

Football grew more than any other youth sport

BY MARCUS E. HOWARD
REUTERS

NEW YORK — Football was the fastest-growing American sport for young players last year, according to a survey sponsored by the sport's governing body.

But it was the game's no-tackle variety that showed the biggest increase — a finding that may reflect concerns about injury.

The number of participants in flag and tackle football grew in 2015 while most other sports, except baseball, posted a decline, USA Football said on Monday,

citing the findings of a survey of 30,000 children and teenagers.

Participation in no-tackle flag football grew by 8.7 percent among children aged 6 to 14, while tackle football rose 1.9 percent. For that age group, the only other sport that grew was baseball, with a 3.3 percent increase. All told, there were 102 sports in the survey.

In the 15-to-18 age group, flag football rose 10.5 percent, while tackle grew by 2.5 percent. Basketball was third, with a 1.1 percent increase. Participation in all other sports shrank.

Tom Farrey, executive director of the Aspen Institute's Sports & Society Program, said he believed the data on participation was bolstered by a 2007 baby boom. Even so, he was surprised that flag football participation rose so much.

"The trend suggests parents are marching to the beat of a different drummer, in pursuing flag as an alternative for their kids," he said.

The findings come at a time of increasing concern about the hazards associated with youth sports, particularly hockey and football, where medical researchers

have warned about the risk of concussions and death linked to brain injury.

A 2014 ESPN poll for ESPNW and the Aspen Institute found that 87.9 percent of parents had concerns about the risk of injury in youth sports.

USA Football, an Indianapolis, Indiana-based non-profit funded in part by the NFL, attributed the increases to better safety and health education.

"Football participation increases, even modest increases, may signal that medically endorsed programs, including our Heads

Up Football program and practice guidelines, are making a positive difference," said Scott Hallenbeck, USA Football chief executive, in a statement.

To cut the risk to players, for example, the Ivy League earlier this year became the first college conference to consider banning tackling during practices.

The 2015 movie "Concussion," starring Will Smith, helped fuel a national conversation about the safety issues associated with football. It tells the story of a Nigerian pathologist who challenged the NFL with his

research into brain damage suffered by professional football players.

Robert Cantu, a Boston University neurosurgery professor and investigator at the school's Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) Center, said the increase in flag football participation signaled that more parents are directing children to a safer alternative.

The survey, part of the annual Physical Activity Council Participation Report, was based on interviews with people aged 6 to 18. Sports Marketing Surveys USA led the research.

DE Long visiting with Patriots

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

Free agent defensive end Chris Long, who was released by the Los Angeles Rams last month, is visiting with the New England Patriots on Monday.

Long has played his entire career with the Rams, who drafted him No. 2 overall in 2008.

Long, who turns 31 this month, was limited to 18 total games the past two seasons because of injuries.

The son of Hall of Fame defensive end Howie Long, Chris Long played in 114 games with 54.5 sacks in St. Louis.

The Patriots don't seem to need another defensive end with the return of starters Chandler Jones and Rob Ninkovich, top backup Jabbaal Sheard and 2015 draft picks Geneo Grissom (third round) and Trey Flowers (fourth round).

Long is expected to visit with the Dallas Cowboys this week. He has already met with the Atlanta Falcons and Washington Redskins.

"I'm in no hurry," Long said last week on SiriusXM NFL Radio. "I know that some teams probably want to get things done, but I'm going to make the right decision. I've got a couple more visits. After I'm done with those next week, I bet you I'll know what I'm going to do. When you spend eight years in one place, your next decision needs to be the right one. I think I'm just being very patient."

NFL NOTEBOOK

Steelers' coach says NFL rescinded hair-pulling fine

Pittsburgh Steelers offensive line coach Mike Munchak said the NFL rescinded the \$10,000 fine for his hair-pulling scuffle with Cincinnati Bengals safety Reggie Nelson on the sideline during January's AFC wild-card game.

"The NFL has rescinded my fine after reviewing the video," Munchak told the Houston Chronicle at a Special Olympics fundraiser Sunday.

Munchak told ESPN on Friday at Ohio State's pro day that he appealed the fine and told the league his grab of Nelson's long hair was inadvertent.

On the play, Nelson flew into Pittsburgh's sideline on an attempt to tackle running back Jordan Todman. Nelson bumped into Munchak and the two appeared to push each other. Munchak caught some of Nelson's long hair with the same hand that he used to carry the offensive play sheet.

Munchak was assessed a 15-yard penalty for the interaction on the Pittsburgh sideline.

The penalty was one of many ugly incidents during the Jan. 9 game, won by the Steelers 18-16, including costly penalties against Bengals cornerback Adam Jones and linebacker Vontaze Burfict.

Jones was initially fined \$28,940 for making contact with an official while arguing with Steelers assistant coach Joey Porter, but that fine was reduced to \$12,500 on appeal.

Porter was fined \$10,000 for being on the field after



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St. Louis Rams defensive end Chris Long at Rams Park in August.

Steelers wide receiver Antonio Brown was knocked out from a vicious hit by Burfict. The NFL suspended Burfict three games for repeated violations of the league's rules on player safety, and his appeal was denied.

