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Spring 5-2020

Youth Tackle Football: A Parent's Decision

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Youth Tackle Football: A Qualitative Analysis of Stakeholders Attitudes Towards Risks Vs.
Benefits

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Senior Honors Project

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the graduation requirements

of the Westover Honors Program

Westover Honors Program

May, 2019

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Abstract

In this paper I will look at the statistics and likelihood of brain damage occurring in children who participate in full contact football, using a 2017 study done by Boston University's Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Center, where former football players were tested for the effects of sustained trauma they first received from playing tackle football at a young age. This paper seeks to explain why participation in youth tackle football is still so high despite studies from Boston University and others like it. This paper incorporates interviews from coaches and directors of youth football elaborating on their opinions of young children's participation in full contact youth football. These arguments will be supplemented by secondary sources from medical professionals and former players to get their perspectives on their perceived dangers of contact football and the precautions they take to reduce these risks. Primary data comes from phone and email interviews of ten current coaches and directors involved with youth football. The respondents were asked about what benefits they believe youth tackle football provides as well as their concussion knowledge and injury concern. Key themes will be taken from the interviews and will be combined with secondary data to understand what benefits are believed to be associated with youth tackle football. Using these themes I will attempt to explain why participation in youth tackle football is encouraged by some despite rising concerns about concussions and traumatic head injuries.

Introduction

As the National Football League plays its 100th season, it boasts an increase in viewership for the second consecutive year (Smith 2019). Following consecutive seasons where the league saw a decline in viewership, this quells the fears many had that pro football was losing its popularity. Professional football remains the most popular sport in the United States. While professional football is beloved by millions across the world who love the intense action of grown men hitting each other for 60 minutes. Despite the popularity of the sport, there is one issue that has been plaguing American football, and has become even more pronounced in recent years. The issue in question is the increased understanding of serious head injuries leading to brain damage later in life and how experts have linked it to playing tackle football at a young age. These studies have convinced some parents to think twice about allowing their children to participate in youth tackle football.

Bleacher Report has ranked American Football as the third most dangerous sport in the world, coming in behind only Mixed Martial Arts and Boxing, two sports where the participants are actively trying to hurt their opponent (Mueller, 2011). Football has experienced some gruesome injuries, including to quarterback Joe Theisman, who had his leg snapped in 1985 after an awkward tackle by Lawrence Taylor. Many players have become paralyzed due to hits to their spinal column, most recently star linebacker of the Pittsburgh Steelers Ryan Shazier, who suffered a spinal contusion and was unable to move his legs after going headfirst into a tackle. Despite equipment improvements and rules regulating the ways in which players can tackle other players, these types of injuries still occur. Most players and fans have accepted these injuries as an inevitable part of the game due to the violent nature of the sport.

However, there exists another injury that is especially prominent in football that affects the majority of football players at some point in their lives: concussions. Even more of a concern than concussions is the long-term effects they can potentially have on athletes, including chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain disease. These injuries have become more of a concern in recent years due to studies of former players' brains that showed signs of CTE. In an article from *Sports Illustrated*, Charles Pierce referenced a study where CTE was found in 110 of the 111 brains of former NFL players when arguing that the NFL needs to recognize this and make an effort to do something about it (Pierce 2017). Many others share his opinion, especially as more research is coming out showing that brain damage later in life is made more severe by playing tackle football at a young age.

Unfortunately, this issue is not one that is confined to professional football. Concussions are also one of the most common injuries in youth tackle football. The difference is, professional athletes are able to make conscious and informed decisions to play the game given the risks, but many youth players are not fully aware or do not understand the risks associated with the sport. Oftentimes, children have outside encouragement prompting their decision to enroll in the sport. In this paper, I will examine attitudes and opinions held by coaches, commissioners, and directors of local youth football leagues concerning the safety of youth tackle football. Data collected from these interviews will help explain why enrolling in tackle football at a young age is accepted and oftentimes encouraged. Based on the takeaways gathered from these in-depth interviews, it appears that youth football stakeholders do not share the same concerns when it comes to the violent nature of the sport. They are much more likely to believe that youth tackle football is beneficial to the children that play and the benefits outweigh the risks. Based on the

firsthand data I collected combined with recent studies showcasing the danger of the sport, I can determine whether significant changes need to be made to make the game more safe, or if concussions and other head injuries are not really as common as people think, as many of my respondents believe.

The study was conducted to gain an understanding of football's stakeholders perceived risks and benefits of the game, as little research exists in this area. The interviews I conducted, coupled with testimonials from pediatricians and others involved with the sport, reveal why people encourage their child to play the sport.

