

Testimony of Terry O'Neil to Public Hearing on Bill #5113, in Hartford, February 27, 2014

My name is Terry O'Neil, resident of Greenwich. I had a career in network television at ABC, CBS and NBC.... produced a lot of NFL football games, a few Super Bowls, was privileged to meet the top coaches of that generation -- Bill Parcells of the Giants, Joe Gibbs of the Redskins, Dick Vermeil of the Eagles, Mike Ditka, Chicago Bears, Bill Walsh, San Francisco 49ers. I was allowed to watch their practices, saw how effectively and safely they practiced.

In the late '90s, when Mike Ditka took the head coaching job at the New Orleans Saints, he asked me to come along. My office on the second floor overlooked the practice fields....dream job.....I watched our team practice every day -- skillfully, efficiently, without injury.

A few years later, when we returned to Connecticut, my oldest son was ready for high school football. As a freshman, on the third day of his high school career, he threw a 37-yard touchdown pass, but fractured his right index finger on the helmet of an onrushing lineman. This would never have happened in the NFL or college football, where they practice with a 5-yard restricted zone, known as a "halo", around the quarterback.

When I asked one of his coaches about rules of engagement in practice, he said, "Every player, every day, every practice, every drill, is live, including the quarterback." I told the story to Dick Vermeil.....he exhaled deeply and said, "Wow."

The next year, it happened again. On the day before the spring game, my son was scheduled to start at quarterback, but fractured his thumb on a defender's helmet.

And for some boys, the injuries were not merely orthopaedic.....that season, 17 of his teammates suffered concussions.....17 players on a 50-man squad.....way too many, most of them occurring in practice.

The *Sports Legacy Institute* of Boston University, co-founded by Dr. Robert Cantu, who is here today, estimates that 60-to-75% of high school football concussions are suffered **in practice, not in games**. They further estimate that nationally 1 billion blows to the head are suffered every season in youth and high school football practice. One billion.

This is madness. In the entire 2012 NFL football season, involving 2000 players on all 32 teams, across five full months of regular season and post-season, from Labor Day through the Super Bowl, how many concussions do you think were suffered by NFL players in practice? 1000? 500? 200? The answer is: 3. Three concussions.....because they've learned how to practice.

In the past year, I've collaborated with Mike Ditka, Dick Vermeil, Archie Manning, Ronnie Lott, Dr. Cantu -- 21 big names in football and medical science -- to form *Practice Like Pros*, a movement to practice high school football with less contact.

We've been solicited by groups all over the country. We've heard the differing viewpoints that are echoing in this room today. Those differences shrink when we make our presentation. Check our Web site, www.practicelikepros.com, for New England coaches' reaction to our clinic last August in Worcester, Massachusetts.

We'd like to be part of the solution here in Connecticut. Please allow us to bring Dartmouth Coach Buddy Teevens and Dick Vermeil or Sam Wyche or Mike Ditka to show your high school coaches and athletic directors how to *Practice Like Pros*.

-- Terry O'Neil