Parental Perceptions Of The Risks And Rewards Of Youth Tackle Football

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CHAPTER 1: STUDY INTRODUCTION

Introduction

“To all you parents debating whether or not your son should play football – let him if he wants to do it. I wholeheartedly believe that the benefits far outweigh the risks” – Chris Creighton, Eastern Michigan University Head Coach (Creighton, 2015).

In early 2015, Eastern Michigan Football Coach, Chris Creighton, penned an open letter to “football moms” that quickly went viral on social media and was picked up by hundreds of news outlets, sports and parenting blogs, and youth sports organization websites who used it to “defend” youth football. In it, he asserts “the game of football is under attack. People are being steered away by the recent attention to concussions and other injuries,” but that parents should be no more worried about youth football than they should be about everyday play and other organized sports because “more concussions occur from riding bikes than from playing football” (Creighton, 2015).

I received a copy of the above-referenced article from a youth coach in attempts to allow my then eight-year-old son to participate in a third-grade tackle football program. You see, I was a football mom. My family’s involvement in youth football was one of reluctance for me – as a former athlete, coach, and sports administrator I supported the game. However, as a scholar, I questioned participation at the youth level. I’m also the wife of a former collegiate quarterback who is now an enthusiastic high school football coach, and the mother to four children whom all learned to throw a ball before they could speak their first word. Sports have shaped my world-view and play an essential part in my professional, personal, and social life. All of these experiences and perspectives have been crucial in developing my professional philosophy as a sport administrator. However, I had no idea how my perspective on youth sport would change when I became a sports parent. For the first time, I’ve watched games from the bleachers with other
moms and dads instead of being on the field or the sidelines. I’ve always been acutely aware of the actions of parents – from the overzealous to the disengaged, they all brought their unique challenges during my time as a coach and administrator. However, it was not until my eldest son began playing youth flag football and I began to sit among them that I realized just how different the sporting world is from most other areas of life. I have seen soft-spoken accountants scream obscenities at teenage referees, and well-mannered PTA moms conspire to remove coaches whom they perceived to be treating their sons unfairly. I witnessed the sinking dread that fills a parent when they watch their child get injured on the field of play and the thrill of watching them achieve success as an athlete. I enjoyed the camaraderie among mothers and fathers who share their children’s youth sporting activities, and I have experienced the politically motivated decisions of coaches and parents.

It was not, however, until I started talking about my concerns with tackle football that I experienced the selective silence from other parents and my son’s team administrators. It seemed to me that most of the parents that I know in my community are informed about nearly everything related to their children – they have researched the vaccines they get at pediatrician visits, studied their kids' classroom curriculum, and read books about child development and effective parenting strategies. In addition, many of them worry extensively about their kids’ safety and work tirelessly to protect them from dangers and undue challenges. However, when it came to football, it seemed that they did not want to know of the potential risks. In fact, of the fourteen second-graders who played on my son’s flag football team (a club-sponsored precursor to tackle football), only two did not move on to play tackle as third-graders. When questioned about why my son wasn’t signed up for the following season, I was upfront with my concerns about the safety of the game. In response, one mother (who was, ironically, a nurse), told me that maybe I “knew too much” about
the injury risks, and another suggested that I “stop reading so much” about the topic. What was it, I wondered, about football that made these otherwise well-informed, over-protective parents throw caution to the wind? It was at this point that I determined that my dissertation research would aim to better understand this phenomenon.

My experience with youth football, while a poignant anecdotal narrative, also serves as contextual grounding for the current study. The experiences of parents in youth sport are varied, and in this qualitative study, I aim to better understand the meaning and realities that parents construct about youth football participation and the safety of the game. In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline the following: 1) study rationale, 2) statement of the problem, 3) significance of the study, 4) purpose of the study, and 5) the research questions that guided the study.

**Study Rationale**

Football is one of the most popular sports in the United States, despite a high risk of injury associated with participation. Millions of young people are treated in emergency rooms every year for football-related injuries; the annual number of football-related cases increased 26.5% between the years of 1990 and 2007 (Nation, Nelson, Yard, Comstock, & McKenzie, 2011). More recently, the issue of head trauma and sports-related concussion (SRC) in football has become a growing public health concern. At least 11 high-school football players died in the United States during the 2015 season (Bachynski, 2016), and thousands more suffered SRC and other head injuries related to tackling and repeated hits to the head. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, between 2001 and 2009, football sent 25,376 kids under the age of 19 to the emergency room for traumatic brain injury each year, second to only bicycling (CDC, 2011). This number likely underestimates the total number of concussions sustained during tackle football, as many children with a concussion do not seek out the medical care of an emergency room or physician
(Langlois, Rutland-Brown, Wald, 2006). The issue of safety in youth sport, namely contact sports like football, has been studied in many contexts in the United States. Given that youth football players between 6 and 13 years old make up 70% of the five million American football participants in the USA (Daniel, Rawson, & Duma, 2012), assessing the safety of the game at the youth level is of particular concern.

In 2015, the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness addressed tackling in youth football for the first time. The committee found that "concussions and catastrophic injuries are particularly associated with tackling and that eliminating tackling from football would probably reduce the incidence of concussions, severe injuries, catastrophic injuries, and overall injuries" (Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, 2016). Despite this, the committee proposed enhancing adult training and supervision in the sport rather than suggest that tackling should be eliminated in youth football. They recommended "that officials enforce the rules of the game, that coaches teach young players proper tackling techniques, that physical therapists and other specialists help players strengthen their neck muscles to prevent concussions, and that the games and practices be supervised by certified athletic trainers" (Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, 2016 in Bachynski, 2016). All medical professionals do not share this recommendation, as evidenced by the January 2016 editorial in the American Journal of Bioethics, whereby Dr. Steven Miles and Dr. Shailendra Prasad countered the position of the AAP in advocating for the removal of youth football programs from public schools (Miles & Prasad, 2016).

In addition to the discussion around football participation in academia and throughout the medical profession, there has also been much debate about its merits in popular culture. Recent cinematic movies, television documentaries, and articles in sports publications featuring former NFL players now riddled with serious physical ailments and diminished mental capacity have
highlighted the problems that many athletes face upon retirement (including “Concussion,” “The United States of Football”, CNN’s “Big Hits, Broken Dreams”, and PBS’ “League of Denial”). Participation in tackle football has also been publicly questioned in the news media by professional athletes (Broussard, 2014; Barra, 2013), researchers (Cantu & Hyman, 2013), and even the United States’ former President Obama, who said “I'm a big football fan, but I have to tell you if I had a son, I'd have to think long and hard before I let him play football” (Foer & Hughes, 2013). Since 2015, several professional and collegiate football players also made high-profile exits from the game, including the San Francisco 49ers’ Chris Borland, and the University of Michigan’s Jack Miller, both citing the fear of long-term damage of brain injuries.

The escalating attention to the issue of safety in football has particularly impacted the game at the youth level, both in participation rates and the culture of the sport. The number of high school football players dropped by 25,000 (roughly 2.5% nationwide) in the 2016-2017 school year, but football remains the largest participatory sport for boys at the high school level (NFHS.org). Pop Warner, the nation's largest youth football organization, saw a participation decrease of 9.5 percent between 2010-12 (Fainaru, S. & Fainaru-Wada, M., 2013). Additionally, the league has implemented new rules, including a limit to the amount of tackling permitted during practice, designed to address player safety. Pop Warner and similar youth leagues across the country have also adopted the “Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports” program aimed at educating youth sports coaches on prevention, recognition, and response to SRC. The 90-minute online training programs have components for coaches, players, and parents that aim to teach proper tackling technique, increase awareness of concussion symptoms, and establish protocols for prevention and treatment in youth football.
Statement of the problem

Given the very public debate about the safety of football, we might intuitively think that the threat of severe injury and head trauma would be enough to give parents pause before signing up their children for a local team. However, there are still an estimated three million young people (age 7-14) who play tackle football annually in the United States (USA Football, 2015). We know that it is not solely the desires of young people that drive participation, as significant empirical research exists to support the substantial role that parents play in the choice of a child's extracurricular activities, namely youth sport (Howard & Madrigal, 1990; Petlichkoff, 1992; Parke, Killian, Dennis, et. al, 2003; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Dworkin & Larson, 2006; Gutierrez, Izquierdo, & Kremer-Sadlik, 2010; Kang, Raffaelli, Bowers, et. al, 2017). In fact, children often rate parents as the most important influence for sports participation over that of coaches, peers, or even the child's personal decision to be involved (Baxter-Jones & Maffulli, 2003). Parental involvement is not just significant for sports selection for their children, in most instances, parental involvement is crucial for the existence of youth sports programs (Hoyle & Leff, 1997). Parents often make a significant time commitment to youth sports and serve in a number of roles to facilitate sports participation for their children, from the logistical (i.e. driving to practices and games, maintaining uniforms, etc.), to the financial (i.e. paying registration fees, purchasing uniforms and equipment, and funding travel to camps, games, and tournaments) (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Besides the commitment that parents make for their own children to participate, they often have to support further the operations of the youth sports organizations, who rely on parents’ skills and time to fill administrative, coaching, and managerial roles in volunteer settings.

For parents, football participation has long presented a challenging dilemma. On the one hand, the sport is culturally popular, carries with it a significant amount of social capital, reinforces
traditionally lauded cues of masculinity, and is associated with the longstanding cultural belief that participation involves positive character-building experiences. On the other, the threat of serious injury and an emphasis on physical violence are also consistent factors of participation. For many families, however, football is a risk worth taking because participation is seen as a useful and essential way to impart positive characteristics and values to young people. Coakley (2006) suggests that parents select sports programs, such as football, not only to maximize their time spent in extracurricular activities but also to "encourage the development of their children into healthy, responsible, self-motivated, driven individuals." Several studies have also suggested that by carefully selecting extracurricular activities, parents believe that they can influence the values, attitudes, and life-skills they may acquire (Hutchinson, Baldwin, & Caldwell, 2003; Kanters, Bocarro, & Casper, 2008). In focus groups conducted with parents of youth soccer players, Wiersma and Fifer's (2008) findings supported this notion of the parental perception that the benefits of participation "outweigh the challenges…and made the efforts worth it in the eyes of otherwise busy and overcommitted parents" (p. 526). Coakley (2006) takes this idea further and suggests that sports participation, especially when children achieve athletic success, validates the "moral worth" of the adults and helps them define themselves as good parents (p. 158-159).

**Significance of the study**

In reviewing the literature on sports parenting, youth football, and the safety of the game, I identified a number of significant gaps in our understanding of this phenomenon. There is an underrepresentation of parent voices in the literature; a limited amount of research has investigated parental experiences in sport. Additionally, I found no studies focused explicitly on why parents allow and encourage their children to participate in contact sports like football when there is such a known risk of serious injury. In addition, there is also a dearth of qualitative studies in the current
literature that seek to understand the experiences of youth football parents who are typically the primary decision-makers in their children's football participation. The vast majority of previous studies have used quantitative methods to examine the safety of youth football. Qualitative methods are well suited to help us understand the experiences of parents and allow for the personal and contextual factors of football participation to be examined.

**Purpose of the study and research questions**

The purpose of this study was two-fold: it aimed to examine parental attitudes regarding youth football participation and their perceptions of the safety of the game. Parental attitudes about football participation were assessed via the following research questions:

a) What motivates parents to allow youth tackle football participation?

b) How do the personal sports experiences of parents impact their attitudes about their children's sports participation?

c) What are the parental expectations and aspirations for their children's sports participation?

d) What differences, if any, exist between the motivations and expectations of mothers and fathers of youth football participants?

Additionally, three research questions related to parental perceptions of the safety of youth football also guided this study:

a) What perceptions do parents have about the physical risks of participating in youth football?

b) How do parents perceive the efficacy of the safety measures taken by their team/league?

c) Why, despite considerable information about the serious physical risk associated with football participation, do parents allow their kids to play tackle football?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“The world today is a challenging place...Children need to have some values to them, some toughness in them, some nobility in them. Football and its values are timeless and universal. We need that now more than ever.” –Steve Baker, President, Pro Football Hall of Fame (Bishop & McKnight, 2016)

The state of football in America

Football is firmly ingrained in American society, and at every level of play, the sport is a cornerstone of extracurricular life. In a report for Sports Illustrated, Bishop and McKnight (2016) describe football as "the lifeblood of small towns, the front porch of universities, and by far the country's most popular and profitable sport" (p. 1). However, the state of football in American culture has been questioned as of late, as evidenced by a downturn in participation in tackle football at the youth level (Fainaru, S. & Fainaru-Wada, M., 2013), the 10 percent decline in NFL television ratings during the 2016-2017 season (Battlagio, 2016), and the lowest Super Bowl viewership in 2019 in more than a decade (Siefert, 2019). When considering these trends in the wake of the $765 million settlement by the NFL of a class action lawsuit filed by more than 4,500 former players who sustained concussions (Oguntoyinbo, 2016), it is easy to see why many industry pundits associate the seemingly waning interest in football on concerns of the health and safety of participants at every level of play.

Football: Is it safe? Questions about the safety of football have been asked since the inception of the game; however, the issue became more pronounced publicly in the wake of the lawsuits filed against the NFL (first initiated in 2011) by former players who claimed that the league taught incorrect, risky tackling methods, improperly treated head injuries, and concealed the harmful effects of concussions sustained during play (Weinbrecht, 2013). In recent seasons,
the NFL has modified game rules and increased penalty implications in attempts to decrease the occurrence of dangerous helmet-to-helmet hits in the game. Despite this, a league safety report indicated that the number of concussions diagnosed in 2015 increased by 32 percent from the previous year (Chappell, 2016). According to the report, 271 concussions were diagnosed in 2015 in the NFL, up from 206 in 2014. More recently, while testifying before a 2016 House Committee on concussion research, an NFL executive acknowledged publicly for the first time that football may be dangerous and was linked to degenerative brain disease (Chappell, 2016).

Despite this recent public attention to the issue, researchers have been studying the effects of sport-related concussion (SRC) for more than two decades (Goldberg, Rosenthal, Robertson, & Nicholas, 1988; Langlois, Rutland-Brown, & Wald, 2006; Dompier, Powell, Barron, & Moore, 2007; Jacobson, Buzas, & Morawa, 2013). Several studies involving current and former football players have linked memory deficits, mood disorders, and loss of motor symptoms with SRC and repetitive hits to the head (Guskiewicz et al., 2005, Guskiewicz et al., 2007, Hart et al., 2013, McKee et al., 2013, Pearce et al., 2014, Seichepine et al., 2013, and Singh et al., 2014). Additionally, a study by Dr. Ann McKee, chief neuropathologist at Boston University, which was made popular by the PBS documentary, “The United States of Football,” revealed that 90 out of 94 former pro football players — and 45 out of 55 former college players were posthumously diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE (Chappell, 2016). Similarly, in a 2017 study, researchers evaluated the brains of 202 former professional, college, and high school football players who had donated their brains to science and found that 90 percent had evidence of various stages of CTE (Mez, Daneshvar, Kiernan, et al., 2017).

At the youth level, many critics point to the fact that smaller players deliver lower-impact hits, so the damage is not comparable to the body collisions at the collegiate or professional level.
However, in 2012, Daniel and colleagues conducted a study measuring linear acceleration forces in 7-8-year-old football players during games and practices for a single season using in-helmet accelerometers. They found that youth football players were capable of generating the high-level impacts that have been demonstrated to cause concussions in adult football players (Daniel et al., 2012). Additionally, unlike high school and college players, the majority of high-level impacts occurred during practices, where youth athletes experienced 15% more impacts than they did in games (Daniel et al., 2012). A 2013 study confirmed that the occurrence of concussion in youth football players (aged 8-12 years) was comparable with the rates in high school and collegiate samples (Kontos, Elbin, Fazio-Sumrock, et al., 2013). Compounding the rates of reported concussion at younger levels of play is the issue that many head injuries tend to go underreported (Langlois, Rutland-Brown,& Wald, 2006) mainly because there is no universal system to test for concussion. Because of this, "the overall prevalence of concussion in high school sports is unknown, and very little is known about the epidemiology of concussion in the pre-high school-aged athlete" (Jinguji, Krabak, & Satchell, 2011, p. 566).

Fundamental to the issue of safety in youth football is the concern around the age and developmental point wherein players face the most significant risk. During a 2009 testimony before a House Judiciary committee, McKee suggested that "because a young athlete's brain is still developing, the effects of a concussion, or even many smaller hits over a season, can be far more detrimental, compared to the head injury in an older player." (Breslow, 2015). Also, because of underdeveloped neck muscles, young people are particularly vulnerable to SRC and face potentially longer recovery times and more significant long-term impact on their developing brains (Guskiewicz & Valovich-McLeod, 2011). It is also believed that effects of head injuries may be
more significant for youth because on a daily basis "the frequency with which their cognitive function is assessed far exceeds that of an adult" (McCrory, Collie, Anderson, & Davis, 2004).

Equally as problematic as the high-level impacts that young athletes can sustain during contact sport is the uncertainty around the long-term effects of SRC. The research from McKee and colleagues suggests the brain never fully heals from a concussion, and that even minor concussive impacts always result in some permanent loss of brain capacity. In this view, repeated head injuries increase the extent to which players incur problems in neurologic functioning over time (McKee et al., 2012). Additionally, a recent study from the American Academy of Neurology suggests an association between early participation in tackle football (before age 12) and an increased risk for cognitive impairment later in life (Stamm, Bourlass, Baugh, et al., 2015). The study, which evaluated former NFL players, showed that athletes who played tackle football before the age of 12 had higher rates of executive dysfunction, memory impairment, and lower estimated verbal IQ than did other NFL veterans who started playing tackle football after age 12. The authors suggest that these findings support the notion "that incurring repeated head impacts during a critical neurodevelopmental period may increase the risk of later-life cognitive impairment" (Stamm et al., 2015). Additionally, Stamm and colleagues suggest that incurring repetitive head impacts during early brain development disrupts neurodevelopmental processes that have long-term effects later in life (Stamm, Koerte, Muehlmann, et al., 2015). Bahrami and colleagues (2016) also studied youth football players (ages 8-13) who recorded no diagnosed concussions during a single football season. Despite this, in tests of the players' cognitive functioning in the post-season, they found evidence of decreased fractional anisotropy (FA), which they attribute to repeated head impact exposure during the football season. The long-term risks of neurological conditions, particularly CTE, as a result of tackle football participation was also suggested by Mez and
colleagues (2017) in the largest CTE case series conducted to date, examining of the donated brains of 202 deceased American football players. Their findings diagnosed CTE in 177 former players (87%) across all levels of play, including 110 of 111 former NFL players (99%), 7 of 8 Canadian Football League players (88%), 9 of 14 semiprofessional players (64%), 48 of 53 former college players (91%), and 3 of 14 high school players (21%) (Mez, Daneshvar, Kiernan, Abdolmohammadi, et al, 2017). The obvious pattern with this data implies that those who had played football longer were more likely to have brain damage, but that evidence of brain injury was prevalent even in young high school aged players. In the 2013 Frontline documentary from PBS, McKee underscored the significance of these studies: “People think that we’re blowing this out of proportion, that this is a very rare disease and that we’re sensationalizing it. My response is that where I sit, this is a very real disease. We have had no problem identifying it in hundreds of players” (Resnick, 2018).

A public debate. As the evidence of the risks of football has become general knowledge, the growing concern about concussions and the safety of contact sports has continued to escalate. A host of events have raised questions for policymakers about safety in youth football, including a 2012 Aspen Institute forum featuring concussion experts and researchers, a 2014 White House summit meeting to raise awareness about the consequences of head injuries in youth sports (Eilperin, 2014), and a 2016 House Committee session on SRC and football where Dr. Ann McKee urged taking steps "immediately" to limit the risk to young athletes (Chappell, 2016). When coupling these events with the exhaustive debates on sports media about concussion in football for the general population, lawmakers have been encouraged to react to what has become a public health concern. In recent years, 31 states and the District of Columbia have passed some form of
youth sports concussion law, many mandating concussion education and training for coaches (Covassin, Elbin, & Sarmiento, 2011).

The various documentaries and news reports that have fostered the public debate on the issue of football safety have also forced the football community to defend participation at the youth level. The websites of the leading youth football organizations (including American Youth Football, Pop Warner, National Youth Football Organization, and USA Football) are full of articles promoting the virtues of the game and refuting the claims that youth football is dangerous for children. For example, in a feature for CBS Sports on the USA Football website in 2014, New York University Langone Medical Center's Director of Neurophysiology Dr. William Barr said: "There's really no good evidence to suggest that a child, after a single concussion, is at any significant risk for long term effects" (Frollo, 2014). The report went on to say, "doctors say the risk to kids from inactivity is greater than the danger of harm from concussions" (Frollo, 2014). Another oft-cited article was written by a Stanford physician and medical researcher (who also is the younger brother to Oregon State University's Football Coach) that suggested "the high-profile research that is regularly cited as connecting the dots between football-related concussions and dementia in NFL players lacks sufficient data to establish a causal link" (Riley, 2014). This, and other similar articles on youth football websites, point to a 2014 study by the MAYO Clinic that suggested that high school students who played American football from 1946 to 1956 did not have an increased risk of later developing dementia, PD, or ALS, despite poorer equipment, less regard for concussions, and no rules prohibiting head-first tackling (Savica, Parisi, Wold, et al., 2012).

A changing game. The recent attention to the safety of youth football has since resulted in changes to the organization of the sport, rules, and policies, and increased interventions aimed at concussion awareness. In 2007, the CDC launched the educational initiative “Heads Up:
Concussion in Youth Sports’’ (building upon its 2005 release of “Heads Up: Concussion in High School Sports”) aimed at educating youth sports coaches on prevention, recognition, and response to SRC. The 90-minute online training programs have components for coaches, players, and parents that aim to teach proper tackling technique, increase awareness of concussion symptoms, and establish protocols for prevention and treatment in youth football. The Heads Up program has adopted 26 "partners" (including the American Academy of Pediatrics), has been publicly lauded and promoted by the NFL and has been adopted by national youth football organizations and High School Athletic Associations across the country (CDC, 2014). More recently in 2012, Pop Warner, the nation's largest youth football organization, announced rule changes limiting contact in practice sessions, which included the addition of the following two rules:

1. “No full-speed head-on blocking or tackling drills in which the players line up more than 3 yards apart are permitted. (Having two linemen in stances immediately across the line of scrimmage from each other and having full-speed drills where the players approach each other at an angle, but not straight ahead in to each other are both permitted.) However, there should be no intentional head-to-head contact! 

2. The amount of contact at each practice will be reduced to a maximum of 1/3 of practice time (either 40 minutes total of each practice or 1/3 of total weekly practice time). In this context, “contact” means any drill or scrimmage in which drills; down line vs. down line full-speed drills; and scrimmages.” (Pop Warner, 2015).

There is limited research on the efficacy of the Heads Up program; however, a 2014 study commissioned by USA Football suggested that the Heads Up coaching education program combined with guidelines limiting contact during practice sessions may help lower injury rates (Kerr, Yeargin, Valovich-McLeod, et al., 2015). In addition, the study also found that coaching
education alone also can be effective at lowering injury rates (Kerr et al., 2015). A 2010 study also confirmed that among 1009 high school coaches using the Heads Up program, most self-reported favorable changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practices toward the prevention and management of concussions (Sarmiento, Mitchko, Klein, et al., 2010). Despite this, there is “no systematic evidence that tackling techniques believed to be safer, such as the ‘heads up’ approach promoted by USA Football…reduce the incidence of concussions in young athletes (Bachynski, 2016).

Despite a general consensus in empirical research about the effectiveness of the Heads Up program in increasing awareness and improving the pedagogy of youth football, the program’s efficacy has also been debated in popular culture. Last year, during a live-televised roundtable discussion during the NFL’s “Heads Up Across America” tour featuring NFL Hall of Fame coach John Madden and Commissioner Roger Goodell, Madden criticized both the Heads Up program and the organization of youth football in the US:

“I’m a firm believer that there’s no way that a six-year-old should have a helmet on and learn a tackling drill,” Madden said. “There’s no way. Or a seven-year-old or an eight-year-old. They’re not ready for it. Take the helmets off kids. . . Start at six years old, seven years old, eight years old, nine years old. They don’t need a helmet. They can play flag football. And with flag football, you can get all the techniques. Why do we have to start with a six-year-old who was just potty-trained a year ago and put a helmet on him and tackle?” (Florio, 2014).

Given this public scrutiny of the Heads Up program and the increasing attention to the immediate and long-term risks of contact sports raised by former professional athletes, it would be intuitive to think that the parents of youth football players would have increased knowledge and awareness
of issues related to head injury and SRC. However, in a study of 310 parents of youth football players (ages 5-15), Mannings and colleagues found that while most demonstrated some knowledge regarding SRC, significant misconceptions remained regarding the definition, symptoms, and treatment (Mannings, Kalynych, Joseph, et al., 2014). Similarly, high school student-athletes reported little knowledge about the signs of a concussion. In a recent study of 334 high school football players in Florida, Cournoyer and Tripp (2014) report that most did not have appropriate knowledge of the symptoms and consequences of concussions. Even with parents or guardians signing a consent form indicating they discussed concussion awareness with their child, 46% of athletes suggested they had not (Cournoyer & Tripp, 2014). From this data from high school-aged athletes, we can deduce that younger athletes would have an even more limited knowledge and understanding about concussions and the risks of participation in football.

Knowledge and perception of football safety have also been found to influence Americans' opinions about whether or not they would allow their child to play youth football. A recent HBO Real Sports/Marist Poll which surveyed 1,298 adults in September 2016 found that "nearly eight in ten Americans say they would allow their child to play football if he wanted to do so" (Marist Poll, 2016). This result is incongruent with the poll's other finding that 40% of all adults and 44% of parents with a son under the age of 18 would be "less likely to allow their child to play football because of the link between concussions from playing football and long term brain injury” (Marist Poll, 2016). The study also found significant differences in the data by race, geography, and socioeconomic status: “only 28% of African Americans are less likely to allow their children to play football because of the risk of brain trauma, compared to 43% of whites and 43% of Latino respondents, and 27% of those in the Northeast US would not allow their child to play football, compared to only 15% in each the South and the Midwest” (Marist Poll, 2016).
The rise of football. To appreciate the passion that Americans have for football today, it is essential to understand the social underpinnings of its rise in popularity. Football has been played, in some form, since the late 1800s, where early versions of the game included little protective gear and excessive violence. Along with the inception of football in the United States, so too came criticism – of the game and its associated viciousness, starting as early as 1876 when representatives from Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, and Yale met to regulate the rules of play and formed the Intercollegiate Football Association (Paolantonio, 2008). The most primitive of the football rules established the concept of possession – of the football and of territory on the field – which differentiated it from rugby and soccer. This early version of football was, as Paolantonio (2008) suggests in his book How Football Explains America, consistent with the American belief in manifest destiny and mirrored the nation’s quest for acquiring territory – “that’s something American players and spectators could embrace. Capture territory. Hold. Advance” (p. 7). Similarly, in the 2004 book The Meaning of Sports: Why Americans Watch Baseball, Football, and Basketball and What They See When They Do, Mandelbaum suggests that “seen from a distance, a football play looks like a pre-modern Western battle…The ways that football teams customarily seek to advance the ball correspond to the familiar battlefield tactics throughout history” (p. 129). The nation began to take notice of football at this point, connecting with the game that reinforced these early-American ideals and cheering for the physicality on the field that embodied toughness and a fighting spirit. In the 1993 book Reading Football, Oriard suggests that “the champions of necessary roughness” in American football wanted to keep the displays of on-field violence in the game because they “were concerned that the ‘free-born American college boys’ might lose their instincts of their ancestral ‘fighters from way back’” (Oriard, 1993, p. 124-125).
Despite the early rules around a line of scrimmage, the violence was not diminished in the game – in 1905 18 players died, and 159 suffered severe injuries while playing football (Abbott, 2011). The violent nature of the sport drew the attention of the news media and so too came the call to reform or eliminate football. *The New York Times* referred to the games as "mayhem and homicide" and ran an editorial titled "Two Curable Evils" – referring to the lynching of African Americans and American football (Abbott, 2011). In October of 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt, an outspoken football fan, held a summit at the White House where he declared that "football is on trial" and called for reform to modify the game. This summit ultimately led to the formation of the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States in early 1906, which was later renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1910 (Abbott, 2011).

