of *Friday Night Lights* received high acclaim from television critics in 2006. However, ratings were low for network executives at the National Broadcasting Company which aired the first two seasons of the show. Seasons three through five were co-produced by DirecTV and NBC which both aired the remaining three seasons of the show. The series ended its run in 2011 after five seasons. *Friday Night Lights* is currently airing in syndication on an American digital cable and satellite channel known as Pivot. This channel targets young adults between eighteen and thirty-four years of age. In 2010, writer Eric Felkey (2010) ranked *Friday Night Lights* one of the top sports television shows of all time. As such high school football depictions have not yet been extensively studied, this thesis examines representations of football, specifically exploring the discursive patterns of high school football in *Friday Night Lights*. The goal is to discover how *Friday Night Lights* constructs meaning for high school football.

## **BACKGROUND: FOOTBALL AS COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY**

To better understand representations and discourses of football, one must understand that people use activity as a means to interpret and understand social identity. This means social attachment and associations result from the semblance-making, or a likeness and appearance in relation with varsity high school football, especially in regards to cheering, tradition, volunteering, and booster support (Tokke, 2013). For high school football, semblance-making provides an opportunity for fans to connect the present to a historical past based on their traditional history with the team. Academic literature has researched the bond between players and fans, between the communities and the football teams they support. Communities have strong connections to the teams they support. Fans highly identified with a local high school football team have higher levels of psychological well-being, community identification, and collective self-esteem, as compared to individuals who were not as highly identified (Reding, 2009). Many fans also see their teams and their teams' players as extensions of themselves (Hirt & Ryalls, 1994).

Educators at Laval Liberty High School in Canada—working in an area where football is not a societal phenomenon—believe football is the vehicle to prevent high school boys from dropping out of school (Yates, 2008). A lot of high school football players are surrounded by the support of family, friends, and civic organizations. These social networks are no longer available when a player chooses to attend a university or college far from home. However, in some cases, high school football teammates have the opportunity to continue playing together at a college far-away from their hometown. This provided a natural experiment of the role of a social network for researchers. In research conducted by Mixon, Ressler, and Cebula (2012), high school teammates who later became teammates in college provided an opportunity to study the role of a social network among athletes. Results indicated social

network effect appears to be significant in demonstrating individual success of college football players.

Thus, having one's high school teammates attend the same far-away school increases the player's probability of success at college football.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis adds to academic literature that falls into specific categories. These categories include football athlete relations to drugs, alcohol, and community perception.

Other research analyzed the connection between sport-related films and portrayals of drug and alcohol use. A content analysis of six sport-related films released between 1994 and 2000 was conducted to consider portrayals of drug and alcohol use among student-athletes (Finley & Finley, 2005).

Researchers also wanted to know if these representations had an impact on viewers who were current student-athletes themselves. A portion of the study looked at the authors' interpretation of emotions student-athletes are intended to have when watching these films. Findings revealed the films supported the idea that student-athletes are supposed to explore drugs and alcohol as part of the social role connection that goes along with sport participation.

A content analysis of top grossing football films such as *Against All Odds* (1984), *Johnny Be Good* (1988), *The Program* (1993), and *Varsity Blues* (1999), examined the portrayal of football players (Jones, 2004). The findings revealed a portrayal of players using illegal drugs, alcohol, stealing, and abuse towards women as the most disturbing behaviors. The positive from Jones' study yielded depiction of players doing community service, helping people in need, and other uplifting deeds both on and off the field. The prevalent challenges included academics, injuries, steroids, and opponents with more talent. Overall, while some players were seen as unlikable characters, most were revered as soldiers, noble, and the pride of the communities they represent on the field.

Media coverage has also focused on scandals within collegiate football. The most notable was the child abuse charges and convictions against former Penn State Assistant Football Coach Jerry Sandusky in 2011. A November survey by Widmeyer Communications revealed 83 percent of 1,000 respondents

blamed the “culture of big money” in college athletics as the reason Penn State officials failed to report suspicious child abuse allegations to authorities; 40 percent indicated they would encourage their child not to attend a Division I institution “that places a strong emphasis on football,” and 72 percent said Division I football has “too much influence over college life” (Grasgreen, 2011).

Robert L. Kerr (2001) examined Bud Wilkinson’s institutional newsletter which persistently attempted to define an optimistic view of college football as a metaphorical domain where football players endeavor for collective success. The article from *American Journalism*: “The Great White Father and the Antichrist: Bud Wilkinson’s Football Letter as Cultural History” offers a look into the cultural significance, language, and images of football as a metaphorical realm. Wilkinson’s *Football Letter* contemplates his desire to disclose information relevant to the audience’s cultural values. His argument is self-sacrifice should be made in the name of team progress.

Sports are demanding more and more attention from students which means less time for academics. Glen R. Waddell, associate professor of economics at the University of Oregon, published a study in late 2011 as part of the National Bureau of Education Research working paper series. Oregon researchers compared student grades with performance of the university’s football team, the Fighting Ducks. “Here is evidence that suggests that when your football team does well, grades suffer,” said Waddell, who by comparing transcripts of over 29,700 students from 1999 to 2007 against Oregon’s win-loss record. For every three wins, grade-point average for men dropped 0.02, widening the G.P.A. gender gap by 9 percent. In a separate survey of 183 students, the success of the Ducks also seemed to yield an academic price: students reported studying less (24 percent of men, nine percent of women), consuming more alcohol (28 percent of men, 20 percent of women), and partying more (47 percent of men, 28 percent of women) (Waddell, 2011).

