



2014 FOOTBALL POINTS OF EMPHASIS

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL – STATE OF THE GAME

“The reports of my demise have been greatly exaggerated.”

As was the case with Mark Twain more than 100 years ago, the sport of football is not dying. It remains the most popular sport in our nation’s high schools, and it is the lifeblood of many towns and communities in the fall – to the tune of about 7,000 games each week. Autumn is characterized by changing leaves, chilled temperatures and brilliant colors that offer fleeting, picturesque landscapes. In many communities across the country, high school football on a crisp Friday evening is an indelible component of those scenes.

Similar to other interscholastic activities, high school football offers its participants special educational opportunities. During those select few evenings, the student-athletes, pep bands and cheerleaders can showcase their talents on a grand stage.

The educational mission of interscholastic athletics is furthered when student-athletes are most engaged in their respective activities. In the case of high school football, Friday nights provide the optimal experience for the student-athletes, as well as for the administrators, coaches, fans and community involved with the game. The value of competition during this particular time is no different than a typical Saturday morning cross country meet or Thursday evening volleyball match.

Ultimately, each sport offers students “teachable moments” that are unique to the interscholastic experience. The preservation of high school football on Friday nights will help provide the environment most conducive to those teachable moments, and help perpetuate an important and longstanding American tradition.

Most recently, the concern about the future of the sport has been centered on the long-term effects of concussions suffered by players. As a result, some parents of youth and high school players have anxiety about allowing their sons – or daughters – to participate in the sport.

As a segue to the rest of this point of emphasis, Max Boot, in a recent article in The Wall Street Journal online (WSJ.com), may have said it best:

“The guiding principle with football should be ‘mend it, don’t end it.’ And, in fact, the process of mending the game has been going on for a very long time.” Toward that end, every state in the nation has adopted concussion legislation, and stakeholders have issued protocols and educational materials on concussions.

During the past half century, the NFHS has been a leader in “mending” the sport by minimizing the risk of injury. Contrary to some reports, the risk of serious injury in high school football is less today than it was 40-50 years ago. Between 1966 and 1972, there were 134 “direct” fatalities in high school football – those caused by traumatic injury while participating in the skills of the sport – with a high of 26 in 1968. In the 2012 season, there were no direct fatalities in high school football and there have been only six direct deaths in the past four years (2009-12).

This dramatic reduction in football fatalities is the result of the NFHS’ rules-writing process and the focus of the NFHS Football Rules Committee, the NFHS Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (SMAC), state high school associations, high school football coaches, football game officials and players to avoid use of the helmet as a weapon.

For the more than 1.1 million participants in high school football, there is tremendous value in making sure that schools continue to provide this opportunity. It is a vital and necessary extension of the classroom that must be retained.

We urge all leaders at the high school level to make the health and safety of our student athletes the No. 1 priority so that those stadium lights will continue to burn bright each week in the fall across the country.

RISK MINIMIZATION

In an effort to minimize the risk of catastrophic head and neck injuries, the NFHS Football Rules Committee continues to urge KEEPING THE HEAD OUT OF FOOTBALL, specifically through the elimination of illegal contact to the helmet. This type of contact must continue to be discouraged in both practices and games. Coaches, game officials, administrators, players and parents involved in the game must reinforce the positive aspects of proper tackling and blocking in high school football. The committee believes emphasis of the four topics listed below can help minimize risk to all players.

TARGETING

While football rules have been in place to penalize fouls for illegal personal contact, the NFHS Football Rules Committee continues to place emphasis on the prohibition of illegal contact to the helmet of an opponent. This is the 26th time the committee has addressed helmet review or helmet contact since 1980. The definition of targeting and its related penalty were created to call special attention to certain wrongful actions.

Targeting is defined as: “an act of taking aim and initiating contact to an opponent above the shoulders with the helmet, forearm, hand, fist, elbow or shoulders.” The foul states: “no player or nonplayer shall target an opponent.”

In order to gauge the intent of the player, game officials must be diligent in observing the tackler/blocker in all related actions to the tackle/block. Targeting an opponent is unnecessary and the rule must be enforced to minimize the risk of injury in high school football.

DEFENSELESS PLAYER

With the importance placed on risk minimization and injuries to the head and neck area, it is imperative to implement rules that place restrictions on hits to players who are not in a position to defend themselves.

In order to properly implement such rules, a new definition for a “defenseless player” was added. The committee has defined a defenseless player “as a player who, because of his/her physical position and focus of concentration, is especially vulnerable to injury.”

Game officials must diligently observe all action for contact against players who are deemed defenseless and penalize illegal personal contact. The game official must draw a distinction between contact necessary to make a legal block or tackle, and contact that targets defenseless players.

CONCUSSIONS

While there seems to have been an increase in the number of reported concussions over the past several years, we don't believe that the actual incidence of concussions has increased. Rather, we believe this is a manifestation of heightened awareness about the injury and improvement in concussion recognition and diagnosis. We have seen a significant reduction in the number of athletes allowed to return to play or practice on the same day of the injury. This is an indication of much-improved education about concussions, and appropriate health-care professionals, coaches, game officials and parents following the mantra of “when in doubt, sit them out.”

Concussions continue to account for the highest percentage of football-related injuries; therefore, proper concussion management at all levels is essential. Coaches and game officials need to continue to be educated on the appropriate steps for minimizing the risk to the participants.

The management of concussions has been and will continue to be a major focus by the NFHS and its member state associations. For the past four years, all NFHS rules books have contained the concussion rule which requires any athlete who exhibits signs, symptoms or behaviors consistent with a concussion to be immediately removed from the contest and not return until cleared by an appropriate health-care professional.

The NFHS SMAC also produced the “Suggested Guidelines for Management of Concussion in Sports” position statement, a shortened version of which has been published in all NFHS rules books since 2010-11. That same year, a six-page section on concussions was included in the fourth edition of the NFHS Sports Medicine Handbook, which was distributed to high schools nationwide.

Coaches and game officials should utilize available professional development tools regarding the proper management of athletes suspected of having a concussion. The NFHS “Concussion in Sports - What You Need

to Know” free online course continues to be an excellent resource for coaches, game officials, athletes, parents and other interested persons. This course is offered for free at www.nfhslearn.com.

With concussion protocols in NFHS playing rules and with concussion laws now in place in every state, high school athletes should not be exposed to repeated concussions.

CHANGING THE MINDSET

The emphasis on risk minimization, involving injuries to the head and neck, has not completely changed the mindset prevalent with some persons involved in interscholastic football. Some still consider it a "badge of honor" for a football player to get his/her "bell rung." Given the information we now have regarding the potentially negative effects to the brain that just one concussion (and, certainly, any subsequent and/or progressive concussions) can produce, a player getting his "bell rung" must not be taken lightly.

The positive aspects of interscholastic participation in the sport of football are many. Inherently, these positive aspects have never required a football player to stick his/her "helmet-in-the-numbers!" It has never been acceptable to play with intent to “take out an opponent.” Therefore, this type of mindset must be addressed and removed from all phases of the game by players, coaches and game officials. All stakeholders must understand that the future of high school football will withstand the head being removed from the game and it will survive such a mindset change.

The NFHS Football Rules Committee has repeatedly emphasized the need to **KEEP THE HEAD OUT OF FOOTBALL**, and has continued this approach by defining **TARGETING** and **DEFENSELESS PLAYER**. Also encouraged is a change in the mindset that some people still have regarding “acceptance” of illegal helmet contact. Athletes, coaches and game officials must continue to be diligent and proactive in striving to minimize risk.