

GET OUR CHILDREN OFF THE GRIDIRON [PART ONE]*

STEPHEN F. GAMBESCIA**

This commentary, calling for the removal of youth football in public schools, may seem an unusual article to appear in the *Delta Epsilon Sigma Journal*. The rationale is threefold. First, I believe the *DESJ* readership consists of those who have demonstrated “wisdom” and “leadership” and are open to provocative ideas. Second, many *DESJ* readers and members teach at colleges where football is not a sacred cow, and thus they can attest to the fact that the goals of higher education can be accomplished without a football team. Third, in a final analysis, the funding, promotion, and idolatry of a sport that by its very design and practice leads to bodily harm is questionable, if not unethical, to offer to our youth.

Call for Public Schools to Stop Sponsoring Football

School board members and officials of public elementary and high schools should take seriously the decision to cease sponsoring football for their students, given a growing national awareness about the injurious nature of this game. American football, by design, is a rough bodily sport. The way that American style football is coached and played invariably involves the use of the head, and to play football means placing the head in harm’s way. Football, from the first kickoff to the final whistle, involves bone-breaking, ligament-twisting, and head-knocking action. Each player is coached, literally, to “get his head in the game,” and 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 (Gambescia, 2015; Kucer and Lewis, 2015).

American Style Football is Inherently Injurious to Youth

All sports have some degree of risk of bodily injury. However, the nature and extent of bodily harm due to youth playing football is perverse. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), roughly 2.7 million youth under 20 were treated for sport and recreation injuries from 2001 to 2009 (CDC, 2008). During that same period, emergency room visits for traumatic brain injuries among children under 19 rose 62 percent. Football has one of the highest number of incidents of players with head impact injuries among youth sport, and concussions are on the rise in youth and high school football, even among the youngest players (CDC, 2008). This data represents the likely serious and officially reported head injuries

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through hospital emergency rooms; however, there are many more head injuries that go unreported.

In 2013, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council released a report from an expert committee reviewing the science of sports-related concussions in youth, *Sports-Related Concussions in Youth: Improving the Science, Changing the Culture* (National Academy of Sciences, 2013). While the committee pointed out the lack of highly reliable or centralized data concerning the overall incidence of sports-related concussions in youth, there were enough reports reviewed that showed youth concussions from playing sport is on the rise, and football is the leading sport causing both many and serious head injuries.

The playing of football as inherently injurious to one's health has captured the national conscience in the last few years. The cover story of *Time's* 29 September, 2014 issue chronicled the tragic events of a high school football player who died from "blunt force injury to the cranium" (Gregory, 2014). Gregory reported on Chad Stover, a 16 year old defensive back at Tipton High School in Missouri, who took two major hits to his head, causing him to collapse on the field. After two weeks on life support, the young athlete died from continued hemorrhaging in the brain and oxygen deprivation. In addition, the National Football League in 2013 made a settlement with about 18,000 former football players based on their cover-up of a sundry of neurological sequela from the players' continual head impact injuries during play (Associated Press, 2013). In documents filed in federal courts for the NFL players against the League, it is estimated that nearly one third of professional football players will develop dementia, Alzheimer's disease, or other debilitating neurological disorders such as Parkinson's or ALS (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2014). This NFL players' backlash stimulated the making of three upcoming motion pictures about the long-standing NFL officials' denial that players had long-term sequelae from the game's contact (McDonald, 2014). Individual and class action lawsuits against the NFL will, no doubt, follow a protracted "Who knew what, when, and who had the power to cover it up" script (Lowery, 2015; Roebuck, 2015), but, in the meantime, the public and parents of youngsters playing football will become wary of the game (Brady, 2015; Brennan, 2015).

The nature and extent of youth injury in sport is disconcerting as youth sports are becoming more intense (Neergaard, 2008). Youth of both genders have begun playing sport at younger ages, specializing in one sport at an earlier age, and playing the sport harder and for longer hours. While a critical mass of adults have an obsession with watching sport, a critical mass of youth are obsessed with playing a sport (Alsever, 2006; Burney, 2013; Mulvey, 2015; O'Neil-Braum, 2006; Weir, 2004; Williams, 2003).

Truth be told, a constant fear of parents whose child plays a sport is that their child will get injured. They actually understand both the roughness of many sports and that their child's body has not developed sufficiently to take the punishment given by the sport. How many of our youth play a sport? Kelley and Carchia (2013), ESPN investigators who tried to answer this question, found that nobody really knows, as there is no central database for this information. They do say that the number is "big!" The Sports and Fitness Industry Association has suggested that there are 21.47 million youth between the ages of 6 and 17 who play sports. Other sport management academics who study this area have youth participation much higher—possibly closer to 30 million (Kelley & Carchia, 2013).

