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MISSISSIPPI

AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION INTO YOUTH TACKLE FOOTBALL SAFETY IN
MISSISSIPPI

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“Only in football is long-term injury the result of not accidents but of the game played properly.” –George F. Will

To the kids who play football, they deserve better.

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Abstract

A football field in the south is a place where young men grow as friends and teammates, but, unfortunately, it is also a very dangerous arena. Players are often concussed, bruised, or have broken bones. These injuries are sometimes shrugged off, but there is increasing evidence that the injuries that young players sustain in their youth will impact their lives in years to come. In this thesis, I examine the current concerns in youth tackle football safety policy and what improvements can be made to the policies that exist. The literature provides evidence of current debate being had over safety; however, I conduct interviews with experts in the field throughout the state of Mississippi in order to better understand the issue as it relates to youth tackle football safety policies.

I found that there are various philosophies surrounding the game of football and what to do to make it safer, there is a lack of adequate safety policies and oversight of those policies, and there is inadequate funding for equipment and personnel that help to make the game safer. These inadequacies do have a way to be improved. By using Kraft and Furlong's Policy Process Model, I present various policy recommendations in order to better the safety of youth tackle football in the state of Mississippi.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A football field in the south is about as culturally hallowed ground as there is. Hundreds of men, women, and children gather to watch young men play the game that they all love. The lights are bright, the grass is freshly mown, the smell of the concession stand radiates through the stadium. Going to the game is almost routine for the locals; however, this night is anything but routine. With only seconds left in the first half of the game, the ball is snapped and thrown downfield, where it is caught by a young man who bears the number twenty-two on his jersey. He is tackled near the ten-yard line, and the crowd erupts. A few seconds pass, and the player still has not risen to his feet. His body lies there motionless while the coaches rush to his side, calling the local ambulance that is twenty miles away. Silence permeates the stadium. The only sound that can be heard are the crickets and the tears of a woman who fears the worst. Paramedics arrive and pronounce the young man dead. As he was tackled, the impact of the collision caused his neck to break. Word of his passing away radiates through the stadium, and the rest of the game is cancelled. A mother lost her son to a game, football.

This tragedy may sound like an anomaly at first glance; however, in 2018, three young men met this same fate in the state of Mississippi, and in the first seven weeks of the 2015 football season in the United States, seven children lost their lives playing the same game. Seven mothers lost their sons to something that is supposed to be fun (ABC News, 2015).

In the United States, football is a way of life. Millions of Americans are captivated every week as players collide, a ball is caught, and points flash up on the scoreboard. However, it is a game that is inherently dangerous. Risk of concussion has recently caught the attention of many, which is a possible cause of falling participation in high school and youth football leagues around the country (Murphey, Askew, & Summer, 2017), but we are beginning to see a new age of safety being ushered into the world of football, as the National Football League (NFL) has come under attack for allegedly pressuring doctors who conduct research not to publish findings that would compromise the NFL, in addition to ignoring evidence that concussion risks are more severe than they previously thought (Laskas & Veasay, 2009).

Colleges have also seen these attacks focused on their liability for injury or death to players due to negligence. For example, in a lawsuit filed by the family of Derek Sheely, a twenty-two-year-old Frostburg State University senior who collapsed on the field during a preseason practice and never regained consciousness, the university was sued for negligence. Despite reporting headaches during his final practice, trainers and coaches did nothing and urged him to continue. His death resulted from an uncontrolled bleed in his forehead (Pachman & Lamba, 2017). In addition to individual colleges facing allegations of negligence, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has faced allegations of fraudulent concealment of facts and information relating to the dangers of multiple concussions and negligence. Pressing these same allegations of negligence and fraudulent concealment of facts, a class action lawsuit was brought forward on behalf of every athlete who has played in an NCAA sanctioned event, and settlement discussions began in 2016 (Pachman & Lamba, 2017).

High school associations have been challenged as well for having inadequate safety measures. For example, the Illinois High School Association faced a lawsuit over its concussion and safety protocols. While the state of Illinois delegates the power of creating and implementing concussion and safety protocol, the lawsuit sought judicial oversight on the creation and implementation of these protocols after one student improperly returned to play after suffering a concussion (Pachman & Lamba, 2017).

All of these different levels of the game have one thing in common: they are played by people who should know that there are risks involved with playing the game, and they choose to play it anyway. Pop Warner is a youth football organization that provides tackle football for children between the ages of five and fifteen (Pop Warner, 2018), where these risks are often not perceived by the players has faced allegations of negligence and not providing the adequate standard of care. Joseph Chernach, a former Pop Warner participant, committed suicide at the age of twenty-five. Upon completing the autopsy, his brain showed symptoms associated with Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). While he also played high school football, making this connection to Pop Warner hard to prove, his mother filed the lawsuit claiming strict liability, meaning that the activity is “abnormally dangerous and cannot be made safe by reasonable conduct, and thus, the purveyor of the activity will be held liable for any resulting injuries regardless of actual fault” (Pachman & Lamba, 2017, p. 189).

While most leagues are full of competent individuals who are able to make reasonable decisions for their well-being, there is one league that does not meet that standard. Participants of Pop Warner, and leagues like it, cannot be expected to assume the risks of the game, since they include children as young as five-years-old. While most

of the public may not see this league as being as dangerous as the NFL or the SEC, there are still risks of serious injury.

According to pathologist Bennet Omalu, “A child who plays a game of football for one season without any documented concussion - several months after that season, if you subject his brain to sophisticated psychological testing and radiological testing, functional MRIs, there is evidence of brain damage” (Morrison & Omalu, 2016). Recently, youth tackle football has come under attack in several state legislatures. Legislators, agreeing with Omalu, argue that football below a certain age is too dangerous for our children, and it may very well be. For example, one and a half in every one hundred youth tackle football athlete exposures result in injury. This number is mostly composed of serious injuries such as fractures, dislocations, and concussions. Youth tackle football injuries are five to fifteen times more likely to result in serious injury than soccer and baseball (Adickes & Michael , 2004, p. 202). This risk rises with age as an eighth grader who participates in tackle football has a thirty-three percent chance of injury, which is four times greater than a fourth grader (Adickes & Michael , 2004, p. 202).

All of these incidents and research findings have led to several state legislatures introducing bills to ban tackle football below a certain age. For example, in the states of California¹, Illinois², New York³, New Jersey⁴, and Maryland⁵, bills on banning youth

¹ Assembly Bill 2108 “Safe Youth Football Act”

² House Bill 4341 “Dave Duerson Act to Prevent CTE”

³ Bill A1269C “John Mackey Youth Football Protection Act”

tackle football are currently being debated. Legislators have begun to shift toward protecting these young athletes from injury and harm as a result of factors such as negative externalities in society, and children getting seriously injured or suffering a concussion at a young age. These injuries can lead to further problems in high school and college athletics, and they can result in consequences that will impact the rest of their lives, such as early on-set Alzheimer's, early signs of CTE, Second-Impact Syndrome (SIS), or worse, death (Pachman & Lamba, 2017). This risk associated with football brings about a discussion regarding ethics, freedom of choice, rationality, and informed consent. While most ethical theories in philosophy will argue that the minimization of injury is a good thing, the question of freedom of choice provides resistance those claims. The idea that players should be free to assume risks of playing football if they choose to do so may not totally apply to children because they cannot be expected to rationally make decisions about a risk to their future. As a society, we affirm this statement by not allowing children to make decisions for themselves in situations where the risk of harm is high. For example, in a custody battle, children do not simply get to choose which parent they want to have custody of them. Their opinion may be taken into consideration, but it is by no means the deciding factor in who gains custody of the child. They simply lack the information and the rationality to make an informed decision about their future.

There is a moral obligation to protect these players if risk of serious injury is present because they cannot be expected to reason through a cost-benefit analysis of

⁴ A3760

⁵ House Bill 1210

playing football with all of the risks associated with the game as it stands today. If they cannot make an informed decision to play with the risk of injury on their own, then their parents have the obligation to make a decision as to what would benefit the children the most, but the government should have the obligation to ensure that the parents have appropriate information to make responsible decisions for their children. This obligation is much like the requirement that our government imposes for public education. Because children do not fully understand the consequences of not getting an education until they are older, they are legally bound to go to school until a certain age, and then they may choose whether or not to continue. There is an information failure present at young ages about the consequences of not going to school. For example, they do not fully appreciate the weight of being unemployed as a result of not getting an education. The same can be said for youth football. If a child cannot make an informed decision, then some entity has the obligation to provide a safe decision for the child.

Because that moral imperative exists, it gives rise to the questions, “What safety concerns are present in youth tackle football?” and “What improvements can be made in youth tackle football safety policy?” Although the obligation to prevent injury in youth football players exists, it is not completely clear as to what that obligation would look like in the policymaking world. Therefore, the intent of this thesis is to examine the relationship between youth tackle football and safety policy. This examination will provide evidence to support recommendations.

In this thesis, I will first give a background of tackle football and the safety issues associated with it. I will then argue that there is an obligation to protect children from possible dangers that are associated with tackle football. Next, I will highlight my

methodology used to determine the current safety policies and protocol in youth tackle football. Then, I will then present my findings. Finally, I will provide my recommendation and conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

Background

American football is dangerous. Players are injured as a part of the game. Intentionally tackling each other to the ground with a force of up to one hundred fifty g makes it common for players to hit each other with a force that is 1.5 times the force that causes a concussion (Higgins, 2009). Hitting a human being with that kind of force is dangerous to the body for a variety of reasons. Injuries range from sprains and bruises to concussions and the occasional death. Institutions have made attempts to make the game safer for the players; however, just how safe they make it or how truthful they are about present risks has been speculated by many in the media (Hoge, 2018). Scandals have emerged involving the NFL that have led to documentaries such as *League of Denial*, movies like *Concussion*, and books like *Truth Doesn't Have a Side*. These pieces of literature have in turn produced a wave of backlash from many in the football establishment, citing the science behind diseases like Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) as “bad science” as in the title of former NFL running back Merrill Hoge’s book, *The Bad Science Behind CTE and the Plot to Destroy Football*. These disputes have seemed to narrow into a topic on the risk of concussion, and then progressed to target and defend youth tackle football. Youth tackle football has made strides to become safer, but there is a lack of consensus in youth tackle football because of many different leagues that all have different protocols and policies. Theoretically, any group of people could start up a neighborhood youth football league and have little to no protocol, so there is a potential danger starting from the age of five years old. In order to adequately establish

the foundation of the problem around youth tackle football, I will offer a background based in the literature on the topic of football safety and how that safety translates to the youth game.

History of Football Safety and Injury

I find it best to start with the history of football safety in general; therefore, I will work from the most well-known realm of football down to the youth game. I will give a picture of the safety protocols in use at higher levels to show that the standard of care reserved for children by football leagues is sufficiently less than that of adults. In this section, I will examine the level of injury associated with football, history of football safety regarding the rules, equipment, protocols, and standard of care present at the professional, college, and high school level, as well as the scandals and disputes that surround the game's safety.

Progression in Rules, Equipment, and Standards of Care

On November 6, 1869, the first game of football was played between Rutgers and Princeton (Pro Football Hall of Fame, n.d.). Lacking any padding, football caused many to fear the dangers that were present for the players. Some journalists compared the dangers of football to the same risk that a soldier assumes in battle (Harrison, 2014). There were initial talks of banning football, and several college campuses did ban the sport. Harvard University faculty intervened in both 1885 and in 1895 by banning football on campus due to the game's violence (Harrison, 2014). Despite the initial scares, football progressed into a game that has overtaken the sports world in the United States, but it did so only because of advances in rules, injury prevention protocols, better equipment, and ensuring a better standard of care for its players.

Many of the rules of football have been changed since that first game between Rutgers and Princeton. In 1876, the first rules for American football were written down at the Massasoit Convention (Pro Football Hall of Fame, n.d.). In those first rules, each team consisted of fifteen players, and they were not required to wear a helmet. It was not until 1939 that all players were required to wear some form of head protection, but facemasks remained illegal until 1951. Players are now required to wear both helmets and facemasks for their own protection (The University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.).

As the rules changed, it can be seen that football started to prohibit more and more violent actions against other players. From tackling below the knees to striking a player with elbows or locked hands, rules are trending towards safety (The University of Wisconsin-Madison, n.d.). The National Football League has made further strides towards increasing the safety of players that are vulnerable to more violent impacts such as quarterbacks, kickers, and defenseless ball carriers through the use of penalties. Roughing the passer is often called when a defensive player strikes a quarterback after a pass has been made or if the quarterback is intentionally tackled below the knees. For kickers, penalties can be given for hitting a kicker after the kick has been made, and the targeting penalty was instituted recently to prevent defenseless players from being hit above the shoulders. These penalties help to reduce the known risk for injury to players. Players are not allowed to slap, knee, kick, block below the waist, use other illegal blocks, or lead with the crown of their helmet (National Football League, 2018).

Many will argue that equipment has been modified to a point where a player can absorb harsher blows to their body, but according to Omalu, this is a myth. He points to a simple experiment that shows how helmets will never be able to absorb the blows to the

head that can cause brain damage. If you put a balloon and a little bit of water into a jar, then wrap the jar with towels and hit the towel-wrapped jar with your hand, you will see the balloon hit the sides of the jar. Now, add two towels, three towels, and you will continue to see the balloon hit the sides of the jar. Omalu says that a person's brain is no different in a helmet. The brain sits inside a fluid in the skull. It is completely free to move around, so when our head is suddenly moved or struck, the brain will hit the sides of our skull. When this happens, the brain can become injured (Omalu, 2018). While the equipment may absorb a small percentage of the force hitting a person, it will not do enough to stop severe injury from occurring.

All of these rules and pieces of equipment have been modified over time to increase player safety during the games, but research has shown that most injuries occur during practice (Hoge, 2018). Consequently, many leagues have instituted practice policies such as heat acclimation policies, limits on full-contact practice time, and time limits on practices. These are being implemented more at the collegiate, high school level, and junior high school levels as the standard of care evolves (Pachman & Lamba, 2017). The standard of care is what standard the teams are being held to for their players' health. There have been many challenges in court that a player was neglectfully returned to play and that being returned to play caused serious injuries. The examples listed in the introduction of this thesis are only a few. As of February 2019, the NCAA is facing over 300 lawsuits that claim players' concussions were mistreated (Associated Press, 2019). The standard of care is already evolving, but it has much catching up to do.

The Level of Injury Associated with Tackle Football

The possibilities of injury are countless, but according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), there are 8.1 injuries per one thousand athletic exposures, where an athletic exposure is defined as one game or practice. From 2004 to 2009, there were more than forty-one thousand injuries among collegiate football players. Of those forty-one thousand injuries, over 50% were lower limb injuries, 16.9% were upper limb injuries, about twelve percent were pelvic injuries, and over 11% were injuries that involved the head or neck. The knee is the most common place of injury among collegiate football players accounting for 17.1% of all injuries (NCAA, 2010). This is compared to collegiate soccer which has an injury rate of 7.7 per one thousand athletic exposures (NCAA, 2010). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) states that each year, football accounts for the most injuries out of all sports, but it also accounts for the most injuries with a recovery time of more than seven days (Kerr, et al., 2015). However, injuries from football can last for much longer. Joints that are susceptible to injury have a greater risk of producing arthritis which can linger for the rest of one's life. Only a decade after a knee injury in a person as young as an adolescent, arthritis can be seen in an X-ray (Brody, 2017). That makes many football players susceptible to developing arthritis at a very young age because of the amount of knee injuries that occur throughout a player's career, but the lifelong impacts of tackle football may not stop at arthritis.

Scandal and Disputes

Some injuries are debated as to the influences they may have on a player's life after football. Concussions have taken the spotlight of this debate after a discovery by Dr. Bennet Omalu was made in the brain of former Pittsburgh Steelers center, Mike

Webster. He named his discovery CTE, or Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, and immediately attributed the condition to Mike Webster's many years in the trenches of the NFL. He also stated that the disease caused abnormal behavior by Webster which had begun to tear apart his life.

In his book, *Play Hard Die Young: Football Dementia, Depression, and Death*, Dr. Omalu describes CTE as the combination of dementia, neuropsychiatric impairment, and major depression into a single syndrome. The type of CTE found in football players is called gridiron dementia and it follows a similar disease model to mesothelioma. As the player with gridiron dementia gets older his chance of having worse effects of CTE heighten. The severity of the condition is linked to the duration and amount of contact that was sustained as a player just as the severity of mesothelioma is linked to duration and amount of contact with asbestos (Omalu D. B., 2008, p. 26).

Many scientists argue against Omalu, saying that the science is "bad," as Merrill Hoge describes it. He cites several scientists in his book who point out the many flaws in Omalu's work and that of Boston University staff which has become the leader in CTE research. Many claim that they may have jumped to a conclusion in attributing those injuries to football when the same traits can be found in brains of drug abusers. The problem with the disease being found in drug users is that it makes the causation more difficult to link with football. Yes, football may help this disease progress, but one cannot say that it necessarily causes it without finding a direct link. That direct link can be hard to find as all of the known cases of CTE have been discovered in an autopsy. The fact that players must die before knowing that they had CTE adds to the difficulty in establishing causation, but we can reasonably infer that football can help to spur CTE

into a more developed state. However, it is difficult to think that it is making most NFL players lose their mind, as in the case of Mike Webster (Hoge, 2018).

As Merrill Hoge points out in his book, most ex-football players are doing just fine; however, he does not define what he means by “just fine.” He cites examples of former players being successful and even getting a Ph.D., but these successes are far from proving that someone is not suffering from injury or mental health issues. The success stories of former NFL players are overshadowed by the few players who commit suicide or destroy their lives and are later found to have CTE, and many players continue to suffer from arthritis or other conditions that have formed over the years since their football injuries (Hoge, 2018). The problem with his thinking is that there are many players that have developed mental illnesses or killed themselves, and to think that it could not possibly happen to many more is just naïve. There have also been studies that suggest a strong correlation between CTE and football. The New York Times published the findings of a study on CTE in 2017 in which a neuropathologist examined two hundred two brains of former football players of various levels ranging from high school to the NFL (Ward, Williams, & Manchester, 2017). Of the two hundred two brains examined, eighty-seven percent had CTE and of the one hundred eleven former NFL players’ brains, one hundred ten had CTE (Ward, Williams, & Manchester, 2017). In addition to CTE, there are other serious injuries that occur in football such as fractures, dislocation of joints, and tears of ligaments. In a study on youth football injuries, players were found to have a rate of injury per athletic exposure, one game or practice, of thirty-three percent in the eighth grade, which quadrupled from the same statistic among fourth graders (Adickes & Michael , 2004).

