



NATIONAL FOOTBALL
FOUNDATION

PRESENTS

ANNUAL REPORT ON FOOTBALL

2025-2026 SEASON

FUTURE FOR FOOTBALL

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"The future for football remains strong at every level of the sport. It is inclusive, builds community and provides many educational and leadership opportunities. **Simply put: it is the greatest of all American sports."**



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Steve J. Hatchell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steve" and last name "Hatchell" clearly legible.

STEVE HATCHELL

President and Chief Executive Officer
National Football Foundation & College Hall of Fame, Inc.



GROWTH OF THE GAME

Football is the most popular sport in the United States.

Football provides many benefits to those who play through association with a team or organization and as part of a community.

Football provides opportunities for band members, cheerleaders, coaches, the community, managers, media, parents, players, referees, trainers, videographers, and many more.

Over the years, many organizations (at all different levels) have worked to make the game better and will continue to do so.

Women's involvement in football has increased significantly.

Rules changes, guidance issued on coaching techniques, and tech advancements at all levels have helped make the game better.

3.8 MILLION
YOUTH PLAYERS

1.07+ MILLION
HS PLAYERS

81,000+ COLLEGE PLAYERS

85% graduation success rate
of FBS students
(70% general student body)

80% graduation
success rate of
FCS students

777 COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES NATIONWIDE
offer football programs

**52 COLLEGES
AND UNIVERSITIES**
added programs in the last
decade (2021-2025)

**9 COLLEGES
AND UNIVERSITIES**
will add football programs
in 2026 and beyond

GROWTH OF THE GAME

INSIGHTS

YOUTH STATS

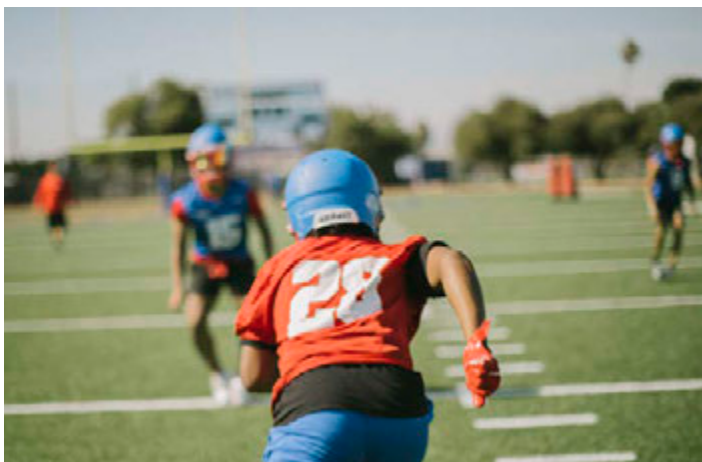
- More than 1.07 Million Players (est.) in High School (NFHS)¹
- 3.8 Million Youth Players (est.)²
- Youth Flag Football Participation Has Surged 40% Since 2019²

COLLEGIATE STATS

- 777 Colleges & Universities Playing Football at All Levels (FBS, FCS, Div. II, Div. III, NAIA and more)
- 81,000(+) College Football Players in NCAA & NAIA
- 96 Colleges & Universities Added Football Programs since 2008
- 9 Colleges & Universities Will Add Football Programs in 2026 and Beyond
- 143 Colleges & Universities Offering Women's Flag Football as a Varsity Sport⁸
- 123 Junior Colleges Offering Football

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED

- Student-athletes outperform their peers academically — with an 85% graduation success rate among Football Bowl Subdivision players and 80% among Football Championship Subdivision athletes — significantly higher than the 67% federal graduation rate of the general student body.³
- NCAA Divisions I and II schools provide almost \$4 billion in athletic scholarships annually to more than 196,000 student-athletes.⁴





INCREASED WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE GAME

The presence of women in football has steadily increased at every level of the game.

