

## Because of risks, schools should drop football

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By *Stephen F. Gambescia*

August is when schools across the country start official football practices. Parents and coaches will pray that no player drops dead from heat exhaustion. That's a rare event, and precautions have been taken to prevent it, which is good. But truth be told, parents need to hold their breath through every play of the season, as American football - by its design and the way it is played - poses a high risk of injury to young people.

Football, from the first kickoff to the final whistle, involves bone-breaking, ligament-twisting, head-knocking action. Players on both sides line up head-to-head. Defensemen often tackle using their heads, and the ball carriers, as last-ditch efforts, buck with their heads to avoid a tackle or gain an extra yard.

All sports have some degree of risk of bodily injury. However, the nature and extent of bodily harm due to youths playing football is perverse.

In 2013, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council released a report by an expert committee reviewing the science of sports-related concussions in youths. While the committee pointed out the lack of highly reliable or centralized data concerning the overall incidence of sports-related concussions among young people, there were enough reports reviewed that showed concussions are on the rise and that football is a leading cause.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, roughly 2.7 million youths under 20 were treated for sports and recreation injuries from 2001 to 2009. During this period, emergency room visits for traumatic brain injuries among children under 19 rose 62 percent.

Because of the risks involved, board members and officials of elementary and high schools should seriously consider not sponsoring football.

There is no question that this is a radical idea and would be a major social and economic change for schools and communities.

Football at all levels of play is unequivocally part of American culture. We invest a lot of time, attention, emotion, and money in the game.

Most can relate to the exuberance that winning football teams bring for players and spectators. Many have had a Remember the Titans experience, recalling the 2000 film about a Virginia high school team. And less-than-stellar players can dream about being the next Rudy, the star of another gridiron film. Our most red, white, and blue holiday, Thanksgiving, is spiced with football. So calling for the removal of football in schools will most likely be viewed as un-American.

At a time when we are fighting against our children becoming overweight and wanting them to get more exercise, why pull the plug on a youth sport that many of them play? At a time when "grit" is identified as a healthy characteristic for college and workplace success, why pull the sport off the list of options?

Maybe it is time to think of football, especially at the scholastic level, not only with such terms of endearment. Maybe it is time to think about scholastic football in terms of what benefits and risks it holds for young people on balance and in the long run.

It may not be well known, but the American Public Health Association, along with several major medical associations, called for a ban on boxing at all levels as early as 1985. In its policy statement, the association said boxing is inherently dangerous and, by design, puts players at risk of harm. In addition, it said that the litany of rule changes, equipment tweaking, and "better surveillance of harm" proposed by apologists hoping to reform the sport would lessen but not eliminate the risk of injury. And it noted that there are ample alternatives that provide any of the benefits that boxing provides.

The same arguments can be applied to American football. While progress has been made through coaching players not to use their heads directly in plays, the fact is that the head is almost always in harm's way; there is no rule change that can make the head incidental.

We should question why we expend so much time, money, and energy on an enterprise that invariably sacrifices so many young minds, bodies, and sometimes spirits. It is time for school leaders and parents to seriously consider getting our children off the gridiron.

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**Stephen F. Gambescia** is a professor of health services administration at Drexel University. sfg23@drexel.edu

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