

# Officially speaking, safety up to referees

It happened late in the game and, after the fact, both teams' sports medicine staffs took every precaution – facemask cut off, sandbags to stabilize the head, victim logrolled onto the spineboard.

Somber faces lined both sidelines and there were tears evident among the injured player's teammates.

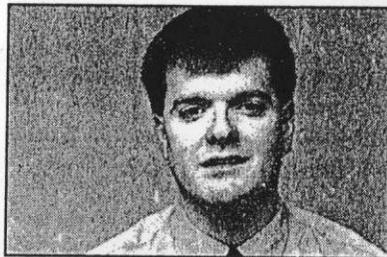
Everyone feared the worst. But in the end, catastrophe had been dodged. The injured Boston College player, freshman defensive lineman Todd McKniff, was able to move all his extremities even if he was a bit dazed. Later Saturday evening, he was released from St. Joseph Medical Center in South Bend to join the Eagles' celebration of their victory over the Fighting Irish.

Cervical injuries happen in football for one reason and one reason only: Spearing.

No one coaches it, but more than a few tolerate it. Shame on them.

Nonetheless, the best defense against spearing isn't good coaching. It is a yellow hankie.

According to an article in last month's issue of *American Football Coach*, spearing occurs in 41



## Sports Medicine

John Doherty / Correspondent

percent of a given high school football game's plays. However, the average referee will call the infraction only once every 20 contests. In short, the rule against spearing is not being enforced adequately and as long as that is the case, spearing – and cervical spine injuries – will continue.

True, since the rule which bans spearing came on line in 1976, the rate of catastrophic injuries in football has plummeted but one broken neck is still one too many.

Jon Heck, the coordinator of athletic training at Richard Stockton College in New Jersey, authored "Re-examining Spearing" in *AFC*. He contends the rule is not enforced because it is

misunderstood. The referees he has surveyed largely believe that unless spearing is intended, then it is not spearing.

Furthermore, many don't understand that the rule is designed to protect the spearer more than the spearee. The latter may suffer a contused thigh or some broken ribs. The former may break his neck.

Heck acknowledges that when a football player braces for a collision, the natural inclination is to duck. Unfortunately, doing so puts one in the precise posture to spear – initiate contact with the top of the head. Effective coaching is required then to convince tacklers, blockers and runners that it is best to lead with their shoulders while keeping their heads up.

However, the ultimate remedy, says Heck, is to continually throw the flag for spearing.

At 15 yards per crack, coaches won't tolerate it for long.

## On thin ice

Lest you think Heck and I are just a couple of disgruntled athletic trainers with nothing better to do than complain about the refs, keep in mind that Heck's ar-

ticle was featured in *American Football Coach*, not in an athletic training journal.

Consequently, it had the editorial blessing of the *American Football Coaches' Association*.

Still not satisfied? I refer you then to this month's issue of *The Physician and Sportsmedicine*.

There, Dr. William Roberts offers a commentary that recommends checking be banned from amateur hockey. A primary care physician at *MinnHealth Sports-Care* in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, Roberts speaks with more than the authority of a clinician and researcher. He was an amateur hockey player in his younger days.

In his review of pertinent literature, he cited a study done during the 1997 Ice Hockey World Championships which demonstrated that games in which officials enforced the rules more rigidly had lower injury rates.

If hockey referees routinely called a tight game, Roberts' rule would be out of order.

*John Doherty is a certified athletic trainer and licensed physical therapist. You may e-mail him via his web page: [members.aol.com/ptatcsport/fitness2/index.htm](mailto:members.aol.com/ptatcsport/fitness2/index.htm).*