NFL

- As of June 2025, the NFL has 12 of its 32 teams with a woman as a controlling or significantly active owner.⁵
- The 2024 NFL season saw a record 15 full-time coaching positions held by women, up 47% from 2021, and the most of any male professional sports league in the world.⁶
- In 2023, a record high 42.5 percent of employees in the NFL League Office were female, a modest increase from 41.3 in 2022.⁷

COLLEGE

- At least 143 colleges and universities now compete in women's flag football as a varsity sport. The number eclipses 200 when including club programs, including 65 in the NCAA. In the 2025-26 season, the NAIA will boast at least 35 teams with three conferences.⁸⁻⁹
- In 2025, Alabama State became the first NCAA Division I program to field a varsity women's flag team.¹⁰

INCREASED WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE GAME [CONT.]

HIGH SCHOOL/YOUTH

- Sixteen states now sanction girls flag football as a varsity championship sport, with ten states adding the sport since 2023. The 16 states that have sanctioned girls flag football includes Florida (2001), Alaska (2004), Nevada (2015), Georgia (2019), Alabama (2021), New York (2023), Arizona (2023) California (2024), Illinois (2024), Tennessee (2024), Colorado (2024) Hawaii (2024), Pennsylvania (2024), Mississippi (2025), Washington (2025) and Ohio (2025).¹¹
- Schools sponsoring football reached their second-highest total in history, with 14,269 programs nationwide.¹

POPULARITY OF THE GAME

Football is the most popular sport in the United States by multiple metrics and its popularity is growing around the world.

ATTENDANCE & VIEWERSHIP

- The average crowd size of an NFL game during the 2024 regular season rose to 69,555, an increase of 0.45% from 2023. This came with increased inventory with the league adding a 17th game.¹²
- 31 FBS programs achieved an average attendance rate of 100% stadium capacity or higher in 2024.¹³
- Of the Top 100 most-watched TV shows of 2024, 72 of those were NFL games and another 4 were college football games.¹⁴
- For a third straight year, the NFL set Thanksgiving Day viewership records, averaging 34.2 million for each of its three holiday games. Digital streaming for all three games delivered an average minute audience of 1.1 million, a Thanksgiving Day record and 36% jump from 2023.¹⁵
- Super Bowl LIX averaged 127.7 million viewers in the U.S. across television and streaming platforms, a 3% increase from last year, making it the most watched event in American television history for a second-straight year.¹⁶
- 33 non-College Football Playoff bowl games averaged 2.7 million viewers, marking a 14% year-over-year increase, including a 21% gain with viewers aged 18-49.¹⁷
- The FCS Championship Game between North Dakota State and Montana State drew 2.4 million viewers, the second-most-watched FCS Championship on record.¹⁷

- ABC averaged 5.8 million viewers for 46 regular season games, an increase of 56% over the previous season, and was ABC's best college football season in 15 years (since 2009). ABC's Saturday Night Football averaged 7.4 million viewers, an 89% year-over-year increase. Ten games on the Disney/ESPN networks drew more than 9 million viewers, the highest number in nearly three decades.¹⁸
- The NFL's Christmas Day double-header streamed on Netflix averaged 30 million global viewers per game, being reached in 218 countries and territories around the world.¹⁹
- ESPN's College GameDay had its most-watched season in the program's 38-year history, averaging 2.2 million viewers per show, a 5% increase from its previous season high.²⁰

POPULARITY OF THE GAME - MISC.

- A 2024 Gallup Poll asked Americans what is their favorite sport to watch. 41% chose football, with baseball at 10% and basketball 9%. ²¹
- Approximately 20 million people in 100 countries across the world play flag football.²²





PARTICIPATION

PARTICIPATION

INSIGHTS

Exhibit 1: National Federation of High School Associations:
Total Participation in High School Football¹

