There Is Crying in Football: Reactions to an Athlete’s Weeping
Brandon C. Martin, William Hill, Grace McIntosh, Nelson Peterson, Olivia Sanborn, and Karol Maybury
Division of Psychology and Human Development, University of Maine at Farmington

ABSTRACT. The current study hypothesized that the status of a professional American football player would influence how observers perceived his weeping after losing a game. It was also predicted that the importance of the game (the NFL Super Bowl vs. a regular season game) would influence perceptions of his tears. Two hundred twenty-two adults, recruited nationally, read 1 of 4 vignettes in a 2 (player status: high- or low-performing) x 2 (game status: Super Bowl or regular season game) between-subjects design. The vignette describes a close game that is ultimately lost by the target’s team, with the target weeping at its conclusion. Participants (N=213) rated his postgame weeping as more appropriate and justifiable, using an allowance composite score, as it was found that there was a significant difference for both player, F(2, 196) = 10.13, p < .001; Wilks’ Lambda = .91; η² = .09, and game, F(2, 196) = 4.27, p = .02; Wilks’ Lambda = .96; η² = .04, status. There were also significant differences found in analyses for player status on perceived emotional stability, F(1, 202) = 20.22, p < .001, η² = .09, and game status on perceived competency, F(1, 200) = 173.63, p < .001, η² = .47. The ramifications of these findings, that situational details and personal attributes of the target influence observers’ judgments of emotional appropriateness, are discussed.

Keywords: football, masculinity, gender norms, crying behavior

There Is Crying in Football: Reacciones a las lágrimas de un atleta
Brandon C. Martin, William Hill, Grace McIntosh, Nelson Peterson, Olivia Sanborn, and Karol Maybury
División de Psicología y Desarrollo Humano, Universidad de Maine en Farmington

ABSTRACT. El estudio actual planteó la hipótesis de que el estado de un jugador profesional de fútbol americano influiría en cómo los observadores percibían el llanto del jugador después de perder un partido. También se predijo que la importancia del juego (el Super Bowl de la NFL frente a un juego de la temporada regular) influiría en la percepción de las lágrimas del jugador. Doscientos veintidós adultos, reclutados a nivel nacional, leyeron uno de las cuatro viñetas en un diseño entre sujetos de 2 (estado del jugador: alto o bajo rendimiento) x 2 (estado del juego: Super Bowl o juego de temporada regular). La viñeta describía un juego cerrado que finalmente pierde el equipo del objetivo, con el objetivo llorando al final. Los participantes (N=213) calificaron llanto del jugador posterior al juego como más apropiado y justificable, utilizando una puntuación compuesta de tolerancia, ya que que habían diferencias significativas para jugador, F(2, 196) = 10.13, p < .001; Lambda de Wilks = .91; η² = .09, y tipo de juego, F(2, 196) = 4.27, p = .02; Lambda de Wilks = .96; η² = .04. También se encontraron diferencias significativas en las análisis del estatus social del jugador sobre la estabilidad emocional percibida, F(1, 202) = 20.22, p < .001, η² = .09, y el tipo del juego sobre la competencia percibida, F(1, 200) = 173.63, p < .001, η² = .47. Se discuten las ramificaciones de estos resultados, que los detalles situacionales y los atributos personales del objetivo influyen en los juicios de adecuación emocional de los observadores.

Palabras clave: fútbol, masculinidad, normas de género, conducta de llanto
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When people observe someone’s emotion expression, their evaluation of the acceptability of the person’s emotion depends upon a number of factors. Observers weigh the precipitating circumstances, the manner in which the emotion is expressed (e.g., subtly or excessively), the status of the person, and how much they like or dislike them (Maybury, 1997; Shields & MacDowell, 1987). Observer judgements are also influenced by how closely the expression aligns with display rules: culturally specific rules about emotion expression, including which emotion to display, how much to show, and when to show it (Ekman & Friesen, 1975).