Football leads the way as one of the most popular sports our older youth choose to play. The National Federation of State High School Associations (2015) conducted a survey and reported that during the 2013-14 school year, almost 1.1 million high school students (both male and female) played football. There is some evidence that those at a younger age are playing less football, e.g., Pop Warner leagues (Brady, 2015). Football is played primarily by boys and young men; however, by the time youth in this country are 17, the percentage of those playing football is close to any other sport for both male and female players, except for basketball (Kelley & Carchia, 2013).

Call for a Ban on School-Sponsored Football is Un-American!

It is understandable to think of a call for public schools to drop football as radical, and the call will most likely be met with strong resistance by the overwhelming majority of people and from the ranks of several stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators, community members, businesses, politicians, public officials, students). The calls for a ban on public school football will be faint; nonetheless, it is time for these voices to be heard.

Arguments against such a ban are many. Football at all levels of play is unequivocally part of the American cultural pastime (Ryan, 2005). We invest a lot of time, attention, emotion, and money into football. It has grown into much more than something we see “on any given Sunday.” At the pro level, it is played and watched on television three times a week. In high school, it is what “lights” our world on Friday nights, especially in small-town America (Steinberg, 2004). On Saturday, the younger kids get to play. A football game is a family and community affair. Chad Stover’s parents did not want to spoil the community’s involvement in football, even after they buried their son. In fact, his death caused the community to rally and players to swear to do their best in honor of the boy (Gregory, 2014).

Most can relate to the exuberance that winning football teams bring to those who play and those who watch. Many have had at some point a “remember the Titans” experience (Bruckheimer & Oman, 2000). Even those players “not so good at it” can dream about being the next Rudy (Fried & Woods, 1993). Football has inspired those who played for the most sophisticated teams who had “all the right moves” (Ball, Deutsch, Goldfarb, & Morton, 1983) to rag-tag prisoners (Giarrapto & Segal, 2005) and those working at a war-time M.A.S.H. unit (Preminger & Altman, 1970). Our most red, white, and blue-blooded holiday, Thanksgiving, is spiced up with football. Calling for removal of football in public schools will most likely be viewed as un-American.

At a time when we are fighting against our children becoming overweight (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014) 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 (Eskreis-Winkler, Duckworth, Shulman, & Beal, 2014; Torpey, 2015), why pull the sport off the list of options?

To be continued in the Fall 2017 issue of this Journal.

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GET OUR CHILDREN OFF THE GRIDIRON [PART TWO]*

STEPHEN F. GAMBESCIA**

Thinking about Youth Football Beyond Terms of Endearment.

For all the good that sports overall, and football in particular, give to our youth, there are too many reports today about the dark side of the football culture. Reports about abusive coaching and sophomoric team rituals at the scholastic level have been damaging (Hefler, 2006; Sielski, 2014; Zimmerman, 2009). Most of college-level football has become “corporatized.” It is a fantasy to think that much of the off-the-field actions of pro football players serve as character models for our youth. However, even with these high-profile negative aspects of football at all levels, many argue that there is generally much virtue in team sport (Appleseeds, 2015; Hastings, 2008) and that American football can instill such virtue.

But maybe it is time to think of football, especially at the scholastic level, beyond such terms of endearment. Perhaps it is time to think about scholastic football according to what benefits and risks it provides our youth on balance and in the long run. It may not be well known that the American Public Health Association (APHA), along with several major medical associations, called for a ban on boxing, at all levels of play, as early as 1985 (APHA, 1985). In their Policy Statement, APHA provides a rationale that one could easily ascribe to American football. First, they state that boxing is inherently dangerous and, by design, puts players at risk of harm. Second, they note that even though apologists have pressed for a litany of rule changes, tweaking of equipment, and “better surveillance of harm” in the interest of minimizing injuries, these changes would merely lessen, not substantially eliminate, the bodily injury problems of “boxing one’s ears in.” Third, they indicate that there are ample alternatives in sport and play to gain any advantage that boxing may provide.

