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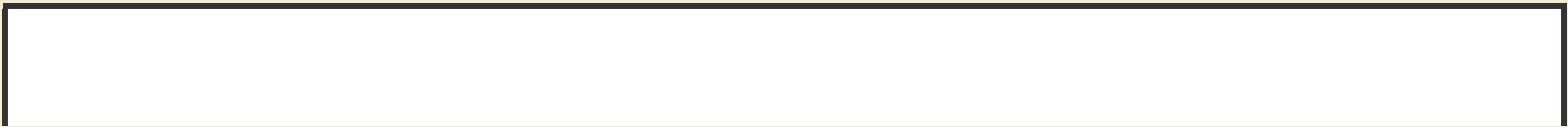
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## Steelers quarterback's care in skilled hands

By [Kevin Gorman](#), TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, November 24, 2009

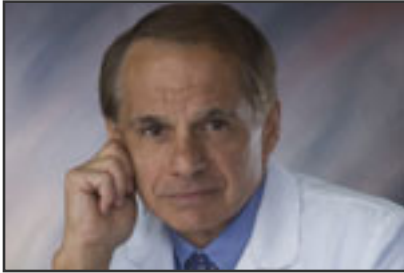
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Kevin Gorman can be reached *via e-mail* or 412-320-7812.

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After being forced to leave the game by a knee to the helmet from Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Derrick Johnson on Sunday, Ben Roethlisberger's head will be in the best possible hands this week.

Those of Dr. Joseph Maroon — a man who has as many Super Bowl rings as Roethlisberger.

Whether the Steelers' quarterback has a concussion and how quickly he can return to playing will be determined by doctors who developed the standard for testing brain trauma. They were recently cleared by the NFL Players Association under a new league policy requiring every team to use an independent neurologist or neurosurgeon to supplement its medical staff.

Maroon, the Steelers' team neurosurgeon and a member of the NFL Committee on Mild Traumatic Brain Injury, said such clearance lends transparency to his role as a non-paid consultant.

"It takes away the bias," said Maroon, who cited UPMC policy in declining to discuss Roethlisberger's injury status. "If the NFL Players Association says, 'This guy is OK,' I hope there is no perception of me being biased against the team or the player. There's no remuneration for that. It's strictly voluntary. I'm not a paid employee of the NFL or the Steelers."

That became especially important yesterday, after the revelation that backup quarterback Charlie Batch might miss the remainder of the season with a broken wrist.

Batch's injury leaves the Steelers with only Roethlisberger and second-year Dennis Dixon at the position and adds urgency to Roethlisberger's availability for the Steelers (6-4) against the Baltimore Ravens (5-5) in a pivotal AFC North game Sunday night.

What the NFL is trying to prevent with its initiative to make the game safer is that players don't rush — and aren't rushed — back following a concussion no matter what the circumstances. Roethlisberger has had two football-related concussions since 2006. He also suffered head and facial injuries in a 2006 motorcycle accident.

"My goal, and the Players Association's goal, is to make sure they have the best possible care they can get, that we can protect them from concussions and when they return, decisions are made, so they get cleared only when they are ready," said Dr. Thom Mayer, medical director for the NFLPA. "We felt there needed to be an expert in concussions. It can't just be a team physician who doesn't deal with concussions. Joe Maroon more than fits that bill. He has a long history of expertise in concussion-related symptoms."

Maroon has been the Steelers' neurosurgeon since 1983 and is complemented by UPMC Sports Concussion Program director Dr. Mark Lovell, a concussion expert who oversees the NFL's neuropsychological testing programs.

"Some teams, like the Steelers, already work with outstanding neurologists or neurosurgeons," NFL spokesman Greg Aiello said Monday in an e-mail, specifically mentioning Maroon and Lovell. "So this policy development doesn't mean anything for the Steelers."

The issue, however, has been a hot-button topic in the league since a House Judiciary Committee hearing last month to address the long-lasting effects of brain trauma with football players. NFL commissioner Roger Goodell addressed the new policy Sunday in an interview on NBC, saying there "wasn't anything wrong with" the previous plan.

"As we learn more and more, we want to give players the best medical advice," Goodell said. "This is a chance for us to expand that and bring more people into the circle to make sure we're making the best decisions for our players in the long term."

"This step is important," Mayer said. "We're also working on stricter guidelines with regard to who can go back to the game."

The criteria for players to return from concussions are more clear-cut. First, neuropsychological testing needs to be normal. Tests were done before the season starts to establish a baseline, and players are required to take the ImPACT (Immediate Post-Concussion Assessment and Cognitive Test), designed by Lovell, to determine that.

Secondly, the player has to be symptom free and remain symptom free after exercising. It will be up to the team neurologist and neurosurgeon to determine when that player is back to baseline, at rest and at exertion.

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