

Testimony

**Jon Butler, Executive Director, Pop Warner Little Scholars
Massachusetts Legislature's Joint Committee on Public Health
Bill H.2007
October 22, 2019**

Good afternoon Chairpersons Mahoney and Comerford, and members of the Joint Committee on Public Health. Thank you for the opportunity to offer our thoughts in opposing H.2007. We appreciate your work advocating on behalf of children, including keeping them safe in sports, something we pursue with great passion. While we share the same interest in taking measures to enhance player safety we disagree with your proposal to ban football for young people.

We think the ban misses the mark for a couple of main reasons:

We have learned enough over the last 10 years or so to know how there were elements we needed to change, and it has. But we have heard from scores of researchers and medical leaders that the science simply isn't there when it comes to connecting CTE and youth sports, despite claims to the contrary. You have written testimony from Dr. Julian Bailes. Dr. Cynthia LaBella – a member of the Pop Warner medical advisory committee, Medical Director for the Institute of Sports Medicine at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, Professor of Pediatrics at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine and past chairperson of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness – was very clear on the issue. Dr. LaBella said,

“There is ***no study*** to date showing the effect of delaying the age at which tackling is introduced to football on risk of injury. Delaying the age at which tackling is introduced to the game ***may*** decrease injury risk for the age levels at which tackling would be prohibited. However, once tackling is introduced, athletes who have no previous experience with tackling would be exposed to collisions for the first time at an age at which speeds are faster, collision forces are greater, and injury risk is higher. Lack of experience with tackling and being tackled may lead to a substantial ***increase*** in the number and severity of injuries once tackling is introduced.”

And that is a very important point we worry about. If you watch the youngest players in a game you understand the hitting is minimal, especially compared to high school, college and professional players. Which means this is the best time for them to learn the proper fundamentals, before you start to see greater disparities in size and before the speed and level of contact increases.

But most importantly, youth football is safer today than it ever has been. I believe others on the panel can speak to the many efforts they have undertaken. For Pop Warner, now in our 91st year in the sport, we have changed how we play and coach the game.

Pop Warner football is different today than even 10 or 15 years ago because of mandated coaching education, medically-guided new rules, a changing culture inside the game, greater awareness around concussions and the guidance of an independent medical advisory committee.

AT Pop Warner we have **undertaken a number of safety measures since 2010, including:**

- This season we **banned the three-point stance** for our three youngest age groups.
- We have endorsed **USA Football's Football Development Model (FDM), which Scott has addressed. I sit on that council** and the model promotes various entry points to the sport, including flag football and Rookie Tackle. Pop Warner has long offered flag football as an option and more of our programs are beginning to offer or explore **Rookie Tackle**, a half-field game that transitions kids from Flag Football and 11-player tackle.
- **In 2016, we became the first national football organization to eliminate kickoffs.** The ban was aimed at significantly reducing the amount of full-speed, head-on impact in games. Instead of kicking it off, the ball will be placed at the 35-yard line to start each half and after each score for our four youngest divisions. And this was a change – as was 3-point stance – that a number of people inside the sport questioned. But we are going to make decisions that are in the best interest of children, based in the science. And we're not alone.
- **We restrict contact to 25 percent of practice time.** Think about that for a second. Only one-quarter of the time is there a contact in a practice.

- **Our coaches are mandated to train in USA Football's Heads Up Football** program, where safer approaches to tackling and blocking are taught. Pop Warner started its partnership with Heads Up Football in 2013.
- In 2012, **we banned full-speed head-on, blocking or tackling drills** where players lined up more than 3 yards apart.
- In 2010, **Pop Warner implemented our concussion policy that requires any participant removed from practice**, play or competition due to a head injury or suspected concussion may not return to Pop Warner activities until he or she is evaluated – and receives written clearance – by a licensed medical professional trained in the evaluation and management of concussions.
- To ensure that we stay on the forefront of health and safety issues and any medical developments that may affect our young athletes, **Pop Warner formed an independent Medical Advisory Committee in 2010**. Led by neurosurgeons, researchers, pediatricians and sports medicine professionals, the committee is focused on the prevention, proper identification and treatment of concussions; hydration awareness and proper nutrition guidelines; and general health and safety issues.

In the end, we believe in making the game the safer and better. I can assure you that the people on this panel and thousands of coaches and administrators and parents across the state want the same thing, and have made change happen independent of state government. You have an important role to play in public health. We appreciate that role. We simply think a ban on a sport that has been played by millions of Massachusetts residents for more than 100 years is not the right step. We are happy to work with you on the measures we all have enumerated today but we ask that you don't take a step that will lead to unintended consequences.

I'll end with this question. Would you rather these kids play pick-up tackle football games without equipment, coaching supervision or instruction at the local park or in their back yard? Or are they better with the adult oversight and rules that we are all implementing? It is that simple. Because if you think you can outlaw kids from playing the sport they watch on TV or play on video games I promise you - you are wrong. They will play. We simply want them to do it as a positive, safer experience.

Thank you for your time.