In the early nineteenth century, most football matches were leisure activities, held in parks and neighborhoods. The rise of football also coincided with an increased emphasis on sports in physical education classes in secondary schools (Ennis, 2006). "Many educators interpreted competitive team athletics as offering students the practical opportunity to experience the ‘rules of life,’ namely victory and defeat, in a way that other physical activities could not" (Bachynski, 2016, p. 31). Football, in particular, was promoted as a "means to instill moral values in boys, which in turn would improve their academic performance (Bachynski, 2016, p. 31). This tie between athletics and schools was further strengthened during World War I as a way to foster physical fitness to prepare young men to serve in the military, and by 1930 physical education was a curricular standard in nearly half the states in America (SPARK, 2015).

Because of the tie between physical activity and military service, there was also a significant emphasis on masculinity within school-sponsored athletic programs. Besides athletics enabling young men to meet the "demands of citizenship," sports were also depicted as a
mechanism to foster discipline, teamwork, and responsibility, which would lead to "the building up of character of the manhood of America" (Bachynski, 2016, p. 20). Leading up to and during World War II, narratives around athletics emphasized the relationship between competitive sports and national defense. In 1940, at an NCAA convention, William Lewis Mather, president of Lafayette College in Pennsylvania suggested that football, in particular, was important for developing young men in America. Football coaches and administrators, he explained, were a group primed to promote "the development of a generation of young men who have the red blood, who have the stamina, who have the loyalty, to protect the American way of life" (Bachynski, 2016, p. 34-35).

This emphasis on developing ‘red-blooded American boys' was further promoted in 1954 when a research study was published by Kraus and Prudden suggesting that European children performed better on a muscular fitness test than did American children (Kraus & Prudden, 1954 in Bachynski, 2016). Bonnie Prudden, a co-author of the study and the director of the Institute for Physical Fitness in White Plains, NY, reported on their findings at a White House summit and suggested a problem with the way that children were being raised:

“American mothers are afraid of their children hurting themselves. This is a Band-aid society. If a child breaks an arm, the arm may be in a plaster cast six weeks. That is not a catastrophe. The catastrophe is that so few opportunities for adventure remain to children – and the few that do remain are often curtailed by overanxious parents” (Boyle, 1955). This message was reinforced two years later when Vice President Richard Nixon posited at the President’s Conference on Fitness of American Youth that “we are not a nation of softies” but could become one “if proper attention is not given to the trend of our time, which is toward the
invention of all sorts of gadgetry to make life easy and in doing so, to reduce the opportunity for normal health-giving exercise” (Bowers & Hunt, 2011).

During the 1950s, while public figures were lamenting overbearing mothers who were creating a nation of "softies," football also began to garner even more public recognition as they began to televise NFL games. This continued rise in the popularity of professional football is significant because it coincided with the establishment of organized youth sports in the United States. Before the 1950s, most sporting opportunities for young people were tied to schools, organized primarily at the high school level (Beaver, 2004). For youth, most sports were played informally as pick-up games in parks and backyards. However, at that time, sports for young people began to be increasingly offered as organized extracurriculars supervised by adults (Adler & Adler, 1998). The popular view was that boys needed to develop "toughness" and an appreciation for competition that would enable them to become productive American citizens. Football was promoted as a way for boys to exert youthful energy in a positive, constructive way rather than resort to acts of deviance or street crime.

Sports sociologists and historians have suggested that organized sports for young people also began to take off as a result of “cultural and structural factors related to family, parenting, and childhood in many post-industrial societies” (Coakley, 2006, p. 154). According to Coakley, changes to the family structure that emerged in the 1950s, including the rise of single-parent households and those in which both parents were working, were primary factors leading to the increase in organized activities for children. With less after-school parental supervision, fears about child safety, and concerns about ill-spent idle time, parents began to seek out organized activities supervised by adults. Parents perceived youth sports to be desirable activities “because they occur under the control of adult coaches and teach important cultural lessons related to
competition and working with others to achieve goals in rule-governed situations” (Coakley, 2006, p. 155).

These changes to the family structure in the United States have continued to evolve, thus shifting the perception of "good parenting" and standards of childrearing. In the early 1990s, Newman (1991) emphasized the increasing burden on parents of maintaining their middle-class status despite widening economic disparities, which further forced more women into the workplace. This also forced them to manage "as best they can with the additional tasks of raising children and scrambling to find daycare (Newman, 1991, p. 113). This change to the family structure seemingly set up a distinct difference in the way that middle-class families were raising children. More recent academic literature suggests a shift from the 1950’s notion of protecting children from danger to an emphasis today in preparing children for adult life (Mintz, 2004). From the early 1990s until today, this type of intensive parenting, which includes the constant teaching and monitoring of children, became the norm of middle-class parents and helped fuel an increased consumption of ‘enriching’ activities for their offspring. As such, more middle-class families turned to youth sports to help fill a void left by working parents and to maximize the potential outcomes for their children. Dyck (2006) explains:

“sport can be fashioned as a source of fitness and health that permits boys and girls to pursue their dreams while it prepares them for the adult world that they will one day enter. It can also be envisioned as a potential source of cultural capital that might ideally even earn accomplished young men and women athletic scholarships to attend college or university” (p. 57).
‘Concerted Cultivation’

This shifting emphasis on childrearing seems to be especially relevant, in particular, for middle-class families in the US, for whom extracurricular activities and optimal use of free time have increasingly gained importance. In her book, *Unequal Childhoods*, sociologist Annette Lareau describes these attempts, seemingly made uniquely by middle-class parents, to deliberately "stimulate their children's development and foster their cognitive and social skills" (Lareau, 2003). She describes this style as "concerted cultivation" which parents employ "to make sure that their children are not excluded from any opportunity that might eventually contribute to their advancement" (p. 5). This is in contrast to the child-rearing practices of the poor and working class, which tend to follow what Lareau describes as "accomplishment of natural growth." In this model, Lareau suggests that parents from low socioeconomic status (SES) households are more likely to focus their childrearing efforts on keeping children safe, enforcing discipline, and regulating their children's behavior. Additionally low SES parents are typically less involved in the structure of their children’s afterschool and extracurricular activities, often not by choice. Lareau (2003) posits that because they have less time and economic resources to dedicate to their children’s formal activities, parents from low SES homes are more likely to offer their children unstructured free time which allows them to exert “more control over the character of their leisure activities” (Lareau, p. 3).

For this study, I specifically selected to examine individuals occupying the American middle- and upper-middle-class. The involvement of middle-class parents in the lives of their children and their heightened concern for academic and athletic success are reflections of their anxiety regarding their children’s chances of becoming members of the middle-class themselves (Lareau, 2003). This involvement is reflective of the perception that “unlike lower and upper
social classes, where membership is almost guaranteed by birth, to gain membership in the middle-class one has to invest years in education and training” (Ehrenreich, 1989 in Gottzen & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). In their recognition of the modern competitiveness of acquiring the “American dream,” middle-class parents invest significant time and effort to prepare their children to be successful. At the same time that they are pushing for achievement, middle-class parents still view their children as vulnerable and in need of protection (Gottzen & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). The parallel roles of “caring and protecting while at the same time pushing one’s child to achieve and succeed has become a common reality of middle-class mothers and fathers” (Kremer-Sadlik & Gutirrez, 2013). An examination of the role that football participation plays in concerted cultivation for middle-class families will add to the literature in the sports sociology and parenting fields.

**Bourdieu’s “Theory of Society”**

Lareau’s concepts of concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth are empirical applications of the broader theoretical model of social class differentiation and cultural politics devised by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s “theory of society” is based around the idea that individuals of different social positions are socialized differently. This socialization provides children and adults with a sense of what is normal and comfortable (habitus), and the resources that individuals have access to and draw upon (capital) as they navigate their social worlds (field) (Lareau, 2003).

Sport is used as an example throughout Bourdieu's work to illustrate the connection between physical activity and one's position in society (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988). The sports preferences of individuals within a particular social class "receive their social significance" based on their perceived benefits (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 209). In other words, the norms and social cues of
the classes dictate what sports are seen as appropriate and preferred. Individuals from lower socioeconomic classes, for example, tend to “value instantaneous gratification and economic reward,” (DeLuca, 2013, p. 344) which is evidenced in their preference for certain sports, like boxing and football, that are characterized by bodily contact and “a high investment of energy, effort, or even pain” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 213). This is in direct contrast to Bourdieu’s assertion that the upper classes gravitate towards activities such as skiing, tennis, and golf in exclusive, private locations with select partners as a way to reinforce their social significance (1984). The American middle-class, according to Bourdieu, is particularly focused on the selection of activities that could advance their social position and reinforce the value they place on “cultural promotion that is manifest through the status production of a socially driven, controlled, and presentable existence” (DeLuca, 2013).

**Habitus.** Bourdieu’s social theory is made up of three fundamental concepts, each of which is represented in the literature on youth sports. The first concept is “habitus,” which is used to refer to the unconscious reproduction of routines and norms that are “deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them” (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316). More generally, habitus is the traits and dispositions that an individual acquires based on their life experiences. These acquired dispositions are shaped by both past experiences and an individual’s perception of the events (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). In this sense, Bourdieu suggests that habitus is created and reproduced ‘without any conscious concentration’ (p. 170). Lareau (2014) suggests that the notion of habitus “stresses the set of dispositions toward culture, society, and one’s future that the individual generally learns at home and then takes for granted” (p. 276).

The notion of concerted cultivation via sports participation is one aspect of the habitus of
middle-class families that has not inspired significant research. However, several studies have suggested that by managing the environment in which their children spend their free time, parents believe that they can influence what values, attitudes, and life-skills they may acquire (Coakley, 2006; Hutchinson, Baldwin, & Caldwell, 2003; Kanters, Bocarro, & Casper, 2008). This is also illustrated in the 2014 book *All Joy And No Fun*, whereby Jennifer Senior refers to this notion of concerted cultivation specifically as it pertains to youth sports participation for children in an upper-middle-class Houston suburb. She described a parental emphasis on youth sport that was both intentional and intense, illustrated by one mother’s take on selecting an appropriate baseball team for her young son: “After-school baseball isn't just Little League here. It's the right Little League team and a private batting tutor...and club-level tournament baseball.” Senior also illustrates concerted cultivation through an examination of Houston parents’ hyperfocus on football, which one mother described after her son went to a football camp: “and those parents were like, ‘We gotta get these kids protein shakes and muscle milk!’ As if their kids were going to go pro. At seven” (Senior, 2014).

Coakley also uses Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as it relates to the family and their decisions around youth sport in his 2006 examination of “the good father.” He describes the implication of a family habitus when they select activities that “will best facilitate the development of their children while also conforming to the current, widespread belief that parents are directly responsible and even legally accountable for the behaviours and achievements/failures of their children” (Coakley, 2006). Given this, Coakley argues that the selection of activities for children entails the ideas that “child development is important, that development ultimately depends on the actions of parents, and that the type of development most valued among many middle- and upper-middle income parents is achieved best through participation in adult-supervised, rationally
organized programmes in which skills are built and manifested visibly and progressively through regular performances” (p. 160).

Youth sport, and football, in particular, is also seen as an important mechanism to reinforce the habitus of masculinity specifically for fathers and sons. For fathers, youth sport has become an increasingly important setting in which to enact their gender habitus. Coakley (2006) suggests that sports, in particular, provide "fathers with a context in which they can be involved with their children without challenging dominant gender ideology" (p. 157). Gavanas (2003) noted that sports serve as sites for men to be involved fathers "without being forced to make a choice between domesticating masculinity or masculinizing domesticity" (p. 8). She further explains: "by transporting the cultivation of masculinity and male parenting into sports arenas and framing fathering practices in terms of coaching and team sport, [men]...can differentiate between fatherhood and motherhood, and simultaneously make fathering seem manly, heroic, and appealing" (Gavanas, 2003, p. 8). Gottzen and Kremer-Sadlik (2012) suggest that the competitive aspects of sports, with its "emphasis on performance and on exclusion of those not athletic or talented enough, render fathers more demanding and challenging" (p. 640). This type of parenting is aligned with Anderson's (2009) description of "orthodox" masculine values, which include an emphasis on risk-taking, tolerance of pain and injury, and competitiveness (Anderson, 2009). Through their involvement in sports, fathers are seen as contributing to children's socialization to values useful in adult life, such as competitiveness, self-esteem, responsibility, and collaboration (Coakley 2006; Kremer-Sadlik, Izquierdo, and Fatigante 2010; Kremer- Sadlik and Kim 2007).

Just as youth sport is seen as an appropriate “manly” activity for fathers, so is football seen as an appropriate activity for young men. Messner (1990) suggests that fathers, in particular, play a significant role in both the introduction to sport and the emphasis on the development of
masculine identity. He notes that in their early sports participation, boys from both lower- and higher-status backgrounds suggest the "importance of fathers and older brothers in introducing them to sports. Both groups speak of the joys of receiving attention and acceptance among family and peers for early successes in sports" (Messner, 1990, p. 433). This suggests the significance of sports like football to passing along a gendered habitus to young boys in the United States. Despite their early draw to sports, Messner also found that the "immediate rewards (fun, status, attention)" coupled with the perceived "structure of opportunity" disproportionately draw more boys from lower-status backgrounds to athletic careers "as their major means of constructing a masculine identity," whereas boys from higher-status backgrounds had a greater range of experiences from which to construct their identity (Messner, 1990, p. 438). In his subsequent work, Messner (2009, 2011) found that professional-class parents use youth sports to strengthen a dominant gender ideology that positioned boys as naturally destined for competition in public life.

**Capital.** The second concept within Bourdieu's theory is described as ‘capital' and may be social, cultural or symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986). The notion of capital is outlined in Bourdieu’s study of French society, *Distinction* (1986), in which he shows how the “social order is progressively inscribed in people’s minds’ through ‘cultural products’ including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life” (p. 471). Lareau suggests that the differences in habitus among social classes “give individuals varying cultural skills, social connections, educational practices, and other cultural resources, which then can be translated into different forms of value (i.e., capital) as individuals move out into the world" (Lareau, 2014, p. 276).

Capital, in its various forms, has been studied extensively within the sport sociology literature. There are two strains of research on capital that are most in accord with the focus of this
study: the cultural capital that parents attempt to transfer to their children through sport, and the social capital that accompanies the youth sports experience for parents themselves. As illustrated in the discussion on habitus, participation in extracurricular activities is seen as a hallmark of middle-class parents' cultivation of their children. Coakley (2006) found that parents see sports programs as "sites where their children can gain or sustain social capital in the form of peer acceptance and cultural capital in the form of knowledge about how to succeed in organized, competitive reward structures in school and work" (p. 160). This is illustrated in the work of Light and Kirk (2001), who examined how members of the upper-class in Australia used school rugby as a means of gaining class distinction for their children. They found that the capital passed on to them from their families reinforced the habitus valued by the school and the rugby community. Similarly, Falcous and McLeod (2012) use a New Zealand tennis club to illustrate how concerted cultivation occurs in sport. They describe parents who specifically chose the sport because of the 'life-lessons' they instill in children, which "reflects the aspiring upper middle classes' preoccupation with self-improvement and, particularly, social mobility" (p. 20). This study also pointed to parents' acute acknowledgment of their motivations for promoting tennis, which relates "to the wider considerations of aspirational middle-class life trajectories rather than anything inherent to tennis per se” (Falcous & McLeod, 2012, p. 21).

In the US, Chafetz and Kotarba (1995) examined how Little League baseball in a Texas suburb was considered to be an optimal extracurricular activity because it was used as a vehicle by which upper-middle-class women could display their proficiency as mothers through their efforts to create "good sons." Similarly, Swanson (2009b) studied the mechanisms that upper-middle-class mothers employed in the process of utilizing their sons' soccer participation as capital to "pass on their class habitus to their children" (p. 405). Mothers identified soccer as an activity
"appropriate" for the development of "good boys," especially when compared with other activities, like football. "Soccer provided this upper-middle-class group of mothers an activity that required their sons to use their bodies more appropriately than football would" (p. 417). This aligns with Bourdieu's notion that "a sport is in a sense predisposed for bourgeois use when the use of the body it requires in no way offends the sense of the high dignity of the person, which rule out, for example, flinging the body into the tough and tumble of 'forward game' rugby" (Bourdieu, 1984 in Swanson, 2009b).

While an emphasis on youth sports participation is not unique to families in the United States, the associated meanings, values, and parental motivations seem to have varying cultural contexts. In a study comparing parents in the US and Italy, for example, Kremer-Sadlik, Izquierdo, and Fatigante (2010) found that US parents were more likely to emphasize their children’s achievement in that they “select, prioritize, and invest in extracurricular and education activities that they believe will prepare their children for survival in the world, and that they perceive the need to regularly assess their children’s performance and to reward achievement, as it helps determine the level of preparedness of a child” (p. 41). This emphasis on performance in sport has also been observed by Elkind (2001) who suggests that a shift towards competition and performance is tied to the changing orientation of US schools that routinely test, assess, and compare students with one another. The need to prepare children for a changing world, especially those in the middle class, is stressful for parents, suggests Elkind (2001), and as a result parents, in part, rely on the "symbolic achievements of their children to relieve their stress" (p. 48). Weisner (2002) takes this concept further to suggest that parents view raising families as a "project" that balances their personal goals for their children, what is possible given their circumstances, and the values of their community. Dyck (2012) also contends that "the dutiful and appropriate raising of
children is a responsibility placed upon parents' shoulders as well as a responsive and malleable medium with which to articulate a sense of personal purpose, comfort, and worth” but that organized activities, like sports, provide "a medium not only for organizing key aspects of child-rearing but also for sculpting an ongoing project and story about who one is and what one's life is and has been about" (Dyck, 2012, p. 62). Sports participation also plays into this concept because although sustaining busy schedules and volunteering requires a substantial commitment from parents, there is high societal value on the activity.

One of the most evidentiary signs of this concerted cultivation approach to raising children is the increasing importance for American families on being “busy.” In Darrah’s 2007 book Busier Than Ever!: Why American Families Can’t Slow Down, he describes “busyness” as the preferred state for families in the United States: “for many Americans, busyness is like water to a fish; the context in which life is lived that is so obvious that is often passes without comment” (Darrah, 2007, p. 4). Studies by Shore (2003) and Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck (2007) also suggest that for middle-class families in the US the notion of "busyness" is an important status marker, as they work to increase or maintain their family's social status. Shore (2003) contends that "busy" is a preferred state of being for middle-class US families, and suggests that "being ‘active' as a kind of ritual class act" (p. 8). In their ethnographic research on busyness in American life, Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck (2007) found that being busy involves more than just occupying time, rather, it is about defining oneself as a moral being who makes distinctive choices about how they lead their lives, both in their professional work, and in how they raise their children. As such, while planning family activities and scheduling extracurriculars for children is time-consuming, it "is seen to make life and lives predictable and meaningful" (Darrah, Freeman, & English-Lueck, 2007, p. 82). Further, "dealing with the demands and details of busyness in family life is, therefore, very
much about whom we choose to be and what we might wish to provide our children, thereby infusing morality into our every choice and action” (Darrah, Freeman, & English-Lueck, 2007, p. 259). Dyck (2012) suggests that youth sports are an important part of modern families’ preferred state of ‘busyness’ because "organized sports offer predictable schedules, provide parents with measurable indicators of their children's achievements, and permit children and youths to gain status with their peers and the larger community” (Dyck, 2012, p. 56).

For the purposes of this study, it is also important to examine how capital extends to the way that parents, themselves, experience the youth sporting experience. Several studies have suggested that parents perceive the relationships with their adult peers that are forged from youth sports to have personal benefits and valued social capital. In a study of Little League teams, Brown (2013) found that the parents saw mere participation in the league “as evidence of moral character, likeability, and sense of commonality between themselves and other parents on a team” (p. 337). This study found four specific social benefits of parent-to-parent relationships among the Little League team: emotional support, child care, information sharing, and business contacts, each of which increased the perception of the value of the relationships (Brown, 2013, p. 337). This notion of social capital for parents in youth sports was also shared by Weirsma and Fifer (2008), who found that the “opportunity to meet other parents and establish a community was important to many parents” (p. 514). Similarly, Legg, Wells, and Barile (2015) found that parents of youth who participated in a sports team often develop a greater sense of community. In a 2013 study of middle-class parents belonging to a swim club, DeLuca found that the notion of "fitting in" with “good people” was also an important component of parents’ leisure experience and a “marker of their shared habitus and levels of cultural and social capital” (p. 352).
Social capital for parents in youth sports was also illustrated in a qualitative study of 26 sports parents, by Dorsch, Smith, and McDonough (2009), which found that youth sports not only provided social outlets for families, but that parents were especially conscious of the way that they were perceived by their peers, and were regularly “attempting to manage the impressions others formed about them, in essence presenting a “public face” to their peers in the bleachers” (p. 457). These findings also bear similarities with those of Swanson’s (2009a) study of ‘soccer moms’ in the US who were continuously trying to differentiate themselves from other mothers of soccer-playing children (p. 349). This is aligned with Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992) assertion that “participants in a field… constantly work to differentiate themselves from their closest rivals in order to reduce competition and to establish a monopoly over a particular subsector of the field” (p. 100).

The concept of capital, in its various forms, was particularly useful in this examination of the parents of youth football players. I considered economic capital in examining how a parent's financial position may impact their preference for sport and their willingness to invest in the ‘sporting future' of their children. In addition, I used the notion of social capital to examine how factors like social relationships and team affiliation impact parental motivation for youth football participation. I also considered the social desirability of youth sports (football in particular) in middle-class communities, as an important theoretical underpinning for this study. Lastly, I considered the ways that parents attempt to transfer cultural capital to their children through sport and the ways that they attempt to build their capital through youth football participation.

Field. The third concept of this theory is "field" which Bourdieu uses interchangeably to refer to a shared ‘social space.’ A field is specific and is delineated by a group's shared rules, logic, and customs. These rules and customs are maintained by the group and are used to identify and
structure the various practices that occur within the space. Youth football itself, for example, is a shared social space, within which sub-fields exist for specific teams, parent groups, and fans. Kay and Laberge (2002) note that Bourdieu conceptualized a field more like a "way of thinking," a tool for the empirical study of various social arenas, than as a conceptual entity" (p.26). Similarly, Laberge and Kay (2002) also note that a field is "a space of competition for resources (economic capital) and rewards (symbolic capital) and of struggle for dominant positions" (p. 254). Bourdieu also outlines the way that fields are sites for competition:

“In every field we shall find a struggle, the specific forms of which have to be looked for each time, between the newcomer who tries to break through the entry barrier and the dominant agent who will try to defend the monopoly and keep out competition… which means, ultimately, the conservation or subversion of the structure of the distribution of the specific capital” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72).

While Bourdieu generally describes a ‘field’ as a social construct, he also suggests a relationship between social space and a geographic one, referring to this relationship as “site-effects” (2000, p. 123). To this end, he also notes the influence of the physical space, suggesting that “if the habitat shapes the habitus, the habitus also shapes the habitat” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 128). Furthering this, when considering the notion of ‘field’ in the context of Bourdieu’s equation, [(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice, it is important to note that the impacts of one’s habitus or their possession of various forms of capital are influenced by the social setting in which they exist.

adventure racing and applied Bourdieu’s social theory to contextualize the “social dynamic and power structure” within the field. They found that the notion of ‘field’ was particularly important in adventure racing as it both situated the struggles between participants and the competition among race organizers to situate adventure racing as a new, exciting sports sub-field. This study highlighted the fact that “the symbolic value of any sport is determined by the particular structure of the field at any given time” (Kay & Laberge, 2002, p. 44).

In a 2006 study of professional soccer in Scotland, McGillivray and McIntosh suggest that the "social positions within the professional football field are invariably distributed on the basis of access to a particular, embodied capital" (p. 374). In this study, they considered how the field impacted various forms of capital; in this instance, the professional football field placed a higher value on physical (body) capital than it did on cultural (education) capital. Stempel (2005) also considered the active relationship that the field has with capital in an examination of adult participatory sports. In his study, Stempel considered which "sporting practices operate as cultural capital and which do not" (p. 414). He examined adult participation in 15 sports and corroborated the Bourdieusian theory of a socially-stratified, highly class exclusive sports hierarchy. Stemple argues that the “dominant classes use strenuous aerobic sports, moderate levels of weight-training, and competitive sports that restrict direct physical domination and/or are aerobically strenuous, in order to draw boundaries between themselves and the middle and lower classes” (p. 411). Stemple continues to posit that that participation in fields related to ‘health’ and fitness’ rather than full-contact sports allow for adults to construct a positive self-identity and to distinguish themselves by “working their bodies to produce disciplined, high performing, and achieving selves” (p. 428) while doing so “within ‘civilized’ constraints on physical domination” (p. 428).
The concept of field is also relevant in the context of parenting in youth sport and physical activity. Nielsen and colleagues (2012) used Bourdieu’s social theory to examine the sport and physical activity preferences of youth in a Danish suburb. They considered the socialization process that occurs within the field of youth sports and how the habitus and capital developed and valued in that field impact the interests and preferences of children. “Using Bourdieu's concepts, a field habitus dialectic is taking place in such social arenas, creating both self-perpetuating exclusion and inclusion processes” (Neilsen, Gronfeldt, Toftegaard-Stockel, et al., 2012, p. 7). To that end, Nielsen and colleagues submit that as socialization occurs (or, as Bourdieu would suggest, habitus is passed along) within a field, it gives participants both the interest and the skills to be able to participate. Conversely, this process within a field also serves to "exclude individuals who have not acquired the necessary competencies or interest in participating" (Neilsen, Gronfeldt, Toftegaard-Stockel, et al., 2012, p. 8).

Dagkas and Quarmby (2012), on the other hand, conceptualized individual family units as pedagogical fields. In this sense, parents influence their children’s perceptions of the value of physical activity and sport through “personal histories and prevailing social circumstances” (p. 210). They suggest that within the field of an individual family it is the “intersection of the family’s social class, cultural, and pedagogical exchanges that most prominently shape young people’s dispositions toward physical activity” (Dagkas and Quarmby, 2012, p. 222). In this sense, the economic and social implications within the field of the family unit impact participation in other fields, including athletics and the community.

In this study, the concept of field was significant because youth football is particularly socially stratified – by nature of the activity, some groups will be excluded (or exclude themselves), and others included. When considering parents in the youth sports experience, the
The concept of field can also be applied in two ways – parents are situated within a particular social-class based field, and their involvement with a particular football team locates them within a unique subfield. In this study, the field of youth football was especially important because the teams were situated within a middle-class community, thus requiring certain forms and levels of (economic) capital as a prerequisite of participation (Bourdieu, 1984).

