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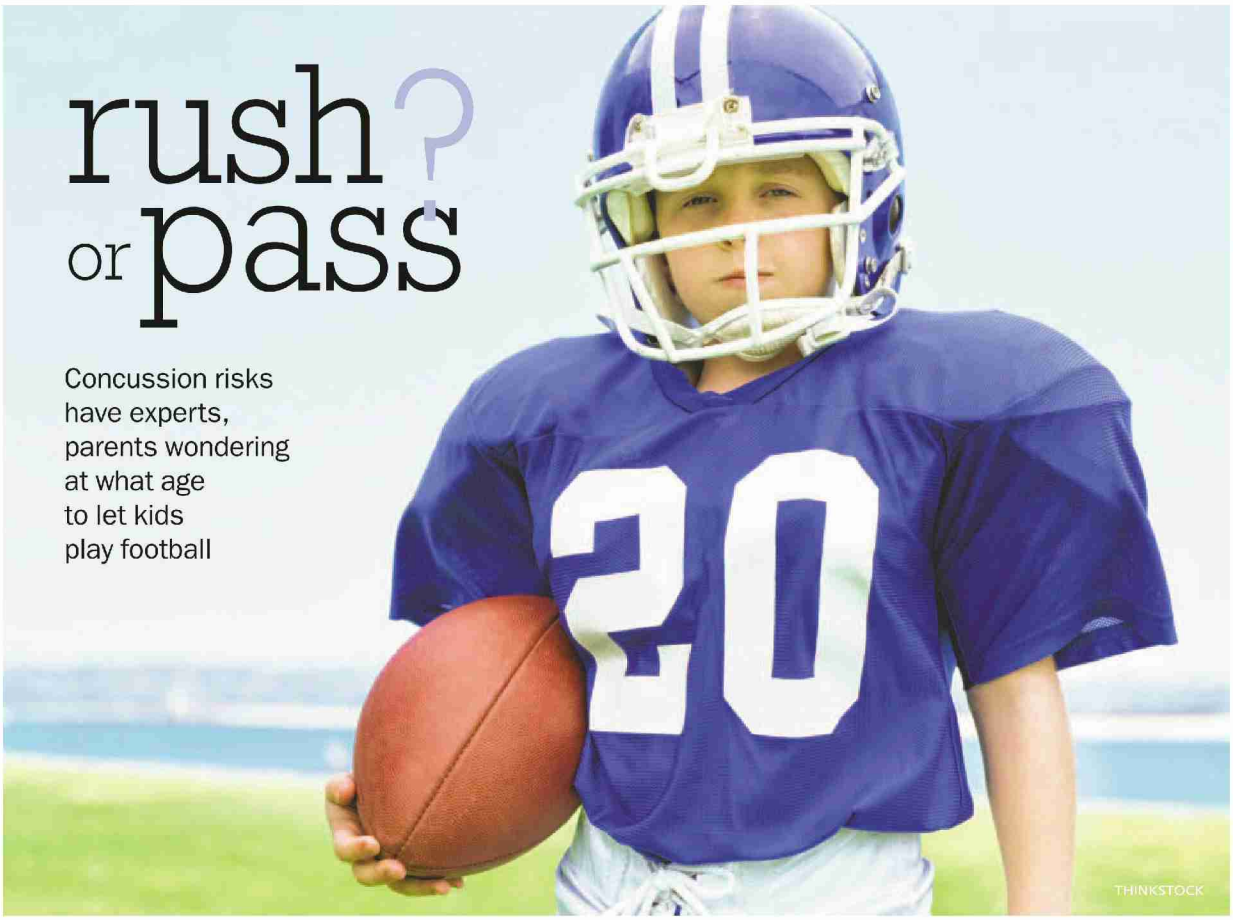

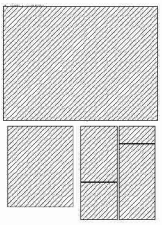

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BY PAUL DEHNER JR. | pdehnerjr@enquirer.com

In living rooms around the country this month, parents of sons will sit down and discuss an increasingly divisive issue.

Whether in high school or as young as kindergarten, the same question hovers over dinner tables and hangs in the shadows of A.J. Green posters.

When should my son be allowed to play football?

In an era where a new study on concussions surfaces weekly and President Barack Obama held a summit at the White House in May engaging the study of youth concussions, parents search for answers.

Still, football infiltrates the lives of young boys deeper and younger than ever, particularly in cities like Cincinnati where kids grow up idolizing Geno Atkins and Giovani Bernard. They want to play. Considering the growth of devices locking children to tablets and televisions, wanting to play, exercise and interact with a team represents an important victory.

Yet, famous sports minds such as Kurt Warner, Drew Brees and Bob Costas all publicly admitted they wouldn't allow their own children to play the game. More and more headlines are drawn from concussion lawsuits instead of game growth.

When should your son play football? Should he play football? Well, it depends on who you ask.

Regardless of opinion, however, in discussions with doctors, neurosurgeons, coaches, players and youth league administrators, a few common themes emerged:

» Youth football has taken a beating, but as much attention needs to be paid to other contact sports, such as hockey and soccer.

» More damage can be done to the developing brain than one that has matured by high school.

» Concern over kids' lack of physical activity should be considered just as serious an issue as concussions.

» Most important, youth football programs must preach education beyond all else to be positive all parties know precisely how to recognize symptoms and treat them appropriately.

Building confidence among parents starts with education

Ron Klosterman and Bob Lyons, who run the Greater Catholic Youth League in Cincinnati in addition to their day jobs, just want parents to understand the situation. Education means empowerment. It also means survival, considering participation has decreased 12 percent since the league began five years ago.

