

## Youth Football

# Hosea Teaching Kids the Right Way to Tackle

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CARSON, Calif. | They walked through dawn's thick fog to the practice turf -- two dozen boys as old as 17 and as young as 9, giving up a Saturday morning to the coach in the Panama hat.

"Dip 'n' rip, baby! Dip 'n' rip!" the coach said as players ducked under five-foot limbo sticks and exploded out the other side.

"Head up! No! Head up!"

"Not chest up, chest out! Yeah!"

Bobby Hosea, a 55-year-old former defensive back and longtime bit actor, has a singular passion: teaching young football players how to protect their heads while tackling. He has watched too many end up in wheelchairs, even coffins. He sees NFL defenders recklessly diving helmet-first and claiming it is too late to change. He hears youth coaches exhorting tacklers to "lay a hat on him," a maneuver so neck-crushingly dangerous it could well be called Rushing Roulette.

So Hosea runs camps that focus on one skill -- tackling with your head up instead of down, and away from contact -- and gives individual instruction to players in and around Los Angeles. USA Football, the governing body of Pop Warner and other leagues for players ages 6 to 14, recently hired Hosea as its tackling consultant and placed videos of his technique on its website.

To lighten things up, Hosea could have amused the youngsters by reading the official definition of tackling, codified at Rule 3, Section 34 of the NFL Rulebook: "The use of hands or arms by a defensive player in his attempt to hold a runner or throw him to the ground." This quaint approach has evolved into the more gratifying and theatrical act of launching head-first into a ball carrier's gut, chest or helmet.

The result has been a steady rise in concussions -- estimated at more than 500,000 each season among the 4.4 million children who play tackle football -- as well as more rare but catastrophic injuries where vertebrae are crushed or fractured, leaving the player paralyzed.

On this Saturday, ages ranged from a 9-year-old who weighed 70 pounds to a beefy high school senior eyeing junior-college ball. The players did not know Hosea from

his playing days at UCLA, the Canadian Football League or the U.S. Football League, nor did they recognize him from recent parts on "24" or "Bones."

Hosea takes a tackler's most instinctual act -- to dive toward a runner, head down and arms extended -- and rebuilds it from the turf up. He keeps knees bent, backside out and chests up, bending the spine and forcing the chin and eyes up. Arms remain at the side until just before impact, when the hips and shoulders thrust up into the opponent, only then swinging forward to wrap up the runner and wrestle him down.

Hosea ran drills as unconventional as his method. The players lined up on their knees 10 at a time and flopped forward onto pads with their arms clasped behind their backs, looking like flying fish. In midair, they must call out the number of fingers a coach raises -- to prove that their chins are up and eyes are alert. Elsewhere, they must run full speed under horizontal bars only 52 and 60 inches off the ground -- Hosea's so-called Dip-'n'-Rip sticks -- before hitting tackling dummies to ensure that they stay low enough with proper form.

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