

## **James L. Holly, M.D.**

**A Plea for the Children By  
James L. Holly, MD Your  
Life Your Health *The  
Examiner* September 3,  
2009**

A recent, local newspaper article featured high school football linemen and boasted of the voracious appetites of these obese children. The article failed to address the life-time health consequences of intentional, teenage, weight gain to improve the youth's contribution to the winning of relatively meaningless football games. The article also failed to note other health consequences which particularly affect football linemen.

### **Head Injuries in High School Football Players**

“Among the 1.2 million teens who play high school football, the group that accounts for most sports-related concussions, between 4 and 6 percent sustain concussions, or about 43,200 to 67,200 injuries a year. However, the real incidence is probably higher, as more than half of high school athletes who suffer concussions are suspected of failing to report the injury, researchers say.” (July 2009, *The Journal of Athletic Training*). The total incidence of injury is 15% for high school football players annually but is much higher in linemen, who suffer the most serious injuries every year.

A study reported in 2007 by the *Neuroscience News Letter* stated that an “‘unacceptably high percentage’ of high schoolers who sustain catastrophic head injury play with residual effects of prior head injury.” Furthermore, the study stated, “The incidence of catastrophic head injuries in football is dramatically higher at the high school level than at the college level, according to a study published in the July, 2007 issue of *The American Journal of Sports Medicine*.”

The report added that “High school football players have more than three times the risk of a catastrophic head injury than their college peers... The authors also found a high percentage of high school athletes playing with neurologic symptoms from a previous head injury at the time they sustained a catastrophic injury. Football has more direct catastrophic injuries than any other sport tracked by the National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research (NCCSIR).”

"The single most important piece of advice that I can give is to never let an athlete play football if he has any neurological symptoms whatsoever," says Dr. Boden. "Those symptoms may include amnesia, dizziness, headache, irritability, and personality change."

## **Linemen at the Highest Risk**

A study reported in *The American Journal of Sports Medicine* (November 2003) stated that “More playing experience and a history of injury in the previous season were significantly related to increased risk. Linemen were at the highest risk of injury, particularly knee injuries and season-ending injuries.”

## **The Risk of Weight Gain for Improving Football Performance**

In the publication, *Preventing School Injuries: A Comprehensive Guide for School Administrators, Teachers and Staff*, Marck Posner reports that the American Academy of Sports Medicine recommends that the pre-participation physical examination include counseling about the dangers of losing or gaining weight in order to participate in sports.

The recent, local article glorifying teenage, athletic obesity failed to point out that high school football participation leads to decreased probability of going to college and that only 53% of college football players graduate from college. Only 8 out of 10,000 high school football players ever earn a living even for a couple of years playing the game. The average NFL career is 2.8 years.

There was a time when intramural, high school athletics were intended to build character, teach team work and build physical fitness. Today, sadly, it seems that there is one goal: win, win and win at any price. If that price is a lifetime of poor health and early death brought on by compulsive eating habits, at least sanctioned if not encouraged by coaches, parents and society for the sake of a Friday- night, football win; so be it.

What happens to these voracious appetites after playing days are over? A recent *Sports Illustrated* article commented about college football players, “...what about departing players who need to slim down? Less than three percent of college players go on to play professionally; the rest are left without the purpose and motivation for which they have been eating and lifting for years. ‘What happens most of the time, especially with the linemen, is that they are tired of working out and worn down from playing, and they just want to rest...’...’They don’t change the way they live and eat. A few years later they are 370 pounds and have serious health issues. It’s a big, big problem.” (June 8, 2009 *Sports Illustrated*.)

This article continued, “There have been several studies of the health problems common among former NFL players, including one in 2006 that found obese players were more than twice as likely as their slimmer teammates to die before the age of 50, mostly because of weight-related illnesses such as heart disease. The wellness of former college football players, in contrast, has gone largely unexamined, although anecdotal evidence supports similar concerns.” No one has ever cared enough about high school football players to even do a study which identified, permanent, long-term disability, life-long health problems or other results of bad habits developed in order to participate in high school football..

Before we boast about high school linemen eating voraciously, and before we show

pictures in the paper glorifying their obesity, remember that only 15 out of a thousand will play college football. And, only two or three colleges will have programs to help those who complete their football “careers” at 21 years of age to regain their health which has been sacrificed for 8 to 10 years for the sake of meaningless football games. Sadly, no one helps those who finish their football “careers” at 18 to regain their health, lost for the sake of a game.

High school coaches need to reexamine their preoccupation with winning even at the cost of the health of the students they use in their programs. Parents should stop allowing their children to develop habits which over a lifetime can rob them of 20 to 30 years of life. They certainly should take responsibility for not allowing their children to pay this game after an injury and before all of the effects of that injury are completely resolved. In the case of a concussion, for an adolescent, one concussion should be the limit before permanently removing the student from contact sports.

If we really care about our children, maybe it’s time to hold coaches, school administrators and school board members accountable for knowingly allowing our children to be misused in this way. In Texas, this plea may fall on ears deafened by the roar of Friday night crowds cheering on the home team, but just maybe there still are parents in Texas who care about their children’s health and futures.

Recently, a patient said to me, “If there is not enough treatment for me and my children, I would rather my children get the treatment. I would rather die myself than let my child die.” That is the response I would expect from a parent. The same should be the case in head injuries and weight gain for the sake of football success. No parent should transfer their parental responsibility to a coach or school administrator who apparently would put the school’s football statistic ahead of a child’s health.