

The people of Maiden, N.C., population 3,419, like to call their home “the biggest little football town in the world.”

Maiden has a problem, though.

ON DEFENSE

Inside Football's Campaign to Save the Game

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Photographs by Ryan Christopher Jones

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The football locker room at Maiden High.

On a December morning in 2017, some of the most powerful men in football gathered at a Midtown hotel in New York with a vital mission: to save their sport.

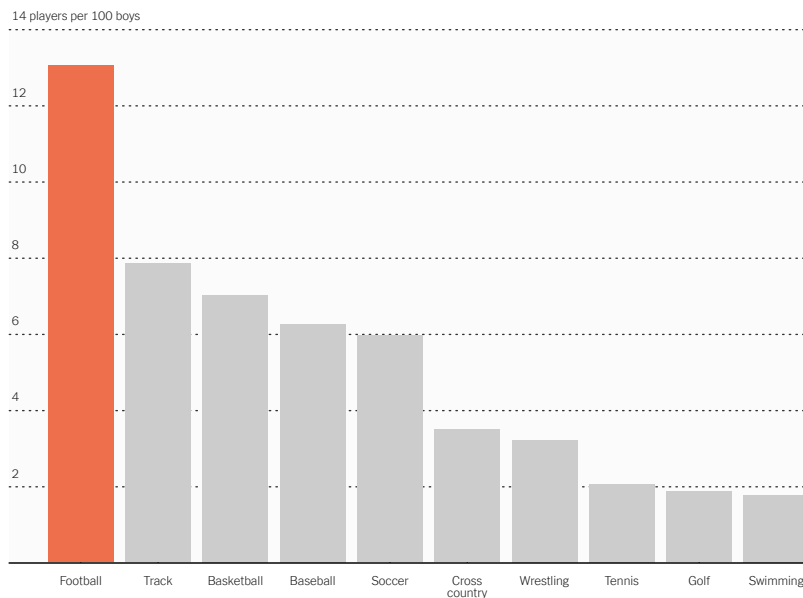
Robert K. Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots, was there, as was the commissioner of the N.F.L., Roger Goodell. Commissioners from the Power 5 college athletic conferences were in the room. So were Northwestern's head coach, Pat Fitzgerald, and a pair of Hall of Famers turned business titans, Roger Staubach and Archie Manning.

That these men felt compelled to turn the gathering, an annual meeting of the National Football Foundation, into a strategy session for pushing back against the forces threatening their game illustrates the dramatic disruption football has undergone in the past decade. Over that time, the public's awareness of football's role in some forms of long-term brain damage has potentially become the sport's kryptonite.

There was no table-pounding, no hand-wringing. But there was a sense of urgency.

"If we stand for anything, it's to protect the game, so let's step off the curb and get to work," said Steve Hatchell, the foundation's chief executive, summing up the mood in the room that day.

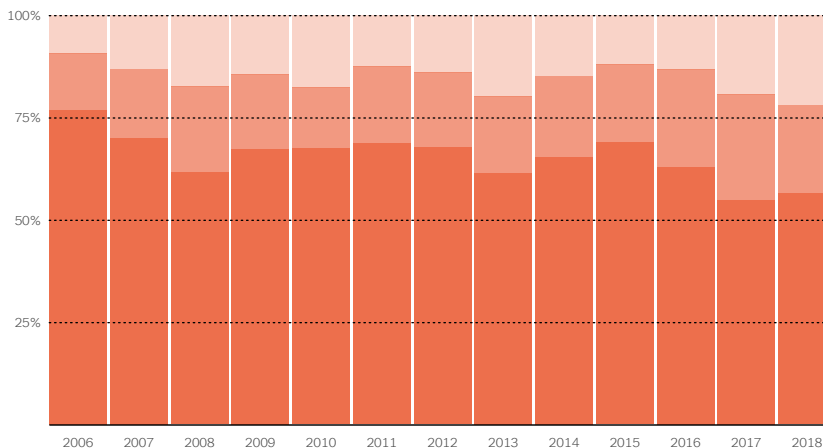
Football is still the most popular high school sport among boys.



