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Football players don't always recognize serious injuries



REBECCA J. DUCKER/ Morning News

Marlboro County High School running back Kris Pankey talks to neurosurgeon Dr. William Naso on Sept. 23 during his six-weeks check-up following a break in his first cervical vertebra. Pankey was injured on the first play of a scrimmage against Myrtle Beach on Aug. 21, but played eight more plays before he realized he was seriously hurt.

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Kris Pankey's story is not necessarily a common one. But it certainly is a sobering one.

What happened to the Marlboro County High School running back during a preseason scrimmage against Myrtle Beach is an athletic trainer's nightmare.

It turned out Pankey was playing with a serious injury, but didn't realize it.

He knows now he is fortunate it didn't end up any worse than it is.

A broken first cervical vertebra (C1) — the one at the very top of the spine — has Pankey wearing a halo device these days to keep his neck stable.

The injury happened on Marlboro County's first play on Aug. 21 against the Seahawks. Pankey played eight more plays after that before he felt bad enough to take himself out of the game.

"It is a scary thing and a dangerous thing," Marlboro County coach Dean Boyd said. "Nobody knew it at first, not even him."

Scary time

According to Boyd, Pankey is one of those players coaches love to have on their team. He practices hard, plays hard and has a toughness about him that won't let him take any plays off, even when there's some pain involved.

Against the Seahawks, Pankey went low to take on a Myrtle Beach defender. Pankey and Boyd believe the injury happened when Pankey's head made contact with the would-be tackler's knee.

But Pankey said the only symptoms he felt at the time reminded him of what is commonly called a "stinger." Usually with a stinger, a person feels some pain and numbness from the neck down through one arm. The symptoms often subside after a few minutes.

But Pankey's symptoms didn't go away. And after a few more plays, he noticed that he couldn't turn his head from side to side and was using only the

movement of his eyes to navigate his way through defenders.

After Pankey was out of the game, he told medical personnel on the scene what was going on. EMTs, Boyd said, immobilized Pankey and took him to the hospital.

Even once Pankey was there, the first news Boyd said he heard was that doctors thought the player might have a concussion, but were going to perform more tests to be safe.

That's when doctors discovered two breaks in Pankey's C1 vertebra, an injury known as a Jefferson fracture.

And that's when Pankey heard something come out of the doctor's mouth that really frightened him: Don't move too much, because a wrong move might mean paralyzation.

"Now that's scary," Pankey said. "I wasn't even thinking about that until the doctors said that word: 'paralyzed.'"

Communication is key

Pankey's case is an extreme example of how dangerous a game football can be.

It is also an example of why athletic trainers find themselves preaching almost constantly to players about the importance of communicating.

"I always ask athletes to tell me what's going on," said Anita Chandler, who serves as South Florence High School's athletic trainer through McLeod Sports Medicine. "I need to know what it is that's bothering them because I don't know exactly what it is unless they let me know."

South Florence senior receiver Blake Vinson takes that advice more to heart these days than he once did.

Vinson missed last season with a herniated disc.

He said he waited too long before he reported the pain to the Bruins' medical staff.

Of course, there is no guarantee that if Vinson had spoken up earlier about his injury that the diagnosis and result would not have been the same.

But he sometimes wonders if he cost himself a few games by not saying something.

"I tried to keep it to myself that I was hurting and I ended up being done for the year," he said.

Why?

Vinson said for him, it was two things: pride and the fact that he loves to play football. Generally speaking, athletes, and especially football players, are coached to be tough and to play through pain.

"I usually don't like to show that I'm hurt," Vinson said. "I spent enough time on the sideline last year. But now I'm to the point where if something is hurting, I let them check it out because you never know if it is serious."

And that's something Chandler loves to hear.

She completely understands that athletes want to compete, even if it means shaking off some pain to do so.

But more often than not, she advises them to err on the side of caution.

"I always reassure them that every injury does not require them to be on the sideline," Chandler said. "It's just a preventative measure to make sure they don't get injured any further and possibly end up with a season- or career-ending result."

It's a catch-22 for coaches, too.

Some players, Boyd said, wouldn't miss a play for anything. Others, though, don't mind skipping a few plays here and there, especially in practice.

"It's a sticky thing," he said. "You sometimes have kids who like to cry wolf, as I like to call it. They might not really be hurt. What we try to express to kids is that if you're hurt, let us know. But don't tell us if you really aren't because then when you do get hurt, we don't know how to handle it because you've cried wolf too many times."

Hartsville coach Jeff Calabrese said he has a simple way of handling an injury situation: It's always medical personnel's call.

"We have two general physicians, two orthopedic surgeons and an athletic trainer," Calabrese said. "I let the guys that do this as their job make that call."

And if players don't practice, Calabrese said, they also don't play on Friday nights.

Getting educated

Not every school, though, has an athletic trainer on hand at every practice or every event.

That's why it is important for coaches themselves to take advantage of any educational opportunities that are available.

On a very basic level, coaches are often required to be CPR and AED (automated external defibrillator) certified.

But beyond that, McLeod Sports Medicine offers two coaches' clinics — one at the beginning of the fall sports season and another at the beginning of the spring sports season — that can help coaches and other non-medical personnel recognize symptoms and injuries.

Chandler said the clinics typically include educational sessions led by orthopedic surgeons, athletic trainers and physical therapists.

"We try to give (coaches) information on what to look for, how to prevent it, what to do if something were to happen while on the field in the case of an event where there is no trainer, so at least they will have some tools to treat an athlete," Chandler said.

A season derailed

Pankey, in his own words, "had everything going for me."

A good student, he had his own car (a silver Mercury Sable) so he could feed his hunger to "keep moving."

"I loved playing football, loved going to practice and I don't like to stay at home," he said.

That came to an end month before last.

Since then, Pankey has had a lot of adjusting to do.

The first, biggest adjustment?

"Getting used to the fact that you've got screws in your head," he said. "And I'm trying to be careful, trying not to bend my neck or anything like that."

His car sits in the yard collecting leaves where he lives with his aunt, Isadora Covington, in Clio.

He can walk, but running and jumping are out of the question for now.

Sleep comes when it comes, and usually does not last nearly long enough. Pankey said he averages about four hours of sleep per night, whether he goes to bed at 10, at midnight, or after.

"If I feel like sleep is coming over me, I hurry up and turn off all the lights, get in bed and try to go to sleep as quickly as I can," he said, "because I know I'll be awake in a few hours."

He is on homebound schooling and has a math tutor come by every now and then to help him out.

But if slowing down has done one thing for Pankey, it has allowed him to think about life.

As upset as he is about missing his last year of high school football, his religious convictions don't allow him to wallow in self-pity.

He said he thinks the fact that he stayed in a game after he was injured made his situation worse, though there is no concrete evidence that is the case.

"But I really don't regret it because everything happens for a reason," he said. "I'm kind of using this time to grow in God. I try not to think about it a lot."

And while football is on hold, other things are not.

He still has his sights set on furthering his education, though he can't decide between criminal law or business management.

He's counting down the four or five weeks until, he hopes, the halo device comes off.

"The first thing I'm going to do when that thing comes off is take a shower," he said. "I can't even do that right now. You miss a lot of little things."

And while there obviously is no football for Pankey now, he's going to make sure to ask about that possibility as it relates to his future the next time he sees his doctor, he said.

If at all possible, he does not want the final football play of his life to be in a preseason scrimmage. In typical fashion of someone who loves the game he plays, Pankey will exhaust all possibilities before he gives up — even though he knows firsthand now what can happen.

"You know the consequences, but you really can't think about them," he said. "I know how hurt somebody can get. I just never thought it would happen to me."

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