Summary

The literature around the safety of youth football and concerted cultivation provided context for my analysis related to the parent experience in youth football. By drawing on the tenants of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, I was able to consider the context of the social field of youth football and the suburban landscape to examine the class-based implications of youth football participation through analysis of the habitus of the middle-class youth football culture and the capital that parents seek for their children and for themselves.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was two-fold: it aimed to examine parental attitudes regarding youth football participation and perceptions of the safety of the game. First, parental attitudes about football participation were assessed through lines of questioning designed to capture their previous sports experience and their motivations and expectations for their children's participation. Additionally, research questions related to attitudes of the safety of youth football were used to assess parental knowledge about the risks of youth football and their perceptions of the efficacy of the safety measures enacted by their teams and leagues. In this chapter, I outline the theoretical underpinnings of the research design, including the assumptions of the interpretivist paradigm and
the study methodology, including the research participants and the data collection and analysis techniques I employed.

**Interpretivist Paradigm.** For this study, I selected an interpretivist approach to guide my research, primarily because this position assumes that individuals are constantly making meaning of their experiences, which, in turn, constructs their reality. The interpretivist paradigm also suggests “the social world is constantly being constructed through group interactions, and thus, social reality can be understood via the perspectives of social actors enmeshed in meaning-making activities” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Using the interpretivist paradigm is especially relevant as I consider the types of “meaning” that parents ascribe to youth football in relation to Bourdieu’s social theory. More specifically, this study will examine how the norms and social cues of the middle- to upper-middle class dictate how parents perceive the experience and how they determine it best relates to their children’s development.

There are several critical components to the interpretivist approach that served as foundational tenants of this study that have allowed me to produce a shared understanding of the experiences of parents of youth football players. LeCompte and Schensul (2010) suggest that in interpretive research “cultural beliefs and meanings are (p. 70):

1. **Socially constructed.** LeCompte and Schensul (2010) described interpretivism as the belief that reality is a ‘social construction’; that is, what people know and believe to be true about the world is “constructed or created and reinforced and supported as people interact with one another over time in specific social settings.” Interpretations are based in a particular moment because they only occur in a specific context or situation and time. Further, an individual’s construction of reality is also dependent on the emotions and meaning they assign to past experiences. Individuals will interpret their social worlds differently and
consequently, will assign a different meaning to the experiences and interactions they have. As I sought to understand how the constructed realities about the safety of youth football are produced and interpreted by parents, I also recognized that my work would similarly be my perception of interactions with my research participants and my interpretation of their experiences.

2. **Situated.** Shared meanings and constructs are situated, which LeCompte and Schensul (2010) define as “located in or affected by the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, age gender, and other contextual characteristics of those who espouse them” (p. 69). Since these characteristics influence how individuals think and act, it’s important to give context that might influence how they interpret a situation. For example, in my study, parents perceived the same situation or interaction differently depending on their previous athletic experiences, history with the team, or their child’s history of injury.

3. **Not fixed.** Interpretive theorists believe that there is no one social construct that is more or less "true," but rather the perceptions of individuals are merely more or less informed and/or sophisticated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Additionally, constructs are not unalterable – through new experiences and interactions, the thoughts and perceptions of individuals may change over time. Consider, for example, a parent whose child suffers a severe injury during the football season; her perceptions about the safety of the game may change once she experiences the implications of such an injury.

4. **Negotiated.** When using an interpretive approach, the researcher creates and recreates the constructs and themes as the study progresses, as experiences occur and new meanings are created, for both participants and the researcher. That is, findings emerge through interactions and observations in which conflicting interpretations are negotiated among
members. In this study, the parents’ experiences and expectations for their children in youth football may change during the project, leading them to amend their interpretation of the safety of the game.

5. **Multiple-voiced.** Interpretivist research should include accounts inclusive of the multiple voices of the participants and the researcher as well as the multiple interpretations of the same experience. As such, LeCompte & Schensul suggest there is not one true reality researchers can study and report on, but rather “reality differs, depending on whose reality is considered” (p. 67). Fetterman (2010) also suggests that the multi-voiced perspective is an important part of interpretivist research because it accepts multiple realities: “People act on their individual perceptions, and those actions have real consequences – thus the subjective reality each individual sees is no less real than an objectively defined and measured reality” (p. 5). As an interpretivist researcher, it is my goal to describe the reality as it exists for the parent participants, within the context of culture, in constructing an understanding of the phenomenon that is youth football participation and the perceived safety of the game.

6. **Participatory.** Since meanings are primarily created through personal interaction, the interpretive approach is inherently participatory. The process of generating and interpreting data is an ongoing one requires the participation of both the researcher and participants "since negotiated meaning cannot occur unless the researcher is a full participant in the process" (LeComte and Schensul, 2010).

I developed this research study through the lens of my interpretivist perspective to better understand the meaning constructed by parents related to their experiences with youth football and the safety of the game. Despite the similarities in the general youth football experience, parents
interpret the experience differently and create their own meaning and value for their participation and involvement. I used my interpretivist lens to understand the value parents place not only on youth football but also to understand how they perceived the safety risks for their children.

**Methodological Overview**

This study was guided by the principles of phenomenology, in that I aimed to describe, as accurately as possible, the phenomenon of parental attitudes towards youth football, refraining from any pre-prescribed framework, but remaining true to the data as it presented itself. Phenomenology is both a philosophy, in that it is concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 79), and a research method used to capture the lived experiences of individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Bevan (2014) posits the interests of the phenomenological researcher as “describing a person’s experience in the way he or she experiences it, and not from some theoretical standpoint” (p. 136). Phenomenology stems from an interpretivist epistemological perspective most notably associated with the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, and later Alfred Schutz, who brought it to American sociology (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Both researchers were interested in the way that human perception and experiences shape their social reality.

Bevan (2014) suggests a semi-structured approach to phenomenological interviewing that fundamentally does not “tell you what to ask but rather how to manage the process of questioning” (p. 138). As a result, Bevan developed a phenomenological interview method based on the theories of Husserl (1970) consisting of three main domains: contextualization, apprehending the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon (p. 138). Each of these domains of inquiry, according to Bevan’s structural concept, is “undertaken in the phenomenological reduction on the part of the researcher” (p. 138). In essence, this is the practice of thematically analyzing the
experiences of the phenomena using what Kvale and Brinkman describe as “deliberate naiveté,” or without the personal knowledge and beliefs that may influence the analysis (2009). Husserl (1970) also described this approach – of abstaining from utilizing prior knowledge – as ‘bracketing’ and suggested its use for researchers to become aware of her own attitudes and preconceptions towards the phenomena. Conducting the phenomenological reduction allows the researcher to maintain an authentic description of the experience, according to the interview subjects, which also allows for a fundamental level of validity in the study design. Bevan describes the phenomenological reduction as a “commitment to adopting the phenomenological attitude, also known as the epoché” which is a “critical-position-taking attitude that requires the phenomenologist to adopt and accept a resolve to take nothing for granted” (p. 139). In essence, the epoché allows the researcher to engage in a reflective process that both acknowledges and questions their position on the phenomenon and allows for a more critical stance towards the data. I engaged in epoché prior to and during data collection to shift my attitudes towards a more critical stance and manage the influence of my personal beliefs during the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenological Attitude</th>
<th>Researcher Approach</th>
<th>Interview Structure</th>
<th>Method</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological Reduction (Époché)</td>
<td>Acceptance of Natural Attitude of Participants</td>
<td>Contextualization (Eliciting the Lifeworld in Natural Attitude)</td>
<td>Descriptive/Narrative Context Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflexive Critical Dialogue With Self</td>
<td>Apprehending the Phenomenon (Modes of Appearing in Natural Attitude)</td>
<td>Descriptive and Structural Questions of Modes of Appearing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Active Listening</td>
<td>Clarifying the Phenomenon (Meaning Through Imaginative Variation)</td>
<td>Imaginative Variation: Varying of Structure Questions</td>
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**Figure 1.** Bevan’s structure of phenomenological interviewing.

**Contextualization.** Husserl (1970) suggests that all aspects of an individual's lifeworld are set within a contextual environment comprised of personal experiences and attitudes that assign meaning to them. Thus, we cannot understand an individual's experience without first examining the context that gives it a specific meaning. Seidman (2006), as cited in Bevan (2014), suggests
that to provide a framework for experience, an interview must first establish a point of context in which the experience is situate, or a focused life history. This is also consistent with Giorgi’s (1989) recommendation of the use of a two-tiered method of interviewing that first aims to capture descriptions of context before questioning to acquire meaning. I structured my interviews based on this method in that I began with questions for contextualization that seek rich, descriptive narratives that provided a backdrop to the rest of the parent perceptions. This was important because it was often difficult to examine a participant’s particular experience without considering the context and background from which the meaning is derived. For example, when asking questions like: “Tell me about your experience with sports growing up,” or “Describe how you interact with sports today – do you watch or play sports as an adult?” I was afforded insights as to how a parent’s past and current interaction with sports may have influenced their perception of their children’s experiences and highlighted areas for further questioning.

**Apprehending the phenomenon.** The phenomenological epistemological perspective acknowledges that the human experience – and the perception of it – is complex and is "grounded in the world which is experienced intersubjectively." (Mason, 2002). Consequently, an important element to phenomenology is in the recognition that phenomena are presented in different ways to different people, also referred to as "modes of appearing." Bevan (2014) describes modes of appearing as "things experienced, such as a person, car, idea, emotion, or memory, is experienced in many ways from different perspectives, by one person or by many people" (p. 137). The second domain of this approach to phenomenological research is "apprehending the phenomenon," which is when the interview begins to explore the phenomenon in detail with more descriptive questions. Sokolowski (2000) posits that the identity of a thing or experience "has modes of appearance and is experienced in many ways." That is, an experience, although shared by many people, might be
interpreted differently by various individuals, or by the same person on a different day. Consider, for example, when a child gets hurt on the field of play; although spectators may all witness the same event, parents may interpret the experience in varying ways depending on a multitude of factors (i.e., the perception may be different if it were a parent of the child getting hurt, versus the parent of the player who made the hit). Similarly, a parent may feel differently about the safety of the tackling techniques being taught at the beginning of the season, when their son is playing in the quarterback position than at the end of the season, when he has been moved to a linebacker. Because of this, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) suggest using both descriptive and structural questions to complement each other and add depth to the data.

In this second mode of inquiry, I used questions to inquire about how parents personally perceive and situate the youth football experience, how they feel about football safety, and the actions they take (or they perceive the team takes) to prevent injury and mitigate risk. To assess this, for example, I used descriptive questions to evaluate the role that parents played in the youth football experience (i.e. "how do you support your son's football experience?" and “what role do you play with the team?”). I used questions like these to elicit a variety of interpretative statements from participants, which were then unpacked with follow-up questions of a more structural nature, such as “Describe a typical week for you and your son during football season.” Through both descriptive and structural lines of questioning, I was able to capture how the participants interpreted their experiences through the descriptions of events using phenomenological reduction while avoiding making premature and assumptive interpretations of the data.

**Clarifying the phenomenon.** The third domain of this approach is "clarifying the phenomenon," which involves "the use of elements of experience, or experience as a whole, while exploring the phenomenon itself" (Bevan, 2014, p. 141). This domain calls on the researcher to
not only assess the meanings that participants assign to experience, but also to use imaginative variation to clarify the phenomenon. Imaginative variation is applied when "the researcher is conscious of an element of experience, which is then put through the process of imaginatively varying its structural components to uncover invariant parts and thus clarifying its structure" (Husserl, 1960 in Bevan, 2014). In this study, I employed imaginative variation by asking questions like “Describe how the experience would change with football if the league made significant rule changes, like limiting contact in practice” and “Do you think that you would perceive safety in youth football differently if your son had gotten injured this season?” Allowing participants to imagine a variation of their current reality encouraged them to clarify their thoughts and was a useful tool to enable them to think about their position. Additionally, utilizing imaginative variation allowed for the experience to be examined for modes of appearance. Bevan suggests that this is useful in increasing the study’s validity because “if the phenomenon is varied with the respondent then the structure remains real and context-bound from the perspective of that person” (p. 142).

Phenomenology is an appropriate methodology for this study because of its capability to capture the essence of the sports parent experience from the perspective of those who directly experience the phenomenon. Utilizing the approach outlined by Bevan (2014), and focusing on describing and thematizing experiences systematically enabled me to demonstrate consistency, dependability, credibility, and trustworthiness, factors essential for qualitative research. Another benefit of phenomenology is that it assumes a different approach to inquiry than quantitative research, which is seemingly the dominant paradigm in the study of safety in youth sports, particularly the risk of SRC in football. This distinction is important because a qualitative
approach provides greater insight into the nuances of individual experience, in this case, parental perceptions and attitudes about youth football.

**Research Procedures**

*IRB Approval.* Appropriate permissions were secured before beginning this study, including approval from the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I provided information sheets to my research participants notifying them of the aims of the research project and advising them of their ability to opt out of the study at any time. Additionally, I verbally informed all participants of the focus of the study, assured confidentiality, disclosed any benefits and risks, and confirmed the voluntary nature of their participation before getting oral consent to participate.

*Research Setting and Participants.* I selected initial participants for this study via purposive sampling, considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) as the most important kind of non-probability sampling because this allows me to select participants who exemplify characteristics needed to maximize my chances of finding patterns for which I am searching (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). The use of a purposive sampling approach was appropriate for the project as it is common in studies that seek to explore a phenomenon on which there is a dearth of prior information.

Participants were recruited throughout the suburbs of southeast Michigan, primarily out of Oakland, Livingston, and western-Wayne counties. The suburban metro-Detroit area is unique in that the city of Detroit (whereby the median household income is $25,762) (US Census, 2016) is flanked by cities that consistently rank among the most affluent in the country. The suburban cities in western-Wayne, Oakland, and Livingston counties, specifically, are decidedly middle- and upper-middle class, with an average per capita income of $67,202 (US Census, 2016). I
specifically included participants who fall into the middle and upper-middle class income brackets to examine the experiences and perspectives that these families have with football, thus allowing me to further relate this study with Bourdieu’s concept that middle-class parents select activities as capital to pass on their class habitus to their children. Focusing on a more affluent population also allowed me to consider this data in contrast with Swanson's (2009b) study of upper-middle-class "soccer moms" who considered soccer as an activity more "appropriate" for the development of "good boy," than other activities, specifically football.

**League Profiles.** This study included 32 parents from teams in five youth football leagues throughout western-Wayne, Livingston, and Oakland counties, including four leagues hosting teams from area municipalities and one parochial league. The three largest leagues (herein referred to as “North,” “East” and “West”) support 12-member organizations in each league that are geographically-based and primarily affiliated with area high schools (i.e., children in the school district that will attend one high school all participate on their corresponding youth team). Another, smaller league (referred to as "Independent") is not organized by affiliated school and supports five-member organizations from around the metro-Detroit area. In addition, a parochial school league offers a tackle football league for 28 area Catholic schools. The fees for participation are predicated on the city from which the team hails, rather than being league-specific. In the West League, fees for participation range from $155-$260; East League, fees for participation range from $165 to $375; in the North League fees range from $200 to $350; in the Independent League fees range from $360 to $425, and fees in the Catholic League vary because they are often tied with tuition rates at the private schools. In each league the divisional organization is similar:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flag League</th>
<th>Freshman League</th>
<th>JV League</th>
<th>Varsity League</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>East League</strong></td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>North League</strong></td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*<em>Catholic League</em> **</td>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8-9</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Junior Freshman (Tackle) League</strong></td>
<td>6-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Freshman League</strong></td>
<td>8-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>JV League</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Varsity League</strong></td>
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</table>

| West League | 7-8 | 100 lbs. | 9-10 | 125 lbs. | 11-12 | 160 lbs. | 13-14 | 200 lbs. |
| Independent League* | 6-8 | 110 lbs. | 8-10 | 130 lbs. | 10-12 | 160 lbs. | 13-14 | 190 lbs. |
| Catholic League* | 7-8 | 100 lbs. |

*Figure 2: League organization
*Catholic League offers both a Junior Freshman and Flag option through second grade.

The most notable difference in the divisional breakdown between the leagues is that the West League and the Independent League offers tackle football at the “junior freshman” level, whereby first and second-graders wear full pads and play regulation tackle football. The Catholic League offers both a flag and tackle option for second graders. In the other leagues, tackle football does not start until third grade, or age eight. There were also some differences in the league rules, as they specifically pertain to safety. Each league adopted safety measures into their organization’s bylaws, including the use of a concussion training program, and employed weight limits for players. Every league required volunteer coaches to have a background check and to have completed the Heads Up concussion awareness training program, facilitated through the associated CDC’s website. All the leagues also had fairly consistent weight limits for players in the different age divisions. Weight limits are used to ensure that kids of relatively equal size are competing
against each other to minimize the risk of injury; however, children who are over the weight limit in all of the leagues are permitted to play in practice (including in full-contact, padded drills). The East, West, and Catholic Leagues do not allow players over the weight limit to participate in the games; however, both the North League and the Independent League have allowances for rostering players who do not make weight. In both leagues, teams can select up to two players who don’t meet the weight maximums (called “X Men” in the Independent League) that, according to the North League’s website, “have their helmet striped with a contrasting piece of tape that is 1” wide and is applied from the front of the helmet to the back of the helmet” (“Rules”, www.wljfl.com). The ‘stripe,’ or restricted, players can only play in the offensive center, guard, or tackle positions. Restricted players may not carry the ball on offense, but are allowed to advance the ball on defense.

Similar to the aforementioned rules changes in the national Pop Warner league, the state of Michigan has also adopted limited contact rules for high school football. The Michigan High School Athletic Association practice rules indicate that after the first game of the season, “teams may conduct no more than 90 total minutes of collision practice in any week, Monday through Sunday” (“Football Practice Policy,” www.MHSAA.com). The Catholic, East, and West Leagues have adopted a similar rule to the Michigan high schools, in that “teams may conduct no more than two (2) "collision" practice days in any week" ("Rule," www.aod.org). In contrast, the other two youth leagues have not adopted rules limiting contact in practices, and typically operate full-contact practices five days a week and in one weekend game. Each of the leagues requires all of its teams to have a medic or certified athletic trainer onsite for games, have specifications for approved helmets, and include rules requiring players to leave the field if their helmet comes off during play.
Data Collection

Data collection took place over eleven months from October 2017 through August 2018. I began in October 2017 with observations of one game from four of the leagues, conducted interviews from November 2017 through June 2018, and completed additional observations at team camps for each of the leagues in July and August 2018. Data collection tools included: a) observations, b) a demographic profile, c) individual phenomenological interviews, and d) artifact collection. To aid in the data collection process, I used four graduate students as research assistants, two of whom are also college football coaches and two of whom were youth sports administrators, to assist in conducting interviews and observations. Their participation was essential to the study; they are industry ‘insiders' with extensive networks in the football community which allowed for access to football parents from across teams and leagues. Three of the four research assistants are also parents of elementary-aged children, which allowed for further relatability to the parent participants. Although novice researchers, they all completed CITI training, were versed in techniques of qualitative methodology, observed me conducting a ‘sample’ interview with an initial participant, practiced interview techniques before conducting interviews on their own, and regularly communicated with me throughout the process to ensure adequate supervision and consistency in methods. The research assistants participated exclusively in the data collection process.

Observations. I utilized two sets of observations during this study – one at the outset and one at the conclusion. The games in each of the leagues are open, public events held at area high school or community fields. I felt it important to spend time within the youth football environment at the onset of the study to provide contextual grounding and establish a framework by which to consider the interview data. During these observations, I sat in the stands or stood alongside the
fence, serving as an observer during the freshman-level games. After each game, I individually recorded field notes that aimed to capture, as accurately as possible, the “behaviors, conversations, processes, and institutional structures that unfold in the presence of or manifest themselves to the researcher” (Schensul & LeCompte, 2011, p. 48). In the first round of interviews, I was mainly focused on the logistics of the game itself as well as observing the behaviors, interactions, and roles that parents assumed during the game. My field notes took stock of several factors related to parents at the games, including: their behavior (did they actively watch games or socialize with other parents? Did they sit with other parents, and if so, who? How did they act while watching their children participate?), interpersonal communication (what did they talk about with other parents? Did they talk with coaches before or after games? Did they speak to their children during games? How vocal were they during competitions?), and their roles with the team and the game (who was volunteering? Were mothers and fathers volunteering in different roles?). My field notes from these observations also included impressions of informal conversations when I was able to casually speak with parents during the games.

The second set of observations took place in July and August 2018, at five team camps and early-season practices sponsored by the clubs from which participants hailed. This round of observations was conducted after the interviews with parents, which allowed them to be used as an important source of data triangulation. These interviews were conducted similarly – sitting in the stands or standing alongside the fence; however, this time I was accompanied at each observation by one of the research assistants. Given his football-specific content knowledge, assessing the coach interactions with players regarding technique and instruction during the trainings added an important frame of reference to the study. He was able to evaluate the training sessions for how proficient the coaches were in football knowledge and the efficacy of their
pedagogical practices. This was important because as I focused on parent perceptions of safety in youth football, I needed to frame their assessment with what their children were being taught on the field. Many parents had limited knowledge of the intricacies of football technique, especially as it related to tackling, so their perceptions were primarily based on their experiences with the youth coaches. Understanding the specifics of each team and the proficiency of the coaching staff offered important comparative data points, against which I was able to consider the data on parental perceptions of safety.

**Demographic profiles.** Short demographic profiles or “face sheets” were used to collect identifying personal characteristics such as age, race/ethnicity, education level, and SES of parents who participated in the formal interviews. Demographic profile information was used in creating a context for each individual’s unique experience as a sports parent helped to emphasize points of interest for follow up during the interviews.

**Respondent-led interviews.** In keeping consistent with the tenants of a phenomenological study, each participant was interviewed once individually, in a semi-structured format using open-ended questions that aimed to explore their attitudes and perceptions about the youth sports experience. Given my interpretivist belief that each parent will create their own interpretation of both the youth football experience and the safety of the game, I could not truly understand these meanings without capturing how parents articulated their feelings. In seeking to understand the perceptions of safety in youth football, participant descriptions of their experiences and the meanings they create from these experiences served as the primary source of knowledge. Although the interview questions were broad and open-ended, they followed the structural recommendations of Bevan (2014) in that they progressed through the three domains of inquiry: “contextualization, apprehending the phenomenon, and clarifying the phenomenon” (p. 138).
The interviews, which lasted roughly 45-60 minutes, were recorded using the Just Press Record app on an iPhone and uploaded to my university-issued computer. I then used the recordings to produce verbatim transcripts of the full interviews. I drafted transcriptions from the audio files of the interviews myself, as soon after the interviews as possible, to ensure that I was able to stay connected to the data, even for the interviews that I did not conduct myself. In addition, I kept a researcher journal which allowed for the capture of nonverbal communication and nuances that were particularly striking during the interviews. I also kept a record of the information I gleaned from the informal communication with the research subjects before and after the actual interviews.

Because this research study took place in communities and social environments with which the research team was relatively familiar (given professional experience and familial participation), we were presented with two unique challenges. The first was defining our team as researchers who were seeking to understand topics that we would be expected to know about already. LeCompte and Schensul (2010) suggest that “if researchers act as if they already know what is important in the field, then research participants will be less likely to try to teach them what they need to know – and the cultural picture the researchers are trying to construct will be correspondingly less complete” (p. 48). Care was taken to find ways of communicating and asking questions that suggest to participants that what we know about football may not be entirely representative of what others in the community know. Additionally, participants in the study were assured that we were trying to discover and represent perspectives that may have been different from our own. The second challenge was mainly based on the participants’ perceptions of the study as a whole – a number of parents declined to participate based on the suspicion of me as a “mom who wants to ruin football.” The utilization of football coaches as research assistants helped to
counter these perceptions, and their involvement aided in getting several fathers to participate in the interviews. Similarly, their presence during the second round of observations allowed me significantly more access than I had during the first round when I was alone. Parents were much less reluctant to talk informally with the male research assistants; however, I am unable to definitively say whether this was based on gender or perceived affiliation (both wore their university football team shirts at observations).

**Artifact Review.** Even though phenomenology typically emphasizes more interactive, participatory methods of data collection, there are also a myriad of benefits to collecting documents related to the project throughout the study. Artifacts provide context for interview responses and observations. I collected information from the various leagues from their websites, recruitment flyers, and information related to Heads Up training. This was a helpful exercise in triangulating the data because these documents also serve as evidentiary materials to corroborate or contradict the accounts of parents during interviews. I used materials posted to the leagues’ websites related to safety measures, league rules, and training information as important artifacts to indicate the areas of emphasis from the leagues’ coaches and administrators. Lastly, I regularly monitored the public social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram) and the related posts made by the teams and parents. Not only did artifacts from the various leagues serve as important contextual items in this study, but examining artifacts also allowed for me to unobtrusively examine the leagues – and how their websites, rules, and training communicate their norms and values. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) suggested that through the analysis of documents and artifacts, "...we can learn about social life, whether it be norms or values or socialization or social stratification, by looking at the things we produce that reflect macro social processes and our worldview" (p. 227).
The Research Process

I designed and utilized a clear study protocol for this research project, which included procedures for collecting and storing data, transcribing interviews and field notes, and conducting data analysis. This protocol followed an eleven-step process, including preparations necessary before entering the field, field-based data collection, and post-field data management and analysis. This process is also outlined in Figure 2.

Pre-Field

1) Before embarking on any study procedures, all members of the research team obtained CITI research certifications in human subject research, health information privacy and security, and responsible conduct of research. Additionally, I provided the research team with readings related to the basic qualitative methodology of the project. The research assistants also observed me conducting a one-hour-long interview and participated in practice interviews with me. In this setting, the graduate student members of the research team also honed skills to practically apply their previous class-based study of qualitative research.

2) Before entering the field, I engaged in pre-analysis bracketing exercises, and led the research team similarly, to address how preconceived biases may impact what is ‘seen’ or ‘heard’ during data collection. This reflexive effort, to explicitly describe the researchers’ experience regarding the phenomenon of study, is suggested by Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2010) as a way for researchers to acknowledge and understand the way that “internal contradictions…complicate and enrich the analysis” (p. 39) and as a method of transcending any bias or preconceptions from the researchers. Each of the research assistants also partook in this exercise to help mitigate concerns about objectivity during the data collection process and to address how perceived “sameness” in experience or knowledge may influence the way that we ask questions (or not ask certain questions
for not recognizing the gaps or assuming we know the answer). This exercise also allowed the members of the research team to acknowledge how their own preconceptions and experiences influenced the way that they interpreted the conversations they had and the experiences they observed.

3) Using my research questions as a guide, I created observation and semi-structured interview guides that were used in the data collection process. The observation guide required researchers to record data on the physical setting, the people involved, and the events that occurred, as well as the instructional content, their instructional strategies, and how the youth and parents responded during trainings. Likewise, interview guides included open-ended questions that aimed to garner the parents’ perspectives on a range of factors related to attitudes regarding youth football participation and perceptions of the safety of the game.

In-Field

4) I conducted one observation from four of the leagues in October 2017. During observations, I made note of the context (i.e. date, time, setting of the game, the coaches, youth, and parents present), the content (i.e. coaching style and interactions with players), and interactions and behaviors (i.e. parent engagement, coach-player/parent-player interactions).

