



Safety first in youth sports leagues

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by Pete Tartline

The issue of sports injuries, and concussions in football in particular, has received a great deal of media attention in recent years.

There are thousands of parents, coaches and volunteers associated with youth sports in central Pennsylvania who think and worry about these issues regularly. I am one of them.



I enjoyed immensely my time playing youth and high school football in this area as well as my time coaching, and like many others believe football to be one of the foundational activities in life that helped to shape me as a person.

As parents though, we struggle daily with wanting to keep our children safe while at the same time allowing them to grow and develop physically and mentally by challenging themselves and taking risks.

The Cumberland Valley Midget Football Association with which I am privileged to be associated with as the parent of a player, coach and board member, fields teams that play in the Catholic Football Association and Keystone Midget Football Conference encompassing teams and associations from Cumberland, Dauphin, Juniata, Perry and York counties.

Next year, the CVMFA is celebrating its 40th anniversary. Since its inception, the mission of the CVMFA has been to provide a structured and fun opportunity for children to learn and play the game of football and cheerleading.

As a follow-up to the series of articles in The Patriot-News on concussions in sports and specifically football, I wanted to expand on the actions being taken by local youth sports organizations such as CVMFA to minimize the impact of injuries in youth sports.

While coaches still motivate and push their players to their maximum capability and to excel in their position, the image of former

college coaching legend Bear Bryant in "The Junction Boys" holding out water as a reward for effort and sacrifice has long been replaced by a more balanced approach incorporating learning and information on healthy growth, development and safety into all activities.

Almost all of the coaches in the CVMFA played football through high school and about 60 percent played in college. More importantly, they have a love and respect for the game and a desire to help mentor younger players.

During the last several years in the CVMFA, football coaches have been required to successfully complete USA Football's coaching certification program, which includes not only how to teach proper blocking, tackling and other football skills and techniques but also includes a module on safe play.

The certification course has been updated for this year with an expanded session on safe play that focuses extensively on concussion prevention, awareness and treatment.

Coaches are looking for symptoms such as a player appearing dazed or stunned, confused, forgetting plays, unable to recall events prior or after a particular hit or fall or changes in behavior or personality. In addition, any symptoms reported by the athlete such as a headache, nausea, balance problems, dizziness, blurred vision as well as others will prompt the coach to take action. Our coaches are taught to immediately remove the player from play and have them evaluated by a health care professional.

At a preseason coaches clinic for all CVMFA coaches conducted by the Cumberland Valley High School football staff, a representative of the PIAA officials discussed their increased focus on reducing illegal helmet contact such as butt blocking, face tackling and spearing as well as reducing helmet-to-helmet contact.

It has been the practice at CVMFA to have a trained medical parent or trainer for each of our youth football teams. Besides the volunteers, CVMFA has partnered with First Choice Rehabilitation to be onsite for practices. Of course, having emergency medical personnel onsite for all games is required.



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Further, the CVMFA is extremely diligent in providing the best and safest football equipment for its players. This is one of our most significant expenses every year. For most of our players, helmets are professionally fit by the manufacturer's representative and our coaches are trained in the proper fit for equipment as part of their USA Football certification. This year, almost all of our players are equipped with Riddell Speed and Revolution helmets.

Our football coaches focus every day on teaching proper blocking and tackling techniques, keeping your eyes and your head up, bending at the knees and not the waist, playing behind your pads and using your leverage playing up through your opponent to not only help our players to play safe, but to help them play better and have more fun.

Safety and the well-being of our kids is always in the forefront of most all coaches' minds and is a priority of every youth football league and association in our area.

Football is a great sport and a uniquely American game that encompasses strategy, skill, teamwork and other virtues that will help to prepare our youth for life like no other sport. Our charge is to help develop our young players to take advantage of what the sport offers and to help them excel in as safe a manner as is possible.

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