Display rules are first acquired in childhood with more intricate rules added throughout adolescence and adulthood (e.g., neutralizing a joyful expression upon winning a card game). As children age, they develop an increasingly nuanced understanding of appropriate emotion encoding in response to various circumstances (e.g., expressing joy upon opening a present, even if disappointed). Adeptness at following display rules is positively correlated with social competence throughout childhood and adolescence (McDowell & Parke, 2005). Both boys and girls mask emotions more with peers than with parents (Zeman & Garber, 1996), but both of these groups (peers and family) may have their own idiosyncratic display rules, which are further mediated by race and culture (Morelen et al., 2013).

Research on the development of display rules reveals some gender-related differences, such as girls masking disappointment earlier in life than boys (Saarni, 1988). Although there are-several differences in display rules by gender, especially greater disapproval of tears for boys (Mendez-Santiago & Campbell, 2013; Stadel et al., 2019; Vigil, 2008), cultural differences add another layer of complexity (e.g., greater acceptance of female anger in Germany vs. in the United States; Sommers & Kosmitzki, 1988).

However, universally, judgements of another’s emotion are impacted by the observers’ partiality toward the target, including their perceived status in the eyes of the viewer. For instance, when viewing a political debate, viewers’ evaluations of the debater’s emotional appropriateness depend upon their allegiance to the candidate (Shields & MacDowell, 1987). In sum, emotion research shows that when observers view another’s emotion, they judge the target by their adherence to display rules, as well as their subjective predisposition toward them. Judgement of too much or too little emotion (appropriateness) “...depends upon who is doing the naming, who is named, and the circumstance in which the emotion occurs” (Shields, 2002, p. 185).

Men’s and boys’ emotion display rules may be uniquely bound by masculine norms, which includes expectations surrounding stoicism and emotional restraint, sexual prowess, and dominance and power (Reigeluth & Addis, 2021). Although these norms differ depending upon a number of factors (e.g., the age of the person displaying emotion, the degree to which observers endorse hegemonic masculinity), there may be some overarching imperatives about emotion displays (e.g., sadness), the manner in which the emotion is expressed (either subtly or extravagantly), and the environment in which it occurs (e.g., privately or in a public sphere such as a sporting arena). Conformity to hegemonic masculinity norms regarding the suppression of sadness may be particularly commonplace.

Although display rules around weeping have historically been gender-specific (e.g., greater acceptance of female crying), emotion researchers have noted a shift over the past 40 years. In 2002, Shields posited that in the realm of politics (namely, weeping by U.S. Presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ronald Reagan) and in professional sports (both coaches and players), tears and “manly weeping” had become more commonplace. Shields presented evidence that, since 1970, display rules against men’s tears have eased. However, research shows that the seriousness of the precipitating event, liking of the target, and the manner in which the tears are shed (e.g., preference for “passionate restraint of tears”) are all variables that continue to influence how a man’s weeping is perceived (MacArthur & Shields, 2019).

For the current study, we examined men’s weeping in professional American football. MacArthur and Shields (2019) recently summarized the body of research examining how different contextual cues impact judgements of tears in sport. The reasons the target is crying, domain (where the crying takes place), and intensity (tearing up or weeping openly) all influence observers’ acceptance of men weeping in sport contexts (Warner & Shields, 2007).

American football is a compelling domain in which to examine perceptions of male weeping because masculine norms include expectations to enact stoicism and emotional restraint (Reigeluth & Addis, 2021) and competitive, aggressive athleticism is a hallmark of the sport. However, the acceptability of male weeping (as mentioned above) has increased over the past 50 years. In 2011, athletes...
themselves provided insight into emotion display rules in football. Wong et al. (2011) asked 150 college football players to evaluate players’ appropriateness when they teared up (or sobbed) after a win or a loss. Players reported “tearing up” to be more appropriate and typical than open weeping; and tears after losing a game were perceived as more normative than after winning a game. Other investigations underscore that tears after a loss appear to be somewhat expected by teammates, and weeping is not universally viewed negatively (Adler & Adler, 1991). Although this may seem surprising, especially because hegemonic masculinity among men is often associated with stoicism and masking emotions such as sadness (David & Brannon, 1976), subordinated masculinity also expects men to show emotion in close and intimate relationships (Connell, 2005; Randell et al., 2015), such as among teammates. These competing imperatives suggest that evaluations of weeping in football may be a fruitful topic to pursue in emotion research.

