

Hands-on approach

Local couple create TackleBar as a safer way to play football

By Scott Beedy

It's safe to say Lexington-Hamline residents Brigid and Jeremy Ling have a football family. Jeremy played football in high school. Their two oldest boys—Caleb, 12, and Emmett, 10—started out playing flag football and now play for a local youth team. Daughter Mairi, 8, is pushing to play with her older brothers. And Franky, 6, has the kind of energy that pairs perfectly with football.

But the Lings, like many parents, were worried about concussions that can come from playing football, especially after learning about the science behind Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, a degenerative brain disease that can affect people who have had multiple head injuries.

"Our oldest two love the sport so much, but we were really having a hard time deciding whether to let our kids play a sport with all we now know," said Brigid, who runs her own communications consulting firm. "Instead of finding another sport for them, we set out to try to change the sport."

Their solution was to create TackleBar Football, which involves strapping two removable foam bars to the back of each player. Helmets and shoulder pads are worn and the game is played just like regular football, but instead of driving an opponent to the ground, players stop once they tear off a bar.

"Safe contact and sound fundamentals is kind of our slogan," said Jeremy, an engineer who works in medical device product development and designed TackleBar. "It's all about body position; that's why the bars are on the body."

Unlike flag football, which uses flags draped on a player's waist, Jeremy said TackleBar is designed to promote proper defensive fundamentals.

"Flags teach poor habits," he said. "They teach you to reach. We want you to get down, get your body into position so you can grab the bar."

The goal is to retain the integrity of the game, but make it safer. Though cur-



SPA's Isaiah Eby rushes Nativity-Groveland quarterback Caleb Ling as Declan Schultz blocks during a TackleBar game on October 5. PHOTOS BY BRAD STAUFFER

rently in its infant stages, TackleBar is already helping keep the Ling children and those of their neighbors on the football field.

Greg Page, a longtime coach of the Nativity-Groveland youth football program, saw the benefits clearly during a pilot TackleBar league that formed last year. "With 10 kids you can pull off a TackleBar team," he said. "You don't have the same attrition issues. Kids can have fun. They can learn all of the fundamentals. The only thing they don't do is tackle all the way to the ground."

"The kids just loved it," Brigid said. "The parents loved it. With 200 kids playing last year (in pilot leagues across the Midwest), we had no injuries and no concussions."

Tackle football programs for youths have been around for more than 60 years locally, but Page said the number of participants has dropped significantly over the last three years. "Not just this program, but all across the city," he said.

Nativity-Groveland still has a traditional 7th- and 8th-grade team that plays tackle football. However, without TackleBar there would not have been enough kids to compete at the 3rd-through 6th-grade levels this season. With TackleBar, participation numbers are close to where they were three years ago.

Other local football programs using

TackleBar include St. Paul Academy, St. Agnes, Blake, Brooklyn Center, Providence Academy, Breck, Cottage Grove, Eden Prairie and Minneapolis North. On average, those schools are seeing a 40 percent increase in participation.

Overall, more than 40 football programs across the Midwest are using TackleBar, including some high schools that are using the equipment in practice to avoid injuries.

"It's a good thing for football," said former NFL quarterback and current Cretin-Derham Hall head football coach Brooks Bollinger. "It's been a tough few years, as far as media attention goes, with the medical scares as a result of concussions."

Bollinger, whose sons play on the Nativity-Groveland team, said it's been fun to watch TackleBar grow. "For my kids, they're excited to put the pads on," he said. "It's fun for them. TackleBar gives them another opportunity to learn the game."

Bollinger credits the design of TackleBar for teaching correct body position. "You have to be in position similar to what you'd be in to tackle," he said. "It forces kids to learn that next level of fundamentals."

Others have also been quick to embrace TackleBar, from former Vikings linebacker EJ Henderson to former coaches like John Gagliardi of St. John's University and Glen Mason of the Gophers. The Vikings also recently approved a partnership with TackleBar to sponsor a big league in Cottage Grove.

"We've been around football our whole lives, and some of the greatest life lessons we've learned and relationships we've built have stemmed from this game," said TackleBar CEO Tim Healy, who was a standout offensive lineman at St. John's in the 1980s. "It's an innovative change to the game at a time when we need to make it safer and more appealing to both youths and parents."

Jeremy said TackleBar gives kids the chance to play and learn the discipline that football instills, while teaching them the skills they need if they want to stay with the sport in high school or beyond. Still, he and Brigid are quick to point out, it's not about winning or losing, but about competing safely.

"There's a place for everybody on a TackleBar football team," Brigid said. "Nobody gets cut. It doesn't matter if you're big or tall or little or short, there's always a spot for you."



Nativity-Groveland football coach Greg Page encourages his 6th- through 8th-grade squad before their TackleBar game with SPA.