



ADVANCING SAFETY IN FOOTBALL

Football, as we know it, is changing. The way the game used to be taught and played is different from what's happening today. Player protection and injury prevention are front and center, causing a major culture shift within the sport. Leagues across all levels are adopting new technology, regimes, and regulations in an effort to reduce the risk of injury, as researchers continue to focus on the impact of sustained contact in youth sports.

To help parents better understand what's changed, we've highlighted the key developments in football safety awareness.

Limiting Contact in Practice

In 2015, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) released a study that found concussions are more likely to occur during a tackle football practice rather than a game, with the reason being that there are simply more practices than games. So, to better protect players, leagues across the country began to decrease the amount of person-to-person contact that occurred during practice.

One study in particular followed a group of high school football players within the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association. After new rules and restrictions were passed defining and limiting the amount of contact allowed in practice, the rate of sports-related concussions decreased by 57 percent.

New Rule Changes

To eliminate potentially risky behavior that could lead to injuries, the NFL, the National Federation of High School Sports (NFHS) and athletic associations alike have changed several football rules, banning certain drills and enforcing new penalties.

For example, full-contact drills, such as the Oklahoma drill, blindside blocks, pop-up kicks, clipping, and targeting are no longer allowed. Additionally, many schools have implemented their own safety precautions by limiting the amount of players on the field and in pads during practice, as well as eliminating contact in two-a-day practices.

Coaches and players also receive mandatory training in concussion recognition and management to increase football safety awareness. In fact, concussion reoccurrences across 20 different high school sports have declined over the last decade, likely as a result of better protocols in concussion management.

Teaching Proper Technique

Across all levels of football, coaches are teaching a new way to tackle. Certain coaches used to teach players to put their heads in front of the ball-carrier when making a tackle, essentially using their head as an extra limb to prevent their opponents from moving forward.

Today, coaches are employing new strategies that reduce the risk of head injuries, even at the professional level. For example, the Seattle Seahawks teach “Hawk tackling,” which is a rugby-style method that focuses on using your shoulder for leverage while hitting the ball-carrier’s thighs. And in youth football, players learn to wrap and roll instead of going in head first.

Even more, the NFL Way to Play is an educational initiative designed to demonstrate proper technique, explain fundamental concepts and share best practices. Football safety efforts are also being implemented in flag leagues where to successfully remove their opponent’s flags, players must square up, bend their knees and align their head exactly as they would in tackle football.

As we continue to learn from research—some studies have found adverse mental health and cognitive functions associated with tackle football, while others haven’t—parents and guardians should feel empowered to promote conversations around football safety.

Parents should inquire about their league’s strategies in preventing injuries. Understanding the ways in which a program is trying to protect its players, coupled with reading the emerging research, can help parents and guardians make informed decisions.

ACTION PLAN

What coaches should do if a concussion is suspected.

- 1) Remove athlete from play.
- 2) Ensure the athlete is evaluated immediately by an appropriate health care professional.
- 3) Inform the athlete’s parents or guardians of the possible concussion.

- 4) Only allow the athlete to return to participation after he or she is cleared by an appropriate health care professional and institute your program's return-to-play procedure.

SIGNS OF A CONCUSSION

- Appears dazed or stunned.
- Appears confused about assignment or position.
- Forgets plays.
- Unsure of game, score or opponent.
- Loses consciousness (even briefly).
- Shows behavior or personality changes.
- Can't recall events prior to or after the hit or fall.

SYMPTOMS OF A CONCUSSION

- Headache or pressure in the head.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Balance problems or dizziness.
- Double or blurry vision.
- Sensitivity to light or noise.
- Concentration or memory problems.
- Feeling sluggish, hazy, foggy, or groggy.