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## 'Brain test' checks athletes for injuries

BY LAURA BRUNO • STAFF WRITER • NOVEMBER 29, 2009

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Dave Kohle remembers being knocked out during a baseball game when he was a teen, waking up to smelling salts and being put back in the game the next inning.



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Dr. Jack Knightly, co-director of the Concussion Center at Overlook Hospital in Summit, demonstrates part of what he looks for in testing athletes after they have suffered a concussion, using Nick Guida, a junior at Chatham High School, as his "patient." (Staff photo: Elbaliz Mendez)

So when Pequannock High School's team doctor barred Kohle's son, Ben, from playing [football](#) freshman year because he complained of headaches a month after a concussion, Kohle gave the doctor a hard time.

"I'm a football guy. It bothered me a lot that my son was not allowed to play football freshman year," Kohle said.

But then the doctor and school officials showed Kohle how Ben performed on a neurocognitive test, called ImPACT. Ben had taken the test in middle school, establishing a baseline score when he was healthy. The new post-injury score was "remendously lower," Kohle said.

"I really didn't know if I believed in the test before, but I do 100 percent now," Kohle said. "They did the best thing by not letting me pressure them into letting my son play."

Pequannock is one of a dozen local school districts using ImPACT, designed at the University of Pittsburgh specifically for managing sports-related concussions. The 20-minute computerized test measures reaction time, memory and attention span through a series of mental challenges. The athlete's speed and accuracy on word, symbol and color problems is repeatedly tested to see how well he or she responds as he or she fatigues. It is now used as a concussion management tool by the NFL, [NHL](#), NBA, more than 360 colleges and 1,200 high schools across the country.

An athlete is tested in the pre-season first, when he or she is healthy, to establish a baseline score. After a head injury, the athlete is tested again to see how differently he or she does in comparison with the baseline.

Before such tests, there were some rough guidelines about how to judge whether a student-athlete was ready to return to play after a concussion, trainers and doctors said. Concussions don't show up on MRIs or CAT scans. Doctors and trainers were in large part reliant on the teens telling them how they felt and whether their symptoms had subsided.

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ImPACT isn't perfect, they said, and it's not the only measure being used for deciding when a teenage athlete can return to the field. But it's given trainers and doctors something they never had before -- objective data.

"It's given me a lot of peace of mind that we're doing the right thing when returning an athlete to the field," said Don Heyburn, Montville High School's [athletic](#) trainer. "It's a science-based decision. It used to be we would have a student return to play and monitor them, but we really didn't know."

Nationwide, the annual incidence of sports-related concussion is estimated at 300,000.

A concussion is a temporary loss of neurologic function as a result of a traumatic event, said Dr. Jack Knightly, co-director of the Atlantic [Neuroscience](#) Institute's Concussion Center at Overlook Hospital in Summit. Major signs of a concussion include loss of consciousness, temporary amnesia, nausea, headache, dizziness and fatigue.

The biggest concern for teenagers is "Second Impact Syndrome," said Knightly. This can happen when the teen hasn't fully recovered from a first concussion. The second hit doesn't have to be as hard as the first, but the result can be a severe head injury with an 80 percent mortality rate, Knightly said.

The Overlook center opened four years ago and Knightly, who is also Morristown Memorial Hospital's chief of neurosurgery, said more than 90 percent of its patients are child-athletes in middle and high school. Many Morris school districts refer their student-athletes with head injuries to Overlook's center for treatment.

In 2008, the center treated 490 patients. This year, as of mid-November, it had treated 550 patients. Sports-related concussions are seen nearly equally in both boys and girls, Knightly said. Recent studies have even shown girls may be more at risk.

Dr. Mark Lovell, one of the designers of ImPACT, and Knightly both said the increase in concussion diagnoses for teenagers is due to several factors, including better understanding and awareness of the injury. In addition, student-athletes are bigger and stronger and more are playing multiple sports, not giving their bodies time to rest, they said.



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Dr. Jack Knightly, co-director of the Concussion Center at Overlook Hospital in Summit, demonstrates part of what he looks for in testing athletes after they have suffered a concussion, using Nick Guida, a junior at Chatham High School, as his "patient." (Staff photo: Elbalz Mendez)

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Thousands of Morris County athletes have established baseline scores with the test, and just this fall, some local districts reported giving as many as 25 athletes post-injury tests. Trainers said some athletes were kept out of play longer because their ImPACT score showed some lingering post-injury mental deficiency.

