

Get your head out of the game

Football execs at all levels need to prevent players from reentering the game once head-on contact occurs

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I've heard a lot of hard hits this football season. Since I have been a sideline reporter on the field for most games, I often see up-close head-on collisions between players that cause my jaw to drop.

I always think, "If I were to be playing right now, and I got hit like that, I would die." It is so scary to think that when you get hit in the head that hard, your brain is physically being pounded against your skull so hard that it begins to bleed. My friend Ben, and former *Shield* colleague would joke about it last year calling it, "scrambled brains." Ouch.

I am definitely not one of those people who thinks football, baseball, soccer and many other head-to-ball/head-to-other-head contact sports should be outlawed. My family is so into sports that our TV automatically goes to ESPN when it's powered on. Everyone in my family is into football, baseball and basketball, so we watch it avidly throughout the entire year.

Football practically owns the TV on fall Sundays in our home, and it has been an American tradition for decades for us to sit down and watch the Texans versus the Broncos, or the Patriots versus the Steelers, over dinner. We thrive on the sports we watch. We make room in our schedule so that we can go to the games or be home in time to watch them on TV. But at what point do the serious hits to the head become unacceptable? I get it

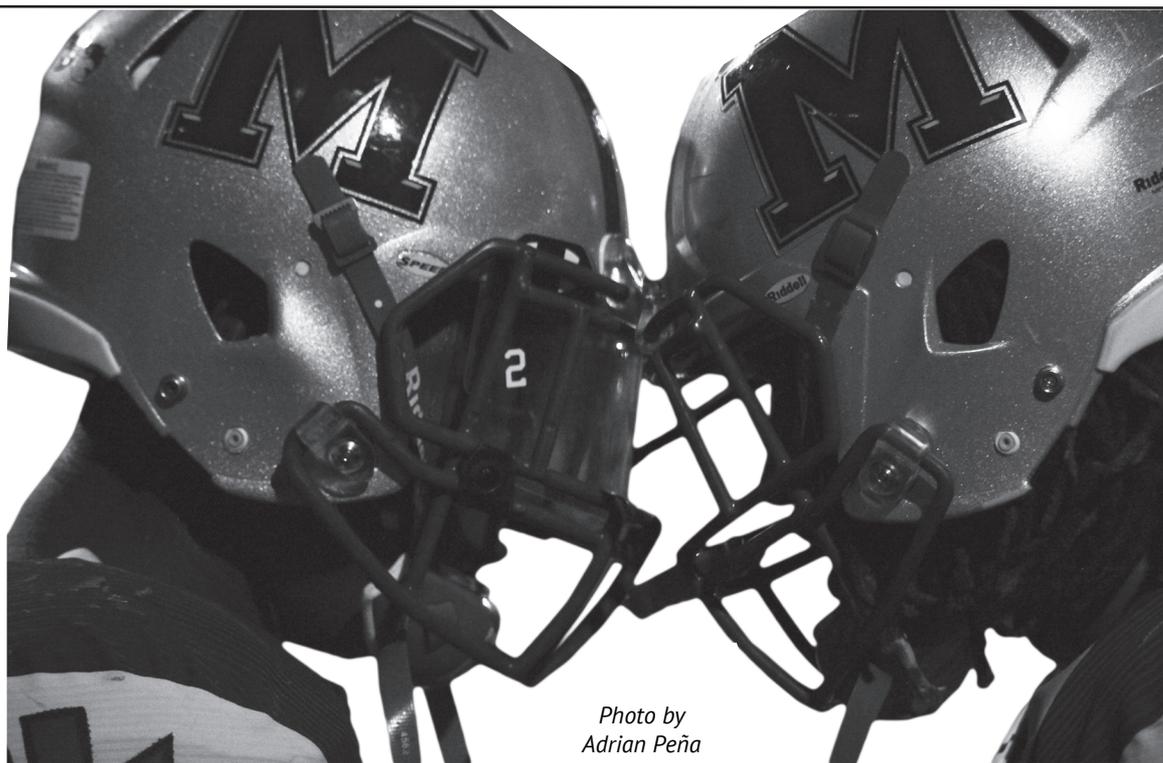


Photo by
Adrian Peña

that advances in protective gear, such as technologically advanced helmets, are expensive, but money spent on prevention against concussions would save money in the long term, eliminating expensive lawsuits that a school or corporation will face for keeping a player in a game after a serious hit. It is also less expensive to sight the symptoms right away and take that player out of the game as soon as a trainer thinks something might be up.

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell knows the league is not doing enough to prevent the long-term trauma of concussions. The commissioner wrote a letter to his fans earlier this year explaining how the league was not doing everything that it could to prevent the long-term damage of head injuries. So, thanks Mr. Goodell for that, but what's the game plan now? To cut down on injuries? So many young football players look up to the older NFL players because they are an inspiration. To me, the real inspiration would be to try to find a way to stop these concussions from happening so severely every time.

Texas UIL rules state that most of the symptoms associated with head-on contact should be evaluated right away and that the player should be taken out of game immediately. NFL concussion protocol is similar, the key difference being the NFL has more resources it can deploy to treat concussion symptoms. For one thing, an on-site neurotrauma expert at each game to help make sure that everything is diagnosed correctly and that the player is taken off the field as soon as head trauma is evident. But do teams always follow this protocol? Nope. On Sept. 8, in the NFL's season opener between Denver and Carolina, Cam Newton suffered head-on-head contact at least four

times throughout the game, yet no penalty was called. On the next concussive hit, he rose slowly off the field; again, there was no call. And what's worse: he stayed in the game. How is he supposed to make the decision to leave the game himself if he can't even remember what happened five minutes ago. If the National Football League with its unlimited resources, can't deal effectively with concussions, then who can?

During several of the McCallum games earlier this season, I saw multiple times players being hit so hard that their helmets came off. This didn't just happen in one game; I saw it happen for about three games in a row. These are kids we're talking about, not 30-year-old men who are doing this to make a living. The harsh reality of high school football is that right now there are about 1 million high school football players across the country. Of that million, only about 73,000 will go on to play in the NCAA, and an even smaller fraction of that, about 2 percent, actually will play for D1 schools. We're talking about these high school students' futures here, and their future most likely isn't at a D1 college playing college football. In the NFL, if a player is diagnosed with a concussion he doesn't have classes to go back to on Monday morning. If a high school football player gets a concussion, he's most likely to be out for at least a week, if not more. He must stay home, no electronics, no reading, no brain stimulation. Maybe this could've been avoided if the right resources were given to the schools or if they were taken out of the game right when the signs of a concussion were noticeable. All I'm saying, corporations, coaches and players: it's just a game.