

**Testimony of Dr. Michael Lewis, MD, MPH, MBA, FACPM, FACN
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Good afternoon, Chairwoman Kaiser and all members of the House Ways and Means Committee.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today. My name is Dr. Michael Lewis. I am the President and Founder of the Brain Health Education and Research Institute, a nonprofit organization I started upon my retirement at the end of a thirty year career in the U.S. Army in order to continue the research and educational endeavors I undertook while on active duty at the Uniformed Services University and the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center in Bethesda that was focused on nutritional interventions for the prevention and recovery from Traumatic Brain Injury. For the past eight years, I also have been in private practice in Potomac where my entire patient population is those who are suffering the lingering ill effects of concussions and brain injuries. Interesting to note that my board certification is not in neurology or neurosurgery, but in Preventive Medicine and Public Health and I am a Fellow of the American College of Preventive Medicine and the American of Nutrition.

I want you to be aware of my background in the context of why we are here today. Despite my chosen profession and focus on brain injury, I am a lifelong advocate of team sports, first as a athlete growing up, and as a father of a teenaged son who played [and continues to play contact sports] not only soccer, basketball, lacrosse, and baseball as a kid, but was an All-County running back in high school in addition to being considered for high school All-American in rugby, a sport in which he continues to play in college. I am a founding member of the Pop Warner Youth Sports Medical Advisory Committee because I, too, am concerned about both the health of our youth as well as the health of youth sports.

In my opinion, sports are an irreplaceable environment for our youth to learn the lessons they will carry into successful adulthood – how to win; how to lose; how to be team player; leadership; working towards a common goal; getting knocked down and getting back up again. When General Douglas MacArthur was Superintendent of my alma mater, the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he penned the words:

Upon the fields of friendly strife
Are sown the seeds
That, upon other fields, on other days
Will bear the fruits of victory.

While General MacArthur's words are a century old, they still ring true today more than ever. I believe there is well-placed concern for the health of our youth playing contact sports, it is my opinion that the concerns are ill-conceived out of fearmongering and misguided. My concerns lay more with the decreasing participation in youth sports and the concomitant increasing rates of childhood obesity. Children will not learn the necessary lessons of adulthood sitting on the couch playing video games while eating junk food.

Organizations such as Pop Warner, USA Football, US Lacrosse, US Soccer, and other organizations offer well organized sporting activities that we should be promoting, not legislating. These organizations are taking effective steps towards decreasing risks of, not only head injuries, but all injuries. I can tell you that Pop Warner, the oldest youth football organization in the nation, is not afraid to make bold changes in the interest of its young athletes. Eliminating kickoffs and the three-point stance for its youngest players were not popular moves with everyone in the football community. But Pop Warner felt they were the right things to do.

Sound policies on player safety have been driven by one thing for the Medical Advisory Committee – science. My colleagues are neurosurgeons, neurologists, pediatricians, sports medicine professionals, and medical researchers. Collectively, we study the data that is required before deciding on a rule.

In the case of the amendment in this bill that would ban tackle for children, the science simply isn't there. There are no reliable studies that show young people are at greater risk for long-term neurological issues by playing tackle football before a certain age. We know because we have looked.

Nor is their medical evidence that tells us young people should be limited to 15 minutes of contact per week, as opposed to the maximum 65 minutes per week Pop Warner currently allows. Our decision, and the practice guidelines issued by USA Football, are driven by the data. Even if well-intentioned, those two amendments are arbitrary approaches guided by fear, not data.

We all are committed to protect and strengthen the health of our children. This demands more information to make informed public health decisions, while continuing to emphasize smarter and safer play in tackle football and other youth sports where concussions and head impacts are possible.

Thousands of young people in Maryland benefit from tackle football and have done so for 100 years. They benefit from medically endorsed practice guidelines and forward-thinking rule changes in youth tackle football, thanks to organizations like USA Football and Pop Warner. They are not ignoring the evidence; they are acting on it.

For that reason, I respectfully ask you to reject any proposal to set an age requirement for tackle football.

Thank you for your time.