Methodology

The primary data for this study was collected through in-depth interviews with eight people involved in youth tackle football, including directors, coaches, commissioners, and board members. Respondents included both men and women, the majority of whom have children who play youth tackle football. Interviewees were notified that they were not obligated to participate in the interview and they could stop at any time if they felt uncomfortable.

Many of the interviews I conducted were with individuals involved in some aspect with the Hill City Youth Football and Cheerleading Association. The Hill City Youth Football and Cheerleading Association is part of the Southwest Virginia conference and consists of seven teams: The Heritage Pioneers, the Rivermont Raiders, the R.S. Payne Dragons, the Timberlake Lions, SWVA 611, the Virginia Colts, and the Virginia Wolverines. The conference is divided into four age groups: six and under, eight and under, ten and under, and twelve and under. Children as young as four are allowed to participate in tackle football with full pads, provided a

coach and parent both complete consent waivers. Parents must provide proof of a child's recent physical, as well as a copy of his or her birth certificate, before he or she can be registered. When in season, teams in all age groups typically practice four days a week for approximately two hours a day. All the games and the majority of practices over the season are full contact with pads.

The other interviews were conducted with members of the River City Youth Football, located in Richmond, Virginia. These interviews included the league director, presidents, and team directors. River City Youth Football oversees 14 teams throughout the area. The children are divided into five age divisions: rookie (ages five to six), freshman (ages seven to eight), sophomore (ages nine to ten), junior (ages eleven to twelve), and senior (ages twelve to thirteen). The youngest age able to participate is five years old and the oldest is thirteen years old. There are no weight restrictions on any of the divisions. Every team in this league complies with the same standards and age divisions.

One additional interview came from the Lake Erie Youth Football League in Amherst, Ohio. The league consists of 14 different teams. This particular person was Director of the Amherst Jr. Comets. This association is for children in kindergarten to sixth grade, although flag and padded flag football are played until a child reaches fourth grade. After that the league has a rookie tackle division for fourth and fifth graders and a varsity tackle division for fifth and sixth graders.

League Affiliation (Team Affiliation)	Role	Gender	Has Children Involved
Hill City Youth	Director of	Female	Yes

Football	Operations		
Hill City Youth Football	Vice Director	Female	Yes
Hill City Youth Football (Rivermont Raiders)	President	Male	Yes
Lake Erie Youth Football (Amherst Jr. Comets)	Director	Male	Yes
River City Youth Football	Director and Coach	Male	Yes
River City Youth Football (Blue Star Cowboys)	President	Male	Yes
River City Youth Football (Cherokee Titans)	Executive Board Member, Team Mom	Female	Yes
River City Youth Football (New Kent Falcons)	Director	Male	No

The point of the study was to identify the motivations and justifications for organizing tackle football for children. As key stakeholders in three separate leagues, the interviewees offered important insights into the perceived benefits of participation in youth tackle football.

Literature Review

Much of the recent research done on youth tackle football has highlighted the negative aspects of the sport, focusing on the risk of concussions leading to brain damage. Many studies have been conducted linking brain damage later in life to exposure to tackle football at a young

age. Experts and medical professionals have started to push for greater restrictions on youth tackle football, including better equipment and age restrictions. Others have also recommended participating in a safer alternative, such as flag football. Experts fear that many teams and coaches are not adequately prepared to deal with concussions and are not aware of the symptoms. Existing research seems to point to the fact that concussions and head injuries are an unavoidable and potentially deadly aspect of youth tackle football.

In recent years, youth tackle football has come under increased scrutiny over the fact that head trauma and CTE experienced later in life have been linked to traumatic brain injuries received while playing youth football. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019), traumatic brain injuries (TBI) can be long term and affect areas such as thinking, sensation, language, and emotion. TBI's include concussions and subconcussive head impacts. Multiple TBI's can result in Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a disease diagnosed postmortem that affects the brain but is still not fully understood (CDC, 2019). CTE is a neurodegenerative disease that causes problems with behavior and thinking while progressively getting worse over time, sometimes leading to dementia.

