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The Record: Rethinking kickoffs

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 THE RECORD

IN THE GREAT Jim Thorpe's day, football players wore leather helmets, if they wore them at all. It would be decades before manufacturers improved on that model, and years later before players began wearing face masks.



Kickoff at Wayne Valley: Controlled chaos.

several minutes on the field. Hobbs suffered a neck injury and reportedly will miss the rest of the season.

Of course, the sort of scary injury Hobbs suffered is one that lives in the back of every player's mind and is a sober reminder of the risk of playing football in the modern era, when players, it seems, are bigger and stronger and faster than they used to be. The risk is especially great on the kickoff, a play made more dangerous by its sheer physics — opposing bodies rushing at one another at full speed.

It is into this mix of competition and athletics that doctors in New Jersey have recently waded, with what football purists may find a staggering suggestion: eliminating the kickoff in high school football and allowing each team to start its possessions on the 20- or 25-yard line. It may seem a radical idea, but it's one that deserves vigorous debate.

The proposal, recommended by the Medical Society of New Jersey's Committee on Medical Aspects of Sports, was first reported in The Record by Local Sports Columnist Darren Cooper, who spoke at length with members of the committee, the same group that has in the past recommended helmets for bicyclists and safety measures for athletes, including the use of breakaway bases in baseball.

"Kickoffs are the most dangerous part of football," said committee chairman Vin McNerney, an orthopedic surgeon at St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson, and someone who has seen his share of high school injuries. "Two teams are coming at one another like gladiators ... that is the worst potential for injuries."

The issue, of course, is heavy on the minds of New Jersey fans, who have grieved over the devastating injury to Rutgers player Eric LeGrand, who was left paralyzed from the neck down after a violent collision during a kickoff earlier this season against Army. McNerney, a longtime fan of the game, says the threat is greater in high school games, where players' bodies and brains are not fully developed, and where size disparity can be a factor.

Hardly a year goes by that some new technology doesn't come along to make players' equipment, from head to toe, safer than it once was.

And yet, football remains a violent and dangerous game.

We were reminded of that fact Sunday night, when Eagles kick returner Ellis Hobbs suffered a nasty hit to the helmet during a game against the Giants and was carried off the field on a stretcher after lying still for

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The doctors' recommendation is backed by a 2009 national study out of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital. According to one author of the study, "during kickoff and punting, a greater proportion of severe injuries occurred compared to all other phases of play," and McInerney says some 30 percent of injuries on kickoffs are severe.

That said, eliminating the kickoff at any level of play will be difficult. It is a fundamental part of the game and one of its most exciting. Unlike the technological improvements made over the years, taking away the kickoff would mark a serious alteration of basic play.

Still, it seems reasonable, given the frequency of severe injuries, and the attention being paid to the concussions of present and former players, that the "no kickoff" option for high schools should get a fair hearing. Meantime, rules committees could at least consider moving the kickoff line closer so as to reduce the number of kick returns.

No one wants to change the nature of the game, to take away the action that makes it so enjoyable in the first place. Yet, at the end of the day, we remember that football is a game, and we would like to see it remain as safe as possible for those who play it.

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