

A Wonderful Gift Parents Can Give to Their Son

My wife and I have been blessed with four children who are all now in their 20s. Two are boys and two are girls. All four were very involved in athletics as they were growing up, and they all had wonderful experiences through their involvement in sports. Our sons both went on to play college football after high school, with football scholarships paying for the majority of their college costs. Likewise, I played football, basketball, and track all four years of high school, and I was also blessed to have my college education payed for through a football scholarship.

Being from a family of eight children with neither of my parents having a college degree, I probably would not have attended college if it would not have been for the game of football. After college, I went on to become a high school teacher and football coach for the next 37 years, and I just retired from teaching and coaching in 2017. To say that athletics in general, and football in particular, have played an important role in my family's lives would be an understatement. My wife and I both firmly believed football was a wonderful gift we could give to both of our sons.

It has been very disturbing for me to read and hear all of the negative press the game of football has received in the last three or four years. A majority of this negative press centers around the risk of concussions while playing football, and many articles focus on brain injuries that have been detected in former NFL players. The interesting thing here is that less than half of the boys who play youth football will still be playing their senior year in high school, and less than 1 percent of boys playing their senior year of high school will ever have a chance to play in the NFL! Literally, only a tiny fraction of boys who play youth league football will ever go on to play professionally. Does it then make sense to decide that we will not to let our sons play youth league football based on studies on former NFL players?

As a result of the bad press and misleading statistics that have been sensationalized across the media, some parents are now hesitant to allow their sons to play youth football, and statistics are beginning to show a decline in youth football numbers. Given my background and involvement with the game of football at the youth, high school, and college level, this trend is very disturbing to me, especially given the misleading way that much of this information has been presented!

Before going any further, I want to state very clearly that there ABSOLUTELY is a risk of injury in ANY sport that a young person might play. Even in golf, where there is no body contact, concussions have been reported by players being hit by a golf ball or club, a golf cart, or simply tripping and falling somewhere on the course. EVERY sport has some risk of injury, including concussions. Obviously, the likelihood of injury increases in sports where contact is part of the game (i.e. football, basketball, soccer, lacrosse, wrestling, baseball, softball, etc.). Youth participation in all sports become for parents, then, an assessment of risk versus reward. What benefits will my child receive from playing this sport versus potential negative consequences? As loving parents, we are all called to make this assessment on our child's behalf!

As good parents, I think it is also important that we are as informed as possible about risks that exist in the sports our children are playing, as well as other activities in which they are engaged. Consider this... the number one reason for hospital visits for injury to youth, including concussion, is falling. So climbing trees, playing on playground equipment, or just running in the backyard accounts for the highest number of concussions in children. Next in line is automobile accidents, followed by bicycle accidents.

Concussions by these types of injuries far outnumber concussions from all athletic sports or events combined! If we are thinking about excluding our sons from an activity for fear of the risk of injury,

should we not allow them to go outside and play, ride on a bicycle, or ride in a car? I think the fact that some refer to this generation as the “bubble wrap society” certainly has some validity.

Statistics show that among youth sports, football has the highest number of reported concussions. However, one should consider that at the high school level, football has more than twice as many male participants as basketball, baseball, and soccer, and has almost twice as many participants as the second largest sport, which is outdoor track and field. Obviously, with so many participants, football is going to have the highest number of concussions. However, when you compare the number of concussions per capita, or per player, the risk of concussion from football compared to other sports, especially the contact sports, becomes a lot more compatible and a lot less distinguishable. Again, every sport and recreational activity young people can be involved in carries some risk of injury.

What, then, are the rewards of playing football that we as parents should weigh against the risks? As I mentioned, I played football, basketball, and ran track all four years of high school. Although I loved all three of these sports, without question I learned the most life lessons from the game of football! It is said that football is the ultimate team sport, because all 11 players must work in perfect synchronicity on every play, or the play will fail and the entire team will consequently suffer.

Likewise, a vast majority of former football players will tell you that of all the team or individual sports they played, football had the strongest influence on them, especially in helping them on their journey to manhood... as well as their journey to God! All sports teach life lessons to a degree, but few teach them the same way as football. The following are some of the most common traits that former players share they learned from the game:

1. The merits of hard work
2. Self-discipline
3. Mental toughness
4. Importance of teamwork
5. Attitude
6. Courage
7. Loyalty
8. A sense of honor and duty
9. Trust
10. Sacrifice

Interestingly, if coaches are men of faith, **FAITH FORMATION** among the players becomes another benefit from the experience. I was certainly blessed to play for several excellent men back in the day. After my parents and our Pastor, my coaches had the most profound influence on my faith formation as a young man. Frankly, there is something spiritual in the nature of the game of football. Many of the toughest and most strong-willed men I have known during my time as both a player and coach have been faith-filled and spiritual people. Those who understand and appreciate the sacrifice and pain suffered by Jesus on the cross, and the reasons He willingly went through it, are usually better at dealing with the adversity presented every 25 seconds in the game of football. Without question, my spirituality and appreciation of my faith have been shaped and strengthened as a result of my participation in football.

