

The Coach Says He's 'Built for Football.' His Parents Worry About C.T.E.

Parents reflect on the pressure and desire they feel to enroll their boys in tackle football, despite the risk of brain injury.

By Lela Moore

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A 15-year-old high school football player made a play and was tackled. He walked off the field and didn't recognize his own mother, who snapped his photo.



David Gavigan, 15, just after suffering a concussion on the football field. Credit Courtesy of Kim Gavigan

“I thought he was looking tough,” Kim Gavigan said of her son David, “but he didn't really know who I was.” It was the second concussion of his short career (the first was at age 8); soon after, he quit the sport.

As football season gets underway in high schools and youth leagues across the United States, communities are gathering in their stadiums to cheer and enjoy the sense of togetherness.

But overshadowing it all is the threat of [brain injury](#) (and [chronic traumatic encephalopathy](#), or C.T.E.) linked to taking hits during football and the angst many parents feel about deciding whether their children should participate.

We [asked](#) parents, via an unscientific survey, to tell us where they stand on the subject of youth tackle football and heard from dozens. Most said that the research on or personal experience with head injuries had compelled them to forbid their children to play.

But the pressure to participate can be intense, especially on boys who are big for their age and even on those who are small.

Here is a selection of submissions from parents reflecting on how their boys' sizes, norms of masculinity and tradition affected their decision. They have been condensed and edited.

Please use the comments to tell us about your experiences with the pressures boys face to play tackle football and whether you think the risk is worth it.

Norm Macdonald, Still in Search of the Perfect Joke

How to Retire in Your 30s With \$1 Million in the Bank

California Tries New Tack on Gun Violence: Ammunition Control

“Real men” are tough and play tackle football’

Children who play football before the age of 12 have a [higher rate of cognitive and behavioral problems later in life](#), according to a study by researchers at Boston University. A [study in the journal Brain](#) found evidence of the degenerative brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or C.T.E., in teenage athletes who sustained head impact injuries.

Vicki Froslee says her sons Alex, 13, and Jack, 11, have been called “wimps” for not playing tackle football

Image



Alex Froslee, 13, right, plays tackle football in Minnesota. His brother Jack, 11, left, plays flag football. Credit Courtesy of Vicki Froslee

I have a 13-year-old and an 11-year-old boy and I finally let my 13-year-old play last year. He is big for his age and about the size of a high school student. I'm more comfortable with him playing, though it still bothers me.

But my 11-year-old is only 85 pounds and would play positions that I have seen get clobbered the most — running back and receiver. I don't know that I will ever be comfortable letting him play tackle.

The real difference between playing tackle football versus flag football is not the skills learned, but the social issues. My kids have repeatedly been called wimps and not “real men” over the years because they have played flag versus tackle.

I think safety for our kids dictates they shouldn't play tackle until at least age 13 or 14. But it will be a very hard sell because of the social bias in our country that “real men” are tough and play tackle football. — *Vicki Froslee, Andover, Minn.*

Amanda Bryant won't allow her four sons to play tackle despite living in “football country”

Image



Kasen Bryant, 12, far right, plays flag football in Oklahoma. His mother, Amanda, will not allow Kasen or his three brothers, Kale, 14, Knox, 10, and Krews, 8, to play tackle football. Credit Courtesy of Amanda Bryant

I am the mother of four sons; we live in Oklahoma, football country. Three of our boys love football and ask to play tackle. In our town they can start at 5 years old. We have opted to play flag football only, due to the risks of concussion.

We face a lot of ridicule from friends and relatives, but we cannot in good conscience let our boys play a game so inherently dangerous. The scientific evidence of the damage done by C.T.E. is too strong to ignore. We will never let our children play tackle ball. — *Amanda Bryant, Norman, Okla.*

‘He is built for football’

C.T.E. can develop years after an athlete stops taking knocks to the head. It can cause memory loss, cognitive problems and dementia.

But under pressure from a persistent coach who pursues their sons even when they discourage the sport, some parents relent. Other parents embrace football without giving the risk a second thought.

Amy Harkins’s son Carson, 17, began playing football his senior year after a coach recruited him for his size



Carson Harkins, 17, began playing football in his senior year at Western Reserve Academy in Hudson, Ohio. Credit Walter Harkins

My 17-year-old son has participated in team activities since elementary school, but things like the chess team and debate team. Never did I think in a million years that he would join the football team in his senior year in high school.

The coach reached out to him over the summer and asked him to join, and I have to believe it was because of his size — 6-3 and just over 200 pounds — but I also wonder if it's because of low participation due to the risk of injury.

I expressed my concern about injury to him and basically begged him not to join the team, but ultimately let him make the decision for himself. He started in his first-ever game last week and I was on edge the entire time.

