

# TACKLE SAFE



## BOBBY HOSEA'S PIONEERING TACKLING TECHNIQUE PROTECTS PLAYERS FROM DEVASTATING HEAD INJURIES.

David Purdum

**A**s a coach, what are you doing right now to make the game safer for your current and future players? Could you be doing more to ensure head-to-head hits are eliminated from the game?

Bobby Hosea can help you answer those questions. Hosea, a former UCLA cornerback who played professionally in Canada and in the USFL, has emerged as a passionate and authoritative voice in the movement to change the violent tackling culture in football. He enlightens coaches, parents and players on exactly how concussions or neck and spine injuries occur and develops innovative tackling methods that can reduce these devastating personal tragedies.

"If you hit a ball carrier with your head, your head's going to stop, but your momentum is going to continue and so is his," Hosea explained. "All that pressure is going to compress your spine and the base of your neck. Your brain is

going to fly forward and slam against the inside or your skull from your head stopping so abruptly."

Hosea coaches a tackling technique that has reduced head injuries for entire youth leagues. He's a developer of talent, like San Francisco 49ers safety Dashon Golden (pictured above). "I learned things from Coach Bobby that I still use today," said Golden, who was fourth on the 49ers in tackles last season. "Players still come up to me today and ask how I hit so hard. I'm not the biggest guy out there, but if you come with the proper technique, you'd be surprised."

Hosea's also a father, who got a reality check when he became the head coach of his son's Pop Warner team. "When I became the head coach, it just hit me," Hosea remembered. "I went from having one son on the team to 25 sons. I knew I never wanted to see any one of them get carried off the field. I went home and prayed."

That reality check combined with Hosea's prayers spawned what is now the Train 'Em Up Academy. But don't confuse this with just another tackling camp. Fifteen years after its inception, Hosea's Academy features coaching tackling safety certification clinics and mothers' tackling safety summits in addition to player camps. He even has a fund-raising method in place to help coaches generate revenue to implement his system. And, if he has his way, the methods taught at the Academy would become mandatory. He's pressing for legislation that would require coaches and players to get certified in tackle safety. Hosea's system already has been mentioned in Congressional hearing on football-related brain injuries.

Most importantly, Hosea's system works. Mike Kulow, a veteran youth coach in a California Pop Warner league, told *Time Magazine* last January that after sending players and coaches to Hosea's camp, the 450-player league had

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only one whiplash injury the following season.

“There are no more excuses,” Hosea emphasized. “We have to protect our young athletes. We have to eliminate injuries caused by helmets now, immediately; not next season; not after you raise the money, now. Frankly, if you’re not willing to do that, you shouldn’t be coaching.”

### **Bobby Hosea’s Helmet-Free Tackling Technique**

Teaching our youngest football players helmet-free tackling technique and having them use these techniques throughout their playing careers is the key to long-term reduction of head, neck and spine injuries. But Hosea insists that we’ve reached a critical point where every coach at ev-

er every level should be re-teaching his players how to tackle without involving their head.

ensive Body Posture,” and he compares it to a sprinter coming out of the blocks.

Hosea considers this an attacking position that forces ball carriers to make one of three decisions. “He can cut left, cut right or lower his pads and try to run over me,” he explained. “If he dips his shoulder, I’m going to step in an imaginary hole. My front foot should be on the outside of my chin, and my back foot right up under my butt.”

Stepping into that imaginary hole is key, says Hosea, and it goes back to being lower than the ball carrier’s facemask. “If we’re even with him, when he lowers his pads and we lower ours, we’re going to have a head-to-head collision,” he said. “So I have to be lower than him from the very beginning. That way, when he dips, I

fenders to shuffle and stay on the offensive player’s trail hip, the back hip or the hip that is opposite to the direction he is going. If the ball carrier cuts right, a defender would want to say on his left hip. “Do not cross his center,” said Hosea, “because that’s when he’ll cut back on you and you’ll lose him. If you stay on his trail hip, he’ll cut back into you and you’ll be in position for a form tackle. Keep your eyes across the front of his body and come from belt-buckle high, up and through his body.”

### **Conditioning to Make a Helmet-Free Tackle**

Through his 15 years working with youth football leagues, Hosea has noticed more and more that young players do not have the proper



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Hosea scoffs at the notion that NFL players can’t be taught to quit leading with their heads. After being repeatedly fined by the NFL, Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison threatened to retire, saying he was being penalized for playing the way he had been taught. That’s a major problem, says Hosea. “Those are the best athletes in the world,” he said. “They are human beings, who are perfectly capable of learning to tackle without their head. Coaches aren’t properly educated on how to get the helmet out of the tackle so they can’t teach it properly,” he added.

So what is Hosea’s proper tackling technique? It starts with an attacking mindset and pinpoint body positioning. A player in proper tackling position, according to Hosea, has his feet shoulder-width apart and knees are bent at a 45-degree angle with the goal of having the tackler’s eyes below the ball-carrier’s facemask.

The most noticeable difference in Hosea’s technique is the defender’s arms, which are extended behind his back with palms up. This creates an inward curve in their spine and forces the player’s head up. Once the player is in the position, he drops his arms down to his side with fingers pointing forward and over his kneecaps. This is what Hosea calls D.B.P., “De-

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**- Bobby Hosea**

drop into that imaginary hole, then come up and through him.”

