



**LA84**<sup>TM</sup>  
*Foundation*

# Youth Football Grant Guidelines





## Introduction

**T**he LA84 Foundation has made grants to youth sport organizations since 1985, funding more than 1,200 organizations providing 50 sports and serving 3 million young people in Southern California. While the Foundation has funded football since 1985, there has been an increase in recent years in football grants. Since 2010 the Foundation has made 58 youth football grants totaling approximately \$600,000. These grants support programs that provide opportunities for football players under the age of 14, mostly in low-income neighborhoods. Recent grantmaking for youth football has coincided with the growing public concern over the dangers of brain injuries in football and youth sports generally.



In October 2013, after careful study and consideration of brain injuries in youth sports, the Foundation adopted new guidelines for evaluating grant proposals and awarding grants to youth football organizations. Under the new guidelines, the Foundation will give preference to grant proposals from organizations whose policies and practices are designed to make the game safer by reducing the intensity and frequency of player-on-player contact, utilizing trained safety personnel at practices and games, raising the age at which tackling begins and providing reliable information on head injuries to parents and coaches.

The football grant guidelines are the culmination of a process in which the LA84 Foundation staff conducted extensive conversations with youth football administrators in Southern California, reviewed the medical literature on youth sports brain injuries and hosted a national conference on tackling in youth football. The conference agenda and links to footage of the sessions are included in this report.



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The development of grant guidelines for football is only one step in the Foundation's campaign to improve athlete safety. The Foundation will continue to sponsor safer-tackling clinics, as it has done since 2010. LA84 also plans to fund research on youth sports concussions, stay abreast of new research and product innovation, and monitor the effectiveness of the new guidelines. The Foundation will make a particular effort to work with referees on better enforcement of existing safety rules in youth football.

In addition, the LA84 Foundation will examine its grantmaking in other sports. The Foundation has made grants supporting many sports in which athletes experience head trauma, including boxing, ice hockey, lacrosse, wrestling, rugby, cycling and soccer. With the exception of soccer, LA84 grantmaking in these sports affects far fewer athletes than in football. Nevertheless, young athletes in these sports deserve the same commitment to their safety as the Foundation requires of its football grantees.



## Considerations that Inform the LA84 Football Grant Guidelines

Concussions occur in many youth sports. Football, among high school sports, accounts for the highest rate and number of concussions, and the greatest number of catastrophic injuries, many of which involve brain injuries.<sup>1-4</sup>

The science of brain injuries in youth football is underdeveloped. There is a paucity of data on youth football. More is known about injuries at the high school and college levels.

Based on preliminary data, it is estimated that between 3.5 and 4.0 percent of youth players sustain a recognized concussion each year. That is significantly lower than the risk in high school football, in which according to one study an estimated 5.6 percent of players are diagnosed with a concussion during one season.<sup>5-6</sup>

Many researchers believe that not all concussions are recognized by athletes, parents, coaches or sideline medical personnel. Therefore, more concussions occur than are diagnosed.<sup>7-8</sup>

Repeated sub-concussive impacts also may pose a danger in youth sports. Recent studies of high school, university and adult athletes in football, ice hockey and soccer report that even in the absence of a diagnosed concussion some athletes experience a loss of cognitive skills, or show physiologic disruptions of the brain.<sup>9-11</sup>

Children's brains may be more vulnerable to injury than the brains of teenagers and adults.<sup>12-13</sup>

Policies and recommendations on the appropriate age to begin playing tackle football vary greatly. Pop Warner, a national youth football organization, permits tackling at age 5. Dr. Robert Cantu, a nationally recognized authority on sports concussions, opposes tackling in football before the age of 14, and favors the same age limit for heading the ball in soccer and body checking in hockey.<sup>14</sup>



Youth football can be made safer even without eliminating tackling. The following practices will make the sport safer.

- Improved tackling and blocking techniques
- Limiting the number of minutes spent in player-on-player full-contact practices
- Increased recognition of concussion symptoms
- Careful treatment of concussions when they occur
- Better enforcement of existing rules
- Providing reliable information to parents and coaches

Many referees, at present, are unaware of or are unwilling to enforce safety rules in youth games. This problem is compounded by a lack of standardized rules in youth football. This is a serious issue.

Tackle football for children is popular among players and parents. Youth football administrators worry that unilateral attempts to implement radical changes to their programs will cause players to switch to other leagues and conferences.



Regardless of what the LA84 Foundation does with its grants policy, youngsters will continue to play tackle football in Southern California.

Playing football involves risk. Not playing football or some other sport also involves risk. In communities with high crime and school drop-out rates and chronic academic underachievement parents and football providers must weigh the physical risk of football against the social and academic risks of non-participation.

There is a greater awareness among parents, coaches and administrators about the dangers of head injuries than existed just a few years ago. Most national, regional and local football organizations are responding to the problem.

Making the game safer will require a broad-based effort of parents, coaches, administrators, referees and medical professionals.



