

SAFETY: Sisters is part of nationwide effort to reduce injury

Continued from page 1

years to make the game a safer sport, through rule changes, increased equipment safety, and practice procedures.

Rule changes in the game — at all levels — have been a big part of the focus of player safety. Tackling rules have been tightened, as well as specific guidelines for the targeting of defenseless players, crack-back blocks, and changes in special teams. This past season the NFL saw a drop in reported concussions by 20 percent, and concussion baseline testing has been a big benefit for athletes at all levels.

The Oregon School Activities Association (OSAA) has taken some initiative in player safety, and has become the first state high school activities association in the United States to require coach enrollment into the USA Football's Heads Up Football program effective in 2016. Created by USA Football, Heads Up Football is a comprehensive approach to teach and safely play the game, and is supported by the American College of Sports Medicine, the National Athletic Trainers Association, and the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine.

It's not just game time. In regards to practice, OSAA recently adopted guidelines that limit the number of days per week of live contact and tackling. The Outlaws' program has been ahead of the game in this area, and last season actually limited the number of live-tackling days in practice to just three for the season.

The team has told *The Nugget* they will continue to limit those live-tackling days.

The top priority for the Outlaws program is player safety, and the coaches and staff not only want their players healthy on game night, but all season long — and also later in life when they walk away from the game.

The Outlaws have live-contact days in daily-doubles

to give the players live situations, and film those sessions so players can see their technique and determine what they are doing well, or what they need to improve on. For the remainder of the season, tackling is done in form-tackling only — literally hundreds of repetitions, in order to perfect the technique and also to save the body and limit the number of potential injuries.

“...they (the players) saw the benefits, including the lower amount of injuries we were having, they began to believe in what we were doing.”
— Coach Gary Thorson

Outlaws Head Coach Gary Thorson said, “Like other programs across the nation, we are always working to make the game safer for the players. We greatly limit our full contact in practice, and constantly remind our players to keep each other off the ground as much as possible, which is often where the injuries occur. Last season our philosophy of limiting contact was initially met with some resistance by many of our players, but as the season wore on, and they saw the benefits, including the lower amount of injuries we were having, they began to believe in what we were doing. We want them fresh and healthy at game time, and this is the way to do it.”

The days of “toughness and meat-grinder drills,” such as bull-in-the-ring, and other similar drills are a thing of the past, and have no place on the practice field at any level.

“In my opinion, any kid who puts on the pads and steps onto the field has already showed the toughness and courage needed to play the game,” said Thorson. “To develop more courage and toughness, you build confidence in their ability to block or tackle, and that is done through teaching proper technique through repetition, over and over again, until they are

able to play full-speed in game conditions. Courage comes from confidence in your abilities, and that is through practice.”

Tackling safety has also gained ground in recent years from watching and studying rugby, whose players tackle without the safety of helmets. Football coaches have implemented several rugby techniques in tackling that takes the head out of the tackle and focuses more on a shoulder tackle and the wrap, which has been a major benefit to many programs.

“Last spring our team began implementing several of these forms of tackles into our practices, and recently began teaching them to our youth players who attended our Outlaw Football Camp this summer,” said Thorson.

Football helmet safety has also been a big issue. Helmets have a safety rating, one of which is given through a comprehensive study done annually by Virginia Tech, where they rate each helmet on the market in terms of its safety. Helmets receive a safety rating of one to five stars. One is not recommended, and five is considered the safest on the market.

The Outlaws have started to receive help for player safety from generous businesses in the Sisters community. Peter Storton and Ron Roberts from RE/MAX Revolution and Jackie Herring from Coldwell Banker Reed Bros. Realty have started to collect sponsorships for the purchase of new helmets for the program that fit the five-star rating.

“While there will probably never be the technology to 100 percent take all concussions out of the game, the improvements in helmet technology have significantly improved the safety for kids playing the game than those even made five to 10 years ago,” said Thorson.

The Outlaws currently have helmets that are at least a four-out-of-five in the ratings system, and they are on track to have all their helmets at the five-star rating in one to two years. Cost for the better helmets increases by quite a bit, but Thorson said that they

will continue to cut corners in other areas of the program to make sure they get the best equipment for their players.

Thorson gave kudos to RE/MAX and Coldwell Banker for their help and the big impact they are making in this area.

Thorson commented as both coach and dad.

“As the head coach, I am nervous for all of our players' health, and never want to lose a single player to injury at all levels of our program all the way down to flag football. I have a son who is part of our program, and I naturally have some worries as a dad seeing him in a high-contact sport, like any other parent would have. We have several other coaches that have sons playing as well, and I am sure they have the same concerns. But, I believe while there are some risks involved in any contact

sport, the benefits they gain through football and other competitive team sports are enormous. When coached properly, I am convinced athletics can be one of the best classrooms an athlete can have in terms of preparation for life.

The sport of football is tough to beat when it comes to teaching the values of teamwork, considering the many players involved, the strategy, and the many moving parts. Add to that the physical demands and toughness involved, it is no wonder that so many of our leaders in our business and military were at some point involved in the game. Everyone at all levels needs to continue to work together to make the game safer so our players can continue to receive the values and lessons taught through this game. I think we are on the right path to do so.”

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