

Should the NFL Take Lessons from Pop Warner Football?

by Anthony Caruso on June 29, 2012

As the NFL prepares to defend yet another lawsuit, Pop Warner will implement new rules to help prevent concussions in young players in 2012 season.

From my perspective as a sports law attorney, the change is significant. It represents the first time a youth football organization has changed its rules to officially limit contact during practices.

Under the new Pop Warner practice rules:

- No full speed head-on blocking or tackling drills in which the players line up more than 3 yards apart are permitted. (Having two linemen in stances immediately across the line of scrimmage from each other and having full-speed drills where the players approach each other at an angle, but not straight ahead in to each other are both permitted.) However, there should be no intentional head-to-head contact.
- The amount of contact at each practice will be reduced to a maximum of 1/3 of practice time (either 40 minutes total of each practice or 1/3 of total weekly practice time). In this context, “contact” means any drill or scrimmage in which drills; down line vs. down line full-speed drills; and scrimmages.

“There are times when people and organizations have to evolve, and this is that time,” said Dr. Julian Bailes, a neurosurgeon and chair of the Pop Warner Medical Advisory Board. “For the future of the sport, we need to morph it now and take the unnecessary head contact out of the game. If parents were considering allowing their child to play football, this (move) should assure them.”

While the organization is expecting some push back from coaches, it is also hopeful that the rules will quickly become the new normal. According to ESPN, Pop Warner has the support of at least one well-known coach.

“I’m very supportive,” Alabama coach Nick Saban told ESPN. “At our level, we try to limit exposure to contact as much as possible because we want our players healthy for the game. It’s even more important for a youth coach to do that. We’ve got to get young people to play the game in a safe way. You’ve got to start somewhere, right?”

It will be interesting to see what effect, if any, the new rules will ultimately have on college and professional football.