

## SPORTS

# ***Youth Football Wants to Save the Game by Shrinking It***

By **KEN BELSON**JAN. 31, 2017



A scrimmage in Solon, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. A new format that USA Football intends to introduce calls for players to start each play in a crouch instead of a three-point stance. Credit USA Football

ORLANDO, Fla. — USA Football, the national governing body for amateur football, intends to introduce a drastically altered youth football game in response to declining participation and increasing public belief that the game is not safe for children to play.

The organization has created a new format that brings the game closer to flag football and tries to avoid much of the violence in the current version. Among the rule changes: Each team will have six to nine players on the field, instead of 11; the field will be far smaller; kickoffs and punts will be eliminated; and players will start each play in a crouching position instead of in a three-point stance.

“The issue is participation has dropped, and there’s concern among parents about when is the right age to start playing tackle, if at all,” said Mark Murphy, the president of the Green Bay Packers and a board member at USA Football.

“There are, legitimately, concerns among parents about allowing their kids to play tackle football at a young age,” Mr. Murphy continued, “so they can look at this and say they’ll be more comfortable that it is a safer alternative.”

Worries about the future of youth football are mounting as evidence of long-term cognitive dangers of playing the game grows.

For years, the sport’s top officials have played down the science and insisted that tackle football could be played safely. Neurologists have found a degenerative brain disease, chronic traumatic encephalopathy, in an alarming number of former football players, and last year the [N.F.L.](#)’s top health and safety officer acknowledged for the first time the link between the disease and brain trauma sustained on the field.

“This is the future of the game,” Scott Hallenbeck, the executive director of USA Football, said in an interview at the organization’s annual convention here last weekend. “All of this is all about how do we do a better job, and a smarter job around the development of athletes and coaches in the game of football.”



A coach instructing a player at the scrimmage.  
Changes will include having six to nine players on the field, instead of 11, and eliminating kickoffs and punts. Credit USA Football

USA Football has for years promoted a program called [Heads Up Football](#) to youth and high school coaches to combat safety concerns and declining participation. But research, endorsed by the organization, that showed Heads Up Football helped reduce concussions and other injuries proved to be misguided, a [review by The New York Times](#) found.

The group has also promoted flag football, which has no tackling, with success. Participation in the game, which is typically played by younger athletes, grew 8.7 percent last year, Mr. Hallenbeck said.

Even so, participation in tackle football by boys ages 6 to 12 has fallen by nearly 20 percent since 2009, though it [rose](#) 1.2 percent, to 1.23 million, in 2015, according to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association. Schools in several states — including in Maine, [Missouri](#) and New Jersey — have shut their tackle football programs because of safety concerns and a shortage of players.

The participation declines in tackle football are worrisome not just to youth football organizations like Pop Warner, but to the N.F.L., which sees youth football as a way to develop future fans and pro players. The N.F.L. has given USA Football tens of millions of dollars to promote the youth game, and the league's presence was felt at the convention, which was held just a few miles from where the Pro Bowl was played.

USA Football began exploring new ways to play the game in 2015. Unlike sports like baseball — which has a progression of levels, from T-ball up, suited to each age group — football had few alternatives to the flag and tackle versions. The new format, called modified tackle, is a way to give nervous parents an alternative.

The first modified tackle scrimmages were held in September with youth teams in Cleveland. Chuck Kyle, the football coach at St. Ignatius High School, who ran the scrimmages, said that though much more work was needed to determine if this version of the game was safer, the initial evidence was positive.

“By bringing the field in, first of all, I think there's better form tackling because less speed, less momentum, more one-on-one tackling,” Mr. Kyle said. “I didn't see as many pileups, because there's seven people” on a side, not 11.





Coaches and players with the Solon Saturns. “This is the future of the game,” Scott Hallenbeck, the executive director of USA Football, said of the new format. Credit USA Football

USA Football is hoping that a few teams and leagues in different parts of the country test the game more formally this year. A national rollout of the game is still several years away.

Still, Mr. Hallenbeck made sure to introduce the concept of modified tackle to the more than 1,000 high school coaches and administrators assembled here. He said that youth football was at a “critical crossroads” and that the football community, which faces “adversity,” must work together to create a safer game with more alternatives for children and their parents.

Other keynote speakers, including former N.F.L. coaches, players and team presidents, echoed Mr. Hallenbeck’s call to arms at the three-day event, saying the sport is under threat..

“There are a lot of geniuses out there that are diminishing football right now,” said Jon Gruden, a former coach of the Oakland Raiders and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, who now works as an analyst for ESPN. “There are a lot of geniuses that are trying to damage the game, and ruin the game. Do you feel it? There are a lot of geniuses that want to eliminate all sports, including recess.”

“Not on my watch, and clap your hands if you’re with me on that,” he added, to loud applause.

Many attendees at the conference said they were receptive to the new format if it helped keep children participating and allayed parents’ concerns.

“The games are getting a lot faster and kids are getting bigger, so they need to modify the game so parents feel it’s safe,” said Paul Macklin II, who helps run recreation programs in Norfolk, Va. “We have to come up with new ideas.”

Medical experts and safe sports advocates were more skeptical. The brains of children grow at incredible rates, and repeated jarring blows to the head can stunt that growth, doctors say. While concussions are a concern, the larger danger to an athlete’s long-term cognitive health is the repeated sub-concussive blows like the ones that linemen absorb on nearly every play from scrimmage.



Mr. Hallenbeck, right, in 2014 with N.F.L. Commissioner Roger Goodell and Charlotte Jones Anderson, a vice president with the Cowboys. Credit John Raoux/Associated Press

Several studies have shown that college and professional players who began playing tackle football as young boys have a greater risk of developing memory and thinking problems later in life than athletes who took up the game after they turned 12. [Starting to play tackle football as teenagers](#) is more prudent, doctors say.

“The earlier they started playing, the worse their brains fared later on,” said Dr. Robert Stern, the director of clinical research at the Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy Center at the Boston University School of Medicine.

“To me, it makes sense we would want to do everything we can to reduce or eliminate purposeful hits to the brain,” Dr. Stern added. “But if the culprit is the repetitive hits to the brain, that’s the starting point for making changes.”

Terry O'Neil, the founder of Practice Like Pros, a group that advocates reducing collisions in youth football, was more direct.

"If there's tackling, then it doesn't matter if it's seven on seven or one on one," he said. "There's going to be contact with the other players and the ground. With the science available now, we find it surprising anyone would be promoting youth tackle football in any format."

Developing modified tackle, he added, is a way for USA Football "to suggest that boys of this age are not able to play the game as it was designed." The solution, he said, is for boys to play flag football through junior high school.

Whatever the merits of modified tackle, the biggest obstacle may be hidebound football coaches and the parents who cling to the notion that football is football only if it is played on a 100-yard field by 22 children at a time.

"We'd get a rebellion if we tried this because so many people don't want to be told what to do," said Jon Butler, the executive director of Pop Warner, the largest youth football organization in the country. Introducing modified tackle football "is going to be by trial and error."