

CLOSER LOOK: ADDING FLAG DIVISIONS TO YOUTH TACKLE LEAGUES



FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

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Commissioners of three thriving youth programs across urban, rural and suburban areas recently informed USA Football of their experience of offering flag as well as tackle across their clubs and how it's impacted their leagues.



Common themes across each of the Commissioners' experiences include:

- Flag increases participation and league registration while offering a spring option in addition to fall.
- Flag advances player skill development as well as social and physical literacy/fitness benefits.
- Objections to flag, particularly when added to established tackle age divisions, should be expected but subside over time as parents see their kids enjoy fast-paced play and football's timeless values at work.
- Advice is unanimous: Leagues "on-the-fence" about adding flag are encouraged to pursue doing so.

COMMISSIONER

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1. Cleveland (Ohio) Mundy Football League - Urban

2. Kansas City (Kan.) Football and Cheerleading - Suburban/Urban

3. Permian/Basin (Texas) Youth Football League - Rural

Q Prior to your decision to add flag, what was your perception of it?

A **DUNN (Cleveland):** I had an inherent interest in flag. I played tackle as a kid, but my younger brother didn't – he played flag for five years. We picked on him, saying, 'You're soft,' and that kind of nonsense. Well, he became an (Ohio) all-state high school player. It's hard to gauge what kind of an athlete a youth player will become.

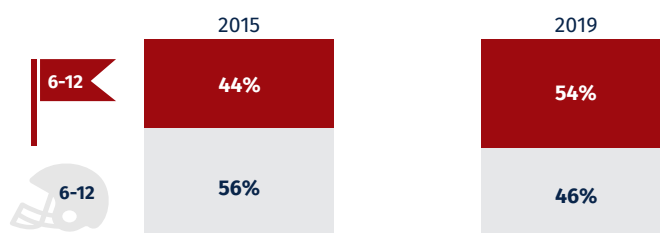
HUNTER (Kansas City): Flag was simply a feeder program for tackle. We've played flag dating back to our first season in 1984, but for decades it was only in grades K-1 with tackle offered for grades 2-8. Seven years ago, we sought ways to increase our participation potential and offered flag for grades 2-3. The following year we added grades 4-5 and grades 7-8 the year after that. Flag now mirrors our tackle divisions.

LAWDERMILK (Permian Basin): I've always viewed it as a necessary steppingstone to build a successful and strong league. We started with flag when we first launched – we were the new league in town and thought it'd help attract kids. We had to start from scratch and build from the ground up. Flag is foundational and attracts new kids and introduces them to the game.

Q How has adding flag helped your program from a participation and financial standpoint?

A **DUNN (Cleveland):** Flag income stays with our clubs. I'd not say it's a big boost in revenue, but it does help the bottom line. The first year that any of our clubs offered flag for ages 5-14 was 2017 and we had 100 players across the board. This figure has increased by more than 100 in each of the two following seasons and we surpassed 400 kids in 2019. We've had three years of flag available for kids across five age divisions for ages 5-14. **Eighty-five (85) percent of our 400-plus kids in flag also are among the 1,800 who play tackle in the fall.** Many of our players' families are in the inner city. Parents want to have their kids engaged with sports and friends in the spring as well as the fall. Flag in the spring opens that door for our families.

6-12-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPATION BY GAME TYPE AND YEAR



A shift has occurred in the 6-12-year-old football ecosystem over the past five years. While tackle used to be the leading space at 56% in 2015, flag is now the form of football most predominantly played representing 54% of the football landscape.

HUNTER (Kansas City): We see more kids play flag on a recreational level. It draws a large number of kids while being less expensive to play and operate than tackle. **Flag provides new revenue for us, which allows us to make improvements to our fields and reinvest in our program across tackle and flag.** There is no negative to adding flag to your league – it's all positive.