The next three steps of the research process were conducted concurrently while the research team was in the field collecting data:

5) The research team collected pertinent artifacts related to parents in youth football or football safety that were produced or distributed by area teams. This included flyers and promotional materials (that were sent home from elementary schools for participant recruitment), safety information (collected from parent meetings), and social media content (Facebook, Instagram).
6) Between November 2017 – July 2018 the research team conducted semi-structured interviews with parents, which were arranged with individual participants. In most cases, parents invited researchers to their homes to conduct interviews; however, they were also conducted in coffee shops, at a public library, and on the sidelines of practices for other sports.

7) Throughout the process, individual members of the research team remained in regular, weekly contact with me to discuss their data collection procedures which allowed me to confirm consistency in interview and observation practices. Given time and schedule constraints, the team only met in-person once at the beginning of the data collection process. In their weekly conversations with me, we regularly debriefed, discussed any emerging themes they recognized, and addressed any problems that arose in the field. Each research assistant sent me field notes from observations and their interviews as soon as they were completed, which allowed me to follow up with questions or clarifying points during our weekly conversations while the information was fresh in their minds.

8) In July and August 2018, we conducted a second round of observations with each of the five teams from which we interviewed parents. These observations were held at team camps and early season practices hosted by each individual team. I was accompanied to the sites by one research assistant at three of the sites (Catholic, Warriors, and Raiders) and visited the other two independently (Eagles and Wildcats). These observations similarly considered context, content, and behaviors as did the first round of observations; however, there were significantly more informal conversations with parents during the second visit. It was also especially helpful to have the football-coach research assistants in this setting because they were particularly adept at assessing the football-related activity and recording the relevant interactions with parents.
Post-Field

As the data was collected in the field by the research team, I began the process of managing and analyzing the data. All data collected through various mechanisms (both audio files and written documents) were saved to an external drive and to my university-issued computer.

9) Along with a graduate assistant, I transcribed all of the interviews conducted by the research team as they were completed, in order to stay "close" to the data. Transcriptions were completed by replaying the files and typing verbatim the audio content into a Microsoft Word file. The interview transcription process was ongoing and continuous until the research team conducted interviews.

10) I created a document to make note of my perceptions and thoughts as I considered the observation data and reviewed artifacts throughout the data analysis process. Akin to the process of transcribing interviews, this memoing of observations and artifacts occurred as I completed them (and received data from research assistants) so as to record as complete of an account as possible. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010), memo writing is an essential step in the analysis process because it aids researchers in coding categorical data and developing thematic patterns.

11) I analyzed data using inductive analysis and constant comparison (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010) to segment excerpts from individual field notes, assign codes, and put similar codes into categories. Throughout the coding process, I identified patterns in the data that were consistent in content and pertinence to the study. Due to the emergent nature of phenomenological research, I used the process of open coding in my analysis to allow insights from the experience of participants to emerge from study data. I conducted several rounds of open coding with each interview transcript. Analyzing the data this way allowed for the exploration and
interrogation of different categories until they began to coalesce into non-overlapping, compelling themes. These themes then served as scaffolds upon which to organize continuing insights and identify similarities and contradictions within the data.

LeCompte and Schensul (2010) suggest that an important aspect of this constant comparison method is that the data analysis “process is recursive or iterative,” (p. 197). My iterative approach to data analysis included the process of collecting data, analyzing it through coding and memoing, collecting additional data, analyzing it, continuing until the data has been collected to the point of saturation and sufficiently analyzed. To that end, categorical refinement was an ongoing cyclical process that allowed for new data to be added and compared with previous data and new themes and sub-themes to emerge. This process was used to confirm and further understand the parents’ stated themes and provide a source of triangulation across the data sources. Because I transcribed and coded the data as I completed the interviews and observations, I was able to identify emerging themes and additional questions that arose after considering the data collectively. I was then able to regularly incorporate this information in subsequent interviews as additional lines of questioning to enhance the data and confirm thematic information.

![Figure 1. Steps in the research process](image-url)
**Trustworthiness Strategies**

In qualitative research, validity is not as easily achieved as it is with a quantitative study because findings are interpretative and there is no specific litmus test to confirm accuracy. Establishing findings as plausible, credible explanations of a phenomenon cumulates when the researcher earns the confidence of the reader that he or she has "gotten it right" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Therefore, according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy, "trustworthiness takes the place of truth" (p. 48). In this study, I aimed to establish trustworthiness by including methods to ensure credibility and confirmability.

**Credibility.** One crucial component of trustworthiness in research is establishing credibility. LeCompte and Schensul (2011) suggest that high-quality qualitative research should contain convincing arguments supported by sufficient evidence that holds up to scrutiny. There were several techniques that I used to enhance the study’s credibility, including data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Triangulation occurs when several data collection strategies are used to substantiate research findings, or as Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010) suggest “using two different methods to get at the same research question and looking for convergence in research findings” (p. 51). I triangulated the data first by comparing the same type of data across different parents (i.e. analyzed the coded data from the interview transcripts across all 32 participants, or across all mothers, for example). I also used various data points to triangulate the data, including observations, interviews, and artifact collection. I also employed member checking techniques as a way to add to the credibility of the study, which involves sharing the emerging themes with study participants. To do this, I afforded the participants an opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected their intended meaning and allowed them to add or amend things as necessary.
Lastly, utilizing a team approach to the data collection also allowed for regular peer debriefing throughout the process. I was able to try out emerging themes with the research assistants, who were not only versed in the methodology of the study, but who were also encouraged to question, critique, and offer alternative explanations of the theories and interpretations of the data. This approach allowed their insider perspective to test my understanding of the data to ensure a more thorough analysis of emerging themes. One additional benefit of using peer debriefing was that they were able to challenge my assumptions or perceptions about the phenomenon, which also contributed to the overall subjectivity of the study.

**Confirmability.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that confirmability in qualitative research occurs when the researcher can demonstrate that the findings are the result of a systematic research process, and not solely based on the researcher’s perspectives of the data. As an additional approach to addressing trustworthiness, I employed three strategies to establish confirmability. First, I ensured that the research team utilized researcher journals to document reflections and to record instances where our subjectivity may have impacted our interpretations of the data. Second, regular debriefing meetings between the research assistants and myself also provided a record of how the study progressed. Lastly, both the raw data and the sorted, categorized data was stored as another method by which to confirm that the findings are based on my own empirical research.

**Transferability.** As a third strategy to establish trustworthiness in this study, I attempted to make my findings applicable to other contexts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that researchers “need to provide sufficient descriptive data to make transferability possible” (p. 298). To achieve this, I aimed to present “thick descriptions” of my participants, research settings, and findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to thick descriptions not just as very detailed accounts, but also use the term "auditability." This suggests that any reader can follow the progression of
events in a study and understand the logic behind it (including the purpose of the study, sampling procedures, the setting, data collection, data analysis, and the reliability of the findings). These factors combine to form an ‘audit trail,’ of sorts, which allows the dissertation committee to authenticate the findings of the research. Also, making this type of contextual information available readers will be able to juxtapose the commonalities and differences of my research sites and participants with their own application elsewhere. In this way, external audiences can determine how readily the research findings can be used to inform future research in various contexts.

**Researcher Subjectivity**

To reduce bias, Brink (1993) suggests that researchers must “examine and declare his underlying values and assumptions in light of the research situation so that they can be considered when reading the research” (p. 36). Subjectivity may influence all aspects of a study, from the choice of topic to interpreting the data. In qualitative research, it is a common practice for the researchers to reflect on the values and objectives they bring to the study and how these may affect the project. As an interpretivist, I acknowledge that just as participants’ backgrounds and past experiences play a role in their interpretations, my own personal background and experiences may have also affected my analysis within this study. To that end, I engaged in epoche, or “bracketing” at the onset of the study, which is an important aspect of the phenomenological research process. In doing this, it allowed me to acknowledge how my personal experiences potentially influenced the way that I interpreted events or interactions and how any assumptions and preconceptions may have shaped my view of the topic. I first attempted to bracket my assumptions regarding this study in the development of the researcher statement in the preface; however, the following is another attempt to address how my personal experiences with sports, especially as a graduate student,
youth sports administrator, and a parent, may have impacted my subjectivity.

I approached this research project with several assumptions that have derived from my experiences as a graduate student, namely as it pertains to the sport of football itself. Throughout my studies I have examined the football and its impacts on individual athletes and the greater community. As a result, I remain a firm believer in the ways that sports, including football, can be a vehicle by which to build character and teach valuable life lessons to the children who participate. Further, team sports are effective ways to encourage physical activity and promote healthy lifestyles. However, I also readily acknowledge that there is a downside to participating in hyper-masculine, power sports, like football, for the way that they can create social stratification and foster hubris among athletes. As I read more about the injury risks of football participation, I was surprised at the extent to which concussion and repeated hits to the head could impact an athlete’s cognition and long-term functionality. This was particularly underscored for me through the mentoring work that I do with members of the university’s football team. Throughout my graduate studies, I’ve worked with student-athletes as a learning specialist with the athletic department. It was here that I began working with a sophomore linebacker, Bryan, several years ago. Bryan sustained two concussions in the first three weeks of the football season, receiving the second only days after he was cleared to return from the first. I was helping Bryan with a paper the day before he sustained the second concussion – his writing, while not overly sophisticated, was clear and appropriate for the course. He came to me with a draft of the completed paper three days after being concussed for the second time, and the remainder of the paper appeared as if a different author had written it. The writing was disjointed and confusing, and he made uncharacteristic errors, like confusing "there," and "their," and not using any capital letters to begin sentences. I couldn’t believe the difference that this head injury made to his academic functionality,
and this made me acutely aware of the immediate impacts of concussion on a young person’s brain. I admittedly think of Bryan each time my son asks me to play tackle football. As a result of my studies and interactions with student-athletes, I acknowledge that I approach this study with the assumption that there are inherent dangers and risks to football participation, especially at the youth level.

Another critical personal experience that I brought to this study is that I am a parent of young children. I have had to make the same choices as many of the parents that participated in this research, but I’ve done so after significant study and extensive professional work in the youth sports industry. As a Masters student in Sports Administration and later as a sports administrator at a youth-based non-profit, I learned how to be logical about sports – to think like a prudent administrator and not a passionate fan, to manage crowds and crisis and mitigate potential risks. I talked down many a parent from an emotional ledge, reminding them that youth sports are, in essence, games for children. I’ve experienced the challenges that come with running sports programs and coaching children, and I know that often the biggest problem with youth sports are the adults involved in them.

And yet, as a parent I still find myself reacting with pure emotion when it comes to my own children's sporting experiences. I have joined my parental peers in yelling to our children from the sidelines of soccer games, our shouts dancing on the line between encouragement and coaching. My disappointment for my child when he didn't earn a roster spot for the soccer team he'd hoped to make was crushing, likely more for me than it was for him. But, there is nothing that elicits a stronger emotion from me than when my children get hurt. When I couple this parental concern with my academic and professional background, the personal decision to disallow youth tackle football for my own kids is a clear one.
As I conducted this study, I was careful not to judge those who perceive youth football differently than me, or those who have made contrary parenting decisions. While these experiences have certainly influenced my pursuit of this topic of study, I aimed to minimize their impact on my interpretation of the data by being especially sensitive to the practices to address validity and reliability throughout the study.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was two-fold: it aimed to examine parental attitudes regarding youth football participation and perceptions of the safety of the game. I considered my research through the lens of interpretivism, in that I described the reality as it existed for the parent participants, within the context of culture, to construct an understanding of the phenomenon that is parenting in youth football. As an interpretivist, I believe that individuals use their social interactions, previous experiences, emotions, and cultural interpretations to establish their own sense of reality. My subjectivity and perspectives on youth football and the safety of the game were acknowledged and managed by engaging in bracketing exercises, recording my experiences and perceptions via a researcher journal, and using research assistants to serve as peer debriefers. Using phenomenological methodology, I employed a research team to engage in observations, conduct interviews and collect pertinent artifacts related to the youth sports experiences for parent participants. Throughout this study, I utilized a variety of strategies to establish credibility and confirmability within my research findings including triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. My intent with this study was to capture the essence of the lived experience of parents to understand why, despite the well-reported risks, so many parents allow and encourage their children’s participation in youth tackle football.
CHAPTER 4: STUDY FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine parental attitudes regarding youth football participation and perceptions of the safety of the game. The research questions that guided the study were two-fold; parental attitudes about football participation were assessed via the following research questions:

a) What motivates parents to allow youth tackle football participation?

b) How do the personal sports experiences of parents impact their attitudes about their children's sports participation?

c) What are the parental expectations and aspirations for their children's sports participation?

d) What differences, if any, exist between the motivations and expectations of mothers and fathers of youth football participants?

Additionally, three research questions related to parental perceptions of the safety of youth football were also used to steer this study:

a) What perceptions do parents have about the physical risks of participating in youth football?

b) How do parents perceive the efficacy of the safety measures taken by their team/league?

c) Why, despite considerable information about the serious physical risk associated with football participation, do parents allow their kids to play tackle football?

The findings from this study revealed that the decision to allow tackle football participation for their sons involved a complex interplay of parents’ desires to portray “good” parenting, their gendered assessment of social status, and their evaluation of how the rewards of youth football
outweighed the risk of participation. This chapter is organized in two distinct sections: the first provides a detailed description of the teams and participants, the second includes the thematic findings that emerged from the study.

Section One: Teams and Participants

Team Profiles. Parent participants hailed from five teams, one from each division described in Chapter 3, as illustrated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>League</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th># of Parent Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent League</td>
<td>Eagles</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North League</td>
<td>Raiders</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic League</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West League</td>
<td>Wildcats</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East League</td>
<td>Warriors</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Participant Team Affiliation

The first two teams, the Eagles and the Raiders (all team names are pseudonyms) hailed from the same city – a suburb northwest of Detroit. The township has 35,000 residents, 96% of whom are Caucasian. The median household income in 2016 was $67,202 and less than 1% of residents in the township live below the poverty level (city-data.com). The Raiders are one of three North League teams in the township. Children in the city are eligible to play for one of the three teams based on their school affiliation; each of the three high school programs has an affiliate youth team. The Raiders organization was founded in 2008 on the principles of “sportsmanship, competitive excellence, and family” and although the teams have historically been at full roster capacity, they have seen a steady decrease in participation over the last four years. The fifth and sixth-grade team (junior varsity) is its largest team, with 30 players on the roster; however, the freshman and flag
teams were considerably smaller in number (20 players on the freshman roster, as reported by a team official) than they have been in years past.

The township is also home to the Eagles Football Club, who sponsors teams in the Independent League. The Eagles’ registration materials tout themselves as the “most successful youth football and cheer organization in Oakland County.” Their registration is open to all youth in the area and is not restricted to specific school district affiliation. They attract youth participants from local competing teams because they start tackle football in first grade (compared to third grade for the other teams in the township) and because they play an annual game at the University of Michigan Stadium. The participation numbers for the Eagles have held steady over the past five years, with their junior varsity team (fifth and sixth graders) at a 40-man roster capacity this year.

The Catholic school is based out of an affluent suburb west of Detroit. The school, which enrolls students in preschool through eighth grade, hosts flag football teams for grades kindergarten through third grade and tackle football for grades three through eight. The school is housed in a city of just under 10,000, with a median household income of $81,000 (city-data.com). Athletic teams are open to students at the parochial school, families who are parishioners of the church, and to students at other local Catholic schools that don't sponsor sports teams. The CYO, as a whole, has struggled to sustain participation in football, adding a flag football option for third graders in the 2015 season and combining several parochial schools to form teams with sufficient roster numbers. For the Catholic School, last year's roster numbers were particularly low, and team officials expected further decreases for the 2018 season. As such, the team joined another local Catholic school to form one football and cheer team for the fall of 2018.

The Wildcats are part of the West League and operate out of a suburb in Livingston county with 10,000 residents. The median household income in 2016 was $55,000, and 86% of residents
were Caucasian, 6% were Hispanic, and 4% were Black. This city is unique because it is mainly suburban but surrounded by other cities that are far more rural. Similar to the teams in the North League, the Wildcats are affiliated with their school district. The Wildcats and other teams in the West League have instituted a flag team for second graders, in addition to the second-grade tackle football team. Even with this addition, league officials reported that their participation numbers have remained consistent for the past five years at every level of play.

The Warriors Football Club draws participants from an affluent city in the East League with a 2016 median household income of $106,500. This city has resident demographics of 83% Caucasian, 8% Asian, and 5% Black. The football organization follows a similar format as the North League with flag football for ages 5-7 and tackle football for youth ages 8-13, starting in the third grade. In recruitment materials and on their website, the Warriors promote their “tradition of excellence” and their philosophy that football should be a “positive experience that results in healthy competition, with emphasis on safety, participation, discipline, commitment, teamwork, and individual growth.” In similar fashion to other teams in this area, the Warriors participation numbers have started to decline at the flag and freshman levels. For this fall, the flag team only had nine players when the season began, and league officials were scrambling to find additional players to field a team. The freshman team numbers were down slightly from the 2017 season, but they had enough to participate. Junior Varsity and Varsity teams were strong with numbers, including 29 players at the JV level and 27 at the Varsity. Ironically, team officials were expecting an uptick in participation for the 2018 campaign because a neighboring team folded after the 2017 season because of declining enrollments.

**Parent Profiles.** The sample for this study was middle-class parents of youth participants specifically on lower-division teams with players between the ages of 7-12. Parents of younger
players are more likely to influence the choice of activity for their children, and collecting data from parents who are early in their child's football career will offer important insights on the motivation for why parents initially choose football as an activity for their children. Initial informants were identified through two mechanisms: first, personal and professional contacts from within the football community were utilized, and second, I used social media to recruit participants (see sample email, personal contact, and social media recruitment flyers in Addendum C, D, and E). Once the initial participants were identified, I used a snowball sampling technique to recruit other participants. Exclusion criteria included household income; to ensure that participants fell into the middle- or upper-middle class, they indicated (on a demographic profile) their household income range (middle class is defined as 67%-200% of the median household income in a given state. In 2015, Michigan’s median income was $48,273, which makes $32,182 - $96,546 for a family of four the standard delineation of middle class in Michigan) (Henderson, 2015). I included 32 parent participants in this study from teams representing each of the five different leagues in western-Wayne, Oakland, and Livingston counties. I aimed for a relatively equal distribution of mothers and fathers in the sample to examine gender differences in the parental attitudes regarding youth football and perceptions of the safety of the game. The participants in this study included 17 mothers and 15 fathers, ranging in age from 37-62. All of the parent participants had a minimum household income of $98,000, with one participant reporting a household income of more than $250,000. Additionally, all parents were well educated: 9% (n=3) held an associate’s degree, 62.5% (n=20) held a bachelor’s degree, and 28% (n=9) had earned a graduate degree. All of the fathers worked outside of the home; of the 17 mothers, 11 worked full time outside of the home, two worked part-time, and four were stay-at-home parents.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Highest Education</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Children's Age (*=Football participant)</th>
<th>Team Affiliation</th>
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</thead>
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<td>PT Exercise Physiologist</td>
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<td>Development Officer</td>
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<td>Raiders</td>
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<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Stay at home parent</td>
<td>14,11,9</td>
<td>Raiders</td>
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<td>Raiders</td>
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Section Two: Thematic Findings

Theme One: Football as a Proxy for Good Parenting

The first predominant theme in this study was the quest of parents to establish themselves as “good” mothers and fathers. Fundamental to the definition of “good” parenting was the perception that keeping children engaged with constructive activities was a central responsibility of the parents. From the time that their children were very young, the parents in this study carefully selected socially-valued athletic activities that they perceived to be enriching and developmental. Additionally, the upper-middle class, suburban lifestyle of the parents in this study had a distinct emphasis on establishing a relatively uniform childhood experience – which helped to further situate a standard of “good” parenting. The parents in these communities expressed the same values, worked hard to keep up with peer families, and ensured that their children had similar, comparative experiences to their friends. In this study, this manifested itself by the parents’ conscious effort to enroll their children in the “right” activities and to be active, participating parent volunteers. In this way, “good parenting” was not just intentionally curating their children’s experiences, it was also a public demonstration of a commitment to their families. In effect, this display of what they perceived to be “good parenting” served as an outward proxy to demonstrate their effective childrearing methods.
This theme was supported by a number of sub-themes that explained the coalescence of factors that went into "good parenting." The first sub-theme explored the ways that the parents' own sports experiences were significant factors in promoting athletics for their children. Next, a second sub-theme illustrated the emergence of the 'good parenting' standard as parents sought out activities for their children at a very young age. The next three sub-themes explained how parents selected specific sports experiences that held value in their suburban social circles, allowed them to spend ‘quality time' with their families, and that promoted positive character traits. Also intertwined throughout several of the sub-themes articulated in this chapter is the specific role that mothers play in their sons' football experiences and the way that their perceptions of football differ with those of their husbands.

**Parent experiences with sport.** Many parents – fathers and mothers alike – reflected fondly on their own sports experiences as youth and expressed a desire for their children to similarly enjoy athletics. Rob, a father of three, urged his children to pursue athletics because of how impactful it was for him: “personally, for me… [sports] helped with my personal development and pretty much everything I’ve done in life.” Tara, still very much an active athlete as an adult, agreed that her own experiences drove her to encourage athletic participation: “I know what sports have done for me; it's made a huge difference in my life. So, I would like for my kids to be able to have those same great experiences and gain things like confidence and self-esteem.”

In the same way that parents reflected on their sports participation as being instrumental in their personal development, so did the memories of spending time with their own parents. Vince, a father of children aged 19, 17, and 8, reflected on how football allowed him to spend time with his own father: “my family was a sports family – my dad was a sports guy. So, he would watch and play sports with us. He was big into sports, so we would go out and do things, and he would
kinda be involved as much as he could, but he had a busy schedule.” For Rob, too, the memories of sporting events were synonymous with family time: “one of the cooler experiences I had growing up was that my dad coached me up until …the post-college years. I always remember my dad coaching, and my mom was always there, my sister was the scorekeeper, it was a family affair.” These reflections of time spent with their parents and families seemed to serve as guideposts for how parents evaluated the time spent with their own children. Football fostered what Erin, the mother of two football-playing sons, described as "quality time together as a family" and what her husband concurred was the time when he was able to be "involved and participating" in his sons' lives. It seems that this assessment of ‘family time’ was based largely on the quantity of time and not necessarily the quality of it since time spent at football practice or game would rarely put mothers, fathers, and their sons in close proximity to one another. Even for the fathers who coached their sons’ teams, most coached a position unrelated to their child, which wouldn’t allow for significant interaction during practice. Liz acknowledged this when she described a typical schedule for her family: “weekends are insane with four kids going in different directions” she said. “We all usually go to football, so at least we’re in the same place for a few minutes.”

**Starting early.** The desire to establish themselves as a ‘good parent' started early for the parents in this study, as many sought out constructive, developmental activities as soon as their children began to walk. Of the 32 parents in this study, most reflected on early sports experiences as a way to constructively occupy the time of energetic toddlers, starting their children in organized sports as early as 18 months old. Tara (all names used throughout are pseudonyms) remembers her son's earliest sports activity: ”as soon as he was walking, around a year, we put him in gymnastics because I thought it would be good for his coordination and would help him athletically down the line. He started soccer … at 18 months because that was the earliest he could play any team sport."
Similarly, Jennifer reflected on the anticipation of enrolling her son into activities even as an infant: "I remember reading through the Community Ed booklets before he was even born, thinking of what I was going to have him do. I wanted my kids to do sports, and art, and music. But we never really did art or music…none of our friends were doing those, and plus we were both athletes, so sports won out early."

While some parents, like Jess, suggested that they tried many extracurriculars for their children when they were young to allow them to "experience a lot of different things," other parents emphasized that the choice to play sports was driven by their children's interests. "We let them try sports that they were interested in – it was all driven by them – 100%," said Evan, whose son started playing flag football before he turned four. Evan’s wife agreed that it was their son’s choice to play football; however, she suggested that the influence to do so was strong in their family: “we’re one of those terrible households where football is glamorized and all of that. My husband loves it, and my kids grew up loving it from the time they were babies.” For all sports, but for football, in particular, fathers were important influencers of participation. Justin, a father of a son and a daughter, underscored this point: "if I think back on all the times that I had a football game or a baseball game on TV when my kids were little…or how often I talked to John about what was happening in the game when he was just little…I don't know how he wouldn’t have grown up to want to play sports.”

**Football teaches the ‘right’ personal skills and values.** Another important aspect of 'good parenting' for these suburban, upper-middle-class parents was the selection of the 'right' activities for their children. The "right" activities were established as those that parents perceived to derive a personal benefit for their children, and with which their peers were also engaged. Parents from all the teams in this study specifically pointed to the myriad of physical, social, and
behavioral benefits their sons derived from their participation in football. Mothers especially articulated the way that football kept their sons active and regularly engaged in physical activity. "The biggest benefit is regular exercise,” said Nikki, a mother with an eight-year-old in the Catholic League, “I want him to be able to do that, to value exercise, for the long term…” Similarly, Amy, a mother with the Warriors, suggested that by participating in physical activity in a sport that her son loves, she was hopeful that it would instill an appreciation for exercise throughout his life. When asked what she hoped her son gets out of football, she answered: “I hope he will continue to enjoy physical exercise and keep up his fitness.”

The participation in physical activity in a healthy setting was also noted as being a constructive way for boys to spend their time in order to stay out of trouble. The notion that without structured, organized activities their children would engage in anti-social behavior was consistent among mothers and fathers. Liz, of the Catholic League, said that “being involved in something outside of school and home, I think it keeps them connected and out of trouble.” Patrick, also of the Catholic League, similarly articulated this concern and the role that football played in addressing it:

“He’s getting ready to start middle school next year. At that age, especially, there are opportunities to fall in with the wrong crowd. Football, and most sports, actually, help to ensure that he’s spending his time on something positive. Too many good kids make bad choices to be accepted – but sports gives them an out. I think that sports are sort-of an antidote to negative peer pressure.”

Football was also described as an outlet for young boys who are especially active and have aggressive tendencies. Nikki, who describes her son as ‘naturally aggressive,’ suggests that football has helped him harness this energy: "now he can [hit people] and not get in trouble, it’s
like heaven for him." For Jess, football was also an important outlet for her "exceptionally active"
son because it allowed him to expel energy positively:

“He needs an outlet that’s positive and physical and for him. I think boys at this age and
even younger, their brains are so active and they are working more when they are moving.
I remember reading something when he was in kindergarten when…[I was] trying to
understand why…he was still always bouncing and moving around.
Football helps with all that extra energy.”

Parents articulated a belief that the ability for boys to harness their aggressive tendencies
within a structured environment, monitored by coaches and umpires, with clear rules about what
was ‘legal’ set a precedent for them to follow in other areas of their lives. Justin, a coach with the
Raiders, eluded to this when he said: “we teach them to be tough, to be aggressive and we
encourage that to a point just before it becomes dangerous. By controlling it, we’re teaching them
about discipline.”

Discipline and respect were often cited traits that parents believed were especially and
uniquely fostered via the football experience. These characteristics were, as one mother from the
Wildcats described "way more apparent in football than in other sports.” Brenda, whose eldest
child played for the Eagles, compared the experience between her two sons (the younger of whom
played soccer): "my youngest is a brat; my oldest is not. I think a lot of it has to do with playing
football." She continued to describe the difference between her two sons' sports experiences:

“[The football players] are always like “yes coach” all of the time. Those football
players are way more respectful than what I see in different sports. And when
I see the soccer kids with their coaches… I’m like, something is way different
here, and I don’t know what it is. I don't know if it’s just the parents, but something is different. And in our league, you respect the coach - and what the coach says and does, you respect it.”

