

Hard Hats Not Hard Enough

By Reg P. Wydeven
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We're coming up on fall, my favorite time of the year. I love the cooler nights, the leaves changing colors and football. My son will be playing flag football again this year at the YMCA. The coaches and refs at the Y do a great job of teaching the kids the game, while still having lots of fun.

Next year my son wants to play Pop Warner football. As the assistant coach of his Y team, I look at my son and know he'll do just fine playing tackle football in pads. As his dad, I'm a little nervous about him getting hurt.

I played football when I was young. I also had my fair share of injuries: I tore up my knee, sprained ankles and broke several bones, including fingers, toes, a rib, and a leg (but thankfully the leg wasn't mine). I also suffered a concussion.

Even though I ended a little banged up, if I had to do it all over again, I would. Some of my best memories are playing football with my friends.

But now that we know everything about the high correlation between football and concussions, and the connection between concussion and long-term memory deficits, I'm a little uneasy about my little guy getting knocked around on the gridiron.

Then I tell myself that I'm being silly and that millions of kids play football every year and only a small percentage of them get hurt. So then I start to feel better – until I read the label on the back of a football helmet.

The warning label on the back of the football helmet made by Schutt Sports reads: "No helmet system can protect you from serious brain and/or neck injuries including paralysis or death. To avoid these risks, do not engage in the sport of football." Then I start to get a little nervous again.

Rawlings, another helmet manufacturer, also adopted the same warning. Riddell, however, the nation's largest helmet manufacturer, doesn't have quite as blunt a warning. The helmet manufacturers use these warnings in an effort to reduce their liability for injuries to players. After all, helmets are under increased scrutiny as lawsuits against football leagues, coaches and equipment makers mount due to growing concerns about the long-term effects of playing football.

The National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment is the organization that creates the standards that helmet manufacturers follow. NOCSAE also creates the template for helmet warning labels.

Despite the warning labels, Riddell, along with the NFL, was sued for allegedly hiding evidence about the dangers of repeated head trauma. An injured Colorado high school football player was also awarded a \$3.1 million verdict against Riddell in April because the company failed to adequately warn about possible head trauma.

Riddell plans to appeal the decision, primarily based on the fact that the jury did not find any design flaw in their helmets and that several coaches were negligent for failing to address the athlete's injury.

So while I certainly want my son to experience the camaraderie and fun of football, I don't want him to get hurt. Maybe I'll just cover him in bubble wrap.

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