The backdrop of American football was chosen deliberately for this investigation; it is a “manly sport” (Nelson, 1994) that is engulfed in the use of physical aggression (Messner, 1992), unsurprisingly making it part of the dominant masculine culture in the United States. Given this, and the admiration of “passionate restraint” of tears, known as tearing up but limiting flow to demonstrate control over emotions in a sad situation (Vingerhoets et al., 2000), MacArthur and Shields (2005) suggested that subtle tears may be acceptable in “manly” sports such as football, especially because it is a domain where masculinity is otherwise unassailable. However, we anticipated that different evaluations of emotion would emerge as a function of level-of-competition (professional vs. preprofessional sport). Likewise, previous research (e.g., Shields, 2005) has suggested that a player’s performance or stature on a team could affect perceptions of his crying behavior.

Hypothesis
We hypothesized that a professional football player would be perceived as more appropriate if he wept (a) as a result of the loss of an important game vs. a regular season game, and (b) was a high-status vs. low-status player. In a separate but related part of this investigation, participants were also asked about display rules they learned about crying (from family, teachers, and peers) in order to examine whether a relationship exists between acceptance of others’ crying and one’s learned beliefs about the advisability of shedding, or suppressing, tears.

Method
Participants
Participants were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (mTurk) surveying system. mTurk allows surveyors, called requesters, to upload their surveys with an incentive of a predetermined payment if completed. Qualifications can be placed on the survey to focus on collecting data from certain populations; the current study placed a qualification of residency in the United States. Participants, called Workers, are awarded a specified amount of payment automatically by Amazon (within three days) after completing the survey. The current study was incentivized with a $0.25 payment, which took approximately five minutes to complete. There was an initial total of 222 participants; however, to evaluate the legitimacy of data collected through mTurk, IP addresses were reviewed to avoid overlapping of responses. Through this filtering, nine participants were omitted from data analysis to 213 total participants. Of these participants, 112 (52.6%) identified as male, 99 (46.3%) identified as female, and two (<1%) identified as nonbinary. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 76 years with a mean age of 38.8 years (SD = 12.1).

Design
The current study was a 2 x 2 between-subjects design. The independent variables were player status (high- or low-performing) and game status (a regular season professional football game or the Super Bowl, the National Football League’s championship game). The dependent variables were scaled ratings of the player’s emotional stability, appropriateness, honesty, competence, and justification of weeping.

Materials
Vignettes
Participants read a vignette of a fictional professional football player who weeps after the loss of either (a) a regular season game or (b) the Super Bowl, and is described as either (a) a high-performing or (b) a low-performing wide receiver. Participants were randomly assigned one of four conditions: regular season/high-performing, Super Bowl/high-performing, regular season/low-performing, Super Bowl/low-performing (see Appendix). They then were asked questions on variables assessing for perceived reactions and thoughts relating to the vignette and the player.

Measures
A total of 20 questions were developed for
participants to answer based on their randomly assigned vignette and relating to the independent and dependent variables. These items were followed by some closed and open-ended questions about emotion display rules from their childhood, and current (adult) display rules they had about crying behavior. For the purpose of the current study, dependent variables were categorized into subgroups for organizational and thematic purposes.

**Allowance.** After reading the vignette, the first three questions assessed how participants perceived the weeping behavior of the fictional football player (Kyle, the target) based on appropriateness of the behavior, justification for the behavior, and emotional stability of the target. Participants responded on a 6-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (completely). Perceived competency of the target was also asked, but will be conducted as a dependent variable for separate analyses.

Other questions, not directly related to emotional acceptability, assessed for perceived honesty and extraversion of the target. However, these were not further evaluated for the current study.

