

Eric LeGrand: Correct tackling form prevents spinal injuries

By KEITH SARGEANT • STAFF WRITER • October 23, 2010

RUTGERS — Whenever Fred Mueller hears of the kinds of catastrophic injuries like the one Rutgers football player Eric LeGrand suffered last week, his first question is this:

"I ask, "Did the kid have his head down when tackling?" said Mueller, director of the University of North Carolina's National Center for Catastrophic Injury Research. "In most cases that I hear of a kid suffering a catastrophic injury, the answer is, "Yes, the initial contact was in the down position."

Mueller has been tracking both fatal and catastrophic trends in high school and collegiate athletics since 1980, and his center has been issuing a report since 1965. That data is sent to the NCAA, the American Football Coaches Association, and the National Federation of State High School Associations.

"You don't see injuries causing paralysis as much as you used to, probably because coaches are finally putting an emphasis on tackling with proper technique," Mueller said. "You see 4-to-6 every year, which is less than 1-per-every-100,000 kids playing football, but it's still too much if you ask me. I mean, if you're the guy being injured, or if you're the family of that injured player, it's going to affect him for the rest of his life."

In the wake of the NFL's announced zero-tolerance policy on "spearing with the helmet" last week as well as the spinal-cord injury that left LeGrand paralyzed from the neck down as the result of a head-first tackle in a game against Army last weekend, coaches throughout New Jersey are putting added emphasis on tackling the right way.

"It's funny because I have a player who talks about always wanting to hit," Franklin High football coach Louis Solomon said. "But just because he wants to hit doesn't mean he's executing what we want to get done. It's more about tackling the right way than hitting. You try to explain the differences, and hopefully this kid will know there's a fine line between running into somebody and tackling with

proper technique."

Mueller, who this weekend was in Concord, Mass., speaking at a conference on football safety, said the purpose of his Annual Survey of Football Research is to "make the game safer, and therefore, a more enjoyable sports activity." His report has been influential in regard to rule changes, improvement of equipment and medical care, and better coaching techniques.

"All of a sudden people are talking about not using your head when tackling and blocking. Heck, that rule has been in the rule book since 1976, at least in the college and high school rules," Mueller said. "Initial contact with the head or face while blocking or tackling is not legal, but it's not being called by the referees. I don't know why it's being called, but if kids would not use their head while making initial contact and use their shoulder, you'd definitely cut down on not only catastrophic injuries but concussions as well."

Avoiding Injuries

Doctors specializing in sports injuries also are trying to minimize the risk of injuries - as severe as a paralyzing spinal-cord injury or as mild as a sprain - more than ever.

"I try to encourage players at all levels, from Pee Wees all the way up to the pros, to tackle with their head up," said Dr. Andrew Hecht, director of spine surgery at Mount Sinai School of Medicine as well as the spine consultant for the Jets. "Believe me, I've



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cared for all too many of these (spinal-cord injuries) working with the Jets and some other teams and I can tell you from experience that it's one of the single things that's transformed the instances of spinal injuries, when athletes began getting educated on tackling with their heads-up.

"But obviously, with the frequency that we're seeing players spearing with their helmets, more needs to be done."

Dr. Barth Green admittedly isn't a football rules official, but he is considered one of the world's experts in neurological injury research. Green, who co-directs The Miami Project to Cure Paralysis, said there needs to be a zero-tolerance policy on helmet-to-helmet contact on every football field in the world.

"It's not even about teaching - I think every coach and trainer teaches," Green said. "If the head is down and that player hits someone with it, they should eject him from the game. There has to be harsh penalties for this. These kids have to get it pounded in their heads over and over again, that hurting themselves or someone else is unacceptable.

"The majority of these catastrophic injuries can be avoided if there's an enforcement of the rules. People don't realize it, but if they keep hitting with their helmet they're going to leave the sport with permanent brain damage, not to mention their other limbs. Every week, it seems, we're seeing players getting carried off the field."

In his report, Mueller says coaches who don't instruct the proper tackling technique could be liable "if a catastrophic injury case goes to court of law."

Legalese aside, Mueller said it's a matter of knowing right from wrong.

"All that stuff you see in the NFL, those violent helmet collisions, that's not the way to do it," Mueller said. "And high school and college players, they need to know that that's not the way to do it, either. They're going to hurt themselves more than anyone else, and that's a serious problem."