Policies in Action

While many disagree on the severity of danger involved with football, some leagues are starting to enact policies to protect their players. These types of evolutions in safety protocol can be seen at the college and high school level. Because the NCAA delegates much of its safety issues to individual schools and conferences, some colleges have taken it upon themselves to make their football team safer. A prime example of this sort of leadership is found at Dartmouth College. Head football coach, Eugene “Buddy” Teevens, became concerned with the level of injury in the game of football associated with tackling, so he decided to minimize the amount of tackling his players would be doing by banning live tackling at practice (House Committee on Energy & Commerce, 2016).

While football requires tackling, some questioned how Coach Teevens’s team would perform on the field during a game. So, Coach Teevens started figuring out a way to prepare his team. In doing so, he met with the engineering department on campus and developed dummies that could move so that his players could still practice tackling, but he also ran full-speed plays avoiding contact just before they would make a tackle which is a very common practice among NFL teams.

By eliminating live tackling in practice, Coach Teevens received a lot of criticism, but as he reported to Congress in 2016, his team had compiled a record of seventeen wins and three losses over the previous two seasons. Many expected his new protocol to hamper development and lead to his players being exposed to more violent hits in the games, but Dartmouth had the top-ranked Division 1 defense in the nation in 2015. Along with the top ranking, their missed tackles per game were at an all-time low, and

there were zero defensive concussions for the 2015 season (House Committee on Energy & Commerce, 2016).

Out of his program, Coach Teevens has begun to work with a program called “Practice like Pros.” The CEO of Practice like Pros, Terry O’Neil, also testified before the Congressional Subcommittee on Energy and Commerce with Coach Teevens about their program for high schools. Their motive was simple in that most head injuries in college and high school occur in practice instead of games. During the hearing, Mr. O’Neil showed a slide that had the statistics on the percentage of total concussions that happened in practices for the NFL and for high schools. In the NFL, three percent of concussions occur in practice, but in high school, sixty to seventy-five percent of concussions occur in practice. “This is the worst, most shameful statistic in all of football,” according to Mr. O’Neil (House Committee on Energy & Commerce, 2016).

Mr. O’Neil also quotes an expert in his testimony to Congress, saying that if a thirteen-year-old has played football his whole life, and another thirteen-year-old has never stepped foot on a football field, it would take the inexperienced player a single week to catch up with the other’s skill level (House Committee on Energy & Commerce, 2016). Mr. O’Neil and Coach Teevens’ program recommends that players below the age of thirteen play flag football citing that it is safer, and it does not undermine the game as it is played. Players can still develop skills to play at an elite level. For example, Peyton Manning and Eli Manning, who combined have four Super Bowl titles, did not play organized football until the seventh grade, and Tom Brady, who has won five Super Bowls, did not begin playing football until the ninth grade (House Committee on Energy

& Commerce, 2016). So, the arguments that many pose, inferring that children will not develop skillsets for their football careers in high school and college, are absurd.

For high school football teams, Practice like Pros recommend that teams have no spring/summer/off-season full contact, three hours total of full contact in the pre-season, and only thirty minutes of full contact per week during the season. For reference, the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS) and USA Football recommend three times as much contact, “Pop Warner four times, and the NCAA six times,” (House Committee on Energy & Commerce, 2016). This program has been instituted in the state of Wisconsin, and a Wisconsin Medical School study found that the rate of concussions fell by nearly half in 2015. (House Committee on Energy & Commerce, 2016).

Current State of Youth Tackle Football

While many of these policies are becoming popularized in colleges and high schools at a minimal level, there is not much being done in the youth football leagues to align with the safety push. Some, such as Dr. Bennet Omalu, have begun referring to youth tackle football as “child abuse” while others, such as Merrill Hoge, present naïve rebuttals essentially saying that the football realm can handle this issue without government interference (Hoge, 2018). The question, however, is if it can. Youth tackle football has more participants than any level of the game with more participants than the NFL, NCAA, and high school teams combined. In the next section, I will examine various youth tackle football leagues to see what information they give regarding their safety protocols.

Safety Protocols

Most football leagues have some sort of safety protocol to ensure some standard of safety for their players. They can range from mandatory practice limits, to water breaks, to rules during the games. It is important to look at the protocols that are in place around the youth tackle football leagues.

Pop Warner Little Scholars has a youth football and cheer program that includes players starting at the age of five years old, but it does not provide its safety protocol on its website nor does it provide access to its rule book and administration manual. Instead, under a tab on their website entitled “Safety”, it reads,

Pop Warner places value on safety measures that make a difference. That’s why we have done things in football like reduce contact to 25% of practice time, eliminate kickoffs for our youngest divisions and require that any player who suffers a suspected head injury receive medical clearance from a concussion specialist before returning to play. Giving our coaches the tools they need to teach the game the right way enhances those efforts. So we made USA Football’s Heads Up Football training mandatory for all Pop Warner coaches because a well-educated coach is critical to a safer football experience. Similarly, we require our cheer coaches to take the YCADA training. And we’re guided by an independent Medical Advisory Committee of

neurosurgeons, sports medicine professionals, pediatricians and researchers, (Pop Warner Little Scholars, n.d.).

In addition to these two paragraphs that are available to the public, Pop Warner also provides a one minute video on the same page ensuring parents that Pop Warner is safe. While they do share the programs that they use, they do not offer which portions of those programs are mandatory or even offered. USA Football's Heads Up Football is a wide-reaching program which is very well designed, but it does not have football leagues of its own. Instead, USA Football offers only recommendations to youth football leagues (USA Football, n.d.).

Organizations like USA Football have a wealth of resources available to ensure the safety of the game. Their website includes proper techniques, drills, tests, coaching classes, referee classes, parent classes, and even helps you to find a league near you that goes through their certifications (USA Football, n.d.). The problem is that they cannot enforce any of the proper ways of playing football because they do not have a youth football league that answers to them.

While Pop Warner only has two paragraphs devoted to their safety measures, some other organizations do not have that. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) of Greater Montgomery does not provide any sort of safety protocol to the public on their website (YMCA, n.d.). The only information on their youth tackle football league is that children between the ages of six and twelve are allowed to participate (YMCA, n.d.). While organizations like these are lacking, there are some that

do try to put safety first and to inform those who may allow their children to play of the safety measures in place.

Leagues that do answer to governing bodies in many states is in public schools. The junior high school level of football is typically run by a state's high school activities association. In Mississippi, that would be the Mississippi High School Activities Association, or MHSAA, and private schools belong to the MAIS, or Mississippi Association of Independent Schools. Though they do not have much available, both of these associations have safety protocols in place.

The MHSAA provides a concussion policy that says,

An athlete who reports or displays any symptoms or signs of a concussion in a practice or game setting should be removed immediately from the practice or game. The athlete should not be allowed to return to the practice or game for the remainder of the day regardless of whether the athlete appears or states that he/she is normal.

The athlete should be evaluated by a licensed, qualified medical professional working within their scope of practice as soon as can be practically arranged. If an athlete has sustained a concussion, the athlete should be referred to a licensed physician preferably one with experience in managing sports concussion injuries. The athlete who has been diagnosed with a concussion should be returned to play only after full recovery and clearance by a

physician. Recovery from a concussion, regardless of loss on consciousness, usually takes 7-14 days after resolution of all symptoms. Return to play after a concussion should be gradual and follow a progressive return to competition. An athlete should not return to a competitive game before demonstrating that he/she has no symptoms in a full supervised practice. Athletes should not continue to practice or return to play while still having symptoms of a concussion. Sustaining an impact to the head while recovering from a concussion may cause Second Impact Syndrome, a catastrophic neurological brain injury (MHSAA, 2016).

In addition to the MHSAA's concussion policy, the MHSAA has a list of certifications and forms for players, coaches, and parents to have before participating in MHSAA sanctioned events (MHSAA, 2017). The MHSAA also includes a 14-Day Heat Acclimatization Period which is to help players adjust to playing in the heat of late summer (MHSAA, 2017). In that period, players may not participate in more than one practice per day, practice should not exceed three hours per day, and players are not allowed to dress in full protective gear until the sixth day of the period (MHSAA, 2017).

While the MHSAA has several policies that are good indicators of their wish to keep players safe, the MAIS does not offer such policies on their website. The MAIS may have some sort of safety protocol for its football teams, but if they do not provide those, then their players and the public are left in the dark as to what will happen if someone becomes injured.

Justification and Conceptual Framework

In the literature that I have reviewed on tackle football, risk of injury is apparent in the game, but the effort to minimize those risks is almost non-existent. I have already shown that football is inherently dangerous and that not much is being done to minimize that risk in youth leagues, but in this section, I will argue that the current efforts to minimize risks should be improved. Policies that are in place for safety should be constantly improved as information evolves if possible. Football is no different. Over time, the game has evolved its own safety policies as information has come to fruition. Take the National Football League (NFL) for example. It began with players having no helmet at all, and when information came that wearing a helmet was safer, the NFL mandated that all players wear helmets. The same is true for facemasks, heat acclimation policies, concussion policies, and rule changes, like where players can line up on kickoffs. These policy improvements are being made at the high school, college, and professional levels, but because of a lack of public literature in safety policies, it is unclear if youth leagues are doing the same across the board or if they are in fact improving certain aspects. This is important because parents may like to investigate league safety policies before letting their children play, and if those policies are not available on a public forum, then the public cannot know if there are any safety policies in place or the extent of the safety policies that are in place. This lack of literature points to underdeveloped safety policies in youth tackle football leagues. It seems odd that we allow children to play a dangerous game with fewer regulations than the NFL. After all, studies have already shown, as presented to Congress, that football has more health

implications at the high school level than it does in the NFL due to underdeveloped bodies (weaker muscles in the neck and around joints) (Nowinski & Bailes, 2009).

However, Merrill Hoge writes in his book that, yes, football is dangerous, but it provides an overwhelming benefit of teamwork, character, and leadership development (Hoge, 2018). However, many parents would probably rather have their children experience these benefits without the potentially serious harm that could befall them, as he acknowledges later in his book. So, even a strong critic of recent science will agree that safety improvements in football are, overall, a good thing. Football does provide not only an arena for children to grow, learn, and ultimately have fun, but the game also provides a larger community that could be beneficial to many people. Parents can even come together and form beneficial friendships, like their children. However, all of the benefits developed through a game being played in junior high school or peewee leagues are not worth broken bones, torn ligaments, brain damage, or death. There is simply not enough good that comes from the game of football that could justify children being exposed to the risk of serious injury that is present in the game, especially when most, if not all, of these goods can be obtained in other, safer sports.

There is an obligation for parents, coaches, administrators and the government to improve safety policies in youth tackle football for the youth of our society because all of these different groups or entities are expected to some degree to keep children safe. We have a long history of taking action when children are in danger because we recognize that children are vulnerable and need our protection from threats to their well-being. They provide the future of our society, which constitutes a general concern with their

safety. There is very little good that can possibly come from children being exposed to the amount of danger that is present in an unregulated football arena.

While it may be difficult to pin the obligation on a single person or handful of people, it seems as though everyone involved has their own role to play in making the game safer for children. Each entity involved should be able to hold each other accountable for and share the responsibilities in making the decisions concerning the safety of children. This notion of shared obligations is present in the current public education system in the United States. Parents have an obligation to provide an education to their children; however, they are not the only ones who have that obligation. Governments also have the obligation to provide an education for their citizens, and because of this, the United States has laws that force children to go to school. However, these two entities, government and parents, are not the sole possessors of the obligation to educate children. Teachers actually maintain the teaching component of education, so they too have the obligation to educate students.

The three different entities share accountability in pursuit of the end result of educating children properly. The teachers are held accountable by the government's regulation of schools and by parents that can have some say in what the school may be doing. Parents can be held accountable by truancy laws and giving the teachers the role of teaching their children. Government is held accountable by parents and teachers because they are voters and can freely elect new leadership if changes need to be made. This example provides a similar framework for how the obligations should exist when it comes to youth tackle football.

As a starting point, parents have the obligation to make sure what their children are doing is safe enough for them to do, but it would be excessive to say that parents can always perceive and be able to prevent these risks of danger to their children. In the event that a parent cannot foresee the dangers present in letting their children play football, the leagues and coaches have the obligation to take special care to make the game safer for children while they are entrusted with caring for the children. While at the surface this seems like a sufficient relationship to keep players safe, a scenario could and often does play out where parents cannot perceive the dangers present in football, and leagues and coaches do not do enough to make the game safer. Merrill Hoge talks about this issue in his book, but offers education as the way to fix this problem (Hoge, 2018). However, government, at whatever level may seem fit, has the power and means to regulate leagues for safety protocols to ensure that players will be kept safer despite the possibility of parents or coaches being unable to perceive the risks present in the game.

Despite the policies being unclear or unavailable in many cases, there are some policies that leagues and schools do currently hold, so there should be an adequate basis to launch the questions of what is currently inadequate and how Mississippi can improve their youth tackle football safety. I have established that there is a problem in the realm of youth tackle football and why it is important that action take place in order to protect youth participants of tackle football. In finding a policy solution to this problem, there are many different factors that will decide what policy should say and whether it will be effective.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Through this research, I explored many different factors in order to give a more comprehensive and practical look at what could be done to better youth tackle football safety policies in Mississippi. This research was conducted through a series of semi-structured interviews with experts in the fields of policy, administration, medicine, and tackle football in order to propose appropriate and feasible policy changes. In order to better understand what a good and practical policy would contain, I discussed the options for potential policy with experts in medicine to determine the level of safety that should and could be met, experts in administration to determine the feasibility of implementing and enforcing policies, and experts in the game of football to ensure that the game of football as it stands today will be compromised as little as possible. I limited the scope of this study to the state of Mississippi due to the access to subjects that was within my means as a student to travel to meet.

I also presented a stronger focus on junior high and high school safety policies instead of presenting a large focus on peewee football leagues because many youth tackle football leagues that are independent from school football teams are not as easily subjected to government intervention because of the flow of taxpayer dollars. In leagues like Pop Warner or Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) youth football, the government does not provide funding, so it is more difficult for the government to regulate the operations of those organizations. However, the government does provide funding to all public schools that participate in the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) and some of the private and parochial schools that participate in

both the MHSAA and Mississippi Association of Independent Schools (MAIS), so government intervention is more likely in both of those leagues. I also made the assumption that if problems and concerns were found among these older age groups, the same problems could be assumed to exist in some capacity within lower age groups.

As for how this research was conducted, after obtaining IRB approval from the University of Mississippi (Protocol #19x-272), I contacted each expert individually asking for their participation in a semi-structured interview. I offered the options of an interview over the phone or an in-person interview to each person. In the interviews, I asked the experts questions relevant to their field of expertise; additionally, I also included several generic questions related to this topic for each person that I interviewed. All of these interview questions can be found in Appendix A and the transcripts of those interviews can be found in the following appendices. After conducting all of the interviews, I evaluated all responses to develop a better understanding of the current safety policies. In the next chapter, I have categorized my evaluation into several themes that emerged from the interviews.

For the sake of protecting the subjects' reputations, jobs, and integrity, I have changed all identifiers in this study. However, the intent in doing this was twofold, I wanted the subjects to be honest with me, and therefore, I needed to guarantee that their names would not be used. The size of the schools and whether they were public or private was not changed in this thesis.

The individuals that I contacted were two junior varsity, or junior high school football coaches and their athletic directors for interviews about their first-hand experience with youth football safety policies and what they find to be inadequate. Of the

two coaches and athletic directors, one coach and athletic director was from a 6-A public school in the MHSAA and possessed over twenty years of experience each and the others were from a 5-A parochial school in the MAIS each possessing around thirty years of experience. Both of these schools are of the largest in their respective associations and have significantly larger financial budgets than many of their opponents. I chose these schools because of their size and financial stability. This method was to investigate how policies were implemented at schools that have the most resources to implement those policies. This assumes the idea that if these schools have issues with safety policies and have trouble implementing them with their large budgets, then smaller less funded schools likely also have this problem.

After interviewing the coaches and athletic directors, the subjects referred me to two more subjects in an athletic trainer who was contracted by one of the schools and had six years of experience and a local sports medicine chiropractor with nineteen years of experience. I conducted similar interviews with the athletic trainer and the sports medicine chiropractor as I did with the coaches. However, I asked them more questions about how children's safety can be compromised in playing football, and what ways were best to minimize that danger. I then contacted the Executive Directors of the Mississippi High School Activities Association and Mississippi Association of Independent Schools to discuss the policies that they have in place, their effectiveness, and what policies they are working on for the future. I also discussed what may be holding them back from implementing more stringent polices.

Table 1

LIST OF SUBJECTS	
JUNIOR HIGH FOOTBALL COACH	5-A (PUBLIC)
JUNIOR HIGH FOOTBALL COACH	5-A (PRIVATE)
ATHLETIC DIRECTOR	5-A (PUBLIC)
ATHLETIC DIRECTOR	5-A PRIVATE
OFFICIAL	PUBLIC SCHOOL ASSOCIATION
OFFICIAL	INDEPENDENT SCHOOL ASSOCIATION
ATHLETIC TRAINER	SAFE SPORTS PHYSICAL THERAPY
SPORTS MEDICINE CHIROPRACTOR	PRIVATE PRACTICE

I approached this research with the view that football is dangerous and that something should be done to make the game as safe as possible while conserving much of what is present in the game today. In Chapter 2, I provided literature that supports the claim that football is not only a dangerous game, but one of the most dangerous games played in the United States, so this claim should be well supported. The claim that something should be done to minimize the danger associated with youth tackle football is one of moral value and holds true in many other aspects, so this claim should be well supported as well.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The methodology that was used in this study had both strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses of the study involve the inherent weaknesses of using interviews as a methodology. For instance, interviews do not simplify the data nor are they conducive for a large quantity of subjects to be interviewed in a short time-frame. Interviews also take into account the opinions of experts who may or may not have support for the claims that they make; however, there were also strengths in using interviews.

