

Opinion: Long-term consequences change the discussion of youth football

By Phil Taylor, Sports Illustrated

I remember sitting at the dinner table with my family six years ago when my son Ben finally said the words I had been expecting, and dreading, for years. He had played basketball, baseball and soccer almost from the day he could walk, and my wife and I were beginning to think that at 14 and nearing the end of his freshman year of high school, he had decided those three sports were enough. But just when we dared hope that Ben would never force us to make the Big Decision, our luck ran out. “So,” he said between forkfuls of spaghetti, “I want to play football.”

Those were the words Ben used, but at the time they seemed to pass through some sort of internal parental translator. What I heard was, “I’d like to subject my brain to repeated trauma and expose my body to increased risk of broken bones, arthritis and paralysis.”

My wife and I needed time to process Ben’s declaration, which didn’t surprise him. “I thought you would probably say no right off the bat, and then I’d have to give you all the reasons you should change your mind,” my son, now a junior at Oregon, said last week when he granted his old man an exclusive interview. “I figured it was going to be more than one conversation.”

He was right. For some parents, the question of whether to allow their sons to play football is an easy yes, for others it’s a don’t-even-think-about-it no. I know one dad who ripped up his son’s football parental consent forms the first time the boy brought them home, then put a second set in the

shredder when his son tried again a week later. But most of us lie between the extremes; we need to wrestle with the issue for a while before deciding. The potential downside of saying yes grew even darker with the news last week that All-Pro linebacker Junior Seau, 43, had committed suicide, an act that may well have been related to the constant cranial pounding of his 20-year NFL career.

Seau's death, coming on the heels of similar suicides by ex-NFL safeties Dave Duerson 15 months ago and Ray Easterling last month, put a famous face on the issue of football's long-term toll. The more we learn about the delayed brain damage that the sport's controlled violence can cause, the harder it is for a growing number of parents to feel comfortable allowing their kids to play. According to the most recent figures available from the National Sporting Goods Association, participation in youth football declined from 10.1 million in 2006 to 8.9 million in 2009. Even ex-NFL quarterback Kurt Warner acknowledged last week that he would prefer his sons, one of whom is 13 and has already suffered a concussion, not follow in his footsteps. "You understand the size [of the players], the speed, the violence of the game, and then you couple that with situations like Junior Seau," he said on Dan Patrick's radio show. "It scares me as a dad."

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