



Jim Broadway

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Illinois School News Service

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Volume 24, Number 5, January 29, 2018

Bill would bar the young from tackle football

By Jim Broadway, Publisher, Illinois School News Service

As evidence grows to convict the game of football of the crime of "destroying brains" (as one of the nation's respected sports broadcasters, [Bob Costas, recently put it](#)), legislation has been filed in Springfield that would prohibit any child who has not yet reached his 12th birthday from participating in tackle football.

The bill is [HB 4341](#), sponsored by [Rep. Carol Sente](#) (D-Buffalo Grove). Filed Thursday, the bill is, [in its text](#), entitled the "Dave Duerson Act to Prevent CTE," in honor of the Chicago Bears defensive back who was diagnosed post-mortem with chronic traumatic encephalopathy after he committed suicide at age 50.

At a news conference [announcing the bill's filing](#), the nature of Duerson's suicide was described; he had shot himself in the chest in order to make his brain available to be examined and his condition diagnosed. Support was expressed at the news conference by friends, family members and former colleagues of Duerson.

In a statement distributed to the media, Sente said, "We all want kids to have fun playing football and to learn to play the game the right way early on." However, she added, "the overwhelming data and powerful stories of our supporters here today show the risks of playing tackle football before turning 12 just aren't worth it."

The "findings" section of the bill cites research linking "sub-concussive impacts as an important factor" in CTE onset and demonstrating that "exposure to tackle football before the age of 12 is associated with a greater risk of neurological impairment than exposure to tackle football starting at or after the age of 12."

Youths 11 and under would be barred from participating in any tackle football games organized by schools, park districts or non-profit or for-profit associations or organizations. The bill differentiates tackle football from flag football or touch football and gives the latter games the okay for young players.

The "Pop Warner Mid-America" region, based in Michigan, organizes tackle football and other games for participants who are [as young as five](#) in "Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, N. Dakota, Ohio, S. Dakota and Wisconsin." I contacted them for a comment Friday. Here is their response:

"As the nation's leading youth football, cheer and dance organization, we appreciate efforts to promote and preserve access to youth sport programs. It is unfortunate that some are looking to politicize youth sports by telling parents which sports their children can play. While we encourage conversations on player safety we do not agree banning football for young people is the answer.

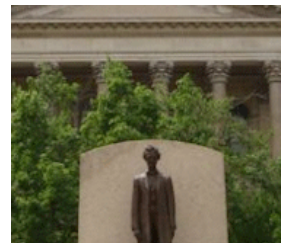
"Literally millions of young people have played Pop Warner football for nearly 90 years and have grown up to be healthy, successful adults contributing to society in so many ways. They are journalists, legislators, physicians, judges, police officers and business leaders. We think the life lessons, experiences and memories from playing this great team sport far outweigh the risks.

"But we also recognize it is a personal decision, one made by a family, and that's why we offer players and their families the option of tackle or flag football. We think improving the game is the answer and that's been our focus. Pop Warner has led the way in making the game safer than ever and we'll continue to work with our medical advisory committee to make it even better."

As ISNS readers will recall, I've written about football's risks to the brain frequently in recent years. Since we get only one brain, and it is where what we refer to as "I" resides - and if it is injured the "I" can turn to someone else, or the head can even become a vacant dwelling - I question it as a game for children at any age.

My rationale's short version is expressed by the [findings of CTE in 88% of the brains](#) of 202 former football players at all levels, and in 110 out of 111 brains of former NFL players that were examined. CTE can be diagnosed only post-mortem. The players' families had donated their brains to be studied.

Such findings have led to efforts on the part of sports equipment manufacturers (among the many adults who make their livings partly because young people play football) to product "improved" helmets. But helmets are ineffective because, as my son the neuroscientist says, "The brain sloshes around in there."



Similarly, state legislation to address the problem has been "improved" in stages over the years. First, there was a law requiring the Illinois High School Association to write up some regulations. Later, a law explicitly required kids to sit out after a concussion was suspected. Later, returning required medical permissions.

The problem with football is the repeated hits to the head, even the sub-concussive hits as referenced in Sente's bill. There's not always an indication of injury. Effects are cumulative. Treatment requires not only that the kid not play for a while, but also that he or she rest the brain in every way. No studying, even.

Is the end of this game, tackle football, in sight? For children, I think so. My take on the Pop Warner statement is that it is to be expected, coming from an organization whose employees make their living by organizing children's games, but the allegation that Sente's bill is to "politicize youth sports" is a pretty cheap shot.

Now that I've offended the football dads (while most moms, I think, agree with me), why don't I rankle the AARP a bit? Hey, I'm a member, but I don't think the most powerful group advocating for us old folks should dismiss so harshly Bob Daiber's recommendation that retirement income be taxed to pay off pension debt.

That's right. Madison County Regional Superintendent of School Robert Daiber, one of the six Democrats battling for their party's gubernatorial nomination, for the privilege of opposing incumbent Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner (or, perhaps, his primary foe, Rep. Jeanne Ives) in the fall, [thinks retirees' income should be taxed](#).

The five state-administered pension programs - the largest of which serves teachers and school administrators - are pretty stressed by a total of about \$130 billion in unfunded liabilities. You can't pay that off with "fairy dust," Daiber asserts. The obligation will not just go away. Everyone should help pay it down, including retirees.

The AARP, of course, disagrees. "Our survey results (of Illinois seniors) were overwhelming, that 89% of the respondents said they oppose the taxation of retirement income," AARP Illinois director of advocacy Ryan Gruenfelder told The State Journal-Register. So AARP Illinois opposes taxing pension checks as well.

