

Date of Hearing:

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT, SPORTS, AND TOURISM

Christopher M. Ward, Chair

AB 708 (Valencia) – As Introduced February 14, 2025

SUBJECT: California Youth Football Act: safety equipment

SUMMARY: This bill would require youth tackle football leagues, and youth sports organizations that conduct tackle football programs, to allow participants to use safety equipment, including soft-shelled add-ons on football helmets.

Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires youth tackle football leagues, youth sports organization that conducts tackle football programs, and coaches of a youth sports organizations, to allow youth tackle football participants to use safety equipment, including soft-shelled add-ons on football helmets.
- 2) Allows a court to grant a temporary restraining order, preliminary injunction, or permanent injunction to remedy a violation or threatened violation of this section.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Defines “youth sports organization” as an organization, business, or nonprofit entity that sponsors or conducts amateur sports competition, training, camps, clinics, practices, or clubs. (Health and Safety Code (HSC) Section 124240(b)(10))
- 2) Defines “youth tackle football league” as the organization that groups together youth sports organizations that conduct youth tackle football, administers rules, and sets game schedules. It may or may not be associated with a national organization. (HSC 124240(b)(11))
- 3) Requires a youth sports organization to comply with certain requirements related to athletes suspected of sustaining a concussion or head injury, including removal from the athletic activity and a prohibition on returning until he or she is evaluated by a licensed health care provider. (HSC 124235(a)(1)(A))
- 4) Requires youth sports organizations to give a concussion and head injury information sheet to each athlete on a yearly basis. (HSC 124235(a)(3)(A))
- 5) Requires a youth sports organization to offer concussion and head injury education, or related educational materials, to each coach and administrator of the youth sports organization, and requires each coach and administrator to successfully complete this education at least once, either online or in person, before supervising an athlete. (HSC 124235(a)(4)-(5)(A))
- 6) Requires a youth football team coach to annually receive a tackling and blocking certification from a nationally recognized program that emphasizes shoulder tackling, safe contact and blocking drills, and techniques designed to minimize the risk during contact by removing the involvement of a participant’s head from all tackling and blocking techniques. (HSC 124241(d))

- 7) Requires each youth tackle football administrator, coach, and referee to annually complete all of the following: (HSC 124241(e)(1)-(3))
 - a) The concussion and head injury education required under existing law for coaches and administrators of a youth sports organization;
 - b) The Opioid Factsheet for Patients that existing law requires to be given to each athlete in a youth sports organization; and,
 - c) Training in the basic understanding of the signs, symptoms, and appropriate responses to heat-related illness.
- 8) Requires each parent or guardian of a youth tackle football participant to receive the concussion and head injury information for that athlete, and the Opioid Factsheet for Patients. (HSC 124241(f))
- 9) Requires each football helmet to be reconditioned and recertified every other year, unless stated otherwise by the manufacturer. Restricts the entities who can perform the reconditioning and recertification to only those entities licensed by the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment. Every reconditioned and recertified helmet must display a clearly recognizable mark or notice in the helmet indicating the month and year of the last certification. (HSC 124241(g))
- 10) Requires at least one independent non-rostered individual, appointed by the youth sports organization, to be present at all practice locations. Requires the individual to hold current and active certification in first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), AED, and concussion protocols. Requires the individual to have the authority to evaluate and remove any youth tackle football participant from practice who exhibits an injury, including, but not limited to, symptoms of concussion or other head injury. (HSC 124241(j))
- 11) Requires safety equipment to be inspected before every full-contact practice or game to ensure that all youth tackle football participants are properly equipped. (HSC 124241(k))
- 12) Requires a youth sports organization to annually provide a declaration to its youth tackle football league stating that it is in compliance with this article and to either post the declaration on its internet website or provide the declaration to all youth tackle football participants within its youth sports organization. (HSC 124241(n))
- 13) Requires a youth tackle football league, on and after January 1, 2021, to retain de-identified information for the tracking of youth sports injuries. Requires this information to include the type of injury, the medical treatment received by the youth tackle football participant, and return to play protocols followed by the participant. (HSC 124242 (b))
- 14) States that nothing in this article, known as the California Youth Safety Act, shall prohibit any youth sports organization or youth tackle football league from adopting and enforcing rules intended to provide a higher standard of safety for youth tackle football participants than the requirements established under this article. (HSC 124243)

FISCAL EFFECT: None. This measure has been keyed non-fiscal by the Legislative Counsel.

