

Concussion worries cause tension in Columbia's youth football community

By [Andrew Wagaman](#)

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Matt Markley, Columbia Youth Football League president, holds a helmet each athlete receives to protect his or her head from concussions at the Cosmo Park equipment shed. Markley is responsible for overseeing equipment distribution from the shed in August before the start of each season. ; [Harry Katz](#)

COLUMBIA — The land was hard and dry where the fifth-grade football player wearing No. 63 fell and hit his head.

Phil Rumbaoa stood 10 yards away along the sideline and saw how the back of the boy's helmet recoiled off the firm field at Cosmo Park. Hardened by the October wind chill, the ground guided the three distinct reactions Rumbaoa experienced in the next moment.

First, he diagnosed. Phil Rumbaoa is Doc Rumbaoa, a physician. He knew the force of the boy's fall was enough to cause harm. Then the Boonville youth football player rolled over onto his elbows, so Rumbaoa knew he had not transected his spinal cord. But this child, who wore No. 63 because it was his father's number in high school and that of brutal Hall of Fame linebacker Willie "Contact" Lanier, usually bounced off the ground after a hard hit. In fact, Rumbaoa admired his resilience. That the player stayed down meant he was hurt.

But in the moment, a second reaction — disappointment — followed his snap diagnosis. Doc Rumbaoa was also Coach Rumbaoa, and No. 63 was his best player. At the very least, he would have to miss the rest of this game as well as the next. It didn't matter that the Boonville fifth-graders were stomping their Columbia opponent. This child's absence jeopardized the squad's competence Rumbaoa had so carefully coordinated.

Rumbaoa's third and final reaction to the player's concussion took over as he emerged from the moment. Approaching the hurt child on the field, Rumbaoa looked back and scanned for his wife in the bleachers. He thought, "I'm going to have to tell Beth."

Then the doctor, football coach and father helped 11-year-old Gabe Rumbaoa off the ground and looked into the boy's soggy and scared eyes. He said, "Son, you've had a concussion. You're going to have to rest. But everything is going to be OK."

Fact vs. meaning

Here's the truth about youth football and concussions.

The numbers say children suffer concussions at similar rates in other youth sports. The actuary declares children are more at risk in the minivan en route to football practice. Self-asserted realists gripe that football gets all the attention

because of the gladiator tradition symbolized by America's favorite spectator sport.

The symbolism is what matters, though. The truth is in its tension.

And when Gabe Rumbaoa's head collided with the field that day, it was slamming into the same world that had elevated his father. The collision had the force of Phil Rumbaoa's own story behind it.

A nuanced threat

Football's concussion controversy began at the highest level of the game with the detection of a degenerative brain disease.

Chronic traumatic encephalopathy — called CTE — is caused by repeated blows to the head and linked to behavioral changes and dementia. It is only identifiable postmortem, and since 2002 doctors have found it in more than 30 dead former NFL players.

Its discovery sparked a national debate about the game's safety — a debate that intensified when CTE was found in the brains of younger football players, dead by their early 20s or late teens.

Some would say it's the price paid to play. Pros in the NFL choose to pit their freakish physiques against one another, knowing the risks: the potential of brain trauma in trade for a dream. It may not be an easy decision, but it ultimately is theirs to make. The same can be said for college and, to a certain degree, high school football players.

But how about for the third-grader eager to strap on a real helmet that very first time?

Three million children younger than 14 play organized tackle football in the United States, including 900 from Columbia and neighboring communities who play in the Columbia Youth Football League.

While organized youth football is about the kids, the leagues are created in the image of those who run them: the adults. And many of those adults are as invested in the game as they are in their children.

Concussions, then, pose a nuanced threat. The community fears for the safety of its children, but it also fears for the survival of the game. Football rewards traditional values such as toughness and persistence, and it implies pain can be instructive. How exactly do you make football safer without castrating the game?

The limitations of management

Despite the simmering national panic over the risk of concussions, youth football is actually thriving in Columbia. Bucking nationwide trends, participation in the Columbia league rose in the past half-decade.

