



## **Lessons from the Gridiron: The impact of concussions – Partly by Shunning Documentary, ESPN Lifts It**

By Richard Sandomir

In August, [ESPN](#) pulled its name and logo from “League of Denial,” a “Frontline” documentary about how the [N.F.L.](#) handled — or, more appropriately, mishandled — the [concussion](#) crisis among its players. ESPN’s decision came seven weeks before the documentary was scheduled to run and ended a 15-month collaboration with “Frontline” that had already produced nine separate reports.

At the time, ESPN said that it had decided to end the collaboration because it belatedly realized that it did not have editorial control over anything “Frontline” televised or posted online, including an online promotion that angered the league and ESPN.

But The New York Times reported that [ESPN had backed out after being pressured by the N.F.L.](#), its most important television partner.

By ending its agreement with “Frontline,” ESPN could not erase its influence on the two-hour documentary, which ran Tuesday on [PBS](#) stations. The film is based largely on the work of two of ESPN’s investigative reporters, Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada.

And the Fainaru brothers were the on-air reporters for an engrossing and disturbing telling of a nearly 20-year story about the league’s resistance to acknowledging the growing evidence of the link between concussions and progressive degenerative brain disease.

So while ESPN could strike its name from “League of Denial,” it could not make the brothers disappear.

ESPN’s pullout was a boon for “Frontline.” The attention paid to ESPN’s hasty decision made a lot of people aware of “League of Denial.” Had ESPN quietly accepted the collaboration ground rules with “Frontline” and told the [N.F.L.](#) that it would be a public relations error to pull out, many people might not have been alerted to the documentary.

“Frontline,” of course, wanted the connection to ESPN. It had spent 15 months working with ESPN and wanted to augment its audience with ESPN’s when it showed the documentary. But the breakup potentially jeopardized the possibility that ESPN would carry excerpts from it on “SportsCenter” and “Outside the Lines” and on [ESPN.com](https://www.espn.com). ESPN was always going to promote the Fainarus’ book, which is also called “League of Denial.” But hyping only the book might have had little effect on the documentary.

Raney Aronson-Rath, the deputy executive producer of “Frontline,” said she had been reassured after ESPN’s unexpected departure from the project that the sports channel would still try to show excerpts. There was, however, no certainty or clarity. “But clearly, considering the fact that they withdrew from the editorial collaboration, we had no idea what would happen in the end,” she wrote in an e-mail.

Then, about two weeks ago, Dwayne Bray, senior coordinating producer of ESPN’s news-gathering unit, called Aronson-Rath to resurrect the relationship. He wanted to work out a deal to carry excerpts, and he had the backing of John Skipper, ESPN’s president, to pursue one. “He felt it would be powerful to have them,” Aronson-Rath said in a telephone interview.

“It was a conversation about what would work best for them, and, in collaboration with the Fainarus, we chose the excerpts,” she said. “We had had such a productive relationship with Dwayne that we’re pleased this came through.”

Aronson-Rath said three clips were chosen: one for “SportsCenter” and two for “Outside the Lines.” They began to run last week. “Outside the Lines” has used excerpts several times. ABC News and the PBS program “NewsHour” have also showed clips.

Skipper told a somewhat different version: that ESPN had had every intention of running excerpts, even after it withdrew from the collaboration. “That was part of our original support for the Fainaru brothers,” he said.

He said it was possible that ESPN’s intentions had not been clearly conveyed to “Frontline” until Bray called Aronson-Rath.

After the abrupt end of the collaboration, she said, “you can understand why we had no idea what they would decide.”

The decision to show excerpts, after the flap caused by ESPN’s withdrawal from the project, apparently increased “League of Denial’s” audience. The documentary drew an average of 2.2

million viewers, according to overnight Nielsen figures, well above the program's average of 1.5 million viewers. "Frontline" also had one of its heaviest days of traffic to its Web site.

For Skipper, one lesson of the flap over "League of Denial" is that he should have ended the collaboration a lot sooner.

"I wish I'd made the decision a year ago," he said. "I still think it was the right decision, while I understand that it opened us up for appropriate criticism."

He stood by his reasoning that ESPN should not have entered into a venture that did not allow it editorial control over everything. And, he added, no one at the N.F.L. has called to rebuke him for showing excerpts from the documentary.

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