**Emotional Background.** The next four questions assessed participants’ display rules learned from friends and family from childhood through current-day. Quantitative questions to assess how participants’ friends and themselves might react in a similar situation presented in the vignette were presented, as well as if they had any rules around crying learned from adult caregivers, and current rules or beliefs around personal crying behavior. Participants were also asked how often they cried to assess personal crying behavior for background, which was assessed on a 6-point scale from 1 (never) to 6 (very frequently). However, these questions were not a goal of the study and were not included in analyses.

**Stimulus Checks.** To ensure participants understood the presented vignette (and that the stimulus was interpreted as intended), participants were asked how good of a player the target seemed for the player status conditions, and how important the game seemed for the game status conditions; both were rated on a 6-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (completely).

**Demographics.** The last two questions of the study pertain to the participant’s demographics, which included age and gender. Race/ethnicity was not asked in the current study and is later discussed in the Discussion section.

**Procedure**

Before the study was distributed for recruitment of subjects on mTurk, university Institutional Review Board approval was sought and granted. Four separate studies were created on SurveyMonkey to change the vignettes for the corresponding conditions. The four conditions (high-performing/regular season, high-performing/Super Bowl, low-performing/regular season, low-performing/Super Bowl) were posted separately to mTurk on December 16, 2020 through January 4, 2021.

After the study was completed, participants were thanked for their participation and redirected back to the mTurk home page. Their data were then transferred to SPSS for data cleaning and analysis.

**Results**

**Preliminary Results**

The stimulus checks for the player and game status conditions were first evaluated to determine the effectiveness of the condition descriptions. These were tested by calculating independent *t*-tests. For player status, participants in the high-performing condition rated the target, Kyle, as significantly better (*M* = 4.00, *SD* = 0.79) than those in the low-performing condition (*M* = 2.38, *SD* = 1.08), *t*(211) = 12.51, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.71. For game status, participants in the Super Bowl condition rated the game to be significantly more important (*M* = 4.47, *SD* = 0.80) than those in the regular season condition (*M* = 3.41, *SD* = 0.99), *t*(209) = 8.69, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.20. Both Cohen’s *d* scores indicated a large effect size (Cohen, 1988), suggesting that both conditions were considered to be appropriately described and measured. Therefore, these descriptions for the conditions were retained.

**Allowance**

We predicted that player status and game-import main effects would emerge with participants rating weeping as significantly more appropriate if it occurred after the loss of a high-stakes (Super Bowl) game and by a high-status player. Before running a 2 x 2 MANOVA with the three dependent variables (perceived appropriateness, justification, and emotional stability), binary correlations were conducted to test for multicollinearity. Emotional acceptability and justification were found to be highly correlated (*r* = .80). To avoid multicollinearity, a composite score of allowance (perceived appropriateness and justification scores summed) was created to sum the two variables, a technique suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001). A 2 x 2 MANOVA, modified to
evaluate allowance and perceived emotional stability, was then conducted.

Controlling for participant age, gender, and crying frequency, we found a statistically significant difference between conditions for both player status, $F(2, 196) = 10.13, p < .001$; Wilks’ Lambda = .91; $\eta^2 = .09$, and game import, $F(2, 196) = 4.27, p = .02$; Wilks’ Lambda = .96; $\eta^2 = .04$, in the multivariate analysis. Considering dependent variables individually, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .01, there were significant differences for perceived emotional stability on player status, $F(1, 197) = 17.55, p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$, and allowance on game import, $F(1, 197) = 8.56, p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .04$. It should be noted that, interestingly, there was no statistical significance for allowance on player status, $F(1, 197) = 0.87, p = .35$, or perceived emotional stability on game import, $F(1, 197) = 2.58, p = .11$. Therefore, emotional acceptability had mixed results and partially support the hypothesis.

Demographics
To evaluate for potential significant differences between gender and age, independent $t$ tests were conducted for the dependent variables. For gender and emotional appropriateness, both allowance ($p = .56$) and perceived emotional stability ($p = .48$) were found to be nonsignificant. For other dependent variables, two significant findings were observed for (a) how the participant would respond in the same situation, as women ($M = 4.16, SD = 1.52$) reported being more likely to display similar crying behavior compared to men ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.45$), $t(208) = -2.93, p = .004$, and (b) how often participants cried, as women ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.10$) reported crying more often compared to males ($M = 2.88, SD = 1.02$), $t(208) = -3.44, p < .001$.