Football representations related to alcohol and drug use have also been examined on the small screen. In 2013, Robert L. Kerr also wrote an article focusing on the heavy drinking narrative depicted in the first three seasons of *Friday Night Lights*, the show that is also the focus of this analysis, but through a different lens. The Kerr study contemplates the manner in which meaning has been socially constructed and contested through mediated representations of the game of American football. Kerr's findings reveal heavy drinking is a consistent storyline with one of the main characters who is a high school football star. A qualitative framing analysis suggests the show "embeds nuanced social meanings in its framing of alcohol use by the player... to associate it with multiple potential outcomes" (Kerr, 2013). However, the dominant framing is positioned to reverse common themes of traditional media representations from glorified character to non-glorified character with excessive drinking key to the narrative process of sending such messages. This project will add to Kerr's (2013) previous research on *Friday Night Lights*. Kerr's study focused on the excessive drinking narrative depicted in the first three seasons of the show. This study will examine representations of football, specifically exploring the discursive patterns of high school football in *Friday Night Lights*. The goal is to discover how *Friday Night Lights* constructs meaning for the sport.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The representations of football exemplify the significant impact the sport has on social, educational, and economic statuses of the communities where it is played. This research draws from the social construction of reality framework. Berger and Luckmann (1966) believe, “social order exists only as a product of human activity.” Social construction of reality notes the results from persons and groups functioning in a social system where mental representations of the action of others becomes habituated into reciprocal roles where reality is socially constructed. Social reality is a means to better understand why communities are so passionate about the football teams they cheer for.

Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall is well-known for his insight on representation and discourse. Hall (2013) states, “To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination; to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses.” He goes on to add there is not a reality “out there” to reflect but that media and culture are co-constitutive. Hall’s concept of representation will assist this study’s analysis of coach player relationships, injuries, and steroid use in *Friday Night Lights*.

Discourse theory refers to the language used to construct reality. Hall (1992) writes, “The production of knowledge through language, but since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do—our conduct—all practices have a discursive aspect” (p. 29). Hall (2013) acknowledges meaning and meaningful practice is formed within discourse (p. 29). The idea of discourse is not about whether things exist, but about where meaning comes from (p. 30). Illuminating discursive patterns used in *Friday Night Lights* will further this study in relation to football discourse in academics and budget vs. football, identity, community, and racial stereotypes.

Bonnie Brennen describes semiotics as the study of signs that exist in our social lives. They are the drawings, photographs, paintings, words, acts, sounds, objects, and gestures; that is, a sign is anything that represents something else (Brennen, 2013). Taking this idea a step further, Jostein Gripsrud 2006, believes semiotics invite us to evaluate texts not just for their obvious content, but for what they have to say, explaining, “It also gets us to think about representation; that is, about how texts show us events, objects, people, ideas, emotions and everything else that can be signified,” (pp. 39-40).

## METHOD

The purpose of this study is to explore the representations and discourses of high school football depicted in *Friday Night Lights* (Berg & Pate, 2007). The main research questions for this project are:

1. How does *Friday Night Nights* portray the sport of high school football?
2. Does *Friday Night Lights* address identity and community? If so, to what extent does this program attach identity and community to this sport?
3. Are racial stereotypes perpetuated or challenged in *Friday Night Lights*? If so, how are they conveyed?

To explore how football is portrayed on television, a textual analysis will be conducted using a blend of representation, discourse, and semiotics in *Friday Night Lights*. Textual analysis is all about language, what it represents and how we use it to make sense of our lives (Brennen, 2013). Language is a basic element of our human interactions, and it is through language that meaning of social reality is constructed. Understanding the concept of text is an essential aspect of the method of textual analysis. We can use texts as documented evidence to make sense of our lives. Texts are tools we use to create understanding from media outlets, and qualitative researchers use to notate relationships between culture, society, and media. I chose to pursue a textual analysis for the purpose of examining representations and discourses of football and the sport's relation to culture and society.

### **The Sample**

To study constructions of football in television, the program *Friday Night Lights* was selected for analysis. Fictional television provides a broader scope of content to examine than journalism news, allowing viewers an in-depth look into the ongoing issues, including relationships, in football. This type of programming also has more flexibility in its narratives than reality programs about football. For this

reason, HBO's *Hard Knocks*, MTV's *Two a Days*, and other reality shows were excluded. Specifically, *Friday Night Lights* was selected because it is the most recent critically acclaimed television show depicting high school football. *The Los Angeles Times* proclaimed the show to be a brilliant series on life in a prep football-obsessed Texas town which has rightly earned critical acclaim (Gabler, 2010). *Friday Night Lights*, which aired from 2006-2010, centers around the fictional town of Dillon, Texas. This location serves as a stand-in for the institution of high school football in the United States more generally, and may provide some understanding for how the text selects, emphasizes, and circulates social issues surrounding high school football in America. In reality, Texas topped the list of high school participants by state with nearly 800,000 students respectively (Howard, 2011). Several Texas football teams are featured each year as ESPN and Fox Sports Net continue to broadcast high school games nationally (Anonymous, 2006). *Friday Night Lights* is an expansion of the box office success feature film and best-selling book *Friday Night Lights*. The main premise of this television show features a tight-knit community consumed in the sport of high school football (Berg & Pate, 2007). In Dillon, Texas, the town's identity is wrapped up in the success of their high school football team. Stand-out players are instant legends for their glory earned on the field of play (Berg & Pate, 2007). The first two seasons aired on the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). The series suffered low ratings and to save the show NBC struck a deal with DirecTV to co-produce three more seasons with each season first airing on DirecTV's 101 Network before NBC's rebroadcast of the series a few months later. To study constructions of football in television, all 76 episodes of the five seasons of the television series *Friday Night Lights* are analyzed, using what Hall (1975) calls the "long preliminary soak."

