



College Coaches: Don't Blame Us for Helmet Hits

College football coaches: Don't blame us for dangerous helmet hits NFL is cracking down on

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

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College coaches have been watching closely as the NFL has cracked down on dangerous tackles and helmet hits. They've heard some of the league's defensive stars complain that they're just playing the way they've always played.

And they have a reply: Don't blame us.

"I only know how I've taught kids my whole life. I've never told anyone to leave their feet, lead with their head. I just never have. I've never taught anyone to do anything that's illegal, that's not in the rule book. I was never taught that, and I've been playing a long time," said Syracuse coach Doug Marrone, who was a longtime NFL assistant before taking the top job with his alma mater.

College coaches from around the country echoed Marrone's sentiment over the past week. They say players are taught to tackle with their heads up, never to use the crown of the helmet to strike an opponent, and to target an opposing player's midsection.

After a particularly scary spate of violent hits two weeks ago, the NFL imposed heavy fines on several players, including Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison, and said it would start suspending players who inflict violent and illegal helmet hits.

Harrison's hit did not draw a penalty flag during the game.

"How can I continue to play this game the way that I've been taught to play this game since I was 10 years old?" Harrison said on Sirius/XM radio last week. "And now you're telling me that everything that they've taught me from that time on, for the last 20-plus years, is not the way you're supposed to play the game any more? If that's the case, I can't play by those rules. You're handicapping me."

Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis said the hit Harrison made on Cleveland receiver Mohamed Massaquoi that drew a \$75,000 fine is the type of contact "you're getting praised for" in defensive

meetings.

The NCAA addressed the dangers of players hitting with their helmets back in 2005, when it changed the rules against spearing to remove any reference to intent. The old rule penalized players who intentionally led with their helmets, forcing officials to judge whether a dangerous, high-speed hit was deliberate. The rule change made all helmet hits penalties.

The change was made to protect the player doing the hitting as much as the player being hit. An unfortunate reminder of that came two weeks ago when Rutgers player Eric LeGrand suffered a spinal cord injury and was paralyzed making a tackle on special teams.

And just like the NFL, conferences are doling out suspensions for dangerous hits to the head.

Just this week, the Southeastern Conference suspended Mississippi State linebacker Chris Hughes one game for a flagrant, high hit away from the play on what was determined to be a defenseless UAB receiver during Saturday's game.

Earlier this season, South Carolina linebacker Rodney Paulk was suspended half a game for a helmet-to-

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helmet hit against Kentucky's Randall Cobb.

The Big 12 on Wednesday suspended Nebraska linebacker Eric Martin for the 14th-ranked Cornhuskers' game Saturday against No. 7 Missouri for "targeting an opponent with the crown of his helmet" in the Oklahoma State game.

The FCS Big Sky conference also suspended an Eastern Washington player for a high hit.

The NCAA gives coaches access to instructional videos on how to properly tackle. Coaches say they work on tackling fundamentals in practice, but by the time a player gets to college he's already made hundreds of tackles.

Minnesota safety Kyle Theret said he learned how to tackle in high school, when he didn't need to lay out an opponent to get him down.

"You learn the right way because you're not going up against as many big guys so you can learn the right way. Now you're going up against a lot bigger guys, so you've got to try to hit them as hard as you can so a lot of people are leading with the head," he said. "A lot of times it's just natural movement. If the running back puts his head down, you don't put your head down or you're going to get run over."

Virginia coach Mike London said he and his staff will point out improper tackling techniques when they are watching film with players.

"It's an ongoing opportunity to teach, to educate them, because heaven forbid something happens," he said. "It's happened nationally to a couple people already. You just don't want to be in that situation. We're always constantly harping on doing the right thing and keeping your head up, wrapping with your arm, more chest to chest with arms."

College Football Writer Rusty Miller in Columbus, Ohio, and AP Sports Writers Jon Krawczynski in Minneapolis, Hank Kurz in Charlottesville, Va., and John Kekis in Syracuse, N.Y., contributed to this report.



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