Interviews allow experts to respond to open ended questions and present the situations and events in the way that they have experienced them. They also gave insights that would likely have not been given had a questionnaire with closed-ended questions been sent to a large quantity of subjects. Instead this qualitative method allowed for various meanings from participants, context of participants, and interpretation of the data collected (Creswell, 2014, p. 18).

This methodology will also provide a way to compare the national conversation of football safety that I presented in the literature to that of a single state. For instance, the literature presents arguments from scientists, doctors, and famous former football players, but it does not tell us the attitudes and opinions of what coaches and administrators of youth tackle football leagues are.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

While conducting the interviews, I found that there were distinct themes that emerged from my conversations with the individuals who participated. The respondents talked about issues facing players' safety, but I also discovered that there are many different philosophies and opinions that are present in the youth tackle football world. Some claim that football is as safe as it has ever been and that it is currently safe enough, and some claim that football could definitely be made safer than it is. This difference of opinion is one that should be kept in mind throughout the presentation of the data and any recommendations in this thesis.

In the data that I collected, I found there to be two areas where improvements could be made in Mississippi junior high sports. Regulation and oversight is the first of these areas. Despite a lack of regulation and oversight, one of the subjects that I interviewed had installed various additional safety precautions at his school. He cited the reason for this set of extra safety measures as the school being fortunate financially. This leads me into the second area where there are deficiencies in Mississippi youth football, funding. In every interview that I conducted, the topic of funding was described as an inhibitor to having greater safety. In this section, I will present the data that I collected and the various themes which emerged. I will begin with difference of opinion, and continue into regulations, self-regulation, and the lack of regulations, and finally, into the discussion on oversight. After the data on regulations and oversight is presented, I will then present the funding issues in Mississippi youth football, including personnel and equipment.

Differing Opinions

Before delving into the data that I will present on the issues facing youth tackle football in Mississippi, I find it important to address the complexity of the issue by presenting the data that show a variety of stances on the current state of safety policy in youth tackle football in Mississippi. Because these opinions can be the foundations for the action or inaction of the officials who are empowered to regulate the sport, the difference of opinion can prove to be vital to understanding the policy solutions that will follow.

In the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA), the Executive Director has the opinion that football is safer than it has ever been and that it is good enough. When asked if he provided information about the risks of playing football to players' parents, he responded, "We actually try to, rather than tell them about the risks involved, we actually try to explain to them that football is the safest it has ever been...I know it was safer than when I actually played." Another Executive Director at the Mississippi Association of Independent School (MAIS) responded to the question saying he thinks that we can do better as a state in terms of safety by saying he thinks "football has gotten a lot more negative publicity than other sports. I mean we see more injuries in cheerleading than we probably do in football."

These opinions can be contrasted with the will to make football safer than it currently is by the middle school football coach and athletic director at Waterford Middle School. At Waterford Middle School, there is evidence of the school going above and beyond what is required by the MHSAA safety guidelines and a concern with the lack of guidelines in the MHSAA rules and on their website. The middle school coach in

Waterford talked about the confusion that is present with regard to safety guidelines and regulations in Mississippi by saying, "...we have these questions all the time like—you know we have questions just about our sport, you have to go to the website, the MHSAA website, and there is nothing—you know, there are like four or five general guidelines, but these are just suggestions, so you are on your own to do that." I also talked to the athletic director who began to list every extra program or regulation that they self-implement because of an understanding that football is a dangerous sport.

The football coach at Saint Thomas More High School in Dallas, Mississippi had an opinion of his own that he forged from over thirty years of experience in coaching football in the youth level. He claimed, "kids start playing football too early," and that an emphasis should be placed on good coaching practices and conditioning,

I am a big advocate of making sure that they are in shape because when a kid is in great physical shape, they can learn better, and they can keep the proper techniques that we taught them. I don't care what kind of techniques you teach them, if they are tired in the ninety-five-degree weather, they are gonna resort back to some bad habits.

While he believes that physical conditioning and proper techniques are essential to safety in football, he also commented that he thinks, "They are not physically ready to be doing some of the things that they are doing. A lot of those kids bring

injuries from peewee leagues to junior high and from junior high to high school, so they are already injured when you get them.”

This opinion is somewhat echoed in the words of Dr. Balie Dunkirk, a licensed athletic trainer, strength coach, and sports medicine chiropractor. He states, “In the 19 years that I have been practicing, I am seeing a younger influx of children, young adults coming in with headaches and stuff after a football game that was not happening 15 years ago or more than that.” He explained that up until the age of twenty-one, the male body is still growing from a musculoskeletal standpoint.

So, the bodies are soft. I tell my patients that their bones are like marshmallows. Now, that’s not true, but it helps them understand it. The bones are softer so the trauma to the brain—it’s not as hard as a turtle shell as it would be when you were 25 or 30. So, when you are in a collision or have an injury at a young age, you are at a higher risk of having trauma from that.

I asked if that was true of all injuries, not just to the head, and Dr. Dunkirk responded, “Every injury. Anything and everything.” All in all, Dr. Dunkirk boiled down his opinion on the cause of the increased injury to parental pressure by saying,

I'm gonna go on a limb and say this actually, and no one expects me to say that because I am supposed to be the athletic minded individual. It is the parents. Parents are pushing their kids too hard. I am seeing younger kids come in to me with substantial injuries. Baseball pitchers, their parents are pushing them wanting them to become the next NCAA player, they gotta get a scholarship at Ole Miss or wherever they are gonna go to school. They are pushing these kids. They have tournament baseball now that goes year-round. When I grew up it was summer, and that was it. Now, you play year-round. These kids are being pushed by their parents wanting to see them excel or wanting them to be the next Michael Jordan or whoever the best athlete they think there is in the mind. It's the parents who are pushing their kids.

While Coach Taylor and Dr. Dunkirk believe that there is an issue in players beginning football too early, the athletic trainer at Waterford Middle School attributes the greatest threat to junior high players as not beginning early enough, "...a middle school player, there is a chance, a good chance that they didn't grow up playing peewee football. Some of those kids never played that, so they don't have the technique down."

These opinions greatly differ with that of the two Executive Directors that I interviewed in that they felt like the few existing safety guidelines and regulations that are presented in the literature were enough because they think football is safe in relative comparison to its past and to other sports.

Table 2

Table of Findings: Difference of Opinions	
Coach #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very concerned about safety. • Very enthusiastic about certifications, education, and new methods for safety. • Thought that more needed to be done than the organization was doing.
Coach #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinks children begin to play football too early • More focused on old school methods of safety like conditioning.
Athletic Director #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety is of the utmost importance. • Thought that more needed to be done than the organization was doing.
Athletic Director #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety is important, but was not concerned. • Thought his organization handled safety well.
Executive Director #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very skeptical to say that football was dangerous. • Instead talked about how much safer it is now than it was in the past.
Executive Director #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very skeptical of the idea that football is dangerous. • Argued that cheerleading saw more injuries than football.
Athletic Trainer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No real comment on the issue.
Sports Medicine Chiropractor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees parents as the main inhibitor to safety of football players. • Kids are playing football too young and too much.

Regulation and Oversight

Both the Mississippi High School Activities Association and the Mississippi Association of Independent Schools provide very little information to the public on their rules, safety precautions, and procedures to the general public, but also, they do not provide much more information to the members of their organizations either. When told that several individuals who participate in the MHSAA described the safety guidelines as ambiguous, the Executive Director for the MHSAA simply said, “Exactly.” This kind of ambiguity in regulations can provide for many questions to arise regarding equipment, especially in youth football. Much of the rules that the MHSAA or MAIS issue are directed toward high school athletics leaving many to wonder if the same applies to the junior high equivalent. These questions can arise from equipment recertification to whether medical staff must be at a game. As the junior high football coach at Waterford Middle School stated, “We recondition our stuff every two years. I am not sure. I think it is recommended, but I do not think it is required in middle school...”

There is a lack of regulation issue according to Mike Nelson, the junior high football coach at Waterford Middle School.

“I don’t know how familiar you are, but I think if you go on—a couple things. The state activities association website—I don’t think there is a lot of rules and regulations regarding any of the middle school sports. They don’t regulate those. There are some suggestions and guidelines, but there is nothing in any sport—how

you are supposed to operate, how you are supposed to do it, how you compete for a championship, any of that...I don't think there is actually any written regulations or policies. It's sort of you are on your own, buddy, to do that.

According to him, there are essentially no policies or guidelines that pertain to junior high or middle school football. When the Executive Director of the MHSAA, Waterford's governing body, was asked about the policies that dealt with junior high football, he responded, "Same as high school, same regulations as high schools." There is an inconsistent thread of information that could be interpreted as a communication failure between the association and their coaches or a lack of clarity issue in the rules and regulations.

Because the coaches and athletic directors in the MHSAA believe there to be inadequate or no regulations, they have begun to take preventative strategies on their own. In Waterford Middle and High School, the athletic director has begun a contract with a local physical therapy group for them to be present at every game and practice and for them to implement a concussion protocol in the high school only. When asked if the concussion protocol is something that he would like to see expanded to the middle school, Mr. Smith said, "Should we test these ninth graders and middle schoolers? I believe it's coming. I believe it's coming and coming soon. That is a step we should probably make. Should it be statewide? I am telling you it is coming. I know it is. It may be after I retire, but those things will come." The athletic director at Waterford Middle School also talked at length about the amount of extra certification that he

requires from his coaches, but his really proud advancement was the presence of his physical therapy trainers. He saw the absence of trainers at opposing teams as an issue,

I can easily foresee the day that if you are gonna hire a head football coach, you have to hire a PT. You have to have one. If you can afford to hire this guy, you gotta hire this guy because I am telling you now, I could not imagine not having a physical therapist on our sidelines...

This issue, while it has to do with regulations, also has a relation to funding and issues with personnel. This leads into the next and final theme of funding, equipment, and personnel, and the lack thereof.

Table 3

Table of Findings: Regulation and Oversight	
Coach #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No oversight • Did extensive certification that was not required • Ambiguous safety policies • Lack of communication
Coach #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saw very few policies • Laughed when talking about the safety policies that his organization had. • Said they want a new video watched with rules every year
Athletic Director #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State organization is almost irrelevant with regards to safety • Mandates many certifications on his own.
Athletic Director #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does nothing more than the MAIS mandates. • Says they have few policies, mainly about heat warnings
Executive Director #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains that they do have oversight • Oversight consists of reports from opposing teams and parents
Executive Director #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oversight consists of reports from opposing teams and parents
Athletic Trainer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No comment
Sports Medicine Chiropractor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No comment

Funding, Equipment, and Personnel

Many of the concerns voiced by the participants were regarding equipment, personnel, and the funding that they lack to ensure adequate levels of each. Dr. Dunkirk commented on the equipment being used by children today by saying, “The equipment is better than I had when I was coming up...So, the performance apparel that the kids are wearing has improved dramatically, but the athletic ability of the children has improved dramatically.” However, as Coach Nelson put it,

I think one of the most over looked things, particularly for this age group is equipment. You know, depending on where you are and what you are doing, if you are in our situation, then you might be using hand-me-downs. If you are in a school district, you might be using hand-me-down helmets. You might be using hand-me-down equipment. You might be using hand-me-down shoulder pads. Of course, and if you get into the elementary thing, that’s basically totally unregulated, so you have got stuff you can buy at Walmart as a parent...if you are using hand-me-down, old high school equipment, what you are using are probably adult sizes. So, you are using equipment that is not designed for that age group. I think a lot of the issue is because it is expensive to get it.

That coach's athletic trainer confirmed that the school uses hand-me-down equipment and old shoulder pads. He also expressed lack of clarity on recertification rules.

The high school gets brand new helmets every two years, brand new shoulder pads about every three or four years, and we do give our stuff down to the middle school. So, yeah, they do use older stuff. Schools with more money could buy new equipment for their middle school, but I don't think that happens very often in Mississippi...I don't think there is a rule in Mississippi about shoulder pads, and I could be wrong on that, but we—we use some old shoulder pads too.

Coach Nelson took issue with how many individuals he had on hand to help supervise practices and to instruct his players,

I think the numbers of coaching—I think there are some guidelines—you have numbers of players and then you have numbers of coaches that you have, but certainly there is not anything concrete about middle school, and so I think that is a problem that you have in a lot of middle schools that have a lot of kids out, and then they may have one coach for fifty kids. Maybe one coach and one volunteer coach with fifty kids...That is just a

situation like—if you’ve got twenty kids, that’s cool, but if you are like us, I mean we got sixty—I got almost seventy kids coming up next year in seventh grade. I think that is some of the biggest issues when you start thinking about safety. That’s not really related to safety rules and policies, but that is just sort of a common-sense thing, but it’s also a money thing [sigh].

In an interview with the athletic trainer that oversees operations at Waterford Middle and High School, I asked about personnel to player ratios. He compared them to the Waterford staff, which he states has its own coaching staff for each team, middle school, ninth grade, junior varsity, and varsity. “A lot of schools, a whole lot of schools, they combine all of that and that is a safety concern.” In other words, other schools may only have one coaching staff that is in charge of all of that school district’s football teams. In the following chapter, I will further discuss the findings that I have presented in this chapter.

Table 4

Table of Findings: Funding, Equipment, and Personnel	
Coach #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team uses hand-me-downs • Other teams are worse off. • Coach to player ratio is lacking at many schools • Funding is big part of the problem • Having a trainer is important
Coach #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No comment
Athletic Director #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is an issue. • Amount of personnel is very important • Having a trainer should be mandatory
Athletic Director #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is an issue in getting the proper equipment and having it refurbished.
Executive Director #1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is probably an issue. • Equipment is better than ever. • Trainers are not mandatory, so coaches need to be first responders.
Executive Director #2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding can be seen as an issue.
Athletic Trainer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Says funding would greatly help to buy safer equipment • Says team uses old equipment
Sports Medicine Chiropractor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Says new equipment is very good • However, it is expensive.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I will discuss the importance of the findings. I presented three major themes that emerged in the findings, and now I will tie those themes together in order to better depict the issues facing youth tackle football safety in the state of Mississippi.

Difference of Opinion

The literature and my collected data both supported the fact that there are differing views when it comes to youth tackle football safety measures on a spectrum from youth tackle football being perfectly safe as the Executive Director of the MHSAA asserted to the opinion held by Dr. Bennet Omalu that youth tackle football is very near child abuse (Hoge, 2018). I have heard from experts that believe children begin playing football too early, and I have heard from experts that maintain beginning football at a young age helps them to learn techniques that will keep them safe. This debate is being had between doctors and between coaches, neither group coming to a conclusion on how this issue should be resolved. Some argue that better educated coaches are needed to educate young children in the proper tackling techniques (Hoge, 2018), and some argue that children should not begin playing football until they are older like Coach Taylor at Saint Thomas More High School. There are also individuals falling in the middle of this spectrum such as Dr. Balie Dunkirk who seems to argue that playing football is fine for children who have adequate equipment and instruction to do so, but the issue instead lies in moderation of that activity. He talks about parents pushing their children to extreme levels of activity, even to the point of injury and damage to their body.

It is this difference of opinion that could be said to have inhibited the flow of funding to football programs for safety measures. Due to the ineffectiveness, the inability to achieve a goal or objective (Kraft & Furlong, 2015), that the continuous debate provides, children are being subjected to policies that are inadequate, inefficient, and ineffective. However, this debate is not new. In the early twentieth century, President Theodore Roosevelt requested the presence of coaches to the White House to solve the injury issue in college football despite his own opinion that he felt no sympathy for players who suffered injury just short of fatality (Klein, 2012). Today, the debate rages on. During his presidency and adding fuel to the debate, Barack Obama spoke out and told a reporter that if he had a son, he would not let him play football (Breech, 2014). In contrast, Dr. Kevin Guskiewicz is one of the leading researchers on concussions, and he maintains that football is safer than it has ever been. His explanation for an increased rise in reported concussions is that players now know about concussions and are more apt to report them (Charco, n.d.).

One need look no further than the congressional testimonies before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce by experts in youth football and medicine to see the debate in full swing. As some defend the safety level in youth tackle football, others, like Christopher Nowinski and Dr. Julian Bailes, attack it saying that it could be better. As Dr. Bailes point out, "...high schools and lower levels have less of everything. They have less education. They have less medical advice and attention. They have less number of athletic trainers...they also have a brain that is probably more vulnerable," in contrast with the National Football League. (Nowinski & Bailes, 2009). Others, like Merrill Hoge, contest the science that is presented against the claim that football is safe enough. Hoge

even does so in the title of his book by calling the science behind CTE and other football injuries a “plot to destroy football” (Hoge, 2018). The main disagreement is whether or not football has an acceptable level of risk. While most coaches and administrators would not fight many extra safety policies and resources, some simply do not think they are necessary

Lack of Funding

In schools, such as Waterford Middle School, where the opinions held by the coaching staff and athletic administration is of the camp that football should be made safer than it is, the administration goes above and beyond what is mandated for safety by allocating funding for certifications, training, and additional personnel. However, like the Executive Directors of the MAIS and MHSAA, the opinions that football is safe enough is likely what prevents those organizations from advancing safety regulations that would require additional funding.

This inadequate funding is a statewide issue and cross class issue as described by multiple of the interviewees. Waterford is not able to purchase new and up to date equipment for its middle school players, and it is of the largest classification in the state and has a significant tax base upon which to draw funds, as Coach Nelson said. He maintained that the issue only gets worse as you move down the size and financial budget scale of school systems in Mississippi.