The characters provide a diverse view from multiple angles of people in a community passionate about their football team and the players on the field. The show evolves and changes with the first three

seasons featuring a high volume of football action scenes in regards to practices and games, and the final two seasons show less on-the-field action, and more focus on the characters in the community of Dillon.

### **Operationalizing Method**

In order to study *Friday Night Lights*, I will examine the signs, which magnify the importance of football in Dillon, Texas. The use of language and terms in relation to representations of football will be texts I look to examine in this study. Examination will be given to how *Friday Night Lights* depicts the sport of football in relation to injuries, steroid use, and coach player relationships. Also, what are the discourses in relation to academics, identity, community, and racial stereotypes in the show? Overall, this study examines *Friday Night Lights*' message that football is more than a sport to the people of Dillon, TX. Careful examination will be given to the town's emotion, financial, and social connection to the high school football team. How do the main characters in the show relate to each other and reveal football representations? This study examines how certain characters view themselves in terms of identity, based on their affiliation with the team. How do these characters describe what high school football means to the town of Dillon? This study takes a close look at the common issues connected to football such as injuries, drug use, and trouble in school. What are common stereotypes in football? How do these stereotypes compare with the discursive patterns of *Friday Night Lights*?

## FINDINGS

The dramatic storylines of the show mainly revolve around the Dillon Panther High School football team. The coaches who lead the team, the players who play the games, and the community that supports the Panthers reveal representations of high school football. The show portrays the glories and downfalls of prominent high school football set in a small, rural Texas town. This fictional town of Dillon, Texas, is used to address discursive constructions surrounding high school football such as coach-player relationships, injuries, steroid use, booster spending, and racial stereotyping.

### Main Characters

The main characters in *Friday Night Lights* display similar characteristics. They portray the cultural appearance of being born and raised in a small, southern-rural community. They all speak with a southern, Texas accent. Most of the characters are living a middle economic class lifestyle based on conversations of budget, and the quality of cars they drive, and the houses they live in. The race make-up of Dillon, Texas, and the characters in the show are predominantly Caucasian, with one main character who is African-American and other supportive characters which are African-American and Hispanic. The main characters primarily consist of teens in high school, with three adults in their forties who have teenage children.

Head Football Coach Eric Taylor is young, passionate, and primed for his first head coaching job with the Dillon Panthers. Tami Taylor is the coach's wife, and she believes in education. She takes issue with football making academics an irrelevant sidelight at Dillon High School. Tim Riggins is the full-back on the Dillon Panthers. He likes to drink, party, and get other students to do his classwork. Tim lives his life for the present moment, and does not think about the consequences of tomorrow. Jason Street is the record setting quarterback entering his senior year who is flooded with offers from big-time

college football programs. Brian “Smash” Williams is the incredibly athletic, star running back of the Dillon Panthers, who is African-American. Next, there is Matt Saracen. Matt is the back-up quarterback to Jason Street. Matt is an undersized, football player, who never expects to see playing time as Jason’s back-up. Finally, Buddy Garrity is the Dillon Panthers number one fan. He is a prominent member of the community, owning the biggest car dealership in town. The portrayal of characters offers a look inside Middle America where high school football is a leading passion. The deep personal examination of main characters may offer insight into depictions of high school football.

### **Coaches**

Coaches in *Friday Night Lights* play more of a significant role portraying high school football than the players. Head football Coach Eric Taylor is one of the central characters throughout the entire series. There are several assistant coaches shown throughout the show, but none of them are portrayed as having a personal investment in individual players. The head coach is depicted as more than a coach, but a father-figure, and mentor to the young men he coaches. His head coaching position comes with a lot of stress and pressure from the community eager for success.

## DISCOURSES IDENTIFIED IN *FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS*

### **Coach-Player Relationship**

*Friday Night Lights* displays close personal relationships between the coaches and the lead players on the team. A good example of coach-player relationship representation takes place when starting quarterback Jason Street is injured and lost for the season. Coach Taylor's season, and job, now rest upon the shoulders of back-up quarterback, Matt Saracen. The town fears the worst, as Matt lacks the size, talent, and most importantly, the confidence to lead a football team. In the episode, "Eyes Wide Open" Coach Taylor confronts Matt in an attempt to embody faith in this young man. The night scene is set on the Panther's football field. The flood lights from the side of the stadium give just enough light to illuminate Coach Taylor and Matt as they talk at the fifty yard line. Coach Taylor has a football in his hand and tells Matt, "Your dad in Iraq that must be hard"—Coach goes on to tell Matt his dad was anything but in Iraq, suggesting his dad was too present in his life. Coach Taylor wishes his dad would have given him more freedom to enjoy the game of football without non-stop instruction and correction. Coach Taylor is suggesting he wants to be a balanced father figure in Matt's life, not too present, but not completely absent. Coach Taylor begins complimenting Matt on the juggling act he does with football, studies, work, all while caring for his mentally ill grandmother. Coach Taylor holds up the football, and points it across the stadium and proclaims, "This is all yours for the taking, depends on how much you want it," and with that said, Coach Taylor gives Matt the football passing the torch of leadership. Matt seems nervous, uncertain, but open to believe he can lead this team, and this town, to victory.

