

The New York Times

Opinion

The Kids Who Still Need Football

America is moving away from this dangerous sport. But some families will decide the risks are worth it.

By Albert Samaha

Mr. Samaha is the author of “Never Ran, Never Will: Boyhood and Football in a Changing American Inner City.”

Sept. 8, 2018

By the time they were in middle school, Andrew Hart and Isaiah Anthony were already thinking about college. Andrew — whose grandparents moved during the Great Migration from the South to New York City, where his parents built working-class lives in Queens — thought he might one day study engineering. Isaiah — whose mother had arrived in the United States from Guyana as a teenager, settling into Brooklyn and working at a day care center — imagined himself in business school.

Both boys knew that when it came to their futures, they had something that seemed to hold even more promise than their good grades and the praise they earned from their teachers: Isaiah and Andrew were exceptionally good football players.

In a country where the margin for error is especially thin for black and brown boys in poor and working-class communities, they and their families also had plans: First, the boys would trade their football talent for financial aid packages from local private high schools. Next would come athletic scholarships to college.

Football, to these boys, was not the end but the means.



Isaiah Anthony at halftime during a 2014 game. Albert Samaha

I met Andrew and Isaiah in 2013, when Andrew was 10, Isaiah was 11, and I was beginning work on a book about their youth football team, the Mo Better Jaguars. As I learned about their lives, it occurred to me that the contemporary debate about the role of football in American society often overlooks kids like them. They're members of the first generation of football players to truly know the physical risks they face, taking the field even as a growing number of adults call for a prohibition of the sport, because their futures depend upon it.

It's now common knowledge that the thousands of hits football players suffer take a toll, greatly increasing their risk of contracting the degenerative brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy. Retired N.F.L. players have described experiencing depression, memory loss and other symptoms of C.T.E., whose onset can begin when people are in their late 20s. Some have died by suicide, with the disease discovered when their brains were examined. A study of the brains of 111 deceased N.F.L. players revealed that all but one of them had C.T.E. The disease has also been found in young men who did not play beyond college, or even high school. Several

families have sued Pop Warner, the nation's largest youth football organization, including, most recently, the parents of two young men who were found to have C.T.E. after their deaths — one died in a motorcycle crash, the other killed himself.

As a result of lack of participation, which some coaches believe is largely driven by concerns over C.T.E., some high schools have eliminated programs. Some N.F.L. players have retired in their physical primes, and some retired ones have vowed to keep their sons out of the sport. There's a push to ban tackle football for younger kids. Pop Warner, like the N.C.A.A. and the N.F.L., has taken steps in recent years aimed at making the game safer, including eliminating kickoffs for younger age groups and ordering teams to reduce the amount of time dedicated to full-contact drills in practice. It may not be enough to erase concerns, and more changes are likely to come. There's an idea that those who play — or the parents who let them — don't understand the risks they are taking and should be protected from the pressures to participate in the brutality.

But that's not always the case.

The truth is, while some will decide the game's risks aren't worth it, others — mostly lower-income black and brown kids — continue to depend on it as a chance to climb the educational and economic ladder. Yes, football is dangerous, but so is leaving one's future in the hands of an unequal educational system. It's no wonder the sport still feels like a winning ticket.

[Discover the most compelling features, reporting and humor writing from The New York Times Opinion section, selected by our editors. Sign up for the Sunday Best newsletter.]

Based in Brooklyn's Brownsville neighborhood, whose ZIP code contains the highest concentration of housing projects in the country, Andrew and Isaiah's team, Mo Better, built a reputation as a regional powerhouse, with a collection of league championships and a pipeline to some of the city's most prestigious high schools. When I first met them in 2013, the program was coming off a successful 2012 season, fielding winning teams in five age groups. But that year, fewer than 50 players signed up — half the number that once came out and barely sufficient to fill three age group teams. By 2017, Mo Better didn't have enough kids to field even a single 16-player team in any age group.



