

The Cost of Contact in Ivy League Sports

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March 2024

Contact in Ivy League sports results in a large number of concussions and other injuries. In a given year in the eight Ivy League universities there are a total of about 145 concussions for men in the “contact” sports: football, ice hockey, soccer, basketball, and lacrosse. There are about 64 concussions for women in their contact sports: ice hockey, soccer, basketball, lacrosse, and field hockey. The total number of injuries for men in the five sports is about 1,533. For women the total number is about 482 in their five sports. If a player plays all four seasons, the probability of getting a concussion in this time for men is about 32 percent for football, 32 percent for ice hockey, 26 percent for basketball, 21 percent for soccer, and 19 percent for lacrosse. For women it is about 29 percent for basketball, 29 percent for ice hockey, 24 percent for soccer, 21 percent for field hockey, and 15 percent for lacrosse. These are large numbers.

The cost of these injuries and of contact in general is larger than simply the time lost recovering from the injuries. There is considerable evidence of long run health problems, particularly in the brain, of repeated contact—repetitive hits—for many athletes. In July 2011 the Ivy League released a report on contact in football and concluded that “...the multiple hits that are sustained in football, distinct from those causing a concussion, may have a role in the development of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) in some individuals” and that “Cumulative trauma, not necessarily concussion, is felt to be the major risk factor for CTE.”

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Non contact sports, of course, have concussions and other injuries, so if contact were eliminated from the contact sports there would still be concussions and other injuries. The base case is not zero injuries, even for life in general! It is possible, however, to estimate the cost of contact in contact sports by comparing the number of injuries in the contact sports with the number in the non contact sports. The difference can be attributed to contact. Of the 145 concussions in the contact sports for men about 131 can be attributed to contact. Of the 1,533 total injuries about 957 can be attributed to contact. For women for concussions about 53 of the 64 can be attributed to contact. For total injuries about 230 of the 482 can be. The “saving” for concussions is particularly high because there are few concussions in the non contact sports.

Why has the Ivy League put student athletes in harms way? There are many benefits of college sports. Sports are an important part of campus life, both playing and watching. They build character; they lead to comradeship; they teach cooperation and selflessness. The question is whether contact is necessary to achieve these aims. Could not the rules be changed in the above six sports to eliminate contact and still have these sports be an important part of campus life? If this were to be done, a committee of experts for each sport would need to be formed to change the rules. Aside from tighter refereeing, for soccer headers would need to be eliminated, since there is evidence that these can cause CTE. For basketball perhaps no dunking since playing above the rim seems to be injury prone. Checking if it exists would need to be eliminated in ice hockey.

The largest change would be in football, where something like flag football would be needed. Although this is the largest change, it is also the largest gain in fewer concussions and other injuries. Even for flag football, the advantages of college sports mentioned above would still exist, and there could still be tail gate parties! An example of a rule change in the right direction is a change made by the National Hockey League for the 2021-22 season. The change is to have strict enforcement against cross checking. Some experimentation would undoubtedly

be needed in each sport to see what is necessary to eliminate contact.

It is time for the Ivy League to realize that it should not be in the business of producing sports that unnecessarily harm its student athletes. There is an alternative that preserves the sports and eliminates the unnecessary harm.