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America’s Game: How Injuries have Plagued American Football

The crowd was silent. Eric LeGrand, a defensive tackle from Rutgers University, lays motionless on the field after a big collision during a kickoff in the fourth quarter. He suffered a spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed from the neck down. Football has been America’s most watched sport for many years, but the threat of injuries during, and even years after participating in the sport has become almost overwhelming. That’s why I believe that football, with it’s current rules, is a sport unfit for human participation. Today’s football causes too many injuries that can affect people’s lives in the short term, and most importantly, in the long term. One major injury that is caused by repeated contact during football is a concussion. These concussions cause health problems not only after they occur, but take major tolls on the brain later in life. There are also known instances of high school football players dying while playing the sport they love. Former NFL players suffering from CTE, increased risk of injury and death in high school, and negative effects the game has on children at a young age are just a couple of reasons why football needs to take a serious look at it’s players’ safety on the field. This is why I believe that unless the game of football experiences major rule changes concerning player safety, I believe that young children and amateur athletes should reconsider their participation in the game of football.

Growing up in a sports family in the south, I would be lying if I told you that I didn’t love football. I used to watch college and professional football whenever it was on and idolized great quarterbacks like Tom Brady, Peyton Manning, and my personal favorite, Brett Favre. When I got to the right age I signed up to play youth football and played for about 4 years up until the seventh grade. Luckily I never suffered any major injuries besides my fair share of cuts and bruises. But once I got older, I came to find multiple reports about retired players suffering from medical conditions that were likely caused by their days of playing football. The once fun and innocent game in my eyes looked even more dangerous. Past professional players deaths were being medically examined and many of them had suffered from CTE. This was only a small portion of injuries and side effects that take place year around from athletes participating in football.

The National Football League is where the game of football is played on the highest level. It has been this way since the league merged with the American Football League back in 1970. The game was even more dangerous for players back then as many rules that exist today for player safety, weren’t in place at the time. Today, some players are experiencing the horrors of their many years of football. A surprising number of players that have passed away revealed to scientists that they suffered from CTE. According to researchers at the Brain Injury Research Institute, “is a progressive degenerative disease which afflicts the brain of people who have suffered repeated concussions and traumatic brain injuries, such as athletes who take part in contact sports…”(Brain Injury Research Institute). Common symptoms of CTE include life-changing effects such as loss of memory, difficulty controlling impulsive or erratic behavior, impaired judgement, increased behavioral problems like anger and depression, difficulty controlling balance, and the gradual onsetting of dementia. Perhaps one of the most troubling factors in the process of testing for CTE, is that the condition is only diagnosable during the post-mortem examination of the brain. CTE is almost unavoidable for football players because their sport requires perhaps the most contact of any mainstream sport in America. The NFL and other football leagues have improved the safety their helmets provide and still cases of CTE are found in players as recent as this year. So unless a major breakthrough discovery in sports science occurs, the risk of CTE in football players is undeniably apparent.

Not every football player in America will play at the collegiate level, let alone professionally. High school football is a fixture in American society and over a million students participate each year on this level. College athletes are also Being the most amateur form of football, high school football players are at the highest risk of the most serious injuries. The rate of catastrophic head injuries is higher on the high school level than that of college. High school is also where the greatest risk of playing football has taken place on the field, death. Every year their are multiple reports of players dying on the field after performing a tackle with poor form, or simply being at the wrong place at the wrong time in a dangerous sport. Some people might say that the kid died doing what he loved, but I believe that there are much more things in life than a football game which isn’t worth risking your life for.

Perhaps the most important football leagues that should be looked at when discussing possible rule changes to make football safer, are youth leagues. Lindsay Gibbs at ThinkProgress unveils a shocking statistic with the quote, “In the past three years alone, 47 kids have died playing football. Seventeen of those deaths are directly related to head injuries sustained in practice or during games”(Gibbs, Concussion expert says extent of brain damage in youth football players 'took my breath away’). This is shocking considering that the speed that these children play football at isn’t remotely close to their older idols. However, serious damage can still be done. Children at this time in their young stages need to be as healthy as possible and injuries to their brain can harm the overall development of the brain itself.

Often you might hear that football fans state that you can’t change the game because it’s fine the way it is. That’s where a huge sacrifice comes in place for league officials. They have to decide whether or not to make huge rule changes to make the game safer for the players, or keep them the same to keep the fans happy. When it comes to professional and college football, I think it’s hard to try and implement major game changing rules because these athletes know the dangers but football is their way of life. So a chance to make it pro and earn enough money to live comfortably for the rest of their lives might be worth the risk for the majority of players. On the high school and youth football levels though, it’s much more of a recreational game and that’s where I believe that rule changes must be made. According to Colin Dwyer at National Public Radio, talks about possible ideas for youth football changes and says, “It’s a leaner, less contact-inclined game, focused on fostering well-rounded athletes and cutting down on the kinds of bone-rattling, open-field hits that can leave parents cringing in the bleachers”(Dwyer, Big Rule Changes Could Make Youth Football Games A Whole Lot Smaller). Some of the rule changes that his article suggest include smaller playing fields, fewer players on the field, no special teams, and no “three-point stance” at the line of scrimmage. Perhaps the rule with the biggest impact would be removing special teams such as punting and kickoff units. This change would eliminate bone-crushing open field hits where there is a high injury rate. That change is also being looked at by the NFL. Kevin Seifert at ESPN writes, “One day, it has long been assumed, the NFL will outlaw the kickoff. It's one of the most dangerous plays in football, a sub-concussive factory, and as New York Giants owner John Mara said just this week: "You've got to do whatever you can to protect [players]”(Seifert, NFL one step closer to eliminating kickoff returns). Other rule changes such as shorter playing field and less players would never make it passed the youth level in my opinion. These rule changes might seem like a big deal to passionate football fans but I believe that to the average parent they would feel more comfortable letting their son play this style of football.

Although the NFL might seem like the place where rule changes are at a minimum, efforts are made to make the game safe in every way possible that doesn’t send aftershocks to the integrity of the game itself. State of the art equipment is in place and new discoveries are being made each year, but equipment has little effect on the true violence of the game. Changes to the kickoff were made moving the touchback to the 25 yard line. This would help discourage kick returns and reduce high speed collision. Experts believe that this would cause an increase of “mortar kicks” where the kicker boots the ball high into the air giving the coverage team more time to run down field and this would also help prevent some high speed collisions. Notice that I said some, the next step the NFL needs to make is eliminating the kickoff. The 25 yard touchback rule was in place for the 2016 season and there was a significant increase in touchbacks. So if there are already huge amounts of return-less kickoffs, I believe it wouldn’t be too big of a change to eliminate the kickoff all together. Fans would miss the tradition of the opening kickoff to inaugurate each new season and to mark the end of one with the opening kickoff of the Super Bowl. But eliminating the most violent part of the game on all levels from professional to youth, is a good start to making football safer.

If rule changes aren’t made, you can expect the same number of injuries in football and tragic stories to surface every year. Many writers and scientists have predicted that football will be ‘dead’ in less than a quarter of a century. Lem Barney, a former NFL football player, is quoted saying, “People often ask me do I miss the game, do I wish I could still play with all the money they're making today. Even with all of that, I'd say, 'Heck, no,’”(Snyder, Lem Barney: Football will be gone in 20 years). He concludes that even the money players earn today wouldn’t entice him to play again because the game is becoming even more dangerous. I believe that this could be because every year athletes are getting stronger, faster, and this will only keep making the game more violent. So unless representatives of all leagues of football come together and make major changes to increase player safety, while keeping the game entertaining, America’s Game could die in the near future.

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