In reality, this inadequate funding hinders adequate safety measures being in place at the statewide level. Without this funding, there is very little that the state organizations can mandate in safety regulations and still allow every school to put a football team on the field. So, naturally, state organizations provide very few and vague safety policies

that schools must follow. They also are not clear what policies are mandatory and what policies are “guidelines.” There is also very little that state organizations can do to maintain adequate oversight over schools in order to enforce the regulations that do exist. Instead, they must rely on the reporting of parents and opposing teams. These various shortcomings in safety policy support the fact that funding is not sufficient in schools and in the organizations that govern sports at the state level. When schools do not find help financially from their state and local funding bases, some decide to take up the task of making the game safer on their own, leaving many schools behind.

This lack of funding has brought about scares in areas mostly concerning the requirement of additional staff and their salaries. The state of North Carolina has already moved forward in requiring an athletic trainer to be present during all football practices and games, but the new regulation causes great unrest about how to pay for their salaries (Hoffman, 2015). Some high schools struggle for the funds for adequate equipment and even for enough money to pay an ambulance to be at the game (Furtado, 2006). These are just some of the problems that arise from a lack of funding for football safety in schools.

Lack of Oversight

The MHSAA and MAIS are the two governing bodies over schools’ athletic activities in Mississippi. They establish rules for safety, play, and conduct; however, they lack substantial oversight throughout the state. According to Athletic Directors Mike Smith and Michael Jones, athletic directors are the only ones making sure that the rules set forward by their respective governing bodies are enforced. In other words, unless a violation of policy is self-reported, reported by a parent, or reported by an

opposing team, there is no oversight being conducted for football in the state of Mississippi.

This leads to an inefficiency and inequity issue. If there is no enforcement of standards being set out by the state associations, then there will be coaches and athletic directors that are not following safety policies as they should be. This leads to some children experiencing inequity from those policies designed to keep them safe. If their coach or athletic director does not follow the rules and there is no efficient enforcement for them to follow those rules, then the children are not being treated as equals to the children in a school where coaches are following the safety policies.

This presents issues in proposing new safety policies and standards. If the state associations decided tomorrow that they would be the leaders in the United States in football safety policy but had no efficient way to enforce those policies, the state would continue to have safety deficiencies (Kraft & Furlong, 2015).

Policy Process Model

In the policy making world, there is a cyclical nature to the creation and adaptation of policies. According to Kraft and Furlong, there are six distinct stages in the policy making cycle: problem definition and agenda setting, policy formulation, policy legitimization, policy implementation, policy evaluation, and policy change (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, pp. 84-101).

The policy process often begins with a problem being perceived in society. As that problem progresses and the study around it is able to define that problem, it commands more attention from political figures that can create an agenda around that problem or add the problem into their existing political agenda. After the problem has

been added to the agenda of political players, a policy begins to formulate in the drafts of goals and means by which to achieve those goals. However, this policy is far from being effective (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, pp. 84-101).

The next stage in the Policy Process Model as described by Kraft and Furlong is the “Policy Legitimation” stage (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 86). This is defined as “the mobilization of political support and formal enactment of policies,” (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 86). In this stage, the public gains the information about the issue and how the proposed policy will help to solve that issue. When the public and political officials have given their support to the policy, it can move to the policy implementation stage of the model where resources are provided for the implementation of the policy. This stage entails the policy being put into action (Kraft & Furlong, 2015).

After policies go into effect, they are constantly under evaluation in order to assess the performance of the policy, and to gain insight for improvements to the policy in the future. This policy evaluation stage often leads to policy change when after evaluations, better means to achieve the policy goals are found. These new-found means can be subject to the beginning of the model where the changes find their way back to the agenda setting stage (Kraft & Furlong, 2015).

Using this model, this thesis fits into the policy evaluation and the beginning of the policy change stage of the Policy Process Model by evaluating the current policies and the conditions surrounding those policies in youth tackle football organizations in Mississippi and providing recommendations for policy changes.

Policy Recommendations

In this section, I present my recommendations for the state of Mississippi to move forward in the direction of furthering the safety of its children who wish to play the game of football. While the alternative exists to ban football before a certain age or altogether for youth participants, I do not believe this to be the best course of action in that football is such a large part of American culture, and it would not be politically feasible for a legislative body to ban football. I believe that the best policy actions would be to better the safety while not taking away from the game that has long been an established part of American culture. However, because the game should still exist, it is imperative that it is made as safe as possible.

Creation of Oversight Committee

Because of the seriousness in potential injury that football imposes, it is pertinent that there is an enforcement committee that is tasked with the regulation and oversight of teams throughout the state. Kraft and Furlong define regulation as a way that government can take action. It can include licensing, inspection, enforcement of standards, and application of sanctions (Kraft & Furlong, 2015, p. 158). All of these powers and duties could and should be given to a committee tasked with regulating youth tackle football in Mississippi.

Simply relying on parents and opposing teams to report violations taking place is not sufficient because parents and opposing teams are often not allowed to be present for practices. This limits what can be seen and thereby limits the amount of reports that can be filed for misconduct, safety concerns, or violations of safety protocols. As the Executive Director for the MHSAA said, it is important that teams follow the safety

guidelines. Compliance is an issue, so there must be individuals who are tasked with policing the policies and teams that are in place.

An oversight committee would have the ability to designate regional officers who could do surprise inspections of various team practices and monitor what those practices look like, how the coaches are handling certain situations regarding safety, and to make sure that safety policies are being followed.

Required Presence of an Athletic Trainer/Medical Staff

Almost every subject that I interviewed talked about how important it is to have an athletic trainer or physical therapist on the sidelines at football games. However, both executive directors that were interviewed told me that there is no requirement for schools to have any medical personnel on the sidelines. A policy to require the presence of an athletic trainer before a game can begin should be put in place.

North Carolina has already taken the step forward by requiring every middle and high school in the state to have an athletic trainer at all football practices and games; however, there is widespread concern over how schools will be able to pay for this (Hoffman, 2015). While this policy will require more funding to pay the athletic trainer to be at every game, there are various ways that schools do this at no cost. The most popular way is to contract the work to a local physical therapist's office. At Waterford High School and St. Thomas More High School, physical therapists are contracted to work the games for free. While there is no money exchanging hands between the schools and the physical therapists, the physical therapists often have an interest in expanding their exposure and name recognition among the athletes and their families so that if an athlete gets injured, they will likely give the physical therapist more business.

If there are no local physical therapist offices nearby, schools should be required to have an athletic trainer on staff. As the athletic trainer that I interviewed put it, if schools can afford to pay coaches, referees, athletic directors, etc. then they should be able to pay an athletic trainer. The absence of any one of those persons that schools already pay for their work, would cause a game to be cancelled. An athletic trainer's presence should carry the same consequences.

In a study done by Wake Forest University School of Medicine, an athletic trainer was instituted in a single youth football organization of about 170 children. The athletic trainer was paid thirty-five dollars per hour for eighteen to twenty hours per week while the organization was in season totaling to seven thousand five hundred dollars for the entire season. The following season they decided that it was necessary to make the position a full-time position for six months, taking the total to sixteen thousand three hundred twenty-eight dollars (Urban, et al., 2017, p. 54). The amount of injuries that took place in the organization with a trainer was compared to the amount of injuries that took place in other leagues. The league that had an athletic trainer at practices and games suffered significantly fewer injuries (Urban, et al., 2017, p. 55). In their conclusion, they described funding as a major obstacle, but overall designated having an athletic trainer as "feasible, appreciated by parents, and may enhance player safety through improved injury awareness, prevention, and assessment," (Urban, et al., 2017, p. 57).

Coach to Player Ratios

Several of the subjects in this thesis discussed the coach to player ratio and how that can play a role in the safety of players. Some schools have numerous coaches per team that the school puts on the field, but some might only have one coach on the field

with sixty players to look after. This leads me to the recommendation that there be a required coach to player ratio for every team that plays youth tackle football in Mississippi. Preferably, this ratio should be around one coach for every eleven players, the number of players that will be on the field at any given time during a scrimmage or game.

Allocate Funding from the State of Mississippi

In the interviews that were conducted, every subject talked about funding as an issue to implementing safety policy. If schools were given more funding, they would be able to pay for better equipment, more staff, and an athletic trainer. These problems' solutions could lie in the state legislature. With the state's power to tax and allocate funds, it is feasible for the state to allocate funding to public schools that is specifically designated for safety policy implementation. This could also be a politically feasible option for action. As politicians realize that safety is lacking in their school districts, they will be more inclined to vote for more funding toward football safety.

Legislation of Explicit Safety Policies

With allocation of state funding for safety policy implementation, the state would then get a say in what safety policies should be in place. I recommend that the state legislature be tasked with the creation of a standard of care for youth tackle football and with the creation of safety policies to achieve that standard. While the public high schools in the state play in the MHSAA, a private nonprofit organization that receives no tax funds, the schools themselves are taxpayer funded, so if the state government mandated that all of the public schools follow certain policies, they would effectively be creating policy for the MHSAA. The MAIS would be an area that is harder to legislate

safety policies; however, some of these schools also receive state funding. Some parochial schools could be penalized by not following state safety guidelines by the removal of the funds that they receive from the state.

There have been statewide policy implementations. As previously mentioned in this thesis, Wisconsin has implemented the Practice Like the Pros safety guidelines and their injuries went down significantly (House Committee on Energy & Commerce, 2016). This program has been outlined in the background section of this thesis. The policies that should be legislated should be very explicit, meaning that they have little room for questions about how things should be done. Several of the subjects of this study discussed the ambiguity in many of the existing guidelines and safety policies. This should not be an issue in the legislature's policies.

Education

In the end, a large portion of the problem that is present in youth tackle football safety is a lack of information and lack of knowledge. We do not know for fact the consequences of repeated head injuries or repeated injuries in general. Many parents may not understand the impacts of what their children are risking by taking the field in a helmet and shoulder pads, and many coaches may not fully understand the gravity of the situation in teaching correct fundamentals to their players and devoting enough time in practice to do so. Many coaches do not even understand the safety policies that are in place in their state associations as several of my subjects attested to. Because of all of these problems, I recommend that education be a large portion of the policy action to take place. Funding for science to either confirm or deny that CTE is caused by football and that repeated head impacts cause life-long damages could be monumental in the future of

football safety, but the most feasible and impactful policies would be those that educate coaches, players, and parents about risks that may be associated with football, the correct tackling techniques, standards of care, and the safety policies that are in place.

Education can take many different forms. Currently, there are various organizations that hold camps and clinics to better educate children on the best way to tackle. One of these organizations, Heads Up Football sponsored by USA Football, has clinics, camps, and even online videos designed for players, coaches, and even parents (USA Football, n.d.). Practice Like Pros is another organization that holds clinics and conferences throughout the year and across the country to encourage less tackling during practice and providing information for coaches on how to conduct practice while minimizing contact, but not losing the valuable fundamentals of safe tackling (Practice Like Pros, 2019).

Other examples of education that can be beneficial to the safety of youth tackle football players is various certifications of coaches, many of which are not required by state associations, but like in Waterford, some schools have decided to obtain numerous certifications through online course work despite the cost and lack of requirement.

CHAPTER 6

LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

Limitations

In this thesis, there are various limitations to the study that has been conducted. Of these, the number of interviews conducted is the foremost. Due to various factors, I was unable to collect a vast number of interviews that would better represent the overall view of Mississippi's football and sports medicine community. I instead conducted 8 interviews, which included athletic directors and coaches from two schools, one belonging to the MHSAA and one belonging to the MAIS. In addition, I interviewed the Executive Directors of the MHSAA and the MAIS, and I was able to conduct interviews with two individuals that are members of the sports medicine community, an athletic trainer and sports medicine chiropractor.

Another limitation to this research is that there is a lack of generalizability among the opinions of the subjects. While they are experts, their opinions are not necessarily the opinions of the community to which they belong as a whole. In addition, I had no way of confirming the truthfulness of the interviewees about the actions that take place in their respective schools, offices, locker rooms, and on their fields.

I also did not have the ability to find and interview many youth league coaches or officials because of their lack of organization. Many schools put teams together for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders to play other nearby schools, but they are not sanctioned and are as informal of football games as there are. Without much organization, I was unable to find out where teams were located or who to contact. Instead, I interviewed junior high coaches and their athletic directors with the notion that whatever their

problems may be, peewee leagues likely have the same issues or even more to a greater extent.

Future Research

This study is not meant to be taken as an end all be all, but as the beginning for future research into the organization and policies that are designed to make youth tackle football players safer. For future research, I recommend a nationwide comparative study of different states' youth tackle football safety policies, a more intensive and deeper study of youth tackle football in the state of Mississippi, and a study on how funding and spending impact safety policy implementation and compliance.

A better understanding of the operations of youth football organizations is needed in order to more fully understand the problem of safety. Because there are very many different leagues, there many different protocols and operations across the country. To research these many different leagues and assess their current safety policies would be a very time consuming and in-depth study; however, it would be a substantial step forward in placing youth tackle football safety policy back on a legislative agenda.

I also recommend a deeper study of youth tackle football in Mississippi. It would be beneficial to gain more interviews from an extensive group of youth coaches, parents, administrators, doctors, and anyone else that may be involved. This would better present the potential strengths and weaknesses of the current state of youth tackle football within the state of Mississippi, and better support policy changes to occur.

Because funding is a very large portion of the issue concerning the safety in youth tackle football, I recommend that a study be conducted of the funding that is allocated to youth tackle football teams and organizations and how that money is being spent. In

other words, a study that could determine whether teams are not receiving enough money to maintain adequate safety standards or whether teams are not spending their money appropriately.

Conclusion

While football safety has become a complex issue and source of great debate in the United States, the policy that determines its future have been left dormant by many in the public sector. In the United States, people love football. It is one of the most American pastimes and a great team sport that reveals character and helps to mold many young men; however, it often does so at a price. Young players' bodies are often damaged by the sport and according to modern science the damages may last a lifetime (Omalu B. , 2018). In some extreme cases, players lose their lives all together (ABC News, 2015).

If we are to allow our children to play football, there must be progress in the policies which are meant to keep them safe. They are the future of our society, and while the sport may teach them valuable life lessons, it should never take a child's life, nor should it injure them for years to come. Not only does the child suffer from the pain caused, but society suffers in the negative externalities from their injuries. If it be a brain injury and the child does not excel in school, society may have lost a key contributor to the future. We must do more to protect these children.

Dennis Mitchell a sixteen-year-old football player at Byhalia High School collapsed on the sidelines during the second quarter of a game against Coahoma County in August of 2018. He was rushed to the hospital, but never regained consciousness (Fedschun, 2018). Another player, Jeremiah Williams of Greenville High School, broke

his neck during a football game in the 2018 season (WVLT News, 2018). William Anderson of Houston, Mississippi collapsed during a junior varsity game and was taken to the hospital only to be pronounced dead after a few hours (Associated Press, 2018). These are the players who have died in Mississippi playing football over the past two years. While only three players have died in two years, one life lost to this game is too many.

While we can do very little to ease the pain, suffering, and loss that countless players and their families have experienced in the past due to a deficiency in safety, we now have the opportunity to minimize the pain, suffering, and loss of players and their families who still sit in stands and bleachers all across Mississippi every Friday night in the Fall. No more parents should have to feel the loss of their child and wonder why there weren't safer rules in place to prevent a tragedy from occurring.

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APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**Doctor/Trainer**

1. How long have you been a doctor/athletic trainer?
2. Can you explain some of your job description as it would pertain to football?
3. In your professional opinion, what is the standard of care in youth sports compared to older age groups?
4. Is the same standard being held for Jr. High Football as High School or college football?
5. Should the standard of care be raised?
6. What are the greatest threats to a Jr. High tackle football player?
7. As a certified doctor/trainer, are schools required to have you at games? What would be the risk of not having a trainer or doctor present at every game?
8. As a health professional, in what areas can we improve safety policies for football in Mississippi?

MHSAA and MAIS

1. How long have you been a part of your organization?
2. Can you explain what exactly is in your job description as it relates to the safety of players
3. What regulations does your organization pose on schools' football teams for safety reasons?
4. What safety regulations are mandated by state law?
5. How do you enforce those rules?
6. Do you go to any length to inform players and parents of possible risks associated with playing tackle football?
7. Do you have any statistics on injuries in your league?

8. Are you currently working on instituting better policies for safety in football?
9. Where does most of your organization's funding come from? Do your funds adequately cover safety measures for all schools or is that an issue?
10. Would you be opposed to considering methods of safety like Dartmouth College? Or eliminating tackle football below the ninth grade?
11. As an executive director of a large statewide sports association, what issues do you see in what currently stands as the safety policy? Could we possibly do better in making football safer for participants? In what ways?

Athletic Directors

1. How long have you been the athletic director at _____?
2. What is your responsibility as the athletic director to ensure the safety of athletes in your school?
3. What sort of safety protocols, if any, are in place at your school or school district?
4. Are you, or any of your coaches, subject to oversight from any other governing body? If so, what does that look like?
5. Do you require that medical staff be at every game?
6. What sort of certification must you and any coaches have?
7. Is funding an issue for implementing the safety protocols that exist? What about future safety protocols?
8. As an athletic director, in what areas is current safety policy lacking? What could we do to make them better?

Coaches

1. How long have you been a football coach?
2. In your time as a coach, how many years have been spent coaching children below the ninth grade?
3. How have you helped to provide a safe playing environment for your players?
4. How much attention do you give to the correct tackling form?

5. What do you see as necessary precautions when it comes to safety, required or not?
6. What does the MHSAA/MAIS require, and what does the school district require? Do you do anything apart from those requirements?
7. Have you always followed the safety protocols as written?
8. What are some of the responsibilities as a coach when a player is injured?
9. Do you treat the middle schoolers any different than a high school player?
10. As a coach, are there areas where safety policy is lacking? What could we do to strengthen those policies?

APPENDIX B

**Interview: Michael Smith, Athletic Director, Waterford School District
Friday, May 3, 2019**

Location: Waterford Middle School

Transcribed: May 4, 2019

Interviewer: How long have you been the athletic director here?

Interviewee: I have been at the athletic director position at this school for four years, and my last gig eight years. So, twelve total years of AD experience, but only four here.

Interviewer: Okay, what would you say that your responsibility as athletic director is to ensure athlete safety at the school district?

