

Risks & realities of contact sports: Most say Hamlin injury an 'unfortunate part of the game', won't affect their viewership

One-in-nine sports fans (11%) say they're watching less because of serious injuries in contact sports

January 12, 2023 – The Buffalo Bills will have an easier time preparing for their playoff matchup this weekend – at least mentally – now knowing that teammate and rookie safety Damar Hamlin has been released from hospital after suffering a terrifying injury on January 2. The Bills take on the Miami Dolphins, a team that will be without their own quarterback Tua Tagovailoa after he suffered his third concussion of the season in a game played on Christmas Day.

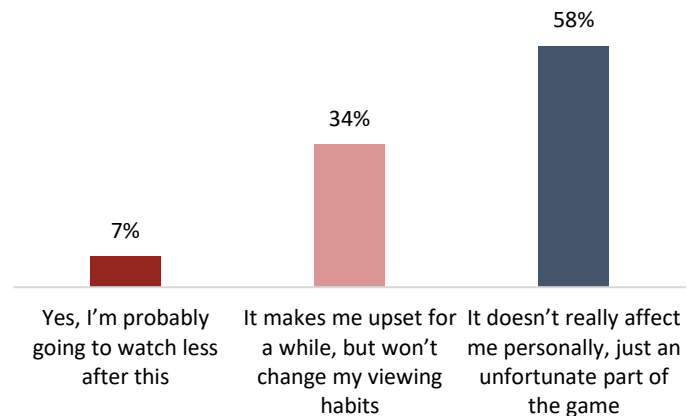
These injuries highlight the [tension](#) between the love of contact sports and the extent to which Canadians deem serious risk of injury necessary to play them. A new study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds Canadian sports fans battling these competing realities.

Asked specifically about the incident involving Hamlin, seven per cent of viewers were affected to the point that they are more likely to tune out from contact sports in the future. One-in-three (34%) were upset by the incident but will continue watching, while three-in-five (58%) say that it didn't affect them personally and is "just an unfortunate part of the game."

This latest catastrophic injury adds to a growing awareness of the risks of contact sports. In recent years, discussions of traumatic brain injury [have grown immensely](#), leading leagues to introduce new protocols for diagnosing and treating these injuries. The unavoidability of concussions in sports appears to be weighing on many fans, even if it isn't causing them to tune out entirely.

Overall, 11 per cent say they watch less contact sports - where there is a perceived increased risk of brain injury - than they used to. Further, fully half (53%) say they think about the concussion risks more often now when they watch sports like football and hockey. One-in-three (36%) say this is not something they really think about when they watch sports.

Does this sort of incident (Hamlin injury) change how you feel about watching contact sports? (Among Canadians who follow any professional sports, n=1,190)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from January 3 - 4, 2023 among a representative randomized sample of 1,515 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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More Key Findings:

- Four-in-five (83%) Canadians say they were following the injury to Damar Hamlin in the days following the incident (Jan. 2 to Jan. 5)
- Close to half of those who follow the NFL very closely or closely say they were emotionally affected by the injury. Approximately five per cent in each group say they are less likely to watch football in the future, while the rest say the injury didn't affect them personally
- One-in-nine sports fans (11%) say they were already watching fewer contact sports like hockey and football than they used to because of the risk of traumatic brain injury
- More than four-in-five sports fans (84%) say they would play football for \$5 million a year, at least for a couple of years, if they had the talent and opportunity. Approaching one-in-five (16%) say it is too risky, even with that multimillion-dollar payout

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Part One: Damar Hamlin injured on Monday Night Football

Vast majority watched or followed Hamlin injury

The sports world came to a standstill on Jan. 2, after what looked like a routine tackle by Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin proved to be anything but routine. Hamlin collapsed in cardiac arrest and was immediately given CPR and defibrillation on the field. As his life lay in the balance, stunned and terrified teammates stood aside in prayer. The game was suspended and ultimately cancelled as Hamlin was taken to the University of Cincinnati Medical Centre for treatment.

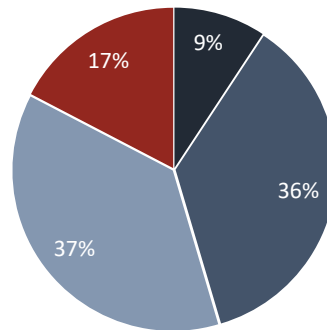
In the days that followed, fans and players from around the world showed support on social media and by donating **more than \$8 million** to his charitable toy drive on GoFundMe. Hamlin has fortunately made considerable progress in his recovery, reportedly asking doctors “did we win” when he awoke for the first time nearly 48 hours after collapsing. Hamlin, a Pittsburgh native who attended the University of Pittsburgh to remain close to family, is just 24 years old.