Football remains far and away the country's most popular sport. It garners huge television audiences every week, and more children play it than any other sport. But participation in youth leagues is dropping. Over the last decade, the number of high school boys playing tackle football — the heart and soul of the sport — has dropped more than 10 percent. The people who play the game are changing, too, with the number of white players diminishing as black and Hispanic players increasingly make up a larger plurality of the player pool.

White high school boys make up a smaller share of football players.

Hispanic Black Non-Hispanic white



Source: Philip Veliz analysis of the National Institutes of Health's Monitoring the Future survey

Harder to measure is how fans perceive the game, but clearly football has become yet another thing that people are for or against. Several states are considering whether young people should even play the tackle version of the sport at all, as they weigh legislation to impose minimum age requirements for playing.

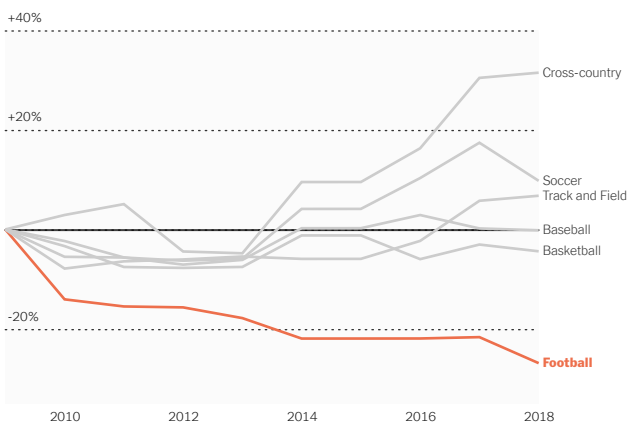
As research on the damage football causes to young athletes grows and stories about the diminished capabilities of former N.F.L. greats continue to be a vital part of the sports conversation, some parents have come to fear that they may be putting their children in danger by letting them play football.

Those forces make securing the future of the sport a substantial challenge. Football participation is down even in unexpected places, while soccer and cross-country running have grown significantly.

Football participation is down in states that typically feed the N.F.L.

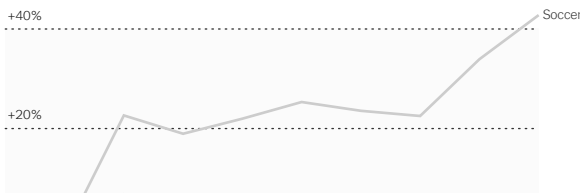
Ohio

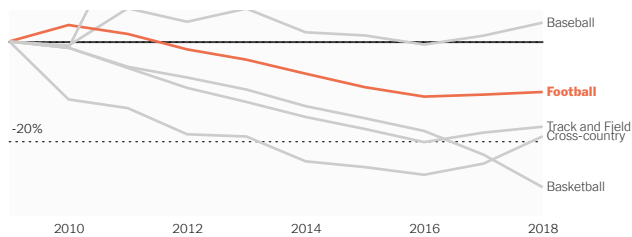
Change in participation since 2009



Texas

Change in participation since 2009





In Texas, the state that gave us \$70 million high school stadiums and “Friday Night Lights,” football participation is down 10 percent. Ohio has produced the fourth highest total of N.F.L. players, but participation has dropped 27 percent in the Buckeye State. Eight Ohio high schools were unable to fill squads to play even eight-man football last year.

Kansas, stricken with budget cuts, has seen participation fall 13 percent. With that decline, expensive football programs have become an easy target for school boards looking to save money. The state now has 12 schools playing six-man football.



Don's Grill. Maiden, N.C.

It's impossible to nail down one reason for the decline. Specialization has hurt all sports, as has the growth of video games and e-sports.

It is also impossible, however, to ignore the impact of health and safety, especially when it comes to brain injuries.

Not only are high school boys almost twice as likely to sustain a head injury in football during a game compared with the next closest sport, but they also are more likely to get a head injury in football than any other injury in any other sport recorded in the National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study.

This is how Caine Houser, the athletic director at Maiden High School in North Carolina, in the heart of a breeding ground for many top college programs, summed up the psyche that his staff has to battle: "Parents are scared of head injuries, and rightly so."

Injuries per 10,000 competition plays **in basketball**

Here are the most common injuries for **boys' basketball**.

In **boys' soccer**, 11 head injuries take place every 10,000 competition plays.

Boys' hockey has the second highest rate of head injuries.