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2021-22	2023-24	2024-25
Boys 6 Man	4,438	4,546	5,102	5,275	6,696	6,806	6,760
Boys 8 Man	19,195	19,514	19,554	20,954	20,243	26,297	22,032
Boys 9 Man	5,310	5,278	4,971	4,992	7,996	5,845	6,305
Boys 11 Man	1,080,693	1,057,382	1,036,842	1,006,013	973,792	1,031,508	1,029,588
Boys Tackle Total	1,109,636	1,086,720	1,066,469	1,037,234	1,008,727	1,070,456	1,065,685
Boys Flag	1,226	1,210	1,144	945	685	999	825
Boys Total	1,110,862	1,087,930	1,067,613	1,038,179	1,009,412	1,071,455	1,065,510
Girls Tackle	2,120	2,143	2,401	2,604	3,633	4,295	4,969
Girls Flag	10,867	11,254	11,007	11,209	15,716	42,955	68,847
Girls Total	12,987	13,397	13,408	13,813	19,349	47,250	73,816

Exhibit 2: National Federation of High School Associations:
High School Football Programs¹

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2021-22	2023-24	2024-25
Boys 6 Man	250	259	317	373	394	374	346
Boys 8 Man	834	841	847	946	1,069	1,143	1,060
Boys 9 Man	265	258	243	244	327	289	277
Boys 11 Man	14,047	14,099	14,079	14,247	13,733	13,788	14,269
Boys Tackle Total	15,396	15,457	15,486	15,810	15,523	15,594	15,952
Boys Flag	69	76	56	33	40	51	47
Boys Total	15,465	15,533	15,542	15,843	15,563	15,645	15,999
Girls Tackle	613	706	735	1,998	2,584	2,250	2,495
Girls Flag	359	420	350	378	662	1,777	2,736
Girls Total	972	1,126	1,085	2,375	3,246	4,027	5,231



SAFETY

FOOTBALL IS NOT THE MOST DANGEROUS SPORT

In 2024, the NFL players suffered the fewest concussions since the NFL began tracking the data nine years ago. Overall, this historic drop was a 17% decline from 2023. The NFL’s chief medical officer credited safer equipment, enforcement of safety rules and broader efforts to foster a culture of safety regarding concussions.²³⁻²⁴

Year	Preseason			Regular Season			Preseason + Regular Season		
	Game	Practice	Total	Game	Practice	Total	Game	Practice	Total

2015-2020*: 4 PRESEASON GAMES AND 16 REGULAR SEASON GAMES PER TEAM

2015	54	29	83	183	9	192	237	38	275
2016	45	26	71	166	6	172	211	32	243
2017	46	45	91	179	11	190	225	56	281
2018	34	45	79	127	8	135	161	53	214
2019	49	30	79	136	9	145	185	39	224
2020*	N/A	30	30	129	13	142	129	42	172

2021-2024*: 3 PRESEASON GAMES AND 17 REGULAR SEASON GAMES PER TEAM

2021	22	30	52	126	9	135	148	39	187
2022	27	25	52	149	12	161	176	37	213
2023	32	26	58	152	9	161	184	35	219
2024	26	18	44	129	9	138	155	27	182

FOOTBALL IS NOT THE MOST DANGEROUS SPORT (CONT.)

- The NFL recently announced the decision to stop teams from supplying smelling salts, ultimately making the game safer, as the substance is known to mask concussion symptoms, potentially delay diagnosis, and risk worsening head or neck injuries, without any proven performance benefits.²⁵
- In a 2025 analysis of 116 studies, the list of sports most prone to incidents of concussions in youth saw football fall to fourth behind Taekwondo, rugby and ice hockey.²⁶
- A 2023 study of all NCAA sports found that women gymnasts experienced a concussion rate 50% higher than football players.²⁷
- The total number of direct traumatic injury-related deaths in football at all levels of play declined 26% the past 10 years compared to the previous 10 years.²⁸







RULE CHANGES, GUIDANCE & COACHING ADVANCEMENTS

Rules are consistently being evaluated and modified to make the game better.

