

Concussions and an N.F.L. Paradox

By MICHAEL D. SHEAR and KEN BELSON MAY 29, 2014



On Thursday, President Obama waded gingerly into a beloved part of daily life that he said is “fundamental to who we are as Americans and our culture.”

Credit Gabriella Demczuk/The New York Times

WASHINGTON — In 2009, Roger Goodell, the commissioner of the N.F.L., was [skewered by lawmakers on Capitol Hill](#) for denying the severity of concussions and failing to do more to help retired players with brain injuries.

Five years later, the issue moved to the White House, with President Obama on Thursday convening some of the country’s top sports executives and researchers to find ways to combat the nation’s growing concussion crisis.

The president's conference, intended to heighten awareness around the issue, highlighted how quickly the problem has turned into a mainstream cause and how uncomfortable the N.F.L.'s role is as the conversation escalates.

Officials for the N.F.L. and in other levels of the sport are increasingly confronting how to make their games safer while still retaining the speed, power and violence that make them so appealing. In doing so, they risk alarming the athletes, their families and fans who now see some of their favorite players having advanced dementia and committing suicide after facing severe mental health problems.



Obama Calls for Concussion Awareness

The president, representatives of professional sports leagues and young athletes at a White House summit called for more robust research into youth concussions.

Credit Gabriella Demczuk/The New York Times

This dynamic has also sent shock waves through the youth sports world, where parents are questioning whether to allow their children to take part in games that could cause them long-term damage. Their collective decisions are likely to affect sports like football and hockey for years to come.

As a father of two athletic teenagers, the president acknowledged those worries in his remarks. He noted the lack of information on how to diagnose and treat concussions and the lasting consequences of repeated hits to the head. Getting parents the best possible information, he said, was critical.

“As parents, though, we want to keep them safe, and that means we have to have better information,” he said to a group of about 200 parents, doctors, athletes and military officials in the East Room of the White House. “We have to know what these issues are. And the fact is, we don’t have solid numbers, and that tells me that at every level, we’re still trying to fully grasp what’s going on with this issue.”

For the president, the event was an opportunity to demonstrate that his administration was engaged in the increasingly urgent conversation among many parents about how to ensure the safety of their children even as they pursued competitive sports.

He said he wanted to use the power of his office to help accelerate a cultural shift among coaches, parents and young athletes, who for too long, he said, have ignored the warning signs of traumatic brain injuries.

“We have to change a culture that says you suck it up,” Obama said, noting that as a young football player, he probably had mild concussions and went right on playing. “Identifying a concussion and being able to self-diagnose that this is something that I need to take care of doesn’t make you weak; it means you’re strong.”

But the president waded gingerly into a beloved part of daily life that he said is “fundamental to who we are as Americans and our culture.”

“We’re competitive,” he said. “We’re driven. And sports teach us about teamwork and hard work and what it takes to succeed.”



In trying to make football safer, Roger Goodell and the N.F.L. are underlining problems.
Credit John Raoux/Associated Press

He took pains not to discourage children from participating in sports, noting that his wife, Michelle, has spent much of her time as the first lady pushing children and young adults to be as active as they can be. And he stayed far away from proposing any new regulations that could be viewed as attempts to impose a “nanny state” mentality on cherished sports programs in schools and in communities.

All 50 states have adopted laws that require athletes who sustain concussions to be taken off the field and not allowed to return until a doctor clears them. Some schools have banned heading in soccer, for instance, and youth football leagues are reducing the number of full-contact practices. Some parents are not allowing their children to play sports like football until later ages, if at all.

This has the N.F.L. and other leagues, which are fending off lawsuits from retired players who say they were misled about the dangers of concussions, on edge because a decline in the number of children participating in their sports may mean fewer fans watching their games and spending thousands of dollars on tickets and merchandise every year.

Goodell acknowledged as much in March when he said that the N.F.L. would donate \$45 million to USA Football, among other things, to expand certification programs for coaches who would be taught safer ways to tackle.

The paradox, though, is that the more the N.F.L. spends to address safety problems, the more it is highlighting those problems, essentially worrying the audience that it is seeking to assure.

Steve Tisch, the chairman of the Giants, said that concussions and their threat to the long-term health of the N.F.L. were major topics of conversation among team owners. Tisch, like his fellow owner Paul Allen of the Seattle Seahawks, has donated millions of dollars to address the problem.

“What I’d like to see is 20 years from now, no N.F.L. players, no rookies playing in 2014, experiencing any head injuries,” said Tisch, who watched the president’s remarks from the second row Thursday. He added, “We’re taking some of the first steps in that direction.”

But Michael Kaplen, a lawyer who represents clients with traumatic brain injuries, said that although the president’s remarks were encouraging, the panelists who spoke after him focused more on ways to protect their sports from the negative publicity associated with brain injury rather than protecting players.

While donating tens of millions of dollars to study concussions, multibillion-dollar sports leagues like the N.F.L. are not entirely focused on public health, said Kaplen, who attended the event at the White House.

Rather, he said, they are trying to “control the public’s perception of concussion risks” through programs that attempt “to convince parents that football can be made safer,” even though there is no empirical evidence that tackling procedures can reduce the rate or severity of concussions.