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## Better instruction, equipment reduce football concussions

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Randy Burns likes what he sees from the sidelines while a Florence youth football team goes through pre-game drills.

He watches the youngsters keep their heads up while blocking. During the game, he notices them lead with their shoulder instead of head when tackling.

"We've got guys here who know how to coach," said Burns, the athletic director for the city of Florence. "They teach the proper way to tackle and block, and teach them how to use their hands. If you tackle with your head down, you jam your neck."

Local youth and high school football programs appear to be among a growing number of organizations with increasing awareness of the dangers of head-related football injuries.

The topic of head injuries in football is gaining a lot of national attention these days.

Congress is considering a bill that establishes standards for student-athletes who get concussions in football and other sports.

A Sept. 23 CNN report from a Congressional hearing quotes a Government Accountability Office study that states 400,000 concussions occurred in high school sports from 2005-08.

The bill, called the Protecting Student Athletes from Concussions Act, is supported by the National Football League.

It requires schools to have policies for concussion education and training for the schools, parents, students and coaches, according to the report.

Burns sees a major difference in awareness in football programs at all levels these days.

"It's a lot different today than when I played," he said. "It used to be that you played with a concussion. Safety better be your number one concern these days."

Youth coaches go through a certification class to assure they are properly instructing their players on techniques, Burns said.

Also, there are restrictions based on weight in each age group for the Quad-Cities League, which



*Jim Hannon/TimesDaily*

The Rams play the Colts in a youth football game in Florence. Coaches and sports trainers say a growing number of organizations are working to reduce head-related football injuries.

includes the Shoals' four major cities. Burns said they don't allow anyone above those weights to carry the football or receive a pass.

The 6- to 8-year-old league's limit for carrying the ball is 90 pounds, Burns said. It's 115 pounds for 9- to 10-year-olds, and 135 pounds for 11- to 12-year-olds.

"If you're an 80-pounder trying to tackle a 135-pounder, you're asking to get hurt," he said.

Howard Carson, who has a 10-year-old son on a Florence youth team, believes his son is safe and well instructed.

"You're going to get bumped and bruised," Carson said. He adds, though, "We had about two or three players injured last season, but not playing football. I believe it was from jumping on a trampoline and smashing a finger in a car door."

Florence resident Tony Harden also has a child on the team. Like Burns, Harden sees a different attitude among coaches these days.

"If someone gets hurt, the coaches don't say, 'Ah, get up and shake it off,' " Harden said.

He also notices a complete change in technique instruction.

"When I played, they used to teach us when we were tackling to put your face mask on their (jersey) numbers," said Harden, who played high school football in the 1980s. "They don't teach it that way any longer, which is a good thing. They teach you to avoid injury: Put your helmet on the football. The football's at the player's side, so you try to prevent neck injuries and those types of things.

"If they teach them the right way early, they'll grow up playing that way. If you go in leading with your head now, it's a penalty."

Lance Delia, president of the Wilson Youth Football League, meets with coaches to discuss safety issues before the season. That includes making sure players keep their heads up and don't lead with their helmets. He also helps instruct players during early-season practices.

"The first two weeks when we start out is all fundamentals," Delia said. "The referees we use are really strict. If a kid leads with the head, they'll caution him, and if he continues to do so, it's a penalty."

Helmets are upgraded every two years to ensure safety, Delia said.

A January TIME magazine article titled "The Problem with Football: How to Make It Safer" explains concussions often occur "when the brain bangs against the skull."

"When helmets clash, the head decelerates instantly, yet the brain can lurch forward, like a driver who jams the brakes on," the article explains. "The bruising and stretching of tissue can result in something as minimal as 'seeing stars' and a momentary separation from consciousness."

The article quotes an NFL study that reveals former professional players over age 50 are five times more likely as the rest of the population to be diagnosed with a memory-related disease.

It also quotes Dr. Robert Cantu, co-founder of Sports Legacy Institute, who said purposefully using the helmet needs to be prohibited. That includes running backs lowering their heads to get an extra yard or more.

He said when a runner does that, the defender's natural reaction is to also hit him head-on to stop him from gaining that little extra. The NFL is considering that rule, the article states.

The NFL now penalizes a player who purposely engages in a helmet-to-helmet hit. The TIME article suggests adding to that by making the player sit out some plays, similar to the way a hockey player gets sent to a penalty box.

The article points out it is important that the NFL continues to focus on this issue, because NFL rules tend to trickle down to college, high school and youth football.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association has been tracking severe head injuries in recent years and has made rule changes along the way, including toughening penalties for spearing and head-down contact. A report released in February shows progress is being made. Data from the NCAA's injury surveillance program show the number of concussions in football games may be leveling off or even dropping. That follows a constant rise during nearly two decades of play.

The NCAA report points out that from 1988 to 2004, concussion injury rates increased an average of 7 percent annually in all sports. In fall 2004, 3.4 of every 1,000 student-athletes who stepped on a football field during a game sustained a concussion. The injury rate dropped to 2.4 per 1,000 players during the 2005 season — the first year the spearing and head-down contact rules were enforced. The rate ranged no higher than 2.8 in three seasons since.

"I'll never forget the night my son got hit head-on," said Heather Gentry, whose son was 7 at the time. He's now in college.

"There was the most horrible sound I had ever heard, two helmets crashing together," Gentry added. "Jason went down and wasn't moving. I was just scared to death. The whole time I was running out there, the only thing I could think of is 'he's just too young for this. I shouldn't have allowed him to play. I should know better.' I prayed to God that he make Jason OK and we wouldn't take this chance any more."

There's an ongoing debate over the appropriate age for a child to play football. The answers vary depending on who you ask, but most will tell you it's an individual's choice.

In the meantime, league officials on all levels emphasize education and training as means to improve safety and awareness.

Jonathan Ratliff, an athletic trainer at Helen Keller Hospital, is the trainer for Colbert Heights High School athletics. He said high school trainers must have a four-year bachelor's degree in athletic training.

"There's a move toward making it a master's program," said Ratliff, who has a master's degree in the field.

Ratliff said he notices an emphasis in head-injury awareness in Alabama and Mississippi high school athletics.

"Coaches are being educated much better," he said. "They had to take a course in head-injury prevention this year."

A major emphasis in the course is a player should remain out of a game if he has even the smallest sign of a concussion, Ratliff said.

"We used to use the phrase, 'got his bell rung,' " he said. "In those cases, the player might have had a concussion and went back in. That once was the mentality of coaches: You got your bell rung, shook it off and went back in to play.

"But today, if there is any evidence of dizziness, vision impairment, nausea or anything, there's no playing until they see a physician. Coaches, themselves, no longer have the clearance to say 'he's all right, put him back in.' Once they have a concussion, they're done until they get a physician's

clearance."

Ratliff said every high school coach he's been around likes that rule.

"I haven't heard of a coach arguing with a trainer about this," he said. "It's a very big shift, and it's just education.

"I've noticed a major change just within the turn of this century of coaches telling tacklers to keep their head up. In talking about prevention, it's all about education."

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