The ten virtues listed above have been instilled in the person I am today in large part because I learned them through this great game. Likewise, a vast majority of the young men I was blessed to coach over the years, including my two sons, have displayed many of these same characteristics as they have transitioned into adulthood. **A BASIC, YET VERY TRUE, FACT IS THAT ALMOST ANY MAN YOU TALK TO WHO PLAYED FOOTBALL IN YOUTH LEAGUES AND THROUGH HIGH SCHOOL WILL TELL YOU THAT THE GAME TAUGHT THEM MORE VALUABLE LIFE LESSONS THAN ALMOST ANY OTHER ACTIVITY THEY PARTICIPATED IN DURING THEIR YOUTH!** There are relatively few exceptions to this statement!

As we commonly hear complaints about the declining resolve, grit, work ethic, and attitude of young men in our country today, we also hear the phrase “a sense of entitlement” quite frequently as well. I, for one, firmly believe this is a by-product of the “bubble wrap society” we are creating in America at this time. Make no mistake about it, **playing football is tough! It demands every ounce of courage, effort,**

resolve, focus, intensity, dedication, strength, loyalty, honor, and faith that a young man can muster! Consequently, those who play football develop a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood that is uncommon in today's world. Only those who have played the game can fully understand it. Frankly, aren't these all characteristics that every employer in our country would like to see from applicants? Likewise, these same qualities will help our sons be better husbands to their wives and fathers to our grandchildren. Today, perhaps now more than ever, **AMERICA NEEDS THE GAME OF FOOTBALL!!**

As parents, it certainly is our job to assess risk versus reward as we determine the sports in which our children participate. Speaking from personal experience, my two sons and I played youth, high school, and college football, and none of us ever suffered a concussion. We also got most if not all of our college educations paid for because of football. Knowing that there is risk in **ALL** of the sports in which my sons participated (and over the years they played almost every sport available to them), I was excited about them being able to participate in the game that changed my life forever, and for the better. My wife and I have never regretted that decision!

It is important for our CYO parents to know that USA Football Head's Up Tackling techniques are being taught across CYO, and coaches are **strongly** encouraged to participate in the Head's Up training program and become certified in these safety techniques. Not only are these techniques good at cutting back on contact with a player's helmet, but they are fundamentally sound and are highly effective in helping teams win! Given the new and improved equipment of today combined with these safer techniques, youth football truly is safer today than it has ever been. The articles below will help validate this point.

I have included with this piece statements from some physicians around the Indianapolis area who played football in high school and/or college and who have also made the choice to let their sons play football as well. I think you will find their thoughts and insights to be interesting. Also, if you and your spouse are undecided about whether you will let your son play football this fall, please read the following articles from one of the leading neurosurgeons in the country. As a person who specializes in brain research, she allows her son to play football and shares that, in her opinion, the rewards certainly outweigh the risks. She also states that a lot of the media hype about the risk of concussions and CTE from participation in football are exaggerated and inaccurate. You can Google the following to read about this neurosurgeon's decision to let her son play football:

“Despite rising concerns over concussions, this doctor prescribes football”

Next is a 66-minute video of Dr. Uzma Samadani, one of the leading neurosurgeons and brain research doctors in America. Although it runs just over an hour, it is excellent and well worth the watch as she discusses in detail the Risk vs. Reward for youth and high school football. Just Google the following:

“Dr. Uzma Samadani: Risk vs. reward for youth and high school football”

As I mentioned earlier, when you compare the percentage of concussions in all sports per capita, or per player, the numbers become interesting. In fact, recent statistics show that football is fourth on the list of concussion as a percentage of total injuries, behind girls' soccer, girls' volleyball and girls' basketball! You can Google the following to read this article:

“Girls' soccer, basketball players have higher concussion rates than male counterparts”

Finally, below are the short statements from well-known physicians in the Indianapolis area who both played football and allow their sons to play as well. You will probably recognize some of their names, and I think you will find their thoughts to be enlightening:

"I played football from 4th grade through my senior year of high school. It was one of the best experiences of my life. Not only have I allowed my son to play football, but I have encouraged it. I also coach football. In my opinion, there are very few activities that teach as many important life lessons as playing the game of football. Football indoctrinates the principles of effort, discipline, team work, resiliency, mental and physical toughness, respect for authority, and humility into those who play the game.