Much of the credit goes to recent directors such as league president Matt Markley and treasurer John Heider. Markley, a 41-year-old father of three sons, works as a business administrator for a number of companies and helps his wife run a funeral home. Heider, a 49-year-old father of two sons, owns a couple of local Deck The Walls stores and is known as the league's jack-of-all-trades. According to Tom Edwards, the Oakland Junior High football coach, the two have overseen the largest growth in the 30 years he's been involved with the league.

Markley and Co. have recognized that all safety — including concussion prevention — is local. National organizations such as USA Football and Pop Warner create optimistic action plans but rely on local leagues to manage mounting concussion fears. The Columbia league has done so.

The board of directors has changed game rules, extended background checks on all coaches and increased the presence of trainers at every practice and game. The directors have added closer monitoring of the condition of helmets and the behavior of coaches. They have partnered with local medical experts to hold clinics educating coaches about the symptoms and repercussions of concussions.

“It's managing a business, but you love the business,” Markley said. “We have invested so much of our time and our own money over the years that we don't

care what it takes. We're going to keep it going because we don't ever want to see it fail."

But they also admit that, regardless of their efforts, risk is never eliminated. Some assistant coaches come on board after the season has started; not everyone can be previously vetted. Limitations also include practical things like improvisational helmet fitting; even with a tape measure and guidelines, Heider said fitting odd-shaped heads so helmets are both fit and snug comes down to "guestimation."

And, even if kids are rarely hurt, the league has no control over what happens when they graduate to fiercer levels of football. Some wonder: What exactly are we passing on?

'Was the squeeze worth the juice?'

Atiyah Ellison picks up his 7-year-old son, sits him down on his lap and confronts the future.

"Do you think you're ready to play tackle?" the former NFL defensive lineman asks.

At 6-foot-4 and 320 pounds, Ellison still bears the physique of a pro football player. The 31-year-old rests at a Columbia shop prior to his first dance lesson for a local charity event called "Dancing with Missouri Stars."

Tyson Ellison turns his round head and looks up at his father with the same big dimples and even bigger brown eyes. Then he answers hesitantly, like this is a trick question.

"Umm ... yeah ..."

Turns out it is. Dad shakes his head softly.

"That's the problem. You're not ready."

The second-grader giggles and flashes a mouthful of small, neat teeth. He does not sound concerned — yet.

“Yes I am! I’ll prove it to you in third grade.”

“Nah. You won’t.”



Atiyah Ellison, a former Missouri football player and NFL player, stands on the Boonville High School football field with his sons Tyson, 7, left, and Braylon, 5. Ellison is a physical education teacher at Hannah Cole Primary School and David Barton Elementary in Boonville and says his children are too young to play tackle football. (Photo: Harry Katz)

Told one way, Atiyah Ellison's is the quintessential football story. He grew up in a poor St. Louis neighborhood. His father was mostly absent, and he died when Ellison was 10. Sports kept him out of trouble while his mother worked. He got his grades up during his senior year of high school when he realized football could take him places. At Coffeyville Community College in Kansas, a "tough-ass" coach nurtured Ellison on lessons such as the critical early pop from a three-point stance. Ellison learned how to harness that pop to inflict pain on offensive linemen. He built his body into a weapon.

Then Ellison played for two years at Missouri, where he earned All-Big 12 Conference honors. He was picked No. 89 in the 2005 NFL draft, and while his six-year, seven-team career might not be storybook, it's in some ways even more fitting — a player grinding it out even after realizing the dream.

When he retired from the game, Ellison and his wife, Jessica, moved back to her hometown of Boonville to raise their three kids: Tyson, 7, Braylon, 5, and Alexandria, 1. He now teaches physical education at Boonville's two elementary schools. It might not be Tom Brady's life, but it is a comfortable one.

So, football gave Atiyah Ellison everything he has. Now he'll be damned if he lets it take anything away.

Last fall, Tyson aged out of Boonville's K-2 flag football league, which Ellison helped start. From here, Tyson's options are to play tackle football for the Boonville Jaycee teams that compete in the Columbia league — or not play football at all.

"The natural step for everyone to make is, 'Oh, so you'll be coaching tackle now,'" Ellison says. "No. I think the kids are way too young to start tackle. That might be the cause of some of this damage later in life."

