

Youth Tackle Program Is Being Eliminated in a Football Hotbed

By KEN BELSON FEB. 3, 2016



The Boys and Girls Club in Marshall, Tex. chose to end its tackle football program because of the long-term dangers associated with the sport. Credit Brandon Thibodeaux for The New York Times

There will be less tackle football in Marshall, Tex., once a football hotbed that competed for high school state championships, produced N.F.L. players like Y.A. Tittle and appeared in the book “Friday Night Lights.”

The Boys & Girls Club in the East Texas town of 24,000 announced this week that it was ending its tackle football program because of the long-term dangers associated with the sport. In its place, the club will expand its popular flag football program.

The decision comes less than two years after the town’s school district, citing safety and financial concerns, dropped seventh-grade tackle football, an important entry-level program.

The move was highlighted in [an article in The New York Times in 2014](#) on growing awareness of perils in the sport.

The Boys & Girls Club had taught players the Heads Up Tackling method, which emphasizes lifting the head rather than drilling it into an opponent; put its coaches through training to detect concussions; and gave its referees the autonomy to pull players from a game if they suspected they had suffered a head injury.

Ultimately, though, the board of the club decided that the potential for head trauma in the young players, coupled with the legal exposure and high cost of running the program, was no longer worth it. They voted, 18-to-2, with one abstention, to end the tackle football program, which had about 75 players.

Pop Warner shut down in Marshall six years ago. For five years, the Boys & Girls Club was the only youth tackle program in town. Tackle football is still available in eighth grade and high school.

In nearby towns, two independent youth leagues offering tackle football have sprung up in the last year, but it is unclear how many Marshall players they have drawn.

“Football is still a great sport,” said Bryan Partee, the executive director of the club and the son of Dennis Partee, a kicker for the San Diego Chargers in the 1960s and 1970s. “But at the Boys & Girls Club, we have to decide how to best take care of our kids.”