



## Helmet isn't just for protection any more

Published: Wednesday, June 30, 2010, 1:46 PM Updated: Wednesday, June 30, 2010, 3:03 PM



**DAVID JONES, The Patriot-News**

The four most devastating hits in the last decade of **Penn State football** all involved lowered heads and battering-ram tactics.

Coaches teach players not to use their helmets as weapons. Doctors warn and plead. But it's like asking a street fighter not to use a baseball bat right there in his hand.

As helmets have been padded and outfitted in the last 10 to 20 years, ostensibly to protect against head injury, the age perversely seems to have generated some of the most gruesome and damaging collisions ever.

**Sept. 23, 2000:** In mop-up time of a 45-6 loss in Columbus, PSU reserve defensive back Adam Taliaferro lowers his head and drives it directly into the knee of Ohio State running back Jerry Westbrook. Taliaferro is paralyzed. Only a miraculous recovery and expert medical attention by both schools' doctors save Taliaferro's ability to walk.

**Sept. 25, 2004:** Late in the first quarter of a 16-3 loss in Madison, Wisconsin defensive end Erasmus James tosses away a PSU offensive tackle and careens around the edge free with a clean shot on backup quarterback **Michael Robinson**, who is focused downfield and does not see him coming. James lowers his helmet and drives it high on Robinson's sternum and into his facemask, blasting him backward onto his back. Robinson lies unconscious and motionless for five minutes, is removed on a backboard and is diagnosed with a concussion.

**Oct. 1, 2005:** Robinson, blessed with not only a 6-2, 218-pound physique but a size 7<sup>+</sup> head, proves adept at delivering the same punishment that he absorbed the season before. In the second quarter of a 44-14 win over Minnesota in State College, Robinson scrambles out of a rollout pass and bowls down the sideline directly toward Minnesota's big-hitting, NFL-bound, 6-2, 215-pound safety, Brandon Owens. It is a head-on collision of locomotives. Robinson blasts his head into Owens' right shoulder, whipping the safety around and leaving him rag-doll limp as he falls to the Beaver Stadium grass.

Owens' shoulder permanently loses all feeling and musculature. He never plays another down of football and never regains complete use of his arm.

**Jan. 1, 2009:** As Penn State scrambles to recover from a large halftime deficit in what will be a 38-24 loss to Southern California in the Rose Bowl, slender wideout **Jordan Norwood** reaches to snare a slant pass between the hashes deep in USC territory. Just as he catches the ball, 6-2, 230-pound USC safety Taylor Mays, big as some linebackers, lowers his head and drills his helmet directly into Norwood's in a flagrant violation of the NCAA's helmet-to-helmet hit rule.

The ball rolls free as Norwood momentarily loses consciousness. Mays is flagged for 15 yards as he celebrates and the crowd hums. He remains in the game. Norwood does not. He staggers to his feet and wobbles from the field like a drunk with the help of teammates. Yet somehow he finds his way back into play in the fourth quarter in the final game of his senior year.

Ask any high school kid about these hits and others like them and they know the teams, the players, even the years. They are legendary, immortalized as YouTube clips, sometimes augmented with violent lyrics from popular soundtracks.

How can you tell players not to use their helmets as weapons, not to lower their heads, not to flaunt the rules, not to sometimes willingly cause head injuries when so often the results are glorious? Dr. Jack Stern, professor of neurosurgery at Yale University School of Medicine, believes the issue is often lost in the fog of trying to make headgear safer.

"The injuries that I see are often from improper use of the helmet. It's illegal to use the helmet as a battering ram. And yet they batter each other with the helmet with a force where, not only can you get a concussion but, more dangerously, you can get a spinal cord injury.

"I don't think the issue is the helmet. I think the issue is to teach high school and college players to play properly and not to butt heads."

Still, at the highest levels, football is a game of who can intimidate most effectively. It was that way even in the leather-helmet days. But the helmets then could not be used to inflict blunt-force trauma.

The NCAA rules committee and its national coordinator of officials, Dave Parry, recently approved unanimously rule 9-6, which allows for review and suspension of any player judged to have attempted to spear a defenseless player with a helmet-to-helmet hit. And yet when that rule was rightly implemented on one occasion last season, the coach and athletic director of the offending player issued a statement blasting the ruling.

In the most blatant possible example of such a hit in the last minute of a spent 30-0 win, Ohio State safety Kurt Coleman loaded up with a running start on immobilized Illinois backup quarterback Eddie McGee, lowered his helmet and drilled the helpless QB. A laughing Coleman was flagged for 15 yards and was immediately removed from the field by defensive coordinator Jim Bollman, his teammates congratulating him on the sideline.

Days later, when the Big Ten suspended Coleman for the next week's game, head coach Jim Tressel and athletic director Gene Smith had the ironic gall to call the ruling "poor judgment."

And if coaches and even administrators won't frown upon such play, why would armed players? The paradox was submitted to Stern that, precisely because helmets are being made larger and with more shock absorption than ever, players seem more likely to feel comfortable using them as weapons.

"But that's not really a paradox," he responded. "Is that to say that if I drive a car made of heavier metal that I can drive faster? No, I choose to drive faster, thinking that I can because the car is made more strongly.

"It's more of an excuse than it is logic."

Stern believes only strict enforcement of the beefed-up rules will curb the trend.

"If we're going to change things, I think the coaches and the refs have to make that emphasis. Too many players think it's safe to use their heads this way. And, frankly, too many coaches teach these techniques even though they know it's dangerous and illegal."

© 2010 PennLive.com. All rights reserved.