The notion of respectful, disciplined boys that Brenda describes above was consistent with how other parents described the benefit of football participation. Ross, a parent with the Warriors, also suggested that discipline was apparent in football “in terms of listening to coaches and others, and [in] following the play the team has to run, they show a good portion of self-control.” Despite this being the most common trait reported by parents to the question “what do you think your son has gained from playing football?”, not all parents believed that what the kids were learning was discipline. Jennifer, the mother of an 11-year old, explained “the whole ‘yes-coach’ thing, to me, isn’t really discipline. It’s more like knowing what to say in the moment, which I guess is a valuable skill, but it’s not really discipline. He certainly isn’t coming home and saying ‘yes-Mom’ when I ask him to do something.” Similarly, Sarah, a mother with an 11-year old son on the Raiders and one playing for the high school, said that football isn’t necessarily what’s teaching kids these skills:

“I don’t think that football always teaches positive character to be honest. It is all dependent on the coach. That guy didn’t teach [my oldest] anything when he was making the kids throw up and screaming at them. But we’ve had some good coaches too who knew how to teach discipline while also supporting and being kind about it.”

A significant component of being disciplined, as articulated by parents, was making a commitment to the team – which many emphasized was an important part of their sons’ decision to play football. John, a coach with the Eagles and the father of a 12-year old player, suggested that commitment was an important requirement of the football experience: “[football] teaches you
commitment and discipline more than other sports. We practice four nights a week for three hours, so you have to be very committed.” Rob, too, said that committing to football is imperative for success:

“I think you can get through baseball and basketball and other sports at these ages and have a good experience but not be all in – like the parents drop them off, and we're babysitting. But you can't do that at football – we had kids that could be really good football players but their heart wasn’t there. And they struggled damn hard, and it got to be a long season – if they are not 100% into football, that would be the worst sport in the world for a parent to push their kid into. Absolutely – other sports you can get through it and have a decent experience. But football is too big of a commitment. There is no other sport that we have been involved with that is so intense with the amount of time.”

There was an awareness of this commitment by parents before they signed their children up to participate, which Jennifer described talking about with her son: "I kept making him confirm that he was willing to practice that much, to commit to that much football. Because with this sport, you can't just decide halfway through that you don't want to play anymore." The commitment made to the team was an important takeaway for some parents, which Tara articulated “learning to commit to something fully is really important for the boys. Some parents make it easy to quit things, but not in football – you have to give 100%.”

Another perceived skill that parents believed was especially fostered by playing football was the notion of cooperation between teammates. Many parents described how the emphasis on teamwork was much more evident in football than it was in other sports. Trisha, of the Warriors, articulated this “I think that football you have to work as a unit more than you would perhaps in baseball or even basketball, where you can have one superstar that makes you win.” Nikki, too,
thought that teamwork was particularly important because of what it taught them about collaboration: “building the team and them realizing that you’re not the only person that matters, and that it takes everyone doing it to get it right.” Jennifer, of the Catholic League, also noted that learning about cooperation was significant because of how “self-absorbed” she perceived kids to be: “so many kids, mine included, are completely focused on themselves. They want to score the touchdowns, they want the recognition. But in football, the majority of the 11 kids on the field won’t ever do that. They have to do their job to help someone else achieve.” Justin, of the Raiders, considers teamwork to be an important foundational skill because “there is very little that they will have to do in their professional lives that won’t require them to collaborate with others. Everything we do in life – run a business, work with a non-profit, plan a large family dinner – requires teamwork. Learning it now will make my kid understand different roles and responsibilities better in other aspects of his life.”

**Ranking kids; ranking parents.** Another important aspect of establishing themselves as ‘good parents’ was the opportunity for parents to compare their children’s attributes – physical, mental, and emotional – to those of their peers. In this respect, football was an ideal measuring stick for parents because it is visible and easily comparative. Practices and drills allowed for a demonstrable appraisal of physical ability – speed, agility, and overall athleticism. This was especially true for fathers, who (all but two) served as team coaches and were thus regularly in positions to assess their sons’ talent. When prompted, all of the fathers and most of the mothers were able to rank their son's ability in comparison with their peers. This was particularly underscored in an interview with Rob, a coach of a fifth and sixth-grade team who was asked: "how do you situate your son's ability with his teammates?" In response, he broke down his son's various attributes:
“He’s definitely in the upper echelon right now…His skill level is in the top third. His blocking, game awareness, physicality is in the top third. His speed stuff – because he’s just not as quick as some of the other kids – he’s probably middle-down there, but he does an amazing job with runs, the longer, distance stuff… and he’s upper third in understanding how the game is played.”

When prompted to assess their son’s “ability,” fathers were more likely to provide a detailed evaluation; mothers, who largely lacked specific football knowledge, relied on their husband’s assessments. Nikki said she knew her son, who was among the youngest on the team, was in the “top five” because “my husband tells me. He’s good though….My husband came home after the first game and …he was like, ‘Oh my God, this kid can play. It’s just natural.’” Additionally, in all but the Catholic league, teams had to indicate their “Top 5” players for each game who would have to sit out if the score got too lopsided. Parents also used this as a measure of their son’s positionality on the team. Brenda played a significant volunteer role with her club and was more knowledgeable of the team’s interworking than most parents. She used the “Top 5” as a way to rank talent from week to week: “everyone is in the know of who the top 5 are because when the score is at a certain point they have to sit out. That’s how you know the good players.”

Football also served as a proxy of good parenting because parents saw it as a platform to show children that if they worked hard, they could demonstrably improve. Vince, whose 8-year old was a starter on the Eagles, described this: "sports isn't abstract – it's an actual tangible measure of the work they put in. I can look out here every week and see if my kid is getting better and how he stacks up with the other kids." Justin, a father of an 11-year old in his third year with the Raiders, also compared football to a standardized exam – "every parent inherently thinks their kid
is good, right? At football or school, or whatever. But here… it's like the SAT; you can compare his skills against all the other kids his age and know where he is really at.”

The comparisons in football were not exclusive to the play on the field; it was clear that significant and ongoing appraisals were happening on the sidelines and in the stands among parents as well. Mothers, in particular, seemed to be engaged in their own type of "good parenting" evaluations. Jess, the mother of an 11-year old who described herself as "not at all sporty," noticed this jockeying during her two years with the Raiders tackle football club: "I’m not competitive by nature, but I often feel like there is a competition going on among parents. People saying “well my kid is doing this and we’re going here and we’re doing that. What are you doing?” And I don’t even go into the details because it’s so exhausting to try to do that with them.”

Another obvious measure of “good parents” was among those dads who served as volunteer coaches. They seemed to be elevated above other parents for their commitment to the teams, especially in comparison to those fathers who weren’t coaching. The way that other parents, mothers especially, talked about these fathers was revered and respected; they were clearly the benchmark of good fathering in the football arena.

For the mothers, those who held visible administrative positions with the clubs were lauded as the exemplary “football moms” – which largely held positive connotations from the other parent participants. These positions required mothers to spend considerable time on team-related activity. Brenda, who had served as her club’s Registrar and Director, said that during the pre-season she spent “well over 30 hours a week” in her volunteer football role, on top of her full-time teaching job. Several parents pointed to the display of dedicated time and energy as a significant indicator of good parenting. For Amy, of the Warriors, the time spent volunteering with the team was worth it in the recognition she got from the kids: “I say [I’m a football mom] with pride - when the boys
outside the season say ‘Hi Mrs. Jones’ and know me as Grayson’s mom, I’m really proud of that because they know I have been there and know my face.”

The good moms were also described as those who were into the games – ringing their cowbells, making posters, and donning the team’s spirit wear. But not all mothers were interested in participating in this ‘competitive parenting’ – the mothers were split into those that embraced their "football mom" role, and others who rejected it wholeheartedly. When asked if she considered herself a "football mom," Jamie, a mother of three with a 10-year old on the Raiders, replied, "hell, no I don't." Her rejection of this role was largely because she didn't know anything about football and didn't care to learn:

"The football moms have their noisemakers, and they know every play, and they know where their kid is. I can’t even find him on the field sometimes. I keep looking, but now they all look the same. I mean, I cheer for him and I watch when he’s on the field. But, no I’m not [a football mom]. Some moms stay for every practice and even watch other kids' games, and they are bedazzled in their gear, yes. Not me.”

Similarly, Liz and Jennifer were able to rank other mothers on their respective teams who better exemplified “good football moms” than they did. Liz, a mother with four kids between the ages of 8-12, said “I mean, I feel like there is one mom who is fantastic – she’s so cute and she gets so excited, and I guess I'm not that excited about it. I'm not ringing my cowbell, I'm not, like, bringing everybody oranges unless I volunteered to do it. I’m just not that into it.” Jennifer, a mother of a 12-year old in the Catholic League, agreed:

"I don't have a noisemaker, and I will not be caught dead waving some pompom around. I mean I don’t wear the team shirts or whatever – I actually have made a point of never wearing the team stuff in any of the kids’ sports. I don’t know why. I’m not trying to be a
good football mom – I’d rather leave that for the other moms who care about matching shirts.”

Just as there was a range of qualifications of “good moms,” there were also specific markers of “bad moms.” This seemed to be especially evident on the Warriors team, where nearly all the mothers articulated their role as “football moms” in comparison with one another. Kim described herself as a ‘good mom’ because she didn’t “rely on other parents to take my children to games...I’m not the one who sits at home and has somebody else pick my kid up and take them wherever they need to be.” Amy also eluded to parents who don’t attend all the football events: “For some parents it’s okay they are not at every practice and not as seen…I am definitely at the games and almost always at the practices.” Similarly, Carol also suggested that parents need not just attend, but actively participate: “I’ve been part of a lot of sports teams where the parents are sitting there reading books or on Facebook, and that annoys the hell out of me.”

This parental hierarchy extended certain social benefits as well – many of the fathers who coached would often meet at the local bar after practices and games to “break down” and “game plan” for upcoming events. Nikki, of the Catholic League, suggested that for the dads who don’t coach, the football experience was much different: “I do notice that the dads on the sidelines are a little more isolated. … They are just …there, watching the game. They don’t really have anything to talk about with each other.” The parents also referenced regular social gatherings, like multi-family pre-game dinners, exclusively among those families that were heavily involved in volunteering with the teams. These were important elements of their social lives, which Brenda described: “football is our social life during the season.”

**Keeping up.** Another critical part of good parenting was keeping up – athletically and socially. There was a continued emphasis from parents across the study on ensuring that their
children were keeping up athletically with their peers. In the west league, children had the option of playing flag or tackle football in second and third grade, and each club sponsored a team for both. An oft-cited justification for parents in this league for starting tackle football in second grade – even with a flag option – was that they were worried their sons would fall behind others who started before them. Chris, a parent of three boys and a high school teacher, described this when he was considering moving from flag football to tackle for his oldest son:

“I was hesitant at first. With him being younger I was kind of like, ‘I don’t know if he’s ready to get smacked around as a second grader by older third graders.’ The whole time I didn't want to do this, but I ended up doing it because I figured he may miss out. It’s also why I moved into coaching – I figured that if they have a bad experience that could be the end of it.”

Parents wanted to ensure other players were not gaining an advantage by training more, harder, or differently than were their sons. Brenda, of the Eagles, said they chose to have her son, a quarterback, start in first grade because “if they aren’t developing their skills at a young age I feel like they would be a year or two behind in skill level.” Similarly, Erin, a mom of two boys on the Wildcats, said that this is why her younger son joined a year earlier than her oldest: “we let Joe start when he was in second grade, which was earlier than Owen because we could see that there were advantages of learning proper technique and training at a younger age.” Michelle said they petitioned to have her son play with the Warriors when he was in first grade, even though it wasn’t the team he was assigned to, based on his zip code, to ensure that he would have an advantage when it came time to play on the tackle team. “He played flag with the league we are with now so he could get a spot on tackle the following year,” she said. Similarly, several parents from the Wildcats organization gave the same example of a quarterback joining the team this year
as a third grader – one year later than most of his teammates – and earning a spot on the “B” team because the position on the “A” team was already taken by a returning player, even though new player was, by all parent accounts, the better quarterback.

“Keeping up” wasn’t just significant for the children; parents expressed the importance of football as a mechanism to engage socially with other like-minded families and to maintain their position in a specific social circle. For Wendy and her husband Will, this was particularly important because they just moved back to the area. “Since we moved back [here] two years ago, it’s actually helped me make friends and get connected to the community,” said Wendy as she described how her kids’ sports were the primary mechanism for meeting other ‘mom friends.’ Most other parents spoke highly of the families within their football organizations, citing personal friendships that had blossomed in bleachers and on sidelines. Nikki appreciated that personal friendships were much easier for the men to foster via sport than in other settings, stating that the “camaraderie” experienced by men during football was unique. While she described making friends as easier for moms, who were regularly at school and sporting events, she said that fostering relationships was harder “especially for the dads. I think that the dads having those other guys around is cool.”

The social aspect of football was also especially significant for parents who were experiencing football with their eldest children – it seemed that the excitement of participation was at its peak when the experience was new. Chris, a father of three young boys, described the “shared values” of families he met through football: “it’s way more than just the benefit to the kids, we now have really good family friends too.” Conversely, for parents with older children who were now experiencing football with younger siblings, the social aspect of football seemed considerably less meaningful. Susan, a single mother of three boys, said the other parents on her youngest son’s
team were “nice, but not my main social circle.” Another set of parents in the study with older children, Vince and Vanessa of the Wildcats organization, were also significantly less friendly with the other parents because they had two children that were much older. “I used to take a lot more pride in it when my [older kids] were younger and hard-core into sports,” said Vanessa, as she described her participation with the team. “I actually laugh now because some of these parents are first-time parents putting their kids through sports and they live and die for scores, and their kids’ participation, and stats, and the team. And I’m thinking, oh my gosh you guys – these kids are in second grade, get over it.”

Participation in the activities around football before and after the season was also socially significant. Jess described this when she was talking about the extra training and camps her children's peers had attended the previous summer. When asked if she felt pressure to enroll her kids in similar training, she reflected on the social importance of football participation for her and her husband:

“It’s hard because when you don’t do it… yeah, you’re not in the same circle anymore. You’re kind of still in it, in some respects, but you’re also still definitely out of it too. When you’re not seeing those people all the time…they kind of start to forget about you, so there weren’t so many invites to things outside of football. It just feels weird. And it’s like I guess we’re not playing football right now, so they don't call us anymore.”

Mothers and football. Although the notion of football being a site for reproducing traditional gender roles is interwoven with themes throughout this chapter, there were three aspects of the mothers’ football experience that were particularly worth noting. Mothers were willing to suppress concerns about the risks of injury because they utilized football to engage with their sons, were
focused on curating an exceptional childhood for their offspring, and valued football as a site for promoting masculinity, especially as it fostered relationships between their sons and their fathers.

**Football as a mechanism to engage with children.** In this study, the mother’s lives were much more interwoven with their children’s organized activities than were father’s. While fathers spent a considerable amount of time coaching, mothers did the rest of the work related to extracurricular activities. In large part, mothers researched and selected the sports, registered the children, paid for them, shopped for and purchased the equipment, laundered uniforms and practice gear, shuttled to practice and games, coordinated carpools, and managed schedules and calendars.

Of the mothers in this study (n=17), four were stay-at-home parents, and two worked part-time. The way the stay-at-home mothers described their support of football for their children differed from that of the working mothers. Jess, a stay-at-home mother of a 13 and 10-year old, described the time she spent at home "getting things ready" as "not real work" because it was "all the mom stuff…it's just what you do as a mom.” Similarly, although Jamie, whose kids were 14, 11, and nine, spent an average of 20 hours per week supporting her kids’ sporting activity, she didn’t consider it an inconvenience, saying “I don’t mind. I’d be driving somewhere anyway.” Carol, a stay-at-home mother with the Warriors, described her involvement in youth sports as a mechanism to utilize her professional skills: “I had a career, and it’s on hiatus so [football] is nice for me because I have always been the person in charge and managing and making sure things are a certain way. So, it’s nice for me to get to exercise some of my skills and just to be part of something my child is part of.”

Conversely, the mothers who worked outside the home articulated their role in supporting youth sports very differently. They were much more likely to describe it as “work,” and referred to their responsibilities in more professional terms, as Jennifer did in describing her role: “I’m like
the administrator for pretty much everything for everybody in my house. I coordinate the logistics – the laundry, the carpools, the equipment, I finance it, and I manage the schedule.” Christy, a pediatrician and mother of three boys, similarly articulated her experience: “my husband coaches, so I do everything else in the background of that…it takes a lot of work. I am the one who organizes team meals and packs lunches, and organizes tournaments…I drive to a lot of practices, and I go to all of his games… it really takes a lot of work.” Interestingly, the mothers who were most involved with the administration of their children’s teams – serving in time-intensive volunteer roles central to the team’s organization, were almost exclusively working mothers. “I always call it my free part-time job,” said Brenda, who is a teacher. “But now that I’ve done it for a long time I’m starting to get tired.”

Brenda wasn’t alone in feeling tired by the pressure to be a good mother. Other mothers in the study said that the youth sports experience left many feeling “too busy” and "tired." Mothers, on average reported spending between 15-20 hours per week in various roles supporting their children's sports activities but were not overly involved in football itself (which is expected in a sport like football that has virtually no female participation). However, it was apparent that many of the fathers and mothers seemed to prefer it this way. Many of the mothers knew almost nothing about football – including what positions their sons played. They seemed, on some level, relieved that they didn’t have to know anything about it. Nikki, who had coached her children in soccer and was an avid athlete herself, said about football “I'm glad we [moms] don’t have to do that anyway. We just get to sit there and take the pictures.” Similarly, Vanessa, a mother of two boys in the Wildcats organization suggested that football gave her a break from child-rearing. "I would say, [football] is doing a lot of the work for me as a parent, really. It’s way easier for me to put
him in sports and make sure he has good people around him. He has to be coachable— we have to do that part— but those coaches do a lot of hard work and teach them a lot.”

**Curating childhood.** Regardless of their work-status, all of the mothers in the study, to some degree, articulated an exceptionally child-centered approach to parenting. Working mothers, in particular, seemed focused explicitly on compensating for time away from their kids by immersing themselves in their children's lives. Susan, a widowed mother of three boys, described this as a challenge for her “because it’s just me, I have to work a lot. So, then I really try to keep the kids involved with activities, which is hard because I’m also very focused on family time.”

Mothers, in particular, emphasized the lengths they went to ensure their children were happy, fulfilled, and prepared for the future. This child-centered emphasis often put the needs and wants of children above those of the mothers. Despite spending upwards of 20 hours a week on sports, most mothers couldn’t think of a benefit they derived for themselves, instead citing their own benefits as “I don’t have to worry about what he’s doing” (Jamie), “I feel better about them not just being inside playing video games and outside getting fresh air” (Liz), and “the benefit for me is that I’m happy with what it does for our kids” (Christy). Brenda considered the hectic nature of her sports-parenting in contrast with what else she could be doing: “it's way better than me just sitting on my butt watching TV. Or else that's what I try to tell myself when I'm really overwhelmed. I say I could have no kids and sitting around doing nothing. But this is the life I’ve always wanted.”

The mothers also described how extracurricular activities for their children often meant forfeiting some type of benefit to themselves. Jess jokingly described date night with her husband as taking place on a soccer sideline and admitted that their family vacations often involved following around the dance team for competitions. Jennifer reflected on the amount of money her
family spent to support sporting activities: "I often think of what else we’d do with that money if we weren’t constantly writing checks for sports – I’d definitely have a new kitchen if we weren’t playing." Even though the families in the study had the means by which to pay for the sporting activities, some still questioned whether or not it was worth it. Liz suggested that although she saw benefit through sports if her children decided to stop playing "I'd be fine with that. Maybe even relieved." Jess determined that the sacrifice was worth it because of the ‘investment' she was making in her children: "it's not cheap. I guess it's like an investment.” The following excerpt clarified the investment she perceived to be making:

“Interviewer: You see it as a type of investment in them?
Jess: Yes. It definitely is.
Interviewer: So, if you see it as an investment – as an investment of a whole lot of time, of a whole lot of parental effort, a lot of money – what is the investment in, specifically? Is it an investment into those soft skills you talked about? Or in future athletic participation?
Jess: I think it’s to be determined. I think it’s both, actually, because one bleeds into the other. Actually… I don’t know… I just want my kids to be happy.”

Describing athletic participation as an investment was a common theme among many parents in the study, but fathers, in particular, seemed to suggest that the value that their children got from sports made all the effort and money worth it. Kevin, from the Warriors, described the sacrifices his family makes to support his son’s football experience: “The biggest drawback is probably family time. But we are a football family, so the weekends, and the games, and going out afterward, that's great. But it is a long season, so there's a lot of time and dedication your whole family has to give for your child to enjoy that time, so there’s a lot of sacrifices in playing the sport.” Patrick, of the Catholic League, described the investment similarly: "Is it a lot of money and time? Yes.
But I don't see that as a sacrifice when I consider all that it does for my children. I see this as an investment in their happiness now, and an investment in their future in the skills that it teaches them – those things will impact their lives in so many ways."

**Promoting masculinity.** Many of the mothers also suggested that football was a prime site for promoting traits associated with masculinity, like toughness and competitiveness. Susan (a single-mom from the Raiders) indicated that she hoped her son learned "how to be tough because that isn't something that I can really teach him to do." Kim, a Warriors parent, also said that she values the toughness fostered specifically in football: "when you get knocked down, you're usually hurt, and you have to suck it up and hide those tears and get right back up on the line. There aren't really other sports that instill that in you.” One of the Warriors fathers, Kevin, seemed to effectively articulate what many of the mothers eluded to when they said they valued football for their sons because it instilled a “competitive drive” (Tara), prevented kids from “being complacent” (Brenda), and “taught them how to be winners” (Michelle). Kevin described an appreciation of the competitiveness of football because it promoted a winner-take-all mentality – which, he argued was a rare lesson for today’s youth. He said:

“in today’s world everyone gets a trophy, everyone is a winner. Well, I think that’s not the way it really works. There are winners and losers in everything and anything, and I think football kind of instills that because if you’re not good enough, then you are not going to play. If you win, then you do get a trophy, but only if you win. You don’t get a trophy if you lose.”

The perception seemed to be that rewarding children at the end of the season with participation trophies was teaching the boys the wrong lesson – that winning isn’t important. Michelle, of the
Warriors, summed this up when she said: “I don’t want my kid to ever think that he doesn’t have to work hard, that he just has to show up and he’ll get something.”

Mothers were proud of their sons “acting like men” and the Catholic League, in particular, emphasized this promotion of developing men throughout their football league. Liz described events, like the jersey ceremony, that were just for the boys and their fathers: “dads stand in front of the boys the week before the first game, and they have to talk about what they love about their son, and then they give them the jerseys.” Jennifer also talked about the events with her Catholic League team: "they have these ‘caveman' parties, I think they call them, where it's just the boys and their dads, and they just grill meat and sit around together. No moms allowed.” Nikki also described the specific effort to promote mentoring that had been instituted by their team:

“the coaches all have a group of boys, and they are their mentors. So, during the week, they will just pull those boys aside and just touch base with them. And they have the third and fourth-grade boys matched up with seventh and eighth-grade mentors. So the older kids will leave practice and come over and pull out their little buddies. The CYO is going above and beyond to make sure that the boys have positive male mentors."

These opportunities to foster strong bonds between sons and fathers seemed especially important for mothers. Nikki said one of the benefits of football was the father/son relationship: “I really like the dad and son together. I like that.” She pointed to the fact that football was important for their relationship even off the field: "they will sit down to watch it, and…he’ll be like “Dad, did you see that guy did this…” and it’s like two grown men sitting there talking about a Monday night football game.” Trisha, of the Warriors, also suggested that football was important for her family because it was “a passion that [my son] and my husband share together.” Susan, whose husband had passed away two years prior, also appreciated football for the positive male role models it
inserted in her sons’ lives: “When they have really good coaches, male role models, who go out of their way and really care about them, that’s just really important for boys.”

**Theme Summary**

As evidenced throughout the first theme in this chapter, parents viewed football as more than a game for children to play. The very selection of football as an activity for their sons made a statement about parenting values and the goals they had for their children. For parents who were athletes themselves, especially for fathers who grew up playing football, they perceived the sport to be among the most important influencers during their sons' formative years. A common refrain among the parents in this study was the role of football in their sons' character development – parents perceived it to foster respect, discipline, teamwork, and perseverance more than other sports or activities. Also, parents put distinct value on the toughness that was cultivated by football; in many respects, by choosing football, parents were publicly emphasizing their value on masculinity and hard work for their sons.

Football was also a valuable experience for boys because of the social capital that went along with it, for children and their parents. It was a socially valued experience for the boys – where they interacted with their friends and elevated their social status. Similarly, mothers and fathers reported that there were few experiences that rivaled the excitement and community camaraderie of ‘Friday night lights.’ It was a social event for all involved, and parents derived as much social gain from their participation as did their sons. Additionally, many parents reported that football was a family affair, with sisters on cheer teams, mothers who were team moms, and fathers who coached. Despite the hectic nature of the activity, the fact that these busy families were all together (at least in the same location) inspired a sense of ‘quality time’ that parents valued. This, too, served a mechanism for the display ‘good parenting’ through an outward commitment
to the teams, their families, and to their sons. Football was clearly a valued experience for the parents in this study, and although most vigorously approved of football participation for their sons, much of their articulated support was buttressed by a justification of the risk of participation.

**Theme Two: Risk vs. Reward**

For all the reasons that parents largely lauded youth football throughout this study, there was also a strong undercurrent of defending the game and justifying their children's participation. As parents extolled the virtues of football, a second theme emerged of an acute awareness of the potential danger of the game and an ongoing assessment of how the rewards of participation outweighed these potential risks. This theme was supported with three sub-themes, each of which contributed to the constant appraisal of the value of their sons' participation. The first sub-theme was the differing roles that mothers and fathers took in their concern for safety and their knowledge and awareness of concussion and SRC. Mothers, generally, were more concerned about the risks of football than their husbands; fathers were more aware of injury symptoms and mostly did not consider football to be a risky sports activity. The second sub-theme revolved around the ways that parents appraised the risk in youth football for their sons. This involved their perception of the credibility of the coach, an awareness of technology advances in equipment, and the safety measures taken by the team and league (including player weight restrictions, teaching safe tackling, and Heads Up training). The assessment of safety in football was also primarily based on the comparison of the game with other sports, namely soccer, that also posed risks to youth participants. Lastly, a third sub-theme emerged that described how parents contemplated the messages they received about football risk: the way that they evaluated the credibility of the information, how they considered the distinctly different messages about the game, and how they situated the potential risk against the immediate rewards of participation.
Awareness of risk. Parents were increasingly aware of the potential risks of football participation for their sons because messages about safety were "everywhere" suggested Patrick, a father and coach in the Catholic League. "Of course safety is something that we've considered. It's something that all parents and coaches worry about on some level." Parents got information about football from a variety of sources, but largely considered issues of safety in the context of what was shared on social media. "I feel like every other week someone is posting something about concussions in football [on Facebook]," suggested Susan, a single mother of three boys. "Sometimes it's overwhelming, and there are so many different opinions that it makes me not want to keep up with it at all." Jennifer, of the Catholic League, agreed that social media fueled the fire on the football debate: "the parents that are big into the team are always posting pro-football articles on Facebook, and then all the other football parents are the ones that comment, like 'yea! Football!' And as soon as anyone posts something regarding safety, they are all like 'you can't bubble wrap your kids!'". Justin, a Raiders coach, suggested that the social media debates have benefits: "it's done a lot to increase awareness, definitely. And, I think that is a good thing, on the one hand, because it's important that people have information about their kids." Rob, another Raiders coach, disagreed: "Those kinds of stories… those comments are killing the game right now, absolutely killing it."