The portrayal of coach and player relationship in this scene offers insight into the type of impact a coach can have on a player in high school football. Matt is portrayed as a small, economically poor quarterback who lacks confidence in himself and his football abilities. Faced with no other option, we

see a depiction of Coach Taylor applaud Matt for his leadership and responsibility off the football field, hoping this will translate to confidence on the field. The representation of Coach Taylor giving Matt the football signifies trust, respect, and a sense of leadership. Matt goes on to lead Dillon to a state championship as season one concludes. Before Jason Street's injury, Coach Taylor did not invest any personal time with Matt. After Street's injury, he mentors and coaches Matt both in football and life. This representation of a coach player relationship offers insight into the positive impact a coach can have on a player's demeanor both on and off the football field.

### **Football Injuries**

In *Friday Night Lights*, the fictional players rarely get hurt. Minor injuries are not shown. The show only features two injuries, both severe in nature. One injury is a spinal cord injury, and the other is an anterior cruciate ligament knee injury. The depictions not only convey representations of how life changing a devastating injury can be for the player, but also the effect it can have on the family of the player, coaches, the school, and the community.

In the "Pilot" episode, starting quarterback Jason Street experiences a devastating, life-changing injury. Late in the first game of the season, the Dillon Panthers are trailing their opponent. This deficit forces quarterback Jason Street to throw a pass highly contested by the opposing team. The other team intercepts the ball and in an effort to tackle the defender who just intercepted his pass, Jason lowers his head and collides violently with the defender. Jason is shown lying on the ground face-up, with a look of shock on his face inside his helmet. After the collision, the trainer on the field asks Jason if he can move his hands, he replies, "Yes," and the camera cuts to his hand gripping the trainer's hand. The trainer then asks Jason if he can move his legs, "Yes," says Jason, but when the camera cuts to his legs, it is clear, they are not moving. As this storyline progresses throughout season one, viewers learn Jason is paralyzed

from the waist down. Jason and his parents strive to find a new normal with his disability, as they struggle with the mounting medical and rehabilitation bills, which are not sufficiently covered by their personal and the school's insurance policies. After deliberation with their lawyer, the family decides to sue Coach Eric Taylor and Dillon High School for not teaching Jason the proper way to tackle. The Street family's case rests in the fact that Coach Taylor and his staff did not teach Jason how to tackle because he was the quarterback. The family claims the team did not wish to risk injury for Jason by having him do tackling drills in practice. Coach Taylor and Dillon protested it was an accident, and it could have happened to any player. In the end, it is Jason who ends the litigation dispute by settling with the Board of Education. Jason proposes payment for medical debt accrued and no additional payout moving forward. Both sides agree, and the issue is resolved.

The knee injury occurs to Smash Williams in the episode "I Knew You When." The injury takes place when a defender from the opposing team goes in for a low hit, cutting Smash's legs out from under him. Applying semiotics the implications of this injury alter Smash's identity. Smash is without his two legs to stand on in Dillon. He is no longer a star football player for the Panthers. This setback ends Smash's season, and his career at Dillon with the injury occurring his senior year. The storyline progresses with Smash rehabbing his knee to attempt a full recovery. The conclusion of the injury to Smash is the loss of his college football scholarship. The college revoked his scholarship after his knee injury. This representation of a severe injury reveals the career ending impact a torn knee ligament can have for a high school football player.

This injury presents an interesting dichotomy in regards to a look at life with and without football. Before his injury, Jason Street experienced the best high school football has to offer; after his injury, he experienced the challenges of adjusting to life as a paraplegic. The representations of a severe

injury depicted in *Friday Night Lights* offer insight into the potential consequences high school players risk when making contact on the football field. The spinal injury articulates representation of how a player's football career can end on one play in a game, and the life changing alterations that come with a paraplegic disability.

### **The Negative Impact of Drug Use**

Representation of steroid use by a high school football player is an intense issue in *Friday Night Lights*. The portrayal of drug use, and the consequences for the player's body and choice to use the drug, are all described in detail in the series. The show only depicts one character using anabolic steroids to increase his size, strength, and speed for football performance, under the pressure of college recruitment.

