



Reynolds player's death serves as tragic reminder

Earl Vaughan

It was supposed to be a great working weekend for Douglas Byrd football coach Russell Stone.

He came in Saturday morning to begin breaking down film with his coaching staff after beating South View on Friday night.

And then the phone rang. It was Adrian Snow, head football coach at West Forsyth High School. Stone used to coach there before he headed back to Eastern North Carolina and jobs at Purnell Swett and Byrd.

Snow wanted to know if Stone had heard the news out of Winston-Salem. Snow hadn't. It was horrible.

Matt Gfeller, a sophomore at Winston-Salem Reynolds, suffered a fatal brain injury during a routine play against Greensboro Page on Friday night. He was kept alive for several hours on life support at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem before dying Saturday morning.

According to published reports from witnesses, Gfeller probably was doomed from the moment of impact.

"There was nothing unusual," Stone said after talking with Snow. "It was just a backside play. He was pursuing and the offensive lineman came out."

It is not clear how Gfeller made contact with the opposing player. Neither Stone nor any of the published reports said anything about spearing, head tackling or the kind of illegal contact that results in crippling or fatal head and neck injuries.

One Reynolds assistant coach was quoted in the Winston-Salem Journal as saying it was the kind of hit that happens countless times every day football is played.

It is the kind of tragedy, Stone said, that reminds players and coaches that football is a dangerous game, even with all the padding and all those precautions.

It is why coaches such as Stone often begin the first day of practice when contact is allowed with a reading lesson.

The reading comes from a sticker that is applied to every football helmet in this country. It is required by the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment.

Here's what it says:

"No helmet can prevent all head or neck injuries a player might receive while participating in football. Do not use this helmet to butt, ram or spear an opposing player. This is in violation of the football rules and such use can result in severe head or neck injuries, paralysis or death to you and possible injury to your opponent."

No gray area there. It's about as blunt as the warning messages you read on a pack of cigarettes.

Yet it's something players don't like to think about — players such as Douglas Byrd senior Kariem Bronson.

Bronson never heard of Gfeller until Monday and didn't know what happened to him.

But Bronson, and all other football players, face the same risks when they walk onto the field for practice or a game.

Bronson has read the sticker on his helmet, he said, but when he puts it on his head, he doesn't think about it. "I just go out there and hit," he said. "I just play football."

Hearing about Gfeller might make him a little more careful, he said, but that's all. "People should know how to be careful," he said, "control their hits and how they hit."

But even with that precaution, there is still the long shot that any player could wind up facing the same fate as Gfeller.

Stone said you can't approach the game with that kind of fear in the back of your mind.

"This is a rare incident, like a pitcher who gets hit by a line drive through the box," Stone said.

"All you can do is warn everyone. I don't know if I could go on if this happened to one of my young men."

Stone said he had thought in the past about the tragedy of an athlete rendered quadriplegic by a football injury. But death is something he never pondered a lot.

"I coached on the field he got hurt on," Stone said of Gfeller. "My son (Tripp) played on that field. I know the coach, the trainer, everyone involved except the young man."

In the end, Stone said there are a lot of sides to this tragedy, none of them good.

"We have to hope and pray it doesn't strike close to home," he said. "I don't know what else to say. It ruined my whole weekend."

And gave countless coaches and players in North Carolina and everywhere this story has spread a lot to think about.

Scholastic sports editor Earl Vaughan Jr. can be reached at vaughane@fayobserver.com or 486-3519.

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