Testimony of Terry O'Neil

Founder/CEO, *Practice Like Pros*

Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

"Concussions in Youth Sports:

Evaluating Prevention and Research"

May 13, 2016

My name is Terry O'Neil, founder/CEO of ***Practice Like Pros.*** My first career was in network television at ABC, CBS and NBC. I produced telecasts of many NFL football games, including three Super Bowls, and was privileged to meet top coaches of that generation – Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys, Bill Parcells of the New York Giants, Joe Gibbs of the Washington Redskins, Dick Vermeil of the Philadelphia Eagles, Mike Ditka of the Chicago Bears, Bill Walsh of the San Francisco 49ers. I spent a lot of

time on their practice fields, saw how they prepared for games with minimal risk to their players.

In the late '90s, when Mike Ditka took the head coaching job at the New Orleans Saints, I went along. My office, overlooking the practice fields, offered a magnificent view of NFL football ballet -- skillful, efficient practice, rarely marred by injury.

A few years later, after our family had returned to Connecticut, my oldest son became a high school football quarterback. On his third day of practice as a freshman, he threw a touchdown pass but fractured his right index finger on the helmet of an onrushing lineman. This would never have happened in the NFL or college football, where they practice with a five-yard restricted zone, known as a "halo", around the quarterback.

When I asked one of Liam's coaches about rules of engagement in practice, he said, "Every player, every day, every practice, every drill, is live, including the quarterback." I told the story to Dick Vermeil…..he exhaled deeply and said, "Wow."

Due to injury, Liam missed exactly half of the 40 high school games his team was scheduled to play. These injuries nearly cost him a chance to play college football.

Frank Gifford, my former colleague at ABC Sports, lived in the same Connecticut town. His son, Cody, played football at the same high school a few years before Liam. Frank and I often commiserated. One day, we counted the combined major injuries suffered by Cody and Liam in high school football:

- 5 concussions,
- 4 orthopedic fractures,
- 1 torn knee ligament.

To our amazement, we realized that only two of these injuries had occurred in games. The other **eight were suffered in practice!**

So in 2013, I called a few players and coaches from my prior careers. Then I cold-called a few top names in medical science. Pretty soon, we had a squad to launch ***Practice Like Pros:*** **Mike Ditka, Archie Manning, Ronnie Lott, Warren Moon, Anthony Munoz, Tony Dorsett, Rocky Seto,**

Buddy Teevens, Dr. Robert Cantu, Dr. James Andrews, et al. See the full list at www.practicelikepros.com.

We found that Cody's and Liam's experiences were not all that unusual. In high school football, a shocking **60% to 75%** of head trauma occurs in practice. In the NFL, that number is **3%.** (Sources: NFLPA, Concussion Legacy Foundation.) That 60% to 75% is the worst, most shameful statistic in football because coaches and administrators control the rules of engagement in practice.

In the formative months of ***Practice Like Pros,*** I met plenty of resistance. Then I connected with Steve Dembowski, the head coach at Swampscott (Ma.) High School, who told me, "Terry, we'd all like to practice with less contact; we just don't know how."

Bingo! That became the immediate mission of ***Practice Like Pros*** -- showing high school coaches….not *telling* them, *showing* them with video from the Cleveland Browns, Seattle Seahawks, Jacksonville Jaguars and Dartmouth College.

Our first video clinic was staged August 10, 2013, in Worcester, Ma. Today's hearing on Capitol Hill is our 30th appearance. Here's our scoreboard: In three years-plus since the founding of ***Practice Like Pros,*** 44 of 50 states have voted to reduce contact on their high school football practice fields.

But we have so much more to accomplish, beginning with the conversion of youth (age 5 to 13) play from contact football to flag. All available science, including two recent studies by **Dr. Robert Stern,** confirm the belief first expressed by **Dr. Cantu** that boys should not begin playing contact football until ninth grade.

And once they enter high school football, they should: ***Practice Like Pros,*** i.e.:

- no full-contact in spring/summer/off-season,
- three hours full-contact total, including scrimmage(s), in pre-season,
- 30 minutes full-contact per week in regular season.

Our effort to implement these standards runs contrary to recommendations of four national governing bodies. For instance, in regular season, USA

Football and the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS) recommend ***three times*** the contact that we advocate, Pop Warner **four times,** and the NCAA **six times.**

In addition, none of these organizations opposes full-contact in spring/ summer/off-season. Some states allow high school teams as much as 18 days of full-contact in spring! That's like playing another half-season.

Our pre-season and regular-season standards have been adopted by one state – Wisconsin – and the results have been superb. A study by the University of Wisconsin Medical School, published in October, 2015, reports that Wisconsin high school football concussions **have been reduced by more than half** since adoption of the new restrictions (see attachment).

At the college level, **Dartmouth Coach Buddy Teevens,** one of our leading supporters, has pioneered an outright ban on full-contact in practice. His team tackles only 10 times per year – on their 10 gamedays.

And in the NFL, progress has been undeniable since the revolutionary 2011 collective bargaining agreement. Last season, of 271 total NFL

concussions, only eight were suffered on practice fields in regular- and post-season.

