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## Leading tackling with head may have led to injury

By *MICHAEL BRINDLEY Staff Writer*

NASHUA – A rare and devastating neck injury sustained by a Nashua High School North football player over the weekend was the result of the player leading with his head during a routine tackling drill, preliminary reviews of the incident have shown.

On Saturday, Nashua North sophomore Cooper Doucette broke his neck during the team's practice. Doucette suffered a break at the C5 vertebra and underwent surgery at Children's Hospital Boston on Tuesday to stabilize his neck and vertebra. The long-term implications of Doucette's injury, specifically whether he will ever be able to walk again, are still unknown.

Superintendent Mark Conrad has been reviewing the incident, speaking with coaches and staff members who were at the practice Saturday, and said it appears while it was a tragic accident, it does not reflect any gaps or issues in the football program.

"My understanding is that this was a routine drill, and he came in for the tackle in the wrong position," Conrad said. "I don't think there was anything we could have done to prevent that. Our initial assessment is our coaching practices are sound."

Conrad said the school has offered guidance counselors for support for teammates who have been shaken by the injury.

"We're keeping him in our thoughts," Conrad said. "He's got an entire team and school community behind him."

The type of injury sustained by Doucette is extremely rare nationally. The National Center for Catastrophic Injury Research at the University of North Carolina conducts surveys each year of sports-related injuries. In 2007, there were only six catastrophic cervical cord injuries in the country sustained during a high school sporting event. There were 74 reported between 1997 and 2007, according to the survey data.

The research center defines a catastrophic injury as one that results in a brain or spinal cord injury or skull or spinal fracture.

The injuries are so rare that Frederick Mueller, director of the research center in North Carolina, had already heard about the Nashua injury when reached Thursday. He said his organization collects the data with the goal of recommending changes to ensure the safety of student athletes is maintained.

Mueller said the best example of that was in 1976 when the National Federation of State High School Associations Football Rules Committee approved a rule making head-tackling illegal. Mueller said the frequency of neck injuries has gone down since that rule was enacted, but they do still occur.

The frequency with which New Hampshire high school football players experience similar injuries is difficult to put into hard numbers – the New Hampshire Interscholastic Athletic Association didn't have data available on types of injuries sustained available Thursday. But it's clear an injury of this magnitude is the first the state has seen in many years, said Patrick Corbin, director of the NHIAA.

"It's a tragedy," Corbin said. "With anybody playing football, there is some assumption of the risk of catastrophic injury. But since I've been here, we've not had anything like that."

Corbin said he has been in contact with officials in Nashua about the incident. As there would be with any occurrence of injury of this magnitude, Corbin said officials in Nashua would prepare a report explaining what led to the injury, to be sent to the NHIAA for review. Corbin said the report should be completed within the next week.

Having worked at Nashua North, Corbin said he has the highest respect for the coaching staff and their dedication to safety.

"Unfortunately, if the kid puts his head down and his helmet first, he's coached not to do that, and it's against the rules," Corbin said. "But these are young people, and they make mistakes."

There are NHIAA guidelines for football practices to which coaches must adhere, but Corbin said it appears the coaches at Nashua North had been following those rules. The guidelines state that for the first three days of practice, players should not be wearing helmets or engaging in any physical contact. After that, there can be limited contact in drills.

The incident at Nashua North occurred on the fourth day of practice, Corbin said, which means the coaches were acting within the state guidelines. Corbin said there are requirements for maintaining proper equipment and helmets, but said with an injury like this, it's unlikely equipment played any factor.

Conrad said part of the training for any high school football program is how to safely tackle and that is done for all athletes in Nashua.

His review also included looking at the response immediately after the injury. He said everything was done to help the student as soon as possible and credited the coaching staff and the trainer for jumping on the situation.

"We had a trainer on site who immediately mobilized and did all the right things," Conrad said. "There was a good response right at that moment."

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