COMMENTS:

- 1) Author's statement. According to the author, "AB 708 safeguards parents' rights to decide on soft-shell helmet add-ons for their children in youth football leagues, allowing them to make informed decisions about player safety. At a critical stage of brain development, it is essential to protect young athletes' long-term well-being while upholding the integrity of the sport. This bill ensures that families have the freedom to equip their children with additional safety measures, aligning youth football protections with those used at the professional level in the National Football League (NFL)."
- 2) Background. On October 3, 2023, this committee held an informational hearing on improving athlete safety in youth tackle football. The committee heard from a number of experts, including Dr. Chris Nowinski, the CEO and co-founder of the Concussion Legacy Foundation; Dr. David Camarillo, an associate professor of bioengineering, mechanical engineering, and neurosurgery at Stanford University; and Dr. Stella Legarda, the president of the California Neurology Society. In addition, the committee received testimony from representatives of the California Youth Football Alliance about the current safety measures put in place with the signing of AB 1 by former Assemblymember Jim Cooper in 2019, as well as former players and family members impacted by CTE and head injuries.

Research to-date suggests that CTE is caused in part by repeated traumatic brain injuries, including concussions, and repeated hits to the head, called sub-concussive head impacts. Symptoms can include difficulty thinking, impulsive behavior, depression or apathy, short-term memory loss, emotional instability, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts or behavior, and difficulty planning or carrying out tasks. The disease often gets worse over time similar to Alzheimer's Syndrome and dementia. Most documented cases have occurred in athletes involved in contact sports such as football, wrestling, ice hockey, rugby, and soccer, as well as striking-based combat sports like boxing and mixed martial arts.

The exact amount of trauma required for the condition to occur is unknown, and a definitive diagnosis can only occur posthumously during autopsy. There is no specific treatment for the disease. There is no known cause for why some people develop CTE, but not others. There is also no proven association with the number of head injuries, the severity of head injury, or the duration of time an athlete is exposed to potential head injury. CTE has been found in teenagers, young adults, and middle aged persons.

- 3) The California Youth Football Act. California has instituted various laws which require concussion prevention and coaches training in both schools and in youth sports, including requirements that schools must have concussion and return to play protocols for all sports. AB 1 (Cooper) of 2019, established the California Youth Football Act, which based on the standards proposed by AAP established a comprehensive safety scheme for youth tackle football including, among other things; not conducting more than two full-contact practices per week during the preseason and regular season; not holding a full-contact practice during the off-season; having coaches receive a tackling and blocking certification; having designated personnel annually complete specified concussion and head injury education, a specified factsheet related to opioids, and designated training relating to heat-related illness, as defined; meeting specified requirements relating to safety equipment; having a licensed medical professional present during games, as specified; having coaches receive first aid,

cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and automated external defibrillator certification; and inspecting safety equipment.

The provision of the California Youth Football Act took effect on January 1, 2021. It is important to note that the Act requires leagues and organizations to retain information for the tracking of youth sports injuries, but no statewide organization is currently gathering that information. Additionally, the Act specifically does not prohibit any youth sports organization or youth tackle football league from adopting and enforcing rules providing a higher level of safety than the requirements of the Act.

- 4) Soft-shelled football helmet add-ons. Soft-shelled helmet add-ons are designed to enhance player safety by providing an extra layer of padding on the exterior of traditional hard-shell helmets. These add-ons, such as the Guardian Cap, are made of foam and other shock-absorbing materials which reduce the force of impacts during practices, scrimmages, and non-contact drills.

The technology was first introduced in the NFL in 2015 and has since undergone extensive testing through simulated impacts and on-field evaluations. Based on these findings, the NFL gradually expanded its use, ultimately approving them for optional wear during regular-season games beginning with the 2024 season.

Research from Virginia Tech shows that soft helmet covers help absorb hits in football. They reduce the force of impact by about 5% and twisting motion on the head by about 9%, making concussions about 25% less likely. This means these add-ons can make the game safer for players.

Certain youth football leagues have prohibited players from wearing soft-shelled helmet add-ons. Youth football league officials cite helmet manufacturers' guidance, which do not recommend them, as the primary reason for the ban. The manufacturers' concern is that, despite the minimal additional weight (~0.7 lbs), these add-ons could alter head dynamics and increase the risk of concussions in young athletes.

