

Former NFL pros push for end to kids' tackle football

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(HealthDay)—A group of former National Football League

greats—including Hall of Famers Harry Carson of the New York Giants and Nick Buoniconti of the Miami Dolphins—is urging parents not to let their children play tackle football until they're at least 14 years old.

The group is instead endorsing a program called "Flag Football Under 14," launched by the Concussion Legacy Foundation. The program aims to educate parents and young players about [chronic traumatic encephalopathy](#). Sometimes called CTE, it is a [degenerative brain disease](#) caused by repeated blows to the head, and has been detected in more than 85 percent of tackle [football](#) players studied over the past 10 years, according to the foundation.

"This education program for parents is inspired by the last decade of research on CTE, which has revealed that the best way to prevent CTE in football players is to delay enrolling in tackle football until 14," Dr. Robert Cantu, the foundation's medical director, said in a news release from the organization.

"We cannot overstate the absurdity of allowing 7-year-olds to receive 500 head impacts a season just because they happen to be getting exercise at the time," added Chris Nowinski, the foundation's chief executive officer who played football at Harvard University.

Young children with developing brains are more vulnerable to the effects of head trauma, which can lead to devastating consequences later in life. Having them play non-tackle, flag football can help protect their long-term health, and won't hurt their chances of making it to the NFL one day, the football veterans advise.

The Concussion Legacy Foundation initiative comes on the heels of a new study published this week in the journal *Brain* that found that repeated head impacts—even in the absence of a concussion—can cause CTE.

"Based on everything we know about CTE, Flag Football Under 14 makes overwhelming scientific sense," said the study's principal investigator, Dr. Lee Goldstein, an associate professor at Boston University's School of Medicine and College of Engineering. "We will never prevent CTE by focusing on concussions. Any meaningful prevention campaign has to focus on preventing all hits to the head, including subconcussive impacts."

Many NFL greats didn't start playing tackle football until they were 14 years old, including Jim Brown, Tom Brady, Walter Payton, Jerry Rice and Lawrence Taylor, according to the Concussion Legacy Foundation.

"To parents who want their children to experience football, they should not play tackle football until 14," Carson said. "I did not play tackle football until high school, and I will not allow my grandson to play until 14, as I believe it is not an appropriate sport for young children."

Buoniconti, a Dolphins linebacker, now suffers from dementia and has been diagnosed with probable CTE.

"I made a mistake starting tackle football at 9 years old," Buoniconti said in the news release. "Now, CTE has taken my life away. Youth tackle football is all risk with no reward."

Added former Pro Bowl Oakland Raiders linebacker Phil Villapiano: "I watched my teammate Ken Stabler [a quarterback elected posthumously to the Hall of Fame in 2016] deteriorate and die from CTE. At some point those of us who have had success in this game must speak up to protect both football players and the future of the game, and supporting Flag Football Under 14 is our best way to do that."

More information: To learn more about Flag Football Under 14, visit the [Concussion Legacy Foundation](#).

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