Interviewee: With regard to—I gotta answer that sorry. (Interruption-Phone Call)

Interviewee: With regard to safety and such as that?

Interviewer: Yes sir.

Interviewee: I am also the safety director. So, that's just another title, not a hat that I wear. With regard to football, I require all coaches to complete the MHSAA recommended guidelines. MHSAA guidelines not only recommend but require that coaches take courses to be able to coach statewide. So, everybody has to have health and first aid on an every-other-year basis, and I make sure that they all do that. I've got a computer file with that. They also have to have AED CPR. Are you familiar AED CPR?

Interviewer: I am not.

Interviewee: AED CPR is with the paddles. Poom!

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Interviewee: We have those stationed on campus in three different areas. One at the basketball gym, one here at the—Yes, coach what do you need?

(Interruption-Coach with Problem-Long Break in Interview)

Interviewer: I think we were just talking about the safety protocol the MHSAA requires.

Interviewee: The MHSAA requires everyone to do it. We not only do that, and I monitor it. We take it a step further. I require, and I am the only school in the state that requires our coaches to complete AIC certification. Okay?

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: Excuse me, every head coach. I have got thirty-four head coaches, and all of them have to get AIC certified. Every high school in the United States is National Federation of High Schools, NFHS. Under their guidelines, NFHS has course that you can take and receive certifications that are higher standards, above and beyond standards. Every head coach I have got is AIC certified. We are the only school in the state that has that, and I am not bragging. I am just telling you what we do for safety. This includes things like concussion protocol. This includes things like the first aid that you have to take anyway. They really only had to take four extra courses. Okay?

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: I reimburse them for them. They are not out anything, and if you coach at Waterford High School and you are new coming in, you have four months to complete AIC certification or you don't get to play with us anymore. If you follow what I am saying? I even offer it to assistant coaches if they want to do it, and I had two to take it, and as I told them, when I start looking for a head coach, don't think that this is not going to—that's initiative. You know what I am saying? This year, I asked for twelve volunteers to take the CIC certification which requires six extra courses above AIC, and twelve people volunteered overnight. So, now I have got, let me see. I got twenty-two now that have to take it within a year because this time next year, well the superintendent gets involved on that by giving them a one percent—excuse me asking for them a one percent pay raise for them through the Board of Education if they complete this extra certification. So, our, all of that is a way of just saying, we step it up. Every football coach on our football staff, and that is from the assistant in seventh grade to the head football coach has to take and complete the NFHS form tackling. It's the right way to tackle. I don't know if you are familiar with it or have ever heard of it?

Interviewer: Yes sir, I think so.

Interviewee: Okay, there is a certification that goes with it. There's three courses that you have to take or you don't get certified. Every coach, head and assistant, has to complete that certification, and they have. I've got a record of that. You follow what I'm saying?

Interviewer: Yes. Is that something extra you do or—

Interviewee: —It's Heads Up, that's what it's called.

Interviewer: Is that something extra you do, or is that something that the MHSAA requires?

Interviewee: No, no. It's actually, it's just me. I talked it over with the head coach when it first came out three years ago, and he said, Michael we ought to be doing this. I said, do it and I will pay you back. Any course that costs you, I will pay you back. He told me, Mike I think all of our coaches need to do it. I said, alright. We will give them six months. We aren't gonna do it over night, but we will tell them in six months they have gotta have it done. They turn their receipts in to me and we reimburse them back, so that way they are not out anything except the time that they are on their computer completing that course which is important because it valuable, but they are not out financially. So, every coach we have got is, every head coach is AIC, twelve are CIC, and all of them by this time next year will be CIC certified, and that is a fairly involved process. Now every football coach we have got, and we are talking six, nine. We are talking seventeen coaches on our staff total. All have Heads Up tackling.

Interviewer: Good deal.

Interviewee: Well, just you are asking so, that's what we do. The concussion forms. I mean the concussion education. Every coach has to take concussion protocol. Every single coach we have got. We have got a full time PT. We have had a full time PT for several years now. That was done before I got here, and the first thing he does if he sees any symptoms of concussion is he does what he (unclear) concussion protocol is called.

Interviewer: Is he at practices and games?

Interviewee: He is gonna be at this game tonight, and he will be at a baseball game tonight too. We have a middle school jamboree today, and we have a baseball game tonight, and he will be at both of them. And if there is ever an event that he can't, we have a partnership with a doctor, Dr. Taylor, that is our team physician. He actually comes to a lot of events. He has a lady that fills in for him because Cameron just can't be at everything. Just like today if this game was at the gym—If we had a game going on at the gym and something else we would cover it that way. Also, I wanted you to know that we have concussion protocol now for not ninth grade football, for varsity football. The concussion protocol I will explain. It is not like if you get a concussion. I will explain it to you. You probably already know about it, but it is for varsity football, that's 10-12, varsity

boys and girls basketball, varsity boys and girls soccer. Every one of them have had a concussion screen done last year. Football had theirs done in August. Soccer and Basketball had theirs done before October. They couldn't practice on the official start day of practice unless they had completed the concussion protocol. And the concussion protocol is, the way I understand it, they get you to take a test. This is a laymen's explanation. Are you familiar with it?

Interviewer: I think I heard something about the Pittsburgh Steelers did something like this. Take a test at the beginning of the season, and if they think you have a concussion, you take the test again.

Interviewee: You take a similar test, and if the answers get fuzzy or you are not where you need to be then it may lead them to take x-rays and such. I think the NFL players, if I'm not mistaken, have to take x-rays. So, they x-ray you in August before you put on pads, and they x-ray you in the middle of October after you have—a middle linebacker hits you, and they can tell if you have got a concussion. I will stand corrected on that. We are not there yet, but we did test all of our boys and girls soccer, boys and girls basketball, and varsity football. So, we will do the same thing again this year. Anybody gets hurt—we did have two kids that utilized it meaning that we had two kids that were diagnosed with possible concussions, of course we don't do the diagnosis. As I said our trainer does that, and then they are sent to the physician. They are two weeks out. Period. I know that much about the concussion protocol, and until a physician releases them, they don't get back on, but I think most everybody that has trainers—I would like to think from going to training meetings and such as that with AD's—follow that procedure. I can't imagine somebody in this day and time not doing it. Of course everybody doesn't have a trainer.

Interviewer: Is that something that you see that could be moving into ninth grade football junior high football in the future.

Interviewee: I don't know. Last year we just adopted our PT services. As I said we have had PT services for years, but it became more competitive here in Waterford. There are three consortiums now. There used to just be one. Now, there is three, and of course everybody wanted that piece of pie. I mean it's a lucrative piece of pie, so we had to do an RFP—put together an RFP. That a request for products. I issued that, and people bid on the job, and then Mr. Harvey and I decided—actually he did—on who he wanted to do it. The doctor was the same way. We used to have just one orthopedic. Now, there is a lot, so last year we had an orthopedic RFP issued. We have an orthopedic. But to make a long story short, when the Safe Sports PT crew got our contract, part of what got them the contract was that they would do a concussion protocol on the five teams that I

listed to you. So, will there be movement more? It won't be for two more years because it is a three-year contract, and we were proud to get that. So, we are gonna go with this, see where this leads us, but can I foresee one day that—yes, I can foresee one day that middle school football will have it. I mean these kids are getting bigger and stronger, tougher and meaner, in ninth grade. Shoot, I have seen some licks in ninth grade that give you shivers, but right now we currently do not do that. Just varsity football, boys' and girls' soccer, boys' and girls' basketball. Varsity, not ninth grade basketball either. We have ninth grade basketball here and that isn't included in it either.

Interviewer: Is that something that the funding is bigger burden on the school or maybe would be for some of your counterparts?

Interviewee: None of that is on us. As a matter of fact, to tell you the truth, Safe Sports, who got our PT contract—they bid on and got our PT contract, Okay? They were supposed to come before football started, and we started the first week of practice, and they still hadn't done it, so I asked my boss—I said what's the deal on this, they said something you know, so Brian picked up the phone and called them, the head of Safe Sports, and said when are we gonna do this, and they said well, there's a problem. Ole Miss was gonna do it for us, and now they are not, and I said I don't care who ya'll get to do it. I want it done. I think they had to hire somebody, or maybe they worked a deal with Ole Miss. I don't know the details, but because all I did was provide the students for them to do it, but they had to scramble to get this done. It's no money out of our pocket. We just had to supply the kids at a certain time for thirty-five to forty minutes to take this test, and it's not really a test. It's an examination. It's a mental examination. So, funding is not on us, but you have to consider it a part of it because part of what they offered was this service. When we were making a decision on it—you know we will give you X, Y, and Z and A, B, and C and somebody else goes I'll just give you A, B, and Z. You take what is best for your school when you decide on who is gonna give you PT services. Does that make sense to you? I am sure funding has something to do with them, but as I said they balked. At first, they said well Ole Miss is not—we are not gonna be able to do it until October, and Brian said well half the football season is gonna be over with in October. We don't want six kids to get concussions—so anyway they did it. They scrambled and got it done.

Interviewer: So, they are paying ya'll for this service or are ya'll paying them for the service?

Interviewee: No, no. We are not paying anybody. What we do is we partially fund the PT guy that is here.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: Okay? But because these kids get injured a lot, and do not need to go to the doctor. Where do you think they go for their services? To Safe Sports. Not all of them. They don't have to, but it's a pretty good foot in the door when the guy that leans over you at the fifty-yard line and checks your knee is Dr. Ed Field. You follow what I am saying?

Interviewer: Yep.

Interviewee: When the momma comes to see you after the game and says, "How is my baby doing doctor?" "I am Dr. Field by the way. He is doing well, but we need to do an MRI. It looks like it may be a torn ACL." Who are you gonna go with? I am not running Dr. Field down. I am just telling you that's life. So, its lucrative for them to do it, but actually the money exchange is not on our part because we are Waterford.

Interviewer: So, it is really between the students and the doctors?

Interviewee: Absolutely. When Dr. Field leans over you at the fifty-yard line and says, "Man you got an ACL tear I think. You are out of the game.". He doesn't get to see your kid the next day. The parent makes that decision, but as I said, a lot times parents like to go with who diagnosed it, who was right there. It's a trust. He comes to all of our events, and everybody knows him, so he wants that contract. He wants that contract. PT, uh, Safe Sports, which is local here, they want our contract. We don't pay for it. They offer us to be able to come here. Now there is a stipend that we have to pay for their PT person to be here physically. That's three thousand dollars, but that's a drop in the bucket compared to what he makes in the services. So, we are not out of pocket to answer your question. We are not out of pocket because they do concussion protocol. We are not out anything.

Interviewer: Okay, good deal.

Interviewee: I don't know if all that made sense to you?

Interviewer: Yeah, it did. And then, my other question is who oversees that yall follow your safety guidelines mandated by the MHSAA? Do they have oversight on that or is it just kind of just you?

Interviewee: It is me and me alone.

Interviewer: Okay, so potentially if there is an athletic director that does not follow that to a t—

Interviewee: —I can't speak for the MHSAA, but my boss who is the superintendent sits on the executive board of the MHSAA, and he is fond of saying, "If you ever come before that board and I have to excuse myself to make a ruling on Mike Smith, you just keep on walking and you walk out the door." Now, he doesn't say that jokingly. He is dead serious, so I am very tough, hard, whatever you wanna call it. I mean we are going to do everything. If I miss something, it ain't on purpose I can assure you. Every coach, for instance, has got to do AED CPR. Every coach has got to do first aid. Every head coach has got to complete AIC. Now, every coach has got to do AIC and CIC. In other words, that's our guidelines, not the state's. Those are minute. For instance, there are guidelines for paraprofessionals. I don't know if you know what a paraprofessional is? Okay? We have nine paraprofessionals, but at one time we had fifteen. We had more than anybody in the state. A paraprofessional is someone who does not work for the district, but coaches our athletes in some shape, form, or fashion. For instance, our tennis—tennis guy—you're an ex-tennis pro, you don't coach, you work at the country club up here or wherever, but you dang good. I have an assistant coaches position that pays six percent supplement. I can hire you as a paraprofessional. There is eight things that you got to do according to the MHSAA in order for you to coach our high school kids as a paraprofessional. And when I tell you I am religious on it, it ain't even funny. I've got a folder with your name on it. I have got a read-out sheet that you have to do all eight of those things, and until I get them all done, you don't come around our kids, even if they are up there at the country club. If they are on their time, that's fine, but if you are working for us, and you are working with my kids, you have gotta do all eight of those. So, who monitors? We do. How much does the MHSAA monitor? I do not know, but we are not gonna do anything wrong, and surely not knowingly and willingly.

Interviewer: I have, pretty much, two more questions.

Interviewee: I don't mean to sound like we are perfect here. I can make a mistake with the best of them, but there are some things you just don't make mistakes on, and things like that, a paraprofessional is not a professional, and they don't know that you can't use profanity. I mean like, teachers are taught this over and over. I mean you go to school for years to learn and then you have principal that monitors what you do eight hours a day with kids, so there has to be really strict guidelines for paraprofessionals. There has to be really strict guidelines for coaches because if you ever wait until a coach gets into his season to ask him to do something, it's like spitting on a forest fire. I mean their mind is so—so we do all of the things that we

have to do in the summer during the month of May. This is a real busy time to do a lot of the work that we have to do because I know that once their season starts, they are gone. I mean they will look you right in the eye and say, “Yeah, I’ll get it done tomorrow.” And they don’t wanna lie to you, but they just wanna win that football game or win that volleyball match. It’s just the nature of people, and I coached for years and I get it, so we do all of our stuff ahead of time. I don’t make us to sound like perfect. We can make a mistake in a second, but we will correct the stew out of it when we do.

Interviewer: Okay. So, my next question is, do you do anything to make sure that coaches are following these protocols in practice?

Interviewee: Yes. For instance, I am going to go to several practices. I never hire a paraprofessional that I don’t personally watch how he interacts with or she interacts with our kids in at least several practices, and they are not gonna know I am there. I am not walking around and hiding or disguised, but I don’t advertise that I am there. I wanna see what is going on when I am not there because that is integrity, doing the right thing when nobody is looking at you. You know what I mean? So, I make it a point on those. The other folks that I have seen for years, I don’t see as much. I enjoy going to watch BP, but I am also watching five baseball coaches interact with kids. I enjoy watching basketball practice. I really do, but I also get to see how my coaches interact, so yes. I am constantly seeing them. I’ll tell you, a great help though has been the therapist from an injury standpoint. I can remember being the PT back in the stone ages, in the 80’s when I was coaching. Okay? I was the guy that when we went to the clinic, I would go to the medical area and they would tell me how to tape ankles and ice things. I mean we just didn’t have PT, but now I trust those guys and those guys are professional. They are not gonna—I’m telling you—they are not gonna send a kid out. I trust them, and I have watched them work. So, that takes a lot off of a coach. They will go out and see how a kid is doing. They will ask a physical therapist, is he done for tonight, but they don’t argue with him. I mean they just don’t. He is part of our in-service. When I introduce him this May the 29th, you will hear it. You know, if he ever says that your kid has got a concussion, if he ever says that your kid is out—you know. And I say it jokingly because everybody already knows it, but I want them to know that he ain’t gonna tell you what play to run, but if he ever tells you that’s it, the kid ain’t playing, then the kid ain’t playing. If the kid has got a concussion, he ain’t playing, and they just know that. Does that make sense? So, that takes a lot of the burden off me from some of those areas, but a lot of the coaching things like too hot—I make sure the bucket is up there. It’s on the field right now because during spring training of football, you have to have a bucket to submerge players in if, I mean, you know. It’s not that

hot, and we are not gonna use it, I know, but it is there just in case, and there is free running water to it in case we gotta submerge a kid. It is there during all practices. Follow what I am saying? So, do I monitor? Yes, but there are some of these coaches that have been here as long as I have been AD if not longer, and I have seen them work, and I see how they interact with kids. So, there is some I monitor more than others [laughing], but not because I like them or dislike them—I know they are professionals and they are gonna do what they got to do—but like I said a smaller thing is that I never, ever hire a para that I don't watch what they do for at least a week or two until I am absolutely dead certain. I talk to some kids sometimes. “Hey, do you get along with Coach? Do they ever slip and say a cuss word?” You know, anything. Now, I'm not trying to catch them, but these things you just can't do with kids. You just can't. Anyway, once again, I ain't perfect and I'm not saying that I can't miss a potential—you know. There's another thing they've gotta—we gotta do a background check. One of the eight things I told you we do is a background check, so we aint gonna be hiring any pedophiles. You know, it is a background check. They fingerprint you and run it through a database just like all teachers have to do, paraprofessionals have to do. And these are safety measures that our kids are not gonna be exposed to bad people.

Interviewer: What areas can you see, as a state, other than Waterford School District, where safety policy is lacking in football, and especially in junior high football? I know that junior high football kind of gets forgotten in some conversations.

Interviewee: You know, it's the things that I told you that we get to because we are Waterford, and I am not saying that we are better than anybody else, but we are a financially stable district compared to a lot of districts. I know because I am from the delta. When we play the delta, we take our PT with us because there is a chance that when we go to Clarksdale they are not gonna have a PT on that sideline. I am not running Clarksdale down, I am telling you straight-up facts. Should we test these ninth graders and middle schoolers? I believe it's coming. I believe it's coming and coming soon. That is a step we should probably make. Should it be statewide? I am telling you it is coming. I know it is. It may be after I retire, but those things will come. You know from the medical end, should somebody ever go around and check to see if everybody has got the tub of ice out there—cause you know how many times it's gonna take if somebody overheats and you ain't got a tub of ice? You got a dead kid, or you have kid with a stroke. You understand what I am saying? There is a reason there is a tent there and a bucket of water every day in practice for your first four weeks. You get what I am saying?

Interviewer: Yeah, I mean I think three kids died last year in Mississippi from heat-strokes.

