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Editorial: Decline in high school football participation is encouraging

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Parents and athletes are continuing to recognize the risk of playing football is too high



Protective helmets worn by high school players cannot eliminate the threat of concussions during practices and games. (Bay Area News Group File Photo)

By **MERCURY NEWS & EAST BAY TIMES EDITORIAL BOARDS** |
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It's gratifying to see that California parents and their high school athletes are slowly beginning to recognize that tackle football puts players at an unacceptable risk of permanent brain damage.

The California Interscholastic Federation reported earlier this month that participation numbers for 11-man high school football in the state dropped by 3.16 percent from 2018. It marked the fourth consecutive year of decline in football participation and a 12.14 percent drop from 2011.

Every parent whose child is playing high school football should fully inform themselves on the studies that have been conducted on the connections between tackle football and head injuries.

A report released July 29 and presented at the annual meeting of the American Orthopaedic Society for Sports Medicine shows that the concussion risk is greater for younger players and on artificial turf, which many schools in the Bay Area use for practices and games.

Further study is needed, but a growing case can be made that tackle football should be banned at all public schools. At the very least, the state should require that a trained, unbiased expert attend all games — and perhaps even practices — to act in players' best interests. Physicians say it can be difficult to determine when an athlete has suffered a concussion, and coaches aren't in the best position to judge whether a player should continue playing after a blow to the head.

The study of 997,308 male athletes found that players were almost as likely to suffer concussions at practice as they were during games, and that nearly 90 percent of all injuries occurred on artificial turf.

The author of the study, Scott Burkhart, a sports neuropsychologist at the Children's Health Andrews Institute in Plano, Texas, also noted that athletes aged 14, 15 and 16 were at a greater risk for concussion compared to players aged 17 and 18.

The report builds on alarming studies about the dangers of youth football.

We encouraged parents a year ago to consider an eye-opening report by researchers at Boston University's Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Center that said "participation in youth football before age 12 increased the risk of problems with behavior regulation, apathy and executive functioning by twofold and increased the risk of clinically elevated depression by threefold."

Doctors have known for years that because teenage boys' brains are not fully developed, they are three times more likely to suffer a concussion than adult football players.


Another study conducted by Boston University researchers revealed that repeated hits to the head puts football players at as much risk of permanent brain damage as concussions.

All told, if history is a guide, some 3,000 California boys out of the 91,305 playing high school football will suffer some form of serious head trauma this fall.

Maybe it's time for them to consider another sport. The good news is that participation numbers for all high school sports in California combined (boys and girls) reached an all-time high for the seventh consecutive year, to 814,004, with soccer, volleyball and basketball showing the largest increases in growth.

California parents should send a clear message to high school football coaches that the exodus from their sport will continue unless they can substantially reduce the threat of head injuries.

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