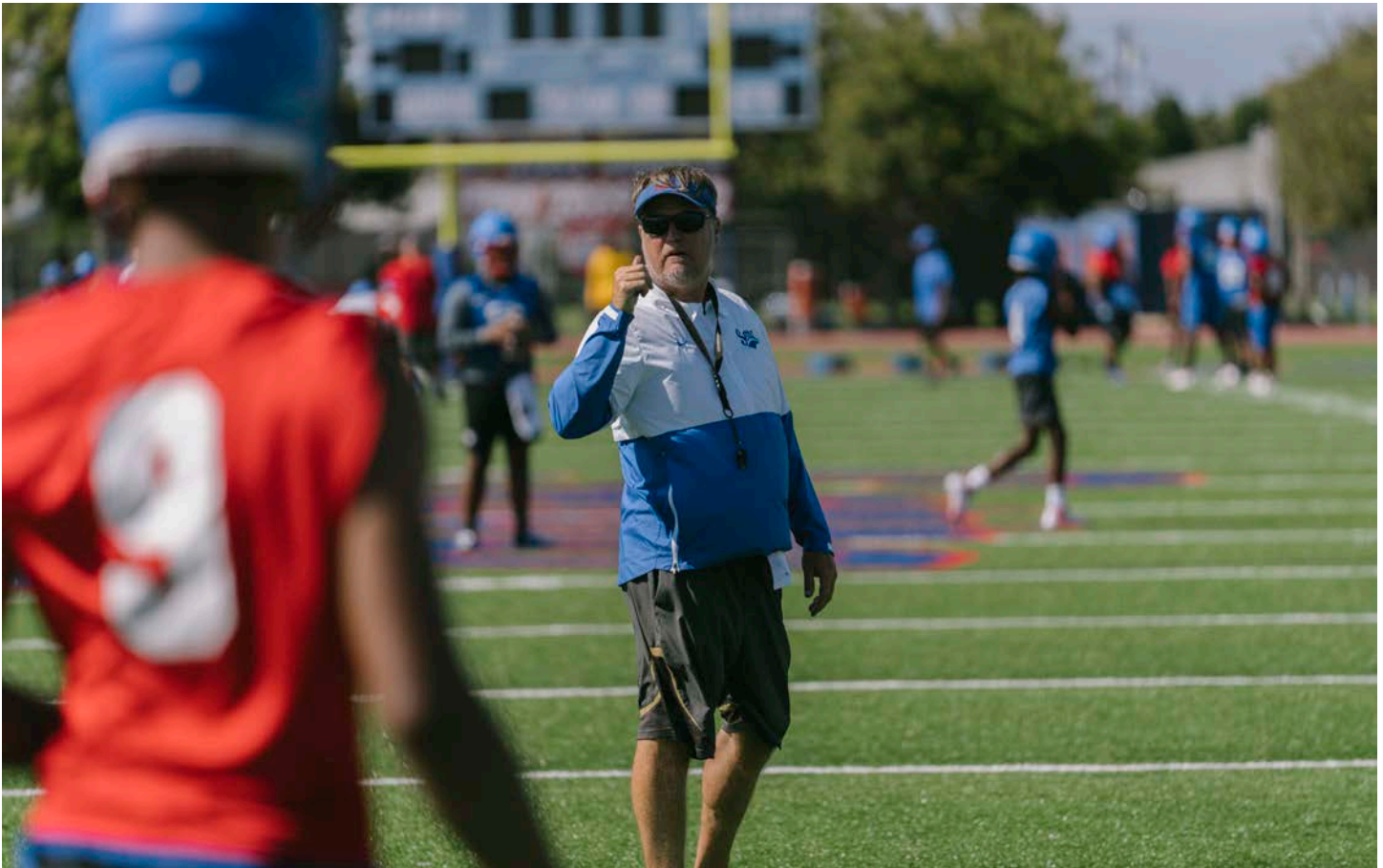
From Pop Warner youth football to the NFL, the sport has modified its rulebooks and penalty enforcement to make the game safer. From eliminating the three-point stance in youth football, the evolution of the Targeting penalty, even rules affecting clock runtime and pace of play, leagues and associations have eliminated potentially dangerous tactics and actions to reduce contact exposures and the risk of injuries.²⁹⁻³²

Limits on full contact during football practices and limiting exposure to heat exertion have been placed by almost every high school athletics association or by state law. Studies done since these limits have been in place (or just before) show a reduced number of injuries, concussions and heat-related illnesses.

