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Posted: October 28  
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## Sports Medicine: Proper tackling needed to help football players remain safe

By DR. JAMES GLAZER

Lately, it has been a dangerous time for football players. On Oct. 16, Rutgers defensive tackle Eric Legrand was paralyzed from the neck down after making a tackle on special teams. The next day, Joshua Cribbs of the Cleveland Browns, Todd Heap of the Baltimore Ravens and DeSean Jackson of the Philadelphia Eagles were knocked out of their games by vicious hits to the head.

The NFL responded swiftly, leveling fines of between \$50,000 and \$75,000 on each of the players responsible for the hits. But for parents around the country, fines don't make up for the fear brought on by seeing a young player lying motionless after a dangerous collision.

Since that weekend, parents have asked me all kinds of very good questions. They want to know if there is anything they can do to protect their children from being a victim of a catastrophic football injury.

Fortunately, physicians have learned a great deal about the kinds of hits that cause the most harm. In football, the most terrifying type of injury is one to the neck. The cervical spine has two features that make it more prone to devastating injuries. First, the bones in the neck are smaller and weaker than anywhere else in the spine. This makes them more likely to be injured in a hard hit.

The second feature that makes the neck so vulnerable comes from the fact that the spinal cord (the vital nerve that runs down the backbone and sends signals that allow us to move our arms and legs) does not have a lot of extra room in the neck. This means that any injury to the bones in the neck has a good chance of impacting the cord. And damage to the spinal cord can cause paralysis of the kind that Legrand suffered.

Research shows that strength and technique can protect football players from many devastating neck injuries. All players, especially younger ones who may not have very developed muscles, should work on neck strengthening exercises. There's a reason that most NFL players (along with NHL and lacrosse athletes) have necks like tree trunks. The simple fact is a strong neck provides a bolster to the bones of the spine, and it can protect the spinal cord in case of an injury.

Tackling technique is even more crucial to a player's safety. Spearing, the act of hitting with the crown of the helmet, has long been outlawed. This is because the bones of the neck are very vulnerable to impact from the top of the head downward. Spearing tackles can crumble the neck, causing the cervical bones to sever the spinal cord.

Nearly every major football spinal cord injury has resulted from tackling with the head

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down. There are much safer ways to tackle. Hall of Fame linebacker Mike Singletary once described his tackling technique by saying he visualized placing his forehead in the chest of an opposing running back. Coaches all over Maine teach this same kind of head's up tackling to keep their players safe.

The last important safety tip that we can take from the recent accidents has to do with the teams' responses to the injuries. Only a few years ago, concussed players like Heap and Jackson might have returned to the game. Players at all levels typically will do almost anything to get back on the field immediately and help their teams.

Thankfully, this no longer happens. Players with concussions should almost never return to the field the same day as their injury. Resting those players ensures their safety, and it speeds their return to play. Only a week after his injury, a healthy Heap caught a touchdown pass to help the Ravens beat Buffalo.

Tragic accidents can always happen in an impact sport like football. Maine parents can help protect their own young athletes by encouraging good training, proper technique and alert responses to injuries.

Dr. James Glazer is a sports medicine physician for Coastal Orthopedics and Sports Medicine in Freeport. He serves as a consultant for the Portland Pirates and the U.S. Ski Team.

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