To evaluate potential differences in age, linear regressions were conducted with dependent variables. There were two significant effects found: age was found (a) to explain 1.8% of the variance for perceived emotional stability, $R^2 = .02$, Adj. $R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 208) = 3.83, p = .05$, and was a predictor of stability (β = -.13, $p = .05$), and (b) to explain 2.2% of the variance for perceived competency of the target, $R^2 = .02$, Adj. $R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 206) = 4.54, p = .03$, and was a predictor of competency (β = -.15, $p = .03$). Perhaps interestingly, age was not found to be a predictor for allowance ($p = .77$).

Discussion
The current study has provided more evidence that judgment of emotion appropriateness is a subjective process influenced by the status of the target and the import of the precipitating event. Namely, suggesting that, when viewing and evaluating a professional football player weeping, observers are influenced by both the status of the player (also found to significantly affect emotional stability) and the import of the game (found to significantly affect allowance; perceived appropriateness and justification).

This study found further support for previous research, which has demonstrated the impact of target status on evaluations of emotion displays (Maybury, 1997; Shields, 2002; Shields & MacDowell, 1987). Previous research has demonstrated that higher status individuals are granted greater leeway to show strong emotion, even if the emotion is disruptive, such as angry outburst (e.g., Maybury, 1997), than lower status individuals. Although it was not explicitly measured in this investigation, an intriguing independent variable that might bear fruit would be likeability of the target, which could perhaps also impact evaluations of tears. Professional football would, once again, be an intriguing backdrop for such an investigation. For instance, researchers might examine whether the target is a member of the observers’ home or rival team. Alternatively, one could manipulate the likeability of the player via a backstory describing his character in a written scenario. Background context about a player, such as criminal behavior (e.g., domestic violence), could have an even more profound impact on evaluations of emotion appropriateness.

The current study may be the first to demonstrate that within the setting of professional football, a game of greater import, such as the Super Bowl, grants players greater allowance for strong displays of sadness. Although this intriguing development should be interpreted with some caution, it is in keeping with display rule theory that observers take into account the concurrent circumstances when judging another’s emotion (MacArthur & Shields, 2019; Maybury, 1997; Shields, 2002; Shields & MacDowell, 1987; Warner & Shields, 2007). Future research on contextual cues and judgments might examine how viewers might weigh the seriousness of the precipitating event of other sport-related circumstances when evaluating appropriateness.

Future research might also tackle questions that emerged from the current study. For one, it remains unknown by how people judge weeping as a function of the player’s age and level of play (high school, college, professional). Although the current study suggests it is acceptable for a high status...
professional player competing in the Super Bowl to cry, it remains to be seen how people evaluate younger players (e.g., a high school player) or how age of respondent (e.g., high school peers) might impact ratings of weeping.

It bears mentioning that there are major limitations specific to race, including the race of the target in this study and asking for participant race/ ethnicity as part of the demographic questions. Because the race/ethnicity of the target was not specified in the presented vignette, participants’ assumptions of the target’s race are relatively unknown. Previous research indicates that when race isn’t specified, participants generally assume the target is a member of the majority group, although this may be impacted by response bias of the participant (Gushu & Carter, 1999) or social features that are present in the experimental stimuli (Strangor et al., 1992). However, 70% of NFL football players are African-American (Lawrence, 2019) and 88% of wide receivers are African-American (Josefsson, 2018). Therefore, it remains uncertain whether participants were picturing an African-American player as a member of the majority in the NFL, or a European American player as a member of the majority in the United States population. This is a crucial descriptor to clarify in future investigations, because race may be a factor that exerts an influence on observers’ evaluation of emotion appropriateness; for example, in a study of African-American professionals, Wingfield (2010) found that suppressing negative emotions was a common work expectation. Although Wingfield is one of the few studies examining race and display/feeling rules in the workplace, it did not include professional athletes, so it remains to be seen how findings relate to a setting like professional football.