I have to hope that nine football games over the course of his life won't have a negative impact on his health, but I can't deny the absolute fear that I'll have every minute that he's on the field. —
Amy Harkins, Columbus, Ohio

Carla Dauphin signed up her son Christopher, 14, for football when he started high school because of his build

Image



Christopher Gulotti, 14, plays on the line for his high school team. He is number 75. Credit Vincent Gulotti

My son didn't ask to play football. I made him. He is a freshman, and I insisted that he play a fall sport in order to make his transition to high school easier. He is a big kid, not built for speed, so he is not cross-country or soccer material. He is built for football.

His pediatrician believed, given today's focus on head safety, football was no more dangerous than any other contact sport at this level — soccer, basketball, etc. And I agreed with him that football carried no more risk of injuries than soccer or lacrosse. —
Carla Dauphin, Wilmington, Del.

John Pisnanont says her son Spencer, 12, can play football if he bulks up

Image



Spencer Pisanont, 12, plays hockey and lacrosse Credit Courtesy of John Pisanont

Concussions are a major concern and have kept my son out of playing tackle football. I've told him that if he were larger relative to his peers, I don't think I would have the same problem with it.

The last two years, I've been telling him to eat more and try to bulk up or get taller, but it hasn't worked. — *John Pisanont, Ridgewood, N.J.*

'It has been difficult for me to tell my son that he can't play football'

The sport remains America's most popular, but [fewer children are turning out to play](#) it, with participation falling nearly 5 percent since 2008, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

Matt Palmer keeps his son Matthew, 8, away from football despite believing his size would make him great

Image



Matthew Palmer, 8, plays baseball as well as soccer. Credit Courtesy of Matt Palmer

My 8-year-old is the tallest, strongest and most powerful kid in his class and on his soccer and baseball teams. If ever a kid were “built for football,” it is my son.

My wife is a pediatric nurse who has worked in pediatric intensive care units, emergency departments, special procedure, and surgical units. She has seen the devastation a head injury can cause to a child, and to his or her parents.

The fact that our son already struggles with dyslexia and mood disorders makes her even more fearful of what a brain injury could do to him. She is adamant that he will not play football.

I view it as inevitable that he likely will, but we have agreed that we will not begin to entertain the discussion until he is at least 14 years old. We both kind of hope in the next few years he will develop different interests.

I have loved watching football for years, but never played. It is something that my son and I enjoy doing together, rooting for the Packers and the Utah Utes. My love of the game has caused some

conflict in terms of why he isn't allowed to play. He doesn't understand how I can love a game so much that I won't let him play. — *Matt Palmer, Salt Lake City*

Karen Kelly says her son Teshale, 12, a natural athlete, would be great at football but refuses to allow it, citing C.T.E. research

Image



Teshale Kelly, 12, making the referee work during a lacrosse game in Vermont. Credit Sandy Brenen

My son, who has always excelled at soccer, has realized he'd also excel at football. His friends and physical education teachers have been trying to convince him to switch to football, and he wants to.

He'd be an awesome wide receiver with his speed and athleticism. I have given him the option to be a field goal kicker, since it's not unheard-of for them to be selected from the soccer team, but he wants touchdown glory.

I had been considering wavering on my anti-football resolve, but the brain studies shut the door on that. I remind him that his brain is the best thing he has going for him.

It has been difficult for me to tell my son that he can't play football because he displays great talent for the sport. He'll be a huge asset to the soccer team, but soccer games don't fill the stands. I have to keep convincing myself I'm making the best decision I can. — *Karen Kelly, Camillus, N.Y.*

'It's sad how many fewer kids we have playing every year'

Some states would like to suppress youth participation in tackle football even more. [Five states have introduced legislation](#), with one bill — in New Jersey — remaining active.

Alaina Kenny says the risk of tackle to her son, Carson, 8, is worth the rewards of family bonding time

Image



Carson Kenny, 8, No. 12, has played tackle football for three years. He signed up after seeing a family friend's game. Credit Kim Howes

The first few weeks of youth football are spent just learning how to properly tackle to avoid head injury. Helmets are replaced every year. Coaches take concussion training. As long as my son enjoys being out there for any of his sports, he will do them. I read the studies, but it's just a risk and a risk doesn't mean you shouldn't. We take risks every day.

All fall we spend at the football fields; my 8-year-old plays and my two daughters cheer. It's a family day at the fields. The organization is a feeling of community and it's sad how many fewer kids we have playing every year. — *Alaina Kenney, Mount Airy, Md.*

Amy Pennella trusts the coaches who lead her son Roman, 13



Roman Pennella, 13, near left, will play high school football in Connecticut next year. Credit Courtesy of Amy Pennella

My 13-year-old will move on to high school football next year. He's wanted to play as soon as he was 8 years old. You know your son loves to play football when he wakes up on Sundays and says, "Who am I going to crush today?"

My son plays both ways on the line and he gets knocked around, but he's been taught how to tackle the right way and I trust in his coaches and other coaches that they are teaching these kids the proper football techniques for less or no injury.