The GCYL consists of 28 programs, the majority of which span four levels of participation from kindergarten through eighth grade.

Sure, league officials can point out the drop in Catholic school attendance that parallels a portion of the drop in football, but there's no denying the safety concerns over youth concussions have kept some kids away.

"Every time you turn on the news, there is somebody saying something; it's just not good," Lyons said. "We make sure our coaches and parents understand some of the trials and tribulations that we are going through."

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The league attempts to confront those trials in the same manner as the NFL.

Commissioner Roger Goodell announced a $45 million donation this year to Heads Up Football, a program in conjunction with USA Football focused on making sure every coach is certified in safe football technique as well as trained in concussion awareness.

Lyons, Klosterman and the CYFL joined with Heads Up for the first time this season after years of sending coaches to training with the University of Cincinnati. Investing in a program with the backing and credibility of the NFL was the best method to attack the problem of education about the issues.

"USA Football is a major step for our league," Lyons said. "The awareness side is huge for us. That is how we approach the lack of awareness, by trying to have our communication at a high level."

Not only was this a major step on the local level, but nationally. Bengals head coach Marvin Lewis sits on the Heads Up advisory committee and is the only active NFL coach among the 22-member group. He proudly stands behind the direction the program has taken in re-establishing the safety of the sport on a youth level.

As the concussion topic caught fire, he feels, the NFL lost its way. By assuring every youth football coach becomes "Heads Up certified," the sport steals back the narrative.

"We did a poor job of being proactive and talking about football and all the virtues and everything it has done," Lewis said. "We allowed people who are kind of uneducated about it to jump on football and cast an unknown shadow and shadow that was unfair. We have pushed that shadow away. We are promoting football. We are promoting safety. We are promoting how to coach football the right way again."

Should players wait until high school?

Dr. Brett Osborn, a board-certified neurosurgeon, father and author of "Get Serious: A Neurosurgeon's Guide to Optimal Health and Fitness," sees danger in allowing children younger than 14 or 15 – when the body reaches skeletal maturity – to play contact sports such as football and hockey.

"The head is a big weight and levers back and forth. Acceleration, deceleration can be quite pronounced," he said. "Not only have you grown into your head at maturity but also developed enough strength into muscles of your neck that prohibit the bobble-headed doll effect. You don't hear people talking about that nowadays."

Osborn does talk about it. Adamantly. For him, the inability of young neck muscles to properly support the head against hits significantly increases risk. Osborn said he likely wouldn't allow his children to play football until high school.

Bengals offensive lineman Andrew Whitworth didn't play until high school and said he wouldn't let his sons play before then either.

"Physically there is just nothing to me in football that is going to teach a kid a whole lot before the age of 14 or 15," Whitworth said.

Avoiding a second concussion, Osborn said, is even more important than protecting against a first. That means extreme precaution and recognition of symptoms such as brief loss of consciousness, memory problems, confusion, ringing in the ears, dizziness, blurred vision, headaches, fatigue and nausea.

"The way to make the biggest dent in context of the long term – not just the single concussion – is a high index of suspicion and education, education, education," he said. Osborn advises that children with concussions should sit out a minimum six weeks after the injury and 12 weeks if symptoms persist.

"Don't get a second hit in the time your brain is recovering. The answer is pull your children out quickly if you are suspicious of a concussion and don't assume that little Johnny is able to tough it out. In actuality, his brain is more susceptible to long-term (complications) and damage than is an older person's brain."

Inactivity could be a larger concern than concussions

In the youth concussion debate, Dr. Gregory Myer acknowledges he falls on an opposite end of the spectrum. As the director of research and the

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Human Performance Laboratory within sports medicine at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, he spends much of his time researching concussions.

He points to the contentions of Dr. Osborn and claims not all come with substantiated evidence, but he'll admit the same of his own contention. That's the point. Nobody truly has all the evidence yet to decide on the depth of danger.

Myer dubs much of the outcry as media "creating almost a panic of what can happen to your children." In actuality, for him, more of the panic should surround lack of activity. Pulling children out of organized sports they enjoy can be detrimental to development of motor skills, teamwork, responsibility and discipline.

"We are going so far one way I am concerned if we don't slow it down a little bit and wait for the evidence, we might not be able to recover," Myer said. "That is what I am really scared about because the long-term effects of a physically inactive lifestyle is going to be probably a much larger problem for our society than long-term effects of concussions. I don't want to minimize the effects and concerns, but I think we have potentially a bigger epidemic we are facing and we have to be careful."

Myer has analyzed the lack of "brain slosh" (movement of the brain within the skull at impact) in rams and woodpeckers, while joining with UC on training to increase perception and peripheral vision to increase anticipation of hits. Myer says overreacting to worst-case Junior Seau scenarios or concussion lawsuits represents a dangerous path. "The media wants to have something exciting and you want to have a dramatic case so you show that child that was on that team that had a bad experience," he said. "What about the other 30 kids that had a great experience?"

Understanding all sides of the argument and stressing education on the issue hold precedence when mother, father and son sit down to talk about playing football.

"There's no doubt when you have parents coming out saying I'm not sure whether I am going to let my son or daughter play football, that's a big deal," Lewis said. "That's important. We've had to get back and really educate people on what it is all about." ■

SKINNER JOINING OUR BENGALS TEAM

Richard Skinner will join Paul Dehner Jr. this season to bring you the best Bengals coverage in town. Skinner helped cover the Bengals for the Cincinnati Post for four seasons, analyzed them for WKRC-TV Local 12 since 2003 and discussed and dissected them regularly as a sports talk radio host for 20 years. Look for their coverage in The Enquirer and at Cincinnati.com, and follow them on Twitter: @pauldehnerjr and @nkyskinner.

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