

Why Football Matters, By John Harbaugh

By John Harbaugh

Football is under attack, but the game and the values it instills in young men are critical to our society.



The game of football is under attack.

We see it every day in the headlines and on the news. The medical concerns are pressing. The game has taken its share of criticism. President Barack Obama said that if he had boys he wouldn't let them play football. Even LeBron James has publicly said no football in his house.

The question is asked over and over: Why would anyone want to play football? And why would anyone let their kids play?

Here's my answer: I believe there's practically no other place where a young man is held to a higher standard.

Football is hard. It's tough. It demands discipline. It teaches obedience. It builds character.

Football is a metaphor for life.

This game asks a young man to push himself further than he ever thought he could go. It literally challenges his physical courage. It shows him what it means to sacrifice. It teaches him the importance of doing his job well. We learn to put others first, to be part of something bigger than ourselves. And we learn to lift our teammates – and ourselves – up together.

These are rare lessons nowadays.

Football has faced challenges like this before.

In 1905, **there were 19 player deaths** and at least 137 serious injuries. Many of these occurred at the high school and college levels. Major colleges said they were going to drop football because the game had become too violent.

That's when President Teddy Roosevelt stepped in to call a meeting with coaches and athletic advisers from Harvard, Princeton and Yale. He wanted to find a way to make the game safer. They made significant changes, introducing new rules like the forward pass and the wide receiver position. Those changes turned football more into the game we know it as today.

We made progress. Rules changed. Society evolved. The game advanced.

We're at another turning point in our sport. The concussion issue is real and we have to face it.

We have to continue to get players in better helmets. We have to teach tackling the right way, and that starts at the NFL level. Change the rules. Take certain things out of the game. It's all the right thing to do.

But even with all of that, the importance of football hasn't changed. In some ways, it's more important than ever.

And I believe the most critical place for football is at the youth and high school levels. For 97 percent of football players, the pinnacle of their careers is the high school game. Few players ever go on to the college level. Even less make it to the pros.

For a lot of these kids, it's not until it's all said and done, and they look back on it several years later, that they realize the difference the sport made in their lives. They are proud of playing the game. Have you ever met anybody who accomplished playing four years of high school football, and at the end of that run said, 'Man, I wish I wouldn't have played'? It doesn't get said.

We know that football players aren't perfect. Nobody is. But millions of former players, one by one, can recount the life-altering principles they learned from football.

They know the value *of* football is the values *in* football.

That's why high school football – and particularly high school coaches – play such a vital role in our society. Our football coaches are on the front lines of the battle for the hearts and minds of the young men in our society. The culture war is on and we see it every day. These young men are more vulnerable than ever.

How many youth and high school coaches serve as a father figure to their players? How many mothers look to the coaches of their son's football team as the last best hope to show their son what it means to become a man – a real man? More than we'll ever know.

Coaches teach our young people the lessons of life that very often they learn from no one else. Coaches have the kind of influence in our schools, and with our young people, that is difficult to come by.

Billy Graham once said, "One coach will influence more people in one year than the average person will do in a lifetime." My dad also says all the time that it just takes one person to believe in a young man or young woman to change their lives. I couldn't agree more.

Our culture teaches us to judge an activity by how it's going to make us feel right now. But football doesn't work that way. The game challenges and pushes us. It's often uncomfortable. It requires us to be at our best.

Isn't that what we want in our society?

Football is a great sport. Football teams can be, and very often are, the catalyst for good in our schools and our communities. Millions of young men have learned lessons in football that they could only learn through playing this game. Football has saved lives.

That is why football matters.