

## Football

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You're four years old. You come across an oval object in your parents' room. It's pretty big, you can't fit it in your hands. It's so interesting! It looks like a ball but it's shaped like an egg, and has what look like shoelaces on the side. And it's such a funny shape! You throw it on the floor. It bounces, but in all kinds of weird directions. Funny! Soon you are throwing it on the floor over and over again, trying to guess which way it will bounce next. You're having the time of your life.

Suddenly, your Mom walks in. She takes a look at you and her face gets white. "What are you doing?" she asks. You're confused. You stop, knowing something is wrong, but you can't imagine what. "Where did you get that? You're too young for that!" she grabs it away.

"Mom. Why?" you ask. She doesn't answer. You are completely confused. She takes the ball away and you don't see it again for a long time.

A year later, you're in your parents' room again, playing with race cars while Dad gets ready for work. Your favorite drag racer rolls into the closet. While you're searching the floor, you come across a pad of material. It is huge, a long piece of fabric with lots of padding. You notice another one like it on the floor. You pull them out and start playing with them. Dad comes out of the bathroom where he was shaving, and sees the padding spread out on the floor.

"Whoa, champ!" he laughs, but very nervously. He quickly picks up the pads off the floor and stuffs them into the closet. "Those are not for you, buddy."

"Why? What are they?" you ask.

"Those are for grown ups only," he tells you. "Don't touch them, they're OFF LIMITS." He looks at you sternly and you get uncomfortable.

"Yeah but what ARE they?" you ask again.

Your dad musses your hair, guides you out of the bedroom with his hand on your back. “Never mind, buddy. I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

A few weeks later, you can’t sleep. You can hear Mom and Dad downstairs watching TV, so you make your way down the steps. From the stairway you can see that on TV a game is being played. There are men in big huge suits and funny hats running around a green field, and they’re throwing that oval thing! It looks really fun, and you start to get really excited watching it. Then Mom turns around and spies you on the stairs.

She gasps. “David!” she hisses to your Dad. She jumps up and walks quickly toward you, blocking your view. Dad abruptly turns off the TV.

“Comon, tiger, you’re supposed to be in bed,” he says, as your mother tries to rush you up the stairs.

This time you won’t go. “Yeah but Dad, what are they DOING???” you insist. Both of your parents look at each other. They look really uncomfortable and nervous. You begin to get nervous, too, and start wishing you hadn’t asked.

“It’s a game, sport,” your father says.

“David!” your mother shoots your Dad a warning look. “Honey, this is one of those things you’re too young to understand,” Mom says.

“I’m big enough! Tell me about the game,” you plead.

“We will, honey, we will. But this game is really dangerous! People get hurt all the time,” Mom explains. “It’s not for kids. Now up to bed.”

You grumble but you can tell you’re not getting anywhere. You can’t sleep that night thinking about it. You want to be one of the guys in the big huge suits, throwing that ball around.

Now you’re 7. You’re over your best friend, Damien’s house. You get bored playing war and the two of you sneak into his oldest brother Zach’s room. “Look at this!” Damien whispers. He dives into Zach’s closet and comes out with an oval ball just like the one you found a long time ago at home.

“My Dad has one of those!” you say excitedly. “What IS it? My parents won’t tell me.”

“It’s called a football,” Damien says authoritatively. “It’s from a game the grown ups play. But Zach is already into it. He hides his gear in his closet under his old clothes. Mom never looks.”

“How do you play?” you ask.

“Well, you start on the yard line.”

“What’s a yard line?”

“It’s a line down the middle of the field. You have to run straight across it, I think. Then you throw the ball at another guy as hard as you can. And he throws it back.” Damien says proudly.

“What’s the point of that?”

“Well whoever has the ball is the bad guy. Everyone has to beat him up. So you don’t ever want to have the ball for too long, it’s bad news.”

“Then why would you ever take it?” you ask, perplexed.

“For your teammate, stupid!” Damien says, exasperated. “You can’t just always be free. You know, it’s like never being the guy who dies when we play war. Everyone has to take turns.”

“So how do you win?” you ask.

“I don’t know,” Damien admits, looking down at the ball in his hands. “I can’t get anyone to tell me how it works.”

“Throw it to me,” you say.

“WHAT? Are you nuts? If Zach finds us here he’ll kill me!”

“Comon! Just throw it,” you say.

Damien throws you the ball. You throw it back. It feels really good in your hands. Why is everyone so worried about this? It's fun! Soon the two of you are throwing the football further and further, laughing. Damien's on Zach's bed, goofing around, tossing the ball down to you, trying to get you to miss it. You're making so much noise you don't hear Damien's mom until she's already in the room.

She looks absolutely shocked. "What...what are you doing?" she whispers. She looks terrible. You try to hide the ball behind your back, but it's too late. "Where did you get that?"

Damien is silent. You say nothing, scared to death.

"Go home," she tells you. "I'll be calling your parents about this."

You walk home, feeling sick to your stomach. Something bad is going to happen now, you know it. When you get home, Mom tells you to go to your room. You wait there for an hour, which feels like forever. Nothing makes you feel better, not your favorite video game, nothing.

When Dad gets home you can hear them both talking in hushed tones, arguing about something. You know it has to do with you. Soon you hear footsteps in the hall.

"Listen, sport, we have to have a talk," Dad begins. Mom is fiddling over and over again with her ring. "We heard about what happened at Damien's today."

You listen, stunned, as your parents tell you that you can't be friends with Damien anymore. He's a bad influence, they say. He's introducing you to things that are for adults and they don't want you to play football anymore. You don't understand. They try to explain, football is dangerous. It's for adults. But they don't tell you why and by now you've learned not to ask too many questions.

When you're 12, they give you a sports education class at school. Finally, you're going to learn about this from an expert. The teacher is a science teacher. You can't figure out why they put a science teacher in charge of teaching you about football. Your science teacher tells you about the basic

rules of football, and the goal. But he doesn't tell you how you can block a play, how to tackle, when to throw to another player. He spends most of his time talking about how to stay safe, and telling you to wait until you're older to start playing. He shows illustrations of players in uniform, and tells the proper way to put on a uniform. But he doesn't show you a film of anyone playing, and you've never seen a game, even though you've caught glimpses of it on TV.

When you're fourteen your Dad sits down with you really awkwardly and gives you the basic rules again, but you learned them a long time ago. You're curious about details, but there's no way you're going to ask him. He tells you that while he understands you might decide to play, he thinks it's better if you wait until you're older, and you are better able to handle it.

Some of your friends' parents give them a five minute talk with the basic rules, but no details. Some parents give their kids protective gear so if they play they won't get hurt, but those parents are the minority, and gear is expensive.

The older you get, the more you learn about football from other kids and the internet. Some kids tell you one thing about the way it's played and other kids tell you something else. The internet has hundreds of stories and websites about how best to play, and what makes the top players so good. But you've tried it now, and some of the things you read really didn't work. You're not sure who to believe.

You get your own football, along the way, and hide it in your closet like everyone else you know. Eventually there are lots of secret games that go on, on the weekends and places where the parents can't find out. Sometimes, kids get injured, and it's all the gossip at school.

You grow older, and eventually you can play the game whenever you can get enough people, but you've been told over and over again that it's much safer to find a regular team, and play with that team for the rest of your life. That way less people will be hurt. That way you can trust that you are taking the least risks.

But it's a tough thing. How do you know who you want to spend the rest of your life playing with, when you were never taught how to play the game?