Interviewee: Yep. Like I said, you can't be too good at it, but some of the things that you will do to step up—I can easily foresee the day that if you are gonna hire a head football coach, you have to have a PT. You have to have one. If you can afford to hire this guy, you gotta hire this guy because I am telling you now, I could not imagine not having a physical therapist on our sidelines for the reasons I just told you. It's not that the coaches wouldn't wanna do right, but I mean I can remember taping those ankles and those swollen, you know, kids and getting them to hobble around to see if they could go back in the game. Rather than being concerned—and I am not an evil person, alright—I was the Offensive Line Coach and Offensive Coordinator and I needed that kid. Can you go? I have said those words. That should never enter into whether a kid goes into a game, and it doesn't with a PT. You follow what I am saying? A PT will never say, "Can you go?" They will say, "Does this hurt and this hurt?" and you know they will ask medical questions, but not "can you go." I mean, I have asked kids that back in the 80's, back a long time ago, but—you understand what I am saying? So, if everybody has a PT, everyone will not be having less injuries, but we won't re-injure. We won't make it worse. You know, a PT sees a kid suffering from heat-stroke, "C'mon boy can you suck it up and go?" Nuh-uh he goes, "Coach I got it." And he can shut his mouth and he can go on and do what he is gonna do because the PT now and that kid have—fixing to take care of it. He is not gonna take a chance. He is not gonna look at him being a sorry or—nuh-uh. He is fixing to get him to the shade, and cool him down. So, I say, things like PT's expanding your concussion protocol, and there is countless other things that you can do. Our CIC certification and our AIC certification, every coach in the state ought to do it. A lot of districts can't afford to reimburse those coaches that. It probably cost us upwards of six to seven thousand dollars over the last four years to get our coaches to do that. I make it mandatory that everybody joins the MAC because if they join the MAC, they get to go to the conference down there for four days. I pay for their meals. I pay for their hotels. I pay for their travel, and I say I do it, but our department does. Okay? And the reason I do it is so that coaches can go down there and learn and get better. Do they have a good time when they go down there? I hope so. They got it coming, but I want them to go down there and interact with other coaches and listen to learned people to get better at what they do in the sport that they are so that our athletes are safer and can excel. Does that make sense to you? A lot of schools cannot afford—when I tell people what I do, I don't brag, I am just—but they look at me and go, well I wish I could afford that, and I feel for them. I really do, but our district will spend funds to make sure education training and our kids come first, but they are able to because we got a tax base. You follow

what I am saying? Greenwood High School which is where I was for six years, didn't have that, and I love Greenwood. I am talking 1986, okay? They didn't have it then. Though, to answer your question, do I think it will get better? Do I think it is—yes. These things will come when enough kids, unfortunately, pass out on the field or stroke or you know, but I am telling you that's a real thing. If you were to ask another coach to look you in the eye and tell you the truth, have you ever asked a kid, "Can you go?" they would be lying to you if they told you they didn't, and I don't think they are gonna lie to you. I think they will tell you straight because I am telling you I did. That should never enter the equation when you are processing an injury to a student. I mean I have heard that before, and I am just passing along things that I have heard, but you will never hear a trainer say, "Can you go? Are you okay? Can you go back in?" nor should he. The swelling, can you feel this? How does this feel? The mobility. You know all the magic Mr. Miagi crap is what I call it. You understand? I hope it has been helpful.

Interviewer: Yes sir. Thank you so much.

END OF AUDIO

APPENDIX C

Interview: Mike Nelson, Middle School Football Coach, Waterford School District
Friday, May 7, 2019
Location: Waterford Middle School
Transcribed: May 7, 2019

Interviewer: How long have you a football coach?

Interviewee: Ah geez, I have been here—this is the fourteenth or fifteenth year, so I have been doing that here for fourteen years at least, and I did it for the first eight or ten years and then I was actually a principal for twenty years, so I have been doing it for twenty plus years.

Interviewer: Okay, how much of that time has been spent coaching kids ninth grade or below?

Interviewee: Oh ninth grade or below? Well I did some before, um, twenty years.

Interviewer: How have you helped to provide a safe playing environment for your players? Or “safer” playing environment?

Interviewee: That’s a—anything specific? That’s a big question.

Interviewer: Just, in practice. Just mainly in practice.

Interviewee: Well, we do this—well, I mean the tackling is a, you know, specifically taught thing. We have been using the past couple of years the NFL—I don’t know if you are familiar with it. They put out a video. We used to call it the Pete Carroll video which is the rugby tackling video that the NFL sponsored in kind of relation to some of the head injuries and everything. So, we don’t emphasize the head at any—you kind of have to watch that video if you are not familiar with it.

Interviewer: Is it the Heads-Up Football?

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah. It’s a—It’s a video, and Pete Carroll bought into it and made a, almost like an hour-long video where he demonstrates each position group. You know, the tackling aspects of it. The aggressive tackle, the shoulder tackle, all those sort of things, and it’s from, you know, and it kind of weaves in Seahawks players doing drills. Showing them teaching the drills, and then it weaves in rugby, you know, footage in there. We have been doing that for, geez, I don’t know, four or five years, a while now. And we post that video on our website, so when we start to teach it in August, you know we put that up. One, for the players to watch it and

two, so the parents can see what we are doing. Yeah, so that's one of the biggest things. I think an overlooked thing, particularly for this age group is equipment. You know, depending on where you are and what you are doing, if you are in our situation, then you might be using hand-me-downs. If you are in a school district, you might be using hand-me-down helmets. You might be using hand-me-down equipment. You might be using hand-me-down shoulder pads. Of course, and if you get into the elementary thing, that's basically totally unregulated, so you have got stuff you can buy at Walmart as a parent. Which that goes to show, when I came here, that was an issue. We had hand-me-down equipment which in itself was really old. If you use equipment for X amount of times the pads themselves get compressed. So, they are not good. If they are not fitted properly, in other words if you are using hand-me-down, old high school equipment, what you are using then are probably adult sizes. So, you are using equipment that is not designed for that age-group. I think that is a lot of the issues because its expensive to get it. That is one of the things that we did. We use smaller, junior high rated pads. We threw away all of the old helmets, every one of them. I have got a hundred fifty of them now. That is a lot. That is a lot of money, a lot of expense. You know we did it and it took years to get to that point. We have junior high rated helmets. They are rated up through the ninth grade. They are lighter. I think that is one of the things that is overlooked. It is an expense, but you know, that's one of the things that we do.

Interviewer: Is that a really big disparity between high school and junior high is the level of equipment or do you see that in high school too?

Interviewee: Sure, sure. Well, it depends on—I mean football is expensive, so yes. There are a lot of variables there. One is just the level of commitment. Number two is your district—how the athletic department operates. There are a lot of different ways. A lot of places are not as lucky as we are to have the resources that we have, so you know, everything is penny-pinched. You can imagine those places, if they get one or two new pieces of equipment they make sure the high school is gonna get it and you know what happens to the old equipment. If it looks in anyway useable, you know what happens to it. It is just gonna get pushed down to be used by JV, by ninth grade, then used by, you know, and so forth. It just gets pushed down. You might be using a twenty-year-old pair of shoulder pads if it has not been reconditioned. And if those pads are the original pads, twenty years-old, then that's what you've got. That is another thing. We recondition our stuff every two years. I am not sure. I think it is recommended, but I do not think it is required in middle school, but we do. Last year, we did helmets. This year, we do shoulder pads.

Interviewer: I know you were talking earlier about the correct tackling form video. How much time do y'all spend in practice looking for correct talking form?

Interviewee: Every time—We call it our tackling circuit, so we do this tackling circuit. That is basically that video. I mean we do it exactly like that video is taught. I mean it has helped us tackle better, number one. Regardless of the safety, anyway, every time we do defense which is, if it's not every day, it is at least every other day. So, at the beginning of every defensive period that we have, that is the first thing that we will do. We will do a little individual warm up, and then the first—well the offensive endo changes every day, but the defensive endo is always the tackle circuit. Then we go into our defensive practice schedule which is just group work but every time we do defense we do the tackle circuit.

Interviewer: Not just you but considering a lot of coaches that you play against, what do you think the level of commitment to only letting players that are tackling correctly play? As in, pulling out a player that is using an incorrect form of tackling.

Interviewee: I can't—I just wanna speak to what we do. I feel good about what we are doing. In addition to that, we are doing the—you know all of our coaches are required to have that National Federation certification. I think Waterford is the only school district in the state that all the coaches have been required to do that, and all the football—and they have also put out a tackle video, I think this Spring, and we have all watched that, and we are gonna get certified in that. So, we will get up to speed with that before we go out in the fall, so that is in addition to what we are already doing.

Interviewer: Do you know what the differences are in MHSAA requirements and the school district's requirements because I know y'all's school district does require extra from the MHSAA, but what does the MHSAA require from you, as a head coach, safety protocol wise?

Interviewee: There is just a basic—really just the safety, you know, the heat, the heat strokes, the concussions, and those things.

Interviewer: Have you and all the coaches here always followed those to the t? Or do you ever see variances in those areas?

Interviewee: [laughing] I think we do—I mean, we do the tent. We do the thing you are supposed to put the ice in. We do that, and I have a water mister that was about a thousand dollars that we have. It's a fan, and it mists water, so that's while they are drinking. The way we work, I mean, we have scheduled water breaks, but we tell the players, if you need water, as long as you ask a coach—unless we are doing something, we typically let you

go get water, so we have those three things every day until it gets in October. Anytime a player needs to go out, and just sit under the tent, or when we have our scheduled breaks, they can go sit under the tent with the water mister. If somebody ever gets in distress then we have that ice bucket, ice bath.

Interviewer: When players do get injured during practice or in games what is your responsibility in handling those? I know I talked to Mr. Smith a couple days ago, and he was talking about y'all have the PT service during games.

Interviewee: Oh yeah. We are great, and they come every day, so we have a contract with a doctor and a PT guy, and so he comes every day. So, at the start of the period, we have kids that need rehabbing or they are seeing the trainer. They go over across the street to the PT facility every day, and then he texts me with whatever the prescription is and whether he is able to handle it there or if he is sending him on to the doctor or to some other organized PT, so we have that. It used to be that they would just come by like once a week, but now it's available every day, so that is huge. If we have a scrimmage or we have a—if we are doing some contact at practice or certainly in games, we contact Cameron to let him know what we are doing, and he will come out there and watch us play, so we basically have someone on site if something happens. That's big for us. We had a jamboree last Friday. That's why I didn't contact you, and he was there, and we had a couple instances where we had to stop play, it was not anything major, but you know, a kid had an injury and he was already there. That is kind of different than the old days where you were kind of on your own. Now, we have the—we are required—of course it's all online, you know their physical forms and the parent permission, so if there is a problem then we are right there, and we have what we need to let them go to the doctor or get treated on site if it's something serious.

Interviewer: In general, as a coach, are there any ways or any areas where you see safety policy lacking? As in, what can we as a state do better?

Interviewee: I don't know how familiar you are, but I think if you go on—a couple things. The state activities association website—I don't think there is a lot of rules and regulations regarding any of the middle school sports. They don't regulate those. There are some suggestions and guidelines, but there is nothing in any sport—how you are supposed to operate, how you are supposed to do it, how you compete for a championship or any of that. So, much less, any guidelines other than the general guidelines for everyone about safety, and security, and equipment, and some of those questions you have asked. I don't think there is actually any written regulations or policies. It's sort of you are on your own buddy to do that. I don't think

every state is like that. I think some other states—you know, you have to make a decision as to whether you are going to be involved in the activities association through middle school. If you are, then you have to adhere to all of their policies and they are regulated. The championships, the play, the eligibility, as well as any of these other things that they wanna—however much of the safety of those things they wanna do, or if you don't then you are on your own, and you are on an island. But in Mississippi, I think everybody is like that. I don't think there is anything. So, there is very little oversight in my opinion, and I could be wrong, but we have these questions all the time like—you know we have questions just about our sport, you have to go to the website, the MHSAA website, and there is nothing—you know, there are like four or five general guidelines, but these are just suggestions, so you are on your own to do that.

Interviewer: That is one thing that I saw looking on their website, all of their guidelines. Have very loose language on them.

Interviewee: Particularly middle school.

Interviewer: And they are not even all put in one place. They are in little posts like they are on social media. [laughing]

Interviewee: It is just an afterthought. It is just an afterthought. If you do some other states, I think it is a lot different. Some other things, I think equipment is a big issue, again which its not really regulated. We are just probably a little bit more fortunate than most that we are able to spend a few little extra dollars to do it right, and it certainly has helped our program. If something were to happen here—if things get pinched—we will be the first ones to get pinched. I think the numbers of coaching—I think there are some guidelines—you have numbers of players and then you have the numbers of coaches that you have, but certainly there is not anything concrete about middle school, and so I think that is a problem that you have in a lot of middle schools that have a lot of kids out, and then they may have one coach for fifty kids. Maybe one coach and a volunteer coach with fifty kids. Maybe a coach and a teacher that they are paying a couple hundred bucks to come out there and they don't know a whole lot, just to be out there. That is just a situation like—if you've got twenty kids, that's cool, but if you are like us, I mean we got sixty—I got almost seventy kids coming up next year in seventh grade. I think that is some of the biggest issues when you start thinking about safety. That's not really related to safety rules and policies, but that is just sort of a common-sense thing, but it's also a money thing [sigh]. You know, if you can't afford to have the extras then you just do what you can do. That leads into maybe these other problems when you have them. You know, thankfully, they just don't

happen every day, but when they do, it could be something that is catastrophic or it could be something that is really severe and hurts a kid and it could something because maybe because you just didn't have enough supervision out there. I think those are the simple things that you could do that we do. I have six coaches that they provide me with, and that we have to go through the certification and then this past year I had two extra volunteers that had to go through all those other courses that we had to do. They had to take about six more of those courses including the first aid and everything to get certified. I think we try to make an effort. I am not saying that we do everything right, but there is a lot of things that we do that we are not mandated—we just do them for safety and a lot of places don't. We are fortunate. We are lucky, but I think that those are just some simple, commonsense things of middle school, staffing, and make sure they are trained, and make sure that they are exposed to some certifications or some training, some recommendations if you have X number of kids then you have got to have X number of trained people. If you could come up with some policies that are on equipment, on how you are gonna do that, or how old, how many years before you cycle it in. If you have a piece of equipment out, how long are you gonna use it, and are you gonna periodically look at it, like I said, after two years we look at it recondition it and they'd come in and say throw that piece of shit out and we throw it out. If you are not doing that then you may keep using it, and those are just some common-sense things that don't have anything to do with tackling, don't have anything to do with what you are doing on the field, but when you really get down to it, those could make the biggest difference. Particularly, at this level because the collisions and the things are not like they are with bigger bodies just if you have the right equipment and some people that know what they are doing, and you are able to just put eyes on them. For example, I know when we had, years and years ago—and we changed it—one of the first things that we did with the newbies, the sixth graders coming up—you know, they haven't done anything which will happen next week. The very first day we had some footballs lying around and two kids got to throwing a football and they collided and the kid got about three teeth knocked out. He is gonna be a senior next year. [laughing] So I mean, we have to think about, we might need to start putting helmets on them the very first day to avoid that. It's just things like that that—one we shouldn't have left it out, but two, we ended up thinking if we are doing drills and stuff and passing the ball around that could easily happen. The very first day, we are thinking well maybe that is one of the very first things we need to start doing. If you are gonna sign up for football, we are gonna have to give you a football helmet, or things like that, and that is a safety thing.

Interviewer: Alright. Well I will get out of here and let you get to practice. Thank you.

END OF AUDIO

APPENDIX D

Interview: Fred Neilson, Executive Director, Mississippi High School Activities Association

Friday, May 15, 2019

Location: Trustmark Park

Transcribed: May 15, 2019

Interviewer: How long have you been a part of the MHSAA?

Interviewee: Nine years. Well, I can go back. I was on the board. I was on the Executive Committee. Do you want to know that or how long have I been in this position?

Interviewer: Just in general.

Interviewee: Let me just tell you and you can write it anyway. So, I have been in this position—this is my ninth year as the executive director, and I was on the Executive Committee of the Mississippi High School Activities Association, who basically runs and formulates the rules and all that kind of thing, for seven years.

Interviewer: Can you explain what exactly you do as it relates to safety?

Interviewee: Yeah, we help first of all to make sure that first and foremost our sports and activities are about safety. That is the very first thing whether it is equipment safety, whether it has to do with the fundamentals of the game, the rules of the game, playing the game. We make sure that we are up to date in whatever the procedures and processes are there both in our state and nationwide, but we also hold our schools accountable for those rules. That's what we do through our association.

Interviewer: What regulations does your organization pose on schools' junior high football teams for safety reasons?

Interviewee: Same as high schools. Same regulations as high schools. Practice times, time allotment. Of course, in middle schools, there is no issue about them having three or four-hour time limitation because they don't have enough time as it is. Most of them practice during the school day, during that one period or one block, so limitations of time at practice. What I just told you the acclimatization period that comes before the season starts is very important in junior high because you may start junior high practice the day school starts, but we don't allow them to have a game. So, we regulate the dates of first scrimmage, first game against another opponent, and those

type of things. That's something else, but they follow the same rules as our high schools when it comes to dehydration, coach certification. They have to have first-aid and safety courses. They have to be certified. Head coach has to be certified in CPR and first-aid and those type things.

Interviewer: Is there any safety regulations that are mandated by state legislature?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: How do you enforce your rules? Do you have any oversight over the schools or is it kind of an honor system?

Interviewee: Yep. We have oversight over the schools. We hold them accountable. We do have a process again. First of all, if they are not following the rule then we will contact the administration and give them an opportunity to be in line and if they don't then there is a penalty.

Interviewer: What does that look like? How are y'all figuring out if coaches are doing what they are supposed to be doing?

Interviewee: Most of the time they are reported to us by a parent. Compliance is basically what it would be about. It would be about compliance, and we can check—we don't do that as much in the middle schools as we do in high school, but if it ever comes to our attention then we actually check the compliance of following those rules, and particularly those rules that have to do—just like in—just like now, one of the rules is a cold ice water immersion tub. It is required now. First year it wasn't mandatory, and then after the second year—if you go to a high school or a middle school practice whether it's a little kiddie swimming pool or—there should be some type of device, way, swimming pool, cattle trough that you can put ice and water in and cool that athlete down, and that is mandatory. So things like that, we can check those things.