Although mothers and fathers equally reported an increasing awareness about football risk, the mothers in this study generally articulated more concern about the safety of football and less awareness of the signs and symptoms of concussions. Jess remembered the Raiders coaches talking about it during a pre-season parent meeting, but when they got “to the specifics …honestly, that’s the point when I start to check out. I hate to say that. But with [Justin] coaching, I didn’t ask as much, and I let him worry about that.” For Liz, too, the specifics of concussion and safety
were outside of her comfort zone, and even though she reported "reading about everything related to my kids," she also noted her resistance to understanding the risks of football. "My husband just sent me a news video last week about [concussion], and it's like you want to know, and you want to understand the research, but at the same time it’s also like ignorance is bliss.” Despite her articulated indifference about safety risks, Liz went on to describe friends from college who were former football players:

“I went to Michigan…but football players that I knew there can no longer walk, essentially. And it wasn’t like they had any major injuries or anything. And now I can look around and see all these former football players that are hardly functioning and I’m thinking, this doesn’t seem right to me. … Then you start weighing in all these studies about the brain, and it’s really concerning.”

With Liz, specifically, it was evident that she wrestled with what her head knew – she was well read, and she had first-hand knowledge of the long-term implications of football participation – and what her heart wanted – she didn't want to disappoint her son and husband. Liz wasn't alone in this – many other mothers reported feeling this pull, but deferring to their husbands, whom they considered to be much more knowledgeable about football because they played it. "I mean…he played it, so I just feel like he's in a better position to say that it's ok," said Jess. "He says ‘you worry about dance, I got football.’”

Fathers reported a much higher level of awareness of safety issues, including concussion, because of the Heads Up training that was required of all youth coaches. The fathers largely praised the training as giving them the confidence to identify the signs of concussion and the justification to remove players from a game or practice if something looked questionably dangerous. After his Heads Up training, Will, a third-grade coach for the Wildcats, said he was "much more aware" of
the signs of concussion and the potential injury implications of receiving one. “I pulled a kid off the field because of a potential concussion. He didn’t have one, but he took a hit to the head and got a stinger, so we pulled him from the game.” He also noted that when he played football in his youth, that level of precaution would have been unlikely: “when I was growing up kids probably had concussions all the time but they still played the sport, and they never got pulled out.” Another component of the Heads Up training is an informational ‘consent form' that is sent home for the parents and the child to review together. A signed copy of this form must be returned in every league before the child is permitted to participate. Ideally, this form would prompt discussion between the parents and their children about the signs, symptoms, and implications of a concussion; however, most parents recounted signing the form and sending it back without considerable review.

Fathers were also much less likely to consider youth football a risky activity than were mothers. Their increased knowledge about the game and their personal experiences certainly factored into this. This was articulated, albeit jokingly by Patrick, who downplayed the risk when he said: "I played, and I turned out ok." In general, fathers thought the risks of football were overblown, overstated, and a result of media hype. Patrick, who had also spent time as a high school varsity coach, talked about this: "football is just the thing right now. It's the click bait for the helicopter parents who have to have something to get crazy about. If it weren't football, it would be something else." Rob, too, thought that the media attention was relatively unwarranted because he perceived the real risk to be at the professional level, not with elementary aged children. "I mean the speed, and the size of these guys at the NFL level is ridiculous – but with these kids, it’s the not the same thing - the technology, the helmets, the tackling technique…the way we teach it now is so sound. But there is such a fear …because of that, and the numbers are dropping.” There was also a general
skepticism around the reports that football was unsafe at the youth level. Vince, a father in the Wildcats organization, questioned whether or not the warnings should be so generalized:

“I know there are a lot of studies in the NFL because some players are donating their brains. I would like to know … is that percentage higher in football than it is in the general population? Or is it just people who had this traumatic disorder are the ones that have their brains studied by science? Is it actually because of football? If you have 100 football players and 13 of them suffer from this, and you go to the general population is it higher than that or is it lower? I don’t know…”

**Assessing Risk.** The second sub-theme that supported the parents’ ongoing assessment of the risk and reward of youth football was the way that they appraised the safety of the game. Because they generally reported being aware of the risks of participation, the parents’ decision to allow their sons to play football was based on calculated risk assessments. The safety of football for their child was assessed using four metrics: the credibility of the coach, the perceived effectiveness of the safety measures enacted by the team, the evaluation of their son’s ability versus those of his peers, and a comparison of the risks of football against those in other sports. The crux of the issue for parents was estimating how significant the risk of football was and whether or not the rewards of participation made it a worthwhile endeavor for their families.

**Coach Credibility.** The perception of safety in football was largely dependent on the perceived credibility and competence of the coaches. When parents viewed the coach as an informed and credible teacher, they were willing to entrust their children to them. Parents considered coaches credible when they perceived them to be knowledgeable about football and “emphasized proper tackling technique” (Wendy). Jess emphasized her trust in the coaches because they assured parents of their concern in a pre-season meeting: “they talked about how they
are truly watching out for our kids and that safety was number one. So, I think… that they do care about their safety.” In addition, most parents could recount an incident that led them to believe that the coaches were genuinely considering their son’s best interests. Nearly all of the parents in the Wildcats organization, for example, recounted the aforementioned incident where Will followed “protocol” by pulling a player off the field for a suspected concussion. This incident was significant to Vanessa, of the Wildcats, because it illustrated the competence of the coaching staff: “They have common sense, none of them are total meat-heads that only care about winning.” The trust in the coaching staff was especially significant because nearly every father in the study was coaching in some capacity. This allowed families some additional reassurance that they were able to mitigate the risk by being present at practices and games. Allen, of the Warriors, articulated this when reflecting on getting involved with football: “I initially got involved like other parents do when you’re frustrated when you see the lack of coaching from the very beginning, it’s like, I want him to have fun and I want practices to be controlled, so the best way to control them is to be a coach.” The fact that most of the coaches were fathers themselves also provided some level of reassurance; Susan made note of this when she compared her ten-year old’s experience with a previous season with her older son. “His coach was some 21-year old kid, he wasn’t even a parent, so I didn’t think he was that good.”

It should also be noted that the children of most of the parents in the study had not suffered any major injury as a result of their football participation. Thus, coach credibility was also somewhat based on their records of keeping children injury-free. Brenda, of the Eagles organization, eluded to this as she was describing the efficacy of the coaching staff: “in my experience, we’ve only called an ambulance twice. I mean, in the seven years that I’ve been there, no one has been seriously injured.” This was also evident when Susan compared the football
experiences of her youngest son, a ten-year-old, with that of her oldest son, who had just started his freshman year of high school. Her ten-year-old had never suffered an injury, but "absolutely hated" football; of his experience, Susan said, "I am not worried about [him] in Raiders, mostly because I think their coaches are fantastic.” Her older son had just suffered a dislocated shoulder during a routine tackling drill in the second week of practice under the tutelage of a 20-year veteran coach. She described her son’s experience: “[he] has some bad coaches, and I’d say that wasn’t as safe because they weren’t being taught properly. …I think it’s terrible. There’s almost no teaching at all.”

**Safety measures taken by the team.** Central to the parental assessment of risk in youth football was an evaluation not of youth football as a whole, but of the specific experience with one particular team. This was an important distinction that was especially well illustrated for families with the Eagles and Raiders organizations because their teams were in different leagues playing in the same community. Families here had a choice to send their kids to play for either club, and an assessment of their safety precautions was a key factor for many parents. The most apparent difference between the teams was that the Raiders sponsored flag football for first and second graders, whereas the Eagles started tackle football in first grade. This was a factor for Barbara, who also had many family ties to the Eagles organization because she wanted her son to learn how to play the right way early on: “we liked it because …this organization does not want a flag league, they want to go right to tackle. They want to be intense. They are serious.” Her husband, John, concurred that flag football as a precursor to tackle football was unnecessary: “I don’t even think flag football is a sport. I really don’t.” Conversely, parents with the Raiders club appreciated the chance to delay tackle football until they were slightly older and bigger, which Jess described: “I mean we were kind of slow cooking them, you know…we weren’t in a hurry to tackle.”
For all the families, there were four safety measures enacted by their respective teams to which parents eluded to various degrees: Heads Up training, new equipment technology, weight restrictions, and ‘new’ tackling techniques. As previously articulated, nearly every parent cited Heads Up as a positive and effective way for coaches to mitigate risk. Will, a coach with the Wildcats, suggested the program’s efficacy could actually be measured in the reduced rate of concussion in youth football: “If you look at statistics from 2017, concussion in football have come down by, I believe it was 15-20% in the past year, just because of Heads Up football.” Although I was unable to verify this statistic, the “reduced rates of concussion” as a result of the Heads Up program was cited by several parents in the study. Will continued by suggesting that the implementation of Heads Up training will make every level of the game safer: “Heads Up tackling isn’t just for youth football, it goes all the way up to the NFL now. …They are phasing out all of the kids into adults who have learned heads up football so it’s going to be a few years before you see concussions go down across the board.”

**Safety technology.** Many parents also cited new technology that was making equipment, including helmets and pads, more effective at keeping kids safe. Nikki discussed her Catholic League team’s assurance regarding their equipment policy:

Nikki: “…The football coordinator said to us at another meeting that he will never ever slack on safety – especially refurbishing helmets. I know our helmets look just like the ones that are on the NFL. That is one thing they said they would never skimp on financially for the team. There is all this new technology - the shoulder pads have that plate right here to prevent cardiac arrest, and the helmets are those certain helmets that have fluid in it so that when it's hit the fluid moves and it absorbs the shock.
Interviewer: Those new ones with the fluid technology – those are the helmets that you have?

Nikki: Well, we don't have those helmets, no. …We actually bought him his own shoulder pads though. …the shoulder pads that we bought him are smaller and fit better so he has better range of movement, they fit better than the ones that came with it.”

Erin, of the Wildcats organization, wasn't so satisfied by her team's equipment policy because of the way that they store helmets and pads in the offseason: "I don’t settle for helmets that sat in a non-climate controlled storage shed. The helmets can’t be that different than a child’s car seat …car seats have an expiration date, I don’t know if they are abiding by an expiration date for our helmets. Between seasons they sit in a big trailer that you would pull behind a truck. When it’s 90 degrees out and any kind of plastic going through that I don’t trust." As a result, Erin and her husband "buy good helmets and we make sure they are professionally fitted.” Jennifer also cited the equipment policy as a safety factor she considered:

Interviewer: What things has your team done to make the game safer?

Jennifer: Apparently, they regularly check the helmets to make sure that they safe, so they replaced a bunch of them this year and got good ones. That makes me feel better about it.

Interviewer: Does your son have a new one?

Jennifer: I don’t know. I mean I guess he probably does… my husband is a coach, so I think he probably would have gotten him one.

Interviewer: What makes them better than the old ones?

Jennifer: No idea.
Coaches noted that they often satisfied parents’ concerns by articulating these equipment policies, including annual inspections of helmets and pads. The constant need to reassure parents as to the safety of the game seemed somewhat exhausting to the coaches, as Will articulated: “Between helmets and pads and everything else it’s – these kids are safe. The only thing more you could do was wrap them in bubble wrap. As long as you have people doing their jobs and making sure that the helmets fit properly and that there is no damage to the equipment. As long as you have that going for you, I just don't see how it’s not safe.” But Adam, the equipment manager for the Warriors suggests that although helmets are refurbished each year, not all the helmets are sent out for repair because that is cost prohibitive for most teams. Similarly, Patrick, a coach in the Catholic League began managing the equipment for the youth team because he “happened to be there on the day they handed out equipment.” He suggests that although there is a ‘right way’ to fit children into helmets, youth programs are often hamstrung by the inventory they own: “So the majority of kids have helmets that fit correctly. But if you have 20 kids playing and you own 20 helmets, some of those kids probably aren’t getting a helmet that fits exactly right. That’s just the reality of it.”

**Weight restrictions.** All of the teams had similar weight restrictions for players in every division. This helped to ensure that players wouldn't be considerably mismatched as a safety precaution (and, typically, as a stipulation of most youth football liability insurance policies). Brenda, the Eagles’ Registrar, often had to help weigh kids before the game and thought this was an important safety measure because "you’re not going to have a huge kid at a young age that will be going against a little kid.” When players were over the weight limit, they couldn’t play in the game; however, this restriction didn’t extend to practice. It was in practice that most of the coaches saw the biggest hits that were most concerning. Rob, with the Raiders, said “even at this level, I see a kid who is 140 going against a kid who is 70 pounds… that scares the hell out of me. Speed
is one thing, but size is going to win out on some of these battles.” He continued to describe what he dubbed the “most vicious hit” this year: “the kid was a physical beast, Dad was a former college DI player, he speared one of the kids, helmet to helmet, and this was a 140-pound kid against a 72-pound kid. Our kid bounced back up like nothing had happened, but that type of discrepancy scares me.” John, of the Eagles, also referenced an incident in practice where his son, a quarterback, was on the receiving end of a big hit by a much bigger player. “He was rolling out, and some kid caught him from behind, and he couldn't catch himself and fell face first. …I saw it happen and saw his helmet bounce off the turf.” However, the resulting concussion did not deter John, who played football himself: “Obviously I wanted to make sure he was OK. But it was a clean hit. Does it concern me? No, he’s still playing.”

Parents also evaluated where their own son fell on the weight continuum as a way to assess this particular risk. The majority of parents in the study had sons that were comparatively large for their age groups, and size mattered when parents were evaluating risk. For Liz, of the Catholic League, size was the reason her eldest son didn't play football, and her youngest did: "my older son is a tall and skinny – he’s got a basketball body. … But my younger son is not; they are the total opposite. He’s stockier …he’s got a football body. Every year, my oldest wants to play, and every year I have a reason why he shouldn’t…I just don’t think he could take a hit.” Erin, a mother of two boys, said her kids’ size was important as they considered football participation:

“this is terrible to admit, but my kids are big kids. If my kids were in the 20th percentile, I would feel differently, and I would make different decisions about football. Instead, my kids are the biggest kids in their grade. I don't know if that is a false sense of security but at this point I don’t worry that much about [safety].”
Wendy, also of the Wildcats, said her son’s size was actually what motivated them to start tackle football in second grade: “we put him in flag football the first year because he had no football knowledge, but being bigger than most of his peers he was almost scared to play flag because he was afraid that he was going to tackle another kid on accident and hurt them because they didn’t wear any pads.” For Patrick, whose 10-year old was “middle of the pack” in stature, size was a consideration because he was playing on the defensive line. This wasn’t the position that Patrick or his son wanted him to play, “I would definitely rather him not have to be in the mix blocking every play, but we’ve tried to reinforce that’s what will help the team.”

Jess’ son weighed 71 pounds – among the lightest on his Raiders’ freshman team, which was concerning to her: “He’s so much smaller than some of those other kids. I know his heart is in playing football and it’s not that he isn’t working hard or isn’t a decent athlete, it really just comes to a point where in certain sports, like football, size really is important." To her relief, Jess' son had announced he didn't intend to play football after this freshman season. "I look at my kid, and I'm so glad I'm not worrying about that next year.”

Safe tackling instruction. Another factor related to the perceived safety for youth football players was the notion of ‘safe tackling.’ Throughout the study, many parents referenced these ‘new tackling techniques' as a way that youth football was getting safer. The Heads Up tackling program, which accompanies the Heads Up concussion training, teaches instructional strategies for taking the head out of the tackle. Similar to Heads Up tackling, another popular "safe" instructional strategy referenced by coaches was "Hawks Tackling," a technique initially advocated by the Seattle Seahawks’ Pete Carroll. The rugby-style technique promotes shoulder-level tackling, effectively taking the players' head out of the play. John had coached with the Eagles since before his sons were even born, and said that he'd noticed the effectiveness of using
the Hawks tackling because he's seen "their confidence actually grows and they aren’t afraid of taking on bigger kids… before they would stand there and just try to get in the way. Now they know to come in low and wrap up around the knees or ankles and just roll. So, for some kids, it actually boosts their confidence, which is good. At this age that's what it’s all about.”’ He went on to explain that the technique is also effective because kids do not have to run at full speed to properly teach it: “you can do it without pads - even getting on your knees and running though, not at full speed, just trying to teach proper head placement, just trying to get them to get their heads out of the way.” Several other coaches agreed that Heads Up tackling seemed to be minimizing helmet to helmet contact, including Patrick who said: "it takes some getting used to for the kids, but once they learn it, it really seems to take down the number of times a kid leads with his head and ends up hurt."

For many parents, the notion of teaching safer tackling also included starting earlier when children were young. This idea – that early tackling was safer than delaying it until kids were "bigger and stronger" – was especially promoted within the Eagles and Wildcat organizations, who started tackle football in first and second grades, respectively. The fear was that if they didn't know how to tackle that when they got to middle school or high school that they would get hurt when going up against kids that had been tackling since second grade. For Christy, a pediatrician and parent of three boys in the Wildcats organization, putting her oldest in tackle football in second grade was a calculated decision: “That has been our philosophy as to why we have let our kids start younger, so that as kids they learn the fundamentals, so they are safer when they do play bigger, faster, stronger kids.” Liz also suggested that this was why she allowed her youngest son to participate on a Catholic League team: “we wanted him to be learning to tackle when everyone else was still fairly small and also learning to tackle. We didn’t want him to start in 8th grade and
then have him get slaughtered.” So, some parents perceived early tackling as a preventative measure for future injuries.

In the same way that different leagues adopted different rules based on the age they started tackling, so too were the differences in their restrictions on the number of tackling days per week. During the 2017 season, only the Wildcats limited practice days in full-pads. However, for the 2018 season, the Eagles, Wildcats, Warriors, and Catholic teams were adopting similar rules enacted by the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) that limited full-pad tackling to two days per week. The Eagles and Warriors practiced four days a week (two days of tackle and two additional days of limited contact), and the Wildcats and Catholic teams practiced three days a week (two days in full pads and one walk through on Fridays). Conversely, the Raiders had not adopted the high school rules and were in full pads, tackling five days a week. Proponents of this from the Raiders suggested that tackling this often was necessary to teach fundamental skills to young children. "When they are that young," said Justin, "you need to keep reinforcing the technique every day, or else they forget. It's like math; you have to practice it to get good." Not all parents from the Raiders thought practicing every day was necessary and appropriate; Rob considered it excessive. "As much as I am a practice, practice, practice guy – I do think that we go, at least, one day a week more than we should,” he said. He also referenced some changes that his staff on the freshman team made that weren’t adopted club-wide: “a couple of years ago, we did a ton more tackling, but we immediately realized that these kids were getting better throughout the season – quicker, getting to the right spots faster, so we realized that with our group that we had to pull off or else they were going to hurt themselves. So, we do just enough to get the technique down.”
The coaches from the clubs who did limit contact in practice were not all supportive of these limitations. John, a coach with the Eagles (who went from fully-padded practices five days a week in 2017 to only two days in 2018), suggested that their days of restricted contact left his youngest players at somewhat of a disadvantage: “So, if we’re taking days off from teaching them how to properly hit I feel like it almost made it worse. I wanted as many days of teaching technique as possible. And I needed it at full speed. Because you can walk through a lot of stuff, and it helps, but at the young ages you need the days just to teach the skills, so they don’t get hurt. We should be spending more time actually hitting.”

Several mothers from the Catholic, Raiders, and Eagles teams weren’t aware that there were restrictions for older players and were surprised that the youngest kids were playing the most football. Jess was among those who were unaware of the high school rules: “these kids, their brains are still developing. I’m not astute enough to know the details of that, but I do know that they are still developing when they are this young, so that doesn’t make any sense. That seems so backward.” Similarly, Jennifer was surprised to learn that her 11-year old was tackling more than college and high school players each week. “I’m sure they blame it on needing more time to teach technique,” she suggested. “I think they need less time running into each other.”

*Comparison with other youth sports.* Justification for youth football was also largely based on parents’ evaluation of football safety in comparison to other sports. This "whataboutism" largely focused on soccer, but parents also cited lacrosse, hockey, gymnastics, and baseball as posing safety threats to children. Many parents rationalized football participation by deflecting to risks posed in other sports rather than address safety issues in football. Susan, a mom of three boys, said part of the reason she liked football was because it was comparatively safe: “I think soccer is way worse – those kids are head butting the ball, and at least our kids are wearing helmets.
In soccer, they are colliding at full speed, and they don't have pads. I don't know why all the attention is on football when soccer is way worse. It's way, way more dangerous than football.”

John, a coach with the Eagles, also suggested that other sports pose significant threats in comparison with football: “in baseball…last year we saw kids who were already 6’2, and when they would hit the ball it would be right on you – you can get hurt there. In soccer those kids are super aggressive too – they throw elbows, and there’s slide tackling.” Additionally, a number of parents also pointed to recent news articles that suggested that soccer actually had more concussions than football. Rob recalled seeing something about it on the television news: “I think I saw something that soccer has more concussions now than football, but people don’t believe that. And they say to me ‘you’re crazy.’ People need to educate themselves on the facts of what is taking place right now …with the soccer studies.” Many parents were also quick to point to everyday activity – falling off a bike or tripping on a sidewalk as posing a similar threat of injury.

Jamie, a Raiders mom, said the risk to children extends beyond sport: "one of my friends was like ‘my daughter is just in the band,” – well her daughter got smacked in the back of the head with a tuba and had a concussion so bad she was out of school for four months. So, I just realized that, you know what? Unless you bubble wrap them, you just pray and hope for the best." The analysis that many parents used to evaluate football in comparison to soccer and other sports was based on the idea that big collisions and extreme hits to the head were the primary concern for a concussion. However, none of them articulated knowledge of the risk of small repeated hits to the head that occur when blocking or conducting routine plays. In addition, in the east, central, and Catholic leagues, players as young as seven were in full pads and tackling every day – during a season that started before most high school teams, who also only tackled a state-mandated two days a week.
Assessing the Information. Ultimately, parents who determined that football was an appropriate activity for their children did so because of the way they assessed a number of messages they received about rewards and risk of participation. Regardless of the type of message and from whom they came, for some parents, the rewards of football participation were so considerable that they were willing to overlook recommendations to avoid participation even from otherwise trusted medical professionals. Nikki recalled her family pediatrician denouncing football for her son. When asked how she might respond to a doctor who advised against football participation, she said:

Nikki: that’s what my pediatrician told us.

Interviewer: Really? Your pediatrician told you to find another sport?

Nikki: Yeah – she gets on [my husband] all the time when he takes him.

Interviewer: So, what do you say to that?

Nikki: I say ‘have you seen my son? Seriously, Dr. O., look at him.’ But it’s just what he’s designed for. I just think that some boys need it. He needs it.

When Nikki needed a doctor’s note for her son to wear a tinted facemask to help prevent migraines, she didn’t ask her family pediatrician: “with the pediatrician I specifically didn’t get the letter from her for his mask, I got it from his neurologist, because I didn’t want to have to call her… And she would have said ‘no.’” Other parents, when faced with the question of how they would respond to a doctor who suggested their sons play a different sport, responded with similar defiance. Rob called such a recommendation “garbage” and suggested that he, in turn, may find a different pediatrician. Christy, who was a pediatrician herself, also agreed that type of recommendation was not appropriate for all kids:
“I would say you should be able to play as long as you play smart and safely. That means having good coaches and having the right fundamentals in place before you suit up and go play a game. And I think that in those games, even if fundamentals are in place, there is still always a chance of getting hurt, but there isn’t anything in life where there isn’t risk. Football can be a safe sport, but you have to play it wisely.”

However, other parents, mothers especially, said a doctor’s recommendation would give them pause. Erin’s response to this question was fraught with obvious angst, as she pointed to this contradiction as a personal dilemma:

I was reading about a pediatrician who said ‘we don’t allow people to put their kids in dangerous situations, and we know football is dangerous, so why do we keep allowing people to put their kids in tackle football?’ And I don’t have an answer to that that makes sense because I know that it’s dangerous, but I keep letting my kids do it. It’s like cognitive dissonance – I don’t know what to do, they are driven to play football in a way that I can’t explain to you, and football, in particular, they just really love it.

For some parents, the fact that there was no definitive recommendation to avoid football from the medical community made their choice even more uncertain. "It's like now for babies, they say ‘put them on their backs to sleep.' It says that everywhere – I saw it on a bus last week," said Jennifer. "But they don't do that with football. If someone went as far as to say ‘don't play football' on a bus, I wouldn't let him play." Rob, too, suggested that the uncertainty of the actual causality of a link between CTE and youth football made him consider the activity as an appropriate risk to take: "I mean the correlation is there, no question about it, but not necessarily the causality. Now, if we’re
going to see that same type of thing with this group of kids in 30-40 years, then we really are going
to have a problem. But who knows with the way that the game is going now, we just don't know.”
Nikki seemed to summarize how many parents felt about youth football, in that her son’s
participation was like “rolling the dice,” but the benefits now were worth the risk: “I feel like I just
put him out there and hope and pray that it ends well.”

Theme Summary

This theme expanded on the first by explaining how, despite the general approval of
football participation of the parents in this study, they also continually felt a need to defend the
game and their participation in it. In doing this, parents engaged in a regular assessment of how
the perceived rewards of participation outweighed the potential risks. In doing this, parents
acknowledged their awareness of the safety risks, increasingly from social media, but mothers and
fathers differed on their level of concern and their knowledge of the signs and symptoms of
concussions and SRC. A large part of assessing the safety risk was the parents' appraisal of the
credibility of the coaches, the safety measures taken by the team and league, the advances in
equipment technology, and the comparison of football to other youth sports. Lastly, parents
weighed the risks of participation by evaluating the messages they received about football safety –
from social media, research, and medical professionals. These factors combined to provide a
basis by which to justify their children’s participation in youth football.

Chapter Summary

The main findings from this study revealed that the decision to allow football participation
was a result of a complex interplay of parents’ desires to demonstrate “good” parenting combined
with their evaluation of how the rewards of youth football outweighed the risk of participation.
The first theme of this chapter outlined the ways that parents established what “good” parenting
looked like in sports, the gendered way in which parents compared themselves and their children with their peers, and their attempts to curate an exemplary childhood. This was demonstrated by the parents’ conscious selection of the “right” activities that proved beneficial for their kids and also derived a benefit for parents. Football provided an opportunity to get a visible measure of their children’s talents in comparison to their peers, and parents were quick to offer comparative rankings of their kids’ talent against their peers. In this same vein, an important part of good parenting was keeping up – parents emphasized that they wanted to ensure that their sons were keeping up athletically with their peers, so no one got a leg up on them by training more, harder, or differently. It was also apparent that keeping up socially was important for parents, and football allowed them to maintain their position in a specifically curated social circle.

In the same way that parents aimed to establish themselves as ‘good parents,’ they similarly used sport as a way to help mold “good kids.” Parents used football, and other sports, as activities to keep boys out of trouble, and to surround them with other “good kids.” Additionally, parents perceived football to instill positive character traits to their children, including commitment, discipline, respect, and teamwork. Parents also saw football as an important investment in their children’s futures – not just athletically (but most aspired to have them at least play through high school), but in their health (keep them active and healthy), their personal development (through learning positive character traits), and in their preparation for life. Football was a mechanism for parents to establish their parental effectiveness and a way of keeping up with their suburban peers. Ultimately, the first theme established the rationale of why football was the ‘right’ activity for children and their parents in these upper-middle class suburban families.