Boys' football has the highest rate of head injuries, nearly double that of hockey.

Source: National High School Sports-Related Injury Surveillance Study

The New York Times commissioned a national online poll of 1,000 14- to 17-year-old boys. The survey, conducted by Pollfish this fall, found 9 percent of those who identified themselves as football players said they had parents who voiced concerns over head injuries, compared with 3 percent of wrestlers and 2 percent of hockey players. Still, only 4 percent of boys who had quit football said that personal concerns over head injuries were the main reason they quit. A third of former players said they just lost interest, another third became busy with something else and 15 percent said they simply started playing another sport.

Houser said the number of players on the Maiden varsity football team had fallen to 30 from 39 since 2008. The decline, he said, is worse in neighboring districts where junior varsity teams have been shuttered. Parents are steering their children into sports that they can play year-round, like baseball and basketball, to give them a leg up on making a college team.

Even though coaches have tried to address their concerns by teaching new tackling techniques and monitoring head injuries closely, Houser said it could be very hard when “parents get caught up in the ‘let’s don’t take a chance’ thing.”

The headwinds are real, but football is still operating from a position of strength. In 2018, for example, nine of the top 10 most-watched prime-time broadcasts were N.F.L. or college football games. Football's golden age may be behind it, but whether it is in a slow fade, on the verge of a renaissance or heading for a collapse is a matter of debate.



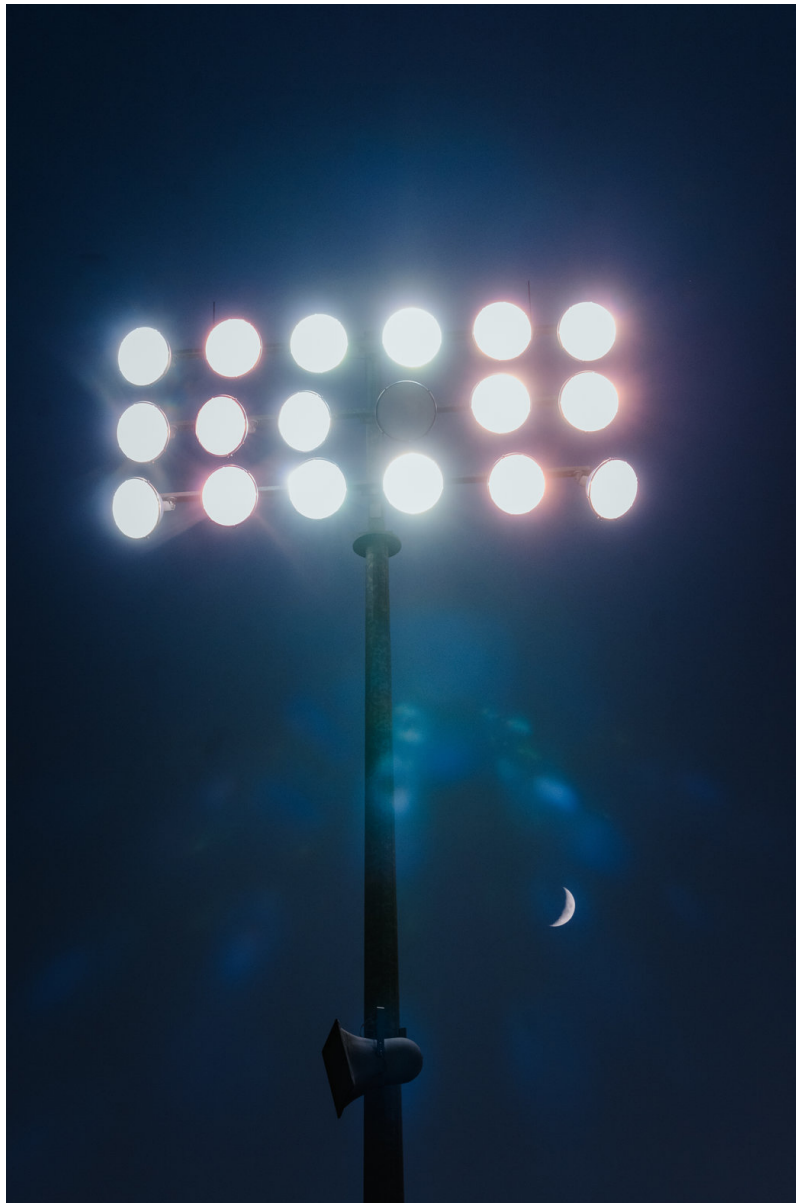
Varsity football practice. Maiden High School. Oct. 31, 2019.

