

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS  
**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE  
2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115  
Majority (202) 225-2927  
Minority (202) 225-3641

May 4, 2016

Mr. Jon Butler  
Executive Director  
Pop Warner Little Scholars, Inc.  
586 Middletown Blvd.  
Suite C-100  
Langhorne, PA 19047

Dear Mr. Butler:

At a House Energy and Commerce Committee roundtable in March, the National Football League (NFL) acknowledged for the first time that there is a link between football and degenerative brain disorders. As the NFL recognizes the risks posed by concussive and subconcussive hits that are inherent to the game of football, we are writing to understand how Pop Warner plans to prevent and mitigate the risks of degenerative brain disorders for your student-athletes.

There is significant scientific evidence to support a link between concussive and subconcussive hits and degenerative brain damage. Repetitive hits to the head—even in the absence of the clinical signs of concussion—can have cumulative, long-term effects on brain function and physiology.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have found that athletes who had no observable symptoms of concussion but who nevertheless sustained repeated impacts to the head performed worse than their non-athlete peers on memory tests, displayed altered brain function on fMRI scans, and showed evidence of altered brain chemistry.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Expert Consensus Document: Mind The Gaps—Advancing Research Into Short-Term and Long-Term Neuropsychological Outcomes of Youth Sports-Related Concussions*, Nature (Apr. 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas M. Talavage et al., *Functionally-Detected Cognitive Impairment in High School Football Players Without Clinically-Diagnosed Concussion*, Journal of Neurotrauma (2013); Nicola Marchi et al., *Consequences of Repeated Blood-Brain Barrier Disruption in Football Players*, PLOS One (Mar. 6, 2013); Inga K. Koerte, et al., *White Matter Integrity in the Brains of Professional Soccer Players Without a Symptomatic Concussion*, JAMA (Nov. 2012).

Researchers have also discovered pathologic and clinical evidence of long-term neurological effects—including the development of degenerative diseases like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)—related to collision sports like football.<sup>3</sup> Boston University (BU) researchers have found CTE in the brains of 90 out of 94 NFL players, in 45 out of 55 college players, and in 26 out of 65 high school players who donated their brains to the BU Brain Bank.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, new research suggests a link between participation in amateur contact sports during youth and the development of CTE.<sup>5</sup> Researchers at the Mayo Clinic recently found that close to one-third of the brains donated to the Mayo Clinic Brain Bank of young males who participated in contact sports during youth had CTE.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the Mayo Clinic study found zero instances of CTE in the brains of 198 individuals who had no history of playing contact sports, and neuropathologists studying CTE have similarly never found the disease in brains that were not subjected to repetitive head trauma.<sup>7</sup>

The statement by Jeff Miller, Senior Vice President of Health and Safety for the NFL, at the Committee's March 14 roundtable acknowledging that there is a link between football and degenerative brain disease represents a significant change in the League's policy.<sup>8</sup> Commissioner Goodell has confirmed that Miller's statement is consistent with the NFL's position.<sup>9</sup> We look forward to seeing how this new approach manifests in increased safety, education, and awareness for professional athletes, coaches, and the public.

Accordingly, we seek to understand what rule or policy changes Pop Warner is considering to address the risks posed by both concussive and subconcussive hits. While changes at the professional level are important, football organizations across all levels, as appropriate, should consider rule changes and educational outreach to ensure the safety of all

---

<sup>3</sup> Ann C. McKee et al., *TDP-43 Proteinopathy and Motor Neuron Disease in Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy*, *Journal of Neuropathology and Experimental Neurology* (Sept. 2010); Daniel H. Daneshvar et al., *Long Term Consequences: Effects on Normal Development Profile after Concussion*, *Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation Clinic of N. America* (Nov. 2011).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Evidence Suggests Amateur Contact Sports Increase Risk of Degenerative Disorder*, Mayo Clinic News Network (Dec. 2, 2015) (online at [newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/mayo-clinic-cte-fl-release/](http://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/mayo-clinic-cte-fl-release/)); *Brain Damage Study Shows Student-Athletes May Risk Same Injuries as NFL Players*, *Bloomberg Business* (Dec. 1, 2015) (online at [www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-01/brain-damage-found-in-one-third-of-former-student-athletes](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-12-01/brain-damage-found-in-one-third-of-former-student-athletes)).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Committee on Energy and Commerce, *Roundtable on Evaluating the State of Concussion Research and Implications for Public Health*, 114<sup>th</sup> Cong. (Mar. 14, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> *Roger Goodell Calls C.T.E. Link to Football Consistent With N.F.L.'s Position*, *New York Times* (Mar. 23, 2016).