Fitzpatrick, Jets 'far apart' in contract talks

Ryan Fitzpatrick wants to return to the New York Jets and the team apparently feels the same. The bridge separating the journeyman quarterback from the franchise is compensation.

Fitzpatrick feels the Jets are offering him the equivalent of a low-end starter or

high-end backup salary, ESPN reported on Monday, saying the sides remained "far apart."

Robert Griffin III met with the Jets last week, but the team termed it "due diligence" and said no contract parameters were discussed.

New running back Matt Forte said he knows Fitzpatrick will be "a big part of" who the Jets are in 2016.

"Based off last year's production, and the way Brandon (Marshall) has talked about the chemistry he's built with Ryan, I would expect and hope it would be him, just based off what they had last year," Forte said on a conference call.

NASCAR

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Harvick gained entry to the postseason Chase, became the fourth different winner in four races and his Stewart-Haas Racing team became the fourth different team in victory lane this year.

Harvick is nicknamed Happy for three reasons. First, it's pretty obvious when he's happy. And, it's also obvious when he's not. Often, he's just plain stoic. After winning his fifth race at Phoenix in six starts by not much more than a front splitter, Harvick was relieved as much as anything, describing himself as "lucky as hell."

He's supposed to win on the mile oval where he has eight victories, four of them with Stewart-Haas. Harvick's only loss at Phoenix in the last six races occurred last fall when Dale Earnhardt Jr. took a rain-shortened victory, which turned into an upside down Happy day.

"I know that you leave here and you don't win, you're disappointed," said Harvick of the expectations he has coming into the desert mile. "We had the rain situation last time, and we were all fairly distraught over the situation and not winning the race. It's a pressured situation that when you come here, your team and your guys and yourself, you expect to be in contention to win the race, but

sometimes circumstances dictate exactly what happens at the end of the race."

Would Harvick have been more aggressive had he been the overtaking driver instead of Edwards?

"I don't think there's any real love lost between the two of us," he said. "You know, I knew that I was going to get hit, and I'm going to hit him in the same type of manner, just for the fact that I don't want to spin him out. But you definitely want to rough him up because that's not the guy that I want to lose to, and I know he doesn't want to lose to me."

So these two guys are not chummy, although they did have an amicable conversation after the race. One of those where the winner

swears on a stack of metaphorical bibles he would have done the same thing as the loser.

Did the race fan who wants to see "win at all costs" and fists flailing at race's end get short-changed? It's hard to argue against a finish decided by 0.010 seconds and contact on three occasions en route to the checkered flag. In the end, the longtime leader who almost got caught out by a late caution was able to hold the lead despite guys pitting behind him for fresh rubber. (If leader Harvick had pitted, of course, several others, including Edwards, would have stayed out and Harvick would have lost too much track position to make it back to the front.)

Celtics

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quite a balancing act without him, and we're going to have to have guys step up and play. We'll probably end up playing a little more traditional because of that, and we'll see."

The timing of the injury is also a problem, with the Celtics beginning a stretch of three games in four nights Tuesday in Indiana against the Pacers and following with the Oklahoma City on

Wednesday and the Toronto Raptors on Friday.

"I think it's a heck of a challenge when you look at our week ahead, right, with (the Pacers' Paul) George, (the Thunder's Kevin) Durant and (the Raptors' DeMar) DeRozan, bang-bang-bang," Stevens said. "But that's this league. That's why long, athletic, versatile guys are in such demand in this league. So, again, we may be a little bit smaller at times at the 3 and we may be bigger than we've been at times at the 4. We'll see how it all plays itself

out and pans out, but we've got a lot of good players, and it's a great opportunity for them. And it's a great opportunity for some of our younger players maybe to take a more pivotal role than they have thus far."

While Jordan Mickey has certainly looked good in limited minutes, the young players to whom Stevens is referring are guards James Young, who was brought back from the D-League because of Crowder's injury, R.J. Hunter and Terry Rozier.

"(Young) shot the heck out

of it today," Stevens said of the second-year swingman's practice performance. "The one thing James has done is he's gotten good game reps in because he's also played in Maine. He had a good practice today. But I thought Terry was one of our better players, from the standpoint of limited amount of time the other day (Friday) and impacting that particular game. And then R.J.'s had his moments, too, so I think we will lean on that (trio) by committee and by feel of opponent probably."

WNIT

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The WNIT, initiated in 1998, provides an automatic berth to a representative of each of the 32 Division I conferences. They go to the teams not selected for the NCAA tournament that finished highest in the regular-

season standings.

The remaining 32 at-large berths are filled with the best teams available, that have a record of .500 or better including conference tournament games.

Among the 64 WNIT entries, UMaine (60th) ranks 10th in the NCAA Rating Percentage Index. Top teams in the field include No. 37 Texas El Paso (Conference

USA), No. 38 Western Kentucky (C-USA) and No. 43 Arkansas State (Sun Belt).

Other qualifiers from the Northeast include Rutgers of the Big Ten, Villanova (Big East), Temple (American), Hofstra (Colonial Athletic Association), Drexel (CAA), Quinnipiac (Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference), Sacred Heart (Northeast Conference), Harvard

(Ivy League) and Bucknell (Patriot League).