At this point, Hosea instructs his players to “rip and shoot,” by ripping their arms forward in an upper-cut motion, which causes their hips to roll forward and their head to move up and away. “You’re going to hit them with your shoulder and lift the ball carrier up off the ground,” Hosea described. “You’re hitting with your legs, which generate the power. Your hips transfer the power, and your arms help accelerate your hips and transfer that power even faster. So when a ball carrier is running at you, you’re generating momentum to meet their momentum. Plus, since you’re below the ball carrier and coming up, you’re actually dissecting their energy so it’s not compressing your spine.”

If the ball carrier cuts, Hosea instructs de-

strength and conditioning to execute a helmet-free tackle when they begin their football careers. Often, their legs won’t be strong or flexible enough to get in the position to avoid hitting with their helmet.

“To get as low as I need players to get, you have to strengthen and build endurance in those muscles,” said Hosea. “Start your kid out early doing forward lunges, keeping his torso straight, backward lunges, leg lifts, crunches, sit ups and pushups. Strengthen those areas that are going to be under stress, including the shoulder areas that are going to be under stress from grabbing, falling down and running into each other. Don’t use weights – just let them use their own bodies.”

### **Drills to Improve Technique**

To enforce D.B.P., “Defensive Body Position,” Hosea starts one drill with players on their knees and a tackling pad laid out vertically about an arm’s length in front of the player. The player’s arms are back with palms up. At the whistle, players whip their arms up in an upper-cut motion, which causes their hips to roll forward and their head to move up and away. They then flop their chest onto the pad and wrap up. Hosea makes his players hold the proper position for a few seconds, because it will put some stress on players’ torsos and upper legs. He asks

them to 'feel the burn and want the burn.' Hosea said, "They like it because they know they're doing it right when their legs begin to burn."

In another drill, Hosea simulates the entire tackling process, using his Dip 'N Sticks, pseudo-limbo poles, roughly 3 1/2 to 5 feet tall, to force players to get low and into proper tackling position. The Dip 'N Sticks, which Hosea first built out of PVC pipe, are positioned in front of tackling dummies. Players are instructed to close a three-yard gap between themselves and the ball carrier, which is represented by cones. During the three-yard close zone, Hosea tells his players to "buzz their feet."

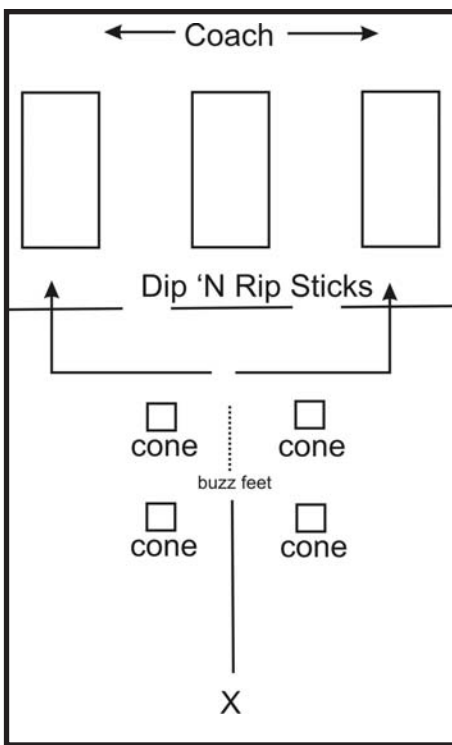
"Your toes go out, you get flat-footed, digging your heels and arches and balls of your feet," Hosea explained. "It's real quick, buzzing of the feet, and it only lasts about three seconds." Once they reach the cone (ball carrier), Hosea points left or right, simulating a cutting ball carrier. The defender mirrors the cut, dips under the Dip 'N Stick then rips through the tackling dummy with the uppercut motion (See **Diagram**). These drills and more can be seen on Hosea's well-crafted YouTube training video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFXpsSincVM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFXpsSincVM).

Bobby Hosea has been fortunate to partner with companies that share his concern for player safety. One of those companies is helmet manufacturer Xenith. Hosea and Xenith teamed up after he met CEO and founder Vin Ferrara at

a safety convention. They joined forces in 2009. "I teamed with Xenith because they impressed me with their outside-the-box thinking about safety," said Hosea. "They're trying to combine technology with know-how, and that's the per-

fect marriage. They've been very open about trying to make a safer helmet, while emphasizing that technique and learning to eliminate from the head from tackling are key."

Since 1997, Hosea's tackling training systems have proven to lower the incidence of helmet-first impact during live competition. With the growing number of head-related injuries in football, Bobby Hosea looks at his camps as saving the sport, one youngster at a time. ▲



## Startling Facts About CONCUSSIONS

- ✓ According to a study by the National Center for Injury Prevention, nearly one of two high school football players (47 percent) say they suffer a concussion each football season, with 35 percent reporting multiple concussions in a season.
- ✓ Children below 14 and young people 15-19 are at the highest risk for a traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- ✓ According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, football accounted for 36,412 traumatic brain injuries in 2007. Only cycling produced more.