

It's no myth: Football is a killer

By Roger Brigham
Herald staff writer

Statistics show that 10 to 30 players will die or be crippled this season

Football today, watched and played by millions but studied by few, is a sport cloaked in myths.

One myth, born in the bloody days of leather helmets and clothesline tackles, says football is a killer sport, a violent activity as dangerous as bullfighting or hydroplane racing.

Another myth, inspired by the contemporary sight of gleaming hardshell helmets, bulky flak jackets and enormous shoulder pads, holds that football has become wimpified and sanitized, with players running no greater risk than a few days on the injury list.

Statistically, the truth is found on some middle ground, where experts speak in terms of catastrophic injuries, incidence per hundred thousand and direct and indirect causes of death. It's found on a field where those who swear by the sport weigh the tradeoff between slight but tragic risks and certain but subtle benefits.

For more than 1½ million athletes across the country this year, playing football will offer a chance to have fun, learn team values and improve self-discipline.

For a handful, however, this season will end in tragedy. Across the country right now, hauling in passes, tackling dummies or hitting blocking machines, are anywhere from 10 to 30 players who will be dead or crippled by season's end.

In this gambling crazy sport, that's the surest bet of all. Consider these numbers extrapolated by research conducted by the Annual Survey of Football Injury Research:

■ Last year 19 players, 17 of them high schoolers, died as a

direct or indirect result of football. That was more than double the number of deaths from the year before (nine) and the highest total since 20 died in 1982.

■ Of those 19 deaths, a dozen were the direct result of the fundamentals of the game: tackling, blocking and so forth. Eleven such deaths were suffered by high school players, the greatest number of fatal injuries at the prep level since 1976 — the year spearing was outlawed.

■ An average of 14.6 players a year have died as a direct or

indirect result of football in the past 10 seasons. The bulk of that is at the high school level, where the average is 11.9 deaths per season.

(And the toll already has started this season. Tim Conke, a defensive end at Southwest Missouri State, became the first known casualty this season when he died July 16. That death was attributed to a heart condition. Parnell Silvio of Indiana and Carleton Oats of Utah State both died of unknown causes Aug. 14.)

■ On the average, nearly 10 more players, 80 percent of them at the high school level, have been permanently paralyzed from spinal injuries in the past 10 years. Another 13 players, 10 of them at the high school level, have been

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SUDDEN DEATH

What every player, parent and fan should know about football

First of four parts

This represents the most important single project of my sportswriting career.

Shortly after I started work at the LA Herald Examiner in the summer of 1986, I spent nine months researching death and disability in football. I found no other newspaper had done any comprehensive reporting on the subject.

I piggybacked meetings with physicians, trainers, coaches, attorneys and players on to other assignments whenever I travelled. They were so eager to talk they asked me to put them in to contact with each other because no communications network existed for them

to share information.

At the end of my research, I took one week to write a weeklong series of stories that was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Specialized Journalism. The series reported on the conditions that made football hazardous and things that could be done to mitigate them; that the only research done into helmet safety was paid for by the helmet manufacturer; that insurance to cover catastrophic injuries for prep players would cost about \$3 per player but few states provided it and the NFL would not chip in; and the families of most catastrophically injured players were ruined financially.