Defining a Proper Tackle

While textbook definitions vary regarding proper tackling technique, bringing a ball carrier to the

ground boils down to one fundamental, Ridgewood High football coach Charles Johnson said.

"Basically, we teach tackling with the chest," said Johnson, who serves as the president of the New Jersey Football Coaches Association. "I don't know a high school football coach who has taught tackling with the face in decades. If you tackle and block with your chest, you keep your head and face out of it."

Johnson said his Ridgewood program "teaches (proper) tackling drills every Tuesday," and the charge is to hit the ball carrier "chest on chest.

At South River, players are ordered to watch an instructional video on tackling when they arrive for the first day of preseason practice.

"Our trainer runs a video on proper tackling, with the positive and the negative things that can happen from it," South River coach Rich Marchesi said. "Everyone has to watch the video, and you're not allowed on the field until you do."

During the season, Marchesi said his team practices form-tackling "probably two or three days a week for about 15 minutes."

"We'll do it at half- or three-quarters speed ... and really stress about keeping your head up, and then we'll do it again pretty much full-speed at that point," Marchesi said. "We talk eye balls in the numbers, head up, sit down with your butt, never drop your head and you gotta get your head across otherwise your other arm is dangling and you get not only neck injuries but shoulder injuries and

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pinched nerves.

"We stress it. Am I going to say it happens every time? Probably not, knowing that on Saturday afternoons it gets pretty violent out there. When the kids are out there on the field, players are going to make a play anyway they can so that's probably when (an injury) happens. In the heat of the moment a kid is going to lay it on the line but all we can do is stress the proper technique."

At the beginning of preseason camp in Franklin, Solomon has his players tackle without helmets. It sounds dangerous, but Solomon insists it's a good way to teach proper tackling technique.

"We go through the basic fundamentals of tackling, always stressing to never make contact with your head," Solomon said. "Making contact with either shoulder, a good athletic stance and driving your legs and shoulders through the offensive ball carrier is the way we teach it. We give the players a reminder that, yes, football is a physical game but there's a right way to attack offensive players."

Worst, Best Practices

Ironically, the worst form of tackling to emulate is often seen from the NFL stars high school players idolize, some coaches say.

"Unfortunately what the kids see on Sunday is some bad tackling technique," Roxbury coach Cosmo Lorusso said. "You see those guys go in like missiles with their heads down, so sometimes we have to tell our players that you can't tackle like these NFL guys do because that's how you get hurt."

Some of Roxbury's best tackling techniques have been ripped from the pages of Rutgers' playbook, Lorusso added.

"Greg Schiano has a good term, 'Bite the football,'" Lorusso said, referring to the Scarlet Knights coach. "We use that term a million times because it puts the head in the proper position. If you're seeing the ball in the kid's hand that means your eyes and your head are up."

East Brunswick coach Marcus Borden has had a hand in helping the New Jersey Football Coaches Association adopt standards for better tackling-technique as well as improved safety equipment.

"It's a real tough game and we ask our kids to be

physical and to put a hit on somebody," Borden said. "Obviously, we're all emphasizing that, but we're asking our kids to do it the proper way."

Borden said his team takes a three-step approach to tackling, which includes repetitions on head placement, angle tackling, and head-on tackling.

"It depends on how you're tackling, because you can't predict where the ball carrier is going, but we want to make sure that their head placement is always in the proper position," Borden said. "Many of your tackles may be angle tackles, so you try to place your head in front of the ballcarrier so you have more of a surface to make a tackle because you can't make an arm tackle. We work on them trying to put their head in front of the chest."

"Tackling itself is an explosion with hips and arm movement, and you're exploding upwards. So you teach the kids power-cleans (a weight-lifting technique) and squatting exercise. So a good tackle would be the use of your arms and hips and head-placement."

At Rutgers, each practice contains at least one period focusing on form-tackling.

"At the start of training camp Coach Schiano goes through the fundamentals of tackling," senior safety Joe Lefeged said. "We have a tackling circuit every day we're in pads, five different stations where we work on different tackles and use the proper form. The perfect tackle is having a great base, keeping your head up and then bringing down the ballcarrier the best way possible."

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"A lot of people think that the best hits are the ones where you leave your feet and missile into someone. But that's not what Coach Schiano teaches. He teaches us to make a form-tackle and try to bring down your man the right way."



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Eric LeGrand is carted off the field after sustaining a spinal injury caused by a helmet-to-helmet collision. (Jason Towlen / MyCentralJersey)

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