

TESTIMONY OF COURTNEY HALL  
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SEPTEMBER 13, 2010

Good Afternoon Chairwoman McCarthy, Congressman Bishop and other members of the Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee of the Committee on Labor and Education (Committee). My name is Courtney Hall. Prior to co-founding Hillcrest Venture Partners and receiving my JD/MBA from the University of Chicago, I played professional football for the San Diego Chargers from 1989 – 1997. In 1989, at the age of 20, I was the 2<sup>nd</sup> round draft choice by the San Diego Chargers. Subsequently, I became a four-time 1<sup>st</sup> alternate to the Pro Bowl and was just recently a finalist for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary All Time Chargers Football Team. At Rice University, I was a two-time MVP for the football team, a recipient of the 1988 American Airlines Spirit Award, a member of the now defunct Southwest Conference (SWC) 1980's All-Decade Team and an inductee into the Rice University Athletic Hall of Fame. I grew up in Carson, CA where I first played tackle football for the local Victoria Park Pop Warner team and then played high school football at nearby Banning High School in Wilmington, CA.

I thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing. I also want to thank the Committee for bringing much needed attention to the important issue of brain injuries in contact sports, especially in tackle football. During my playing years, from Pop Warner to the NFL, there was very little awareness of or attention paid to the dangers associated with contact sports. I hope that through the work of this committee, light will be shed on the mistakes of the past so they will not be repeated.

As an offensive lineman, I played football for nearly 20 years and, for me, concussions were always a part of the game. I have had many concussions, ranging from mild to severe. My first concussion occurred when I played Pop Warner tackle football. As I was running downfield, to cover a punt, I tried, unsuccessfully, to run through a defender to get to the return man. As I was helped to my feet by my teammates and over to the bench, the first words from my coach were "are you okay?" His second remark to me was "get ready to go back on the field, we just recovered a fumble". Throughout my career, I have had many similar experiences ... be it stumbling back to the huddle after a hit or block, or crawling off of the field in a daze after an intentional or unintentional knee or hit to the head. In each of those instances, I did not want to let on to my coaches or teammates that I was impaired due to the "warrior" mentality that was ingrained in me by coaches, teammates, TV and others. My strangest concussion occurred when I was in the NFL. I was running to block a defensive lineman and as I collided with him, I blacked-out, but could feel my legs pumping and driving so as to keep on my block. As the play was over and I stumbled back to the huddle, I whispered to my fellow offensive lineman, "[h]elp me out the next couple of plays. I just got my head dinged".

For each incident I either returned to play immediately or after a couple minutes of “examination and recuperation” on the sideline. The examination usually consisted of cursory questions that were asked of all players who experienced concussions. Questions like “how many fingers am I holding up?” and “what day of the week is it?” But in reality, the ultimate decision to return to the game rested on the desire of the player, the coach and/or how critical the player’s absence would be to the outcome of the game.

Hindsight tells me that I should not have returned to the playing field under those circumstances. In fact, new research into the effects of concussion injuries shows that returning to play was not only not in my best interest, but more than likely made me more susceptible to further injury. However, as I am sure is still the case for many football players today, I just wanted to be on the field. I have not only experienced concussion injuries, but I also have witnessed guys return to the game and seen firsthand how they reacted to their injuries. Although these players exhibited signs of wooziness and imbalance, as was in my case, generally they were still allowed to return to the field. As I said before, hindsight tells me that those players would have been better off not returning to play so soon, but thankfully that decision is closer to being placed in the hands of an independent third party and not those of the player or coach.

This Committee and the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) should be applauded for raising the public’s awareness of this issue. I particularly want to note the NFLPA’s new Player Concussion Committee, which will ensure that future generations of players – professional and amateur – are provided with the knowledge to make the best possible decisions. I am delighted and encouraged to see players taking the initiative and exerting control over their personal welfare. I would also like to commend the National Football League (NFL) on their new policies to restrict players who have experienced concussions and other brain injuries from returning to the playing field prematurely.

Football truly is an amazing sport. It is a passion of mine and the lessons I learned have served me far beyond my collegiate and profession playing experiences. But no sport should unduly endanger the lives of its participants. This is especially true for tackle football. I recognize that today’s athletes are bigger, stronger and faster than those of my era, and based on these factors alone, the resulting force of the hits is greater than it was in my day. With more research into ways to protect the players, all of us - players, coaches and fans - can continue to enjoy this game for years to come.

Thank you again for your hard work on this issue and inviting me to this hearing. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.