

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS  
**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE

2125 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6115

Majority (202) 225-2927  
Minority (202) 225-3641

October 17, 2017

Mr. Scott Hallenbeck  
Executive Director  
USA Football  
45 N. Pennsylvania St.  
Suite 700  
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Dear Mr. Hallenbeck:

We are writing to request an update on USA Football's efforts to improve the safety of youth football programs and its process for evaluating player safety.

On October 13, 2017, Congressional Democrats from the Committees on Judiciary and Energy and Commerce convened a forum to hear from experts and players. The experts were clear: tackle football, particularly at young ages, poses significant safety concerns. Studies have shown that athletes who begin playing tackle football before the age of 12 are at greater risk of developing cognitive and memory problems as adults.<sup>1</sup> USA Football currently promotes a youth tackle football program and a flag football program for younger children.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, USA Football began developing a modified version of tackle football specifically for younger players.<sup>3</sup> This third program, referred to as "rookie tackle," uses smaller teams and playing fields and has rules intended to reduce player contact.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Not Safe for Children? Football's Leaders Make Drastic Changes to Youth Game*, New York Times (Jan. 31, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> USA Football, *The New Advancement in Youth Football Development: The Modified Game* ([web.usafootball.com/blogs/modified-tackle/post/13247/the-new-advancement-in-youth-football-development:-the-modified-game](http://web.usafootball.com/blogs/modified-tackle/post/13247/the-new-advancement-in-youth-football-development:-the-modified-game)) (accessed Aug. 29, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> *Big Rule Changes Could Make Youth Football Games A Whole Lot Smaller*, NPR (Feb. 1, 2017).

USA Football asserts that the development of rookie tackle “relied heavily on research and advice from medical and youth football experts.”<sup>5</sup> However, USA Football’s selection and use of experts to study the effectiveness of its programs has previously come into question.<sup>6</sup> In August 2016, we wrote to USA Football requesting more information after the *New York Times* reported that the organization used misleading statistics to promote the effectiveness of its Heads Up Football player safety program.<sup>7</sup> In your response, dated September 13, 2016, you described USA Football’s intention to improve efforts to ensure the accuracy of future studies it endorses, and you committed to working with the Committee to improve player safety.<sup>8</sup> We seek to understand how rookie tackle aligns with that commitment.

USA Football stated that the rules of rookie tackle are not yet finalized and that there are no plans for a wide rollout of the game.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the *New York Times* quoted the coach who ran USA Football’s first rookie tackle scrimmages as saying that, although initial signs were positive, “much more work needed to be done to determine if this version of the game was safer” than tackle football.<sup>10</sup> We therefore request a response from USA Football to explore the following:

1. What research and methods is USA Football employing to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of the rookie tackle program?
2. USA Football describes rookie tackle as a bridge between flag football and tackle football that “introduces tackle football to younger players.”<sup>11</sup>
  - a. What age groups generally participate in flag football and tackle football programs?
  - b. What age groups are playing rookie tackle in the current pilot?

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<sup>5</sup> See note 3.

<sup>6</sup> *N.F.L.-Backed Youth Program Says It Reduced Concussions. The Data Disagrees.*, New York Times (Jul. 27, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Rep. Jan Schakowsky, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, et al, to Scott Hallenbeck, Executive Director, USA Football (Aug. 23, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Scott Hallenbeck, Executive Director, USA Football, to Rep. Jan Schakowsky, Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade, House Committee on Energy and Commerce, et al, (Sep. 13, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> See note 4.


<sup>10</sup> See note 1.

<sup>11</sup> See note 3.

- c. Is there an age at which USA Football believes tackle football and rookie tackle are inappropriate?
3. Does USA Football have a timeline for a wider rollout of the rookie tackle program? If so, what is that timeline?
4. In your September 2016 letter, you mentioned USA Football's efforts to ensure the accuracy of scientific studies it endorses, including a proposed audit of data collection methods and requiring future studies to be published and peer reviewed.<sup>12</sup> What is the current status of these efforts?

Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions, please contact the Democratic Committee staff at (202) 225-3641.

Sincerely,



Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Ranking Member



Gene Green  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Health



Diana DeGette  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight  
and Investigations



Jan Schakowsky  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Digital Commerce  
and Consumer Protection

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<sup>12</sup> See note 8.