

Injury Risk in Youth Football- Facts Versus Propaganda

Written by Dave on July 12th, 2010

The True Story of Injury Risk in Youth Football

Some people, mostly the proverbial "soccer moms" have a fear their children will be hurt if they play youth football. Even Lombardi/Outland winner Ndomukong Suh's mother wouldn't allow him to play football until he got into the 8th grade, she required him to play soccer.

Mr Suh's boredom with soccer and relentless pestering of mom finally resulted in her finally relenting and saying yes to real football when he turned 13.

My guess is most of the youth football naysayers probably have never even seen a youth football game. It seems many of them think Junior is going to be smacked around by 4.4 forty guys who weigh 220 lbs like they see on TV on Saturdays and Sundays. While it's normal for moms to be protective of their children, medical facts and statistics just don't support their fear. Most youth football players bear little resemblance to the guided missile freak athletes mom sees when she's flipping through the channels and stumbles onto an ESPN highlights snippet.

The real facts found in a Mayo clinic report say that "the risk of injury in youth football does not appear greater than the risk associated with other recreational or competitive sports." Interestingly enough the study also found there was no correlation between body weight and injury. So much for little Johnny being "too small" to play youth football.

Personally I've coached for over 20 years and I've only had kids suffer broken bones 2 times and neither were what most would call "serious injuries." On the other hand I have had MANY of my players injured during the season, while doing non football activities. I've had kids break their arms and collar bones riding bikes and skateboarding. Had kids suffer neck injuries from swimming, concussions from riding horses and debilitating knee injuries from playing baseball. Unfortunately football has an undeserved reputation for being a rough sport with a lot of injuries.

I find it amazing that most moms are just fine with Junior not wearing a helmet or ANY PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT when he is riding his bike (on concrete), skating (on concrete), skateboarding (on concrete), Jet skiing, snow skiing or riding horses. Yet somehow playing football on a grassy field in a certified protective helmet with mask, shoulder pads, padded pants and mouthpiece is somehow more dangerous than all these other activities? Where's the beef?

In today's "helicopter mom" world where many parents seem to want to control the outcome of every event in their children's lives, maybe we see more of this type of unwarranted fear. Or maybe our beloved sport is the victim of those that for whatever reason don't like it. Personally I've never tried to convince a soccer family they should quit playing soccer and play football. I have however met lots of soccer people that are hell bent on convincing most people they meet that you are somehow unenlightened if your kids aren't playing soccer. They seem to get frustrated that you don't appreciate 0-0 ties and the insomnia relief watching soccer on tv provides to the non soccer loving world. This is a problem I don't have the answer to.

Fortunately I've never had a mom come out and tell me to my face that they weren't going to let their kids play because they thought the sport was too dangerous, but I know plenty of guys that have. The net is you have to feel bad for the kids, but do you really want an overprotective mom or dad trying to control every outcome for a player on your team? Do you think those kinds of parents are going to be fun to work with? Do you have LOTS of

time to answer their loooooong daily e-mails? Do your best, put on a great face for our sport but don't beg. You may get what you wish for and end up enduring that "season from hell" veteran coaches warn you about.

The Mayo Clinic Story

Thursday, April 11, 2002

Injuries Uncommon in Youth Football, Mayo Clinic Study Reports

ROCHESTER, MINN. — A Mayo Clinic study of youth football showed that most injuries that occurred were mild, older players appeared to be at a higher risk and that no significant correlation exists between body weight and injury.

The study, which appears in the April issue of Mayo Clinic Proceedings, found that the data for athletes grades four through eight indicated that the risk of injury in youth football does not appear greater than the risk associated with other recreational or competitive sports.

"Our analysis showed that youth football injuries are uncommon," said Michael J. Stuart, M.D., a Mayo Clinic orthopedic surgeon and the principal author of the study.

Dr. Stuart and his colleagues studied 915 players aged 9 to 13 years, who participated on 42 football teams in the fall of 1997. Injury incidence, prevalence and severity were calculated for each grade level and player position. Additional analyses examined the number of injuries according to body weight.

A game injury was defined as any football-related ailment that occurred on the field during a game that kept a player out of competition for the remainder of the game, required the attention of a physician, and included all concussion, lacerations, as well as dental, eye and nerve injuries. The researchers found a total of 55 injuries occurred in games during the season — a prevalence of six percent. Incidence of injury expressed as injury per 1,000 player-plays was lowest in the fourth grade (.09 percent), increased for the fifth, sixth and seventh grades (.16 percent, .16 percent, .15 percent respectively) and was highest in the eighth grade (.33 percent).

Most of the injuries were mild and the most common type was a contusion, which occurred in 33 players. Four injuries (fractures involving the ankle growth plate) were such that they prevented players from participating for the rest of the season. No player required hospitalization or surgery.

The study's authors said risk increases with level of play (grade in school) and player age. Older players in the higher grades are more susceptible to football injuries. The risk of injury for an eighth-grade player was four times greater than the risk of injury for a fourth-grade player. Potential contributing factors include increased size, strength, speed and aggressiveness. Analysis of body weight indicated that lighter players were not at increased risk for injury, and in fact heavier players had a slightly higher prevalence of injury. This trend was not statistically significant. Running backs are at greater risk when compared with other football positions, the researchers reported.

Other authors who contributed to the study include: Michael A. Morrey, Ph.D., Aynsley M. Smith, RN, Ph.D., John K. Meis, M.S., all from the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center and Cedric J. Ortiguera, M.D., a Mayo Clinic orthopedic surgeon in Jacksonville, Fla.

Mayo Clinic Proceedings is a peer-reviewed and indexed general internal medicine journal, published for 75 years by Mayo Foundation, with a circulation of 130,000 nationally and internationally.

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