

The Two River Times

News

Protecting High School Athletes From Sports Concussions

By Ryan Fennell

For athletes that participate in fall sports, August marks the end of the lazy summer days and time to start preparing for the upcoming season.

While athletes return to training regimens and take the first steps toward what they hope will be a successful season, they must also be careful not to sustain any season ending injuries.

One dangerous injury that has recently been making headlines throughout the sports world is the sometimes overlooked or downplayed concussion.

A popular misconception is that an individual loses consciousness when suffering a concussion. The contrary is actually true and less than 10 percent of incidences of concussion result in a loss of consciousness according to the Athletic Trainers' Society of New Jersey (ATSNJ).

While it might seem that more and more concussions are taking place, the ATSNJ believes that the increase in awareness and spike in publicity that concussions have received in the last few years, especially since career-ending concussions have been found in professional sports of late, more athletes are reporting their concussion symptoms.

In a study published in 2004 entitled Unreported Concussion in High School Football Players only 47 percent of high school football players reported their concussions.

"I don't know that we are necessarily seeing more concussions, but it has been publicized more than it was," said ATSNJ President-elect Eric Nussbaum, Athletic Trainer at Colts Neck High School. "With that increase there's probably a rise because physicians and athletic trainers are more tuned into picking up some of the symptoms."

Another dangerous and potentially fatal risk of not reporting or ignoring concussion symptoms is the Second Impact Syndrome (SIS).

Second Impact Syndrome can occur when an athlete sustains a second blow to the head before recovering from the first concussion. The second blow can be relatively minor and can cause rapid brain swelling, respiratory failure, permanent brain damage, and death.

"As long as you still have symptoms and receive a second blow to the head the chances of a longer duration of recovery, heightened effects, all the way to the extreme being death, can occur with Second Impact Syndrome," Nussbaum said.

According to Nussbaum it was originally thought that the population most susceptible to SIS was athletes under the age of 18, however, incidences of SIS have been found at the collegiate level.

"The amount of research that is coming out on concussions right now is probably 100-fold from what it was 10

EMAIL A FRIEND



years ago," said Nussbaum. "The National Athletic Trainers' Association Research and Education Foundation has been doing a lot of research and have been over the years."

"As more and more research comes out we start seeing more of the long term effects of concussions," added Nussbaum. "I think it makes more people more apt to report what's going on."

Nussbaum also emphasized that concussions do not solely occur in football players but occur in all sports.

"I've seen them in pretty much every sport that we have."

According to Nussbaum he has seen concussions in track, tennis, cheerleading, soccer, baseball, and lacrosse.

"It happens in every sport. Obviously in football there is a lot of collision, but it does happen in every sport."

Nussbaum said that he sees between 30 and 50 concussion cases in varying degrees each year at Colts Neck High School.

"Ninety-five percent get better within a week," Nussbaum said. "There is a smaller percentage that will have a little bit longer recovery and an even smaller percentage that runs into long-term post-concussive syndrome that can last for months, years, or even be life-long. That is a very small percentage, but it can happen."

Nussbaum said that it is important that athletes be aware of the most common symptoms of concussion, which includes headache, light-headedness, dizziness, poor concentration, fogginess, fatigue, irritability, nausea, vomiting, and of course loss of consciousness.

Symptoms of a concussion might also not occur for days after the initial blow to the head.

"I've had kids that felt fine and then started getting symptoms days later," Nussbaum said.

There is a gradual exercise protocol that was developed by the world's concussion experts at a conference in Zurich, Switzerland.

It begins with no activity until asymptomatic at rest followed by light aerobic exercise, then sport-specific drill without contact, non-contact training drills, and then full practice before returning to play.

"If any symptoms occur at any point you need to step back and re-evaluate what's going on with the head and back off the progression," Nussbaum said.

"The big thing is for athletes to be honest with their parents and athletic trainers and let them know if they're experiencing symptoms of a concussion," said Nussbaum. "It's better to tell somebody than it is to try to work through it and risk getting Second Impact Syndrome or having prolonged concussion symptoms. It's important for athletes to be open and honest."

For more information visit www.atsnj.org.