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JAN. 25, 2018

Safety, Health Goal of Proposed End to Youth Tackle Football Under 12 in Illinois

CHICAGO -- Football is inherently a dangerous game. But it shouldn’t be that way for children, and it won’t be under a new legislative proposal that would end youth tackle football in Illinois.

Amid growing concern of long-term brain problems from repeated head injuries in football, State Rep. Carol Sente joined with a coalition of football stars, medical experts and advocates at a Chicago news conference Thursday at the start of the Illinois General Assembly’s 2018 legislative session to call for new protections in youth football.

Sente, D-Vernon Hills, and the coalition unveiled the Dave Duerson Act to Prevent CTE that would end organized tackle football for youth under age 12. Dave Duerson was the starting strong safety on the 1985 Chicago Bears Super Bowl team and captain at Notre Dame who took his own life at age 50, and was found to have the brain disease Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) that has been linked to head impacts received playing football.

The legislation, aimed at helping youth enjoy the game while reducing long-term health risks, was introduced at a news conference in Chicago on Thursday, Jan. 25. The coalition behind the Dave Duerson Act to Prevent CTE outlined its plans for winning support of the new legislation during the 2018 legislative session.

The coalition includes:

- State Rep. Carol Sente, D-Vernon Hills
- Dave’s son Tregg Duerson
- Duerson’s former teammate Otis Wilson
- Former Chicago Bear and TV broadcaster Mike Adamle
- Liz Nicholson, wife of former NFL player Gerry Sullivan
- Chris Nowinski, Ph.D., CEO of the Concussion Legacy Foundation

These advocates helped support the legislation’s contention that repeated hits to the head can cause Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), and tackle football is an inappropriate activity for children before they turn 12.

“When my father tragically took his own life, he donated his brain to science in hopes of being part of the solution,” said Tregg Duerson, who also played football at Notre Dame. “Thanks to increased attention and research on brain trauma, we know that part of the solution is to guard young children’s developing brains from the risks of tackle football. This bill honors my family’s hopes and my father’s legacy to protect future athletes and the future of football.”
The best evidence shows CTE risk correlates to the number of years playing football, much as lung cancer risk correlates to number of years smoking. Athletes who begin football before 12 have a greater risk of cognitive impairment, mood and behavior disturbances as adults than players who began after 12.

The coalition also pointed to overwhelming public support from former and current football players and coaches and the general public to end tackle football for pre-teens, and to encourage them instead to play flag and other non-contact versions of football.

Sente has sponsored and supported a number of proposals in recent years in Illinois aimed at reducing concussions and other head injuries in youth sports that can create lifelong problems. The youth tackling ban is the critical evolution in that important public policy work, she said.

"We all want kids to have fun playing football and to learn to play the game the right way early on. But the overwhelming data and powerful stories of our supporters here today show the risks of playing tackle football before turning 12 just aren’t worth it," Sente said. "We have a long road ahead, but I am confident we have the science on our side and can make a very persuasive argument that safer football for youth will lead to healthier and more rewarding lives for generations to come."

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