

TESTIMONY OF
RICHARD C. CASTER
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND
LABOR

11:00 a.m. E.S.T.

September 13, 2010

Congresswoman McCarthy and Congressman Bishop,

My name is Rich Caster. I played 13 years as a tight end and wide receiver in the National Football League. Eight of those seasons -- from 1970 to 1978 -- were spent in this area playing for the New York Jets.

I am testifying today both in my personal capacity and as a representative of the National Football League. I appreciate the opportunity to be here and to testify because I believe that we need to do more to raise awareness of the dangers of concussions in youth sports. Parents, coaches, teachers and trainers will benefit from this hearing, and so will our kids.

Participation in athletics teaches our children essential life lessons. Team work, the importance of physical fitness, commitment, hard work and dedication as well as the benefits of both winning and losing are embodied in youth sports. As we teach our children those lessons, we also have a responsibility to protect them as much as possible from the injuries associated with sports.

A recent study in the journal Pediatrics found concussions may have doubled in the last few years in the most common youth sports. While this could be attributed to the developing science around concussions or the increased knowledge of the issue, the statistic signals that we - as leaders in our communities -- must educate, raise awareness and learn to treat these dangerous injuries.

As more has become known about the dangers of head injuries, the NFL has chosen to become the leader on concussions not just for the safety of its own players, but for all athletes at all levels of football as well as all other sports. I am proud of what the NFL has done in the professional game, but I am particularly pleased to share with you the NFL's initiatives to educate and inform all sports at all levels about concussions.

Last December, the NFL, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) produced a public service announcement devoted to youth athletes as well as their parents and coaches regarding the importance of concussion awareness. The message aired repeatedly on national media throughout the end of the NFL season and the playoffs.

That was just the beginning. The NFL has worked closely with the CDC, USA Football, and others, to disseminate CDC educational materials for young athletes and their coaches. In addition, USA Football – the independent, non-profit organization that serves as the official youth football development partner of the NFL and its 32 teams – along with the NFL will conduct a national campaign from mid-September through November 2010, titled “Put Pride Aside for Player Safety” to emphasize concussion awareness in youth sports, particularly football. The campaign challenges and instructs coaches, parents and youth players to make the right decision when a concussion is even suspected.

Recently, the NFL and CDC have jointly developed an educational poster that will be widely available in the coming weeks on the CDC's website regarding concussions. The NFL also mandated that a similar poster be prominently displayed in every locker room across the League and is replicating that effort at the youth level. The NFL hopes to educate as many people as possible about concussions with this material.

Additionally, the NFL has undertaken a state by state campaign across the country to pass laws designed to prevent the dangerous effects of concussions in youth sports. Named after Zackery Lystedt, a standout youth football player in Washington state, these laws will help prevent the most damaging results of concussions. Zackery was a 13-year old star football player who suffered an undiagnosed concussion in the second quarter of a game in 2006. After resting during halftime, Zackery returned to play in the second half. Tragically, late in the game while preventing a touchdown, his helmet hit the turf hard. He soon lapsed into a coma after suffering life-threatening injuries.

Zackery survived, but faces a long road of rehabilitation. In the meanwhile, due to a heroic coalition of doctors, advocates and local elected officials, the state passed the law named after Zackery. The law includes three essential elements:

1. Student athletes and a parent or guardian must sign a consent form acknowledging they are informed about concussions
2. Any youth athlete who appears to have suffered a concussion in any sport is not permitted to return to play or practice on the same day. And,
3. That athlete must be cleared in the subsequent days or weeks by a licensed medical professional trained in the management of concussions before returning to play or practice.

Lystedt laws have now passed in five other states, including Oregon, New Mexico, Connecticut, Oklahoma and Virginia. In New York, the bill passed the state Senate and is awaiting action in the Assembly -- we encourage everyone to support action in the Assembly this year.

As part of their state-level advocacy, the NFL will convene an educational and advocacy summit next month in Seattle. It will be available on-line to anyone interested in learning more.

Finally, I understand that the NFL has been working with this Committee to educate and raise awareness as well as find ways to adopt the three simple principles of the Lystedt law nationwide.

As the most popular sport in the country, the NFL understands its obligation to lead in this area. The NFL will continue to provide the model for all sports at all levels of sport.

The NFL looks forward to continue working with this Committee and all other advocates for the benefit of youth athletes everywhere.

I look forward to any questions.

Thank you.

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