So our template of limited-contact practice is available and thriving at all three levels. And again we emphasize: there should be no fourth level…..grade-school boys should play flag, not contact, football.

The question now is how quickly we can affect change. We quote the words of Dr. Ann McKee, speaking to this Committee March 14:

> **If there is something we can do to limit this risk, it must be done immediately.**

Respectfully submitted,

Terry O'Neil

Founder/CEO

Practice Like Pros

www.practicelikepros.com

Wisconsin Model

WISCONSIN INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

5516 Vern Holmes Drive • Stevens Point, WI • 54482-8833
Phone 715-344-8580 • FAX 715-344-4241 • email info@wiaawi.org • Web site www.wiaawi.org

WIAA Football Player on Player Contact

Limitations are the following:

Drill Contact (Air, Bags and Wrap) is unlimited. Competition/Full Contact (Thud and Live/Full) has limitations. The Acclimatization Regulations also apply.

Week 1 – Only Drill Contact (Air, Bags and Wrap) is allowed and it is unlimited. Competition/Full Contact is not allowed.
Week 2 – Drill Contact (Air, Bags and Wrap) is unlimited. Competition/Full Contact (Thud and Live) is limited to 75 minutes per week (excluding a scrimmage).
Week 3 and beyond - Drill Contact (Air, Bags and Wrap) is unlimited. Competition/Full Contact (Thud and Live) is limited to 60 minutes per week (excluding games).

DAVE ANDERSON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
danderson@wiaawi.org

WADE LABECKI
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
wlabecki@wiaawi.org

DEBRA HAUSER
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
dhauser@wiaawi.org

TOM SHAFRANSKI
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
tshafranski@wiaawi.org

MARCY THURWACHTER
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
mthurwachter@wiaawi.org

TODD CLARK
COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
tclark@wiaawi.org

University of Wisconsin
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
AND PUBLIC HEALTH

News and Events

Concussion Rates Way Down After New Rule in High School Football

Madison, Wisconsin - New research shows that limiting the amount of full-contact tackling during high school football practices can have a big impact on reducing the number of concussions among players.

A University of Wisconsin-Madison study examined sports-related concussion rates among Wisconsin high school football players after the state's interscholastic athletic association limited the amount and duration of full-contact activities during team practices.

The rule, which first went into effect for the 2014 season, prohibits full contact during the first week of practice, limits full contact to 75 minutes per week during week 2, and caps it at 60 minutes thereafter.

Full contact is defined as drills or game situations when full tackles are made at a competitive pace and players are taken to the ground.

Findings show that the rate of sports-related concussions sustained during high school football practice was more than twice as high in the two seasons before the rule change as compared to the 2014 season, said Tim McGuine, senior scientist in the department of orthopedics and rehabilitation at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

The study was presented October 24 at the American Academy of Pediatrics national conference in Washington, D.C.

"This study confirms what athletic trainers in high-school football have long believed about the association of full-contact drills or practices and the likelihood of concussion," said McGuine. "This is probably also true for other football injuries such as sprains, fractures and dislocations."

The study used data from the Wisconsin Interscholastic Sports Injury Research Network, which has recruited and enrolled more than 16,000 adolescent athletes from 103 high schools and sport venues across Wisconsin. They serve as subjects for cross-sectional, cohort and randomized control trials.

The study's findings suggest that limiting full-contact high school football practices may be a no-brainer, McGuine said.

"Educating high school coaches about limiting the amount of full contact would be an effective and economical way to help protect students from head injuries," he said.

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News tag(s): research, brain, ortho, sports medicine

NEWS FEED

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smphweb@uwhealth.org

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Website Feedback

Reaction from Wisconsin Coaches, April 7, 2016

Mr. O'Neil,
It was great listening to you and Coach Teevens give your presentation at the WFCA clinic. It made me rethink how we do things from a contact standpoint.
Casey Hintz, Recruiting Coordinator/Inside Linebackers Coach
St. Norbert College

Good morning Terry,
Please send me your presentation from last night's WFCA convention. I really want to show it to all our other coaches, and start redesigning what we do for tackling.
Coach Ryan Karsten
Siren High School, Siren, Wi.

Terry,
Great job at the WFCA clinic this past weekend – very much appreciated! Please send me the tackling videos. Our staff is looking forward to viewing the tape!
Skip Verick, ILB Coach
East Troy (Wi.) High School

Terry,
Thank you for an excellent presentation at the WFCA. Please send me those videos. I want to incorporate a lot of it into our drills for the D-line here at UW-Lacrosse.
Coach Bob Lichty
University of Wisconsin-Lacrosse

Mr. O'Neil
Thanks for the presentation you and Coach Teevens made last night at our state clinic. It was incredibly valuable and eye opening. Please send the videos.
Coach Scott Cramer, Defensive Coordinator
Verona Area H.S. Wildcats, Verona, Wi.

Thank you, Terry. It turned out great. Many positive comments on you and Buddy.
Dan Brunner, Executive Director
Wisconsin Football Coaches Association (WFCA)