In the episode "Crossing the Line," Brian "Smash" Williams begins to feel the pressure to perform. Former Dillon Panther football players are leading Smash to believe if he makes scout, Grady Hunt's top 100 prospect list, he will get to play college football at the school of his choice. As game day approaches, the lights are bright for Homecoming at Dillon High, and Grady's first live look at Smash. From the first snap of the game, it is clear the pressure is taking its toll on Smash. He is dropping passes, fumbling the ball, and playing selfish football. Disgusted with his play, Smash throws his helmet to the ground in frustration. The camera pans to his mother and siblings in the stands. They are vividly disappointed and embarrassed by Smash's outburst. Later, Smash tracks down Grady at his hotel. Grady is agitated Smash is standing at his hotel door late into the night, but offers these words of guidance for Smash's improvement, "Be honest, I am worried about your strength and size. So what you should work on is lifting and conditioning." Devastated by Grady's evaluation, Smash makes his way to a local body building gym where steroids appear to be easy to come by. As this story line plays out in season one, Smash's strength and conditioning improve drastically with help from the steroids. When Smash's

money supply to buy the drugs runs out, he lies to his church congregation by claiming to need money for a SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) prep course. The church takes up a collection for Smash, and his deception of the church, the team, and the community continues with his drug use. Smash's mom eventually stumbles upon his drug stash while cleaning his room and the deceit is exposed. His mother is heartbroken. His teammates are stunned, and Coach Taylor's trust is lost, Smash hits rock bottom. He is suspended by Coach Taylor from team functions and required to submit to random drug testing on a regular basis.

Smash's experience with steroids is visually depicted in the show, with images of the drugs, needles, and the side effects. The scenes portray the character inserting the drugs and needles into his body, causing acne and sudden mood swings filled with anger and rage. This storyline demonstrates the pressure that high school football players feel to perform for their peers, teammates, coaches, and for themselves. And yet, for Smash, the dire consequences highlight the risk of steroid abuse, as he is shown at a great disadvantage for his actions. His use of performance enhancements makes headlines and college scouts make note of his poor decision. What he thought would make him stand out to college recruiters ultimately, hurt his stock for the majority of schools interested in him as a student-athlete.

### **Academics and Budget Spending vs. Football**

The tension between football and academics provide some emotionally charged scenes conveyed in *Friday Night Lights*. Language used to entail meaning of how important winning football games contrasts with the emphasis on a good education. Most characters in the show that play high school football players are not depicted with academic issues. The topic of grades and football eligibility is not frequently portrayed in the show. There is one example used where the player, an educator, and the

coach all get involved in regards to discourse of football performance colliding with the demands of academic performance.

In the “Nevermind,” episode, Tim Riggins is sent to meet with the guidance counselor, Tami Taylor, about his grade in English class. Tim responds by suggesting he should be moved to an easier class. Tami soon realizes Tim is receiving special treatment from his peers, teachers, and coaches. After investigating the matter further, Tami discovers “rally girls,” female student-fans of the team, have been completing Tim’s homework for years. Teachers have been turning a blind eye to the issue, and the coaches are only concerned with Tim’s performance on the field. Tami is furious with her findings. She (Episode “Nevermind”) raises her voice to Tim and proclaims, “It is part of my job to make sure you don’t grow up stupid. It’s bad for the world. From now on, you are going to sink or swim based on the work you do, you got me?” Realizing he has met his match, Tim pleads with Tami, “We are two wins away from playoffs Mrs. Taylor. The timing of this couldn’t be worse. I don’t pass, I don’t play.” Later in the episode, Tami confronts her husband about the lack of academic accountability for Tim. The night scene begins with Coach Taylor pulling into the drive way in what looks like an older model Ford Explorer. Coach Taylor sees his wife heading for the trash can. He pleads with his wife to let him take the can, and she replies, “No, I have already dragged one to the road. I might as well drag this one, too.” As Tami refuses to let go of the trash can, it tumbles over as the two wrestle for control of the can. Trash spills out onto their yard and the two characters look at each other as if to say, “Now look what you’ve done.” Tami reveals her findings of the rally girls, and Coach Taylor reacts, “Look, that is very nice of you, but we are both aware of the no-pass, no-play policy. If just for the next few games, we have a chance for the playoffs.” Tami interrupts Eric by raising her voice and replying, “I don’t even want to

ask you if you knew that he's been cheating, but he's been cheating." The two go back and forth arguing before Eric finally acknowledges he realizes the importance of Tim's education. Tami replies:

Do you though, do you think it is as important as winning? It does not do Tim Riggins a bit of good to grow up ignorant, and mean, and dumb. And that's what you are encouraging with these boys. You are making them feel like what this town makes them feel like, which is football is the most important thing, if we send that message to him, that is what he is going to believe.

Coach Taylor is left speechless as he knows Tami is making a point he cannot refute. Applying Brennan's semiotics, the moment the trash can turned over and spilled into the front yard facing the road in front of Coach Taylor and Tami's house as a foreshadowing signifier. This signifies the exposure of knowledge previously concealed. The trash can turns over just before Coach Taylor begins the conversation with Tami in regards to Tim Riggins' academics. The conversation leads Tami to realize her husband knew about the lack of academic integrity taking place. It also reveals Coach Taylor's stance on this issue when he asks Tami not to take action before the football season is over. The trash spilling onto the front lawn facing the road signifies Coach Taylor's "trash" spilling out where "everyone" can see. Confronted with the notion he might lose his star full-back reveals what takes priority when academics and football collide for Coach Taylor. It is football.

The football facility luxuries in *Friday Night Lights* also gives viewers insight into the importance of football. The need for basic elements to educate students is pushed aside so accessories for the high school football team can continue to flourish. An example of football facilities taking precedence over education occurs in the episode, "Hello, Goodbye."