Recent research has shown a strong correlation between playing tackle football and experiencing CTE later in life. In 2018, researchers from Boston University's Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Center conducted a study on the brains of 246 males who had played at the youth level. After examining the brains, 211 of the 246 were diagnosed with CTE. Age of first exposure and first signs of symptoms were recorded by interviewing friends and family. The study found that "[i]n the 211 participants with CTE, every one-year younger participants began to play tackle football predicted earlier reported cognitive symptom onset by 2.44 years and

behavioral/mood symptoms by 2.50 years” (Alosco et al., 2018). In addition, “[a]ge of exposure before 12 predicted earlier cognitive and behavioral/mood symptom onset by 13.39 and 13.28 years, respectively” (Alosco et al. 2018). This is an extremely alarming statistic especially for youth tackle football, as people who started playing younger start exhibiting symptoms of CTE earlier than those who began playing later. Those who began playing before the age of 12 showed symptoms the earliest, and most football leagues, including those included in this study, consist of players primarily 12 and under.

As many studies have alluded to, earlier exposure to tackle football typically correlates to earlier symptoms of brain damage later in life. The American Academy of Neurology studied 42 former NFL players to examine the effects of repeated exposure to head impacts before the age of 12 on later-life executive function, memory, and estimated verbal IQ. The participants were divided into two groups, those who had their first exposure before age 12 and those who had it after. The results indicated that the group consisting of players who had their first exposure before age 12 performed significantly worse on neurological tests than the other group. The researchers concluded that incurring repeated head impacts during a critical neurodevelopmental period may increase the risk of later-life cognitive impairment (Stamm et al., 2015). This study also points to the fact that young children are more significantly affected by hits to the head than other age groups, despite playing tackle football at a lower skill level.

These studies clearly show that a younger age of first exposure results in earlier cognitive and behavioral symptoms of CTE. The effects of this could be significant if youth leagues take these results into account and consider an age limit on participation in youth tackle football or

deem the sport too dangerous to be played at all. Parents with children participating in youth tackle football could see these results and reconsider when and if they let their child play.

Despite studies showing the dangers of tackle football for young children, there has been little done to make youth tackle football safer for children at the national level. In an article from the New England Journal of Medicine, public health scholar Kathleen Bachynski describes how double-digit numbers of children have died as a result of youth tackle football in recent years; however, despite projecting that eliminating tackling from youth football would probably reduce the incidence of concussions, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has recommended more adult supervision rather than eliminating tackling from the game (Bachynski 2016). The AAP believes that teaching proper tackling and having knowledgeable coaches will reduce the risk of concussions in the sport, but the author states that there is no evidence that this is true. It appears that from the AAPs perspective, football is a healthy sport that builds boys' bodies and promotes teamwork but could result in serious bodily injury.

Autonomy in decision making is an argument made in support of tackle football. For example, the AAP believes it is up to the participant to decide if the risks outweigh the benefits. However, children are not able to fully weigh the potential outcomes of their decisions. According to Bachynski (2016), the United States must discuss and decide the acceptableness of exposing children to these head injuries. The author makes it clear that this is not a matter to be taken lightly and should be given significant concern given the recent studies showing the dangers tackle football poses to young children.

Despite the AAPs conservative approach to this issue, many healthcare providers are beginning to take an active stance and encourage their patients to avoid youth tackle football

entirely. In an editorial for *Clinical Orthopedics and Related Research*, authors Seth Leopold and Matthew Dobbs argue that orthopedic surgeons should encourage families and their children to avoid participating in tackle football (Leopold & Dobbs 2016). The authors refute several of the main reasons why parents let their children play tackle football. For example, Leopold and Dobbs note that other sports have higher rates of concussions per athlete-exposure, which is the likelihood that a player will receive a concussion during a game or practice, but football causes more concussions than any other sport (2016). Playing football for fitness is not a legitimate rationalization because the obesity rates are higher in youth football players than other children. Football injuries are more likely to be serious or catastrophic than any other sport, and children can obtain similar fitness and teamwork skills by playing other sports. Finally, decreasing contact in practice does not reduce head injuries because such a tactic increases concussions in games due to improper tackling (2016).

Many pediatricians have already begun to turn against youth tackle football due to the negative effects they have witnessed in their patients who participate. Fishman et al. surveyed 227 pediatricians; 96% reported they had seen increased awareness and concern about concussions in parents that had children participating in tackle football or ice hockey. Additionally, 85% reported increased visits for head trauma. Perhaps most significantly, 77% of respondents the pediatricians surveyed would not allow their child to participate in tackle football, and 81% recommended eliminating tackling from practice (Fishman et al 2017). Because of this, the authors argue that the AAP should take a more active approach in placing restrictions on youth tackle football in an effort to prevent head injuries from continuing to occur.