Last season, UMaine's appearance in the WNIT was brief as the Black Bears dropped a 71-60 decision at Villanova.

UMaine is making its fifth WNIT appearance, having also played in 1990, 2003, 2005 and 2015. The Black Bears' only victory came in 1990 against Wyoming (68-48).

NCAA investigating men's bracket leak

THE SPORTS XCHANGE

The NCAA is initiating an investigation after the full bracket for the men's basketball tournament was leaked online early into CBS's Sunday selection show.

"We go to great lengths to prevent the tournament field from being revealed early and the NCAA took its usual measures to prevent this from happening," the NCAA said in a statement Sunday night. "Unfortunately, and regrettably, the bracket was revealed prior

to our broadcast partners having the opportunity to finish unveiling it. We take this matter seriously and we are looking into it."

The selection show, which started at 5:30 p.m., was extended to two hours this year. But the entire bracket was posted by an anonymous Twitter account by 6:20 p.m. After first being received with skepticism, it proved to be 100 percent accurate.

The original posting of the bracket and the entire account that sent it out disappeared from Twitter late Sunday evening.

NCAA

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Trojans won 29 games in a brilliant reconstruction job by first-year coach Chris Beard, a former Bob Knight assistant at Texas Tech, and if they can adequately defend the taller Boilermakers inside, they might pull off a stunner.

Iona is a threat to Iowa State in the 4-13 matchup, particularly if Iona's defense can come up with a formula to at least slow down the high-powered Cyclones. Iowa State has been leaky on defense and the Gaels will be eager to prove they can run with one of the Big 12's top teams. And if one is inclined to go by seeding, 11th-seeded Gonzaga is certainly a candidate to dump sixth-seeded Seton Hall in Denver as long as its guard play is decent, because the frontcourt of forward Kyle Wiltjer and center Domantas Sabonis is capable of dominating.

SOUTH

No. 13 seed Hawaii has been a good story, the champion of the Big West tournament to advance to the NCAAs for the first time since 2002. The Rainbow Warriors have the size and skill to compete with Cal in the first round, and senior point guard Roderick Bobbitt (13.5 points, 5.6 assists per game) is a kid from Oakland who will have a chip on his shoulder against the Bears. Bobbitt poured in 32 in a three-point loss to Oklahoma in December. Center

Stefan Jankovic (15.9 ppg) will be a tough matchup for Cal's centers, who are fouling machines.

No. 6 Arizona will get the winner of the best "play-in" game ever — Vanderbilt vs. Wichita State. That will be a tough opening opponent for Arizona, which doesn't have the raw talent of its Elite Eight teams from the past two seasons, but the Wildcats will always be a tough out. They took West No. 1 seed Oregon to overtime after being down 17 in the second half in the Pac-12 tournament. Any better-seeded team can't afford an off day against a rugged rebounding effort with a pair of 23-year-olds on the front line.

WEST

Teams seeded fifth in the NCAA Tournament historically are vulnerable to first-round upsets, posting a modest 50-44 record against No. 12 seeds. In fact, a 12th-seeded team has knocked off a No. 5 every year except 1988, 2000, 2007 and 2015 under the current format since the field expanded to 64-plus teams in 1985. Eighteen of the 44 victorious No. 12 seeds went on to reach the Sweet 16.

Can 12th-seeded Yale turn this region into the Wild West? The Bulldogs, making their first NCAA Tournament appearance since 1962, could present problems for No. 5 Baylor. Yale, led by sophomore point guard Makai Mason and senior forward Justin Sears, won 17 of its past 18 games. The Bears lost three of their past four.

Cimbollek

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The men have won more than 1,100 games, an average of almost 20 wins per season and have been to 18 national tournaments.

Caruso, who also played for Husson, is the leading active Maine college men's coach in wins with 432.

On the women's side, Walker has led the Eagles to eight national tournaments with a 1993 NAIA Final Four appearance.

She has compiled 23 winning seasons in 24 years of coaching Husson teams. An outstanding point guard while playing at the University of Maine, she brought her point-guard mentality of making good basketball decisions to Husson.

Walker has the second most total wins, 446, as an active Maine college women's basketball coach.

Next season she will break the record for most years as a Husson coach as she is currently tied with MacGregor at 24.

This past season both teams went 21-7, won the regular season NAC titles, hosted the NAC tournneys

and won both tournneys before losing in the first round of the NCAA Division III tournneys.

Both teams count on Maine players. This year's men's team had six and the women had 10, including five from Aroostook County.

Both of the Eagles programs have flown a little under the state's college basketball media radar over the years, as Division I UMaine in Orono garners a lot of attention over the course of a season, regardless of how successful Husson has been. Yes, the UMaine women's program has been successful, but the men's program continues to struggle.

I'm a 1959 Husson grad and obviously favor those programs over others such as UMaine. As an alum and former Husson player, I couldn't be prouder of what Husson has done on the basketball court under the leadership of their coaches as well as the stature it has gained as an educational institution that is now a university.

Bob Cimbollek is a retired high school basketball coach and athletic director.