

## Necessary roughness

By KEVIN TRESOLINI • The News Journal  
October 31, 2010

The video is called "Heads Up," and Howard High football coach Dan Ritter shows it to his team every preseason before the first practice.

Put out by the National Athletic Trainers' Association, it demonstrates safe and proper tackling technique and the damage that can occur when a football player makes violent contact, whether intentionally or inadvertently, with his head down. Helmet-to-helmet collisions are especially unsafe.

In two of the earlier scenes, it shows head-down hits by Mississippi's Chucky Mullins and Washington's Curtis Williams that left each paralyzed with cervical fractures. Both died two years after their injuries.

"We worry about it all the time," Ritter said of the dangers of incorrect or overzealous tackling, and why he and his staff educate players constantly.

Football's perils came into painful focus the weekend of Oct. 16-17, when the sight of motionless players clearly demonstrated the game's inherent danger.

A Rutgers University player, Eric LeGrand, was paralyzed when he led with his head while tackling Army's Malcolm Brown on a kickoff return.

And in the NFL, a series of violent collisions forced the league to greater scrutinize – and threaten heavier fines for – head-to-head contact. NFL rules prohibit hits to the head of a player in a defenseless position.

New England Patriots safety Brandon Meriweather was fined \$50,000 for drilling Baltimore Ravens tight end Todd Heap. It cost Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison \$75,000 for a hit on Cleveland Browns wide receiver Mohamed Massaquoi.

Area fans likely most remember Atlanta Falcons defensive back Dunta Robinson launching himself like a missile into Eagles wide receiver DeSean Jackson, leaving both sprawled on the field. Jackson suffered a severe concussion. Robinson was fined

\$50,000.

Delaware State sophomore cornerback Matt Spicer said that with the speed, intensity and brutality of football, injuries are unavoidable.

"I honestly feel as though they're making football soft," Spicer said of the NFL's reaction to that spate of violent hits. "In the game, when you play football, things are going a hundred miles an hour and your first initial thought when you see a guy come out of the backfield or a receiver about to catch a ball is to not let them catch the ball by any means necessary.

"In order to force the ball out, you have to go hard. If you pull up just a little bit, he may catch that ball. When you go hard, it ends up in big collisions and hits and concussions. That's all part of the game."

Ritter said "everybody was talking about" LeGrand's injury at Howard the following Monday. To him, that was a good sign, despite the unfortunate circumstances.

"Several players said he ducked his head down," Ritter said. "When we practice we're always trying to teach the right habits, and when we do our tackling circuit it's 'use your shoulders, keep your eyes up.'"

When a player rams into another with his head, especially into an object as hard as another helmet, the spine absorbs the force of the collision, the NATA video points out.

But with the head up, muscles in the neck bear the brunt – and can handle it. Tacklers are still



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supposed to lead with their shoulders.

"This game is not going to remain the game it is if we have those kinds of injuries taking place," University of Delaware coach K.C. Keeler said. "Why would parents let their children play the game? So I think it's really important that we, as ambassadors of this game, do a good job of teaching the kids how to tackle properly.

"It's tough because they glorify all the great hits. When we put our highlight tape together, we glorify the great hits. But there's a way to make those great hits and not make those great hits."

Howard senior two-way lineman Tyreese Green said that crushing hits like those delivered in recent NFL games demonstrate the sport's very lure, as a way to "release your anger." But, he added, "you can always hit somebody in the proper way."

Green, when playing defensive tackle and bearing down on an opposing ball carrier, said instincts take over, but learned habits have sunk in, too.

"I always hear Ritter's voice in my head saying, 'See what you hit,'" Green said, referring to his coach's hint to keep his head up.

University of Delaware senior safety Anthony Bratton said "it's a fine line" often between a dangerous hit and a hard tackle. But keeping proper tackling technique in mind is the best defense against serious injury.

"Head up, chest up, wrap your arms, drive your feet," Bratton said, reciting the words he's heard often from UD coaches during their tackling circuit drills.

"You always want to play hard and fast and physical," he added. "But you want to play it safe as possible, too. That guy you're going against is playing for the same reason you are, because he loves the game, too, because it's fun."

