Making Progress to Defeat the “Silent Epidemic” Upon Us

As I write this issue’s editorial, the east coast of the United States is in the grip of a bitter winter storm with high winds, snow, and bone-chilling temperatures—the locals refer to this as a “nor’easter!” The country, however, is in the midst of a more important battle facing athletes of all ages, genders, and sports—concussion! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has referred to traumatic brain injury (TBI) as an important public health problem and as a “silent epidemic,” whereas the complications associated with the long-term effects of concussion can linger but not be readily apparent. The topic of concussion is one that I am passionate about—I have spent many years researching its outcomes among soccer athletes.

I’m not a huge fan of the National Football League (NFL), so I usually watch NBC’s Sunday Night Football telecast to catch the scores and highlights of the games I didn’t watch during the day. A few Sundays ago, prior to the start of the Packers vs Patriots game, Bob Costas, whom I admire as a broadcaster, asked NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell about injuries in the league, specifically about head injuries and concussions. Interestingly, concussions in the NFL are up 21% over 2009 (34% over 2008), and this year there has been a constant spotlight on the vicious helmet-to-helmet blows delivered by these gridiron icons. I was disappointed and shocked by Mr. Goodell’s response. In protecting the interests of the league, the Commissioner spoke at length about how the league was treating the concussions and how they had in place new policies and guidelines governing their management league-wide; but in my mind he missed the point. Where is Bill O’Reilly’s “no spin zone” when you need it most? Commissioner Goodell said nothing about PREVENTION!

This mindset is such a disservice to the players, but more importantly to the millions of youth nationwide who emulate and strive to be just like their professional role models. While I applaud the NFL for their new policies governing sport-related concussion management, they have done little on the prevention front. I’m a believer that players need to gain a greater appreciation of the wide impact concussion can have on their overall health and well-being so that when they are concussed they learn to take their time in returning to the game. This process needs to start when they are young and first beginning to play sports.

In addition, coaches need to instruct athletes on the proper skills and techniques to ensure that games
are played safely. Although the primary emphasis of this editorial highlights football, teaching proper techniques and a basic understanding of the rules of the games in other sports where concussions are prevalent is also warranted.

I’m cautiously optimistic that things are about to change regarding the sport-related concussion epidemic we are facing. Certified athletic trainers are beginning to gain a better understanding of how to manage sport-related concussion, thanks in part to the trickle-down effect from their colleagues in the NFL. More importantly, though, is that they are throwing away treatment and evaluation schemes they were taught years ago in favor of the newer tools available to them that are supported by evidence and proven to be effective in the management of concussions.

Through the TBI Act of 1996 (PL 104-166),1 Congress first charged the CDC with “determining the incidence and prevalence of traumatic brain injury in all age groups in the general population of the United States.” This relatively obscure law produced an important document,2 titled “Traumatic Brain Injury in the United States: Emergency Department Visits, Hospitalizations and Deaths 2002-2006” that enlightened the public on the importance of managing concussions and their long-term ramifications on society as a whole. Most recently, the legislative arm of the National Athletic Trainers’ Association has worked with federal legislators to ensure that the voice of athletic trainers is heard (for commentary about this, see my September/October editorial3) in the writing of the following 2 bills: HR 6172: Protecting Student Athletes from Concussions Act of 2010, and HR 1347: Concussion Treatment and Care Tools (CONTACT) Act. Although these legislative actions are an obvious step in the right direction, the real force behind the change will be parents.

As a parent of 2 teenagers, I am fully aware of the importance that sport plays in their lives. As a certified athletic trainer, I’m at an advantage when it comes to medical knowledge, especially with regard to sport-related injuries and illnesses; yet we cannot discount the knowledge base of the sporting-parent population as a whole. Never was this more apparent to me than during a meeting of parents organized by the athletic training staff at a high school here in Delaware this past fall. I was utterly amazed at the vast knowledge of sport-related concussion these parents had and the excellent questions they asked about current treatment and prevention strategies. This is a group of individuals on a mission to change how concussions are handled to ensure their children return to sport only after the injury has completely resolved—and whose voices will be heard loud and clear by clinicians, coaches, administrators, and politicians. I left the meeting that night feeling optimistic that finally we can make some progress in the educational arena regarding sport-related concussion and protect our youth moving into the future. And so I say, Mr. Commissioner, if you don’t wish to answer the question, it looks as though others might. ■

REFERENCES


The author has no financial or proprietary interest in the materials presented herein.

doi:10.3928/19425864-20110225-01