Tami Taylor is eventually promoted from guidance counselor to high school principal. She is facing budget challenges in her new leadership role. As she is studying financial spreadsheets late one night in her office, in walks Buddy Garrity, with a big smile and a check for the football team. Tami is blown away by the number of zeros on the check and asks what the money is for. Buddy proceeds to tell Tami the boosters have raised the money for a jumbo Tron. He goes on to explain how this thirty-foot Mitsubishi big screen will be “pure Nirvana” for Panther fans. Tami asks Buddy if Dillon needs a jumbo Tron. Buddy responds, “Well, no Tami, we do not need one, but we want one, and we are going to have one because of that.” Throughout the episode, Tami struggles with the school’s lack of academic funding, while the football team is set to splurge for a new jumbo Tron. She even goes as far to research the District by-laws to see who has the ultimate authority when it comes to booster donated funds. It is through this initiative Tami learns her position as principal grants her the right to have the final say on how the money is spent. She responds to Buddy:

I can’t stop worrying about all the things that the school needs. You know the school needs basic, basic things like... Teachers for one, and pencils, and chalk, and text books and we need those things. I have decided to re-allocate the jumbotron funds to academics.

Tami’s risky decision draws the ire of Buddy, the boosters, and the town. Eventually, Buddy and the boosters freeze the money raised for the jumbo Tron forcing Tami to back down from her stance for academics. Tami is forced to let teachers go due to the budget, while Buddy and the boosters get their jumbo Tron.

Tami also discovers her husband and his coaching staff have new computers in their offices, despite receiving new computers two years before. Coach Taylor responds by stating he and his staff put

in for an upgrade so coaches can network and communicate in house. With resentment Tami responds, “How nice for you.” As Tami is leaving Coach Taylor’s office she comments on the cool temperature, and then realizes that offices are air conditioned. She gives a sarcastic smile and storms out of the office with a look of defeat on her face. She is surrendering to the fact she is fighting a losing battle. Football is the most popular sport. It is the best funded sport or program without doubt. Her crusade for academics is noble, but no match for football in Dillon, Texas.

The discourse of football and academics is a conflict between discursive understandings of what is important. The show portrays a town set on funding the facilities of the football team while forsaking the needs of students and teachers who attend the school. In a rural, middle economic class, the few patrons with large sums of extra money are shown giving their excess to the high school football program.

### **Identity**

The characters portrayed as high school football players in *Friday Night Lights* reveal the importance of status amongst peers and football teammates throughout the television series. The show depicts a status level associated with being a member of the team. An example shown throughout the show is where the players wear their game jerseys to school the day of the game. Also, exterior shots of players’ homes have billboards in the players’ front yards signifying the importance of the Panthers. The players’ last names and jersey numbers are on display so the town can see where the glorified players live.

The show then conveys a higher level of status for the football players who achieve success on the field of play. An example used in the show reveals scenes where former Panther players, in an attempt to motivate current players, make a fist with their hands to draw attention to state championship

rings on their fingers. These tight shots of large, shiny, championship rings have glorified representation. There is also discourse theory and the language used to construct a reality of the passion for football at Dillon High. Players often reference the word “state” in dialogue throughout the show. This reference is portrayed through representation as the “promise land” for the state playoffs and the state championship. Players also reference the term “QB1” when referring to a player of great prestige. This term is directed towards the starting quarterback of the football team. “QB1” is portrayed as receiving special treatment from coaches, teachers, and female fans of the team. The discourse for football players throughout *Friday Night Lights* reveals a status for players which give them an identity of confidence, unity, and entitlement at Dillon High School.

Other gender representations include examples of status for girls who are affiliated with the high school football team. In the “It’s Different for Girls,” episode, a cheerleader is berated at school for sexual involvement with Tim Riggins. The dialogue amongst characters focuses on the notion that girls are scorned for the public knowledge of their sexual involvement, while football players are glorified for the history of their sexual activity. Also, rally girls are depicted throughout the television series. These female fans of the team are not cheerleaders, but over-eager fans wanting to assist the star football players. In the episode, “Nevermind,” Tami Taylor finds evidence that rally girls have been doing Tim Riggins’ homework for years. These females are also shown preparing snacks and pre-game meals for the football players on game days. While some representations of female gender are undermined in the show, there are positive representations. In the episode, “It’s Different for Girls,” when the cheerleaders compete in a competition where the town, and the football team turn out to support them. There is an intentional effort on behalf of the football coaches and players to return the favor of support as cheerleaders are often cheering for the football players the majority of the time.

## Community

*Friday Night Lights* portrays community messages throughout the series in regards to how important the high school football is to the town of Dillon, TX. Multiple episodes features language used to construct football, and what the sport means to the identity of the community. High school football is depicted as a carrier of hopes and dreams for Dillon, TX.

The portrayal of community in relation to high school football in *Friday Night Lights* reveals a deep personal connection. Those in the community who follow and support the team financially are not individuals with a son participating on the football team. The strong supporters of the team are portrayed as life-long residents of Dillon who have unconditionally supported the high school football program their whole lives.

An example of community is portrayed in season one after Jason Street's injury. In episode "Eyes Wide Open," Coach Eric Taylor finds himself in Buddy Garrity's office at Buddy's car dealership. After Buddy greets Eric, the camera does a quick pan to a plaque on the wall which reads, "Booster of the Year." Buddy proceeds to make it very clear that he likes Eric, and wants to see him succeed as head coach. However, Buddy's underlying message is clear, losing is not an option. Eric proceeds to tell Buddy the team is prepared to do their best in week two of the season. Buddy quickly replies:

I don't want to hear that, this is not just some game after what has happened with Jason. This is about tradition, it's about this town, it's about the spirit, and keeping this town alive. That's football, that's all we got. If we lose this game, this town is going to be in turmoil. I don't need that.