"While there have been numerous negative reports in the media regarding the risks of playing football, there is no additional serious risk relative to other sports for the level of play in which most participate (grade school and high school). I personally had a concussion playing high school football and recovered easily. There is no doubt that concussions that go unaddressed or that recur multiple times are health threats to players. However, concussions that are identified, treated properly, and are infrequently occurring do not pose a significant health risk to our sons. Players at the grade school and high school level are monitored more aggressively than ever before to ensure risks are mitigated, injuries and concussions are recognized quickly, and are treated efficiently. I firmly believe that the benefits of playing football far outweigh the risks. This includes my perspective as both the parent of a football player and as a physician. I strongly encourage you to allow your sons to play this great game."

Michael S. Morelli, MD, CPE, FACG – President, Indianapolis Gastroenterology and Hepatology

"As an orthopedic surgeon, I see sports injuries every day from, it seems, every sport. Surgical training teaches one to weigh the risks and the benefits of any procedure prior to considering performing the intervention. I look at sports and, in particular, football in the same manner. Certainly, playing football carries some risk and recently publicized risk. In three years as a youth football coach, I have seen one concussion. In my family, I have seen more basketball injuries than football and even one swimming concussion. Injuries happen. Concussions are better recognized than ever before and as CYO coaches we ALL are specifically trained in recognizing concussions and preventing injury through better technique.

"As for the benefit of football, I would credit football with helping me become a successful surgeon. My first day in the operating room managing a surgical team to complete a complex task was not really my first day. I had spent years as a youth football quarterback doing that very thing. I remember my high school coach nearly 25 years ago telling the team that there was "nothing better than Friday night football." Athletically, at least for me, this was very true. I did not play in college or the NFL but the sense of team, sense of friendship, brotherhood really, and sense of accomplishment was undeniable. I saw boys that were lost, frankly, find purpose with football unlike any other sport and saw boys become men, including me. The benefits outweigh the risks for me so again in the words of Coach Purichia, 'Let's play football!'"

Corey Kendall, MD, Orthopedic Surgeon – Orthopedic Sports Medicine

"I played football at Benton HS, which is a small town in Southern Illinois, and at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. I have two sons, Jake and Charlie, who played football at Roncalli HS and at Wabash College. I am an orthopedic surgeon with OrthoIndy. Jake is an attorney with Morse and Bickel in Indianapolis. Charlie is an investment banker with JP Morgan in New York City.

"I truly believe football had a very important role in our lives. Football teaches you discipline, teamwork and mental toughness. I believe those traits will help you in life regardless of what you end up doing as a career. Football is truly a team sport and you have to learn how to trust those around you as everyone has to be in sync in order to be successful. It helps you learn controlled aggression as you always have to be in control of

your emotions. Practices are challenging and tough which allows you to learn how to work through adversity in order to get the job done. Learning how to regroup when the chips are down will help you in life. Sometimes sports are not fair and neither is life. Sports help us deal with those tough times in my opinion. I like to see how people react to a loss as it is easy being a good person after a win. Losses bring out your true character.

“For me, football is safe enough for my family, as are all sports. I believe the lifelong lessons learned as to work ethic and discipline and dedication outweigh the risks of injury. There is no doubt that football is a contact sport, but today coaches, team physicians and trainers are teaching different techniques, handling injuries differently and fitting the equipment on the players better now at all levels than they did in the past.

“If one of my boys would have had recurrent severe concussions, then I would have had them move towards a non-contact sport. However, I was willing to take this chance initially and encouraged them to play football if that is what they wanted to do, as it is very rare that a player has these issues. All sports have their potential for various injuries, but I like to put this in perspective. I use a phrase with my patients that my mentor, Dr. Dimon, taught me in 1991 during my fellowship in hip and knee replacement surgery. When patients were concerned about the risks of surgery he would say, ‘If I told you everything that could happen to you on your way home in your car, you would probably never drive again. However, you do drive and everything is usually OK and if something bad happens it is usually a minor fender bender and not a big catastrophic wreck that we know can happen.’ He would say surgery is very similar to that scenario. Personally, I think athletics are similar to that scenario too.

“Good luck and I hope all of your children benefit from participating in sports and I would not take football off of your list of sports based on what is going on in the media at this time. I would do it all over again for me and my family. Just my opinion.”

FRANK KOLISEK, MD, Hip and Knee Surgeon - OrthoIndy

“As the football season will be approaching before too long I am aware of the concerns of some parents allowing their sons to play football at the CYO level. I had the fortune to play CYO, high school and college football. I did play basketball and baseball in high school as well, but the experience in football has stuck with me far more than the other sports. Football was able to provide structure, maturity and respect for not only teammates but the coaches as well. I think back to practices and games that are still the highlights of my younger days. I am so happy that I was able to learn the game at a young age and I have continued it on to this day. I carried on my love for the sport by coaching at the CYO level and my hope was always that I could help each child have the same fantastic experiences I had.

