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Is high school football worth the risk?

By Jim Nowlan

Talented linebacker Chris Borland called it quits this past week after just one year in the NFL. “I don’t think it’s worth the risk,” Borland told ESPN, referring to multiple concussions he has sustained. Several other NFL players have also retired this past year for similar reasons.

In Illinois, a class action law firm in Chicago has filed suit this year against the Illinois High School Association. The suit contends that the IHSA has failed in its responsibilities to provide adequate safety oversight for the 557 member high schools and their 47,000 football players.

The IHSA responds that if the suit is successful in requiring more and expensive medical oversight during practices and games, the death knell will probably be sounded for many small high school football programs.

Is the risk of concussions worth the benefits of team-building, competition and camaraderie that flow from playing high school football?

The brain is a three-pound soft-tissue organ that basically floats in the skull in a thin shield of spinal fluid.

According to the Sports Concussion Institute, a concussion is defined as a complex process that is induced by trauma to the brain. “It can be caused either by a direct blow to the head or an indirect blow to the body.”

A concussion is considered a brain injury, like a bruise to the brain. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) says that even a ‘ding’ or what seems like a mild bump to the head can be serious.

A British journal of sports medicine suggests that “a second blow before the brain has recovered results in worsening metabolic changes within the cell.”

That is why there is so much attention paid in recent years to when a youngster should be allowed to return to play, and of the training of those who oversee the concussions.

I played small rural school football decades ago. I can still recall being knocked unconscious during a kick-off and the ammonia coursing up my nostrils from the smelling salts.

Little thought was given to concussions or their care back then. I went right back into the game, something that would not happen today.

From various sources, I have teased out that there are about three fatalities a year on average from head injuries in American high school football and about twice that many from cardiac-related issues, among 1.1 million players.

By comparison, 3,900 drivers out of 10 million drivers age 19 and under were involved in fatal accidents in 2009.

The suit against the IHSA by attorney Joseph Siprut is brought in behalf of a former high school player Alex Pierscioneck. Alex apparently suffered multiple concussions on the playing field in 2012 at South Elgin High School and, according to the complaint, still suffers from memory loss and migraine headaches.

Siprut complains, among other things, that the IHSA fails to require medical personnel at IHSA football contests who have specific expertise in concussion diagnosis, treatment, and management.

Further, the suit goes on, the IHSA fails to require that medical personnel be available and on-call for the football practices of IHSA's member schools (as opposed to games).

[IHSA executive director Marty Hickman told the Chicago Tribune that the doctors, athletic trainers and other expenses the suit would impose on high school football programs aren't the only costs at stake. He also worries that other lawsuits might be forthcoming that would seek huge financial awards, something the Siprut suit does not.]

I talked with my local football coach, Jade Noard, whose teams have gone to the playoffs 19 years in a row. He runs a good program. Jade has both a doctor and trainer at all his home games, though not at practices.

"Things are quite a bit safer than 15 years ago," the coach says. "There is not so much contact. We also recently spent, for example, a good amount of money on tackling dummies, so the players tackle it rather than one another."

"We do everything we can," Noard says, "but injuries do happen. You are never going to take 100 percent of the risk out, in football or in life.

["The parents who are concerned about high school football injuries may be the same ones who throw the car keys at them when they are of age."] [If deleted, you will need to close the quote in paragraph just above.]

I also talked with five good "Dr. Moms" who work in my newspaper business. One said she would not let her son play football. There are just too many risks in a "win at all costs" environment, she observed.

The other four said they would permit their sons to play.

As one noted, "I do have fears of injuries. What mother doesn't? Life is a set of choices. A mother can't protect her children from everything."

If I were in 2015 a father of a boy who really wanted to play high school football, I would probably okay it, but without enthusiasm.