Perhaps as a result of studies bringing to light the dangers of the sport, it appears that parents are becoming more concerned about their child's well-being when playing youth tackle football. Studies have shown that a majority of parents actually support placing age restrictions in youth tackle football. The Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics surveyed a nationally representative sample of people to determine demographic factors that may influence whether or not parents want age restrictions, as well as parent perception of the concussion risk and the intensity of support. The surveyed yielded 1025 responses, with 61% of respondents supporting age restrictions and an additional 24% indicating they would maybe support them (Chrisman et al 2019). In female participants, a greater perceived risk of tackle football was associated with greater odds of supporting age restrictions and men with a child between 6 and 12 years old had greater odds of supporting restrictions (2019). In this case it appears that even people who have a young child participating would be in favor of supporting age restrictions.

Along with implementing age restrictions, flag football has been proposed as a safer alternative to tackle football. Many consider flag football as a better option as there is no bodily contact between the players and therefore less risk for concussions. However, many involved with the sport argue that tackle football is actually the safer version of the sport. Many youth football leagues maintain that flag football is just as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than tackle football, citing studies such as the one conducted by Andrew Peterson from the University of Iowa. Peterson picked three leagues (2 tackle, 1 flag) and reviewed injury reports after each practice and game, which included how many players were injured, the type of injury, and whether it occurred in tackle or flag football. He found that there were a total of 46,416 exposures to injury throughout the three leagues and a total of 128 injuries among 121 players

(Peterson 2017). The average age of the injured child was 10.6 years and 33 of the 128 injuries were classified as concussions (2017). The study showed that injury rates were lower than expected, with only occurring 2.76 times through 1000 exposures (2017). To their surprise, the researchers found that flag football had a higher rate of injury per 1000 exposures, with 5.77 compared to 2.6 for tackle football (2017). Severe injury rates were slightly lower in flag football, but concussion rates were nearly double that of tackle football, 1.33 compared to 0.68 (2017). Based on this study it appears that flag football may be just as dangerous if not more dangerous than tackle football. This can potentially take away from the argument that children should play flag football until they reach an age where they can play tackle football. One limitation of this study is that the sample size for flag football was very small and therefore could have resulted in results that are not representative of flag football as a whole.

While much research has been done to show the potential harmful effects of youth tackle football, there is very little research that explains why parents and stakeholders encourage children to play a sport with potential for life-changing injuries. My research shows why parents and stakeholders are comfortable signing their children up for tackle football as young as five years old. Through interviews with authority figures in youth football, I discovered their views on the dangers of tackle football as well as why the benefits of the game that make playing it worth the risk. Interviewing people involved with youth tackle football provided me greater insight into the nature of the sport because respondents experience it firsthand. My research will use these people's beliefs and opinions compared with recent studies in the medical field to decide if youth tackle football is really as dangerous as we are being led to believe.

Results

Following the eight in-depth interviews I conducted, I was able to come away with five common themes based on the answers of the participants.

1. Participating in youth tackle football helps children learn and develop teamwork skills.

Nearly all of the respondents mentioned learning teamwork skills when asked about the positive effects of participating in youth tackle football. It was the most commonly described benefit out of all the others that were given.

2. Playing tackle football helps children develop skills they would not gain if participating in another sport.

Everyone interviewed was adamant that youth tackle football taught children skills that they would not acquire in other sports. In addition to teamwork skills, the most commonly identified skills included discipline, social skills, hard work, perseverance, and physical development. Despite the concrete belief that tackle football provides unique benefits, the respondents provided little evidence to support these claims.

3. Parents are concerned about concussions but leagues have adequate ways of dealing with them.

Most of the respondents indicated that parents have expressed concerns about concussions and the safety of their children; however, they were very clear about the fact that their respective associations have adequate resources available for concussions and are very familiar with concussion protocol. Some even provided their team's individual concussion protocol.

4. Flag football is not a safer alternative than tackle football.

In agreement with the earlier cited study, nearly all respondents expressed the belief that they would not consider flag football a safer alternative to tackle football. A few respondents

even mentioned that they had witnessed more concussions in flag football, with one saying: “Since my children have played tackle we have seen a decrease in concussions. More were evident when playing flag.” Again, no explanation was given as to why that may be the case.

5. The benefits of youth tackle football greatly outweigh the risks.

Finally, all interviewees believed benefits of participation greatly outweighed the risks associated with youth tackle football. Respondents believe that leagues are well-equipped to deal with the risks of the sport and the risks are not dire enough to keep children from participating.

