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Let mothers lead fight against youth sports injuries

Deaths of student athletes can be prevented if we know what to look for

Susan Reimer

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Patti James was in Toronto with her husband when she got the call no parent wants to receive. Her football-playing son was in a Little Rock, Ark., hospital after collapsing in practice with heat stroke.

"I thought I would get to the hospital and find him sitting on the side of the bed eating Jell-O with an IV in his arm," she said at the Youth Sports Safety Alliance symposium in Washington Tuesday.

Instead, he was in a drug-induced coma and on a respirator. His liver and kidneys were failing.

Her son Will survived — probably because there was an athletic trainer at the practice who worked to bring down his core temperature right away. Another football player, who collapsed in the heat the same day but at a school without a trainer, did not.

"We're just parents," she said. "We think when we drop them off for practice, they will be safe."

Heat stroke, concussions, sudden cardiac arrest, undiagnosed sickle-cell anemia. These were among the causes of death for at least 50 young athletes in 2010.

Deaths such as these almost always occur during a sports practice or during conditioning drills. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control reports, high school athletes suffer 2 million injuries, 500,000 doctor visits and 30,000 hospitalizations each year. Among these are 63,000 brain injuries a year.

Like Patti James, most of us simply drop our kids off at practice. But we make sure we are in the stands when the games are played because we think that is where the real danger is — from a determined opponent.

If college or professional athletes were injured or died in these numbers it would be a national scandal. Instead, it is our youngest and most vulnerable athletes who are succumbing and who have the least protection.

Beth Mallon's son, Tommy, had his neck fractured by a hit in the last minutes of his final high school lacrosse game. The athletic trainer on the field saved his life, the San Diego mother believes, because he

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knew what to do. Tommy is now recovering with only minor physical consequences and has begun, with his mother, Advocates for Injured Athletes.

"We have a younger son who is playing," she said in an interview during the symposium. "I can't keep him from playing the sport he loves, but I can make sure that there is an athletic trainer on that field or in that gym or he won't be playing."

With quick and informed treatment of heat stroke "you can be home for dinner," said Dr. Douglas Casa of the University of Connecticut, who has made this his mission since surviving his own heat stroke.

But Kelci Stringer's husband, Korey, died from complications of heat stroke in August 2001, while practicing with the Minnesota Vikings. She has started a foundation to help inform athletes and their families about this most common consequence of summer football practices. But she is anxious as her 12-year-old son, Kodie, takes up the sport.

"I thought Korey's death was personal and affected only me and his family. Now I know that it has become almost epidemic among young athletes," said told the Alliance members. "It is not only preventable, it is 100 percent survivable."

Now, she says, "I have to educate [Kodie's new coach] every year."

The Youth Sports Safety Alliance is working with Congress and state legislatures to mandate better education and supervision of young athletes. National Athletic Trainers' Association president Marjorie Albohm described working with coaches, athletic directors, principals, school superintendents and lawmakers.

But as I listened to the testimony of the determined women who have been inspired by the deaths or injuries of their husbands or children to campaign for reform, I thought, "Give this job to the mothers."

Tell us the symptoms and the warning signs of concussion, heat stroke or a sickle-cell episode. Teach us that girls respond differently than boys to head injuries and that a sickle-cell crisis can look like a muscle cramp.

Tell us what precautions — hydration journals or sideline tubs of ice — are needed. Tell us what the coaches need to learn to keep our kids safe. Tell us the difference an athletic trainer can make when a catastrophic injury occurs during a practice or a game.

Tell us, and we mothers will get it done. Or you can bet the kids won't be getting out of the car.

For more information on youth sports injuries, go to nata.org.

susan.reimer@baltsun.com

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