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Youth football coaches stress the proper way to tackle

'Eyes to the sky' - but not to the NFL; coaches say pros leading with the helmet is the wrong way

By Robbie Enos/Gold Country News Service



Tim Lloyd

Michael Wanner (left) and Noah Parker of the Oakmont Junior Vikings Junior Midget team meet during a tackling drill Wednesday at Oakmont High School.

Football is an interesting psychological study in which athletes knowingly risk traumatic injury in exchange for the thrill of competition.

It's because of this that safety increasingly is a large priority in the football world. A recent spate of concussions has become all the rage, sparking media interest and controversy in the National Football League.

One aspect of blame is the technique defensive players use when tackling another player. Leading with the head, better known as "spearing," has drawn the bulk of negative attention. Players who lead with the head run the risk of head and neck injuries and, in extreme cases, paralysis and death.

Sierra Youth Football Conference teams in Roseville and throughout the Placer County area, which take the field today for the second round of the playoffs, take safety seriously. Tackling technique and coaching are viewed as critical to the safety of boys who are new to the sport.

"As soon as we get into camp, we are working on tackling basics, starting with the mighty mites all the way up through the program," Woodcreek coach Russ Collias said. "Learning good form tackling

from this age on up through the high school level is key to both safety and winning."

Dale Mortensen is the tackling guru for Granite Bay football. He's a coach at the high school and takes time to run clinics and help coaches at the youth level.

In 1997, Mortensen attended a clinic at Washington State University. Coaches in the program brought attention to bad tackling techniques and the large consequences. Washington State was losing scholarship athletes to major injuries and needed to develop a more specific outline for tackling techniques.

Mortensen teaches these principles in the Granite Bay youth program, specifically "hitting up" and through ball carriers. The key among all the youth coaches was keeping the head up, which protects the neck from serious injury.

"You hit up on the ball carrier," Mortensen said. "You hit him chest plate to chest plate, drive your feet, and wrap. Many adults were taught to hit down and through, but now we have learned safer techniques."

Oakmont Junior Vikings president Art Reyes said coaches teach players to "see what you hit" and "eyes to the sky." Spearing is a red flag for all staffs and a penalty in a game.

"Spearing is the problem," SYFC president Todd Peek said. "Leading with the head, we don't want that. It's a penalty for a reason."

Said Mortensen, "You do not use your helmet as a weapon. You use your helmet to protect your best weapon: your brain. That weapon makes you a smart football player."

Curt Crandall is in his ninth year of coaching youth football in Folsom and the current head coach of the Junior Pee Wee team. He said the teams work on proper tackling techniques weekly.

"We have four or five stations that are set up with different-type scenarios," Crandall said. "We teach head in front and getting it across the body and then shooting the hips. ... We slide the head under the arm, contact with the shoulder and wrap and drive. We don't teach launching either."

Coaches don't take errors in tackling lightly. Ted Nance is the defensive coordinator for the Oakmont High freshman team and coaches the youth programs. Nance played football at the University of Idaho and broke his neck. He understands the importance of technique.

"If we have a kid that is not understanding the tackling techniques, I cut him," Nance said. "I tell the parents the first meeting we have that if your kid keeps putting his head down or he isn't getting it, I have to cut him. We have safety cuts here, and that's a safety cut. I don't care if he's the best player. If he's putting his head down, he's a safety risk for himself and the other players."

Asked how often concussions or neck injuries occur, coaches said one to two per season.

"It is a collision sport, and things are going to happen no matter what," Mortensen said.

Crandall estimated Folsom has had three incidents of concussions this season in an organization with five teams carrying at least 30 players on each team.

"Through all the practices and games to only have three concussions, I think, is minimal," Crandall said. "For the most part, football is a pretty safe sport. The kids get hurt more often on the playground or on their skateboards than they do out here."

Ultimate caution is taken when injuries occur. Players who sustain a head or neck injury can't return until being cleared by a doctor.

"We don't take issues like that lightly," Reyes said. "If there's a concern, that player must be cleared by a doctor."

Coaches also said they never make references to the NFL.

"We have to look at the fact that the NFL is about money," Peek said. "The TV and media is not helping either. Every night you see the highlight reels, and there are all these big hits. Unfortunately, kids see it and that's what they want to do."

Said Nance, "We don't talk about the NFL. You hear kids asking each other, 'Hey! Did you see that hit last night?' but we don't ever talk to the kids about that. We teach them the right technique - using your shoulder instead of the head and wrapping up."

The mystery is where players get the idea to lead with their heads in the first place, because every coach agreed that proper tackling technique is common knowledge in the game.

"The guys who lead with their heads are doing it wrong," Reyes said. "I don't think you'll ever find a coach who said that's how to tackle. Your

helmet is there to protect you. It is not a weapon, and if you use it like one, you won't play."
Matt Long of Gold Country News Service contributed to this report.

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Sierra Youth Football Conference, Woodcreek, Roseville, Oakmont, Granite Bay, Folsom, NFL