“Having a son play both CYO and high school football I can speak from experience that I had no reservation when he started playing football at the grade school level. His experience in football allowed him the opportunity to make lifelong friends that other activities did not. At a young age my son was given the opportunity to enjoy the positive aspects of growing up when there are so many negative influences. The concerns of parents at the grade school level should be minimal and if my son were to ask to play again I would encourage him to play. I would also encourage other parents to let their son play football.”

MARK V. BOHNERT, D.D.S. Southeast Family Dental

“This letter is in support of Catholic Youth Organization football. I had the great opportunity starting in 5th grade to play CYO football at St. Patrick's School in Terre Haute, Indiana. That school just celebrated its 150th year of educating young children. The sports program included basketball, kickball, football and track. As youngsters, we looked forward to being able to play football in 5th grade.

“Like today, the rules at that time were highly restrictive in regard to weight, height and body mass that would allow players to carry the football. In addition, we had extremely strict rules about hitting above the shoulders, and our coaches taught us tremendously good techniques in regard to stance, squaring your body up before a tackle, and never leading with your head. All those rules were imprinted upon us early.

“I had the great opportunity in high school of playing with many of my same teammates, as well as many of my former opponents at Schulte High School in Terre Haute. We had a winning record throughout the years and went undefeated in my senior season because we had such a great bunch of teammates.

“I went on to play college football at Butler University. Our head coach, Tony Hinkle, would always say, ‘good teams have great players, great teams have great teammates.’ The comradery and the value of 11 years of team football have given me many close friendships over the years, as well as many life lessons. Skills that are hard to come by in any other adverse environment are considered normal behavior when you are a teammate. Team building and putting your own personal needs aside for the need of the team is both normal and accepted behavior. Starting football in middle school breeds that type of healthy behavior.

“It has always been my training and my expectation that coaches should teach fundamental football skills that avoid risky head banging behavior. I was blessed throughout my career of having those types of coaches who taught you the fundamentals of blocking and tackling. As an offensive lineman throughout my time in football, I never sustained any sort of head injury. Concussions were rare back then, and they were referred to as ‘having your bell rung.’

“Modern medical science has shown us that the concussed brain needs time to heal just as any other injury. The recognition of concussive symptoms has been greatly improved in the world of football. Technologic advancements in regard to monitoring and improved head gear have given us such greater advantages in regard to protection. Coaches and trainers have become keenly aware of prevention.

“My own son played high school football and he was happy to do so and I was happy to see him play. I have been a sideline physician for Butler University for nearly 27 years. We have had a constant vigilance in regard to the detection and prevention of concussion on the field.

“I look back and would not have had it any other way despite all the scientific warnings in regard to traumatic brain injury. As a physician who treats many other orthopedic injuries, I see the side effects of head injury on an upfront, close basis. I would not want that for my children, yet at the same time, the risk is low and the rewards are high.

“I am so pleased to support Catholic Youth Organization football, as I know good coaching is at the heart of that organization; always has been and always will be. Good coaching is the key to injury prevention. Good coaching is the key to injury surveillance. The Catholic values that promote life and well-being are well placed in CYO football. I thank you for the opportunity to speak my mind in regard to this controversial subject of youth participation in football. It has been my firm belief that me starting in 5th grade with tackle football was an ideal time for me to start the process of learning appropriate blocking and tackling techniques, and appropriate team behavior. Thanks to all those people who participated in this wonderful sport for a lot of joy, happiness and competitive fun for so many years.”

THOMAS J. FISCHER, MD, Chairman of the Department of Hand Surgery St. Vincent Hospital

In summary, football is a challenging game that requires dedication, courage, effort, teamwork, and a long list of other life skills that will serve our sons well as they transition into manhood. Like every other physical activity our sons might be involved in, both athletic and non-athletic in nature, there is a risk of injury. As parents, we must decide if the rewards of playing the game of football outweigh the risk of getting seriously injured. Again, statistics show that this risk is lower than riding in a car, riding a bicycle, climbing trees or playing outside at recess or in the back yard. Also, when comparing injury percentages per capita with the other sports, youth football is not much different than most other athletic activities.

Looking back on the pertinent lessons learned and the lifelong friendships built through the game of football, I can honestly say that it changed both my life and the lives of my sons for the better. My wife and I both agree that it was well worth the risk involved. **Likewise, we both strongly believe that allowing our sons to play football truly was a wonderful gift we gave to our sons!** The five physicians who wrote paragraphs above feel the same way. It is my hope that if you and your spouse are “on the fence” about whether you will let your son/s play football, you will choose to give them **“the gift.”**

May God bless you and your family always!

Bruce Scifres

CYO Executive Director, Archdiocese of Indianapolis