One-in-11 Canadians (9%) say that they watched the incident unfold live, while others began to follow along in the hours and days that followed:

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**Awareness of Buffalo Bills Damar Hamlin having collapsed on the field
(All respondents, n=1,515)**



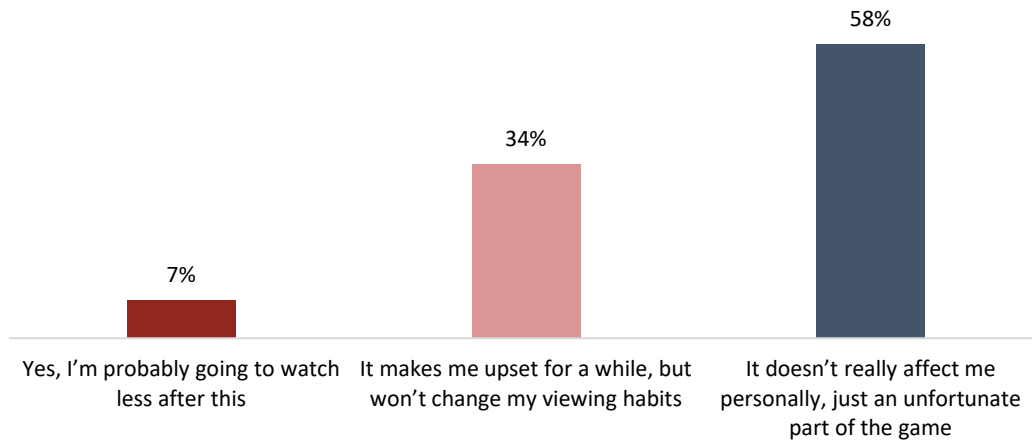
- Watched it live
- Saw some of the coverage the night it happened
- Saw some coverage in the following days
- Didn't know about it until now

An unfortunate part of the game

Many viewers were overjoyed as they saw Hamlin [tweeting along](#) as his team took the field on Sunday. A first play kick-return touchdown by Nyheim Hines further brought [tears to the eyes](#) of some. The game, however, represents a tension between viewers and a sport that can be [damaging if not crippling or ultimately fatal](#) to its participants.

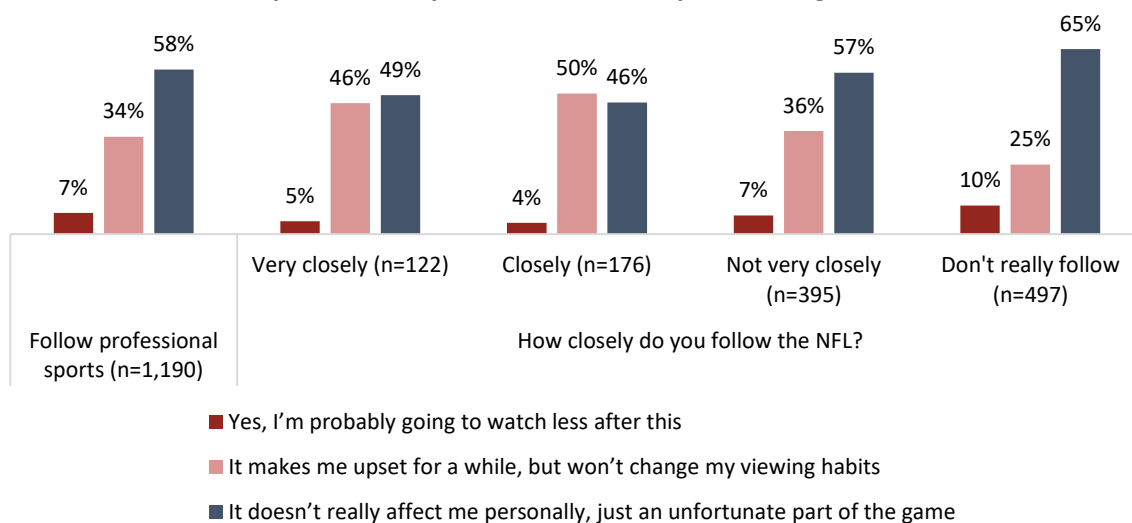
While the specific injury to Hamlin is rare, it was enough for a handful of sports fans (7%) to say that they are probably going to watch less contact sports going forward. One-in-three (34%) say that they were emotionally impacted by the injury, but are still going to watch, while 58 per cent say this it was an “unfortunate part of the game” and that they don’t think about it much further beyond that:

**Does this sort of incident change how you feel about watching contact sports?
(Among Canadians who follow any professional sports, n=1,190)**



This type of incident evidently has a widespread and varying impact on different levels of fans. Those who follow the NFL most closely are much more likely to say that they were personally upset about Hamlin's injury, but that their viewership would likely not change. Those further removed are more likely to say that they will watch less or that they are far enough removed that it won't impact them. This suggests a challenge in drawing new viewers to sports where injury concern is paramount:

Does this sort of incident change how you feel about watching contact sports, or is it just an unfortunate part of the game?



