

## **New Youth Tackle Football Study Indicates Injury Risks In Unlimited Divisions About The Same As Weighted Divisions**

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A study of Accident insurance claims submitted under the American Youth Football, Inc. insurance plan for the 2009 to 2011 seasons indicates that the risks of injury to lighter players is about the same in the weighted (age groups and maximum weights for all players), modified (age groups for all players and maximum weights for ball carriers only), and unlimited (age groups only) divisions. This is the most recent study to shed light on the hotly debated topic within the youth tackle football community about the pros and cons of weighted vs. unlimited divisions. Up until about seven years ago, most youth tackle football was played under rules that required players to be separated by both age groups and maximum weights. However, many youth tackle football organizations have shifted to unlimited and modified divisions.

A 1997 study by the Mayo Clinic of youth tackle football injuries indicated that the number one risk factor for injury is age and that weight groupings would not appear to protect lighter players. The study found that the risk of injury to an eighth grader was four times the risk of injury to a fourth grader. Therefore, the higher the age, the higher the chance of injury, and as a result, correct age groupings are critical to limiting injuries.

Proponents of weighted divisions cite anecdotal stories about unlimited divisions where the occasional urban legend who is significantly heavier, stronger, and faster is the source of multiple injuries to much lighter players. On the other hand, unlimited proponents argue that there are no weight categories in middle school, junior high, high school, college, or pro football and that there is no justification for the same in youth football ages 15 and under. For a full discourse on the pros and cons of weighted vs. unlimited divisions and the entire 1997 Mayo Clinic study, see the following blog posting:  
<http://www.sadlersports.com/blog/debate-on-weight-limits-in-youth-tackle-football/>

In the American Youth Football study, a total of 931 injury surveys were taken over three seasons. The coach completing the Accident insurance claim form was asked to indicate the type of division (ex: weighted, modified, or unlimited) and if the weight of the injured player as compared to others in the age group was about average, below average, above average, significantly below average, or significantly above average. To follow is a table which compares the results:

### Weighted vs Modified vs Unlimited Divisions In Youth Tackle Football

Weight of Injured Player As Compared To Others In Age Group	Total All Divisions	% Of Total All Divisions	Total Weighted Division Only	% Of Total Weighted Division Only	Total Modified Division Only	% Of Total Modified Division Only	Total Unlimited Division Only	% Of Total Unlimited Division Only
About Average	703	75.5%	247	76.20%	246	75.02%	210	75.26%
Below Average	93	10.0%	30	9.25%	38	11.50%	25	8.96%
Above Average	84	9.0%	31	9.56%	28	8.53%	25	8.96%
Not Specified	45	4.8%	15	4.62%	15	4.57%	15	5.37%
Significantly Below Average	3	0.32%	0	0.0%	1	0.30%	2	0.71%
Significantly Above Average	3	0.32%	1	0.3%	0	0%	2	0.71%
	931	100%	324	100%	328	100%	279	100%
Compiled 4-22-12								
Period 01-01-09 to 03-01-12								

The results of this study tracked the progression of injuries to players of various weight categories through the weighted, modified, and unlimited divisions. The percentage of total injuries to lighter players (both below average and significantly below average) was about the same regardless of the division in which they participated. The percentage of total injuries to below average weight players ranged from 9.25% (weighted) to 11.50% (modified) to 8.96% (unlimited). The percentage of total injuries to significantly below average weight players ranged from 0.00% (weighted) to .30% (modified) to .71% (unlimited).

For all divisions combined, the percentage of total injuries to players below average and significantly below average was about the same as those to players who were above average and significantly above average. The 1997 Mayo Clinic study found that heavier players were injured slightly more often than lighter players.

### Conclusion

Most scientists and doctors who have studied the issue speculate that older players are injured more frequently because they run faster, hit harder, and are more aggressive. However, youth players who are larger don't necessarily impact with more force if they aren't fast and strong. The number one determining factor of speed and strength is age maturity.

Youth tackle football organizations should choose the type of division that is the best fit for their local community. Each division, whether weighted, modified, or unlimited has its own pros and cons; however, the evidence does not support the often assumed conclusion that unlimited divisions are more risky than weighted divisions.

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