Buddy's declaration of the team's importance to the community is not an over dramatic statement by a rabid fan. The community depiction of Dillon reveals the town taking more pride in their football team, than any other aspect of community life. The dialogue is a reference to the tradition of winning in the town, and the town's spirit living with wins or dying with loses depicts the depth of personal connection the community has with the team.

### **Racial Stereotypes**

The discourse of racial stereotyping of high school football players is a subject of great animosity for the community of Dillon, TX. *Friday Night Lights* provokes viewers to look at the progress of this issue in society, and also consider how the community can continue to come together and unite against the issue of racism.

Two of the central characters in the show are quarterback Matt Saracen, and running back Smash Williams. These players hold the highest profile positions on the team. The show uses these two positions to depict racial stereotyping amongst high school football players. For example, in "Black Eyes & Broken Hearts," the team is celebrating a win in the locker room while local reporters gather interviews from coaches and players. Assistant Coach Mac McGill is fielding questions when one of the reporters asks, "Are you saying that race isn't an issue for the Dillon Panthers?" Coach McGill responds by saying race is not an issue for Dillon. Another reporter proclaims Dillon was one of the last schools to be integrated and only one African American athlete has played quarterback in forty years. Coach Mac refutes the notion that Dillon only plays Caucasian athletes at quarterback by proclaiming the best player plays, regardless of skin color. The reporter then asks why Smash does not play quarterback, and Coach McGill replies:

Guys like Smash have a natural gift for running the ball. Guys like Smash, they are fearless, they are dangerous, they are like junk yard dogs. You want them carrying the ball... You want them tearing up turf out there.

The reporter counters by asking if Coach McGill is saying Caucasians like Matt Saracen make better quarterbacks. Coach McGill replies, "You could say that." An assistant quickly pulls Coach McGill away from the reporters to prevent further damage. The local media twist the interview into racist remarks by Coach McGill. At first, Smash is indifferent to the quote made by Coach McGill. However, his girlfriend Waverly Grady is outraged by Coach McGill's comments. She is well educated, and displays a great deal of pride for her African-American heritage. Smash is influenced by Waverly's instigation and then instructs other African American players on the team to walk out of practice in protest. They demand Coach McGill be fired. Coach Taylor is forced to make a tough decision and decides to keep Coach McGill on staff. Smash and the other African American players eventually give in and return to the team in time for the playoffs.

The discourse of racial stereotyping renders insight into the issue of racism in Dillon. The town is depicted as predominantly Caucasian through discourse and representation of fan attendance at the home football games, and other community scenes in the show. The issue of racial stereotyping is portrayed to challenge parents, players, and coaches to examine how far the community has progressed with racial integration in football and as a society as a whole.

## DISCUSSION

The typical players in *Friday Night Lights* have a lot in common and portray a similar cultural appearance. They speak with similar Texas accents, and they all portray the backstory of growing up in Dillon. However, the differences in age, race, and gender assist in enabling depictions of high school football to unfold. The show's representation of diversity appears similar to the Housing Assistance Council's (2012) report on race and ethnicity in rural and small town America. In 2010, according to the HAC, 77.8% are white and non-Hispanic, and 9.3% Hispanic, and 8.2% African American. The central characters in the show allow this study to examine the portrayals of high school football and what they may reveal.

The representation of coaches illuminates the impact a coach may have on a player. High school coaches have a bigger impact on athletes than coaches at any other level (Anderson, 2005, Coakley, 2009). High school football coaches' personal values revealed themes of hard work, honesty, trust, family and faith (Hughes, 2010). They also selected American cultural values such as personal responsibility as a social and cultural responsibility, and affirmation of patriotism, nationalism, and punctuality.

The findings in this thesis reveal a before-and-after effect of a coach investing in a player. The football player portrayal prior to receiving attention from a coach lacked confidence, leadership, and knowledge of the sport. The television show then depicted the positive progression of a young man, and high school football player who receives encouraging mentorship from a coach.

The representation of injuries offers extreme depictions of the physical ailments which may result from playing high school football. However, most injuries in football are not as severe. From 2001 to 2005, injuries resulting from football accounted for 1,060,823 emergency room visits to United States

hospitals (Mello & et al., 2009). High school football athletes' statistics reveal from 1984 to 1999, there were 63 injuries resulting in permanent disability (Mueller, 2001). *Friday Night Lights* features scenes of high school football practices and games where players are fully equipped with standardized padding and gear while making contact with teammates and opposing players. The show's attempt to portray severe injuries occurring while proper coaching and equipment are being administered may offer insight into the physical nature of high school football.

Steroid use in *Friday Night Lights* portrays two colliding issues. One is the issue of a player placing pressure on himself to impress college football scouts; and second, is the player's inability to believe he can achieve success without cheating. The reported rate of steroid use among U.S. high school age males is 6% to 11% (Kroichick & Stephens, 2003). In the state of Indiana, a study revealed 6.3 % of tested high school football players were current or formal users of anabolic-androgenic steroids (Stilger & Yesalis, 1999). The average age for first time use was 14, and almost half of the studied participants revealed they could obtain anabolic-androgenic steroids anytime they want. In 2007, Texas Legislature funded the random steroid testing program for University Interscholastic League athletes in Texas (Miller, 2011). Years later budget cuts shrunk the initial \$3 million annual budget to \$750,000. The number of positive tests for steroids was so minimal; the governor suggested funding for the bill was too excessive.

