
Posted on Thu, Aug. 26, 2004

Young athletes defend against risk of concussion

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Associated Press

ERIE, Pa. - The last thing soccer player Courtney Mercier remembers before losing consciousness was that a defender was gaining on her.

Mercier, 14, can't recall the defender tripping her from behind, or her head striking the ground.

"I was out 15, 20 seconds," said Mercier, a Millcreek Township girl who was attending a soccer camp in late July at Penn State University. "I look up, and I see these heads staring down at me. I had no idea what was going on."

Mercier had suffered a brain concussion. The blow to her head had caused her brain to smash against the inside of her skull.

Though Mercier has recovered completely from her injury, more serious concussions can cause permanent brain damage or death.

About 1.1 million Americans suffer concussions each year, reported the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nearly 300,000 of those injuries occur during sporting events.

"We estimate that 10 percent of all athletes (who play contact sports) will suffer some type of concussion during their career," said Dr. Laura McIntosh a Saint Vincent Sports Medicine physician. "We see them happen in football, hockey, soccer, lacrosse, even cheerleading."

McIntosh treats athletes who have suffered concussions and helps determine when they can play their sport again.

It's a tricky decision for two reasons: Symptoms of a concussion may be subtle or not show up until weeks after the injury, and studies have shown that anyone who suffers a concussion is more prone to develop another one.

Robert Barger, 16, a Mercyhurst Preparatory School football player, suffered a concussion during a 2001 football game when he played for the St. Boniface School eighth-grade team.

He received another in September 2003 while returning a kickoff during the Lakers' game against Conneaut High School.

"I got hit in the head," Barger said. "I felt a little dizzy and had a headache. I went over to the sideline, and the trainer said that I probably had a concussion."

Even though his second concussion didn't seem as severe as the initial one, it took Barger several weeks to get over the occasional headaches and lightheadedness.

The concussion even affected his schoolwork.

"It was hard to see what was on the chalkboard and hard to concentrate," Barger said. "I was feeling dizzy, so I kept wanting to close my eyes."

In order to better determine when an athlete is ready to resume playing a sport after a concussion, doctors at Saint Vincent and psychologists at HealthSouth Rehabilitation Hospital of Erie are relying on a new computer test.

The IMPACT program uses a video-game format to test a person's reaction time, attention span, visual and verbal memory, and nonverbal problem solving. It is used by the National Hockey League and other professional sports leagues.

The program, which was designed by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Sports Concussion Program, asks participants to look at a series of words or designs twice, then asks them whether other words or designs were in that series. The entire program takes 20 minutes.

"When someone is suffering from a concussion, it takes them longer to process information," said Tammy Kordes, a HealthSouth sports psychology consultant. "This program shows us that. The athlete can't hide from this kind of testing."

The diagnosing of sports-related concussions has become more precise in recent years, but its treatment remains the same: Get the athlete off the playing field and away from further contact.

Unlike other sports-related injuries, the only cure for a concussion is rest. Mercier went to a conditioning practice for the McDowell girls soccer team

eight days after her concussion but couldn't make it through the drills.

"I got very lightheaded and nauseous," Mercier said. "I went to see Dr. McIntosh, who said only do some light jogging. I went back to conditioning practice a few days later, and I felt fine."

Both Mercier and Barger have recovered from their injuries. Mercier will play this fall for either the McDowell varsity or junior varsity girls soccer team, while Barger will again play football for Mercyhurst Prep.

Athletes who suffer concussions can take some measures to prevent another one. Barger now wears a specially designed football helmet that is supposed to reduce the risk of concussions.

He wore it in 2003 when he suffered his second brain injury.

"Yeah, it didn't do much for me," Barger said.

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American Academy of Ophthalmology: <http://www.aao.org>

Vision Service Plan: <http://www.vsp.com>

Parents Active for Vision Education: <http://www.pavevision.org>