

Listening to Wisdom from a 10-Year-Old Son about His Head Injury

By Adam Buckley Cohen
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“Dad, I’m scared. I only have one brain, and I don’t want to hurt it playing football.”

My son Will, his 10-year-old eyes filling with tears, was trying to decide whether to play quarterback in his peewee game against Roosevelt Elementary. Ten days earlier, he’d taken a helmet-to-helmet hit during practice and possibly, although we really don’t know, sustained a concussion. Now I wanted to help him make the right choice — if only I knew what that was.

For several years, I have been following the furor over football and head injuries. I’ve become all too familiar with accounts of N.F.L. veterans exhibiting Alzheimer’s-like symptoms in their 40s, of teenagers dying after playing too soon after a concussion. But these tragedies didn’t seem very relevant to my own life until Will took that first big hit.

I wasn’t there, but he told me afterward that he went to the sideline to lie down. He thinks one of the coaches checked on him, but he can’t remember. Because he fell asleep.

He fell asleep? Isn’t that the first thing they tell you to avoid in a head-injury situation? Was this the moment I’d been dreading since his mother (grudgingly) and I (excitedly) told him that, yes, he could play tackle football?

Was this a concussion?

Will spoke clearly, and his memory seemed intact. He did his homework with no trouble. In short, he seemed his usual, fifth-grade self. He returned to practice the next week, after a pediatric nurse practitioner assessed him — looked into his eyes, asked him a few questions — and cleared him. When she mentioned in passing the idea of seeing a neurologist, I shrugged it off.

I don’t know why, at this crucial moment, I didn’t remember all I’d read. Or why I didn’t discuss the situation with Will, the person affected most by my decision. He was fine, I decided. And everything seemed that way until the morning of the Roosevelt game, when he told me he didn’t want to play.

At first, he said only that his stomach hurt. But as I asked more questions, he brought up the subject of concussions. Will, it turns out, knew more than I realized. He’d read Troy Aikman’s account of being unable to remember a Super Bowl victory. He knew

that Steve Young had retired because of concussions. And he recognized that if he kept taking hits year after year, he could suffer the same fate — or worse.

As he explained his fears, I thought about why I wanted him to play that afternoon. Like most parents, I wanted my child to experience competition and learn the lessons that sports teach. There was more, though. I was using Will to live out the gridiron fantasy my mother had short-circuited when she'd forbidden me to play as a kid.

But when Will voiced his fears, I woke up. This was one of those moments that could have changed the lives of the children I've been reading about, kids who played through pain and got seriously hurt.

And so Will did not suit up against Roosevelt. Still, when he soon after informed his mother and me that he was ready to return to the team, we allowed him. He took his share of hits over the final few games, but he's already announced that he'd like to play football again next fall. We haven't yet decided what we'll do.

If we choose to let him take the field again, we'll do our best to learn from all of the information that's come to light. Before the season begins, we'll take Will to a neurologist for baseline testing. If he takes another hit like the one this season, he'll go back to the neurologist, who will do a proper examination to determine when, or even if, he's fit to return.

One day, helmets may come equipped with sensors that measure the impact of each blow a player takes. Perhaps neurologists will populate the sidelines in the same numbers as trainers and those guys who squirt electrolyte-replacement drinks into players' mouths. Whatever happens, we'll no doubt remember this era as one of those "before" times, much as we recall automobiles before seat belts and airbags or restaurants before smoking bans.

This Sunday afternoon, I am taking Will and his brother Theo to see our beloved Philadelphia Eagles. Theo will sport a Donovan McNabb jersey, and Will will don Brian Westbrook's 36. Only Westbrook won't be playing; he's out after sustaining a pair of concussions.

When I told Will that I wished Westbrook would play, he shook his head.

"He shouldn't play until he feels 100 percent better," Will said. "Because even though football is all he does, he still needs his brain."

Once again Will reminded me that no matter how many articles parents read, we can still learn plenty by listening to our children.