There Are Alternatives to Playing Football in Schools

There is a growing movement in this country to substitute flag football for

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American football at the scholastic level. Flag football provides just as much fun, exercise, camaraderie, skill and team building, competitiveness, and character building as football, with much less stress all around (Gerdy, 2015). It is true that youth are at risk for injury when playing other sports (e.g. soccer, ice hockey). However, those sports can be tweaked to significantly reduce the risk of head injury while not fundamentally changing the game; whereas almost all aspects of football involve use of the head. For example, officials of a private middle school outside of Philadelphia, PA, banned the use of “heading the [soccer] ball” (Boccella, 2014). Most girls’ ice hockey leagues ban checking against the boards, which cuts down on the risk of head injury. Ice hockey leagues could take more seriously the parameters for which open-ice checking occurs, especially as it relates to contact with the head.

There are positive signs that we are taking head injury seriously in sports, including football. For example, during the Summer 2015 Women’s Soccer World Cup, a few players were wearing a “protective band” on their heads (Tannenwald, 2015). Manufacturers of football helmets are working to improve their basic protection, and technology is used to measure the number of intense hits [to the head] a player takes (Associated Press, 2011). The amount of players’ contact in practices for football is being curtailed in some leagues. Coaches are being counseled and trained on how to minimize a player’s use of the head (USA Football, 2015). There is more concern over the “big hits” in youth football (Gregory, 2015). However, it is fair to say that these measures, while perhaps ameliorating the risk of head injury, will not, in the long run, be successful, given that the use of the head in American style football is fundamental to the game. Furthermore, promoting such harm reduction “advances” will only stall the more reasonable action—simply not offering football in our public schools.

Why Call on Public Schools?

Why the call to action for public schools? Given that public school funding comes from the largest segments of communities across the country, we have a responsibility to ensure money is used in a useful and productive manner to achieve the goals and objectives of public education. Furthermore, at a time when many public school districts are struggling to fund basic academic and co-curricular activities and programs, why then put more stress in a system for a student activity that in the long run has questionable benefits, given the mission of the school? Actually, I suspect that the movement to remove football as a school activity will take place in nonpublic schools sooner, given the smaller and narrower constituents that school leaders and boards of trustees have to please. It may be easier to remove a football program from a nonpublic school; however, with public schools the rationale for such a radical social movement is more compelling.

Some apologists for keeping football, even if they agree with the risks to youth, will argue this is yet another example of the “nanny state” stepping in to rule our lives or note that removing football perpetuates our creating a *Puritan culture* of protection for our millennial children (Commes & DeBard, 2004). Again, in the short term such arguments seem fair; nonetheless, in the long run we need to question why we expend so much time, money, and energy for an enterprise that invariably sacrifices so many young minds, bodies, and sometimes spirits. It is time for school leaders and parents to take seriously the importance of getting our children off the gridiron. It is an idea whose time has come. What the futures of college and pro football look like without their sacrificial scholastic farm teams is for the marketplace of ideas to decide; meanwhile, it makes sense to divest our schools and communities of youth football.

Some Next Steps

Here are a few advocacy steps to what admittedly will be a very challenging socio-cultural and economic activity to promote change in our schools:

- Ethicists, working with medical and public health professionals, should develop a treatise arguing the rationale for the dissolution of scholastic football in public schools.
- School Board officials should be encouraged to ask for a full hearing on the health effects of football on our youth; they should propose the dissolution of football as a school sponsored event.
- Health surveillance on the morbidity and mortality from youth playing football should be improved dramatically.
- Parents should be given accurate and comprehensive information on the injurious effects of youth playing football.
- While technology, rule changes, and other “tweaks” related to the game should be encouraged, it should be made clear that these measures can only ameliorate, not eliminate, the risk. These measures should be promoted and recognized as part of the planned obsolescence, not “fixes” that will keep youth football alive in our public schools.
- Alternatives to football, especially flag football, should be seriously considered as offerings in schools to gain the many benefits of participating in youth sports.

Summary

There will be growing national awareness of the serious injuries, especially head injuries, caused by American style football and at all levels of the sport in the US. American football, by design and the way it is played, is a rough bodily sport. Football invariably involves the use of the head by all players and during almost all plays in the game. The head is a fundamental part of the game, and, while good

intentions can be made to play “heads-up football,” the use of the head cannot be coached out of the game; it will be in harm’s way. Game rule changes, better coaching, and improved protective technology will be offered during the impending national conversation to temper, if not eliminate, youth football in the US. Promoting harm reduction “advances” will only stall the more reasonable action— simply not offering football in our public schools. While youth football has played a significant socio-cultural and economic role in our country, in the long run, we need to question why we expend so much time, money, and energy for an enterprise that invariably sacrifices so many young minds, bodies, and sometimes spirits. It is time for school leaders and parents to take seriously the importance of getting our children off the gridiron.

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