Ellison thinks about the routine, fundamental head knocking that happens in the trenches, and he can't help but wonder if he faces degenerative brain disease in the future. He never suffered a diagnosed concussion amid thousands upon thousands of controlled collisions, but there were times when he asked himself, "What the hell just happened?"

In some ways, he's still trying to answer the question.

"It's a weird thing for me because without football I don't know if I could have provided for my family the life they have now," Ellison says. "I used it as a tool, and I know for plenty of other people, too, it changed their lives.

"It's later, when you see guys flipping out at 40, that you start thinking, 'Was the squeeze worth the juice?'"

The fear pendulum

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a concussion is a type of traumatic brain injury caused by a bump, blow or jolt to the head that can change the way your brain normally works. But massive blows to the brain can be harmless, while incidental knocks — and even whiplash from hits to other parts of the body — can cause massive damage.

The almost complete lack of research on brain trauma in youth football doesn't help. Studies using helmet sensors to measure acceleration and G forces have quantified impact at the pro, college and high school levels. But even among experts, the risk of concussions in youth football remains a he-says she-says debate based more on experience and emotion than any objective evidence.

Robert Cantu, a nationally known neurosurgeon and author of the recently published "Concussions and Our Kids," says children shouldn't play tackle football until they are 14. In a kind of lose-lose situation, kids' brains are not fully developed but are also further along than the rest of the body, including the neck. Even if 8- to 10-year-olds are essentially hugging each other to the ground, the potential for whiplash-related concussions and spinal injuries are greater than for older kids.

Cantu's mantra: No head trauma is good head trauma.

A counterbalance to that perspective comes from Thomas Martin, an MU neuropsychologist who spoke at the league's first coaches' concussion clinic last August. In 2011, he helped write the state law that more strictly regulates how soon high school players suspected of suffering a concussion can return to play.

Martin thinks Cantu's preemptive measures go too far. His take: Fear and hysteria can be just as crippling as concussions, and the community hasn't figured out yet where to draw the line.

"The pendulum has swung too far," he says. "We've gone from not appreciating concussions to where we're saying, 'Do we really want to play at all?'"

Martin fields calls every week from parents wondering if their child should return to football (and other sports) after suffering a concussion. Most have already heard both conflicting advice from other doctors, athletic trainers and parents. One doctor might recommend concussed kids sit in a dark room without any physical or mental exertion for two weeks; another might say they can return to practice the next day if, off the field, they no longer show any symptoms.

"As a parent, it's very confusing now," Martin says. "It gets difficult to know who to believe and what to do."

Martin feels for the families. He recognizes the blurry nature of concussions causes tension in itself. But he also worries their risks are overstated.

Now 47, Martin played college football and then won several national semi-pro championships with a team in Racine, Wis. He sometimes wonders if he should have quit playing earlier because of health issues he faces today. But it's not the "three or four" concussions he suffered that concern him. It's his knees. He's had 18 knee surgeries to date, and he struggles to stand up from a sitting position.

Martin doesn't see why people should react differently to the two types of injuries.

"If you play the sport, you have a chance of blowing out your knee," he says. "Does that mean that no one should play this sport? Of course not, but you do have to consider whether you want to go back to the game. You might do some long-term damage.

"The same goes for concussions."

Martin even has a mystique-killing analogy for the repeated subconcussive hits that are thought to cause long-term brain damage.

“My feeling is that it’s like running on a knee,” he says. “You eventually wear out a joint.”

The warrior mentality

There’s another reason Atiyah Ellison won’t allow his boys to play youth tackle football – one born from experience rather than hard evidence: He didn’t start playing the game himself until he was in high school. His mother wouldn’t let him.

Ellison grew up right next to the park where the local youth football league practiced. Watching was all the education his mother needed to make a decision.

“The coaches just wanted to see who could knock the piss out of each other at 6 years old,” Ellison says. “She saw the kind of practices and said, ‘There ain’t no way I’m signing you up.’”

Much as he wanted to play at the time, Ellison now believes his mom was right. There are worse things than hurt feelings.

He admits he now micro-manages his own sons’ athletic activities. If he is not coaching his kids himself, he still attends their practices. He wants to make sure they are learning the right lessons.