LAWDERMILK (Permian Basin): Financially, it's added 15 teams that carry 15-to-20 kids each. We're an organization-based league so every organization has its own flag team. We're definitely the biggest flag league in the area and provide that entry level to the sport.

Q How has flag helped your players' skill development?

A **DUNN (Cleveland):** Significantly so. It means more time learning skills, having fun, being taught by a caring coach, gaining reps. You also play more positions – linemen in tackle play positions in the spring (flag) that they don't play in the fall when we're in tackle. **Of our four tackle football division champions last year (2019), three of their clubs offer flag and that's no coincidence. Having flag and tackle offerings working together helps a young player become a better player.** And our coaches gain a better sense of their players' individual abilities. If a kid makes a few plays in flag in the spring, coaches know their strengths when they start tackle in the fall.

HUNTER (Kansas City): I have three examples of this. We have 16-to-20 tackle teams on each grade level across grades 3 to 8. Last season (2019) was the first time that we had an entire flag team – we had three of them; one 5th grade team and two in the 6th grade – make the jump to tackle with a handful of returning tackle players. Two of those three teams went undefeated and the third was above .500. All three were great tackle teams when they made the change. **Playing flag strengthened their skill sets** – it was a great learning experience for them **and led to a player progression both in football acumen and athleticism.**

LAWDERMILK (Permian Basin): We run flag different than most others I've talked to. It's 9 vs. 9. Real blocking is allowed and those fundamentals directly translate to the tackle game. The kids are taught how to engage and disengage with other players, fire out of a three-point stance. It's also helped the coaches quite a bit, too. **When our players go on to tackle, they aren't starting from scratch. They're able to build upon what they learned in flag and are prepared to play tackle.** I tell others all the time, flag is the foundation of our program. Everything sits on top of it. The kids buy in, the parents buy in and it helps get families into your organization, but more importantly, stay in your organization as they get older.

Q Did you field concerns or objections from parents or coaches when you made flag part of your league?

A **DUNN (Cleveland):** In our first year, we had to sell it to the coaches. It would mean that they'd need to focus more on development as a lot of these kids may not have played football before. Well, the competition was strong and the next year we had more coaches say, 'We want in.'

HUNTER (Kansas City): Our board was initially against it. They thought it would take players away from tackle. Well, some kids weren't ready for tackle and we needed to make this move. Our flag numbers grew exponentially. Now, seven years later – with our tackle number increasing by 35 players last year – we have more kids in flag (2,000) than in tackle (1,650). Both have strong participation. We're seeing upward spikes in both. And for many of our kids, by the time they've played two or three years of flag, they want to play tackle. Although our board members were initially hesitant to add flag, they made the move before most people did.

LAWDERMILK (Permian Basin): Since flag was part of our league from the very beginning, we never really had any objections. When we first started out, we offered flag through fifth grade. Initially our numbers were high, but they became smaller over time. Now, only offering it at the younger age levels (4- to 6-year-olds), we have a couple people who revert back and are asking if they can play at older ages. It just goes to show that a lot of people in our community see the value of flag and the skills that are learned through it.



Q What advice do you have for other leagues considering flag?

A **DUNN (Cleveland):** Do it. **If you really want to develop your kids as complete athletes and provide them with coaches and mentors, add flag.** In our case, by adding flag in the spring and having unlimited weight in the fall, we have ‘flag’ kids now playing tackle and bigger ‘tackle’ kids now playing flag – and all of them are having fun.

HUNTER (Kansas City): Do it! Flag football is growing at a rapid rate and any organization that isn’t offering it is missing out on a huge opportunity. Don’t think of it as competition between flag and tackle, think about all the players that want to play football but tackle isn’t an option for them for one reason or another.

LAWDERMILK (Permian Basin): If you’re not doing it, you’re missing out. There’s so much competition for kids’ time these days. If you aren’t welcoming kids interested in flag, then you’re going to lose them and they’ll never be part of your organization. We’re very family-oriented with multiple kids of one family playing all across our league.



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