

I wrote this article on 2/3/2016, the day of the publication of an open-letter, addressed to government ministers, by the Sport Collision Injury Collective, calling for a ban on tackling in the game for under 18's. Please have a read of this letter before reading my piece to be fully informed – this is one link to it, many available (<http://www.rte.ie/news/2016/0302/771965-rugby-ban-schools/>)

cheers, enjoy:

The open-letter, published yesterday by the Sport Collision Injury Collective, is the first step in a planned national campaign to raise concerns over the increase in schools rugby. It is not a one eyed attack on the game, but a sound argument, based on evidence collected over 12 years. It incorporates all facets of injury, not simply problems with concussion and brain injury such as CTE, a topic that is currently haunting professional rugby and American Football. As a personal 'frequent flier' to A&E, and connoisseur of strapping tape, it is hard to argue against the conclusion that rugby is a sport that leads to a higher rate of injury than a non-collision sport such as rowing. For the talented all-round sportsmen capable at turning their hand to anything, there is little argument then that rugby is not the safest of options for them to engage in physical activity.

In response much of the rugby community has rolled out what are starting to become tired clichés. The importance of building character, camaraderie & respect, whilst important, is an argument that has evolved little since the publication of Tom Browns Schooldays in 1857. Yes they are good reasons to be involved in rugby, and count positively toward a cost benefit analysis of playing the game, but they are not addressing the issue being raised. Professor Pollock and other signatories are not questioning this idea of 'moral improvement,' but that it is a sport played to the overall detriment of participants physical health.

There is though a vital side to this argument that has been missed, an argument built upon rugby being a sport in which all shapes and sizes are not just tolerated, but vital to the game.

At the heart of the argument is a fundamental truth that no one is disputing: All children benefit from taking part in regular meaningful exercise. Every effort should be made to engage children in physical activity. It is beneficial for their physical wellbeing, and just as importantly their mental well-being.

The million dollar question is how? How can you engage effectively children with a vastly different genetic and social background, given that not everyone has a multi faceted talent at sport. For those of us that inherited the balletic grace of an arthritic giraffe, sports requiring intricate balance and poise such as football, cricket, horseriding and hockey were always going to be a struggle. When children struggle at a sport, they

disengage from it, and cease to participate. This lack of sporting participation is a key component to another unarguable fact: that childhood obesity is on the rise, a subject of greater long term health implications than sprained thumbs and broken legs.

In one of life's great injustices not all children are born equal. Three basic body shapes exist: ectomorphic, mesomorphic and endomorphic. Grossly simplified, endomorphs are more likely to carry a higher percentage of body fat, and be at greater health risk for obesity. It is not the body shape required for the vast majority of sports, where 'carrying a bit of extra timber' is of severe detriment to performance. From tennis to football, the mesomorph and ectomorph are king, with the 'larger' children stuck in goal, or left to keep score. Not so in rugby. Far from being an unnecessary addition they are vital to the game. The old rugby saying that the two most important players to select were your tighthead prop, and your reserve tighthead, is as true in schools rugby as it is at international level. Without these players the game can't work. And without rugby these children would, in all likelihood, be lost to sport. The benefit to that particular child of being both active and receiving praise based on genuine merit, not simply for having taken part, cannot be overestimated for their general health.

In the interest of full disclosure I was that 'fat kid' through the middle years of secondary school, owing to both a body shape that has a depressing tendency to gravitate towards endomorphic, coupled with an amazing ability to consume my bodyweight in tiramisu. I can offer then at least one case study for my argument, but suspect there are many more. Removal of tackling and scrummaging until the age of 18, in favour of touch or tag, as was the suggestion of the SCIC's letter, would lead to a faster game and remove the point of difference rugby has. This would be to the detriment of inclusion, and cut adrift those most at risk.

To the RFU's credit they have not taken the ostrich approach to the issue of injury and concussion. They have engaged with it and are ensuring education workshops are being undertaken in clubs around the country. In New Zealand, the realisation that a large number of injuries in junior levels comes from mismatches in size, has led to them categorising teams not by age groupings but by weight, a system that may have some merit in Britain.

Rugby may not be the safest sport, but for many of us it's the only one where we felt valued. We weren't just human detritus floating on the pitch or players making up the numbers, but a crucial component in a team. The children that often can't find a place in other sports are vital to 'prop up' rugby. Remove tackling from the game and you deny that chance to feel valued to those children most at risk from inactivity.

(One issue I dont cover above is the somewhat arbitrary age chosen of U18, which would allow people to get married before deemed responsible enough to engage in contact sport/rugby. There's a joke to be made here about contact sport on a wedding night, but im classier than that...)