*Friday Night Lights* depicts steroid use as a "quick fix" to a needed increase of strength, size, and speed for football performance. The portrayed issues and consequences of illegal steroid use may offer answers to questions about drug use amongst high school football players.

The conflict between the football team and those in academics magnifies the significance in this culture. The show's depiction of academic fraud taking place enforces the need for high school football

players to be held accountable for their academic studies. In recent years, public school districts have made it easier for students with low grades to stay on high school football teams (Lavigne, 2012). For these schools, a student can have below a 2.0 grade point average and still play football. School officials believe football is the student's incentive to attend school. In an article for *The Oregonian*, Wendy Owen asks if smart kids play sports, or do sports make kids smart? The coaches, players, and sports philosopher Owen (2009) interviewed said a little of both. High school football player, Zack Hickman said, "To play sports, you have got to be smart. At the same time, that sport is going to teach you something" (2009). The messages in *Friday Night Lights* used to describe the consequences of a player receiving special academic treatment is portrayed as severe. The show challenges the idea of high school football being placed above academics as a potential detrimental to the player's future success after football is over. *Friday Night Lights* aired during the span of years that included the recession of 2008 when capital outlays were greatly reduced for schools. This is significant to note with the show's portrayal of excess spending on football facilities and accessories, while educational budget needs were viewed as lacking proper funding to operate.

In *Friday Night Lights*, participation in football creates an identity in the town, suggesting an elevated social position. A player's school status is signified through his football uniform and front yard sign. These signs represent the identity of how this student is viewed by peers at school and members of the community. Applying semiotics illuminates the glorified representation of state championship rings. The rings are used as signs representing the ultimate goal of each Dillon Panther season. The show depicts a team so rich in winning tradition, that a season which falls short of a championship is a failure. The discourse of football success finds players referencing the starting quarterback position as the leader of the team, in addition to elite social status.

The community depictions reveal the town's deep relationship with the high school football team. The portrayal of Dillon's spirit in need of reviving after the injury to starting quarterback Jason Street reveals the community's conscious awareness of the importance one player can have on a team. The discourse of football portrayed as the only variable the town has to take pride in, may offer insight into the emphasis placed on high school football. The portrayed notion that a loss for the football team could lead to the town's turmoil may suggest the importance the community places on winning and losing in high school football. H.G. Bissinger (1990) chronicled the single-minded devotion of Odessa, TX for high school football. The impact of losses on the field magnified the social, racial, and economic struggles; whereas, victories seemed to mask harsh realities facing the town.

In this show, the issue of race in Dillon, TX, is brought to light by stereotyping certain positions on the football field. The findings of discourse on racial stereotyping portray an older, Caucasian, assistant football coach describing the abilities of players on the team. A comparison study of high school students' stereotype beliefs about intelligence and athleticism revealed society profoundly influences high school students' beliefs and impressions (Hodge et al., 2008). Consistent stereotyping about African American athletes have depicted them athletically superior to Caucasian athletes, while Caucasian athletes have been portrayed as intellectually superior to African American athletes (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). The show's depiction reveals local reporters searching for a controversial angle while questioning the assistant coach. With no malicious intent, the Coach addresses the talents of two different players, of two different races. This leads to a racial divide amongst the high school football team, and the community. *Friday Night Light's* portrayal of racial offense taken by the African-American player is the center piece which opens up a broader issue of race in the community of Dillon.

Football is the vehicle used to examine the racial progress achieved in the community, and the inspiration for continued progress moving forward.

## LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The implications of this study did not observe the football representations in other television shows which feature other dramas, comedies, and reality programming. Also, this project did not look at high school football discourses and representations in films. This textual analysis focuses on the texts in *Friday Night Lights*; whereas; future research could look at audience reception and how viewers are interpreting the text. With the *Friday Night Lights* series conclusion occurring in 2011, future research could study how discourses and representations of high school football have changed over the last five years.

## CONCLUSION

The representations of football in *Friday Night Lights* offer a contemporary look into the sport at the high school level. If you watch the show you will likely have a better understanding of football and what it means to a small town community. The message of *Friday Night Lights* is that football matters. It is more than a mere game. It is the centerpiece, a way of life for many people. Each season of the show seemingly begins and ends with the football season beginning and ending. In real life, most football seasons run August to December. That is five months out of the year. What does the fictional town of Dillon look like the other seven months of the year? This show captures an audience that connects to the rural, middle-class communities across the United States. Viewers relate to the narratives in this show due to dark reality depictions. *Friday Night Lights* shows the audience the harsh ramifications of those most passionate about high school football. From a life changing severe injury, to the losses which can occur with steroid use, this show even depicts the outcome for character Tim Riggins not achieving an education. Unable to succeed without the special help he received in high school, Riggins drops out of college. Upon returning home to Dillon he struggles to adjust to life without fame and football. He eventually participates in an illegal chop-shop to dismantle stolen cars, and ends up in jail. The viewers of *Friday Night Lights* connect to the social moments of pain and anguish displayed by the characters. *Friday Night Lights* offers an expansive look at high school football through television drama. These representations may shape audience perception toward the significance of high school football in Texas, and the perception of pressure placed on coaches and players to be successful.

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