

HEADS UP!

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell talks about the importance of protecting student athletes from traumatic head injuries.

Roger Goodell, the eighth chief executive in the NFL's 90-year history, took office in 2006. He spoke with State Legislatures about the importance of laws to help prevent young athletes from suffering traumatic brain injuries.

STATE LEGISLATURES: Why is the NFL working with state legislatures on laws dealing with youth sports concussions?

Goodell: Together, we can make sports, which are essential for so many of our kids, safer. Sports teach teamwork, perseverance, dedication and commitment that will serve kids well throughout their lives. Youth sports are safe, but we can make them even safer, especially with regard to head injuries.

We are changing the culture in the NFL with regard to concussions. Doctors—not coaches—are making the decisions regarding when a player returns to a game. When we in the NFL change our approach, we are told by youth coaches and parents that others on all levels take notice and follow.

As more is learned about the ways to manage concussions, the NFL will continue to lead by example. The medical literature says risks associated with concussion are greatest when the brain is still developing, so the greatest care must be taken with young athletes.

We have made it a priority to support laws that address youth concussions across the country. We are building on the work done in the Washington Legislature with the 2009 Zackery Lystedt law, which is a model we encourage all states to follow.

SL: What are the primary elements of a substantive law?

Goodell: It is a remarkably simple idea, but one that protects our young athletes from the worst risks of concussion. The law contains three core principles:

◆ Educate athletes and their parents or guardians about concussions.



◆ Remove an athlete who may have suffered a concussion from play.

◆ Allow athletes to return to play only after being cleared by a licensed health care provider.

The law requires every child, as well as the parent or guardian, to sign an information sheet regarding concussions and their symptoms every year. Second, since children are at risk if they have suffered a concussion, they must be removed from competition immediately. Finally, only a licensed health care provider trained in the management of concussions should determine whether the child is able to return to play. These three simple steps will help prevent unnecessary head injuries to our children.

SL: Why should states pass this law?

Goodell: Concussions are brain injuries. They are an important public health concern in all sports. Girls experience concussions at significant rates in soccer; boys who play football, wrestle or play hockey suffer concussions as well. Experts also tell us that removing children immediately from play or practice and allowing them to recover completely is the

best way to keep concussions from having long-term effects. We owe it to our children to adopt this law.

SL: Why aren't medical guidelines sufficient?

Goodell: In a matter as important as the health of our children's brains, we owe them the best, most comprehensive response. Laws raise awareness. Laws mandate change. Laws create uniform application of these standards. Guidelines are a second best alternative but they risk sporadic or inconsistent enforcement in different regions in a state.

SL: What does this law cost?

Goodell: There is no cost. There are no state expenditures, or costs borne by the school district. Washington Governor Christine Gregoire has told us that her state passed this law without creating any new costs to the taxpayers. There is, however, a significant cost associated with the emergency care and long-term rehabilitation in the tragic circumstances when a child suffers a traumatic brain injury. This law helps prevent burdens on the health care system and on the school district. Most important, this law spares the emotional cost to the family and the child associated with these injuries.

SL: Which states have passed these laws?

Goodell: New Jersey, in December 2010, became the ninth state to pass a substantive law. The other states are Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Virginia and Washington. We congratulate all of them and thank these legislators for their leadership.

SL: What can the NFL do?

Goodell: First of all, we can help raise awareness in a positive way on this issue. I am on record that we will help pass laws in at least 10 more states in 2011. My office and the 32 NFL clubs will contribute to legislative advocacy around youth concussions in the states that choose to address this important public health issue this year.

SL ONLINE

Check out more from the NFL on preventing youth concussions and who to contact at the league for additional information at www.nfl.org/magazine.