Another important finding was that both the selection of football as a sport for their sons and the perception of the safety of the game was especially gendered. Mothers were significantly
more worried about football safety than were fathers, but despite their significant concerns they a) had a very child-centered approach and didn’t want to say ‘no’ to their kids who “loved playing football,” and b) were conscious of the social implication of not playing football – they didn’t want their children or themselves to feel excluded. Fathers, on the other hand, mostly felt that the concern about safety in football was largely unwarranted. Several fathers emphasized that it was impossible for mothers to really understand the risk because they had never experienced football as a player or a coach. In turn, mothers largely deferred to their husband’s opinion on football participation for their children.

The second theme expanded on the first as it explored how parents evaluated the benefits of football in comparison with the well-publicized risks of participation. This evaluation was based on several factors, but the perception of safety was largely dependent on the perceived credibility and competence of the coach. When parents viewed the coach as a trustworthy, credible teacher than the belief was that they were teaching appropriate technique and keeping their children safe. This fact was especially significant because nearly every father in the study was a coach or worked with the team in some capacity, which allowed families some reassurance that they were able, to some degree, control the risk. Parents also saw early football participation (for youth ages 7-12) as a way to mitigate the risk of tackling because they perceived teaching children proper technique early was safer than delaying participation when kids were “bigger and stronger.” The fear was that if they didn’t know how to tackle that when they got to middle school or high school that they would actually get hurt when going up against kids that had been tackling since second grade. So, parents perceived teaching tackling technique early as a preventative measure for future injuries.

The second theme also revealed the justification that parents utilized to determine that football was an appropriate and ideal activity for their children. Parents largely compared the risk
in football to other sports that they perceived to be riskier than football. Soccer was the most common comparison because parents perceived it to include similar contact to football without the protective pads. Ultimately, parents considered the safety of football in a ‘risk versus reward’ capacity, and the potential benefits of the activity – physically, socially, and emotionally – outweighed the perceived risk of participation.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine parents’ attitudes about youth football participation and how they perceived the safety of the game. Approaching this study from a qualitative and interpretive perspective was significant in my ability to conduct an in-depth examination of how personal, social, and parenting factors influenced parental attitudes about their sons’ football participation. The main findings from this study revealed that the parents’ perception of youth football was based on the complex interaction between a variety of factors, including parents’ desire to portray “good” parenting, their attempt to cultivate the “right” skills for their children, the value they place on social status and comparison, and their evaluation of how the rewards of youth football outweighed the risk of participation.

In this chapter, I conclude the study by a) linking the findings to the existing literature and the theoretical framework that guided the research, b) exploring the potential implications of this study on youth football and sports parenting, c) outlining the limitations of this study, and d) sharing plans for future directions of this research.
Theoretical Framework

Habitus

Bourdieu (1984) conceptualized habitus as the reproduction of routines and norms that an individual acquires based on their life experiences and their social position. Each social class has its own distinct habitus that determines the standards for its members’ practices and behaviors. As it pertains to athletics, Bourdieu suggests that the distinct habitus of each social class will impact their sport preferences and the meaning they assign to participation because “agents apprehend objects through the schemes of perception and appreciation of their habitus, it would be naïve to suppose that all practitioners of the same sport (or any other practice) confer the same meaning on their practice or even, strictly speaking, that they are practising the same practice” (1984, p. 209-211). In this study, I examined the way that suburban parents enacted their middle-class habitus through youth football. I found that habitus influenced football participation for parents in three ways: the consideration given to football as an ‘appropriate’ activity for their sons, the attempt to reproduce the way that they were socialized, and the meaning they assigned to the football experience for their sons and themselves.

Football as an ‘appropriate’ activity. In many ways, the popularity of football in these upper-middle-class communities ran counter to the way that Bourdieu described the differences in activity preferences between social classes. Bourdieu suggested that ”the body is in the social world but the social world is in the body” and as a result, there were distinct differences in sport preferences based on class habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). For the working class, Bourdieu describes preferences toward activities involving the "pursuit and expression of toughness" (Bourdieu, 1984), and "sporting activities which cultivate physical strength…that demand a high investment of energy or even pain…and which sometimes endanger the body itself” (Williams, 1995). This
was in contrast with the way that Bourdieu described the middle-class habitus of the body that was more focused on the "social norms of self-presentation" and the status orientation of physical activities. Considering this, the selection of sporting activities is essentially a way by which individuals express and display their class status to themselves and the world around them.

Football, by all accounts, would fall into the category characterized by the “pursuit and expression of toughness.” And yet, the habitus of the middle-class parents in this study allowed for their sons to pursue football and situated it as a valuable activity in their suburban communities. This was in contrast to the work of Swanson (2009a, 2009b) who, in a study of ‘soccer moms,' highlighted the preference of soccer for upper-middle-class mothers because they deemed it "more appropriate" for their sons than football. Similarly, Andrews (1999) suggests that parents perceived suburban soccer to be an investment in the "right" type of activity and the development of the "right type of body," as compared to football. But in fact, it was the emphasis on toughness and aggression that was attractive to many of the parents in this study. Parents valued strength and masculinity and encouraged their sons to participate in activities that fostered these traits. Interestingly, parents in this study made a similar comparison between soccer and football as they did in Swanson's work (1999a, 1999b), but came to distinctly different conclusions than the parents in her study. Whereas soccer was seen as the ideal activity for middle-class boys in Swanson's work, soccer was seen as decidedly less desirable than football among the parents in the present study. Patrick, a parent in the Catholic League, described soccer as his son's "consolation prize" when he deemed him too young to play tackle football, and Rick, a coach with the Raiders, half-jokingly suggested that soccer "was more of an activity than a sport." This distinction was significant because it emphasized the importance of developing ‘tough' boys, but it also highlighted another important value. In an era of youth sports where "everyone gets a trophy"
(Kevin), parents were explicitly focused on ensuring that their children understood the value of hard work and that rewards come with winning, not just for showing up. They perceived these skills to be uniquely fostered via football in comparison with soccer, which many parents pointed to for their wide use of "participation trophies" (Tara) for all youth players. In this way, the parents' preference for football in this study was not just about the "appropriate" use of the body; it was also about the "appropriate" development of values.

Reproducing parents' socialization. Another aspect of enacting their middle-class habitus was how parents in this study sought to reproduce the conditions and values in which they had been socialized themselves. Consistent with Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus, it was evident that parents made a deliberate attempt to replicate aspects of their own upbringing that they perceived to be developmentally valuable. Mothers and fathers alike reflected on the way that sports helped to shape their childhoods. Although many of the mothers were active in sports growing up, fathers seemed to significantly influence the sport selection of their children. Patrick reflected on his role in his son's football participation: "I know that if he had been born into another family... if he didn't have a dad that played football, that loved football... he probably wouldn't be playing." This point was also underscored by the ways that that parents reflected on their own sporting experiences and promoted similar sports for their young children, as Justin articulated: "sports did a lot for me, I want him to benefit too." Several of the fathers, in particular, credited much of their professional success on the skills that they developed in sports; John suggested that football helped him "get when I am today," and Allen said that without football "I don't know where I'd be." The influence of parents in their children's sport participation is consistent with Dixon, Warner, and Bruening’s (2008) study which suggested that children follow their parents’
attitudes about sport, and Dunn, Kinney, and Hofferth’s 2003 findings that outlined the desire to integrate cultural values as a leading reason why parents select team sports for their children.

Replicating their own sports experiences for their children seemed particularly significant in light of the modern-day injury concerns in youth football. Studies suggesting the injury risk and the long-term implications of concussion have only been widely disseminated in recent history; thus, the conditions in which children participate in football today are decidedly different than they were two and three decades ago when parents were youth athletes. Despite more empirical research suggesting the risks of the game, media coverage of injuries, high profile lawsuits from the NFL to Pop Warner, and collegiate and professional athletes leaving football, many of the parents still suggested that the "hype" over safety was "largely overblown" (Rob). Also, many of the parents (especially fathers who also coached) thought that the game was considerably safer today that it has ever been. Citing rule changes, equipment advances, and modifications in training and teaching methods, parents generally felt that the game was taking adequate precautions to keep children safe and was erring on the side of abundant caution when an injury did occur. Despite a changing landscape of youth football, the habitus of parents did not change, nor did the way that they socialized their children into football.

**Meaning of football.** Youth football also served as a site in which to enact a suburban habitus because it was perceived to be the ‘right' activity for their sons, in part, because it allowed for the embodiment of middle-class values. In this study, parents sought activities, like football, that they perceived to teach skills that were universally important – like commitment, discipline, respect, and teamwork. Additionally, Bourdieu suggests that the sports preferences of individuals within a certain social class "receive their social significance" based on their perceived benefits (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 209). In this study, parents pointed to benefits to their children like staying
active, avoiding unproductive, unsupervised idle time, and generally developing into "good kids." Interestingly, some parents felt that these benefits and skills could be acquired through most other sports, but it was largely mothers who had not played football themselves and were not coaches who thought this. However, in many instances, parents felt that football was unique in teaching these character lessons, and did so more effectively than other sports. This was acutely described by Brenda, a mother from the Wildcats who contrasted her eldest son’s experience with football versus her younger son’s experience with soccer and concluded that the lessons related to respect and discipline were “way more apparent in football than in other sports.”

Another important distinction between the benefits of football and other sports, according to the parents in this study, was the way that it fostered cooperation and collaboration. Trisha, Nikki, and Jennifer all suggested that football was different from other sports in this sense because it took the cooperation of all eleven players on the field on every play for the team to be successful. Many of the fathers also pointed to this distinction and suggested that it was much more difficult to rely on one standout player for a team to win because each player had to "do their job" for a play to work (Justin). This general philosophy was consistent with mothers and fathers across the study – parents encouraged their sons' individual development at the same time as they encouraged the overall success of the team, which was another critical aspect of the suburban habitus. Booth and Loy (1999) suggest that a critical element of the middle-class habitus was the emphasis on "individualistic achievement within the framework of group cooperation and collective responsibility" (p. 13). This was generally perceived by parents to be a critical life-skill, as articulated by Jeremy, a father on the Raiders, who suggested "there is very little that they will have to do in their professional lives that won't require them to collaborate with others. Everything we do in life…requires teamwork."
One of the most important aspects of football participation for many of the parents was the emphasis on masculinity. Even as parents extolled the other virtues of participation, they did so within the framework of turning their "boys into men" (Amy). Nikki specifically emphasized the value she placed on the way that football was an important shared interest between her son and husband, and a primary mechanism for them to foster a close relationship. This was similar to the way that Harrington (2006) described youth sports as a means for fathers to develop close relationships with their children, and how Kay (2007) suggested that sports allow for father-child bonding and act as a framework for continued friendship as children get older. In the present study, parents seemed explicitly focused on developing masculinity, and associated traits like toughness, as a way to prepare them for the challenges of the future. This is similar to Messner's findings (2009, 2011) that professional-class parents use youth sports to strengthen a dominant gender ideology that positioned boys as naturally destined for competition in public life.

In this study, football was equally as important in establishing the class-based habitus of parents as it was for their children. Their child's participation in football was a statement about the distinctive choices they made in raising children, about their values, and about the people with whom they chose to surround themselves. Selecting "good kids" for their sons' teammates, and "good families" with which to keep company appropriately positioned them among their desired peers. Tara described hers as a "football family," and many parents also articulated the way that football was a central focus of their family life. Their middle-class habitus influenced this identity, and it also influenced the way that they made decisions about football and the meaning they gave to participation. This is consistent with the "football-first" families outlined in Boneau, Richardson, and McGlynn’s study of youth football parents for whom “the sport of football was central to their identities and consumed their conversations, time, and resources” (Boneau,
Richardson, & McGlynn, 2018, p. 8). In their study, the parents’ identities as being from “football families” was the framework they used to normalize football participation and rationalize playing in spite of any potential injury risks. In the present study, it was clear that the parents’ identities were shaped by their middle-class habitus, which in turn normalized – and even glorified — youth football in their families and communities.

In addition, the all-consuming parental focus on football and other organized activities for their children contributed to the middle-class habitus that equates "busy" parents with "good" parents. The parents in this study, especially the mothers, articulated a very child-centered approach to parenting, that prioritized their activities over most other aspects of family life. Working parents were especially focused on compensating for time away from their kids by immersing themselves in their children's lives, intent on producing successful, well-rounded offspring. When coupling this with their desire to ensure that their children were ‘keeping up' with their peers, it resulted in "busy" and "tired" parents, and overly-involved children. This aspect of the suburban habitus was so ingrained, after lamenting on the challenges of coordinating schedules and carpools and reflecting on the 20-plus hours a week she spent on youth sports for her children, Brenda justified it as "the life I've always wanted." This was consistent with the findings of Darrah (2007) and Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck (2007) that suggests the middle-class habitus dictates that if children are not sufficiently involved – and successful – in a number of organized activities, it reflects poorly upon them as parents. In this way, children become embodied expressions of their parent's habitus, through which their social standing is asserted and expressed.

Capital

While habitus suggests that individuals make choices based on an unconscious reproduction of norms and values, capital dictates how these choices are “constrained and
influenced by the resources and social identity of the actor” (Korp, 2008). In this study, capital was displayed through tangible and intangible assets that were valued in the middle-class suburban landscape. The concerted cultivation practices of the parents in this study required considerable amounts of economic capital for participation in youth football, but they also relied heavily on cultural and social capital to establish the value of the sport for their children and themselves. Youth football proved to be a significant mechanism for middle-class families to enact their class-based, suburban habitus because it translated into these important forms of capital. Parents clearly saw their children as a worthy investment of economic and social capital to help foster the development of "good kids" and to realize their future potential. As it relates to capital, participation in youth football was also important for parents because it provided an outlet to socialize with like-minded peers and as a site to build and display their own capital in their suburban communities.

Cultural Omnivores. Parents’ attempts to cultivate culturally-valued skills, experiences, and social connections for their children began very early, as illustrated in chapter four. Most of the parents in this study encouraged participation in a myriad of activities when their children were young, to best match a sport with their child’s personality and physical characteristics. This is consistent with what Stempel (2005) describes as a benefit for families with a high SES – they have the luxury of being ‘cultural omnivores,’ or trying out a range of activities for their children without losing social status. Trying a range of activities is a luxury, suggests Stuij (2013) because children’s participation in a new activity “requires a feeling of ‘belongingness’.” Families with a high SES have the financial capital to pay for lessons and participation, and their children have access to the proper equipment, which helps them feel comfortable within the social context of new sporting activities. Stuij (2013) continues to suggest that middle and upper-middle-class
families do not just have access to sport, they learn ‘belongingness’ “by gentle persuasion of their parents who (used to) practice a particular sport themselves, encourage their children to try, and give some room for negotiation on which sport their children practice” (p. 781). In this way, Stuij found that the children from families with high SES understood the appropriateness of a sport from their parents, and selected activities consistent with these standards. My findings were similar to Stuij’s conclusions; parents, especially fathers, significantly influenced the sports selection of their children. While the parents in this study consistently emphasized that the decision to play football was largely at the request of their sons, there was clear influence from the parents that pointed the children in the direction of sports that were valued in their families and suburban community. The mothers in this study seemed to acknowledge the push towards specific sporting activity; Tara, Jess, and Jennifer all articulated this when they described the sports in which they enrolled their toddlers, well before they were able to request specific activities themselves. Similarly, when Erin described her families’ passion for football, she noted that the love was instilled in her sons from infancy: "my kids grew up loving it from the time they were babies.” Thus, the decision to play football was naturalized for many children; a cultural and familial norm that was so ingrained it was rarely questioned. In this way, parents subtly reinforced habitus by providing the framework that gave a sense of what sports were normal, comfortable, and appropriate for their children.

**Culturally significant skills.** In this study, parents also made a concerted effort to transfer cultural capital to their children through their athletic participation. This was primarily evident in the way that they sought out activities, like football, that they perceived to instill the ‘right’ skills in their sons. Parents perceived football to foster important character traits like respect, discipline, teamwork, and perseverance more than other sports. In addition, parents put value on the distinctly masculine values that were fostered by football, especially toughness and appropriately-used
aggression. This was consistent with previous studies that suggest that football teaches boys to value “competitiveness, asceticism, success (winning), aggression, violence, superiority to women, and respect for and compliance with male authority” (Sabo & Panepinto, 1990, p. 115). In this study, parents looked to football as a way to develop positive character traits, productively utilize their sons’ free time, and turn their “boys into men” (Amy) with the hopes that these traits would serve them well in the future.

Equally as important as positive character development for the parents in this study was the emphasis that they placed on their children excelling and succeeding in their sporting activities. This is why many chose to play with the teams that they did, paid for off-season strength and agility training, and put such an emphasis on their sons fully committing to the football experience. Similarly, this is why football was valued as an activity that allowed children and their parents to measure their performance against that of their peers, which Eagles' father Vince suggested that provided “an actual tangible measure of the work they put in. I can look out here every week and see if my kid is getting better and how he stacks up with the other kids.” This emphasis on their children’s performance was consistent with what has previously been described as “a general belief among American middle-class parents that children must continuously improve and acquire new skills in order to be prepared for adult life” (Gutiérrez, Izquierdo and Kremer-Sadlik 2010).

**Social comparison.** In this study, a large part of the way that parents enacted their social capital was based on comparison, or ‘keeping up’ with their peers. Parents and their children placed value on the activities in which their peers engaged. Many of the parents first signed their children up for football because it was what “all the kids were playing,” even though they also acknowledged many children who were playing other sports in these suburban communities. Much of the value placed on youth football seemed to be reinforced by being surrounded by others
believing and doing the same. Their suburban habitus normalized the youth football experience for parents in a way that made it a marker for social status. Football translated into social capital not because ‘everyone’ was playing, but because the ‘right’ people were playing. The families in this study looked to other parents that they respected and considered peers, for signs of appropriate activities for their children. Football, in this way, was a guidepost of suburban habitus, and parents used it to extend social capital to their offspring by ensuring that their sons’ experiences were aligned with their peers. This finding was consistent with how Andrews (1999) describes the way middle-class individuals look to one another for insights into lifestyle choices, placing value on the sameness of a homogenized suburban childhood.

Football was not just socially validating for the parents in this study; the experience was also used as a proxy for good parenting, another critical component of how suburban parents established and displayed their capital. Contemporary literature has established differences in the way that mothers and fathers are identified as ‘good parents.’ The discourse around being a ‘good father’ has evolved within the last several decades to encompass "a combination of both traditional and nontraditional masculine values” (Claringbould & Adriaanse, 2015), which, in part, is reflective of the shift in American culture towards fathers’ increased involvement in the care of children. In 2016, fathers reported spending three times more hours per week caring for their children than they did in 1965 (Parker & Livingston, 2018). Scholars like Coakley (2006) and Kay (2009) have identified sport as a socially appropriate activity for which men to participate in the raising of children in “a context in which they can be involved with their children without challenging dominant gender ideology” (Coakley, 2006). Similarly, while mothers have historically always been engaged in the domestic responsibilities of raising children, Trussel and Shaw (2012) describe their increasing role as manager and organizer of family activities. The
findings from the present study were consistent with this contemporary literature; in the football arena, there was a clear delineation of duties for mothers and fathers. Fathers largely assumed coaching roles, while mothers served in support and administrative positions, but it was clear that for all parents there was a distinct social advantage to being an actively participating volunteer. These parents, who spent considerable time volunteering with their youth football teams, enjoyed an elevated social status, exclusive social opportunities, and were lauded as exemplary football parents by their peers.

Another part of being a ‘good parent’ was not just putting their children in the right activity; it was also about the parents participating in the right activity. This was evident when Kim, Amy, and Carol described how the ‘good mothers’ were the ones driving their children to practices and games, actively attending, watching, and cheering for them during football activities, and “not relying on other parents” to handle these important components of the experience. Being known as a ‘football mom’ was particularly important for many of the mothers. Amy, for example, described the pride she felt when other children acknowledged her outside of football because she spent so much time with them during football season. Similarly, the parents were all able to informally rank the other parents according to their perceived effectiveness, suggesting that parents were seeking the approval of children and their parental peers alike.

Another significant marker of good parenting was measured based on the athletic ability of the children on the field. In a similar way that parental involvement was a form of capital, so was having a gifted athlete. Parents talked about the pride that they felt when their kids experienced success and how other parents would congratulate them when their son threw a touchdown or made a big tackle. In this way, the success of the child was equated with successful parenting. In the 2009 book Until It Hurts, Mark Hymen rationalized this: “If a child is the most gifted athlete
on the block, it stands to reason she was raised by the most gifted parents” (Hyman, p. 19). Likening good athletes with good parents is also likely an underlying reason why parents are willing to invest so much economic capital in youth sports and off-season training – parents want their children to excel, in part, to enjoy the capital that comes along with it. Investing in their children and then having them excel serves as symbolic achievement for the parents, and proves that they are doing well in their "project of raising a family" (Weisner, 2002; Dyck, 2012).

Field

Bourdieu (1984) conceptualized field as sites – both social spaces and geographic ones – where ‘agents’ were located, norms were set, and social positions were maintained. The impact of one’s habitus and their possession of capital are influenced by the social setting in which they are positioned, a relationship illustrated by Bourdieu’s equation \[(\text{habitus})(\text{capital}) + \text{field} = \text{practice}\]. The field also serves as a site where people maneuver and struggle in pursuit of resources considered desirable within that field and are “characterized by their own particular relations of power and types of capital, and are bound by time and place into spaces of cultural reproduction” (Dagkas & Quarmby, 2012). Each individual agent is positioned within the field based on the interaction of the rules of the field, their habitus, and their various forms of capital. In this study, the field played a significant role in the way that habitus and capital were developed, shared, and valued. There were two predominant aspects of the field that I considered herein; first, the middle-class suburban landscape played an important role in dictating the interests and preferences of parents and their children. Secondly, the youth football environment also served as a field that framed the norms, relationships, and cultural values reproduced therein. Within the youth football field, the individual teams with which the parents were affiliated served as sub-fields that contributed to the socialization of children and parents alike.
**Suburban Field.** Parents were situated in a specific field based on their social class and the communities in which they lived, which has herein been referred to interchangeably as “suburban” and “upper-middle class.” Parents navigated their cultural field using the lead of others whom they perceived to have similar habitus and utilize comparative economic and social capital – to understand the norms for behavior. Youth football participation allowed parents to align themselves with other parents that were ‘like them,’ in their values, social status, and economic standing. We saw evidence of this in the way that Jess was influenced by her neighbors even though she "wasn't sure about football." She valued the experiences of her similarly-situated peers within her field and perceived importance in aligning her family with theirs. This is consistent with the way that Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) found that the actions of the "players" in a given field simultaneously set the standard or the "right" thing to do within that field, while also continually being influenced by the field itself. Thus, these middle-class parents observed their peers utilizing youth football as a significant marker of suburban capital, and felt compelled to engage similarly. In this way, the suburban field largely dictated the standard of "good" mothers and fathers, but the actions of the parents – especially their self-sacrificing commitment to raising engaged, successful children – continually reinforced it.

The suburban field was also an important context for the families in this study because it both constrained their behavior to comply with cultural norms and also encouraged them to try to distinguish themselves from their peers. While on the one hand, the parents were trying to fit in by attempting to keep up with other families, the suburban field also encouraged that they try to stand out – by ensuring that their children had every advantage that they could afford. So, parents stayed ‘busy' with their children's activities – a standard widely accepted as "good parenting" within the field, but they also carefully selected the types of activities in which their children participated.
This was an interesting dynamic specifically within the youth football field. Parents wanted their children to play football because it was a socially validated activity, and they also sought out opportunities to gain valued capital within the field by paying for extra training, private coaches, and skill-development clinics to ensure advantages for their sons.

**Youth Football Field.** The field of youth football was initially crucial to this study because of the capital required for entry – the sport was a socially stratified activity, and economic capital was a prerequisite for participation. The communities in which these football teams were located were all middle to upper-middle class, which suggested that most residents had the disposable income to support their children's athletic endeavors. But the specific choice of youth football allowed parents to self-select into this particular field, further illustrating the value of football within this field.

Besides the economic capital required, youth football, as a field, was also a significant site for the reproduction of social and cultural capital. The intersection of families' middle-class habitus and their suburban cultural standards helped shape parents' dispositions towards youth sports. These dispositions were embedded in the actions of parents in this field – from the initial decision to enroll their children in tackle football, to the way that they jockeyed to position themselves amongst other parents, to the advantages they attempted to cultivate for their children. These actions were both structured by the field and also contributed to the structure of the field itself. Just as in the larger suburban field, the youth football sub-field was also a site of relational comparisons, as evidenced by the mothers' voluntary ranking of the 'good football moms,' the way that fathers who were coaches were socially elevated over those who did not volunteer, and the unique social opportunities extended to some parents and not others.
Because of the controversy around the sport, membership in the field of youth football also distinctly positioned its agents against the anti-football movement. Parents reported their "constant justification" for allowing their children to play what others perceived to be an unnecessarily dangerous activity. Because of this, participation in the field of youth football was simultaneously an outward statement of its agents' values and their rejection of what Patrick referred to as "helicopter parenting." Despite this, parents sought to position youth football against involvement in other activities; they distinguished themselves by pointing to the way that life skills, like discipline and respect, were "way more evident" in football than other sports (Brenda), but also aligned themselves by frequently pointing out that soccer parents were also engaging in a risky activity for their children (more so without protective equipment and headers, many parents argued). Thus, the publicly perceived safety concerns around football made the parental choice to participate in this field a deliberate statement about which middle-class values they chose to accept and reject. In this way, families made decisions about the forms of capital passed on to their children and reinforced the habitus valued by the suburban and football communities.

**Team Sub-Field.** Within the field of youth football, individual teams were more specific sub-fields that influenced the experience of parents and children alike. This was particularly evident in the community that hosted both the Eagles and Raiders teams that played in two different leagues. While the children on the various teams were playing the same game, the experience was perceived differently. The families from the Eagles were "serious" about football; some parents from the Raiders even described them as "over the top" (Rob) and "crazy" (Susan). Conversely, Eagles parents described their experience with their team as "elite" (John) and eluded to their league as distinctly superior to that in which the Raiders played. This distinction seemed to be predicated on the fact that the Eagles team started tackle football in first grade (versus third grade
for the Raiders), practiced more often during the week, and had a structured off-season weight training and conditioning program. Tara was a new parent with the Eagles when I spoke with her; she was moving her son from the Raiders (where he had played for six seasons) because she felt he was “ready for more serious football.” In doing this, she acknowledged that moving from one sub-field to another would likely change their social relationships and the overall football experience, but it was important because it was the best move for him “as a football player” (Tara).