Why should just being old give you a tax break? Seriously, the AARP is not in the leadership business. Like any other statewide association, it must appease its members. Just who are these old codgers who don't want to be taxed?

First of all, they are generally not the cohort identified as "[The Greatest Generation](#)." Those folks have moved pretty much through the pipeline. Mostly what we're talking about here are the spoiled brat children of the Greatest Generation. Sure, we're talking about my generation, the war babies and boomers.

We didn't endure the Great Depression or enlist for World War II. We were born into war-driven prosperity and most of us did our best to avoid Viet Nam (like Bill Clinton and George W. Bush). I dodged being drafted into the Army by donating four years to the Air Force. (But I'm proud of the war protesters in my cohort.)

What does this have to do with taxes? Just this: Illinois' fiscal stress, especially pension systems' unfunded liabilities, is largely a result of my cohort's enjoyment of programs and services provided by our state government at levels beyond the ability of our elected officials' ability to pay for them, given our aversion to taxes.

So now, rather than participate in a small way to pay down the state debt that resulted from services they received but did not pay for (because so much of the *costs were just paid by short-changing the pension systems*), today's AARP members are saying, "No way! Send the bill to our children and grandchildren!"

One more meander and I'll return to the subject. I want to say a little something about government and what it costs. First, Henry David Thoreau's motto - "That government is best which governs least." - is drivel. The implication drawn by many is that the smaller our government the better. Sounds good, but is just a pander.

Going back to basics, government is inevitable. If it's not elected, it's government by the strongest. If it is not formal, it is government by corporations. Sometimes it's costly, but my sense is that the best government meets needs for us all that we can't meet for ourselves, and otherwise helps the weakest of us get stronger.

Actually, my cohort seemed to be heading in that direction in the 1960s and 70s, but we sort of lost our way in the 1980s. Wonder what happened? One thing was that a leader we loved and respected (still do) told us "Government can't solve your problem; government *is* your problem." We got redirected into glibness.

Back to taxes: Illinois' personal income tax rate is [still at the low end nationally](#), despite last year's increase; we are one of just eight states with a flat income tax structure (rich and poor pay at the same rate); there is no "means test" for the policy of not taxing pension income. Daiber's proposal is modest and it is right.

Where are the other candidates for governor on the tax issue? A nice piece of work [by the Illinois Associated Press](#) reveals that incumbent Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner and his primary challenger state Rep. Jeanne Ives (R-Wheaton) want to repeal last year's tax increase, incrementally, over a period of years.

That's not a big surprise. They are members of a political party that, nationally and in Illinois, increasingly demonstrates that its affection for you is directly correlated with your income; if you're rich, they love you; if not, good luck. There is no "differentiation" between the GOP candidates on this issue.

Among the six contestants for the Democratic nomination for governor, only one is opposed to any tax system change other than a rate reduction. The growing realization that Illinois' future viability depends on a "graduated" tax system has bypassed the physician on the ballot, [Dr. Robert Marshall](#).

The other five Democrats have expressed support for a progressive system of taxation, but only Daiber and Tio Hardiman have identified the rates they would propose to apply to the earning "brackets" of Illinois taxpayers. The other three are correct in noting that such details would necessarily be outcomes of negotiations.

History lesson: For gubernatorial candidates to even consider tax structure changes is unprecedented in Illinois. It is an important tax concept discussion that has been a long time coming. Why would that be?

It goes back to the Democratic primary of 1972. The candidates were Paul Simon, who had distinguished himself as an effective Lt. Governor for four years, despite serving with a Republican Governor, Richard Ogilvie (the best governor of Illinois in my lifetime) and Montgomery Ward lawyer Dan Walker.

The income tax had just recently been imposed. Reporters naturally wanted the candidates' opinions on it. Simon was always thoughtful and responsive to the press. The flat 2.5% personal rate at the time was too regressive, he said. He favored a graduated rate. At what top bracket? Maybe 7.5%, he mused.

It was not a campaign proposal, of course, but Walker seized the chance to misconstrue it. In perhaps the first use of the late attack-ad strategy in Illinois, he invested heavily in a TV spot saying "Paul Simon would triple your income taxes." That and some other falsehoods made Walker a surprise primary winner.

There have been some efforts in the legislature to pass resolutions allowing a question about graduated tax rates to be put to a vote of the public, but serious consideration of such proposals by candidates for statewide office has not been expressed until this year. Sane tax policy? It now seems possible.

Note on school funding: Rauner [reportedly announced Friday](#) that an "agreement" had been reached to streamline the process by which the Illinois State Board of Education declares that a private school is "recognized," and therefore would be eligible to enroll students who receive "Invest in Kids" scholarships.

Such scholarships, paid for with donations of as much as \$1.3 million by wealthy school privatizers - who then receive income tax credits for 75% of their purported largesse - were included in last year's compromise school funding reform bill after Rauner vetoed SB 1, opening the door for another GOP gift to the wealthy.

Not a lot of detail has been provided about this turn of events. It has been expected that SB 444 - a bill ISBE needed to distribute "evidence-based funding" to school districts, but which was also vetoed by Rauner - would have to be addressed in some way before the distribution could be made.

The House committee on PK-12 appropriations was to hold a "subject matter" hearing at [3 p.m. today in Room 114](#), with testimony and discussion to focus solely on Rauner's veto of SB 444. Clarification of the status of the EBF process seems likely at that hearing. (You should be able to [monitor it at this link](#).)

Links to all newsletters posted last year - and it was a very exciting year - can be found in the [web page at this link](#).

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