Some districts do the baseline testing with high school athletes involved in contact sports only. Montville, Madison, West Morris Regional, Pequannock and Kinnelon baseline test all their athletes, regardless of the sport. Pequannock is the only Morris district that tests its middle school athletes. Kinnelon also tests coaches, which proved helpful when a lacrosse coach got hit in the face with a ball during a scrimmage.

Pequannock apparently has used ImPACT the longest in Morris County. On the recommendation of its team doctor, Dr. Paul Ostergaard, Pequannock began using ImPACT seven years ago.

It was Ostergaard who first told Ben Kohle and his parents two years ago that he would not clear the freshman to play football. Kohle was complaining of headaches after a non-sports-related concussion that summer. He had an accident in late August at home in which a weight bench fell on his head. Two weeks later, he thought he was fine and repeatedly dove head-first into a friend's pool during a party, sustaining a second concussion. Pequannock High kept him out of all sports for three months, causing Kohle to miss the entire football season.

"I lost that 'it' factor," said Ben Kohle of his recovery after the second concussion.  
"I will never throw a football the same way. I still compete at a high level, but I still feel something is missing."

Kohle, now 16, a junior and his high school's quarterback, said he knew something was wrong after the day in the pool, though he didn't realize then it was a second concussion. He was sensitive to light and noise and had constant headaches. He had difficulty making it through the school day.

"I think seeing the test was like, wow, there really is something wrong with me," Kohle said.



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Dr. Jack Knightly, co-director of the Concussion Center at Overlook Hospital in Summit, demonstrates part of what he looks for in testing athletes after they have suffered a concussion, using Nick Guida, a junior at Chatham High School, as his "patient." (Staff photo: Elbaliz Mendez)

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Madison has been using ImPACT for three years. The district first got the program through a grant provided by the Brian Injury Association of New Jersey. In 2006, the group opened an offer to match the cost for a three-year subscription.

"I think you're putting athletes at risk if you don't have this," Madison athletic director Sean Dowling said.

For \$1,300, with the district paying half, Madison could baseline 300 athletes the first year and 150 each following year. The test is good for two years, so most athletes are tested in their freshmen and junior years.

The most expensive package ImPACT offers is \$1,000 a year to baseline up to 1,000 athletes. Dowling said there is no question that the district will continue to pay for the program after the grant runs out.

Joanna Boyd of the Brian Injury Association said her group's goal with the grant was to have districts find ImPACT indispensable.

"This is the only brain injury you can fully recover from. It can mean changing the quality of your life from a short-term injury to a lifelong disability."

Morris parents who have had experience with ImPact said it helped them understand the injury better.

"It made us more aware that just because you can't see the injury it doesn't mean there wasn't damage," said Edie Guida, of Chatham Township, whose son Nick had two concussions last year during his sophomore year while playing football and lacrosse.

Athletic trainers said the test helps in convincing parents and athletes that the teens are not healed.

"It gives me documentation if someone really argues," said Suzanne Barba, athletic trainer for West Morris Central.

Barba and other trainers said teens will lie and say they don't have symptoms, but once they sit down to take the test, it's difficult to fake it. Teens often will be more honest on the [computer](#) than with their trainers, Barba said.

Lovell -- the doctor who was one of ImPACT's designers -- recommends schools use some kind of baseline testing, whether ImPACT or one of its competitors on the market, as part of an overall management plan.

First, there needs to be a proper evaluation on the sidelines after a hit, involving simple memory and balance tests, Lovell said. If there is any suspicion of a problem, coaches and trainers should err on the side of caution, he said. A day or two later, some post-injury neurocognitive test should be given, he said.

Finally, before returning to play, an athlete should go through a week-long ramp-up of physical activity,



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Dr. Jack Knightly, co-director of the Concussion Center at Overlook Hospital in Summit, demonstrates part of what he looks for in testing athletes after they have suffered a concussion, using Nick Guida, a junior at Chatham High School, as his "patient." (Staff photo: Elbaliz Mendez)

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gradually increasing the intensity each day. If at any point symptoms return, the athlete is not ready to return, Lovell said.

ImPACT has recently developed, with [funding](#) from the Centers for Disease Control, a new version of the test that is good for children 5 years old and up, Lovell said.

"If you don't do something like ImPACT, you're allowing a child to manage their brain injury, and that's scary," Lovell said.

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