In leagues that have prohibited these add-ons, some officials have imposed strict penalties, including suspensions for coaches and fines for teams that allow players to wear them. These measures have sparked significant backlash from parents, who are increasingly voicing their concerns over what they see as unnecessary restrictions on player safety.

- 5) Policy considerations. Similar legislation is currently being considered by the Rhode Island and West Virginia state legislatures. The legislation from both states would require all students participating at the interscholastic league level to wear an impact-reducing soft-shell helmet cover at all times while participating in football games and practices during any time in which a traditional football helmet would be used. The West Virginia legislation would allow this requirement to become permissive should grant funding for the purchase of the soft-shell helmet cover be unavailable.
- 8) Arguments in support. According to Fullerton Pop Warner in support, "Many parents view soft-shelled helmet add-ons as crucial safety equipment, yet some leagues are preventing youth athletes from wearing them by imposing restrictions. Research from Virginia Tech demonstrates that soft-shelled helmet add-ons reduce impact forces and lower concussion

risks. During a time when children’s brains are developing, it is important to ensure their future well-being and long-term success are protected, while also respecting the fundamentals of football. Additionally, the National Football League utilizes these add-ons at the highest levels of the sport.”

9) Double-referral. If the bill is passed out of this committee, it will be re-referred to the Assembly Committee on Judiciary.

10) Prior and related legislation.

- a) AB 749 (McKinnor) of the current legislative session would enact legislation relating to a study to evaluate the creation of a California Department of Youth Sports. This bill is pending referral to an Assembly policy committee.
- b) AB 734 (McCarty), would have prohibited youth tackle football leagues, and youth sports organizations that conduct tackle football programs, from allowing the participation of any person younger than 12 years of age. The bill failed passage on Assembly 3rd Reading.
- c) AB 2127 (Cooley), Chapter 165, Statutes of 2014, limited interscholastic football teams to two full-contact football practices per week during preseason and regular season, prohibited the full-contact portion of a practice from exceeding 90 minutes in any single day, and completely prohibit full-contact practice during the off-season. The bill also required a student-athlete who has suffered a concussion or head injury to complete a graduated return-to-play protocol of at least seven days.
- d) AB 2007 (McCarty), Chapter 516, Statutes of 2016, requires a concussion and head injury information sheet to be signed and returned by the athlete and athlete’s parent or guardian before an athlete begins practice or competition in one of 27 sports offered by youth sports organizations, and proscribes return to play protocols for concussed athletes.
- e) AB 2108 (McCarty) from 2018 would have prohibited any person who is not at least 12 years of age from playing tackle football with a youth sports organization. The bill was withdrawn by the author prior to its hearing in the Assembly Arts, Entertainment, Sports, and Tourism Committee.
- f) AB 1 (Cooper), Chapter 158, Statutes of 2019, established the California Youth Football Act, with the purpose of establishing comprehensive safety measures for youth tackle football. Provisions of the bill included limits on the number of full contact practices per week, the amount of time per practice that can be full contact, specify the training programs that must be completed by coaches and administrators on tackling and blocking as well as concussion and head injury education, and regulate equipment inspections and recertification.
- g) AB 379 (Maienschein), Chapter 174, Statutes of 2019, deleted the specified designation of 27 sports from the definition of youth sports organizations, expanding the scope of the definition to any amateur sports competitions, training, camps, or clubs in which persons 17 years of age or younger participate. The bill added requirements to youth sports

organizations for specified protocols relating to sudden cardiac arrest prevention, similar to the concussion protocols required by AB 2007 (McCarty) in 2016.

- h) AB 2300 (Cooper), Chapter 49, Statutes of 2020, revised the California Youth Football Act to delete the ability of an emergency medical technician or paramedic to “evaluate” youth tackle football participants, and instead specified that an emergency medical technician or paramedic has the authority to provide prehospital emergency medical care or rescue services consistent with their certification or license.
- i) AB 1348 (McCarty) from 2022 would have required the Surgeon General to convene a Commission on CTE and Youth Football to investigate issues related to the risks of brain injury associated with participation in youth football, and to provide recommendations to the Governor and Legislature on strategies to reduce this risk, including the minimum appropriate age for participation in youth tackle football. The bill was vetoed by Governor Newsom, who stated that the effectiveness of the California Youth Football Act, which took effect in January 2021, had not been sufficiently assessed and that more research is needed to better understand current safety measures and the risks.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

California Neurology Society
California Youth Football Alliance
Concussion Legacy Foundation

Opposition

There is no opposition on file.

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