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Head, neck injuries ought to raise alarm

The most disturbing development of this football season hasn't been the string of losses by the local college teams or the usual assortment of blown calls. It's been something more alarming than that: head and neck injuries.

There was the brain injury suffered by Bullitt East junior Jesse Bratcher that left him in a coma for several days in August. There was the concussion Florida quarterback Tim Tebow suffered against Kentucky on Sept.26, leaving his status uncertain for the Gators' game at Louisiana State on Saturday.

There was the hit that left St.Xavier sophomore Lucas Tutwiler motionless for nearly 10 minutes at Papa John's Cardinal Stadium on Saturday. Tutwiler required five hours of surgery Sunday to repair two fractured vertebrae in his neck.

And then there is the backdrop of last week's chilling New York Times story that reported the results of a study conducted by a University of Michigan research group. They found higher rates of dementia in retired pro football players than the general population, a study the NFL was quick to dismiss.

I wonder how much outrage there would be if these developments were coming from boxing instead of King Football, the game that I believe also gets a pass from fans and media in the world of performance-enhancing substances. Color me skeptical that pro football players produce those bodies by dining at the training table and lifting extra weights.

Football is a violent and inherently dangerous game.

Risks are assumed by anybody who snaps on a chinstrap. I get that.

Injuries happen. Always have. Always will.

But after sitting in a press box and watching Tebow and Tutwiler go down the last two weekends and also visiting Bullitt East to observe the miraculous recovery by Bratcher, it's difficult for me to keep shrugging off head and neck injuries as "part of the game."

This is a perfect place for me to make something perfectly clear: Not one syllable of the column I wrote about Tebow after the Florida-Kentucky game was written to even hint that Tebow deserved to be injured that night.

That, unfortunately, is how some readers interpreted the fourth paragraph in my Sept.27 column, when I wrote: "The kid deserved a blow."

That's sideline chatter for saying that Tebow deserved a rest, some time on the sideline to relax. Most readers understood the context of the message that I set up in the first three paragraphs, when I wrote that considering the score and how sick he had been prior to the game, Tebow deserved to be on the sideline with a cold glass of water.

I'd never advocate an injury for any player. Head and neck injuries in football have long been something that have turned me away from the game. I hope that Tebow, as well as Bratcher and Tutwiler, make complete recoveries, and that Tebow plays against LSU on Saturday.

Bullitt East athletic director Bob Blackburn said Bratcher continues to recover from the brain injury that he suffered during a junior-varsity game Aug.24.

In an e-mail, Blackburn wrote that Bratcher is working with a homebound teacher and plans to return to Bullitt East for the second semester.

Wrote Blackburn, "His sense of humor is intact as he has expressed that things he did not know before, he still does not know. His vision has greatly improved. ... Thanks for keeping him in mind as he is very important to our community."

Blackburn said that Bratcher is expected to attend Bullitt East's next home game on Oct.23.

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