

Could Flag Football One Day Leapfrog Tackle Football In Popularity?

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One hundred years into the future, what if millions of people gathered every February, not to watch the Super Bowl, but to instead watch the annual world flag football championship?

Once a casual activity played at family reunions, the competitive sport of flag football is “soaring,” “exploding” and “skyrocketing in popularity nationwide,” according to mainstream news outlets.

There’s some data behind the breathless headlines: According to the NFL’s official flag football program, since 2015 the number of kids ages 6 to 12 who play flag football has risen by 38%, to more

than 1.5 million.

In my recent book, “Emerging Sports as Social Movements,” I explore nontraditional sports like flag football and disc golf. One of my key findings is that splashy headlines about trendy sports rarely capture a sport’s true reach and staying power.

For every sport like pickleball that gains widespread, sustained popularity, there are several – adventure racing, paintball and wakeboarding – that remain firmly ensconced in their niche.

In the case of flag football, there are a handful of recent trends that truly do point to a promising future. But there are also some red flags that could end up hampering its growth.

A fun, fast, safer alternative

Though its rules are similar to tackle football, flag football is currently gaining attention for what makes it different.

It’s considered a no-contact sport. A “tackle” involves snatching one of two flags that hang from the hips of the ball

carrier. While players face injury risks, they sustain far fewer head impacts than athletes who play tackle football.

With the public’s concerns about brain injuries on the rise, many parents are opting for flag football instead of tackle for their kids.

Obscurity is a powerful barrier to emerging sports. But getting noticed may not be a problem for flag football.

The International Olympic Committee announced in October 2023 that flag football would be headed to the Summer Games in Los Angeles in 2028. It’s not clear yet if active NFL players can compete, but if they are eligible – and if the U.S. assembles a “Dream Team” like the Olympic men’s basketball team of 1992 that included su-

perstars Michael Jordan, Larry Bird and Magic Johnson – flag football could get on the radar of millions of casual sports fans in 2028.

The Olympic version of flag football is fast-paced. Games are shorter than a typical game of tackle football. Five players compete on 50-yard fields with 10-yard end zones for two 20-minute halves. This format made its first big appearance in the 2022 World Games in Birmingham, Alabama, where the U.S. men won gold and the women took home silver.

The NFL cultivates the grassroots

Although it may come as a surprise, the NFL is embracing flag football and taking its growth seriously.

In 2021, the NFL and Nike committed US\$5 million in equipment to support high school flag football teams across the nation. The NFL’s official flag football program operates more than 1,600 local leagues and receives sponsorships from top brands like Visa, Gatorade and Subway.



Youth flag football players run drills with their coach before a game in Dayton, Ohio, on Oct. 8, 2023. Megan Jelinger/The Washington Post via Getty Images

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