### Notes with links:

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2. Safe Kids Worldwide. (2013). *Game Changers: Stats, Stories and What Communities Are Doing to Protect Young Athletes*. Washington, D.C.: Safe Kids Worldwide.
3. Mueller, F.O., Cantu, R. (2012). *Catastrophic Sports Injury Research Twenty-Ninth Annual Report Fall 1982 - Spring 2011*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research.
4. Mueller, F.O., Colgate, B. (2013). *Annual Survey of Football Injury Research 1931 – 2012*. Chapel Hill, NC: American Football Coaches Association, National Collegiate Athletic Association, National Federation of State High School Associations.
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7. McCrea, M., Hammeke, T., Olsen, G., Leo, P., Guskiewicz, K. (2004). Unreported Concussion in High School Football Players Implications for Prevention. *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine*. 14(1): 13-17.
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10. Koerte, I.K., Ertl-Wagner, B., Reiser, M., Zafonte, R., Shenton, M.E. (2012). White Matter Integrity in the Brains of Professional Soccer Players Without a Symptomatic Concussion *JAMA*. 308(18):1859-1861.
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12. Giza, C. C., Hovda, D. A. (2001). The Neurometabolic Cascade of Concussion. *Journal of Athletic Training*, 36(3): 228–235.
13. Schatz, P, Moser, R S. (2011). Current Issues in Pediatric Sports Concussions. *Clinical Neuropsychologist*. (25)6: 1042-1057.
14. Pop Warner, Ages and Weights.
15. Cantu, Robert, Hyman, Mark. *Concussions and Our Kids: America's Leading Expert on How to Protect Young Athletes and Keep Sports Safe*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2012.



## Youth Football Grant Guidelines

The LA84 Foundation will continue to fund youth football organizations. In evaluating requests for youth football grants, the Foundation will give priority to those organizations that proactively promote player safety by adhering to the following practices.

- Require tackle coaches to be trained in the Bobby Hosea Train 'Em Up Academy "helmet-free" tackling method, or the USA Football Heads-Up technique.
- Distribute information regarding the dangers of concussions to parents, coaches and players
- Provide flag football for 6- and 7-year olds and offer tackle no earlier than age 8.
- Prohibit pre-season player-to-player physical contact, using pre-season practices instead for conditioning, strength training, skill development and recruitment.
- Prohibit full speed head-on blocking or tackling drills in which the players line up more than 3 yards apart, chop blocking, face tackling or spearing techniques
- In regular season 2-hour practices, use the first 90 minutes for non-contact or limited contact drills, and the last 30 minutes for full speed contact if desired
- Limit full contact drills to no more than 90 total minutes per week.
- Use trained personnel as safety monitors at practices to help identify concussion or other injuries.
- Have trained medics at all games.



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*The Foundation will continue to sponsor safer-tackling clinics, as it has done since 2010.*

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For those organizations that meet the regular funding requirements and demonstrate these best practices the LA84 Foundation will provide funding for these purposes:

- Coaches to attend clinics that promote safer-tackling clinics.
- Safety equipment – specifically new helmets, plus pads and dummies or other tackling equipment that can be used in practice as an alternative to player-on-player contact.
- Hiring of qualified medics for all games.



# Should Children Play Tackle Football?

Los Angeles  
August 18, 2013

*Links to YouTube providing full conference sessions & individual interviews are available below*

## Agenda

### **The Concussion Crisis in Youth Sports**

Dr. Robert Cantu, *Emerson Hospital*

### **Youth Football Head Injuries: What We Know**

Dr. Patrick Kersey, *Datalys Center for Sports Injury Research & Prevention*

Dr. Thomas Dompier, *Datalys Center for Sports Injury Research & Prevention*

Dr. Meeryo Choe, *UCLA Division of Pediatric Neurology*

Moderator: Dr. Vernon Williams, *Kerlan-Jobe Center for Sports Neurology*

### **"My Dad's Brain": A Film Documentary**

Rebecca Carpenter, *Writer & Director*, interviewed by Oscar Edwards,  
*Gridiron Technologies & Science*

### **Youth Football Leagues: Weighing Competing Demands**

Keith Johnson, *Falcons Youth and Family Services*

Phillip Lomax, *San Diego Youth Football and Cheer*

Moderator: Patrick Escobar, *VP Grants & Programs, LA84 Foundation*



**One-on-one Interviews**

**Rebecca Carpenter**

Writer & Director, "My Dad's Brain"

**Robert Cantu**

Emerson Hospital, Concord, MA

**Thomas Dompier**

Datalys Center for Sports Injury Research & Prevention, Indianapolis

**Keith Johnson**

Falcons Youth and Family Services, Los Angeles





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## LA84 Foundation

The LA84 Foundation is endowed with surplus funds from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Our mission is to serve youth through sport and to increase knowledge of sport and its impact on people’s lives.

The Foundation has committed more than \$206 million to accomplish its mission since 1985. To date, more than 3 million boys and girls, and more than 1,100 youth sports organizations throughout Southern California have benefited from the endowment. They will be joined by many more in the years ahead.

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