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Collinsville High players learn from haunting football injury

Players, coaches say practice essential to safety

By Aaron Sudholt
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Matt Reichert, a junior varsity football player at Collinsville High School, doesn't worry about what being tackled on the field might mean. For him, it's just a part of the game.

"It all depends on where you hit," said Reichert, an outside linebacker.

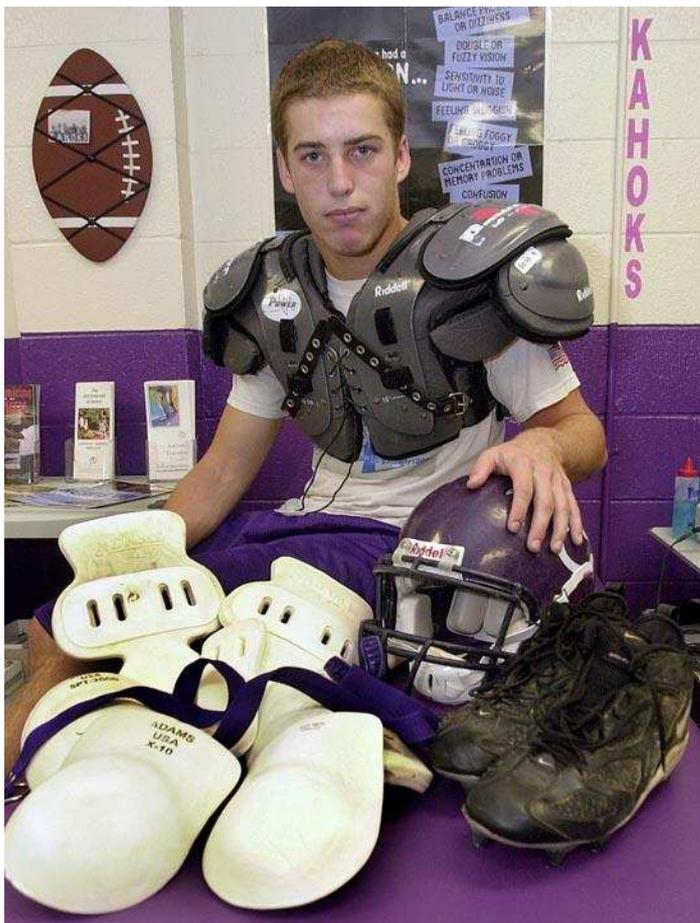
Reichert said he has confidence in his equipment and training - and knows how to take hits and hit back.

But after East St. Louis High School linebacker Demond Hunt Jr. was hospitalized with brain injuries following a jarring collision in a game against Collinsville this month, there is new focus on how players deal with hits - and what's stopping them from getting hurt.

"It's kind of surprising," said junior Clayton Boren, a varsity football player who plays tight end, just before football practice last week.

For players, the type of injuries Hunt suffered after the Oct. 3 game is among the most serious on the field, along with less common spinal cord impacts.

Collinsville High School Head Football Coach Mike Liljegren said it's his job to make sure



JOHN SWISTAK JR. PHOTO Junior Paul Henderson, 17, of Collinsville, with his football gear. Basic football gear equipment includes a helmet, mouth piece, shoulder pads, hip pads, tailbone pad, thigh pads and knee pads.



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the injuries don't happen. The key, he said, is twofold: equipment and training.

On Thursday afternoon, that was just what Liljegren was getting ready to provide as he stepped into his office just before taking his team out for an afternoon of low-impact training.

"The No. 1 thing we do is to teach proper tackling," he said. "You don't want a kid out there just throwing themselves around."

Liljegren said tackling becomes dangerous when players shove face down, leading with the crown of their head, also known as spearing.

That technique is risky - players tackling headfirst can jam their spine, potentially causing serious injury. The impact can also trigger a concussion, which if serious and frequent enough can lead to brain injury.

"If you've got your head up, you're going to be a better tackler," Liljegren said. "Everybody thinks it's because you're going to hurt the guy (you tackle), but you're really going to hurt yourself."

The advice translates to practice.

Liljegren, who has coached college and high school football for more than 13 years, said that if players don't get enough days of practice, even missing one or two sessions can keep them off the field for a game or even a season if it's not made up.

"I had a backup quarterback who couldn't play in the fall," Liljegren said. "He called in sick and missed three practices."

Players are also heavily padded, with equipment protecting shoulders, legs, thighs, the groin and head. Air-filled bladders and additional padding to protect the brain stem are recent advancements in helmet design, Liljegren said.

Yet pads and helmets aren't everything, and when something goes wrong with Collinsville's players, it's often the team doctor and athletic trainer who step in.

Amanda Baugher, the school's athletic trainer, attends every football game to help with athlete health and identify injuries.

She's particularly on guard for concussions, which are fairly common and can be very serious, especially if a player has had one before.

"The signs are a headache, or dizziness or nauseous or off-balance," Baugher said.

"Double vision or fuzzy vision. Mental changes, groggy or just kind of disoriented. Some will have amnesia before the hit or after the hit. Concentration difficulties or confusion."

If a player show any sign of injury, it's her job to take them off the field. If it is serious enough, they are taken to a waiting ambulance.

"There was once a time where the whole responsibility of this kind was put on the coaches," said Matt Badgely, assistant principal for athletic activities at CHS. "All the data shows that if you identify an injured person, you get to them and you get them the proper medical attention that it is not going to be a long lasting (injury)."

The availability of team doctors and athletic trainers is a fairly recent development at the high school level.

"Thirteen years ago we wouldn't have seen an athletic trainer or a campus doctor at all," he said.

Baughner, for example, was hired by the school at the beginning of 2002.

"It's been more at the college and professional level," she said. "It's been slowly coming down to a grade school level."

The role of the medical team was especially important following Hunt's injury. He suffered the hit during the first half and was shuttled to Anderson Hospital in Maryville. Later, after brain swelling, Hunt was taken to Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center in St. Louis. As of Thursday, Hunt was still hospitalized, although his conditions have improved, said Angelique Caldwell, who works in the East St. Louis High School athletics office.

Liljegren said Hunt's injury was handled as well as he could have hoped.

"You don't want that to happen," he said, "but when it does that's how you want it to be handled."

By the numbers: High school sport injuries

- 7.2 million: the estimated number of high school sports players in 2005
- 1.4 million: the number of injuries each year among players during football, wrestling, volleyball soccer, basketball, baseball and softball games and practices
- 4.36: the rate of injuries during football, out of 1,000 games and practices
- 2.44: the rate injuries per 1,000 athlete exposures overall

Source: 2006 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study

Sound off

How do you feel about player safety at high school football games? Sound off at suburbanjournals.stltoday.com/

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