



Steve Alic

Datalys Center concludes two-year youth football player safety study commissioned by USA Football

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USA Football has released findings from a two-year study to advance player health and safety in organized youth tackle football.

USA Football, the sport's national governing body, 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.

"Based on this data, it is clear that coach behavior impacts player safety," Datalys Center President and Injury Epidemiologist **DR. THOMAS DOMPIER** said. "It is the position of the Datalys Center that coach and player education that includes proper tackling, limited contact drills and injury recognition, including concussion, should be mandatory in football and possibly other sports."

More than 25 percent of U.S. youth football organizations registered for USA Football's Heads Up FootballSM program in 2013. Endorsed by experts in medicine, child advocacy and sport, Heads Up Football establishes standards rooted in education. The program encompasses USA Football's nationally accredited coach certification course, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) concussion recognition and response, heat and hydration protocols, equipment fitting instruction and fundamentally sound tackling techniques.

USA Football commissioned the Datalys Center to conduct the study to provide new information for America's football community, including:

- Observations about player safety at different ages, as well as game versus practice situations;
- Playing standards (player-age; player age-and-weight) and their relation to player safety; and
- The level and variance of player safety in organized youth tackle football.

The primary purpose of the study was to compare the level of 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 (NATIONTM).

"The health of the millions of children who love to play football and gain its fitness and social benefits is our top priority," USA Football Executive Director **SCOTT HALLENBECK** said. "This research underscores that education changes behavior, which is a long-standing premise held by USA Football and medical experts. This new information enables us to advance player safety and strengthen standards such as those in our Heads Up Football program that today are put into practice by youth and high school programs in all 50 states."

Independent nonprofit USA Football has educated more than 110,000 youth football coaches since 2007 to safeguard player health and best teach the sport in partnership with the CDC and leading medical organizations and experts.

About Datalys Center for Sports Injury Research and Prevention: A national 501(c)3 non-profit organization that conducts and facilitates research and surveillance programs. The Datalys Center programs aim to support the sports injury information needs of organizations focused on improving the health and safety of the growing number of Americans who are physically active. Through the Datalys Center's collection and application of injury and treatment information, policies and education can be developed in order to understand and prevent sports injuries more effectively. For more information, visit www.datalyscenter.org.

About USA Football: Indianapolis-based USA Football (usafootball.com) is the sport's national governing body, leading the game's development for youth, high school and other amateur football players. The independent nonprofit partners with leading medical organizations and collaborates with football leaders on youth, high school, collegiate and professional levels for a better, safer game through coaching education and player skill advancement. USA Football was endowed by the NFL Youth Football Fund in 2002.

- See more at: <http://usafootball.com/blogs/health-and-safety/post/8127#sthash.qPYhgm3A.dpuf>