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Should Kids Play Football?

More young athletes are saying America's favorite sport is just too dangerous. *By Jennifer Shotz*

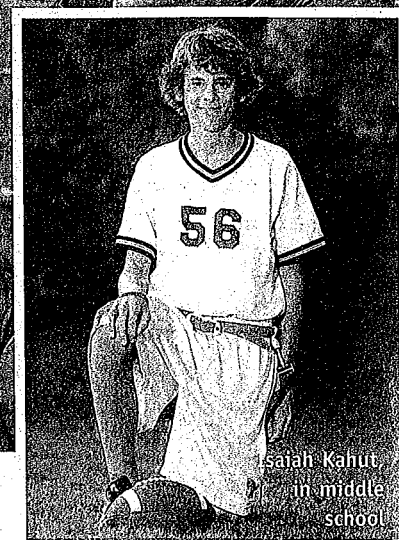
For as long as he could remember, 13-year-old Isaiah Kahut had a dream: to play high school football. He'd dreamed of it in kindergarten, throwing a football with his dad. He'd dreamed of it in elementary school, playing in his town's youth flag football league. Now, finally, his dream was about to come true.

It was the summer before ninth grade, and Isaiah was at football camp, preparing for his first season as a running back for Skyview High School in Vancouver, Washington.

The Skyview Storm went to state championships twice. Many former players went on to play on college teams. Isaiah wondered: Might he one day receive a scholarship to play college ball?

But on the second day of camp, his plans came crashing down around him. He was running with the ball when he was tackled. His head smacked the turf—*hard*.

The moment he got up, he knew something wasn't right. "I could see and hear," he remembers, "but I couldn't comprehend what was happening around me."



Isaiah Kahut
in middle
school

Headaches and nausea soon set in. His parents rushed him to the hospital, where doctors diagnosed him with a severe concussion—a brain injury resulting from a blow to the head. For two weeks, Isaiah had to rest in a dark, quiet room so his brain could heal. Then, for two miserable months, he felt foggy and had trouble answering questions.

Terrible as it was, Isaiah's injury was not unusual. Every year, tens of thousands of youth-football players get concussions.* Most return to the field after they heal. But as Isaiah slowly recovered from his injury,

he began to think hard about the risks of the game he loved. After much soul-searching and talking to his family and doctor, he made an agonizing decision that is becoming more common in youth football.

Isaiah decided to quit football. For good.

A Football Crisis

Football is America's most popular sport. Some 2.5 million kids play the game—often in leagues that start as early as first grade. In many towns, high school football is the heart of the community, with sellout crowds turning out on Friday nights to cheer on the team. College football brings in more than \$3 billion a year; the NFL rakes in more than \$9 billion. And across the nation, star players of all ages are worshipped as heroes.

But America's favorite sport is in crisis: An increasing number of kids are choosing not to play. According to ESPN, enrollment in Pop Warner, the largest youth-football league in the U.S., dropped 9.5 percent from 2010 to 2012. Because of concussions, many considered the game just too risky.

Football has been a rough sport since it was first played in the 1800s. Until recently, knocks to the head were considered just part of the game. But today, we know those knocks can be devastating.

A single concussion, if treated properly, will likely heal without any long-term effects. Repeated concussions are another story.

Football players of all ages have suffered permanent brain damage from repeated concussions—even when they've given their brains time to heal (which can take months). If a player's brain has not healed, even a small jolt can cause permanent damage—or death. In milder cases, athletes can be left with lifelong pain, memory lapses, aggression, depression, personality changes, and many other issues.

Can Football Be Safe?

So is it time for us to give up our most beloved sport? Some fans point out that injuries can happen in any sport, from soccer to skateboarding. If we got rid of football, where would we draw the line? On the other hand, no sport has more concussions than football. Several NFL players have stated that

the game is so risky they wouldn't let their own kids play.

