

NCAA football rule changes to help prevent concussions are major step in the right direction

Published: Sunday, September 05, 2010, 12:49 AM



Brad Wilson

For all the excitement, thrills and action that football provides, for all the love its players invest in it, the game's dark side of injury and agony never lurks far away.

More attention has been paid to concussions and head injuries in football over the last decade or so, and it is about time. Repeated concussions have been linked to increased cognitive loss, the onset of depression and even Alzheimer's disease.

Until fairly recently, it was not uncommon for players who'd had their "bell rung" or suffered a serious blow to the head to come right back in the game after minimal time off. That has changed for the better, but it is hard to imagine how it ever happened at all.

I suffered a Grade 3 concussion in December 2008 and my head swam for days. I couldn't have even picked up a football 20 minutes after the concussion happened, much less played the game. Your brain is never quite the same.

If we're done, thank goodness, with the Neanderthal days of players needing to "gut out" concussions and endure head injuries, there is still much progress to be made.

So it was good to spend a few moments last week with Jim Maconaghy, the coordinator of football officials for the Patriot League, and hear that there's a renewed emphasis and focus on preventing head injuries. In fact, the NCAA has two new rule changes that should cut down on the appalling damage done by concussions in the sport.

One is banning "wedge" formations on kickoff returns, where blockers form a staggered line to protect the ball carrier.

"What you get is players throwing themselves at high speed into the wedge to break the wedge up," Maconaghy said. "This has been tied to head injuries and the NFL has experienced a preponderance of head injuries on kickoffs."

No wonder, with bigger and faster players running as fast as they can to make a play, and with the head of speed they can gather on kickoffs the resulting physical forces can be explosive. If the only way to break up the wedge is to fling yourself at it, well, that is a recipe for disaster.

The good news here, as Maconaghy noted, is that the foul of setting up a wedge will be a 15-yard penalty whether there's contact or not -- which means that the formation will likely disappear quickly. If contact was necessary for a foul, the physical violence would not be prevented.

"I don't expect (this rules change) to be a big problem," Maconaghy said.

No, but it may well avert plenty.

The other change is more subtle. When an player is injured and play stops, he has to leave the field for one play at least. In the past, though, a coach could call a timeout and by doing so allow the player to stay on the field for the very next play. If the play is a 2nd-and-8 at the other team's 12 late in a game when you're losing by five, and the injured player is the quarterback or standout wide receiver, it's easy to see that might be "worth" the time out to a desperate coach.

But imagine the injury is a concussion, the player stays in and gets drilled again. That ugly scenario is no longer possible.

"They can't buy their way back in with a timeout," Maconaghy said. "This was driven by a focus on concussions."

What that means is that a trainer or doctor will be sure to get a look at the injured player and make sure he stays off if need be.

While it would be nice to think no coach would take such risks with their players, some ethically-challenged win-at-all-costs types might have done just that in the past. No longer, and, again, thank goodness.

Maconaghy said, in general, the Patriot League has few problems with spearing, leading with the head in a tackle, and the like. Given the league's commitment to real student-athletes and their welfare, that is perhaps to be expected and certainly to be praised.

Still, one wonders, could more be done to stamp out head injuries? Maconaghy is skeptical.

"I am not sure there is a lot more we can do without getting into having better-designed helmets," he said. "The coaches are doing a good job teaching proper tackling techniques, but the harder hits that get a reaction from teams and fans, the vicious hits that cause damage, the kind players try and pose afterward, that we have to police the most. But while there are times in games things get out of control, we don't see the intent to injure we saw in the past."

That's surely some very, very good news for the young men who strap on the pads and play the sport.

I still think more could be done. I'd eject players guilty of spearing or violent blows to the head. I'd ban the "terminator" tackle, the flying-hit-without-wrapping designed to drop a ballcarrier in his tracks (though it often doesn't work, making the play useless as well as dangerous). And I'd rustle up some foundation money or get some boosters on board with some bucks to develop safer and more secure helmets.

No matter what, concussions and head injuries will always likely be a part of football's dark side. But it's good to know the NCAA and its officials are doing more and more to throw light on them.

Brad Wilson can be reached at 800-360-3601 or bwilson@express-times.com. Talk about sports at lehighvalleylive.com/forums.

© 2010 lehighvalleylive.com. All rights reserved.