Interviewer: Do you require medical staff to be at every football game?

Interviewee: No. We can't. Well, no. That is why we have our coaches be first responders, particularly in junior high. Now, as an administrator, the home team administrator makes sure there is either an athletic trainer, which is through one of our sports medicine trainers or a local team physician. Sometimes it's a dad on the field, some type of first responder, but we don't require ambulances to be there simply because there are not enough ambulances in Mississippi to cover all of our games. That's why our coaches have to be—when I coached, we were the first responders. We didn't have athletic trainers. We didn't actually have team doctors, although we made sure that a local guy was there if it was some type of

life threatening situation, and junior high games, I will tell you that our folks do have a first responder there and that they do have—if they can't have an ambulance there like high school, you just have to today, but if they don't have an ambulance there, they are on call to be there. You know how ambulances have to do, sit in certain spots and respond to whatever. But our middle school folks have the same type of responsibility that our high school people do.

Interviewer: Do you or your organization go to any length to inform players and parents about the risk associated with playing football?

Interviewee: Well, we do. Risks associated with football? We put out any information that is out there on our website, so yes, we do. Our schools do more of that than—we put that information out to our schools. We certainly can't get a seminar for our parents. We expect our schools to do that, and plus the national—you don't even have to do that anymore in my opinion because the national news and media does all that for you as far as risk. We actually try to, rather than tell them about the risk involved, we actually try to explain to them that football is the safest it has ever been. The equipment as I mentioned before, the safety precautions that we take, the practice times, limited practice times, I know it is safer than when I actually played.

Interviewer: Do y'all keep up with any statistics on injuries?

Interviewee: No. Our schools are required to—if it's a broken bone, or something of that nature, we provide catastrophic insurance to all of our students. That means that if you have had a serious injury, then this is your secondary coverage and you are able to come and utilize if it goes over a certain amount of dollars in medical bills, so our schools are required to report those. Having been an athletic director, we teach our schools how to document—they document those things within their schools, and it could be that even if they think it is a possible mild concussion or something that happened, you have to document it because later on, it's going to come back upon that school if there is any kind of liability issue. So, we do communicate. We do publicize. We do speaking at conferences. Make sure they understand the importance of documentation and particularly with injuries.

Interviewer: Are y'all currently working on instituting any policies that may be better than what we have currently?

Interviewee: We are constantly looking at better ways to do things, and most of that—I attend sports medicine seminars. We actually work very close—we have a MHSAA Sports Medicine Committee which is made up of physicians and

athletic administrators, and coaches in our state, and we meet and discuss any type of new things that might be down—limitations at practice is a new thing that we just did. Immersion tub being required at all sports. We just approved batting—infielders in fast-pitch softball wearing a facemask. That all comes through and are run by and actually asking them to make a recommendation to us as far as that it is something that we need to implement or not. So we have the MHSAA Sports Medicine Committee that is constantly looking at our rules along with Mississippi and all those other states you mentioned—51 because of Puerto Rico are in the National Federation of High Schools, so that is a sanctioning body. We have a national sports medicine advisory committee, and every state has their own sports medicine advisory committee, and so we constantly—again the safety of the game and all those things are at the forefront and particularly the sport of football. So, new things. I can't think of anything new that is coming down in particularly junior high football that we are doing. I mean we adhere to the—most of your coaches that coach high school, most of them because of small schools, coach middle school too. So, they are already certified in CPR, certified in First Aid and Safety. And that is sport specific First Aid and Safety. It is not the same thing as the course that they give the teachers on the teacher day at school. It is sport specific that they have to qualify for, so it is being looked at all the time.

Interviewer: Just to kind of help me get an idea of yall's organization is structured, do yall receive any state funding? Or are yall a public organization?

Interviewee: Nope. We are a private non-profit. You can go on our website and see who we are and what we are about on the website. We have been in existence for 97 years. They really started with literary contests, chess or checkers, speech and debate, and also in that we are an activities association. Most states are not, they are just athletic, so we do band, cheer and dance, speech and debate, and choral music, and all that too. We are a private non-profit organization, we receive no tax funds, we basically operate off of gate receipts for championship games which also our schools—we pay our schools mileage. They receive financial help for participating in those championships. No tax dollars. As a matter of fact, four years ago we stopped charging membership dues to our schools. We basically operate off of gate receipts from championship games—which our schools of course realize, if you pay twelve football games you realize gate receipts. If play in a championship game, the MHSAA will have the gate to operate the game, and also in turn, we turn around and give the mileage and certain things, and the other thing is partnerships. The partnerships that we have that you will see today, they help us to put on these events so the schools don't have to pay money in membership dues. We are governed and ruled and we are our schools. We have 250 high schools. We are a middle school association as well. A lot of states are not. A lot of states

just do nine through twelve and the middle schools are kind of on their own in other organizations. We are middle school and high school, so we have the activities part, and we are glad about that because it's all under one organization in Mississippi. Now, you've got a lot of great communication and consistency of how you do. The consistency of how we do high school football is the same with middle school football. Now if we could just get youth football to be that same way, it would help, and I am talking about from a philosophy standpoint, what you do as a coach, why are you coaching, what are we supposed to be teaching them at this age, you know going up.

Interviewer: Do you see funding as a barrier to having better safety for some schools? I have talked to a few coaches already at individual schools, and they say that we might be going to these schools say somewhere in the delta or somewhere where there might not be a trainer, so they have to put a trainer on their bus to come with them.

Interviewee: That is right. Oh, absolutely funding, and it's not talking football, it is just athletic programs as a whole. As the schools function, as a former principal, schools operate—there are some districts that give a certain amount of dollars to their athletic program as a whole for officials and some things, but most of them operate off of their gate receipts. Just for example, if we were going to have a game here and we were going to try to pay for this game right now, we had gate workers start at 8:30, police officers, security, all those different people, and we had to—this gate right here would not pay for this game, so we will end up relying on, hopefully, the next game will bring more that will pay for their game, and at the end after we play twelve games, hopefully then we will be able to pay for everything that we do, and also have enough that we can give mileage to the schools. We will give them a certain percentage, every school will get a per game share, but it depends on how many—what crowd we get. We have also developed partnerships through the years that we take those partnership dollars, and we apply them toward championships, so they will realize money back from these games. Hopefully, it will pay for their rooms if they stay, I know it will pay for their mileage, and hopefully they will have some to go back into their baseball program, but it is gonna depend on—and this is a 2-A game right now at 10 AM—maybe the 5-A game, it may be pretty full. Schools do the same thing, if you ask them about their issues they will always be cost of equipment, football helmets have gone up, all of those things, so they have to really be strict with their budgets and all of those things.

Interviewer: I have talked to a couple of junior high coaches already and they have said that funding is an issue and then some of the policies are kind of ambiguous to them.

Interviewee: Exactly.

Interviewer: They have a lot of issues with that. A problem will arise and they will say “how do we fix this?”

Interviewee: What is so tough about junior high to begin is that we have no state championships. The only involvement the MHSAA would have is that they have conferences. For example, in Vicksburg, Warren Central played in that Little Dixie with Vicksburg, Warren Central, they play with Pearl and they play with Madison and all now. The overall operation of the games and the officials and all that we do, but they are in a conference. We don't have state championships for middle schools. We are getting there. We are thinking about starting track. It's just you have to put them in regions, now you have got to divide them by class, you have extra weeks in a season. So, and again, it has never been and most states don't have junior high championships. But we don't really, like that junior high coach, whatever their issue was and again you have to know that our junior high coaches may not come to our district meetings that we have two times a year in every—maybe their athletic director comes and their high school coach. Maybe the junior high coach needs to come to those informational MHSAA meetings in the fall and in the spring, and then they could see the process of being able to—if you have an issue or if something happens or even a question about the rule then you could figure out how to solve that. What I am saying to you is that a middle school coach, if that's all he coaches, coaches that one sport and teaches in the school and all that, he probably does not have the same type of involvement as the—he doesn't go play for a state championship, that kind of thing that high school coaches have.

Interviewer: Do y'all have any regulations on how many coaches you are supposed to have per so many kids?

Interviewee: No, and again that is totally up to the school, and now they have a ton of them. You know football staff when I coached—we may have had three assistants and now they have ten. So, no, we do not have regulation on how many, and again you may have a smaller school, particularly junior high that has one or two and you know that could be an issue from a teaching the game standpoint, you know spending enough time with you as an individual trying to teach you how to properly block, how to properly position yourself in a safe way, or how to tackle, so it could be an issue.

Interviewer: As an executive director of a statewide sports association, what issues do you see that currently stand in safety, and what might you do to fix those, or what do you think we could improve on?

Interviewee: Yeah, and we have talked about it already. Probably the number one is just compliance with the existing rules that are in place, compliance with the guidelines, just like the acclimatization, coaches will have a tendency, and I was one, to once school starts, you have been out there for two weeks, so now all those kids have gone through the two-a-days or the acclimatization period and time and they are in shape, and then school starts and you have four kids come out wanting to play. It's a big-time problem in middle school because you don't have the same type summer programs, weightlifting programs, nutrition programs, in middle school that you have in high school. So, there you go, but that is just another aspect of just the safety part of coaches complying with the rules that are already in place from a health standpoint. But just making sure that they follow the policy, and it's a local level too. If I have a football coach, and he coaches junior high, I am usually gonna have an athletic director—the athletic director and principal are responsible to make sure that the coach complies with the rules and guidelines. So, that is probably something that is an issue continuing with the proper techniques in football, the proper training in football, the coach education, those are things that I don't see them as problems. I just see them as ongoing things that we need to keep working on and keep improving on all the time. These football helmets and shoulder pads, the way that those things are today—that's why I go back, and we limit the amount of time they can spend on the practice field today, we limit the amount of time they can have full contact. We have never done all that. If you saw that little ole helmet that I had, you probably wouldn't play with those helmets today, but now they have \$2,000 helmets today. It is as safe today as it has ever been as long as we continue to follow and comply with the guidelines and rules and that we always, even as a coach, keep safety at the forefront of what we are doing.

Interviewer: I know that when I was looking at the website, there were guidelines and then there were rules. Are guidelines necessarily required?

Interviewee: If it says required we have that on there, and usually the things that you see as guidelines, yes those are required. There may be a time—sometimes there is a cost factor in implementing a new rule just like the kiddie pool or the cold immersion tub I talked about that you can get kids getting heat exhaustion here in Mississippi starting out practice and you can get him and ice him down before you can get any kind of help to come, so there is a cost factor involved. We will usually just say 'recommended'. If it is just recommended then that would be a guideline and then the next year we may—we give you a year to appropriate funds—it's not in your budget this year, but budget for it next year because next year we are gonna require it. We are careful about how we do that.

END OF AUDIO

APPENDIX E

Interview: Michael Jones, Athletic Director, Saint Thomas More High School

Friday, May 13, 2019

Location: Saint Thomas More High School

Transcribed: May 13, 2019

Interviewer: How long have you been the athletic director here?

Interviewee: I have been the athletic director for Saint Thomas More now for six years, but I

was the assistant athletic director for about four years before that.

Interviewer: Okay, what is your responsibility as athletic director is to ensure the safety of athletes at the school?

Interviewee: During football season, there are several things that you have gotta do. For football season, you have got to have your helmets certified every two years. You send them off to Riddell, about the only one that does that now. Every ten years—the helmet can only be ten years old. They have a stamp on the back of it and they discard them once they get that old. From the standpoint of the coaches, all coaches have to take concussion—watch concussion videos each year. They print that off to me, so I can see it and put it in a file. They [MAIS] require that we do that, which we do. Also, we keep up with the things like heat indexes. The MAIS will send us information when it gets certain degrees, and there is protocol as far as what we need to do as far as water breaks and keeping kids hydrated. We—MAIS has never really did this, but the MHSAA used to, and we do it. We keep three big buckets of ice water, and I am talking tubs. So, if a kid does get dehydrated from heat exhaustion, we put them in those tubs which tremendously helps them.

Interviewer: Is the helmet reconditioning stuff mandated by the MAIS for junior high and high school, or is that just high school?

Interviewee: Yes, junior high and high school. Each year, they come in there and look at your helmets, and each year, they take our helmets and recertify them. [Showing receipt for certification of helmets, totaling almost \$4,800] That is just high school right there. You see that bottom figure down there? That is just high school. Junior high will be about the same number, so that comes out of our football budget every year, and that is not even new helmets.

- Interviewer:** I know that was something that I had discussed in a previous interview with a coach. They said that they didn't think the reconditioning was necessarily mandated at the junior high level. They talked about it like it seemed more like a guideline. They said they do it, but they didn't think they were necessarily required to do it.
- Interviewee:** I have always been under the impression that we are required to do it, and I would hate to be caught with a helmet that wasn't recertified.
- Interviewer:** Yeah, I bet. What sort of safety protocols are in place at this school that you might be doing extra. Do y'all do anything extra than what the MAIS requires you to do?
- Interviewee:** Well, we do post all over the fieldhouse all the concussion symptoms. We do that in the schools. We do have to have a defibulator at both schools, in the gym, at the football field, which we do. You have to check them periodically to make sure the batteries aren't run down. That is the key things that we do.
- Interviewer:** Are you, and any of your coaches, subject to any oversight from the MAIS? Do they come in and check-up that y'all are doing the right things?
- Interviewee:** No, they don't. They put it on us to make sure that we do that. I didn't add it, but we also have to have our certification with red cross every year. We have to do that every year, well actually its every two years. That is coming up this year and we will have a class here at the school.
- Interviewer:** I know one thing I was wondering; do you have oversight over the football team? Like do you ever check-in on the football coaches and make sure they are doing what they are supposed to be doing?
- Interviewee:** Yeah, I do. We pretty much ask our coaches to give us a schedule of what they are doing. We don't go over there and really enforce it because that—his plan could change during practice, but I do go around to different sports to observe what they are doing in practice.
- Interviewer:** Do y'all have medical staff at every game? Or are y'all required to have them at every game?
- Interviewee:** We are not required to have that, but we are very fortunate—two things. Hope provides us with trainers, and it may be that they are on our sidelines or it may be that because Hope has one trainer that does Dallas, Warren Central, and us that if they know a team is coming to us and a trainer from Natchez is coming with them, they inform me. They have my schedules,

and they inform me each week who is gonna be there, either them or someone from another school traveling. We are very fortunate also to have several doctors that have kids in the school, and we will ask them to make sure that somebody is at our games, particularly our home games. Even visitor games, when we go out of town, we have an idea of who is at the game so we can get someone down there if we need them.

Interviewer: Is that ever a problem, going to schools that don't have trainers?

Interviewee: It is a concern. It is not a problem. I know we went to a game over in Jackson or Pearl this year. They had a doctor. It wasn't a trainer on the field, and one of our kids was hurt and we had to go looking for their trainer or doctor. They had somebody in the stands that we had to go get and bring them down there. You always want to know. One of the things that both the MAIS and the MHSAA does each year, we send the plan to them, not only medical safety but also law enforcement safety. We send a plan to them of our—a diagram of our facilities and we tell them where security will be, where medical staff will be, where school personnel will be. We have ambulances at every game that will have trained personnel with them.

Interviewer: I was wondering if y'all have to pay for the service of the trainer that y'all have at all the games.

Interviewee: No. We are very fortunate that Hope provides us with a trainer. For years, Saint Dominic's provided us with one, but they have got out of that support, but Hope has taken that on.

Interviewer: Is that just a local business?

Interviewee: It is actually out of Jackson, but it is more of a—we don't necessarily pay them, but because they are there, if something happens, and there needs to be rehab, we are gonna send, you know, to Hope to some of their doctors. With Saint Dominic's we did it with Sport's Medicine. We would send out kids to Sport's Medicine, but now we send them to Hope which is kind of their pay off.

Interviewer: Do you think that funding is really an issue for implementing safety policies?

Interviewee: I think it is. I think a lot of these schools—we are very fortunate because we are located where there are doctors and rehab facilities over in the Jackson area that can provide us with stuff, and you get into a lot of areas in Mississippi—they don't have the closeness of staff like we do. It is hard to go out and pay someone to be at every event because I know if I

don't have someone at a basketball game which seventy-five percent of the time, I do. The lady will call me and say, 'Hey I will be at Dallas Jr. High tonight,' and I have her number so she runs back and forth. You know we are fortunate that we can call her and we are all in proximity and in ten minutes, you can be here from wherever she is at.

Interviewer: As an athletic director, in what areas is safety policy currently lacking in Mississippi, and what would you do to improve it?

Interviewee: I think the areas in statewide is that somebody [medical staff] is at every facility during every game. It is hard to do, because there are just not enough people out to do it. Think about all the games that we got. In the summer, I got softball going on. I got girls' soccer going on. I got junior high football going on. I got high school football going on. Cross-country events. You know, I got five things going on when it is a hundred degrees, so if you could get five people, somebody to be at each one of them, then that's great, but that is hard to do. That would be funding that the state—people could look at even from the state. You know we have had some people this past year—I know some young men passed away at football games because there were no trainers there.

Interviewer: Is there a difference here between the standard of high school safety and junior high safety?

Interviewee: I don't think it is a difference in standards. We try to ensure the same measures that we do on high school. We do the same thing for junior high athletics. They are not really differentiated in one way or another.

Interviewer: Thank you.

END OF AUDIO

APPENDIX F

Interview: Michael Taylor, Head Football Coach, Saint Thomas More High School
Monday, May 13, 2019
Location: Saint Thomas More High School
Transcribed: May 13, 2019

Interviewer: How long have you been a football coach?

Interviewee: Here, or?

Interviewer: Just in general?

Interviewee: I have been a football coach for thirty years.

Interviewer: Thirty years? In your time as a coach, how many years have you coached ninth grade and below?

Interviewee: That was the earlier part of my career when I did junior high and high school. I would probably say about 12 years.

Interviewer: What have you done outside of the school requirements or the MAIS requirements to make the game safer for your players or help ensure that they are not getting hurt as often?

