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Rehberg: Why all schools should retain athletic trainers

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BY ROBB S. REHBERG
NORTHJERSEY.COM

Robb S. Rehberg is a professor of athletic training at William Paterson University, and director of Emergency Medical Services at Montclair State University.

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YANKEES pitcher Andy Pettitte recently developed soreness in his throwing shoulder and was removed from the starting rotation. During the Giants-Cowboys game, Justin Tuck injured his shoulder and had to leave the game. And in their win over FIU, Rutgers quarterback Tom Savage sustained a concussion and lay motionless on the ground for over 45 seconds.

What do all of these situations have in common? In each case, an athletic trainer was on the scene to immediately evaluate and treat the injury. In fact, all athletes in the professional ranks and in the NCAA have access to an athletic trainer.

So it would seem logical that high school athletes, whose growing bodies are more vulnerable to injury and who tend to have higher injury rates, would have access to the same care as elite college and professional athletes.

Record Staff Writer Jeff Roberts' article, "Young Athletes at Risk" (The Record, Sept. 21), identified how important athletic trainers are to high school sports, as well as the fact that some schools still choose not to have an athletic trainer.

Athletic trainers are not a luxury, but a necessity. State Sen. Paul Sarlo, D-Wood Ridge, understands this, and his proposed legislation requiring athletic trainers in schools would ensure our student athletes receive the athletic health care they deserve.

But not all schools appear to agree.

"We have an EMT cover our games," "We have a chiropractor who helps out," "Our coaches are trained in first aid" are explanations some offer for not retaining an athletic trainer.

Band-Aid solutions

Those "solutions" are only a Band-Aid on the problem. In some instances, they may be a violation of New Jersey law regarding athletic training practice. Although EMTs are skilled in emergency care, they are not trained to recognize many athletic injuries, make return-to-play decisions or provide preventive or follow-up care.

Moreover, studies show that more injuries occur during practices than in games. If an EMT or chiropractor is hired to cover only football games, who is covering all of the other practices and games?

And although the state Interscholastic Athletic Association now requires First Aid and CPR training for coaches, it is unreasonable to expect any coach to assume the role of a health care provider.

New Jersey schools ensure the health and well-being of students by requiring a school nurse. But the risk of injury and illness during school hours is generally low compared to the risk involved for those participating in athletics. And yet there is no requirement that schools provide the same level of care for sports practices and games, when the risk of injury is greatest.

In these economic times, it's understandable that schools and taxpayers alike may be concerned with the cost of adding another employee. But are schools that refuse to hire athletic trainers really doing their homework? Have they really examined cost versus benefits? Do they realize that athletic trainers can actually save money in health care and insurance costs?

Schools without athletic trainers are running a big risk to athlete safety, as well as their bottom line. Just recently, the Tahoma, Wash., School District settled a lawsuit filed after coaches allowed a football player to return to a game twice after sustaining a concussion. The athlete suffered permanent brain injury, which may have been prevented had there been an athletic trainer there to intervene. The school district settled the lawsuit for \$14.6 million dollars, more than 230 times the annual pay of an athletic trainer.

A matter of priorities



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Having an athletic trainer is not a matter of money, it's a matter of priorities. Simply put, the safety of our children should always come first, not as an afterthought, or only if there's enough money left.

In the last year at high schools in New Jersey, a junior varsity basketball player collapsed from sudden cardiac arrest. A varsity football player suffered a ruptured spleen. A soccer player found that what he thought was just a nagging bruise was actually a bone tumor.

What do all of these situations have in common? All of these athletes survived because their school employed an athletic trainer who immediately intervened.

Robb S. Rehberg is a professor of athletic training at William Paterson University, and director of Emergency Medical Services at Montclair State University.

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