In the coming weeks, The Times will examine football's hold on America, among children and their parents in the heartland, at public high schools and elite colleges.

A significant decline in football's prominence would represent an important cultural shift in America. The sport long ago surpassed baseball as the true national pastime, both in terms of participation and fanaticism, and seeing its numbers drop represents a chance to understand in real time how quickly the ground can shift.

In the middle of the 20th century, boxing and horse racing ruled, then suddenly they did not. Few understood or explored the dynamics — safety concerns were growing, and entertainment options were increasing — while they were underway.

Certainly, the 30 or so National Football Foundation board members in the room that morning two Decembers ago understood that they had to try to change the narrative surrounding their game. All were volunteers. All were there on their own dime. Most had played the game, and credited the lessons they learned on the field for their success. They were savvy businesspeople, and many were invested in keeping the sport a multibillion-dollar industry at the top of the nation's entertainment pyramid.



Friday night lights. Maiden High. Nov. 1, 2019.



"Parents are scared of head injuries, and rightly so," said Caine Houser, athletic director at Maiden High.

The organization was founded in 1947, when football was ascendant, by a war hero, a coach and a sportswriter: Gen. Douglas MacArthur; Army's coach, Red Blaik; and Grantland Rice of The New York Herald Tribune. They wanted to make sure football inhabited a sacred place in the American psyche. Its mission was straightforward: to promote football as a way to mold future leaders through sportsmanship, competition and academic excellence.

By the time that December 2017 meeting had ended, football's power brokers had decided to try to make that mission relevant in the 21st century.

Within weeks, money had started to roll in. Kraft and Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys and a foundation board member, along with Goodell, on behalf of the N.F.L., came up with several hundred thousand dollars. The N.C.A.A commissioners pledged to set aside money from the College Football Playoff. Several doctors offered their counsel, including those skeptical of research linking repeated head hits to degenerative brain disease.

Practically overnight, rebranding football became perhaps the biggest part of the foundation's portfolio, next to maintaining the College Football Hall of Fame and honoring the academic achievements of collegiate football players.

By May 2018, the campaign #FootballMatters had begun to spread across multiple platforms. On the Football Matters website, there were resources for parents on rule changes and safety advances; articles about leadership and teamwork and overcoming adversity; and football-friendly data, such as the number of colleges that field football teams (775, with seven more being added by 2022) and the number of college players who are working on their master's degrees (1,439 out of about 73,000).

Each Friday, fans who connect with Football Matters on social media get "hype videos" of high school coaches' pregame talks to their teams. For casual fans, there is a documentary about Polynesian football or a YouTube video of a girls' tackle football league in Utah.



Football remains the king of high school sports, despite declining participation.