Studying display rules on the football field, as a function of player race, would help develop this area of emotion research further. Future investigations might benefit from including explicit descriptions of the race of the target, and the race of the participants, in order to further reveal emotion expression display rules as a function of race. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) stereotypes surrounding emotion expression have been underresearched, and Wingfield’s (2010) study suggests race of target might impact evaluations of emotion appropriateness.

Relatedly, future investigations might examine how people assess emotion as a function of sport and culture. Examining cultural differences across sport (e.g., Spanish soccer vs. American football) could provide a more nuanced understanding of display rules in different sporting domains.

The current study suggests that, consistent with findings of other research in the field of emotion (MacArthur & Shields, 2019; Maybury, 1997; Shields, 2002; Shields & MacDowell, 1987; Warner & Shields, 2007), player status and game import have a significant effect on the perceptions of a professional wide receiver weeping after a game. Specifically, emotional stability on player status and emotional allowance on game import adds to research on the effects of status on emotional and general perceptions of others (Maybury, 1997; Shields & MacDowell, 1987). However, mixed results and aforementioned major limitations should be considered and utilized to not only support previous research, but also provide a direction for future research on the topic of perceptions of emotion in the sport setting.

References

Kyle (28) plays professionally in the National Football League (NFL). He is a wide receiver who is on the field for most of the team’s offensive plays; he contributes a significant amount to the team and has performed among the top wide receivers in the league. Kyle and his team are playing in the Super Bowl, the championship game, and lose in a tough back-and-forth match. Right after the final whistle, Kyle is overcome with emotion. Tears well up in Kyle’s eyes and drip down his cheeks. He tucks his head into the neck of his jersey and squats down for a moment, then gets up and slowly walks off the field.

Scenario 1 (Good/Super Bowl)

Kyle (28) plays professionally in the National Football League (NFL). He is a wide receiver who is on the field for most of the team’s offensive plays; he contributes a significant amount to the team and has performed among the top wide receivers in the league. Kyle and his team are playing in the Super Bowl, the championship game, and lose in a tough back-and-forth match. Right after the final whistle, Kyle is overcome with emotion. Tears well up in Kyle’s eyes and drip down his cheeks. He tucks his head into the neck of his jersey and squats down for a moment, then gets up and slowly walks off the field.

Scenario 2 (Good/Regular)

Kyle (28) plays professionally in the National Football League (NFL). He is a wide receiver who is on the field for most of the team’s offensive plays; he contributes a significant amount to the team and has performed among the top wide receivers in the league. Kyle and his team are playing in the first game of the team’s 16-game regular season schedule, and lose in a tough back-and-forth match. Right after the final whistle, Kyle is overcome with emotion. Tears well up in Kyle’s eyes and drip down his cheeks. He tucks his head into the neck of his jersey and squats down for a moment, then gets up and slowly walks off the field.

Scenario 3 (Bad/Super Bowl)

Kyle (28) plays professionally in the National Football League (NFL). He is a wide receiver who is on the field for most of the team’s offensive plays; he has been performing inconsistently for two seasons and is statistically now one of the worst wide receivers in the league. Kyle and his team are playing in the Super Bowl, the championship game, and lose in a tough back-and-forth match. Right after the final whistle, Kyle is overcome with emotion. Tears well up in Kyle’s eyes and drip down his cheeks. He tucks his head into the neck of his jersey and squats down for a moment, then gets up and slowly walks off the field.

Scenario 4 (Bad/Regular)

Kyle (28) plays professionally in the National Football League (NFL). He is a wide receiver who is on the field for most of the team’s offensive plays; he has been performing inconsistently for two seasons and is statistically now one of the worst wide receivers in the league. Kyle and his team are playing in the first game of the team’s 16-game regular season schedule, and lose in a tough back-and-forth match. Right after the final whistle, Kyle is overcome with emotion. Tears well up in Kyle’s eyes and drip down his cheeks. He tucks his head into the neck of his jersey and squats down for a moment, then gets up and slowly walks off the field.
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