

AP survey: Most states limit full contact for HS football

Larry Lage | AP August 30 at 4:05 AM



In this Aug. 16, 2019, photo, Ann Arbor Pioneer High School football players run a drill at the school in Ann Arbor, Mich. Michigan has joined New Jersey in an attempt to make high school football safer, limiting the amount of time players make full-speed contact that sends them tumbling to the ground. (Larry Lage/Associated Press)

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Pioneer High School coach Bill Bellers stood before his team in an overflowing huddle, reading the safety warning on a white sticker affixed to a purple football helmet.

Bellers asked his players if they understood the risks and still wanted to be a part of the season's first full-contact practice on a field that sits across the street from Michigan Stadium.

"Yes, coach," the players replied matter-of-factly.

Bellers had a follow-up question.

"Does everybody still want to play football?" he asked.

The fired-up players left no doubt.

"Yes, coach!" they shouted.

What took place over the next two-plus hours probably didn't look much like your father's football practice.

At another high school in nearby Ypsilanti, players often pop pads and rarely go to the ground.

"Beating them into the ground and running until you vomit and the old sort of 'you're tough' stuff — that's gone from the game," said Chris Westfall, the athletic director and football coach at Lincoln High School.

Michigan, among other states, has implemented rules to drastically reduce the amount of time high school football practices include full-speed collisions with at least one player going to the ground.

An Associated Press survey of high school athletic associations in all 50 states and the District of Columbia found that while most states limit full contact, not all are tackling the topic in the same way.

Nearly 40 states have rules and regulations regarding the amount of time, or the number of days, a team can have full-contact practices, while more than 10 states don't set limits before the games begin. During the regular season, 43 states have set rules on the total time, or number of days, players can hit each other at full speed and go to the ground. Eight states, meanwhile, have chosen to let coaches decide how much their players collide in game-like conditions without a predetermined winner or loser during the regular season.

Earlier this month, USA Football unveiled the game's first long-term

development program in the hopes of growing the game by making it safer and catching up to other sports around the world in terms of improving skills. The sport's governing body provides resources for coaches, including levels of contact that start with going against air to the highest intensity of live action. USA Football's guidelines are adopted by most athletic associations in the country.

"I applaud these states for looking at the issue very carefully," USA Football CEO Scott Hallenbeck said. "I think everyone is in agreement that reducing contact is paramount to address the challenges in sport."

Participation in boys' 11-player high school football fell by nearly 31,000 last year and plummeted to its lowest total since 1999, according a National Federation of High Schools report released this week. Michigan had 1,607 fewer high school boys in 11-player football last year than in 2017, for example, and New Jersey had 519 fewer boys playing 11-man football.

Trying to reverse the trend, both states have cut back on the amount of time coaches are allowed to put their players in game-like situations while practicing.

The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association approved a proposal in February to reduce in-season full contact from 90 minutes to 15 minutes per week and preseason full contact from unlimited to six hours total, including scrimmages. Three months later, the Michigan High School Athletic Association voted to trim the amount of full-contact football practice permitted from a maximum of 90 minutes to 30 minutes per week. The governing body now limits coaches to six

hours of game-like practices in the preseason per week instead of allowing one full-contact practice per day as it did in the past.

“New Jersey and Michigan, by enacting new regulations this year, can now tell parents, ‘We’ve reduced the risk dramatically,’” said Terry O’Neil, founder of Practice Like Pros, a nonprofit with a mission to reduce injury in adolescent football.

Not everyone is a fan of the limitations, however.

“I personally think it is ridiculous because the sport of football is played with tackling and blocking and it doesn’t let kids learn how to properly block and tackle,” said Mark Vorobiev, a parent of a current and former Ann Arbor Pioneer football player. “The biggest problem I see with limiting it to 30 minutes a week is it’s not preparing them for a game. If the kids aspire to play in the next level, our Michigan kids are competing against players from some states who don’t have the same limits. If they’re lucky enough to play college football, they won’t be as prepared to play against bigger and stronger kids who hit a lot more in high school.”

At Pioneer High School on a recent evening, coaches put players through a progression of contact levels that used tackling dummies to simulate ball carriers, pads on their arms to replicate blockers and a thick cushion for players to land on after being tackled with proper form.

“Much more part of our practice and preparation is using implements rather than doing live hitting and tackling each other,” Bellers said. “We’re tackling inanimate objects that can’t be hurt and you can’t get hurt tackling them.”

The players did hit each other at full speed, with at least one player hitting the artificial turf, during a 3-on-3 drill in a confined area and during a 9-on-9 portion of practice. Each time there was full contact, though, the team was on the clock and the coach knew it.

"How are we on time?" Bellers asked aloud at one point, standing behind quarterback Conor Easthope.

"We have three minutes," a coach on the defensive side shouted.

Earlier in the day, the practice plan allotted for 70 minutes of the highest intensity of full-contact drills during an afternoon session. That left the team with fewer than five hours of similar activities the rest of the week, which included two-a-day practices.

"It's forcing us as coaches to think about it," Bellers said. "And think about how we organize our practice, how we run practices and paying attention to the amount of contact kids are getting."

Owen Aldridge, a senior linebacker for the Pioneers, said the new rules are good. However, he would like to hit more.

"As a defensive player, I like tackling people," Aldridge said. "And just running by them, tagging off, it's not really too much fun. But I can definitely understand it."

Players in other states potentially get much more of an opportunity to collide at full speed in practice.

Preseason limits are not in place on full-contact drills at game speed with players going to the ground in a more than 10 states, including

South Carolina, where a longtime coach scoffs at the time constraints imposed elsewhere in the country.

“The people who come up with these rules do it because it sounds good, but you’re splitting hairs when it comes to timing what you do in practice,” said Bobby Carroll, who has three-plus decades of high school football coaching experience in South Carolina. “If you script 35 plays and it takes 10 seconds to run a play, that’s about six minutes and you would have 84 more minutes if you look at it that way.

“In 36 years of coaching in South Carolina, I don’t recall us ever going live for two straight hours all week long and I don’t think anybody does that here. In my heart of hearts, I think the game is safer than it ever has been because the equipment is better and coaches are more educated because colleges and NFL teams share videos to show us drills on proper ways to practice. The way to prevent injuries is with proper coaching. I’ve seen youth football coaches put kids on their back 10 yards apart and have them get up and collide. If my son played for a coach like that, I would change teams.”

During the season when coaches traditionally cut back on game-like situations in practice, Louisiana is among the minority of states that do not set limits on what is commonly known as live football.

“The climate in our nation calls for there to be less and less contact each year due to the threat of concussions and other injuries sustained from contact,” said Eric Held, a former football coach who is the director of the Louisiana High School Coaches Association. “Because of awareness that spreads across all levels from pro to college to high school to youth levels, coaches are beginning to

practice smarter with less tackling to the ground and the disappearance of the archaic full speed, head on 1-on-1 contact drills.

“In Louisiana, we are moving toward more education with our coaches in the near future involving tackling certification and other components of risk minimization.”

Follow Larry Lage at <https://twitter.com/LarryLage>

Associated Press video journalist Mike Householder in Detroit contributed to this report.

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