

October 2nd

This is Lieutenant Roger McCort from The Salvation Army in Eureka with today's Community Comment.

I'd better start by reminding you that my opinion is my own, and not that of KINS or The Salvation Army. Why add an extra disclaimer? Because I'm going to admit something most men would be afraid to speak about: I think we should stop playing football.

Before you leap to any conclusions, I am offering no comment on the whole National Anthem deal. The issue I have has nagged at me for years and has been brought forward, as it is every year about this time, by the beginning of the football season.

Like most boys my size – I was six-five in middle school – I was recruited by my school's athletics program. I played regularly through my seventh and eighth grade years, racking up tackles and walking off injuries which should have put me in the hospital.

I was never the fastest player, but I was always the largest, making me either the immovable object or the unstoppable force, depending on whether I was playing defense or offense. Either way, I would take enough hits to retire a set of pads at the end of each season. My injuries included a fractured vertebrae, a hip injury, a dislocated knee and a concussion. Like most kids, I healed fast and lied about any symptoms which would have kept me from playing.

I was lucky. One running back who tried to carry the ball through a hole guarded by our best linebacker ducked his head a little too far when he got hit. It was almost an hour before the paramedics got him strapped to a backboard and removed from the field. We heard the next afternoon that the doctors thought that kid would be paralyzed for the rest of his life.

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, The National Center for Catastrophic Sports Injury Research has compiled data on football-related deaths since 1931. Their records show a clear pattern which hasn't changed much over 80 years: a LOT of kids die playing football. Over 2,000, with numbers not changing much from year to year. The 2016 season was almost kind: Only 16 people are reported to have lost their lives playing the game. Two in organized youth programs. Ten in middle and high-school. Three in college. And one at the semi-pro and professional levels.

The statistics for permanent injuries and the evidence for systematic traumatic brain injuries are much worse, with serious and potentially fatal injuries outnumbering fatalities by three to one. I've rarely been so grateful for my collection of too-minor-to-count injuries, even when the weather shifts and I realize I can still feel every one of them.

Every study and every report that comes out makes it more and more obvious that football is closer to a bloodsport than an entertainment. Yet we suit up children as young as five years old and send them out on the gridiron to tuck their heads down and smash them into others hard enough for the impact to echo through the stands. And I'll be honest, I don't think that's wise.

I know I'm on dangerous ground here. Football is the church of choice of the average American male and a growing number of women as well. And yet the facts are the facts and we should consider whether we as a culture want to continue offering our children up as sacrifices to the meat grinder of full-contact sports. There are plenty of athletic opportunities which see far less people dropping dead or being permanently damaged through the course of ordinary play. Doesn't it make sense to shift to them instead?

Grace and peace to you. This has been Lt. Roger McCort with today's KINS Community Comment.