

Testimony of

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Before the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing  
and Trade

“Improving Sports Safety: A Multifaceted Approach”

March 13, 2014

Chairman Terry and Members of the Committee:

My name is Scott Hallenbeck. I am the executive director of USA Football, the sport's national governing body.

More than 4.5 million American children enjoy the fitness, social and academic benefits of playing youth and high school football.

USA Football, based in Indianapolis, is an independent non-profit organization with members residing in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Our members are youth and high school football coaches, players, parents, school district and youth league administrators and football game officials. As the sport's national governing body, it is our responsibility to lead and serve the youth and high school football community. USA Football was endowed by the National Football League (NFL) and the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) in 2002 through the NFL Youth Football Fund. Our office partners with more than two dozen organizations who endorse and/or support our work for the betterment of youth athletes' safety, spanning medicine, child advocacy and multiple levels of sport, from youth, high school, collegiate and professional levels. I have served as USA Football's executive director since 2005.

In 2008, USA Football became our country's first national governing body of sport – and one of 26 youth sports and child advocacy organizations – to participate in the CDC's Heads Up Concussion in Youth Sports initiative. Today we continue to join with the CDC and other medical experts, including our medical advisory committee, composed of medical experts with a diverse range of expertise including orthopedics, sports medicine, neurological injury, rehabilitation medicine, athletic training, sports cardiology, hydration and environmental issues and exercise science, to advance player safety.

We believe in a holistic approach to teaching football. We agree with medical experts who state that education delivers behavior change to advance the safety of our young athletes.

## USA Football's Heads Up Football Program

USA Football's Heads Up Football<sup>SM</sup> program is a comprehensive approach to a better and safer game. Heads Up Football includes six primary elements:

<b>Coaching education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coaches within a youth program are trained to teach the game's fundamentals by completing USA Football's nationally accredited Level 1 Coaching Certification Course. High school coaches will gain training through USA Football's High School Coach Certification course. Developed in partnership with the National Federation of State High School Associations.</li></ul>
<b>Equipment fitting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coaches, parents and players are taught proper helmet and shoulder pad fitting.</li></ul>
<b>Concussion recognition and response</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coaches learn and are assessed on CDC concussion recognition and response protocols through USA Football's Level 1 Coaching Certification Course.</li><li>• Coaches, parents and players are taught CDC concussion-related protocols.</li></ul>
<b>Heat and hydration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coaches, parents and players are taught heat and hydration safety measures set forth by the University of Connecticut's Korey Stringer Institute.</li></ul>
<b>Heads Up Tackling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• USA Football's Heads Up Tackling technique, endorsed by medical and football experts, which teaches to keep the head up to reduce helmet contact for safer play.</li></ul>
<b>Player Safety Coach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appointed by a participating Heads Up Football youth organization or high school, this individual ensures compliance with Heads Up Football's player safety protocols, coach certification, and the conducting of safety clinics for coaches, parents and players.</li></ul>

Nearly 2,800 youth leagues across the United States registered for Heads Up Football in 2013, accounting for more than 25 percent of the youth football community. In addition, 35 high schools in 10 states piloted Heads Up Football during the 2013 season. USA Football will offer its Heads Up Football program to all youth leagues and high schools this year as we strive to establish the teaching of consistent technique and terminology from youth through high school football.

The Fairfax County (Va.) Public School District was the first in the country to adopt USA Football's Heads Up Football program in each of its twenty-five high schools and expressed very favorable results. A video (4:20 in length) capturing the reaction of the parents, coaches, athletic trainers

and administrators to the program's first year may be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYExUhGKxB4>.

In addition to Fairfax County Public Schools, a number of school districts and state high school athletic associations have reached our nonprofit office to learn more about Heads Up Football. We estimate that between 500 and 1,000 high schools will adopt our Heads Up Football program in 2014.

USA Football has trained more than 110,000 youth and high school coaches through its online course. USA Football's Level 1 Coach Certification Courses (one for tackle football, another for flag football) are the first and only football coaching education courses to earn national accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Coaching Education (NCACE).

