

# NATA/AFCA Spearing and Football Task Force Finishes work

By Ron Courson, ATC, PT

Two high-profile injuries sustained by intercollegiate football players during the 2004 season led to an increased awareness of the spearing issue in intercollegiate football.

Tennessee Tech University wide receiver Drew Hixon sustained a significant brain injury in a September 2004 football game from a helmet-to-helmet hit from an opposing player. Following the hit, he was unconscious on the field. Hixon was in a medically induced coma for more than three weeks. He spent five weeks in intensive care in Tampa, Florida, where the injury occurred, before he was transferred to a brain injury rehabilitation hospital in Virginia, where he received intensive rehabilitation for several weeks. By early 2005, Hixon had returned to his family to continue outpatient rehabilitation.

In a second incident, University of Georgia wide receiver Reggie Brown was knocked unconscious from a violent helmet-to-helmet hit on national television during a game in October 2004.

Both of these injuries drew significant media attention regarding spearing and helmet-to-helmet contact in football. Initiated by the CUATC, an NATA/AFCA (American Football Coaches Association) Spearing and Football Task Force was created to:

- Review the current NCAA football rules and determine whether there should be a change in the rules regarding spearing and helmet contact;
- Discuss how to encourage football officials to enforce the spearing rule to prevent further injury; and
- Determine how to better educate football officials, coaches and student athletes regarding spearing.

## getting to work

The Spearing and Football Task Force met Jan. 11 in Louisville, Kentucky, in conjunction with the CUATC mid-winter meeting and the AFCA convention. AFCA Executive Director Grant Teaff offered support to the task force and assisted in providing facilities and organizing the meeting.

Joseph Torg, MD, shared research data and historical information regarding spearing with the task force. Torg was a leader in creating the original NCAA spearing rule recommendation of 1976. New incidents of permanent quadriplegia have dropped significantly since the rule was instituted. However, the number has climbed in recent years.

Concerns were raised that the athletes at the highest risk were those involved in high-speed collisions, such as defensive backs, striking wide receivers in open field and special teams players. Head and neck injury and epidemiology information was shared by Robert Cantu, MD; Frederick Mueller, PhD; and Randy Dick, PhD.

Awareness was raised regarding the incident of head injuries from helmet-to-helmet blows as well as injury to the cervical spine. A recent NFL head injury study cited 68 percent of the concussions in the NFL occurred from helmet-to-helmet contact.

Jon Heck, MS, ATC, designed and implemented a survey of NCAA football officials from the SEC, ACC, Big East, Big 10, Big 12 and Pac-10, with 205 NCAA football officials responding. Heck conducted a similar study in the mid-1990s with high school football officials. The goal of the survey was to determine why enforcement of the spearing penalty is low and to identify deterrents to enforcement.

According to the survey, only 51 helmet-contact penalties were called this year by the officials participating in the survey. Further, a study of the most recent NCAA football officiating statistics showed that spearing is called at a rate of one call every 50 games, or one call in every 833 calls (In comparison, holding is called one in every six calls.) The existing spearing rule read, "Spearing is intentional use of the helmet (including the face mask) in an attempt to punish an opponent." Football officials felt, as evidenced by the survey performed by the task force, that it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to determine the intent of the football player. Therefore, football officials felt the penalty was not called as frequently due to the wording.

### changing the rules

A discussion of the proposed changes to the spearing rule ensued. The task force was not meant necessarily to draft a specific rule change, but to bring the problem to the NCAA Football Rules Committee so it could consider a rule change and/or methods for better enforcement of existing rules.

The task force identified the need by showing the increased instances in injury and pointing out that the spearing penalty is not being called (supported by NCAA statistics). The task force offered a theory about why the penalty is not being called (supported by football official survey) and made recommendations for the Football Rules Committee to consider.

Football Rules Committee liaison Tim Neal, ATC, presented the task force's findings and recommendations to the committee in February. Following a lengthy discussion, the Football Rules Committee voted to delete the word "intentional" from the rule, stating that "after revealing survey data from the AFCA and officiating organizations, it appears that officials are hesitant to call this foul in some cases because intent is difficult to determine. The Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sport also recommended this alteration."

This rule change will be implemented in college football next year. Additionally, emphasis will be placed in the 2005

NCAA College Football Rule Book regarding enforcement of the new penalty.

### education

The NATA/AFCA Spearing Task Force will continue with the next phase of the project by developing educational materials. Specific activities include:

- Making a video for coaches and officials, explaining the injuries caused by spearing and helmet-to-helmet contact and the importance of prevention through proper coaching and officiating;
- Developing a video for college athletes, explaining the difference between good and bad tackling form. It will be recommended that the tape be shown each fall and spring football season prior to the start of contact drills;
- Creating a poster for football locker rooms and athletic training rooms, emphasizing the importance of proper tackling technique;
- Launching a campaign to educate media on the spearing mechanism of injury and the importance of preventing head and cervical spine injuries through proper coaching.

The task force felt that in many instances, media tend to glamorize high-profile hits – even if those hits are illegal. Younger football players imitate what they see, so educating the media about proper, safe and legal tackling is key in making sure the public gets the correct message.

### task force participants

The CUATC thanks those involved with the task force, from the NATA to the AFCA to the NCAA and the many athletic trainers, coaches, physicians, researchers and other health care professionals and administrators who recognized the need for a rule change and were instrumental in the drafting and implementation of it.

All members of the CUATC participated. In addition, Tim Neal, ATC, of Syracuse University represented the NCAA Football Rules Committee; Jon Heck, MS, ATC, of Richard Stockton College represented the NATA Spearing Position Statement writing group; Michael Ferrara, PhD, ATC, of the University of Georgia represented the NATA Concussion Position Statement

writing group; and David Green, ATC, of Tennessee Tech University shared his experiences from Hixon's injury.

Physicians and researchers prominent in the area of orthopedics, neurosurgery and injury epidemiology were invited, including Joseph Torg, MD; Robert Cantu, MD; Julian Bales, MD; and Frederick Mueller, PhD.

Representatives from the NCAA included Randy Dick, PhD, with the injury surveillance system; David Klossner, PhD, ATC, with NCAA education; Michael Krauss, MD, representing NCAA Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports; and individuals from the football rules committee and the football issues committee. **nm**

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