

Football and Concussions

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last year my son played Pop Warner youth football for the first time. He was one of over 250,000 kids across the country to participate in the program that has been around for over 85 years.

This was my first exposure to Pop Warner, and I was impressed with the operation. The Fox Valley Pop Warner runs with military precision, from issuing equipment to having 18 games in one day all starting on time. They have a beautiful facility that features two fields nestled in Plamann Park and an awesome concession stand.

My son was lucky to have a great group of coaches and a bunch of his buddies were on his team. This was his first year of tackle football, and he learned a lot. More importantly, he had a ton of fun.

Unfortunately, not everyone is quite as lucky.

On June 7, 2012, Joseph Chernach committed suicide. Chernach was a 25-year-old young man who grew up in Michigan and played Pop Warner football there for four years, starting at age 11. Chernach's mother, Debbie Pyka, noticed that Chernach changed during college, becoming very depressed.

An autopsy revealed that Chernach had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a brain disease believed to be caused by repeated blows to the head. CTE has been found mostly in athletes who play contact sports, such as football. The issue has become a significant concern for professional and youth athletes. CTE is the subject of the movie, 'Concussion,' which stars Will Smith as Dr. Bennet Omalu, who studied the affliction and warned the NFL about the dangers of concussions.

As a result, Chernach's family sued Pop Warner for \$5 million, claiming the organization failed to properly train coaches, use the "safest helmets" or "enforce limitations on hitting in practice." The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Wisconsin, further alleges that Pop Warner's conduct was "deliberate, an actual disregard of the plaintiff's right to safety, health or life...."

"Pop Warner allows children who still have to sit in the backseat of a car to play tackle football with helmets -- that is the problem," Gordon Johnson, the Chernach family's attorney, told ABC News last year. He added, "We just want children to play. We don't want children to engage in combat."

This was the first suit filed against Pop Warner related to concussions. The organization responded that they are committed to player safety and has and will continue to work to make it safer. The league has striven to increase coaches' education through the Heads Up Football, which teaches proper tackling technique.

Pop Warner also implemented rule changes to promote safety. Starting in 2010, any player suspected of having a concussion was benched and not allowed to play until he or she was cleared by a doctor. Limits on contact were introduced in 2013. These rule changes ban full speed head-on blocking or tackling drills in which players are lined up more than three yards apart. In addition, a maximum limit of one-third of the practice time was set to allow for player contact.

The parties ultimately settled out of court, the terms of which have not been disclosed.

I loved playing tackle football, and it taught me sportsmanship, teamwork and camaraderie. I'm hoping the NFL, Pop Warner and others continue to find ways to make it safer so all kids can play and enjoy it as much as I did.

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