Part Two: Brain injury risk weighs on many sports fans

While the cardiac arrest suffered by Hamlin was a rare sports occurrence, traumatic brain injuries are not. The NFL has reported an average of well over 200 concussions a year since 2015. Most prominently this year, Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa experienced a disturbing head injury on Thursday Night Football in late September, while also enduring a second and third concussion later in the season.

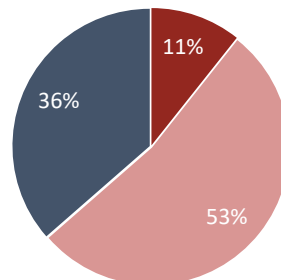
For their part, one-in-five Canadians say this is an experience they've had themselves playing sports.

Related: One-in-five Canadians say they've suffered a concussion playing sports

Concussions in contact sport a concern for two-thirds of fans

The increased awareness of head injuries in sports has had an effect on many sports fans. One-in-nine (11%) say they are watching less contact sports in recent years because of what society continues to learn about brain injuries. Fully half (53%) say this is something they think about more now when they watch, even if it doesn't negatively impact their viewership:

Has increased awareness of brain injury in contact sports affected your viewing in recent years? (Among Canadians who follow any professional sports, n=1,190)



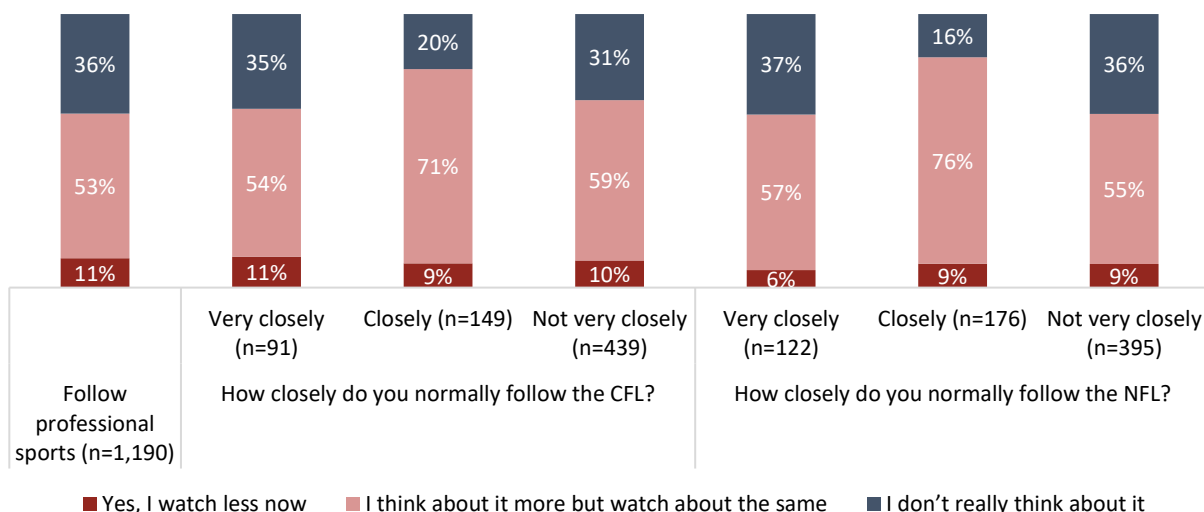
- Yes, I watch less now
- I think about it more but watch about the same
- I don't really think about it

Widespread awareness of this issue is evident among those who follow both the CFL and the NFL.

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In recent years, there has been increased awareness of the potential of head injuries – like concussions - in professional sports like hockey and football. Has this affected your viewing of contact sports in recent years?



Risk vs. Reward? Most would still play football if they had the chance to make millions