The Annual Survey of Catastrophic Football Injuries, published since 1977 by the University of North Carolina's department of exercise and sports science, revealed there were nine cervical cord injuries with incomplete recovery (paralysis) during the 2009 football season. Seven occurred at the high school level, one in college and one professionally. The rate of such injury was one per 200,000 participants (there were roughly 1.8

million players).

There were another nine who suffered brain injuries and 24 who sustained head or neck injuries but recovered completely.

But a note of alarm was sounded in the survey because there were more catastrophic injuries in the 2000s than the 1990s. A decrease before that had been attributed to the 1976 rule that made spearing, or leading with the helmet, illegal in blocking or tackling. The word "intentional" was removed from that rule in 2005.

Injuries have always been a concern on the football field. What's changed, and made some injuries more severe, is the players are "bigger and faster," said college football Hall of Famer Tubby Raymond, Delaware's coach from 1966 to 2001.

The survey recommends continued vigilance in educating players about tackling and blocking technique and to not use the head as a battering ram. Strengthening neck muscles is also advised as a preventive measure.

"The last two or three years there's been a lot of concern about leading with the helmet, so we coach it hard and, fortunately, we haven't had any issues with it," Keeler said. "When you see what happened at Rutgers ... and one of my good friends [Phil Longo], who's now at Youngstown State, was the head coach at La Salle and it happened at La Salle with one of his kids playing Duquesne. It's devastating."

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Keeler was referring to Preston Plevretes, who was knocked unconscious when hit in the head during a punt return in Pittsburgh in 2005. He suffered a traumatic brain injury that required emergency surgery. He is still trying to regain complete speech and motor function.

His family was awarded \$7.5 million in a settlement with La Salle after claiming Plevretes had been allowed to play despite suffering a concussion a month earlier and was at greater risk from subsequent contact.

"Safety's such an important part of what we do," Keeler added, "and we make sure that every punter, every kicker, every snapper, every quarterback, every offensive lineman, is taught how to tackle just like the defensive kids are."

Raymond said there was discussion in the 1960s and '70s about possibly removing the facemask from helmets as a safety precaution.

"Jerry Claiborne was the one who really pushed it," Raymond said of the ex-Virginia Tech, Maryland and Kentucky coach. "Everybody thought he was crazy but, you know, I don't care how tough you are, you're not going to put your face in there without a facemask."

Bratton has seen numerous replays of the fine-inducing NFL hits and felt that the last-second movements by the players demonstrated that sometimes injuries are unavoidable. In some, he said, the receiver bracing himself may have actually made him more prone. And Robinson's head-on hit on Jackson seemed aimed at the receiver's chest but ended up getting him higher up.

"It's a fine line," Bratton said. "A player might change his position just slightly and it's hard to adjust. Sometimes that turns something that wouldn't be a hard hit into a hard hit."

Bratton will continue to relish the opportunity, he added, to lower the boom, but anyone who is leading with his head is putting himself and the opposing player in danger, he said.

Like Keeler, Delaware State coach Al Lavan said the key to prevention is in the fundamentals, which requires teaching.

"The way that we teach [tackling] is just the fundamental of targeting and leading with the shoulder," Lavan said. "It's always from the lower to

the upper part of the body, from the waist up, that you try to make a tackle.

"Helmet-to-helmet, in the true realm of things in the number of tackles, just doesn't happen that often, but you know it when you see it."

And nobody wants to see it, because the results, as Rutgers' LeGrand learned, are life altering.

But while remembering proper techniques to avoid injury, Spicer, like many, won't change his approach.

"I feel like they're trying to take the intensity away from the sport that makes football so great," he said of the NFL crackdown. "Me personally, I'm going to keep on doing what I do. I'm not in the NFL so, if I get a big hit, no money's going to be taken away, my scholarship's not going to be taken away.

"I'll probably get a penalty, but I'm sure the coaches will understand. I'm pretty sure they all feel the same way I do."

Staff reporter Mike Finney contributed to this story.

Contact Kevin Tresolini at 324-2804 or ktresolini@delawareonline.com.

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**Purchase this Photo**  
Rhode Island linebacker Dan O'Connell lays a hit on UD receiver Tommy Crosby on Oct. 18. (News Journal file)



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