But there are holes in his defense.

“Braylon, what do you think about football?” he calls to his middle child, who will play again in the K-2 flag football league this fall.

“I think about tackling people,” the 5-year-old quickly responds.

“You can’t tackle people in flag football, though.”

The boy reconsiders.

“Then, stealing the flag and kicking butt.”

Tyson, the oldest, chimes in.

“When I think of football, I think of kicking butt, winning, intercepting, plus ... umm ... destructing the confidence of the other team.”

No, hurt feelings are the least of Ellison’s worries.

“You’re not going to play football for a while,” he says.

Despite all the years he played, he admits he’s now a little afraid of the game. He realizes youth football is not the NFL, but he sees how the warrior mentality infuses it. *Destructing the confidence of the other team*. Whoa.

See, Ellison knows just how real that warrior mentality is. In the NFL, he says, players are told behind locker room doors they are killers.

Maybe football’s squeeze was worth its juice for Ellison. Not for his kids, though.

“You can’t control it, you can’t make that game nicer,” Ellison said. “They try to with penalties and stuff, but at the end of the day they ain’t stopping anyone for real.

“It’s just too late. It is its own animal, its own entity. You can’t go back now.”

Forever forward

What, then? Does America take a knee? Does it back away from the beast — or sic it with a kennel of lawsuits?

The NFL is betting it does neither. Last year the league launched its “NFL Evolution” campaign with the slogan “Forever forward, forever football.”

During February’s Super Bowl, it featured a minute-long advertisement depicting the sport’s progression in the last century with the closing voiceover: “Here’s to making the next century safer and more exciting.”

Remember, this is about fearing *for* the game, too. Football is the most intimately American sport. It teaches the values that pervade the narrative the nation passes on: The people who make it are the ones with the highest pain tolerance. As that

narrative is questioned, complicated and contradicted, football keeps things simple.

Far away from the heart?

Gabe Rumbaoa recovered from his concussion and was back on the field three weeks after his fall. In fact, he sat out a week longer than necessary. Boonville was playing a weak opponent, and his coach didn't need him in the game.



Gabe Rumbaoa, 13, had a concussion when he was 11 years old, but that hasn't stopped him from playing football. (Photo: Elizabeth Cardwell)

During a conversation at his Missouri Vein Care office, Phil Rumbaoa praised all four of his children's character and abilities. But he called Gabe, now 13 and in eighth grade, the "All-Star Kid."

"He tends to be one of the leaders," Rumbaoa says. "He's not necessarily telling guys to do this or do that; he's just got that personality and charisma that makes kids want to be in his fold."

Among Gabe's group of friends, it's cool to be both athletic and smart. According to Dad, No. 63 gets straight A's, and the girls are starting to notice him.

Rumbaoa, 55, also appreciates his son's happy-go-lucky demeanor — when he's off the football field or wrestling mat, of course. He remembers his own 13-year-old self as more intense and analytical.

But then, Rumbaoa's childhood in Los Angeles was different. In his working-class Filipino community, moms fed their sons to grow big and strong like Rams quarterback Roman Gabriel, and you didn't let your guard down for a moment. Someone might call you a sissy.

Rumbaoa didn't play organized youth football because his parents couldn't afford to enroll him in the local Pop Warner league. But he still remembers his very first high school football practice. That was the day he learned the lesson of tenacity.

The freshman went down with what he thought was a bullet to his right calf. His coach, who also taught honors biology, came over to massage out a cramp. Then he said: "You'll be OK, Rumbaoa. It's far away from the heart."

The basics of tackling he learned were to stick your forehead's point in the other guy's chest. He had his "bell rung" on a regular basis.

"I remember making a tackle and getting a knee in my earhole," Rumbaoa says. "I bounced up and started jogging back to the middle of the field. Well, that was the last play of the game – everybody else was walking off. I had no idea where they were going, but I finally started heading that way. Figured I'd find out later."

As a running back and linebacker, Rumbaoa played two of the positions most susceptible to vicious hits. That wasn't by accident. Coaches would yell, "Goddammit Rumbaoa, you gotta run *around* them!" Even during special teams practice, he would stick his head right into the personal protector of the punter every time. He routinely "saw stars."