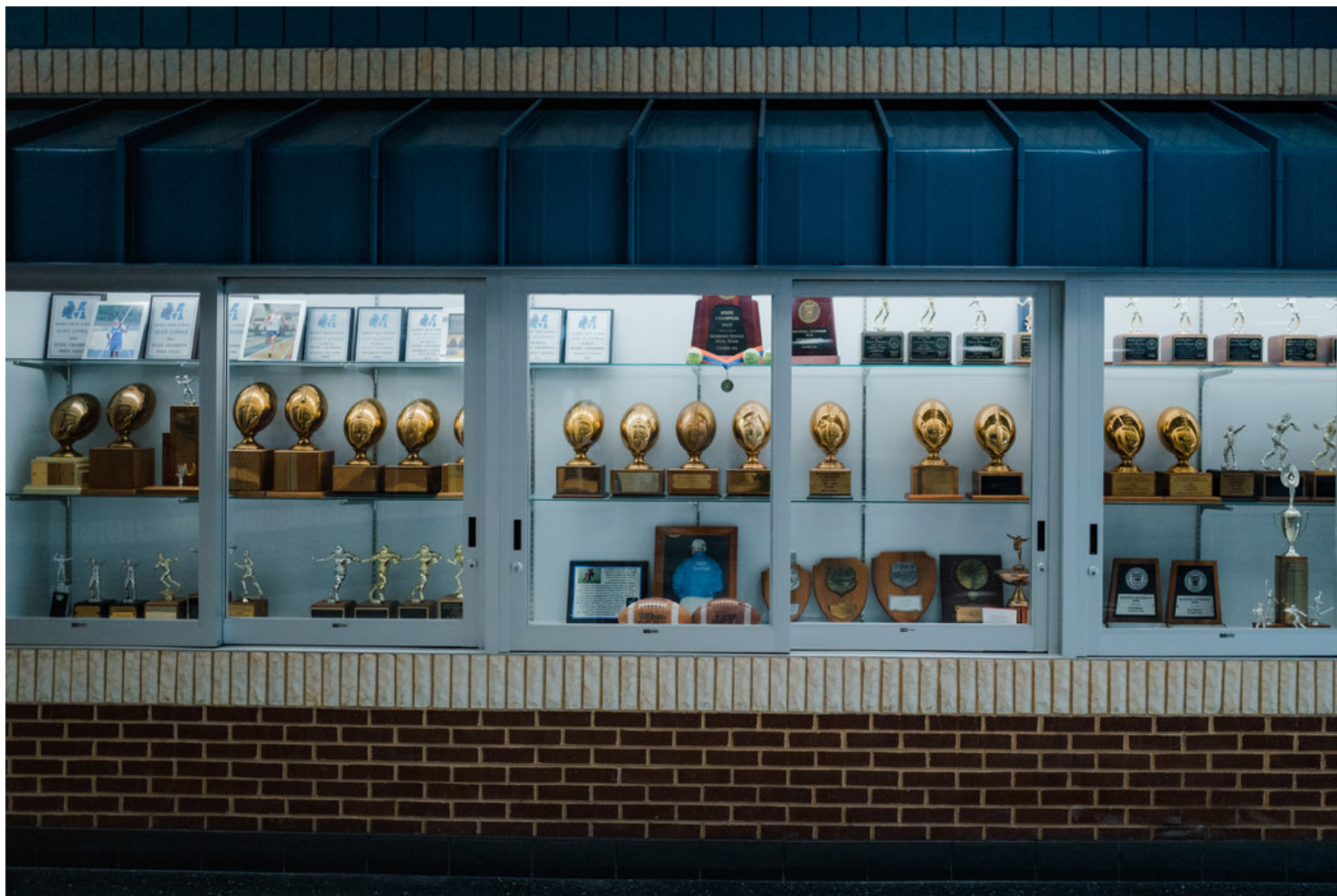
The five-year campaign has cost \$2 million so far. The foundation's leaders say they have been careful not to allow the N.F.L. and the N.C.A.A., or their largess, to take the lead in a campaign aimed at everyday people. Is it working? It's too early to tell. Television ratings are rebounding after a period of decline, but participation has continued to fall.

"We're not going to change anyone's minds, but we hope to put football in a fuller context and give people enough information to make their own decisions," said Ken Luce, the founding partner of LDWW, the marketing agency based in Dallas that is running the campaign.

Others in the sport who want to maintain football's prominence have redoubled their efforts to build a better helmet, but the structure of the human head — hard skull, soft brain — makes that challenging. Pop Warner is pushing the idea that tackling can be safer, though many neuroscientists are skeptical. Teams and coaches at every level are decreasing the number of contact practices because scientists increasingly warn of the risk of not just concussions but also repeated head and body hits. No one knows how much is too much.

“We are facing a lot of issues — the biggest one is that you can get hurt playing football,” Hatchell, the foundation's chief executive, said. “But we have decided to be a player in the conversation. To push back.”

Hatchell concedes that the foundation — and all of the game's boosters — need to be nimble and aggressive in telling people that their game is changing for the better. “It's still the most popular sport out there,” Hatchell said. “So how do we continue to build on it?”



There is a reason Maiden calls itself “the biggest little football town in the world.”

Participation data for Washington State only available through 2016. Participation data in North Carolina and Alabama start in 2015, and participation data for Louisiana and Oklahoma start in 2013. High school enrollment figures for 2016 are used for 2017, 2018 and 2019.

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