



Flag Football & Zionsville (Ind.) Youth Football League

In 2019, the Zionsville (Ind.) Youth Football League (ZYFL) incorporated flag and TackleBar® football into its league offering, forming its current structure:

Game Type	Grade/Age
Flag	Grades K-1 and 1-2
TackleBar	Grade 3
Minors (11-player, full-field)	Grade 4
Majors (11-player, full-field)	Grade 5-6

- The league's first season of flag for Grade K-1 and Grades 1-2 divisions drew 103 players.
- After replacing tackle with TackleBar, Grade 3 participation increased from 14 in 2018 to 47 in 2019.
- Grade 4 contact football – increased from 42 in 2018 to 56 in 2019.

The following Q&A was created to share the league's experience of adding game types this past fall. Responses below are given by **ZYFL Commissioner Andrew Manna** and the league's **TackleBar Division Commissioner Josh Medvescek**.

What were your impressions of flag prior to this season?

AM: I saw flag football as something that was a different type of activity, maybe not necessarily football, but a maybe a light version, where kids have an introductory taste and had some fun, not necessarily developed any skills. From the survey we did at the end of the year with parents, we saw an increase in the overall level of excitement and that really started with our Grades K-2 flag players and parents, who have commented that they are ready for more and they are ready to comeback. We saw dozens of parents and family members watching their kids play flag and then sticking around to watch the TackleBar game and sticking around to watch the tackle game.

JM: Flag is an opportunity to progress from one skillset to the next based on the age and ability of the players that are involved. TackleBar gives you the ability to block and start the process for learning how to tackle but doesn't complete the tackle. In addition, we play flag on a smaller field, we play TackleBar on a smaller field. I see these versions of our sport as an integral part of the progression to building skills to develop that full tackle player. In my opinion, the flag, much like soccer, is kids gaining that athletic coordination as it relates to football and how their body moves in space. I think that is an extremely important skill for every kid to learn regardless of football or not.

Were there other unexpected results by offering flag?

AM: Well, we promote year-round multi-sport athletes. We encourage kids to play soccer, baseball and other sports. Due to interest, we will offer a spring flag initiative through our high school, which will be a five-week flag program. We may conduct a flag tournament at season's end by virtue of our parents' interest.

What have you learned by offering the limited contact game type through TackleBar?

JM: For TackleBar, there is a component of contact that comes into that age division where those kids can start to introduce contact to the game. It is not a big collision type of scenario. It is just being comfortable with making contact with another kid your size and age with pads on. I've coached my two oldest boys all the way through. What I saw with them is "contact courage" is the most important skill you can develop in a first-year football player. Without having the fear of them being taken to the ground, without the fear of a big tackling drill in practice, that's something that can be encouraged more and more.

How did parents react to a game type involving TackleBar?

JM: As we got feedback throughout the year, I had several parents come up to me and say, 'Can we just finish the year playing tackle?' In response to that, we had a board member say, 'I don't see that as a failure, I see that as a success.' We took kids that were not quite ready for tackle at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year, they were. The skills they learn in TackleBar relate almost completely to contact.

As the TackleBar commissioner, I was very big on 'teach your kids how to tackle. Do not teach them to grab the bar in practice.' In practice, you should have tackling drills that do not go to the ground. One coach gave us feedback that he didn't even use the TackleBars during practice. He only used them for the games. It was all the USA Football tackling progression in practice.

How has USA Football's National Conference been a help to you and the ZYFL?

AM: We went to Orlando for last year's National Conference. That was where we met some flag folks and some TackleBar folks. We had good conversations during the meetings about what we wanted to do. From that, it was our springboard for the rest of the year. This year we made sure as well, although it was a goal in the past, that anyone that was involved with kids on our sidelines or at practice was USA Football certified. We made up badges for them to wear during games to show they were certified.

What was the message you wanted parents to know in this first season with added game-types?

AM: We just wanted to show people that football is fun. It was a ton of education, marketing and communication about the three-tier or "three game-type" approach. We used that PowerPoint slide that has the flag player and the TackleBar player and the tackle player moving up in the game-type categories. We had that on social media, we had that at our parent meetings, we had a hard copy flyer, we pasted it around town. We tried to explain to people to give us a chance at this first level for flag. Even if you're not sold on being a tackle football player down the road, give us a chance at the base level of flag and have fun and we'll see you next year.

JM: Once you get the buy-in to do it, you have to keep the progression concept at the forefront of how you develop the rules and how the game is played. Don't set up the program and put it out there and walk away from it. You have to stay on top of the coaches to ensure they are building the skills.

JUST GETTING STARTED WITH LIMITED CONTACT?

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