Discussion

This study relies on in-depth interviews with individuals who hold positions within youth tackle football organizations. As people heavily involved in the organization and promotion of the various leagues, these key stakeholders are likely to be the most involved with, and have the strongest opinions, about the sport. Moreover, nearly all the interviewees either have, or have had, a child who plays youth tackle football, which potentially influenced their responses about the perceived benefits and risks of the sport. Finally, I also questioned participants about the youngest age they had witnessed playing youth tackle football. Based on the eight interviews, it is evident that youth tackle football stakeholders do not share the same concerns as some medical professionals do about the dangerous nature of the sport. Rather, they believe that youth tackle football is beneficial for participants, in terms of helping them develop important life skills.

Nearly all of the respondents mentioned learning teamwork skills when asked about the positive effects of participating in youth tackle football. Participants mentioned “Teamwork”, “working as a team”, “importance of working together for a common goal”, and “learning to work on a team” as the most significant benefit of youth tackle football. It is evident based on the interviews that people involved in the organization and promotion of youth tackle football see

developing children's ability to work together as a team as an important benefit of the sport.

Being able to work in a team is a highly valued skill in life, and while the respondents did not provide any real evidence as to how youth tackle football helps with teamwork skills, they were all confident that it does. This can explain why children are encouraged to participate in order to start building these skills at a young age.

Respondents also saw tackle football as the best--and oftentimes only--way to help children learn valuable qualities, such as leadership and teamwork. In other words, interviewees felt that participation in other sports did not provide the same learning opportunities as tackle football. One of the respondents suggested that the reason for these benefits could be the "unique positions" of football. They are saying that children learn teamwork better in youth football because of the variety of different positions and their different roles on the field. This helps explain why parents and organizers encourage children to participate, as people believe youth football helps develop teamwork and social skills better than other team sports. However, most failed to give a justification for their answer, simply responding with "Yes" when asked if the benefits were better developed in youth football. The inability of interviewees to support their belief about other sports indicates a bias about football, likely due to their involvement.

Despite the testimonials of its stakeholders, youth tackle football does not provide benefits that children would be unable to get by playing another team sport. One of the most common arguments I have heard in favor of youth tackle football is that playing on a team helps children make friends and learn to work as a team, and it is clear that my respondents felt youth tackle football accomplishes this better than any other sport. Studies have shown that "team sports offer a social and motivational way for improving fitness and health" (Herzog 2018).

While it is evident that playing team sports does provide some additional benefits, there is no evidence that differentiates the benefits of tackle football from these other sports. In order to prevent parents from switching their children to other sports with less physical contact, it appears that people involved with youth tackle football claim that it provides unique benefits without actually being able to back up these claims with evidence.

Concussions have become a major issue plaguing youth tackle football, but those I interviewed took a different stance. The interview results demonstrate that parents have increasingly expressed concerns about concussions. However, according to the league stakeholders, concussions are not common. Moreover, they believe the leagues are adequately prepared to respond to them when necessary. When asked if parents had expressed concern about concussions, the director of the River City Youth Football League responded that “Yes, parents want to be knowledgeable.” It seems that parents are more aware of the risk associated with the sport given the recent studies, and they want to be informed about the safety of their child.

Despite the concern from parents, those that I interviewed did not see concussions as a serious issue. When asked how often his league deals with concussions, one of the respondents answered with: “Not as often as the media will have you believe.” People involved in football believe the media overemphasizes the amount of concussions taking place in youth tackle football.

All that I interviewed were confident in their leagues ability to deal with concussions. Despite their testament to the infrequent nature of concussions, those I interviewed felt their teams were adequately prepared to deal with them and have specific concussion protocols. One respondent said: “We have [a] concussion protocol we follow to determine if we feel they may

have a concussion. If we feel they may, they are sent to a doctor and may not play until they are released from doctor's care." Another respondent replied with: "We are fortunate to have trained medical people in our organization." It appears that the league organizers believe coaches and officials can accurately determine if a player has a concussion and will refer them to a medical professional until they are cleared to play again.

Under closer examination, the leagues represented in my study had varying levels of preparedness when dealing with concussions. I went to the websites of the two main leagues which my respondents came from to see what I could find in terms of concussion policies. The River City Youth Football League website has a link to a graphic from the CDC, which outlines the symptoms of a concussion, as well as a four-step action plan to be used in the event of a concussion. In addition to this base protocol, some associations have extra measures to deal with concussions. For example, the president of the Blue Star Cowboys provided his team's concussion policy. It offered much more detailed steps of how to react to a possible concussion and return to play guidelines. In addition, every coach or volunteer that is present for games and practices must take training in recognizing and reducing the risk of concussions. On the other hand, the Hill City Youth Football website did not provide information about concussion protocol. Given the rising concern over concussions and head injuries, parents would find some much needed peace of mind knowing there is a clear concussion policy in place. The fact that there is nothing about it on the league website shows that they are not making player safety a priority.