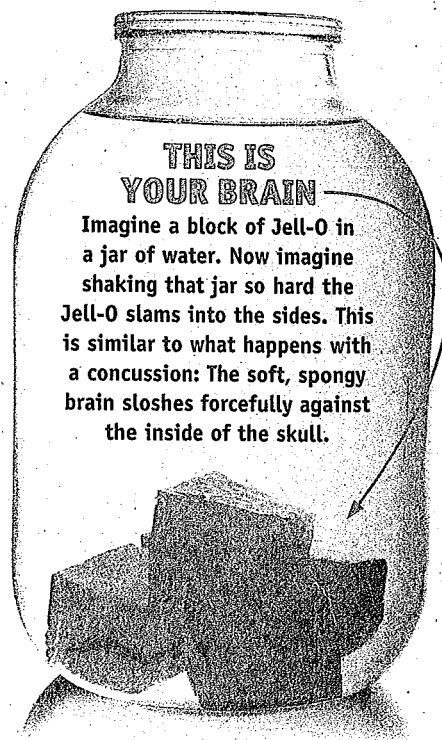
Yet with all the public attention on the concussion crisis, football seems to be getting safer every day. For example, Pop Warner has limited the amount of practice time that includes tackling. (Most concussions **sustained** in football happen during tackles.) Nationwide programs are training coaches, parents, and athletes to recognize and treat concussions. All 50 states have passed laws requiring a medical professional to sign off before an injured player can go back on the field. Even the NFL has altered some of its rules.

But do these measures go far enough? Some believe we should ban tackling. A few schools, like Isaiah's middle school, have already done so. Die-hard fans, however, say that football just wouldn't be football without tackling.

An American Tradition

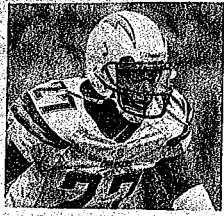
Of course, there are many wonderful aspects of football. Young athletes learn discipline, focus, teamwork—skills that will help them be successful later in life. Players often form lasting friendships, and they get to participate in an American tradition that is a major part of our culture. They also **reap** the benefits of being physically active.

Football can even help with college. For many students, an athletic scholarship is the only way they can afford



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM (JAR); SHUTTERSTOCK (JELL-O)

*MORE THAN 147,000 CONCUSSIONS OCCURRED IN YOUTH FOOTBALL DURING THE 2013-2014 SCHOOL YEAR, AS REPORTED IN THE NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS-RELATED INJURY SURVEILLANCE STUDY.



In 2013, Paul Oliver (left) of the San Diego Chargers committed suicide. An autopsy showed he had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). CTE is a brain disease found in people with a history of brain trauma, such as concussions. It can only be diagnosed after death. Eight NFL players who committed suicide have since been found to have had CTE. The NFL has said one in three retired players will likely develop concussion-related brain disease.

to go. Football offers the most full scholarships of all college sports.

Then again, college players often make football, rather than learning, their first priority—which puts them at a disadvantage when they look for jobs. (Few college players make it to the NFL.) So the

question we have to ask is: Do the rewards of football outweigh the risks?

Life After Football

Isaiah, now 17, is confident he made the right decision. Since quitting football, he has thrived.

He runs track and went to state championships; he plans to run in college. He stays connected to football by photographing games for his school yearbook.

He still gets headaches once in a while, but for the most part, his symptoms have faded. “I understand what could have happened if I’d stayed on the team,” Isaiah says. “Brain damage could have affected my entire life.”

And that made walking away the right choice. ☉

Should Kids Play Football?

Identify evidence from the article that supports each side of this debate. Write the information on the lines below.

YES

THE REWARDS OUTWEIGH THE RISKS.

1 Football builds important skills like teamwork.

2 _____

3 _____

NO

IT'S WAY TOO DANGEROUS.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

EXAMINE POINTS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE DEBATE—AS WELL AS YOUR OWN BELIEFS—and decide what you think. State your opinion in one sentence below. This can become the thesis statement for an argument essay.

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