athletes and their developing brains. Additionally, we need to ensure that parents have accurate, up-to-date information necessary to make informed decisions about their children's participation in football and other contact sports.

To assist our inquiry, please provide a briefing with responses to the following questions by May 25, 2016:

1. Concussion management protocols and protocols governing return to play after a concussion are certainly important components to protecting athletes from head trauma. However, such protocols do little to address the issue of subconcussive hits. As referenced above, subconcussive hits, even in the absence of a concussion diagnosis, have been linked to decreased cognitive functioning and changes in brain chemistry.
  - a. What is Pop Warner doing to address the risks of subconcussive hits to youth players?
  - b. What is Pop Warner doing to ensure that parents are made fully aware of the risks of subconcussive hits and the linkages between repetitive head trauma and CTE?
2. In addition to the above-referenced studies linking CTE to subconcussive impacts, research has shown that children as young as six years old can experience collision impacts as severe as college football players.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, a new study has shown that former NFL players who began their careers prior to age 12 were more likely to exhibit cognitive impairment than those who began after age 12.<sup>11</sup>
  - a. Does Pop Warner believe it is safe for children as young as five years old to engage in high-impact collisions during practices and games? Please explain how your organization ensures that children under the age of 12 who participate in tackle football are protected from the risks of early exposure to repetitive head trauma.
3. In 2012, Pop Warner instituted changes to the rules governing contact during practices. The amended rules did not require changes during games. The new practice rules required that players be no more than three yards apart during full speed blocking or tackling and established that a maximum of one-third of practice time can be devoted to contact, including scrimmages and contact drills.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Ray W. Daniel et al., *Head Impact Exposure in Youth Football*, Annals of Biomedical Engineering (April 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Julie M. Stamm et al., *Age of first exposure to football and later-life cognitive impairment in former NFL players*, American Academy of Neurology (2015).

<sup>12</sup> *Pop Warner to limit practice contact*, ESPN (Jun. 15, 2012) (online at [espn.go.com/espn/story/\\_/id/8046203/pop-warner-toughens-safety-measures-limiting-contact-practice](http://espn.go.com/espn/story/_/id/8046203/pop-warner-toughens-safety-measures-limiting-contact-practice)).

- a. Do the current rules governing contact in practices and games sufficiently protect youth players against or otherwise mitigate the potential long-term effects of subconcussive hits?
  - b. Is Pop Warner considering any new rule changes, protocols, or initiatives to protect youth players from the cumulative effect of repetitive head trauma?
4. Communication and outreach to parents of children interested in playing youth tackle football is a serious responsibility. The ability of parents to make fully informed choices about the risks associated with football is paramount to the integrity of the game.
  - a. How does Pop Warner communicate the safety risks associated with football to parents, coaches, and community leaders?
  - b. In what ways does Pop Warner advertise and recruit for no-tackle or flag football leagues? Does Pop Warner actively promote no-tackle youth football as an alternative to tackle leagues?
  - c. How does Pop Warner coordinate with other youth sports leagues, including school teams, to ensure that the parents of youth and young adult athletes receive consistent messages about ways to prevent and mitigate the risks of contact sports?

Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions, please contact Una Lee or Elizabeth Letter of the minority committee staff at (202) 225-3641.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Ranking Member



Gene Green  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Health



Diana DeGette  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight and  
Investigations



Jan Schakowsky  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Commerce,  
Manufacturing, and Trade