- High school athletics associations in almost all 50 states began the 2019 football season with limits on full contact practices in high school football.³³
- The NCAA and NFL limited full-contact practices and prohibited drills that encourage or create straight-line contact.³⁴⁻³⁵
- The HEARTS (Cardiomyopathy Health Education, Awareness, Research and Training in Schools) Act was signed into law in December of 2024 to help students and staff in schools nationwide be prepared to respond to a cardiac emergency. Legislation was prompted by live-saving treatment administered to the Buffalo Bills' Damar Hamlin in a 2023 nationally televised game.³⁶
- Maryland passed the Jordan McNair Safe and Fair Play Act, which gives student-athletes certain health-related protections, including the right to speak up for themselves when they are exhausted or overheated and remove themselves from competition until they are ready to return.³⁷
- 24 states have enacted legislation aimed at protecting sports officials from assaults or harassment.³⁸
- Youth football has its first safety standards and benchmarks set by a national athletic equipment standards committee.³⁹
 - Tailored to address unique risk exposures for youth football players. The primary differences being exposure at the youth level including frequency, type, location and magnitude of impacts. All factors are influenced by player age, size, speed and coordination.
 - New mandate goes into effect in March 2027 that helmets cannot exceed 3.5 pounds, including facemask and all accessories.
 - Rotational acceleration during testing cannot exceed 5,000 rads per second squared.

RULE CHANGES, GUIDANCE & COACHING ADVANCEMENTS

- The NCAA teamed with the U.S. Department of Defense Concussion Assessment, Research and Education Consortium, the largest concussion and repetitive head impact study in history. The project, funded by the NCAA and DOD, launched in 2014 and now includes 30 college campuses.⁴⁰ Among their key findings and conclusions:
 - The average time between injury and return to play in the original NCAA Concussion Study (1999-2001) of 6.7 days has been increased to 16.1 days (2014-2017 study window).⁴¹
 - Female and male collegiate athletes take approximately the same amount of time to recover from a concussion, crediting equity in access to sports medical care.⁴²
- College athletic training staff are starting to report to medical staff instead of athletic staff and coaches, as the NCAA has recommended it as a best practice.⁴³
- As of 2017, all 50 states require coaches to be trained in youth sports concussion recognition and awareness.⁴⁴
- Pop Warner Rules and Heads-Up Football Training has lessened injury rate, with 87% fewer injuries compared to non-Heads-Up and non-Pop Warner programs, according to Datalys Institute's research data.⁴⁵







ABOUT THE NATIONAL FOOTBALL FOUNDATION

The National Football Foundation was founded in 1947 with leadership from Colonel Earl “Red” Blaik, General Douglas MacArthur, and Grantland Rice with a mission to mobilize the constructive forces of amateur football to strengthen America’s young people. All felt strongly that the sport built leaders like no other activity. The hallmarks taught through the game, courage, dedication, discipline, teamwork and tenacity, uniquely positioned football’s impact on the country.

The National Football Foundation is a multifaceted, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and representing everything right with the sport. Through the NFF’s programs and initiatives that encompass a broad spectrum of amateur football, the organization preserves the past, promotes the present, prepares for the future and protects the game and the opportunities it provides. These national programs and initiatives include, but are not limited to: Annual Awards Dinner, College Football Hall of Fame, Future For Football campaign, National Scholar-Athlete awards (including the William V. Campbell Trophy presented to college football’s top scholar-athlete), nationwide Chapter System, and research.





ADDENDUM

GROWTH OF THE GAME

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NATIONAL FOOTBALL
FOUNDATION

FUTURE FOR **FOOTBALL**