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SPORTS

What Football Crisis? In Alabama, the Game's Hold Only Gets Stronger

In pockets of the South, more kids are playing football than ever, with parents and coaches saying the rewards outweigh the risks

By Laine Higgins

Sept. 7, 2017 3:11 p.m. ET

Mobile, Alabama

Russ Meyers has been playing tackle football since he was 6 years old and as he embarks on his senior season in high school here, he sees no reason to change the sport he loves.

“I grew up when you hit somebody, you try to hit them hard. You’re not really worrying about getting a concussion,” said the 18-year-old, who will play both linebacker and running back for UMS-Wright Preparatory School.

That old-school view of football is still prevalent throughout Alabama, where there are few signs of the concussion crisis roiling the sport at all levels. While many high schools around the country are rethinking their commitment to football, the varsity weight room at UMS-Wright just got a \$9,000 facelift and now includes a dozen power weight racks and a fridge fully stocked with two flavors of Muscle Milk. For the upcoming

season, each of the team's linemen received bionic looking knee braces, which retail for \$900 a pair.



UMS-Wright Preparatory School students and fans cheer during their home opener against Charles Henderson High School of Troy, Alabama, Friday, September 1, 2017. PHOTO: MEGGAN HALLER/KEYHOLE PHOTO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Fears about concussions and brain trauma have contributed to a slide in football participation at the national level, where the total number of players is down 4.3% in the last decade.

Meanwhile the sport is booming in Alabama, where participation in 11-man high school football is up 40.8% since 2006-07, according to data compiled by the National Federation of High School Associations. That gain comes despite a 5.6% drop in the population of Alabama boys aged 15-19 over that same period.

Perhaps more striking is the sheer proportion of Alabama teens who don helmets and pads: 18.7% of boys aged 15-19 play football, the second highest percentage in the nation behind Mississippi. Other states in the southeast likewise buck the national trends.

The disparity highlights football's resilience in pockets of the country despite the spate of negative headlines. And it points to a possible future in which football becomes more of a regional phenomenon than it has been for the half-century in which it blossomed into the country's most popular sport.

The difference, according to many in Alabama, is that people here don't view it as one of many extracurricular activities—it is instead a cornerstone of communities that produces rewards far outstripping the risks.

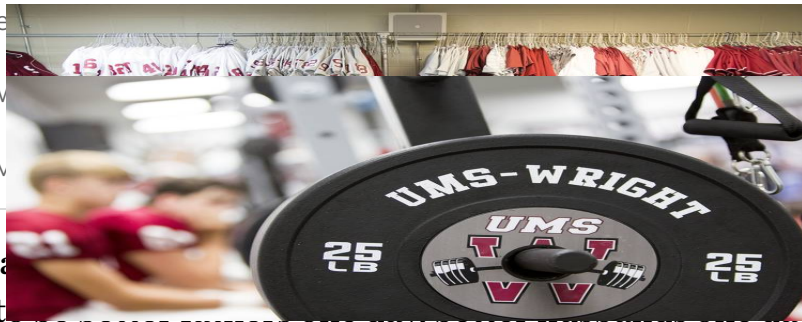
[Click here for a broader look at how high school football is changing in America](#)



“For us it’s more than just football,” said Josh Niblett, head coach at Birmingham’s Hoover High School, whose program is ranked

Players eat together before their game Sept. 1.
Offensive linemen wear knee braces, valued at \$900 a pair.

PHOTOS: M



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ninth in the country by USA Today, teaching young men how to work hard and discipline.”

Coaches and players acknowledge that football’s character lessons can be gleaned from other sports, but say they are more strongly reinforced on the football field where players literally are knocked down and asked to pick themselves up time after time. Beyond that, football can also make a college education possible through an athletic scholarship.

It’s also no coincidence that the state’s two dominant college teams—Alabama and Auburn—have combined to win five national championships in the last 10 years.

Football boosters around the state say parents and kids understand the risks better than ever, and that the game is getting safer. But many of them also say they would resist further changes to the sport—organized flag football leagues are virtually unheard of in Alabama, for example—and feel the focus on the sport’s risks is bordering on hysteria.

“I think so many of the parents involved now played football and they understand the danger to it and all. I think they see what their kid is going to get out of it and the things



Varsity football players at UMS-Wright Preparatory School in Mobile, Alabama, relax in the weight room before game time on the afternoon of their home opener against Charles Henderson High School of Troy, Alabama, Friday, September 1, 2017. PHOTO: MEGGAN HALLER/KEYHOLE PHOTO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

he is going to learn from it are worth the risk,” said Terry Curtis, head coach at UMS-Wright.

In areas of the state experiencing substantial population growth, football programs are bursting at the seams. Since forming in 2005, Spanish Fort High School outside of Mobile has won four state titles and now boasts a squad of 102 boys. Farther south, Elberta Middle School is in the first year of a four-year process of starting a high school. Athletic director Greg Seibert expects by the time the school is ready for a full varsity season, it will have a football roster between 100-125 players.

“The demand is larger than the roster availability” at many schools, said Alabama High School Athletic Association executive director Steve Savarese.

Still, some of the national trends are creeping in. The NFHSA reported that the number of boys playing football fell by 2,188 in 2016-17, a decrease of about 6.7%. According to Alabama officials, however, about 1,234 freshman football players were omitted from the state’s total for 2016 and the decline is closer to 2.9%.

“I am confident that football will be as strong five or ten years down the road as it is today,” said Savarese. “Everybody wants to be a part of football on Friday night.”



UMS-Wright Preparatory School in Mobile, Alabama, takes on Charles Henderson High School of Troy, Alabama, Friday, September 1, 2017. PHOTO: MEGGAN HALLER/KEYHOLE PHOTO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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