

A Real Knockout

By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was in high school, I played tight end on the football team. I may not have been very big, but I was slow. One night we played Oshkosh West at Titan Stadium and we marched down the field into their red zone. On the five-yard line, we ran a pass play where the quarterback, along with the receivers and backs, all rolled out to the right side of the field. I was the decoy, as I lined up on the left and ran a pattern into the back left corner of the end zone.

Unfortunately, our pass got intercepted and the speedy defensive back had a good return. Since I was velocity-challenged and located on the complete other side of the field, I had little hope of catching the back but I chased after him anyway. Sadly, I forgot about the safety guarding me who blocked me by slamming his helmet into my chinstrap.

As a boxing fan, I had heard the expression “out on his feet” before, and that night I lived it. I don’t remember the rest of the game, but that Sunday at our film session, we all had quite a laugh as one of my teammates had to come out to get me as I stood on the 15-yard line in a daze.

I was later diagnosed with my first concussion. While we knew that wasn’t good, we had no idea how serious concussions were back then. I felt good the next week, so I played. Many people argue with me, but luckily I had no long-term ill effects.

Today’s doctors, coaches and athletes have much more awareness of the seriousness of concussions, especially for adolescents. As a result of this heightened awareness, U.S. Senator Robert Menendez and Representative Bill Pascrell made a joint announcement last month that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agreed to study and develop national guidelines for managing sports-related concussions for student athletes.

The Democrats from the Garden State introduced legislation that would have made such protocols mandatory. The bill passed in the House but was knocked out in the Senate. About a dozen states, including New Jersey, have laws requiring a physician’s approval for a student to return to sports. While the WIAA recommends a “when in doubt, sit them out” policy, Wisconsin is one of many states that has no law requiring a doctor’s approval for a student-athlete to return to play.

Because of states like Wisconsin, Pascrell indicates there needs to be nationwide guidance for schools and youth sports programs to follow. “The science may be changing, but that’s no excuse for not establishing a protocol,” he explained, referring to discrepancies in scientific findings on concussions.

According to the CDC, “as many as 3.8 million sports-and-recreation-related concussions occur in the United States each year.” The agency defines a concussion as “an injury that changes how the cells in the brain normally work.” Coaches are advised to watch for “a forceful blow to the head or body that results in rapid movement of the head” combined with a change in memory, judgment, reflexes, speech, balance or muscle coordination. Young people, particularly girls, are more susceptible to long-term repercussions than adults.

Pascrell claims that 41 percent of student athletes who suffer concussions return to playing too soon, sometimes with serious or even fatal consequences. Known as “Second Impact Syndrome,” the CDC warns that if a second concussion occurs without enough recovery time from the first concussion, brain swelling, permanent brain damage, and death can result.

The CDC will convene a panel of experts to define the scope of the protocol, review existing literature and current science on concussions and have protocols ready for distribution by the fall of 2014. Until then, hopefully our coaches and student-athletes realize that long, healthy life is worth more than fleeting glory on a field or court.

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