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## Tackling, at the Turn of the Century

By GREGG EASTERBROOK

WASHINGTON — THE public was increasingly upset over the physical toll wrought by football. University faculties were in an uproar over funds diverted from education to the sport. The president called the leaders of the football establishment to the White House to demand change — and they responded.

This may sound like a story at the top of your news feed, but the year was 1905, and the president was Theodore Roosevelt.

At the time, before the forward pass, football consisted almost entirely of men bashing one another as the ball was carried, foot by foot, down the field. There were no shock-absorbing pads or faceguards: nearly every game produced broken ribs, noses and limbs. Brutal moves were almost never penalized, including elbows to the face and the infamous “clothesline” — one player slamming his arm into another’s neck.

In the fall of 1905, at least 18 players died during or immediately after football games — and there were far fewer contests than now. Newspaper readers across the country were shocked by a photograph of the swollen, bloodied face of a college football star leaving the field. In a sign of how much times have changed, the player in the photo, Robert W. Maxwell, was a 240-pound guard from Swarthmore renowned for his size; today Swarthmore doesn’t even have a team, and a lineman of Mr. Maxwell’s stature would be dwarfed on the field.

Football was corrupting education, too. At the time, college football was the heart of the sport, and already a magnet for school resources. The University of Wisconsin faculty had just passed a resolution demanding the school drop football, which it said had become “a business supported by levies on the public.”

Meanwhile, ringers — large, talented nonstudents, wearing jersey numbers listed for actual students — were commonplace, though using them was against the rules. Football sleaze even made it into the movies, eventually playing a significant role in the plot of the Marx Brothers film “Horse Feathers.”

Roosevelt, an exponent of “the strenuous life,” loved football, for its machismo and for bringing a manly man activity to college campuses. But he knew the sport was becoming socially harmful and feared that it might end up outlawed.

The president had no statutory authority over athletics, but he did have the bully pulpit of his office, and he called the presidents of the powerhouse football colleges to the White House. (In another sign of changing times, the men he invited came from Harvard, Yale and Princeton.)

Roosevelt got the college leaders to agree to rule changes to address brutality and to legalize the forward pass, which added grace to the sport while reducing all-out collisions. The presidential initiative also played a role in the 1906 founding of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, which is today condemned as a guardian of the status quo but was originally conceived as a reform organization.

How much credit Roosevelt deserves has been debated — some commentators think he saved football, while others say that his primary concern was ensuring his beloved Harvard stayed in the sport. Whatever the case, no president has had similar involvement since.

That needs to change. Football is the king of sports, the most popular game in the world's leading country. But it also has deep-seated problems that few of the organizations involved, from youth leagues to the professional level, seem prepared to face in full.

For a decade, evidence has been accumulating that helmet-to-helmet contact in football causes long-term neurological harm. Spectacular highlight-reel hits are not the only problem; the accumulated effect of many routine hits may be as bad for the brain.

Yet there's been a recent increase in youth tackle football — three million people, some as young as 5 years old, now put on pads in organized play. Some 1.1 million play high school football, with many states now allowing year-round football practice. In an education-based society, having millions of young people spending ever more time bashing one another's heads can't be good.

Meanwhile, in college football, the money increases while the educational results stay modest. One study found that just 55 percent of Division I football players graduate — and a college diploma has more economic value than any amount college players might be paid.

And at the professional level, despite rolling in profit, the National Football League receives billions of dollars in public subsidies and tax favors, while setting bad examples for the young regarding painkiller abuse and weight gain.

There seems little chance the N.F.L. will give up its subsidies, or collegiate football-factory behavior will change, or that youth and high school play will be restructured, without outside pressure. President Barack Obama, like Roosevelt an avowed football fan in his second term, is the man to provide that pressure.

Earlier this year Mr. Obama said, “If I had a son, I’d have to think long and hard [before I let him play football](#).” He should call the leaders of today’s football establishment to the White House and push them for comprehensive reform — to protect taxpayers, and people’s sons. Historians may treat him kindly if he does.

*Gregg Easterbrook is the author, most recently, of “[The King of Sports: Football’s Impact on America](#).”*