A Popular Representation of Disability:  
*Friday Night Lights*

Every Tuesday and Thursday, around dinnertime, when a break from studying is much needed, I turn on the TV hoping to find something good; something interesting and simple, yet still dramatic and realistic, to watch while I eat my Easy-Mac. I always end up tuned to NBC’s *Friday Night Lights*. The show is centered around a high school football team in a small Texas town, where they take football even more seriously than we do here at Penn State. Much more than the beauty of winning, teamwork, friendship, and determination, the show highlights, through one of its main characters, the possibility of a life-changing injury from a high-contact sport like football.

In the show’s pilot episode, quarterback Jason Street was tackling a defender when he sustained a C7-T1 spinal cord injury. As a result of this simple play, he was paralyzed from the waist down. As the season continued, Jason became a bigger part of the storyline, his paralysis a major part of his, and the rest of the characters’ lives. David Edwards, a high school football player paralyzed from the shoulders down after a collision in a game, inspired Jason’s character in *Friday Night Lights*. Scott Porter, the actor who plays Jason, conducted extensive character research on paraplegics and quadriplegics. According to numerous websites and blogs for those with disabilities, Porter’s research was well done and has made his acting accurate and believable. The website *Disaboom* quotes Porter in an interview saying, “A great majority of the fan letters I get are from people who have suffered either a career-ending injury or any injury that is paraplegic or quadriplegic in nature. They say it’s the most realistic view of a
quadriplegic’s life in a long time. I just take it as such a huge compliment” (Mabe, Catherine).

It is extremely important that the media portray people with disabilities accurately because the media has a large influence on people’s stereotypes and views of those with disabilities. In *Friday Night Lights*, the disability related scenes are said to be “seamlessly interwoven with the other scenes” (Duncan, Barbara) making them seem “normal” and allowing the audience to identify more with Jason. The majority of the media seems to be more invested in depicting the “normal” able-bodied person in our society but as TV shows like *Friday Night Lights, Glee*, and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* prove, the media can and should present disabilities as more “ordinary” rather than strange and grotesque. It should also be noted that *Friday Night Lights* does an excellent job of not suggesting that this specific representation of Jason in a wheelchair is a representation of everyone who uses one. The portrayal of Jason’s disability is very realistic and unique to his situation so that viewers don’t make the common mistake of generalizing about all disabilities when only seeing one representation. The former star quarterback, disabled as a result of a game injury, is very easy for an American audience to identify with because his disability is portrayed as “normal” and his character and situation are unique.

Along with Scott Porter’s excellent acting, disabled viewers praise *Friday Night Lights* for the way the show incorporates common disability related dilemmas. Jason is pitied and too often consoled for his unfortunate situation. Because the majority of the small Texas town witnessed the paralyzing tackle, they all felt the need to give him their sympathy. Since Jason had an acquired instead of a congenital disability, he experienced
the rough transition from able-bodied to disabled. Lyla was Jason’s sweet and loving girlfriend before he was injured and she remained his girlfriend through the end of season one. The difficulties of being in an able-bodied and disabled relationship were brought to the surface of the show’s storyline. Lyla was very optimistic about Jason’s potential for complete recovery. She conducted research about others’ success stories attempting to give him (and herself) hope and inspiration. Her extreme optimism and expectation for him to “overcome” his disability were often too much for Jason. Tim, Jason’s best friend, did not know how to deal with the realities of Jason’s injury and their subsequent on-and-off friendship realistically portrayed people’s responses to similar events. Jason’s family had a difficult time adjusting to the major changes in their lives as a result of his injury but they rearranged the house to accommodate Jason and they were also able to raise his spirits. Despite the many dilemmas that he was presented with, Jason made the most of his new reality in time.

One way in which Jason “overcame” his disability was by playing wheelchair rugby. While recovering in the hospital, Jason shared a room with a fellow paraplegic, Herc, who introduced him to the sport. Jason viewed wheelchair rugby as a perfect outlet for his competitiveness. Before his injury, Jason was very determined and focused as well as extremely athletic because of football. Through the example of wheelchair rugby, *Friday Night Lights* succeeds in showing its audience that Jason’s basic characteristics did not change just because he was paralyzed. His original identity does not falter, he just finds new ways to remain competitive and driven. Lennard Davis says that, in our culture, “the identity of people becomes defined by irrepressible identificatory physical qualities that can be measured” (8) meaning that people are too often characterized solely
by their physical abilities rather than mental abilities or attributes. The show should be lauded for presenting the contrary, showing how Jason’s personality remains the same and portraying him with the same characteristics both in and out of a wheelchair. Along with the incorporation of wheelchair rugby, this show also presents the audience with an accurate portrayal of the road to the Paralympics.

In my opinion, and also according to those who are disabled themselves and have viewed and reported on the show, there is very little that is objectionable about the representation of disability in *Friday Night Lights*. Paraplegics and quadriplegics who watch Scott Porter’s every move say that he makes only a few minor mistakes; too much hand usage here, too much movement there. Many in the disabled community feel it is unfair that able-bodied people are chosen to play disabled parts. They argue that someone who actually has the disability they are trying to portray to the audience will do a better job than someone “imitating” the disability. They also believe that showing an audience that a disabled person is capable of being a successful actor will help change our prejudices about disabled people’s abilities. Although I understand this point, I believe that the media can change people’s prejudices about those with disabilities even if the actor does not actually have the disability he or she is trying to portray (a great example of this is Michael Sheen’s performance in the film *Music Within*). Even though he is not actually disabled, everyone is still very impressed with Porter’s performance and has little to no complaints about his acting in a wheelchair.

I believe that the able-bodied and disabled alike often compliment *Friday Night Lights*’ portrayal of a paraplegic young man because his story is told over a long period of time. Because Jason’s character is in a TV show as apposed to a two-hour movie, the
scriptwriters are able to show a variety of attitudes, adjustments, and situations, all of which greatly contribute to his narrative. Just as in reality, the disabled person and the people in his or her life develop, change, and display many different emotions and responses to certain situations. A TV show that progresses with time is better able to represent all aspects of disability than a film because films often feel the need to have a sort of closing where the disabled person is cured, dies, or teaches the audience something. This need for closure in movies often results in the cutting out of important steps in the disabled person’s life whereas in a longer-running TV show, the complexity of the situation can be justly represented.

One complaint of the show could be that it is unrealistic that Jason does not have to face much discrimination. The average disabled person might say that experiencing ableism, discrimination in favor of the able-bodied (223), is a big part of their everyday life and that Friday Night Lights does not show this realistic side of being disabled. I would argue that Jason doesn’t encounter much ableism because he is still known in the community as the popular football player who simply came up on the wrong side of a tackle. I would also bring up that Lyla’s attitude towards her boyfriend can be considered a sort of ableism because of her constant enthusiasm about how Jason will walk again and how everything will be ok because he will be cured of his disability.

In his brief essay regarding the history of disability, Colin Barnes states, “Our perceptions of impairment and disability are coloured by a deep-rooted psychological fear of the unknown, the anomalous, and the abnormal.” (20) When TV shows and films accurately represent disability, our perceptions of it are not as negative and our prejudices begin to collapse. The more they are portrayed as normal and ordinary in the media, the
less anomalous disabilities seem to us and the less we fear them. Shows like *Friday Night Lights* allow the able-bodied to relate more to the disabled and once the able-bodied are able to identify with the disabled, they will be more accepting and respectful.

**Works Cited**


