

SPORTS

As Worries Rise and Players Flee, a Missouri School Board Cuts Football

By **KEN BELSON** SEPT. 28, 2015

MAPLEWOOD, Mo. — Students and families at Maplewood Richmond Heights High School are looking forward to homecoming, the highlight of the autumn school calendar for decades. But for the first time, the centerpiece event will be soccer, not football.

The school board in Maplewood, a St. Louis suburb, disbanded the high school's football team in June, even though it reached the state championship game five years ago. A decade ago, such a move would have seemed radical. But concerns are growing about football players' safety, and soccer and other sports are gaining popularity.

“Over all, it was, ‘Can we field a team that is competitive and safe for the kids to perform?’ ” said Nelson Mitten, the president of the Maplewood Richmond Heights School Board, who said players' injuries last season included a broken ankle, a torn anterior cruciate ligament and a significant head injury. “Whenever you have anything like that, you have to be a responsible board and discuss what we can do to make sure we can field a

team.”

The viability of football at the high school level remains unquestioned in most communities in the United States. But situations like the one in Maplewood are becoming more familiar.

Ridgefield Memorial High School in New Jersey scrapped its varsity football program this season because only 13 students tried out. Camden Hills Regional High School in Maine announced last week that it would cancel the final five games of its football season because injuries had left the team with younger, less experienced players who were at risk of being injured as well.

“I want to make sure folks know that this had nothing to do with wins and losses, lack of effort on our kids’ part, coaching, or anything but numbers,” said Nick Ithomitis, the Camden Hills principal.

Over the weekend, concerns about player safety intensified when Evan Murray, the star quarterback at Warren Hills Regional High School in New Jersey, collapsed on the field after a hit and died soon after. The medical examiner in Morris County ruled the death accidental and determined that Murray had lacerated his spleen. The spleen was abnormally large, making it more susceptible to injury, and there was no evidence of head trauma, the examiner said.

Murray was the third high school football player this season to die directly from injuries in a game. Five football players died last year, according to the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research.

There are no precise statistics on how many schools have shut down their football programs because of safety concerns, but a number of teams have been disbanded as participation in tackle football nationwide has declined amid rising awareness of concussions and other dangers.

Despite the popularity of college and professional football, the number of

male high school football players has fallen to about 1.08 million this year, a 2.4 percent decline from five years ago.

Pop Warner, the largest youth football organization, has seen larger decreases. It has also been sued by a parent of a player who committed suicide at 25 and was found to have chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a brain disease linked to repeated head hits.

The football deaths this year have involved a range of positions.

This month, Tyrell Cameron, a sophomore at Franklin Parish High School in Louisiana, died after being hit during a punt return. The local coroner has not determined a cause of death. In Oklahoma, Ben Hamm, a 16-year-old linebacker at Wesleyan Christian School, died on Sept. 19, eight days after he was hit in a game.

No such tragedies have occurred at Maplewood. But the number and seriousness of the injuries to football players have weighed on parents, eroding support for what was once the school's showpiece sport. More parents are enrolling their children in a growing number of youth soccer programs, leaving fewer students playing football by the time they reach high school.

"The boys I've seen, they're growing up with soccer," said Betty Pearson, whose oldest son played football at Maplewood but whose youngest son plays soccer. "I come out, and there are 10 kids kicking the ball around in the street. I don't think I've seen that with football."

In 2010, the 300-student school had 38 players on the football team, twice as many as on the soccer team. Last season, only 20 students were on the football team, three fewer than the minimum recommended by the state. The team had to forfeit a game because injuries left the sideline depleted. A student who sustained a head injury sat out the rest of the season.

Mitten, the school board president, said that the series of injuries last

season led the board to discuss disbanding the team. The students were polled about their interests, and just 15 said they would try out for the team this season, including only five returning players. Although a few alumni were not happy with the board's proposal, no parents attended board meetings to complain.

“When you simply don't have the players, it's obvious,” Mitten said. “I had two parents informally raise concerns, but this was more of a student-participation-driven decision. It withered.”

Declining youth participation rates have started to worry the N.F.L. because the league's long-term health could be affected. The league has donated tens of millions of dollars to USA Football, which has been training coaches and promoting a safe-tackling program to reassure parents.

N.F.L. Commissioner Roger Goodell, speaking at a conference in New Orleans this month, said the sport was “safer than ever” because of awareness about injuries.

“I had a concussion playing baseball, and they didn't do anything about it,” Goodell added. “We're smarter about how long we practice.”

Youth leagues and high schools have followed the N.F.L.'s lead and reduced contact in practice, but most serious injuries occur in games. Safety standards also vary widely. Many schools, for instance, still do not require trainers and emergency workers to be present at games. Coaches are sometimes unable to recognize the symptoms of concussions and unwilling to take players out.

“So many player protections — equipment, practice formats, drills, regimens — that are standard in pro and college football are unknown in high school football,” said Terry O'Neil, the founder of Practice Like Pros, a group that advocates safer football techniques. “After all the many excellent rule changes in the last few years, we don't expect any future rule changes to

change the game drastically. Game day will always be dangerous.”

Mitten agreed.

“I was very concerned about the number of injuries I saw our student-athletes were suffering,” he said. “I didn’t think there was any need for them to be doing that if that’s what was going to be the result.”

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