Interviewee: Well the first thing you do is you make sure they are dressed properly with the right equipment, then you have to make sure that they are in condition. I am a big advocate of making sure they are in shape because when a kid is in great physical shape, they can learn better, and they can keep the proper techniques that we taught them. I don't care what kind of techniques you teach them, if they are tired in the ninety-five-degree weather, they are gonna resort back to some bad habits. If you have got them in condition, they are more apt to do the things that they are supposed to do.

Interviewer: How much time to do you give in practice to teach the correct tackling forms? Or do y'all spend a lot of time on that?

Interviewee: We usually do. The early part of the year, we teach more fundamental things, but as the year goes along we kind of give a period for it, but we don't sit there all day. If you are doing the same thing for three months, that means the kids are not picking up what you are trying to do, and you are gonna need to find a new way to teach what you are trying to do. It all depends on the kids, and the team that you have. If you have got a junior-

senior team where fundamentals have already been taught to them and they know better, you can just do one short period day to day, and go on about your business, but if it is some younger kids you have to be a little bit more careful about what you are doing.

Interviewer: Is that a problem with some coaches not pulling players out when they are tackling correctly or might be a danger to themselves or do coaches typically overlook that.

Interviewee: Well that comes with experience. Younger coaches have a tendency to get more amped into winning and losing and one on one drills and who is winning and losing, but to an older coach, that is not what is most important. What is important is proper stances, seeing what you are hitting, and proper techniques, making sure you are dressed properly.

Interviewer: What safety precautions that y'all do, do you see as necessary, required or not?

Interviewee: It is always required. One thing is just see what you hit. If you see what you hit, it helps you keep from laying out and keeps your neck from being in a vulnerable position.

Interviewer: Do you know what the MAIS requires from you as a coach, and then what the school may require separate from that? Do they require more?

Interviewee: They are pretty much the same thing. They want you to be up on the rules, you can go to clinics, or you can watch films on concussions and things of that sort. You are required to do those things. The MAIS—every year they require you to do something dealing with safety.

Interviewer: Have you and your coaches always followed the safety protocols as they are written?

Interviewee: Yeah. Like I said, earlier in my career, I was a little amped sometimes to try to cheat and do other things and rush through it because 'I want to make sure I put this play in' or something, but as you get older you realize it is more important first of all, that you teach the kids the proper way of playing, sportsmanship, and things of that sort.

Interviewer: What kind of oversight do y'all have? Does anybody ever check up on you as a coach or any of your other coaches to make sure everything in practice is going fine? I know sometimes there might be one coach at practice and nobody is checking up on them and there might be one of those young coaches you were talking about putting some players in harm's way. Does anybody really check up on y'all?

Interviewee: That is pretty much the job of the athletic director to come around and make sure everything is in order, ask coaches, ‘what do you need? Do you need proper equipment?’, and listening to parents and everybody’s complaints. Pretty much, the oversight is the athletic director.

Interviewer: What are some of your responsibilities as a coach when a player is injured? I know y’all have a trainer, but to what extent are you involved in the process?

Interviewee: Nine times out of ten, trainers take care of them. That’s what you do immediately, you get somebody to check them out, if not you send them to a doctor, their own personal doctor. It is up to you to find out what is going on with the kid though. They must also have written permission or something signed by the doctor that let you know when it’s time for them to come back, and never rush a kid back before their time. If they come back before their time and re-injure themselves, you are liable. You have got to follow the rules and protocols, and like I said when the kid is hurt, you have got to immediately get help whether it is from the sport’s medicine or their personal doctor. As a coach, you just follow the rules.

Interviewer: This is kind of the big question because my whole thesis is basically on how we can rewrite some policies to make football safer in junior high, so what, as a coach, can you see that can be improved in safety policies in Mississippi for junior high football. I know sometimes high school has a bit more regulations than junior high does.

Interviewee: Right. Well it goes all the way back to peewee league. The equipment we used back in the day was not as good as the equipment we use now. I think sometimes kids start playing football too early. They are not physically ready to be doing some of the things that they are doing. A lot of those kids bring injuries from peewee league to junior high and from junior high to high school, so they are already injured when you got them. When I first started coaching, kids didn’t have many injuries. Now, the first day of practice kids are already hurt, and you are like what is wrong? “Ah, well hurt this doing this and I hurt this doing that.” I think sometimes, they are not getting the proper rest and they are doing too much. You know, bigger, stronger, faster, but yet and still sometimes a kid has got to be a kid. You have got to learn to enjoy the sport, and I think by them playing so early and playing so many things when they are early—it takes the fun out of it, and by the time they get to be eleventh and twelfth grade they are drawn out. Of course, and I have had great athletes when they are seniors that don’t wanna play college ball because they are burnt out and they don’t wanna do it anymore.

Interviewer: Well that is all I have got. Thank you.

END OF AUDIO

APPENDIX G

**Interview: Dr. Walton Jones, Executive Director, Mississippi Association
of Independent Schools
Thursday, May 16, 2019
Phone Interview
Transcribed: August 6, 2019**

Interviewer: How long have you been a part of the MAIS?

Interviewee: Probably right at twenty years or so.

Interviewer: Can you explain what exactly it is that you do as it relates to the safety of athletes in the MAIS?

Interviewee: You know, we have an athletic commission that is made up of headmasters from each of the districts around the association. We are also National Federation members. We are one of only a few independent school organizations that are members in the National Federation, so we ascribe to all National Federation rules, safety guidelines. Our coaches are required to take the sport specific tests before practice starts each year. The same goes for officials, so there is complete online testing and certification and all of those things.

Interviewer: How do you enforce all of your rules? Do you have oversight over all of the schools or maybe have someone that goes around and checks on them? Or is that more like an honor system?

Interviewee: There is an athletic commission rule and handbook so if they do not play in accordance with the rules then they are not allowed to participate.

Interviewer: When y'all are finding out about schools that are not playing according to the rules or practicing according to the rules, is that basically being reported by parents or is there someone appointed to look into that?

Interviewee: Well most of it is reported via the schools because of the competition advantage, so if a school was starting to practice early in the heat index, they would be turned in, it would be investigated, and then the school would be placed on probation and the coach could be fined.

Interviewer: Okay. Do y'all go to any lengths to inform players and parents of the possible risks associated with playing football?

Interviewee: Say that again.

- Interviewer:** Do y'all inform players and parents of possible risks associated with playing football? Do y'all do anything like that?
- Interviewee:** That is at a school level generally, so they meet with parents. We don't have a public campaign because we deal with schools and not individuals.
- Interviewer:** Is there any difference in the safety in high school and junior high school? Or do they follow the same regulations?
- Interviewee:** Same regulations.
- Interviewer:** Okay. Are y'all currently working on instituting any better policies for safety in football?
- Interviewee:** I think you know anything that is pushed down from the National Federation which is the NCAA of high school sports, so anything that is directed by them, we use their rules and perimeters or so that is the governing body much like the NCAA would do for college athletics.
- Interviewer:** I wanted to know more about how y'all's organization is set up. Do the schools have to pay membership dues or where does the majority of y'all's funding come from?
- Interviewee:** It is a membership organization.
- Interviewer:** Does the cost of implementing different safety policies weigh a burden on y'all in any way.
- Interviewee:** It is probably not as burdensome on us as it is for the individual schools. The schools are the ones that would feel the burden of implementation probably more than we do.
- Interviewer:** Do y'all require medical personnel to be at every game?
- Interviewee:** Uh, there is certain requirements for ambulances and different things or trainers and that sort of thing.
- Interviewer:** So y'all do require ambulances to be at every game?
- Interviewee:** At our championships we do. I don't know the specific rule, but it has to be within a proximity or there.

Interviewer: As the Executive Director of the MAIS, what issues do you see that are currently in safety policy? What could we do as a state to better football safety for participants?

Interviewee: I think it is just an education. I think it is a training issue. We have looked at different tackling systems that are out there. I think that it's how do you play the sport better, how do you train participants better, how do you inform coaches, so I think it is a continual education process. I also think that football has gotten a lot more negative publicity than other sports. I mean we see more injuries in cheerleading than we probably do in football. I would say that basketball rival injuries as far as that concern and football does as well. It is just a sports activity is a dangerous activity and better training, better equipment will help us all in the long run.

Interviewer: Well, that is all the questions I have. Thank you so much.

END OF AUDIO

APPENDIX H

Interview: Balie Dunkirk, Chiropractor
Monday, December 16, 2019
Location: Dunkirk Chiropractic
Transcribed: December 16, 2019

Interviewer: How long have you been a chiropractor?

Interviewee: I'm a sports medicine chiropractor. I have been in practice for 19 years in Waterford, Mississippi. I'm an old athletic trainer. I am a nationally certified strength and conditioning specialist or a.k.a. strength coach, and I am a chiropractor.

Interviewer: Okay, can you explain kind of what you do with football players and injuries?

Interviewee: Yeah, sure. I see all types of athletes in all forms of athletics. Football wise, I mostly see them during the injury. We do perform pre-physicals, assessments before they engage, but if they come in with an injury and we check them out, the main thing that I am looking for is head trauma. If you are watching any television shows the first thing you see is a doctor run in with a light and shine it in their eye. You are looking for pupil dilation to see if there is brain hemorrhaging or brain trauma. The eyes will show you that immediately, so we usually look for that type of thing. It has been on the increase. In the 19 years that I have been practicing, I am seeing a younger influx of children, young adults coming in with headaches and stuff after a football game that was not happening fifteen years ago or more than that.

Interviewer: Do you have any idea of what might be causing that? Is it like a lack of care?

Interviewee: I don't believe it is a lack of care. The equipment is better than I had when I was coming up. It is better than what my father had who played college ball. So, the performance apparel that the kids are wearing has improved dramatically, but the athletic ability of the children has improved dramatically. It is not a simple just run down the field and just fall on the ground when someone grabs you by the shirt sleeve. Now you have got fifteen-year-old kids that are hitting each other with tremendous force. The medical literature says that with some of the NCAA college boys are wearing receivers in their helmets to determine what type of impact and how much g-force, they are getting. Some of those people are getting 40 times the normal, 40 times their body weight in collision when they get hit.

Interviewer: I had listened to one guy talk in a congressional testimony and he was talking about when kids are hit might suffer more injury than a college or NFL player. Do you think that is true in regard to the severity?

Interviewee: Sure. Here is what I know of. Here is what I think it is. It is because the human body is growing from a musculoskeletal standpoint until a male is 21 years of age. So, believe it or not patients are coming to me and I take an X-ray and they are 19, and I see damage in their body, and I say you had a car wreck probably when you were 13 or maybe 10, and most of my patients will look me in the eye and say yeah, my mother rolled her car, we were hit from behind by an 18-wheeler when I was young. So, the bodies are soft. I tell patients that their bones are like marshmallows. Now, that's not true, they are not that soft, but it helps them understand it. The bones are softer, so the trauma to the brain—it's not as hard of a turtle shell as it would be when you were 25 or 30. So, when you when you are in a collision or have an injury at a young age, you are at a higher risk of having trauma from that.

Interviewer: And that is for all injuries? Not just head injuries?

Interviewee: Every injury. Anything and everything.

Interviewer: Now, I was just wondering your opinion on—as far as the oversight—is the standard of care for a junior high or a peewee football team significantly less than a high school or college football team?

Interviewee: It has improved dramatically. Like I said, I am a strength coach, but I did not have a strength coach when I was growing up. It was just our lineman coach who was just the biggest muscular guy on the team. He came in and wrote what to do on the board. He wrote it on a chalkboard, walked out, and sat in his office while we lifted weights. That was strength training. Now every high school in the—even the junior high schools here in Waterford has a strength coach that is certified and is actually being paid to watch the progression of these children, high school, intermediate, junior high, female and male athletes.

Interviewer: What do you think the greatest threat to junior high football safety is? That we can prevent at least. I know a lot of things that we do are just sort of reactionary, but are there any primary prevention improvements that you can see would be possible?

Interviewee: I'm gonna go on a limb and say this actually, and no one expects me to say that because I am supposed to be the athletic minded individual. It is the parents. Parents are pushing their kids too hard. I am seeing younger kids

come in to me with substantial injuries. Baseball pitchers, their parents are pushing them wanting them to become the next NCAA player, they gotta get a scholarship at Ole Miss or wherever they are gonna go to school. They are pushing these kids. They have tournament baseball now that goes year-round. When I grew up it was summer, and that was it. Now, you play year round. These kids are being pushed by their parents wanting to see them excel or wanting them to be the next Michael Jordan or whoever the best athlete they think there is in the mind. It's the parents who are pushing their kids.

Interviewer: So, you think it is more a cultural problem?

Interviewee: It is a culture. Yes.

Interviewer: I had a football coach that I talked to that coached for over thirty years, and he was just saying that the increase in injuries that he is getting at the high school level like kids coming in saying oh I hurt this when I was a kid. He said they are basically just building on their injuries.

Interviewee: That's exactly right.

Interviewer: So, you don't see any policy oriented solutions to these issues?

Interviewee: Getting above my pay grade there. Something needs to be done, and because I feel like it is more of a psychological thing, more than a physical component, the psychology of the parent pushing the child, I don't know how you would get a handle on that.

END OF AUDIO

APPENDIX I

Interview: Cameron Thompson A.T., Safe Sports Physical Therapy

Tuesday, December 17, 2019

Location: Waterford Middle School

Transcribed: December 17, 2019

Interviewer: How long have you been an athletic trainer?

Interviewee: I have been an athletic trainer since May of 2014, so I have—this is my 6th season.

Interviewer: Okay, can you explain kind of what you do as it pertains to football teams that you serve?

Interviewee: Yeah, so at Waterford, I cover middle school and high school. There is a seventh-grade team, eighth grade team, ninth grade team. There is a JV team and then the varsity team. I show up every day. During the summer time, we do workouts. I show up there and just help out with lifting techniques and stuff just to prevent injuries. I cover our football practice during the summer time, hydration and any injuries that might happen. Once football season starts, I am up here every day during practice just seeing if there are any injuries, evaluating and if there is an injury, just be the gatekeeper on going to see a physician.

Interviewer: I have kind of been looking at the different areas of care, equipment, funding, and personnel. Can you see a difference between the levels of those from high school to junior high changing? Like is there less funding or not as good of equipment or not as good of care in junior high compared to high school?

Interviewee: Yes. Yes and no. In the high school that I went to, the middle school got all of the leftovers that the high school has used for X amount of years, and the same thing at this school even though it is larger. They do still get some of our hand-me-down stuff. The high school gets brand new helmets every two years, brand new shoulder pads about every three or four years, and we do give our stuff down to the middle school. So, yeah, they do use older stuff. Schools with more money could buy new equipment for their middle school, but I don't think that happens very often in Mississippi.

Interviewer: So do you think that is a problem—I know Waterford is a pretty well-off school—but do you think that is a big problem across the state as far as some schools that might be not as well-off financially?

Interviewee: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. I would say probably the middle schools are using their hand-me-down equipment. Maybe like Oak Grove, I don't know, Jackson Prep, Waterford, Tupelo are the only people providing new equipment for the middle schoolers.

Interviewer: As far as the recertification on equipment and stuff, can you talk a little bit about that? Or do you know much about that?

Interviewee: I know helmets need to get recertified every 2 years, and I could be wrong. You could probably google some of this, but I think helmets get certified every two years. They get checked for cracks, and they get new hardware in them, new foam inside of them, and then they get a new coat of paint. Shoulder pads. I don't think there is a rule in Mississippi about shoulder pads, and I could be wrong on that, but we—we use some old shoulder pads too.

Interviewer: And then the sizing on the equipment, especially for the junior high kids. Who is in charge of—how do y'all make sure that all of that fits properly.

Interviewee: Usually the coaches are in charge. Usually the coaches are in charge and they kind of go by size. They will have—on the shoulder pads they have like a chest size. You know and it is small, medium, large and has the number size of inches for the chest. So, we go by that and the coaches are in charge of that.

Interviewer: As far as the personnel goes, have you seen in this school or any of the other schools that y'all play that there might be just a few coaches for a whole lot of kids, like that ratio being out of whack? And do you see that as a safety issue?

Interviewee: For other schools yes. For Waterford, no. Just because we have—you know
the funding is good enough here that we can hire—we have our own ninth grade coaching staff and our own varsity coaching staff, and our own middle school coaching staff. A lot of schools, a whole lot of schools, the combined all of that and that is a safety concern.

Interviewer: What do you think the greatest threats to junior high players are versus a high school player?

Interviewee: Versus a high school player, a high school player has most likely been taught correct tackling techniques and a middle school player, there is a chance, a good chance that they didn't grow up playing peewee football. Some of those kids never played that so they don't have the technique

down, but our coaches do a good job here of teaching how to tackle you know head up.

Interviewer: Are a lot of the injuries that you see from not being taught the right way to tackle?

Interviewee: To be honest, I don't have a whole lot of neck or head injuries in junior high football because they are not strong enough. They don't run fast enough. They don't have much force on their hits really so I don't think I have seen really but one or two head or neck injuries in six years so far.

Interviewer: Do you think that football can be made safer for junior high kids, and what areas do you think could be addressed?

Interviewee: Areas that could be made safer, like you said you could have more coaches teaching the middle school group tackling techniques which is basically if you got the funding to hire those coaches. Also, if you had the funding for newer helmets and equipment that are up to date obviously that is gonna help out. Maybe kickoff—taking out kickoff just because they have a lot of speed running down and that would probably be the only time that I could see a rule change.

Interviewer: How big of a help do you think it is to have an athletic trainer on the sidelines? Do a lot of schools even have those? Are you required to have an athletic trainer there?

Interviewee: You are not required to have an athletic trainer, but my thoughts on it is if you can spend money for coaches, you can spend money for the equipment that you do have, and you can pay officials every single game, why aren't you protecting the kids and having a certified athletic trainer at the game?

Interviewer: Do you go to a lot of schools that don't have athletic trainers?

Interviewee: Waterford is 6-A so pretty much every 6-A school obviously has an athletic

trainer, but there is a lot of schools, especially a lot of delta schools—you know, funding is incredibly low in that are, so you know they don't think to put an athletic trainer out there. And not just the delta there is a lot of schools that are smaller in Mississippi that don't have athletic trainers

END OF AUDIO