Each team-specific sub-field also served as its own competitive arena for the parents, where they vied for stakes that included advantages for their children and social status for themselves. In the way that Raiders' mom Jess described the "competitive parenting" that she observed as parents aimed to cultivate experiences that would give their sons an edge. Similarly, parents aimed to position themselves advantageously against their peers. For all of the teams, this largely meant volunteering – as coaches for the fathers and as visible volunteers for the mothers - as this brought the social status and public recognition of being a ‘good parent.' Consistent with Swanson's (1999) findings of the way that mothers aimed to distinguish themselves from others within the field of their youth soccer team, the parents in this study also seemed to be regularly assessing their position among their peers and seeking some form of distinction for themselves within the field. For the fathers, this generally came with the extent of their coaching roles. But, for the mothers, this came in many more forms because mothers sought to distinguish themselves by either fully embracing or fully rejecting the mothering norms on the team-specific sub-fields. This was illustrated in a number of ways: volunteering (Brenda who proudly spent "well over 30 hours a week" in her volunteer football role versus Liz who suggested that "I'm not bringing anybody oranges unless I volunteered to do it"), what they wore (Jamie’s rejection of her team’s norm of coming to games “bedazzled in their gear” versus Jess describing the homemade scarves she made
for the mothers on the team), their sideline behavior (Jennifer’s admission that “I don't have a noisemaker, and I will not be caught dead waving some pompom around” versus Nikki’s account of pacing the sidelines and cheering loudly), and their identification as a football mom (Amy suggested that describes herself as a football mom “with pride” versus Jamie’s response “hell no, I don’t”). In all of these instances, it was the field that helped to construct these parents’ attempts at distinction because it served as a structured space (physically and socially) whereby individuals aim to reproduce the social and cultural norms and differentiate themselves from them. In this way, the way that parents enacted their habitus and their possession of various forms of capital were clearly influenced by the social setting in which they were situated.

**Implications on sports parenting and youth football**

Throughout this study, I have attempted to garner insights as to why parents choose youth tackle football for their sons in light of increasing social concern regarding the safety of the game. An analysis of the parents' embodied habitus, their social and cultural capital, and how they were situated within a suburban field allowed for regular and ongoing assessments of how the perceived rewards of participation outweighed the potential risks of youth football. In this section of this paper, I aim to frame the findings of this study within the broader contexts of modern-day parenting, football, and youth sport while also considering the implications my findings may have in each of these areas.

**Anxiety about the future.** More than other socioeconomic classes, the middle-class, according to both Bourdieu (1984) and Lareau (2003), is especially conscious of reinforcing a class habitus that establishes and advances their social and economic position. This is especially relevant in considering the emphasis on childrearing in suburban communities where parents are increasingly focused on curating an optimal childhood for their offspring. Lareau (2003) suggests
that this concern for their children’s success reflects parental anxiety about future generations’ chances of becoming members of the middle-class themselves. According to a 2017 Pew Research Study, only 37% of Americans believe that today’s children will grow up to be better off financially than their parents, and 61% of those aged 50 and over believe the next generation will be worse off (www.pew.org). When coupling this future financial uncertainty with a shrinking American middle class, it is easy to appreciate the angst that middle-class parents feel about preparing their children for the future. Parents are working tirelessly to give their kids an advantage for the unpredictable – jobs are changing, technology is impacting the workforce, and the professions of the future are uncertain. As a result, parents are trying to prepare their kids for every possible future by ensuring that their time is spent on activities that will give them the skills to be successful.

These middle-class parents have a unique challenge because while they are intently focused on childrearing, they are also working more hours each day and longer work weeks. In the United States, 85.8% of men and 66.5% of women work more than 40 hours a week (American Time Use Survey, 2018). At the same time, parents are spending more time on childrearing than ever before (Pew Research Center, 2018). Despite this, 43% of working American mothers and 63% of fathers do not think they spend an adequate amount of time with their children (Pew Research Center, 2018). In his 2006 book, Whose Game Is It Anyway?, Ginsburg argues that “the busier and more distracted adults are, the more attention they pay to their children’s sports games” and that in “hoping to compensate for sixty-hour workweeks, which distinguish them from their parents’ generation, have become voracious consumers of material things, including the trappings of youth sports” (in Hymen, 2009, p. 23). This is especially true for the American middle and upper-middle classes, whose children are increasingly enrolled in organized, adult-run extracurricular activities.
In 2017, 69% of children from homes with an income of more than $100,000 played at least one sport, up from 66% in 2011 (State of Play, 2018). As noted by Weininger, Lareau, and Conley (2015), the benefits of extracurricular activities for children have been shown to positively impact psychosocial development (Linver, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009), educational outcomes (Covay and Carbonaro, 2010), and college admissions (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004). But more importantly in this study, extracurricular activities were widely lauded by parents as important developmental experiences for their children.

This desire to nurture the growth of children to give them an edge in the future has been especially apparent for mothers. Weininger, Lareau, and Conley (2015) found that college-educated mothers enrolled their kids in more activities, and Warner (2005) suggested that working mothers, in particular, compensated for time away from their children by immersing themselves in their lives. In the present study, the mothers' lives were much more interwoven with their children's organized sporting activities than were fathers'. While fathers spent a considerable amount of time coaching, mothers did the rest of the work related to youth football participation. In addition, many of the mothers specifically talked about the role they felt expected to play of the enthusiastic cheerleader – ringing cowbells, wearing scarves in team colors, and making posters for the second-grade team's homecoming. The pressure they described to be a good mother left many feeling "busy" and "tired." Even if they did not want to spend the time on all of these activities, they also did not want their children to fall behind, so they continued to engage in an ‘extracurricular arms race.’

Given this changing middle-class landscape in the context of Lareau's (2003) theory of concerted cultivation, we can appreciate the perceived urgency with which families utilize structured, goal-oriented activities to develop the minds, bodies, and cultural skills of their
children. With the economic capital to make choices about their children's extracurricular time, parents have the luxury of being intentional about the types of activities they promote and encourage. Thus, as illustrated throughout this study, parents were seeking activities, like youth football, that established and reinforced values relevant to their middle-class habitus that would prove useful in adulthood, like responsibility, discipline, collaboration, and competitiveness (Coakley 2006; Harrington 2006; Kremer-Sadlik, Izquierdo, and Fatigante 2010). Among the most important values fostered though youth football for the parents in this study was the apparent emphasis on masculinity. As parents described the benefits of participation for their sons, they did so, as Coakley (2006) explains, with "an eye toward making their boys into men tough enough and competitive enough to succeed in a ‘man's world.’"

**Football, masculinity, and the ‘wussification’ of America.** Since the late 1990s, there has been a trend, particularly with conservative pundits and politicians, in talking about the myriad of ways the decline of the American culture is weakening children, especially boys, dubbed the ‘wussification’ of America. With concerns about an overly politically correct culture and a perceived weakening international position of the United States, many theorize that this is a dangerous position for men in America. This concern was highlighted in Adams’ 2014 book, *American Boomerang*, that suggests that "all aspects of male culture have been called into question…from all levels of society." Adams argues that not promoting masculine activity and behavior becomes "a very dangerous thing" because it erodes important cultural values and can have wide-ranging detrimental impacts. In an interview with Fox News, Adams suggests that "wimps and wussies deliver mediocrity; men win. America has always been about winning, so this is pivotal to the health of the country." This descriptor has not just been used in right-wing politicking; we saw it more recently in the football community in response to Adrian Peterson's
suspension from the NFL for disciplining his son with a switch. According to Foote, Butterworth, and Sanderson (2017), after the decision, many fans took to Twitter to express their "dissatisfaction with a sport/nation gone soft" and suggested that the suspension was a reflection that the United States "had lost its moral compass and become weak." Given football's general position as a preserve of masculinity, it is no surprise that many found the NFL's punishment a reflection of declining standards of manhood. "Such a fan base has grown nostalgic for a return to the "good old days" when conventional norms were unquestioned—days when players were allowed to be aggressive on the field, to not take it easy on the quarterback, and when hits did not matter if they caused injury" (Foote, Butterworth, and Sanderson, 2017).

This concern about weak American boys has seemingly struck a chord with middle-class families because I observed an underlying awareness of this 'wussification' from parents in this study. This was evident when they complained about all kids receiving participation trophies and the changing football rules designed to make the game safer, when they jokingly compared an 'activity' like soccer with a 'sport' like football, and when they scoffed at recommendations from their pediatricians to avoid a dangerous sport for their sons. It seemed that, in some ways, choosing to participate in what has long been lauded as America's most masculine team sport (Trujillo, 1995), was a direct response to this national trend. In the way that football promotes masculinity through "sacrificing one's body for the sake of sporting glory" (Anderson & Kian, 2012) it also is "one of the most appropriate sports in which to find reproductions of hegemonic masculinity" (Trujillo, 1995). Masculinity was a respected trait among the parents in this study, and they articulated a desire to foster toughness and competitiveness in their sons. They promoted this tough, masculine narrative because the alternative seemed to be fostering overly-sensitive boys
who they feared may shy away from a competitive future. In this way, these parents’ acceptance of youth football was also an outward rejection of the softening of American male culture.

Anderson (2012) also suggests that attitudes about masculinity are changing in the United States, but rather than a detrimental marker of a nation in decline, he theorizes it is actually keeping children safer. In his research on masculinity among American high school and college athletes, he has historically found that young men aimed to “prove their heteromasculinity through participation in competitive, combative team sports, like football” and that if they rejected the dangerous, hypermasculine norms of the game they risked being “criticized for not being tough enough.” As it relates to head injury, this fear has led to 40% of football players who receive a concussion not reporting it to their coaches or medical personnel as recently as 2017 (CDC, 2018). However, Anderson suggests that within American culture as “homophobia declines, masculinity also softens and young men re-evaluate masculine scripts” which is leading to the rejection of the “practice of accepting traumatic injury for the sake of team victory” (Anderson, 2012). Because of this, it seems that football players are increasingly aware of the risks of head trauma and are more proactively seeking to protect themselves.

This is consistent with analyses that indicate media outlets are also “beginning to shift emphasis away from masculine warrior discourse and toward promoting the long-term health of athletes” (Anderson & Kian, 2012). This is important because the influence of the media is significant on parents’ assessments of risk and benefit in youth football (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2018). Similarly, in an analysis of the documentary League of Denial, Furness (2016) suggested that the film “contributes to a progressive shift in the way that injury and vulnerability in professional football players is both discussed and remembered in popular culture” (Furness, 2016). This changing narrative around football and head injury was also evident in Cassilo and
Sanderson’s 2018 analysis of the media response to the voluntary retirement 24-year old Chris Borland amid the risks of the game, which similarly found that the media “largely supported Borland and praised him for his decision to prioritize his health above his football career” (Cassilo & Sanderson, 2018, p. 102). This was also supported in Sanderson et al.’s 2016 assessment of the media coverage around injuries to NFL quarterbacks Jay Cutler and Robert Griffin III. The researchers found that "a cultural shift may be occurring, wherein reporters frame athletes who prioritize their health in favorable ways." As a result, they hypothesized that this type of media coverage might inspire a "trickle-down effect," whereby "young athletes would advocate for their health and well-being, seeing that professional athletes who did so were largely commended, instead of condemned" (Sanderson et al., 2016).

Boneau, Richardson, and McGlynn (2018) acknowledge that that media plays a vital role in the way that parents make sense of youth football participation for their children. This is critical because despite academia's emphasis on the media's shifting narrative surrounding football safety, many more in popular culture warn against significant declines in ‘America's game.' In an article for ESPN.com, Dr. Joseph Maroon, a neurosurgeon for the Pittsburg Steelers and consultant to the NFL, suggested "the problem of CTE, although real, is it's being overexaggerated and being extrapolated to youth football and to high school football" (Seifert, 2015, ESPN.com). In response to the notion that health concerns threaten football's future, an article in USA Today suggested that “as long as football exists, there will always be people willing to play” (Chase, 2015, USAToday.com).

This sentiment seemed to ring true for the parents in this study. Although the potential risks of football participation certainly played into their considerations for their children, their child-centered lives made it difficult to say no to an activity that was socially desirable for children
and parents alike. This was similar to the findings of a study of youth football parents conducted by Boneau, Richardson, and McGlynn (2018) who, despite some concerns regarding the game's safety, their general position was to focus on benefits of the sport: "community identity and social influence were critical factors informing decisions for these parents." In addition, in this study parents used a variety of justifications for participation – comparative activities that were as risky, an increased risk for delaying participation, and competent coaches teaching proper technique. They also pointed to a number of changes to the game intended to make it safer as a reason to play, including rule changes and investments in improved helmet technology. This was consistent with Kroshus and colleagues (2018) suggestion that parental decisions about tackle football participation are viewed within a relative risk framework; when making sporting choices for their children, parents considered the risk and benefits of tackle football and available substitutes. Ultimately, in this study parents perceived the benefits outweighed the risk of football participation for their children. As Nikki articulated, the benefits of football were so significant that she felt that she needed to put her son out there and theoretically ‘roll the dice’: “I feel like I just put him out there and hope.”

Study Limitations

Although this study provides significant contributions to the literature on sports parenting, including the motivations for youth football participation and perceptions of football safety, it’s also important to consider the limitations of this research. From the onset, I approached this study based on the question of why parents choose to allow youth football participation for their children, despite the considerable and well-known risks of the game. The root of this question inherently suggests that youth football participation is fundamentally problematic. I approached this study
based on the significant literature suggesting a growing public health concern around the correlation between football and head trauma and sports-related concussion (SRC); however, not all scholars accept the notion that youth football is a potentially dangerous activity. This could be perceived as a limitation of the study; approaching the research from this perspective certainly may have impacted the line of questioning and the interpretation of the results.

In this study, I explored how middle and upper-middle class, suburban parents negotiated the decision to allow their sons to play tackle football, despite their considerable access to information suggesting that it may be a risky activity. In doing so, I forewent the collection of data from the poor, working class, or upper-class parents. While I contend that the suburban parenting experience surrounding youth sports is unique in its fervor and focus, in retrospect, it would have offered significant points of comparison to explore the approach to youth sports with parents of different socioeconomic classes. While this limitation did not preclude me from conducting an analysis of social class as it pertains to parents’ perspectives and experiences, a more socioeconomic and ethnically diverse population would lend other viewpoints and offer important comparison points to the middle-class experience. Variance in class and ethnicity would have also been particularly useful in analyzing the data against the backdrop of the social theories of Bourdieu (1984) and Lareau (2003). In future research, it will be prudent to investigate the similarities and differences between youth football experiences among more diverse parent populations.

Another potential limitation of the research was the fact that most of the research team were considered industry ‘insiders,’ who, in some instances, had established relationships with the parent participants. While these relationships were valuable in providing access and a level of candidness during the interviews, this familiarity could also be considered a limitation of the study.
Involving a number of graduate students in the data collection process was critical in conducting observations at multiple sites during the football season and completing interviews with parents. While it could be considered another limitation of the study to have various people adding their perspectives to the interview and observation process, ultimately, their football knowledge and perspective added an essential aspect to my data collection and analysis.

**Directions for Future Study**

This study provided insights into the ways that parents negotiated their role in youth football in relation to their sons' sports experience. However, to more fully understand the motivations and challenges of football parents, additional research should be undertaken. There would be merit in conducting studies that were specifically focused on just mothers or just fathers, given that their motivations, expectations, and concerns were different. This would allow a deeper dive into the way that mothers and fathers assign meaning to the football experience for themselves and their sons.

As I considered how middle and upper-middle class families experienced youth football, it also left me with additional questions related to how poor and working-class families experienced youth sport. Future study should include a more socioeconomically diverse sample of parents and families to evaluate the continued relevance of Lareau’s (2003) theory that children from low SES families participate in sports by way of “accomplishment of natural growth” rather than by the concerted cultivation model of middle-class parents. This topic is especially timely given the shift in youth sports over the last decade away from community recreation and towards club-sports and travel teams. In an article for *The Atlantic* earlier this year, Thompson described the impact of the American system of youth sports as “serving the talented, and often rich, individual at the expense of the collective”—has taken a metal bat to the values of participation and
universal development. Youth sports have become a pay-to-play machine” (Thompson, 2018). Declining participation numbers in youth sports in low SES households suggests this is true; thus, future study is warranted to evaluate how poor and working-class parents negotiate youth sports participation for their children.

Parents, of course, choose to opt-out of youth football for reasons unrelated to their socioeconomic position, which also suggests another direction for future research. While this study was insightful for understanding the motivations and concerns of parents with youth football participants, it would be interesting to see how these compare with parents who have disallowed football participation. Future studies should explore how significantly concerns about head injury and concussion have impacted parents’ perceptions about youth football. This type of research, with parents who have specifically opted out of football for their sons, could also seek to explore how the suburban, middle-class habitus is enacted by these families. It would be especially interesting to see whether or not their own habitus impacts the extracurricular activities they select for their children and whether or not they seek out other similarly situated sports experiences.

In addition to continued study with parents on the topic of youth football, it would be prudent to include children in future studies. Assessing the experience of children would serve as an important point of comparison to the experiences of their parents. More specifically, future studies should consider how the widening gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in youth sport impact children from different socioeconomic classes. If, as Thompson (2018) suggests, poor children are being “left behind” by an increasing emphasis on travel teams in youth sports, what is their experience playing sports in their communities? Do they assign different meaning to the experience? Are they as informed about the risks of youth football, and as concerned with the safety of the game? These questions would be necessary to include in future study on this topic,
in large part because it would allow for examination of how Bourdieu's theories of habitus, capital, and field intersect to influence the motivations and values of youth, and how Lareau's theories of concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth impact the children of families from varying social classes.
APPENDIX

Appendix A: Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: Parental Perception of Risk and Reward of Youth Tackle Football

Principal Investigator (PI): Laurel Whalen
Kinesiology, Health, and Sports Studies
313-577-2704

Purpose
You are being asked to be in a research study of parental perceptions of youth tackle football because you have a child participating on a youth football team. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University and with youth football organizations throughout Wayne and Oakland Counties.

Study Procedures
If you take part in the study, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire and participate in a 40-60 minute interview. The questionnaire will be used to gather general information about study participants, including demographic information; the interviews will assess your experiences with youth football and your perceptions of the safety of youth tackle football. At any point in the process, you have the option of not answering some of the questions and still remaining in the study.

Benefits
As a participant in this research study, there will be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks
There are no known risks at this time to participation in this study.

Costs
There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation
You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality
You will be identified in the research records only by a code name or number.

Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal
Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with Wayne State University or its affiliates.
Questions
If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Laurel Whalen or one of her research team members at the following phone number 313-577-2704. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call the Wayne State Research Subject Advocate at (313) 577-1628 to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input.

Participation
By completing the questionnaire and interview you are agreeing to participate in this study.
Appendix B: Parent Interview Guide

Introduction: Thanks so much for meeting with me. I really appreciate your time and I’m looking forward to learning from you. I am interested in understanding your experiences with youth football, and I’ll be asking you questions related to your background with sport, your experiences with your son playing youth football, and we’ll talk about your perceptions of safety in the game. I’ll be using a tape recorder during our interview. All the information you tell me today is confidential and I will never use your real name.

To begin, I’d like for you to tell me a little about your personal experiences with sport:
1. Tell me about your personal sports experience growing up. Did you play sports?
2. What do you remember most about your sporting experience as a kid?
3. When you were younger, how did playing sports make you feel?
4. What about now? Do you watch sports on TV or consume other sport media?
5. Do you watch sports with your kids?

Now I want to move to talk a little more about your children’s sport experience.
6. What sports do your kids play?
7. How did you decide what to sign them up for?
8. How old were they when they first played organized sports?
9. How did you pick the league and/or team?
10. Do they play other sports now?

Now, I want to focus specifically on your football experience with your son:
11. How did you land on football as an activity for your son?
12. What position does he play? Is it the position that he wants to play?
13. Did your kid’s team win a lot of games? (*Does parent acknowledge if they kept score?)
14. How did this success (or lack thereof) make you feel as a parent?
15. Is your son one of the better kids on the team? How do you situate his talent with his peers?
16. Do many of his friends play football?
17. Lots of research talks about the ‘soft skills’ or character lessons that kids learn from playing sports, do you think that football instills these skills? What do you think your son has gained from playing football?
18. Do you think football teaches different skills than other sports? Why?
19. Why do you want him to play sports?
20. What do you hope he gets out of playing football?
21. What do you hope the future looks like for your son athletically? Make the high school team? Play in college?
22. Talk to me about your role with the team or with your son’s participation. How do you support the football experience for him? (volunteer with team, drive to practice, make posters, video during games, etc.)
23. How much time do you spend supporting football (and other sports) for your kids during the season?
24. Do you describe yourself as a sports parent (football mom)? What does that mean?
25. Do you know many of the other parents? Describe your interaction.
26. What do you perceive as the benefits for you through football participation?
27. What about the drawbacks? Any negative aspects of participation for you, personally?

There has been a lot of information in the news and in movies about the safety of football. I want to ask you some questions about your perceptions of safety in football and some of the steps that the league and the sport, in general, are taking to make the game safer.

28. I know your league/team offers the heads up concussion training and talk about it at the pre-season parent meeting. Did you attend this? How was the information delivered (coaches talking/handouts/video, etc.)?
29. What measures has your team (or the league) taken to make the game safer?
30. How effective do you think these things are?
31. What is your perception of safety in the game – is football safe?
32. In high schools in Michigan, new legislation has restricted the number of days they can be in full pads and have contact during practice. This doesn’t impact youth football though. Are your kids in full pads every day? Why do you think there is a difference between these youth and high school rules?
33. Do you think the experience would change in youth football if your league made similar rule changes, like limiting contact in practice or going to flag-football only?
34. Does your son’s football participation ever make you concerned about his safety? Why?
35. Has your son ever been injured playing football? What was his most serious injury?
36. Has he ever had a concussion?
37. Concussions is obviously a ‘hot button’ issue right now. Is it something that worries you?
38. Last year on Good Morning America, during a segment on safety of contact sports, like football, the host asked the pediatrician, who was a guest on the show: “what would you tell your patients if they wanted to play youth football?” The pediatrician answered “find another sport.” How would you respond to that?
Appendix C: Observation Guide

Date and time of event:
Type of event (practice, game, meeting, training, etc.):
Location of event:

If football training/event:
  • Level of practice
  • Attendees (# of participants, # of coaches)
  • General description of practice activities
  • Assessment of coaching/safety of activities

If parent meeting/training
  • Attendees (# of participants, # of coaches)
  • General description of activities
  • Assessment of environment/parental response
  • Questions asked/answered

Parental behavior:
  • Attendees (parents/spectators)
  • General observations of parent behavior
  • Parent interaction with children
  • Parent interactions with other parents
  • Parent interaction with coaches
Appendix D: Demographic Profile

Study Name: Parental Perception of the Risk and Reward of Tackle Youth Football

Principle Investigator: Laurel Whalen, Wayne State University

Study Description: This study is designed to assess parent perceptions of youth tackle football and the potential risks of their children’s participation.

Participant ID Number: ________________________________

Team Affiliation: ________________________________

Age: ________________________________

Ethnic Background (select any/all that apply):
[ ] Caucasian/White  [ ] Native American or American Indian
[ ] African American/Black  [ ] Asian/Pacific Islander
[ ] Latino/Hispanic  [ ] Other

Marital Status:
[ ] Married/Domestic Partnership  [ ] Widowed
[ ] Divorced  [ ] Never Married
[ ] Separated

Who works in your family?
[ ] Husband. (If checked) Please specify occupation: __________________
[ ] Wife. (If checked) Please specify occupation: __________________
[ ] Other relative. (If checked) Please specify occupation: __________________

Household Income Range (indicate the income range for all wage-earners in your household)
[ ] Less than $32,000 per year
[ ] $32,000 - $97,000 per year
[ ] $98,000 - $249,000 per year
[ ] More than $250,000 per year

Highest Education Attainment (indicate the best answer)
1. Father:
   [ ] Some High School
   [ ] High School Graduate
   [ ] Associates/2-year Degree/Some College
   [ ] Bachelors Degree
   [ ] Graduate/Professional Degree
2. Mother:
   [ ] Some High School
[ ] High School Graduate
[ ] Associates/2-year Degree/Some College
[ ] Bachelors Degree
[ ] Graduate/Professional Degree

Children in the Household
Please circle:
1. Boy/Girl  Age: ________
2. Boy/Girl  Age: ________
3. Boy/Girl  Age: ________
4. Boy/Girl  Age: ________
5. Boy/Girl  Age: ________
6. Boy/Girl  Age: ________

Child(ren) who participate in tackle football
1. Age: __________
   Level/Team: ________________
2. Age: __________
   Level/Team: ________________
3. Age: __________
   Level/Team: ________________
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ABSTRACT

PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE RISKS AND REWARDS OF YOUTH TACKLE FOOTBALL

by

LAUREL WHALEN

May 2019

Advisor: Dr. Nathan McCaughtry

Major: Kinesiology (Pedagogy)

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Football is one of the most popular sports in the United States, despite a high risk of injury associated with the game. The issue of sports-related concussion (SRC) in football has garnered widespread attention in both the media and in scholarly literature as a result of documentaries, movies, and popular journal articles highlighting the connection between former professional football players and the neurodegenerative disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE (McKee et al., 2013; Mez, Daneshvar, Kiernan, et al., 2017). Although some studies have identified extremely few concussions in youth football, others have reported rates of concussion (Kontos, Elbin, Fazio-Sumrock, et al., 2013) and impacts comparable to the highest-force collisions in high school and collegiate football players (Daniel, et al., 2012).

Despite medical experts’ warnings that youth under the age of 18 should not participate in tackle football (Findler, 2015; Omalu, 2017), children between the ages of six and 13 comprise 70 percent of more than five million participants in the United States (USA Football, 2018). However, participation numbers in youth football have steadily declined over the last decade; Pop Warner, the nation’s largest youth football organization saw a participation decrease of 9.5 percent between 2010-12 (Fainaru, S. & Fainaru-Wada, M., 2013), and 6.5% fewer high schoolers in the US played
football in 2017-2018 than they did a decade ago. This study aimed to understand why parents promoted football for their children, despite the known risks, by examining parental attitudes regarding youth football participation and their perceptions of the safety of the game. Using Bevan’s (2014) semi-structured approach to phenomenology, 32 youth football parents in middle- to upper-middle class suburban neighborhoods were interviewed and observed over the course of a year. Data were analyzed using the framework of Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, capital, and field to consider the class-based implications of suburban youth football participation. The main findings of this study suggest that the decision to allow tackle football participation for their sons involved a complex interplay of parents’ desires to portray “good” parenting, their attempt to cultivate the “right” skills for their children, the value they placed on social status and comparison, and their evaluation of how the rewards of youth football outweighed the risk of participation.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Laurel Whalen earned her undergraduate degrees in English and speech communication from Albion College and a Master’s degree in sports administration from Wayne State University. After these educational pursuits, Laurel spent several years working in the sports industry – as a collegiate coach, youth sports administrator, and non-profit fundraiser. She earned her PhD from the division of Kinesiology, Health, and Sports Studies at Wayne State University in 2019, while also serving as a program coordinator and lecturer in the Sport Management and Administration programs. During this time, Laurel received accolades for her writing (American Kinesiology Association Graduate Writing Scholar, 2015), teaching (Blackboard Exemplary Course Winner, 2017), and service to the university (College of Education Faculty Service Award, 2018).

During her time as a doctoral student, Laurel participated in evaluation and research related to a number of grant-funded programs, including the Detroit Healthy Youth Initiative, the Danialle Karmanos’ Work it Out Program, and Michigan Swimming. Her research interests include topics related to youth sports, coach education, sports parenting, and the impacts of various sociocultural factors, like race and class, on sport and physical activity.

Laurel lives in metro-Detroit with her husband, Jason, and their four children, Colin, Ellison, Jocelyn, and Gillian. She spends her free time volunteering with a number of youth sports and community organizations, serving on several local advisory boards, and attempting to turn her children into good humans.