Due to the concern over head injuries leading to brain damage later in life, some experts are encouraging children to play flag football until they reach an age where they are deemed

mature enough to play tackle football. However, most of the interviewees indicated that flag football is actually more dangerous than tackle football. For example, one respondent said that “Since my children have played tackle we have seen a decrease in concussions. More were evident when playing flag.” She claimed to have witnessed more concussions in flag football. When asked the same question, another respondent said: “No. I’ve seen concussions in flag football also.” It is clear that this was not just one person's belief, but one that was shared by almost everyone I interviewed.

Although many of my respondents were adamant about the fact that flag football was not a safer alternative to tackle football, they did not say why they believed it was not safer. Some stated that they had witnessed more concussions, but they failed to explain why that might be the case. A study conducted by researchers from the University of Iowa in 2017 found that injuries were not less common in flag football than tackle football, and concussion rates were actually higher when compared with tackle football leagues (Peterson 2017). This study detracts from the argument that children should play flag football until they reach an age where they can play tackle football. Many proponents of youth tackle football have latched onto this study as proof that tackle football is not as dangerous as people believe. However, the researchers involved in the study admitted that their results were limited because there were only 13 total injuries in the flag football league, and there were also too few concussions to make a significant conclusion about the rate compared to tackle football (Peterson 2017). Although many tackle football stakeholders point to this research as evidence of the dangers of flag football as an alternative, the study's small sample size is a significant limitation, one which undermines its use as a rationalization.

Interestingly, a link on the homepage of the Hill City Youth Football and Cheer website, directs parents to this very same study. This may be an attempt to curb parents' rising fears about the sport and keep up their participation numbers out of fear that parents will begin to pull their children and have them compete in flag football if they think it is a safer alternative.

Respondents overwhelmingly believed that the benefits of participation in youth tackle football greatly outweighed the risks. For example, one respondent argued that “the risks can be managed and mitigated through proper coaching, proper tackling techniques, and proper equipment.” None of the respondents provided any firm evidence to why the benefits are greater than the risks but rather collectively adhered to the idea that the risks associated with the sport are not a big concern. Everyone firmly believed that youth tackle football provides tremendous benefits to those who participate, despite growing evidence of the risks of participation.

It was evident from the interviews that many people involved with youth tackle football are resentful of the violent, injury-riddled way their sport has been portrayed in recent years. Although studies show that youth tackle football can lead to lifelong injuries, stakeholders believe that these claims are overblown and do not accurately reflect the sport. They do their best to provide a safe and fun environment for the children who participate and it is demoralizing to them when their sport is continuously criticized for putting children in harm's way. In reality, concussions can happen in any sport, although much more likely in tackle football. Leagues can have the most up to date concussion protocol and professionally trained staff, but these injuries can only be avoided by fundamentally altering the nature of the game.

Conclusion

Following the completion of my interviews, it was much easier to see why youth tackle football still has thousands of supporters and children are still encouraged to play despite studies showing the damaging effects it can lead to. Everyone interviewed was extremely passionate about the sport and proclaimed its benefits profusely. It feels as if they are being backed into a corner by those wanting to change the sport because of the injury concern, and they feel that they must justify why tackle football provides benefits no other sport does in order to justify the continued participation of youth. They are assuring parents that they have a concussion protocol in place but that does not change the fact that children can still experience serious brain damage later in life as a result of sustaining concussions when they were younger. The only way to prevent this from happening is to simply stop youth tackle football. Players who start later can still experience problems but not nearly as severe as those who begin at a young age. I am not directly advocating for the removal of youth tackle football, but it appears to me based on the interviews I conducted and the studies I have read that it is hard to justify allowing children as young as four to participate in a sport that will likely lead to brain damage and a premature death, regardless of the benefits associated with it.

The interviews conducted could also justify the reasoning for allowing children to play tackle football as people close to the game may see benefits that others may not. Others can use this study to determine whether there should be an age limit to play tackle football that will make the game safer for children, and what changes can be made to make coaches more prepared to deal with the seemingly inevitable possibility that one of their players will suffer a concussion or head injury.

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