"The NCACE recognizes USA Football's exceptional work in providing high-quality coaching education and delivering it in a compelling format. USA Football successfully melds how to teach football's fundamentals and advance player safety while promoting the game's inherent team-first values. More sports organizations would do well to view USA Football's courses as a model for what theirs can be."

--NCACE Executive Director Christopher Hickey

This month, USA Football will release a coach certification course tailored for high school coaches.

Medical experts have endorsed the Heads Up Football program. In their own voices, the following are a sample of comments regarding USA Football's Heads up Football program for safer play:

"I think this overall approach and the specific techniques within the program are exactly the next steps we need to take to improve head safety in tackle football. The effort to teach effective, yet safe tackling and blocking techniques at the earliest youth levels can only have positive downstream benefits for our players at the high school, college and professional levels ... These efforts should lead to a reduction in the factors that result in concussions."

--Dr. Gerard A. Gioia, pediatric neuropsychologist, Children's National Medical Center

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“I like it. It’s short and to the point, and most importantly – teaches the key fundamentals of keeping the head up, while using the legs, hips, chest, and arms for safe and effective tackling. I have shown it to my two sons who are currently playing football, and I think it will positively influence the way they play the game. “

--Dr. Kevin Guskiewicz, Co-Director, Matthew Gfeller Sport-Related TBI Research Center Chair, Department of Exercise and Sport Science Chair, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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“As a team physician with a specific interest in head and neck injury who has cared for football players for three decades, I find this USA Football offering to be very valuable in helping to make players on the field better and safer. This well thought out approach is a huge step forward for safer football participation by protecting the head and cervical spine during tackling. Also, introducing this proper tackling technique early in a player’s career is essential to its success.

“Avoiding unnecessary head contact is a major part of concussion and cervical spine injury prevention teaching in the medical and sports communities, and this program is the best (by far) of any I have seen. The program is ground breaking, well designed and very timely.”

--Dr. Stanley A. Herring, Director, Sports Spine and Orthopaedic Health  
University of Washington Medicine

Some of the medical and sport backers of USA Football’s Heads Up Football program include:

- Amateur Athletic Union
- American College of Sports Medicine
- American Football Coaches Assoc.
- Arizona Coaches Association
- Atlantic Coast Conference
- Big 12 Conference
- Big Ten Conference
- Indiana Football Coaches Assoc.
- Korey Stringer Institute
- Maxwell Football Club
- Michigan H.S. Football Coaches Assoc.
- Minnesota Football Coaches Assoc.
- National Athletic Trainers Assoc.
- NATA Research & Education Foundation
- National Fed. of State High School Assoc.
- National Football League
- National Parent Teacher Assoc.
- National Police Athletic League
- NFL Alumni Association
- NFL Head, Neck & Spine Committee
- North Carolina Coaches Association
- Northern Va. Football Coaches Assoc.
- Pac-12 Conference
- Pop Warner Little Scholars
- Prof. Football Athletic Trainers Society
- Sport Safety International
- Sports & Fitness Industry Assoc.
- United Youth Football

## **Youth Football Safety Surveillance Study, commissioned by USA Football**

USA Football commissioned its Youth Football Player Safety Surveillance Study in February 2012 with Indianapolis-based Datalys Center for Sports Injury Research and Prevention. The independent scientific study monitored leagues in six states and is believed to be the first of its scope in youth football's 80-plus year history.

The study, which encompassed more than 4,000 players ages 5-14, documented player health and any sustained injuries during the course of the 2012 and 2013 seasons. USA Football anticipates commissioning ongoing research in future years for safer play and playing standards.

Study findings include:

- Nearly 90 percent of youth players did not sustain an injury that resulted in missing a game or practice.
- Of the 22.4 percent of players who reported an injury, 70 percent returned to play the same day.
- Of the 11.9 percent of players who missed a game or practice because of injury, 60 percent returned to play within seven days.
- Bruises were the most common injuries (34 percent), followed by ligament sprains (16 percent).
- 4.3 percent of players in the study sustained a concussion.
- Players were more likely to sustain an injury during games than in practices.
- No catastrophic head, neck or heat-related injuries were reported among the more than 4,000 players during the study's two-year span.

