

HEALTH & FITNESS

Concussion and Sports: How the Rules are Changing for Athletes

By Shelly Gordon
Special to the Times

Increased education and awareness about the potential for injury has changed the way the game of football is played, and new rules have been put in place to protect NFL players.

Pacific Brain & Spine neurosurgeon Dr. Ronnie Mimran serves as the team neurosurgeon for the Oakland Raiders.

His practice focuses on surgical and non-surgical treatment of brain and spine disorders, with an emphasis on minimally invasive techniques for the spine. He performs surgeries at Eden Medical Center and San Ramon Regional Medical Center.

I asked him to give me his perspective on the neurological challenges facing both professionals as well as young athletes and teens who play tackle football.

What has changed in football since neurological damage caused by brain injuries came to light 15 years ago?

Players are penalized for helmet-to-helmet hits or hits to a defenseless player.

Before, players would shake off injuries and ignore signals to walk off the field. Now, instead of players assuming they have to take their hits like a good soldier, they are self-reporting concussions or taking themselves out of the game.

In addition, starting in 2009, the NFL mandated that each professional football team hire its own neurosurgeon.

To prevent bias, teams are now also required to bring in an independent neuro-trauma consultant to corroborate the physician's diagnosis and treatment for brain concussions.

So today, when a player is suspected of having a concussion, he is removed for the remainder of the game. Players no longer blame the doctors for taking them out. They understand that the NFL changed the rules and the rules are

the reason they're being taken out of the game.

Awareness and education have become paramount among coaches and trainers. They are recognizing that concussions aren't easy to spot because a player's injury isn't always obvious.

So even if he isn't limping, he may still be hurt. Now, if the coach suspects that a player is injured he will remove him from the game.

What about young athletes and high school football players? What are your top recommendations for preventing injuries, during practice or during the game?

First, young athletes, under high school age should avoid tackle football. They can learn the game by playing flag football.

Young athletes can still learn the fundamentals – running, passing, kicking – while avoiding early head hits to the skull and brain at a time when brain development is really important.

Injurious impacts have ripple effects during a young player's developmental years.

When athletes get to high school they may feel more emboldened toward aggressive physical contact. Coaches should limit padding, helmet use or other protective equipment during practice to discourage players from aggressive physical contact.

Proper fitting of equipment is essential. An older brother shouldn't hand off his football gear to his younger sibling. Families should invest in new, properly-sized equipment instead. Helmets and shoulder pads should not be passed down from one brother to the next.

What about technology? How is technology being used to prevent injuries?

To really solve the problem of concussions in sports we need a multifaceted approach. As I said, one arm is education; the second is changing the rules of the game. The third and final piece is technology.

The NFL, along with the Department of Defense and other institutions are funding research for equipment and this research is delving into a variety of issues.

Helmets are an obvious target for innovation. Researchers are studying the question of how we can make helmets absorb impact before it is transferred to the skull and brain.

But it's also important to know that a large number of concussions are caused by contact with the ground. So, the composition of the field turf where the game is played – and the idea of changing ground cushion to absorb impact, without changing the way the game is played – is another area that is being researched.

Is there anything else that parents, coaches and those in the sports world need to know about these neurological issues?

Don't ignore injuries from other sports besides football. I've seen



concussions in water polo, soccer, rugby, even cheerleading... over the last 20 years, I have seen them in nearly every sport or activity imaginable.

Concussions are not a football specific injury. It happens in all sports. It's important to be aware of these issues and, as the NFL has done, to take steps to change the rules, upgrade equipment, and reduce the likelihood of brain injuries.
Shelly Gordon is a writer for Pacific Brain & Spine.

Saturday, May 19

Neighborhood Cleanup Day

EVENT FEATURES

Citywide Garage Sale ~ 8am - 1pm
Host a garage sale at your home. The City will provide free advertising, including a map and listing in the May 17 edition of the *San Leandro Times*.

Spring Cleaning Event ~ 10am - 3pm
Bring appliances, mattresses, electronics, scrap metal, clean wood/yard trimmings, tires household batteries and fluorescent lamps. Residents may also drop off cell phones, chargers, CDs, DVDs and audio and video tapes for recycling.

Keep your neighborhood clean and green! Pull out your old, unused items from the attic in preparation for San Leandro's annual Citywide Garage Sale and Spring Cleaning Event.



SIGN UP TO PARTICIPATE

You can sign up online or complete and submit this form by May 9th to receive free garage sale advertising and/or access to the recycling event.

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