

## Coaches say don't quit football out of fear

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Dante Love's injury that likely ended his football career is every parent's nightmare.

**ADVERTISEMENT** While heat stroke actually claims more lives -- 25 in the past decade -- it's spinal cord injuries and the threat of paralysis that grab headlines.

The sight of Ball State's Dante Love lying motionless on the Memorial Stadium turf at Indiana was poignant -- borderline tragic after taking the jarring hit on an otherwise picturesque late summer night.

Lessons can be learned, however, from the spinal injury that research data prove uncommon.

But that doesn't take away from the horrifying scene of a football player strapped to a stretcher.

"It is a dangerous sport, it really is," Southside football coach Mike Paul said. "You don't ever want kids to not play because of the danger. ... That's every coach's fear to have somebody hurt like that."

Love suffered a cervical spine fracture after catching a Nate Davis pass in Saturday's 42-20 win at Indiana. The receiver appeared to dip his head as Hoosier defender Nick Polk approached, also with his head lowered. Love, a potential NFL draft pick, will likely never play football again, but should lead a normal life after completing rehabilitation.

His injury prompts the inevitable question among parents whose children are involved in the game: Are they taking a risk with their children's health?

Local coaches are using the tragedy to explain to their players that the proper tackling technique is paramount to preventing such injuries.

"I was sharing with some of the guys, if you watch Dante, he lowers his head and puts his spine in that dangerous spot of being injured -- leading with the crown of his head," Central coach John Hochstetler said.

The occurrence of a spinal fracture like the one Love suffered is still rare, according to an annual survey done by the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research at the University of North Carolina. Only six high school football players, or 0.40 per 100,000, suffered a cervical cord injury in 2007.

At the college and professional levels, only four such injuries have occurred in the past four years combined.

Those numbers were much higher several decades ago. The UNC study cited 36 football fatalities and 30 cases of permanent paralysis injuries suffered in 1968 alone.

Since then, rules have been instituted to outlaw spearing, or leading with the head.

Increased attention to player health and safety has also increased in recent years. Southside football players and wrestlers do specific neck exercises to strengthen the muscles in that region.

The addition of athletic trainers at games and practices also shows the preparedness for such injuries on



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Central's Anthony Mann takes a hit from Southside's Cork during a game earlier in the season. (Photo by John Bergin / The Star Press)

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the high school level. Hochstetler remembers coaching a junior varsity football game in the early 1990s in which a player suffered a spinal injury and there were no trainers on site.

"Lots of us were looking at each other wondering, 'What do we do?' " Hochstetler said.

Now, Central is among the programs to have a trainer at all practices as well as games.

Kevin Beach, the Central athletic trainer also preaches proper technique. But if a neck or back injury appears to be serious, he is prepared for the worst.

He has "spinal boarded" about a dozen high school athletes in his nine years. Football is the most dangerous, but he's also tended to similar injuries in wrestling, basketball and soccer.

He's thankful none of the 12 athletes had a spinal fracture, but no precaution is spared when it comes to spinal injuries.

"I've seen a lot of people go into a tackle with their head down, but knock on wood (a fracture) has never happened," Beach said.

And while severe injuries occur in every sport, football's violent nature gives it the highest percentage of "catastrophic injury" among fall sports, according to the UNC survey. From 1982-2006, 96.8 percent of the 623 autumn high school incidents that "resulted in a brain or spinal cord injury or skull or spinal fracture" were related to football. At the college level, that number is 100 percent.

Delta coach Grant Zgunda said parents shouldn't be scared to sign their kids up to play football after seeing Love's injury.

"It's a very rare occurrence," he said. "I don't know many players in Ball State history have had to do that, but I guarantee it's pretty small."

Heat-related injuries are also factored into the numbers as heat stroke has caused 25 football deaths in the past decade, according to the survey.

And like spinal injuries, heat stroke can also be avoided through proper procedures that have been taken by local programs.

Still, the reality of life-altering injuries is real for football players at every level.

In some cases, all the precautions, training programs and teaching can't avoid disaster.

"It's amazing the sport we all love so much can be deadly," Hochstetler said.

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