

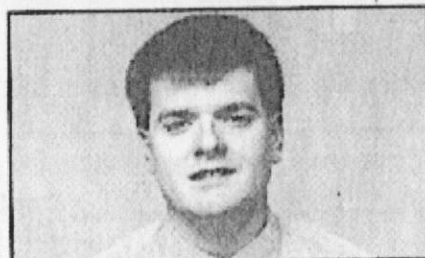
# Spearing story elicits feedback

**Dear John:** I read your column of Nov. 26, 1999, and I feel compelled to respond to some inaccuracies in it.

The article begins with the premise that officials do not call enough spearing penalties because they believe (mistakenly) that unless spearing is "intended," it is not spearing. Spearing is called infrequently for a very good reason; it occurs very rarely. Contrary your statement, spearing is an intentional act. The high school and college rule books define spearing exactly the same way: "Spearing is the intentional use of the helmet in an attempt to punish an opponent." Therefore, an official must be convinced of the player's intent to use the helmet with intent to inflict injury. If the ballcarrier attempts to avoid a shoulder tackle with the result that the tackler's helmet, not the shoulder, makes first contact, this is not spearing.

There are also rules against helmet contact in the form of "butt-blocking" or "face-tackling," which both require that the aggressor "drive" the helmet into the opponent, again implying an intentional act. No matter how concerned they are about player safety, officials cannot penalize an act which does not violate the rules. The obvious alternative is to change the rules. But such a radical change is not justified.

The incidence of catastrophic spinal cord injury in football is so rare today as to be statistically in-



## Sports Medicine

John Doherty / Correspondent

significant. Out of literally hundreds of millions of contact plays every year, only a handful of serious spinal injuries occur.

Nor is it likely that imposing more 15-yard penalties would cause coaches to place greater emphasis on safety. Implicit in this assumption is the incorrect belief that coaches are more concerned with field position than the health of their players.

Better coaching of technique, education of players, and proper fitting and wearing of equipment have all been shown to reduce the frequency of crippling spinal injuries in football. That is where the emphasis should remain.

Bob Parker, Football Program Chairman, Lake County Athletic Officials Association

**Dear Bob:** Jon Heck, the head athletic trainer at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey, authored the article in *American Football Coach* which I cited in my column. Rather than answer you directly, I have asked Jon to do so. His response follows. -JD

**Dear John:** There are four rules

in high school football regarding spearing. **Spearing:** (see above). **Face Tackling:** driving the face mask, frontal area, or top of the helmet directly into the runner. **Butt Blocking:** a technique involving a blow driven directly into an opponent with the face mask, frontal area, or top of the helmet as the primary point of contact either in close line play or in the open field. **Illegal Personal Contact:** when a player intentionally uses his helmet to butt or ram an opponent.

Parker writes, "The obvious alternative is to change the rules." The rules are already in place that eliminate all headfirst contact. The video "Prevent Paralysis: Don't Hit With Your Head," which is put out by the NFSHSA, clearly states since 1976 all headfirst contact is a rules violation. So, the "radical change" he says is unjustified already took place 24 years ago.

Parker states "the incidence is ... statistically insignificant." Currently, there are 5-12 cases of quadriplegia in high school football per year. In the mid-'70s, the number was 25, which is no more "statistically significant" than seven. Statistical significance cannot be relevant to paralyzed high school football players. We all say there has been a "dramatic reduction" since the rule change. It is not statistically dramatic; it is impressive because there are 15-20 fewer paralyzed athletes every year. But we cannot be content until they

are eliminated, and they will not be until the incidence of head-down contact is drastically reduced.

I believe the spearing penalty (any of the four) should be used as a deterrent. Parker mentions this assumes coaches are more concerned with field position than their players' safety. This is oversimplification. Why didn't the NFSHSA just make it a "point of emphasis" to coaches not to teach headfirst contact? The same reason clipping, the crack back, and face mask penalties are on the books.

No matter how you define a spear, I find it rather implausible that of the millions of helmet contacts occurring, only one in every 20 games justifies a penalty. If any official concedes there is helmet-first contact in football, they are conceding there are violations of these rules that are not enforced.

In regard to one point you made in your column, I don't feel that the yellow hankie is the best defense against spearing; I do believe proper coaching is.

**Jon Heck, Coordinator of Athletic Training, Richard Stockton College.**

You may access the several commentaries and research articles Heck has authored on spearing at: <http://loki.stockton.edu/~aspreys/Published.htm>

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