Andrew Hart, right, with a teammate during a recent football practice. Damon Winter/The New York Times

This is not unusual. Many of their opponents were losing kids too. Pop Warner participation declined by around 10 percent from 2010 to 2012, after what the organization had deemed 80-plus years of steady growth. Although a spokesperson for Pop Warner has said that participation nationwide has remained stable since, some youth football coaches have reported losing one or two teams in most towns in their area. In my five years following *Mo Better*, at least three Brooklyn-based programs stopped fielding teams or merged with other teams.

But even as football's decline begins to seem inevitable, the moral reckoning is only in its early stages. The sport remains on the throne it's occupied in America for the past half-century, a multibillion-dollar business that dominates television ratings and is fed by a pipeline of high schools and colleges that have eagerly invested in state-of-the-art stadiums, high-salaried coaches and blue-chip prospects who draw crowds. The 130 or so college programs in the highest athletic division can hand out 85 football scholarships each, which is more than those for basketball, baseball, softball and soccer combined, not to mention any other extracurricular endeavor.

To many of the boys and their parents who chase that opportunity, turning away from the sport is a luxury they don't think they can afford, a mind-set that became clear in conversations and interviews. From what I saw at practices and games in New York City and northern New Jersey, football's harm is being increasingly concentrated on those who grow up with few other options.

Education in America is widely seen as a path to success, but all kids don't have access to the same paths. The system is girded by property taxes, leaving residents of poorer neighborhoods with underfunded schools. School district policies confine most kids to the schools closest to them, often to the detriment of black and brown children born into communities blighted by racist housing policies that for decades choked off resources and financial opportunities. Children's academic successes or setbacks may be determined by factors outside their control, but can snowball quickly.

That's why New York's mayor, Bill de Blasio, recently backed a proposal to change admissions for the city's eight "specialized" public high schools, which accept only the select few students who score highest on a standardized test. Some New Yorkers celebrate these schools as meritocratic bastions where all kids have a fair shot at an elite education. Yet the numbers don't reflect that. Though around 67 percent of the city's public high school students are black or Latino, just 10 percent of the students accepted into specialized high schools this year were, a figure that's likely informed by the resources of their elementary and middle schools.



Andrew Hart during a recent football practice. Damon Winter/The New York Times

Andrew was fortunate. He was awarded a financial aid package that covered the \$46,000 annual tuition at his dream high school, Poly Prep Country Day in Brooklyn. He had aced the admission test and graduated from middle school with honors, so he can't say for sure how much his football skills played a role in that. But he remembers the doors first cracking open on a summer afternoon before sixth grade when a Poly Prep coach came to the Brownsville park where he was practicing to watch him play and talk to his parents. The coach kept in touch and guided the family through the application process.

While Isaiah wasn't recruited by any coaches from private high schools, coaches from several public high schools pitched their programs to him. He chose Erasmus Hall, which has one of the city's top football teams.

When it comes to plans for the future, Andrew is now split between going into law or medicine. Isaiah is still thinking business. But that crossroad comes later. For now, their minds are on earning free entry into a university, avoiding the quicksand of student debt. In their eyes, a football scholarship is the clearest road to that next checkpoint.

Football reflects this country's racial caste system: mostly black players sacrificing their bodies for the entertainment of a mostly white audience. That dynamic is likely to become even more pronounced. Surely we'd feel better as a society if promising kids like Andrew and Isaiah weren't bashing their heads together hundreds of times a week. But until they see other lanes of opportunity reliably opened for them, they will continue to do so.

On a rainy Sunday morning last October, Isaiah took the field with his Erasmus Hall junior varsity teammates for a game against South Shore High School. He'd done well the previous season as a speedy running back on the freshman team. But in the year since he looked like he hadn't grown as much as some of his classmates, and he now seemed to be the smallest boy on the field.

Early in the game, the ball came his way and a wave of defenders converged. He sidestepped the first, ran around the second, juked the third. When I'd last seen him play three years earlier, his extraordinary speed had made him seem unstoppable. But on this morning, as the escape routes closed and the wave crashed in, it looked as if he was just trying to survive out there.

Albert Samaha is the author of "Never Ran, Never Will: Boyhood and Football in a Changing American Inner City."

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 9, 2018, on Page SR3 of the New York edition with the headline: The Kids Who Still Need Football