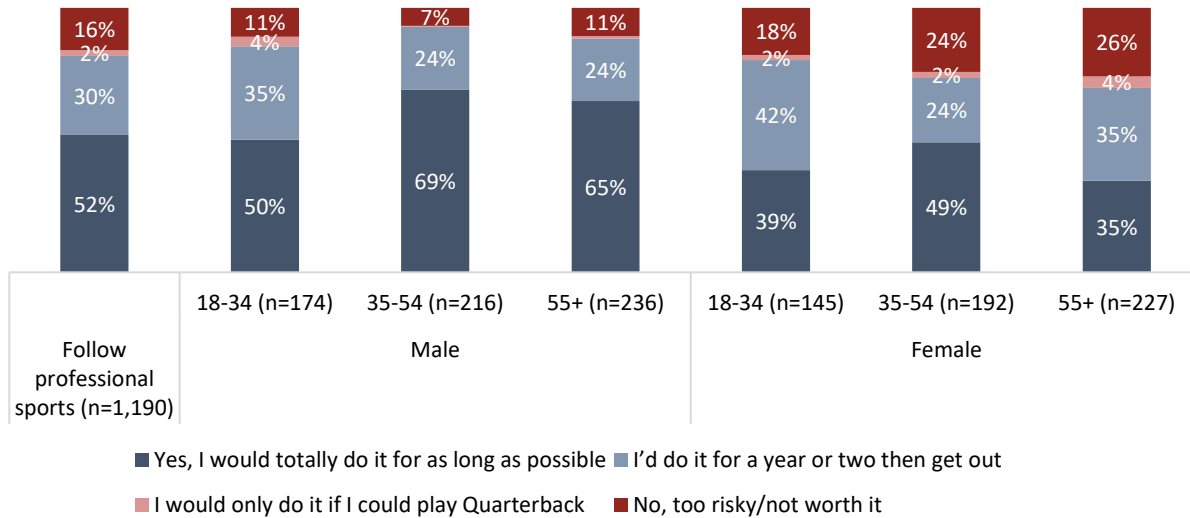
To better understand the risk versus reward nature of this debate, Canadian sports fans were asked a hypothetical question: if you could play professional football for \$5 million per year, would you? (The question asks each person to assume they had a sufficient talent level, and that their position would be running back.)

Half (52%) say they would play for as long as possible, including two-thirds of men over the age of 34. Another three-in-ten (30%) say they would play for a year or two to earn the money and then quit. This is the most common response among young women (42%). A handful would only play if they were able to be the quarterback, while 16 per cent say the risk is not worth the reward. One-quarter of women over the age of 34 choose this latter option:

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**Assuming you were talented enough and had the opportunity to be a professional NFL football player, and you were going to be paid \$5 million a year, would you take that opportunity, or is it too much of a health risk for you?
(Among sports fans, n=1,190)**



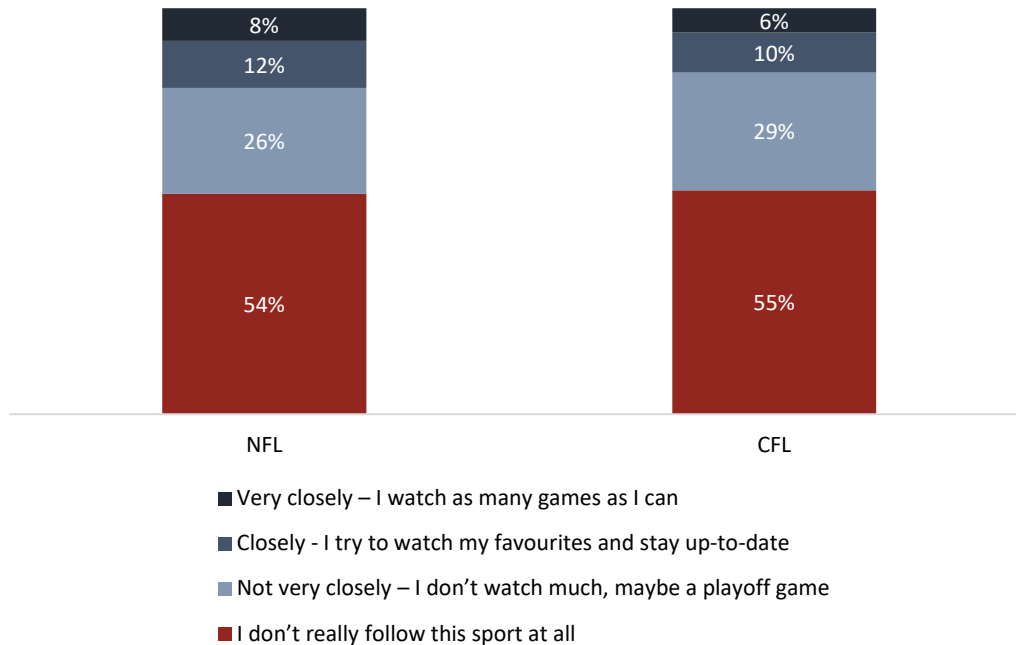
Appendix: How many follow professional football in Canada?

Canadians were asked how closely they follow a variety of professional sports in Canada. For those results, please see the detailed tables below. Overall, attention paid to the NFL is slightly higher than that paid to the CFL, with notable demographic variations:

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How closely do you follow each of these professional sports leagues?
(n=1,515)



For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results by NFL and CFL viewership, [click here](#).

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