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County Council
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My name is Ruth Becker. I live in Chevy Chase and my son, Matan, is a junior at B-CC and proud Baron football player. This letter to council considers the risk of Covid transmission in football and offers suggestions for a safer return to play.

In particular, my testimony seeks to address concerns raised by County Health Officer and Chief of Public Health Services Dr. Travis Gayles during the county council session on Tuesday, March 16, 2021. Noting that organizations such as the Maryland Public Secondary School Association and the National Federation of State High School Association have recently recommended removing risk categories associated with different sports, Dr. Gayles remarked that notwithstanding the changes, "The factors that originally drove our public health guidance… have not changed, and continue to raise concerns regarding the risk associated with those activities" -- i.e. sports including football. Those factors were previously noted as: level of contact; proximity between players; and the duration of contact between players.

In this regard, and in the hope of serving the council's aim of guiding a safe and equitable return to youth sports in Montgomery County, I offer the following for consideration:

1. The duration and proximity of contact between football players during games does not pose a significantly-elevated risk of Covid-19 transmission. Data from this past fall's SEC football season revealed that players are unlikely to transmit the virus to one another during the course of play. The SEC had outfitted players in tracking devices underneath their shoulder pads that measured proximity to other players during the course of games. Through three games, the data led researchers to conclude that, "few players from opposing teams spend enough time close enough to one another over the course of a game to be considered high-risk contacts (six feet for 15 minutes)." Often, the amount of time players were in close contact with one another during the course of a game was much less.

2. Mask use and outdoor play significantly reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission in football. The latest guidelines from the CDC, the American Pediatric Association, and the NFHS all agree that in addition to considering the duration and proximity of contact between players, guidelines governing youth sports should consider the context in which contact between players occurs, including mask use and whether an activity takes place indoors or outdoors. Significantly, these recommendations derive in part from a joint effort between the

CDC and the National Football League:

In a paper jointly authored by the CDC and NFL following the NFL's testing and contact tracing programs this past season, researchers found that Covid transmission may occur in less than 15 minutes of interaction and at distances of more than six feet apart. Crucially, however, the NFL learned that **proximity and duration were not the only factors that determined how risky contact was:** Interviews revealed that where the virus was likely transmitted between players in less than 15 minutes of close contact, contact may have occurred in unmasked meetings in small rooms, while eating or drinking, or while sharing rides in personal vehicles.

Following a cluster of such cases, the NFL adopted a number of league-wide changes including adopting a risk assessment model that accounted not only for the duration and proximity of contact between individuals, but also considered both face mask use and the setting in which contact took place -- including whether contact occurred outdoors or indoors. To this extent, **"mask use and outdoor settings were considered protective."**

At the same time, the NFL also adopted a number of strict mitigation protocols for transmission prevention, including quarantine for high-risk contacts, closing eating areas, and strict mask requirements. Together with the expanded understanding of which contacts were riskiest, these measures prevented spread of the virus within the NFL environment.

Of course the MCPS football and the NFL are different environments, and MCPS can hardly match the robust testing and contact tracing implemented by the NFL -- or SEC -- and arguably, MCPS students are less likely to be compliant with the mitigation measures that are put in place than professional or college players are. Still, the NFL study has clear implications for public health practice: It's clear that considering the context of interactions, including whether masks are worn and whether interaction is indoors or outdoors, in addition to considering duration and proximity, would greatly improve risk-assessment efforts.

3. Finally, physical contact between players -- including tackling -- does not pose a significantly-elevated risk of Covid-19 transmission. During the March 16 council meeting, Dr. Gayles suggested that the county's public health guidelines had considered the "level of contact" between players, and should continue to do so. This is appropriate insofar as the county's guidelines distinguish between "contact" for the purposes of Covid transmission risk assessment, on one hand, and physical contact between players in the course of play, on the other. The county's guidelines should consider transmission risk only, and not physical contact.

Researchers expecting sports with high levels of physical contact have been surprised to find no link between Covid transmission and on-field contact. In a recent study published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, researchers considered viral transmission in the course of rugby games. Theorizing that "the repeated close contact interactions between participants during a match represent .. opportunities for transmission … via droplets, aerosols and fomites," researchers analyzed video footage and GPS data from a series of professional rugby matches in which participating players subsequently tested positive for Covid-19.

What they found surprised them: The researchers found that “despite tackle involvements and close proximity interactions,” they could not identify any cases in which players transmitted the virus to others on the field, even where players were presumably contagious at the time of the game. This led the research team to conclude that “the classification of rugby as a ‘high risk’ … should be re-evaluated.”

While the data-set is small, and football differs in certain crucial respects from rugby, the conclusions are instructive: There is no reason to believe that tackling -- or anything else -- makes football riskier than any other sport.

Indeed, similar studies of sports with physical contact have not demonstrated any link between on-field physical contact and viral transmission. Recently, in order to evaluate the risk of viral transmission associated with contact sports, researchers studied 1,337 professional soccer players in Qatar. The results were clear: “No infection could be traced to training or matches,” the researchers concluded.

Finally, a quick note: The Maryland Sports Commission’s Return to Play report seemed to suggest that football was a particularly “high-risk” sport because equipment had to be shared among players. While there is scant evidence at this point in the pandemic of fomite transmission of the virus, MCPS football players have nevertheless been issued pads and helmets that they will keep -- and not share -- for the duration of the football season.

How else can we ensure a safe return to play?

While the study of Qatari soccer players revealed infections traceable to on-field play, players still became infected with the coronavirus. The biggest risks? “Social contacts and family.”

To this end, health officials have already done well to remind players and their families to take appropriate precautions off the field in order to protect teammates and, once they begin to return to MCPS high schools in large numbers next month, fellow students. (Notably, the vast majority of MCPS high school students set to return will only do so once the scheduled 3-game season is well underway.)

And health officials are leading the way on mask-wearing, testing, and contact tracing.

In addition, **health officials must urge players to maintain social-distancing on sidelines and during water breaks.**

While last fall’s SEC football tracking data did not show high-risk contact between players from opposing teams during games, the data *did* show high-risk contact among players on the same team, either on the sidelines -- or in huddles, which must be discouraged, for now.

Similarly, the CDC-NFL study suggests that eating and drinking in close proximity to others poses particular risk for Covid transmission. Guidelines must accordingly insist on strict social distancing guidelines whenever possible -- and especially when players remove their masks to drink water, or for any other purpose.

Finally, the CDC-NFL study also found that ridesharing in personal vehicles poses particular risk for Covid transmission. So health officials should remind players to choose among the safest available means to travel to and from games and practices, urging mask-wearing and ventilation where ridesharing is unavoidable.

I hope the above is of use in your deliberations. Thank you for your efforts to keep our student-athletes and community safe.

Ruth Becker