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Highland athletes get their heads checked

By Dan Thompson - Journal Sports Writer

POCATELLO - A healthy brain is a whole lot more efficient than a bruised one.

So for as much time as they spend studying X's and O's during the regular soccer season, the 25 minutes the Highland teams' players spent sequestered in a computer lab Monday clicking on those same two letters sure would pay off if they ever absorb a stinging smack to their head this season.

"The problem is, concussions aren't being recognized," said Highland athletic trainer and teacher Caroline Faure. "These tests are needed."

That sentiment drove Faure and husband Brent Faure, who also teaches and serves at Highland as an athletic trainer, to implement the ImPACT tests four years ago for all Highland athletes involved in high-contact sports - such as football, soccer, volleyball, basketball, wrestling and cheerleading. In all, approximately 400 students will take the 25-minute, computerized examination that provides the objective data necessary for the Faures to properly diagnose concussions - and prevent players from damaging their brains any further by rushing back into competition.

"The risk of second impact syndrome is way too great," Caroline explained. "We need to realize the game isn't as important. There will be plenty more games to come."



Philip Clifton II takes a test to set a baseline on his brain's motor skills to test for concussions and their effects on student athletes at Highland High School. Journal photo by [Doug Lindley](#)

And so Highland athletes will continue to file into computer labs this week, some saying they want to trick the computers. Quickly, though, they embraced the seriousness of the test and the room silenced shortly after the players filled it.

"I'm thinking the whole time, if there's a big game coming up, should I take this slower just in case?" said Brian Ramsey, captain of the boys' soccer team. "But it's a good test. If you get a concussion, sometimes you don't know it."

With this test, at least their trainers will know.

The baseline test, which need be taken just once every two years, first asks participants about any concussion symptoms they might be exhibiting at the time. Those include dizziness, vomiting and headaches as well as less-often recognized effects such as sensitivity to light or noise and irritability. A healthy person after a full night of rest logs zero to five symptoms on a normal day; a person with a recently bruised brain might list as many as 70 symptoms.

After that stage of the test, participants enter an eight-step segment that tests players' memories, reaction times and color and shape recognition. For example, the first segment flashes a dozen words for a second a piece, and then the program asks them if certain words were on the list or not.

It doesn't sound too daunting, but when the seventh segment asks participants to remember those words once more without a refresher, it becomes a whole lot trickier. The test does the same thing with designs of meandering lines.

"They'll come back and show you those same lines later in the test," Brent explained, "and you can imagine, it'll be pretty clear then if your brain isn't working."

All these data are logged into the computer for comparison after a player suffers a concussion. At that point, they'll take the test again. Often their scores on the memory tests are the same, as they have seen the segments before and the words and designs don't change, but the reaction scores often drop noticeably.

"They can't lie on the reaction tests," Caroline said.

Caroline devoted her doctoral dissertation to concussions and their diagnoses, leaning on some research conducted by professors at the University of Pittsburgh. All the data collected from Highland athletes are added to the pool of information at Pitt, furthering the studies at that institution.

In Idaho, only Centennial High School in Boise conducts these same ImPACT tests. The program costs \$500 each year, a dollar amount far lower than the Faures deem the program's value. The data can also be synchronized with their PDAs, so they can administer truncated concussion tests on the sidelines after a player takes a hit without needing to return to the training room. Few smaller schools can afford to keep even an athletic trainer on their staff, so concussions often go undetected at 1A, 2A and 3A schools, as Caroline's research found. At Highland, the Faures diagnose 15 to 20 concussions each year. With the impact program, they can test players for weeks after the initial hit and trace their progress back to full cognition, which often takes multiple weeks, especially at the high school level.

The Faures hope they can at least diagnose the injuries so players don't jump back on the field, court or pitch and hurt themselves again.

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