

Study shows positive results for Heads Up Football youth program



Mason Mitchell, 9, participates in a Heads Up Football drill during Fairfax County Youth Football practice in Virginia (Photo: H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY)

On the heels of a study raising questions about youth football and brain impairment later in life among NFL players comes another study showing positive results for a national program to protect the heads of young players.

Heads Up Football, designed to train coaches to teach youngsters to keep their heads out of tackling, delivered fewer measured helmet hits, concussions and overall injuries in a comparison done last season with leagues that did not participate, according to data released Monday.

The study was done by the Datalys Center for Sports Injury Research and Prevention, which manages the NCAA's injury surveillance system.

It was commissioned by USA Football, an Indianapolis-based non-profit, which launched Heads Up Football nationally in 2013. USA Football said it played no role in conducting the research.

“What we thought going (in) was maybe if we educate the coaches, maybe that will make a difference, and it really did,” said Tom Dompier, Datalys president and injury epidemiologist.

The week before the Super Bowl, Boston University researchers released a study based on tests of memory and thinking functions given to 42 former NFL players. It found those who played football before age 12 did “significantly worse” than those who began at 12 or over.

That report urged more research on balancing the “countless benefits” of youth sports with the “potential detrimental effects” during young ages of brain development.

USA Football, which last year received a five-year, \$45-million grant from the National Football League Foundation, said 5,500 youth leagues (more than half the U.S. total) and 750 high schools in 44 states participated in Heads Up in 2014. It includes a coaching certification course, training of “player safety coaches” for each team, concussion awareness training for coaches, parents and players and instruction on helmet shoulder pad fitting and coping with heat and hydration.

In the study, Datalys said 2,108 players ages 5-15 on 100 teams in four states (South Carolina, Arizona, Indiana and Massachusetts) were monitored by “independent” athletic trainers.

“What we did is compared a number of leagues that had gone through Heads Up Football and a number of leagues who had not to see if educating coaches, tackling differently, concussion awareness, if all those things made a difference in terms of injuries and impacts to the head,” said Dompier.

Datalys said the Heads Up leagues had a 34 percent reduction in concussions in practice and a 29 percent reduction in games.

“When we hypothesized the study we thought we'd only see a difference in practices because that's where ... the researchers thought it would make the biggest difference,” said Dompier, who said data shows the training carried over into games.

The study outfitted 72 players with helmet sensors for practices. Of those, 38 were in Heads up Football and 34 were not.

The study found the Heads Up group had an average of 2.5 fewer head impacts per practice that measured at 10 G's (force resulting from acceleration). Datalys said that over a 12-week season with three practices a week that would be 90 fewer such head impacts per season.



Datalys also said that Heads Up players have a 76 percent reduction in overall injuries.

“Now those are all injuries, so those include the most minor injuries, those are injuries that are like overuse (injuries) or scrapes and bumps that the player may get evaluated by the athletic trainer and then return to sport the same day,” he said.

But Datalys also reported a 57 reduction for Heads Up in more serious injuries that kept players from returning to practice or play for at least 24 hours.

Dompier said the result fit a trend he'd seen in two previous years of monitoring injuries for USA

Football. He said Datalys began studying such topics as whether grouping players only by age – and not taking weight into account – might cause more injuries.

It found no correlation

“It made us hypothesize after that first two years well maybe it’s related to coach or player behavior, the way they tackle or drills that they run at practice,” said Dompier.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell mentioned Heads Up at his Super Bowl press conference.

“It’s teaching coaches how to coach safe techniques. It’s teaching kids how to play the game safely, and that’s good for the long-term future of the game, and we’ll continue to invest in it as we’ve done,” said Goodell.

Jeff Miller, NFL senior vice president of health and safety policy, was asked about youth football.

“I would tell a parent, and as one whose son is about to start playing tackle football this coming fall, there’s no safer time for you son to play football,” said Miller.

“We have laws in 50 states now that ... tell people how to deal with youth concussions,” said Miller. “We have, through USA Football, at least more than 100,000 coaches who are trained and certified. ... So the game has changed a great deal from those retrospective studies that may have analyzed players who played youth football 40 years ago versus what’s going to happen on the football fields this fall.”