Datalys found that leagues and individual teams within leagues were the strongest predictors of injury after controlling for factors such as age, player size, plays per game and playing standards.

Researchers conclude that coach education could address changeable behaviors within teams and positively influence player safety.

The dual purpose of this study was to examine the level of safety in youth football as well as any differences in safety across age-only and age-weight playing standards. Age-only leagues assign players to teams based strictly on age or grade level, though may assign a maximum limit on ball-carrier weight. Age-weight leagues assign players primarily based on their weight. The study found that there was no difference in the level of safety between either standard.

Also according to the study, injury risk was lowest among the youngest players – and gradually increased with age. Players ages 5-7 reported three injuries restricting participation. No youth player age 7 or younger sustained a concussion during the two-year study.

Thirteen youth football leagues of varying sizes and demographics in Arizona, Indiana, Massachusetts, Ohio, South Carolina and West Virginia comprised the study's sample. Individual leagues are undisclosed to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

The Datalys Center placed athletic trainers at the leagues' practice and game fields to manage and document player health. The Datalys Center employed the same intensive methodology to USA Football's Youth Football Safety Surveillance Study as it does for the NCAA Injury Surveillance Program and the National Injury Treatment, Injury and Outcomes Network (NATION™).

USA Football remains committed to research that advances player safety and welcomes all research on this topic across the landscapes of sport and science.

### **Non-Contact Football Development**

USA Football is engaged in providing youth with non-tackling alternatives to developing their skills in the game.

USA Football's FUNdamentals program is designed to introduce children age 6-14 to football by teaching basic skills in a fun and energetic environment. More than 100 current and former NFL players hosted FUNdamentals camps in 2013. The program also is being licensed to multi-sport facilities for children.

FUNdamentals incorporates a series of drills to teach passing, catching and running skills in a non-contact setting. All skills and drills selected are based on USA Football's Player Progression Development Model, ensuring that children learn the game's fundamentals in an age-appropriate manner, based on their cognitive and physical maturity. Children also are introduced to the basics of USA Football's Heads Up Tackling techniques through fun, non-contact drills.

Our office also has administered the NFL FLAG powered by USA Football program since 2010. NFL FLAG is non-contact football that is open to girls and boys aged 5 to 17 and spans more than 1,000 youth sports leagues across the country.

Since USA Football began operating the program (2010), the number of young athletes has grown from 133,000 to 220,000 – an increase of 65.4 percent.

### **USA Football Background Check Program**

USA Football offers all youth football programs a two-year background check for their adult volunteers that normally costs \$25 and offers financial assistance to lower the price to \$15. These checks are conducted by the National Center for Safety Initiatives (NCSI), a background screening industry leader.

The fully managed screening system is designed specifically for youth-serving organizations with optimal safety in mind. Subsidized by USA Football and made available to every youth football organization in the United States, the program is tailored to meet a youth football organization's needs. Services include a fully managed and administered program featuring online applicant self-registration and "Red Light/Green Light" determinations to easy-to-read background check reports. NCSI's Check-It-Twice™ searches include searches through two independent, screened and selected national database providers as well as all state sex offender registries and county records.

Since 2007, there have been more than 110,000 screens subsidized by USA Football (more than 25,000 in 2013).

Approximately 5 percent of these checks have drawn "red lights." The highest percentage of red lights are related to felonies, force or threat of force and controlled substances (generally in that order). More than 10 red lights were issued in 2013 for sex-related crimes, keeping these individuals away from youth football players.



## **USA Football Equipment Grant Program**

USA Football annually distributes \$1 million in equipment and uniform grants to youth and high school football programs across the United States based on need and merit. The program has awarded more than \$6 million in football equipment since 2006.

Each selected youth league and high school receives a grant package valued at up to \$1,000, offering a variety of football equipment and uniform options to choose from.

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