



Heads-up football takes on added importance in tackling

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Jon Heck said something dangerous occurs at least a third of the time during any high school football game.

Heck said helmet-first contact while running, tackling or blocking - an illegal form of contact which can lead to catastrophic cervical spine injuries, head injuries or concussions - happens at an alarming rate.

Heck, the coordinator of athletic training at Richard Stockton College, said in the 1990s he did a film study of an entire season of one local high school football team and said helmet-first contact occurred 42 percent of the time. He doubts it's changed much.

Like he says, when was the last time you saw a penalty called at a high school football game for illegal helmet contact?

The National Federation of State High School Associations doesn't keep statistics on how often penalties are called for illegal helmet contact, which includes spearing, butt blocking and face tackling. But Heck, referring to penalty statistics for NCAA Division I football in 2006, said spearing was called only once every 106 games and butting or ramming with the helmet once every 60 games.

The National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research said there were 10 cervical cord injuries from football in 2006, with eight on the high school level. Heck said one is too many, and doesn't think it is addressed enough among officials and coaches.

"It's football's dirty little secret," Heck said. "It's the one thing about football that is not often talked about. If you look for it, and if you watch games on film, you can see that it happens all the time. It's gotten to the point where I think most people think it's an acceptable part of football, that players are going to drop their heads at times to make a hit."

Heck is an authority of the subject of illegal helmet contact. He was the lead author on

the National Athletic Trainers' Association position statement on head down contact and spearing in football in 2004. He was the chair of the committee that produced the DVD "Heads Up - Reducing the Risk of Head and Neck Injuries in Football" that featured Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy and dealt with the dangers of tackling with the head down and the proper techniques to initiate contact. Heck also had 11 articles published on the dangers of illegal helmet contact.

Larry Blohm, a long-time official and the rules interpreter for the Atlantic chapter of the New Jersey Football Officials Association, said illegal helmet contact is "probably a foul that should be called more often."

Blohm said the difference between legal contact, and illegal helmet contact, is not always easy to detect. Blohm said there are many instances where a tackler properly makes contact with the shoulder. But in a fraction of a second, amid the twisting of the bodies on plays occurring at a high rate of speed, the helmet can be repositioned to make it look like illegal contact when it is not.

Heck, who lectured recently on the prevention of cervical spine injuries at a symposium in Voorhees conducted by the Adam Taliaferro Foundation, thinks more penalties should be called. He thinks coaches, if they are not already, should spend more time teaching proper technique.

But officials and coaches say the issue of illegal helmet contact is addressed. Blohm said the topic is regularly discussed at officials' meetings.

The northern New Jersey chapter of the New Jersey Football Officials Association has the "Heads Up" DVD on its website.

Holy Spirit High School coach Bill Walsh said he thinks it is being called more, and that the officials are addressing it more during games with the players, telling the players to "keep your head up, keep your head up."

Starting this season, the National Federation of State High School Associations placed butt blocking, face tackling and spearing under the heading of "Helmet Contact – Illegal" to emphasize the danger of illegal helmet contact with the "intention of further reducing the risk of injury."

The NFHS also removed the word "intentional" from its spearing rule starting with the 2006 season. So any contact with the top of the helmet, whether an official believes it intentional or not, is against the rules and subject to penalty.

The NFHS defines spearing as initiating contact with the top of the helmet, butt blocking as initiating contact with the front of the helmet and face tackling as initiating contact against a ball carrier with the front of the helmet.

Walsh and Atlantic City coach Bob Weiss said their teams teach the proper technique on a frequent basis.

"We teach it every day," Walsh said before a recent practice. "In fact, in four minutes, that's what we are going to do. We are going to have a tackling session. We begin each defensive period with the proper technique on tackling, every day, through November. It's more important than ever, because in high school, the kids are bigger, stronger and faster than they've ever been. They are enormous."

Weiss said his players watch the NFL, and "they might be the worst tacklers in football" with the way they drop their heads in trying to make a tackle.

"We emphasize all the time to keep your eyes open and your head up," Weiss said. "We tell our players that helmets don't make tackles. Arms and legs do."

Heck, the brother of Vineland offensive coordinator Dave Heck, said more needs to be done to heighten the awareness of the dangers of illegal helmet contact.

Andre Taliaferro agreed. Andre is the father of Adam Taliaferro, the former Eastern High School standout who recovered from a paralyzing spinal cord injury while playing at Penn State in 2000. Andre listened intently while Heck spoke on what could be done to prevent catastrophic cervical spine injuries.

"If you could prevent one person from going through what we went through or anyone else who has been there, it's a world of difference," Andre Taliaferro said. "Everything Jon said today was so right-on. I think every high school, college and the NFL should have that. The things he talks about can make a difference. It could have made a difference in my son's life."

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