Back in his office he flashes a self-aware smile and considers the space around him.

"It kind of makes me wonder how I managed to do this."

But Doc Rumbaoa says he might never have made it here if it weren't for football. He was subject to dismissal at UCLA his freshman year before becoming a football team manager the next fall and a walk-on his junior year. Midway through that season, he made it onto the Dean's List. Structure made a difference. So did his teammates' efforts to make walk-ons fold.

So like Ellison, Rumbaoa knows the beast that is football. And like Ellison, he believes his bond with it helped him aspire to his current position. But whereas Ellison backs away from the beast, Rumbaoa tries to make it heel.

Even now that his son has aged out of the league, Rumbaoa continues to coach Boonville's sixth-grade team. He is also developing something he calls his "Grand Experiment."

Rumbaoa brings it up at both the beginning and the end of a conversation about concussions and the youth sport. He wants to pass along "positive coaching" principles and challenge accepted norms. There should be more to the reasoning behind tactics other than "It's how I was raised." He has considered running a clinic for the mid-Missouri youth football community.

The Grand Experiment is also deeply personal. Coaching football was what Rumbaoa really wanted to do for a living. Now he wants to see what will happen when the Boonville High team is made up of his former players, taught his way.

"I have these dreams," he says. "The Grand Experiment is, 'Can I get all these kids on the same page so that when Gabe's a senior, he'll have three years of underclassmen who were taught just like him?' What is that team going to do?"

Prioritizing risks

At the Columbia league's concussion clinic last fall, coaches watched a video that used a handful of local youth athletes to demonstrate the ambiguity of concussions. One of the kids featured was Jackson Nicoli, the middle son of league president Matt Markley.

Jackson suffered a series of concussions during his freshman season at Hickman High. Markley can't quite shake the sick feeling of seeing his son's "glazed doughnut" gaze.

"It was my first experience really seeing one, and I was scared to death," Markley said. "You're helpless, and that's what's frustrating."

Nicoli eventually decided to quit the game, but his younger brother, Carter Nicoli, quarterbacked the JV team as a freshman this past fall. He wants to see where

football will take him, and Markley does not intend to intervene. His youngest son loves the game. If Carter Nicoli's future includes a concussion, well, they'll cross that bridge when they get to it.

"I think most of us understand the risk-reward, if you want to call it that," Markley says.

Most of the adults running the Columbia league think all the precautions that can be taken are being taken. John Heider, the league treasurer and Markley's right-hand man, had to laugh at a new national rule that tries to ban ball carriers from leading with their head.

"I'm sorry, but what are they supposed to do?" Heider said. "Turn around and lead with their butt? Hel-lo?"

Tom Edwards, the Oakland Junior High coach and longtime Columbia Youth Football League board member, wonders how much more you can really ask. We already live in a padded society, and that poses risks, too.

"I think kids are softer than they used to be," he says. "Not all of them, but in general they've been coddled a lot. They look for a way out, (and) a lot of times they're given a way out.

"I see it in the classroom, too. 'Oh, this is hard. I don't feel good, something's wrong with me.' They have a fit."

But for every parent who coddles, another one oppresses. A 2010 Reuters survey ranked American parents the worst behaved at children's sporting events in the world. Phil Threatt, the league's head athletic trainer, gets a front row seat for the spectacle.

"It's amazing how worked up they will get," he says. "They so want kids to be tough and successful that they're yelling and screaming, pumping their fists, running up and down the sidelines."

What motivates this hysteria, though? Could it be the fear of surrendering to the reverse sentiment? Does all the tension come down to the insecurity of losing something essential?

Markley's sons have graduated from the youth football league now, as have Heider's two boys. Still, both men will be back for equipment handout day in early August at Cosmo Park, where every year it all begins again. They will measure third graders' heads, fit them with their first helmet and then send them on their way.

"You've never seen kids more damn excited in your life," Markley says. "And the parents – they get excited, too. Because their little kid is like, 'Holy crap, that's a helmet! It's a *real* football helmet, Dad and Mom!"

Supervising editor is [Jacqui Banaszynski](#).